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HEADLINE: One-on-one **relationships** create true **integration**

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BODY:

Gary Wemlinger, my neighbor in a subdivision in Kernersville, N.C., recently found out that he has inoperable renal-cell carcinoma that has spread to his liver and muscles. A father of five, his only hope for survival is a stem-cell transplant he can't afford. Since learning the grim news, I've been involved in efforts to raise the money Gary needs -- about \$ 500,000 -- to pay for the procedure, which is not covered by his health insurance.

Gary is white, and I'm black. Had we been living in segregated neighborhoods, I'd most likely never have known him as a human being, nor cared about his fate.

Integration humanizes us. Yet a new State University of New York analysis of Census data found that while blacks and whites overall live in slightly more integrated areas now than 10 years ago, their children live in increasingly segregated areas.

Recent news events -- Mississippi's decision to keep its divisive flag, the conviction last week in the 1963 Birmingham, Ala., church

bombing, the riots in Cincinnati after a white police officer shot a black youth -- also underscore how much this country still is haunted by the specter of race.

Still separated

Why are so many Americans resistant to integration, the only way blacks and whites can ever know and care about each other as human beings? Racism clearly plays a part in residential segregation. Whites still flee neighborhoods when the number of black families moving in increases beyond the "tipping" percentage. Some whites won't even purchase a home lived in by blacks. And some real estate agents still engage in "steering" when serving homeowners of different races, despite legislation outlawing such practices.

Gary's wife, Jerrie, an ebullient Southerner who grew up in a children's home, is a real estate agent. She and I have spoken about housing discrimination, which she acknowledges exists and which she abhors. When my mother, Magdalene, and sister, Miriam, who'd been living with me, my wife and our three children, found minimum-wage jobs and saved enough to start dreaming about their own house, Jerrie offered to help. She admired their work ethic and family values, but knew many lenders would overlook these qualities and focus solely on their credit history, which they hadn't yet established.

Similar problems

Jerrie and Gary taught me a lot about how many whites in the South grew up poor and confronted many of the problems faced by poor blacks: lack of access to decent housing, good schools, adequate health care and well-paying jobs. From me, Gary and Jerrie learned about the pervasiveness and perniciousness of white bigotry in denying blacks equal opportunity. In many ways, we became each other's teachers. And our example teaches our children a vital lesson about race relations: the need for friendship and assistance instead of hatred and fear.

The Wemlingers' youngest son, Eric, is best friends with Miriam's son, Sibusiso, and his academic accomplishments in a program for gifted students have been an incentive to Sibusiso. Eric's hero is Tiger Woods, whom he assiduously tries to emulate. And the other day my daughter, Bianca, came home overjoyed that she and her classmates were helping the Wemlingers raise the money needed

to pay for Gary's transplant.

Maybe this is what Martin Luther King Jr. had in mind when he said that "one day down in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers."

I believe more in integration because of what I went through. In my homeland of South Africa, there used to be a law that mandated racially segregated neighborhoods. It was called the Group Areas Act. A cornerstone of apartheid, the law made blacks and whites such strangers to each other that their lives became ruled by stereotypes, half-truths, mistaken beliefs and fear. Few whites knew blacks as human beings, and without such knowledge, they seldom empathized with their plight or understood the enormity of apartheid, a system they condoned. And throughout my childhood I thought all whites were like the brutal police officers I encountered during police raids, whom I hated.

Sadly, Americans have adopted a Group Areas Act of their own. With segregation the norm rather than the exception, blacks and whites seem to have given up on King's ideal of an integrated society. At times, the two races seem more like denizens of separate planets than fellow Americans.

Honest communication

Integration is not easy. When Gary and I met, we had misconceptions about each other, the result of living in a society steeped in racial hatred and mistrust. But once the human connection was made and we ceased to be stereotypes, we found out that we have more in common than in difference. We found out that we were both devoted to our families, that we both work hard, that our children thrive in public school and are fanatical about sports and that we could depend on each other to watch out for them.

Sure, there has been friction in our **relationship** as we moved from what King called "mere physical proximity" to "spiritual affinity," but many times, through honest communication, we found out that it arose out of ignorance rather than malicious intent.

For integration to work, we must give one another the benefit

of the doubt and commit to doing all we can to make it succeed. Laws that used to sanction segregation and condone racism have been abolished, but that cannot change attitudes. Those can only change with genuine person-to-person **relationships**, which only integration can foster. And only when attitudes finally change and we acknowledge and affirm each other's humanity will we truly become one nation.

I will do all I can to help save Gary's life. But even if he doesn't make it, I know that I'll continue to care about his wife, Jerrie, and their children. Thanks to integration, Gary and his family have become too human for my heart to allow them to fade into stereotypes.

Mark Mathabane, author of several books, lectures on race, education, freedom and human rights.

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