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# The Cost of Segregation || Part III: Where We're Headed

## SITE INDEX

- Homepage
- Search
- CyberSurveys
- ▶ News Talk
- ▶ Autos Talk
- ▶ Sports Talk
- ▶ Lions Talk
- ▶ Pistons Talk
- ▶ Wings Talk
- ▶ Tiger Talk
- ▶ Tech Talk
- Horoscope
- Hot Sites
- Lottery
- Recommendations
- Weather
- Staff

## NEWS

- Autos
- ▶ Insider
- ▶ Auto Show
- ▶ Consumer
- ▶ Joyrides
- Business
- Careers
- Census
- Columnists
- Commuting
- Detroit History
- Editorials
- Health
- Metro / State
- ▶ Livingston
- ▶ Macomb
- ▶ Oakland
- ▶ Wayne
- ▶ On Detroit
- Nation / World
- Obituaries
- ▶ Death Notices
- Politics / Govt.
- Real Estate
- Religion
- Schools
- Special Reports
- Technology

## SPORTS

- Sports Home
- ▶ Lions/NFL
- ▶ Red Wings/NHL
- ▶ Pistons/NBA
- ▶ Shock/WNBA
- ▶ Tigers/Baseball
- ▶ MSU
- ▶ U-M
- More Colleges



Donna Terek / The Detroit News

Rachael and Christoph Sanowski scrape wallpaper in their Southwest Detroit home. In their neighborhood, blacks and whites are minorities to the Hispanic population.

### White pioneers

## Young white couple wants to live in Detroit

They buck a four-decade trend by moving to city

By Ron French / The Detroit News

**DETROIT** -- Sometimes, Rachael and Christoph Sanowski feel like they're swimming upstream.

The Sanowskis recently bought a home in Detroit. It needs new wiring and new plumbing. The roof leaks and the walls need patching.

They did it because they thought it was the right thing to do.

But there are times when the right thing to do is very, very tiring.



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 ▶ [TV Listings](#)  
[Crossword](#)

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 ▶ [Decorating](#)  
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 ▶ [Gardening](#)  
 ▶ [Home Improvement](#)  
 ▶ [Home Life](#)  
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 ▶ [Wine Report](#)

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[Sports](#)  
[Red Wings](#)  
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[News](#)  
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"Once a city is segregated, it's tough to reverse," says Christoph, 30. "Who wants to be the first?"

It's a question faced by the Sanowskis and other whites who are bucking a four-decade trend by moving into Detroit. Their numbers are small, and they are dwarfed by the whites who continue to leave the city. Yet their stories offer a glimpse of the potential -- and the challenges -- of re-integrating the largest black-majority city in America.

"It's one thing to want diversity," said Rachael, 27. "(But) you can feel the neglect in the city and the people."

**Another culture**

Rachael grew up in Harrison Township in Macomb County. Her graduating class from L'Anse Creuse High School included two blacks out of 248 students.

"My only contact (with blacks) was sports," she said. "I didn't know there was another culture 15 minutes away."

She met her husband while teaching in Germany. When the couple returned to Metro Detroit two years ago, the German Christoph was stunned by the level of segregation.

"You cross Eight Mile and all the people in the cars are white. You cross back, and everyone is black," he said, shaking his head. "It is the craziest thing."

The couple moved to Detroit at the end of a decade when more than half all white Detroiters left. The white population of Detroit, not including Hispanics, fell from 212,000 in 1990 to 100,000 in 2000.

Rachael commutes 30 miles each way to Chesterfield Township to teach English and German at her alma mater, L'Anse Creuse, passing dozens of suburban apartment complexes in which the couple could be



Donna Terek / The Detroit News

**The Sanowskis attended Grace Community Church, a mostly black congregation in Detroit.**

**White pioneers**

Rachael and Christoph Sanowski recently bought a home in Southwest Detroit, bucking a decades-old trend of whites fleeing the city.



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living more comfortably.

They live in Detroit instead, plugging two holes in a dike that some say broke long ago. "Maybe I can make a difference," Rachael said.

The couple rented a house just south of University of Detroit-Mercy Hospital while looking for a home to buy. They combed the city's streets for integrated neighborhoods like others search for fireplaces and walk-in closets.

It's not easy. Only one out of every 10 census tracts in Detroit has a population at least 40 percent white.

"Will we be isolated? Will we stand out on the street?" Rachael asked. "We want to establish a dialogue. Just the appearance of diversity doesn't mean hearts are any closer."

### **Beautiful people**

First, they considered the neighborhood in which they were renting, North Rosedale Park. Though the homes were nice, the couple had difficulty connecting with their black neighbors.

Striking up friendships in the neighborhood "takes more work," she said. "I don't know if they think we have a secret white life somewhere else, or what."

Once the barriers of distrust between the white couple and their black neighbors began to fall, the Sanowskis heard tales of police intimidation and job discrimination.

"I find it painful," Rachael said. "In the suburbs, it's not in your face, you don't feel it. (But) once someone you know tells you stories, then you can't deny anymore that there are race problems.

"It's hard to be that close to it, because then you have to start asking questions -- am I a part of it?"

They made an offer on a home in the Woodbridge neighborhood, where they believed nearby Wayne State University would encourage diversity. But the home was surrounded by vacant lots, where homes had been torn down. "There was a lot of prairie there," said Christoph, who works at [Lear Corp.](#) in Dearborn. When the home next door was gutted by fire, the couple backed out of the deal.

On Dec. 30, they moved into a two-story home in Mexicantown. There, blacks and whites are minorities to an established Hispanic population. It is an impoverished neighborhood, with renovated homes sprinkled among houses that have been neglected for decades.

"I see a lot of potential in this neighborhood, and there are probably a lot of beautiful people," Rachael said. "But you don't see it at first glance.

"It feels right to be here," she said. "There are so many buried treasures."

Inside the home, the couple has found beautiful oak floors under ratty carpet. Outside, two African-American neighbors have volunteered to help clean up the house and lot.

They know it will be a long, hard job. They're trying, one new light socket at a time.

"I want to be close enough to hear and see what is going on in the city," Rachael said. "You can have good intentions, but you could just end up

Kramer said. "You can have good intentions, but you could just end up being masochistic."

"We ask ourselves a lot, what are we doing here? I don't know how to make it a reality."

"I don't think this is for everybody. That's not the solution," Christoph said. "Probably there is no ultimate solution."

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