Our dirty little secret:

racism
THE 'R' WORD
SHATTERING THE ILLUSION OF ANN ARBOR'S UNIVERSALLY TOLERANT ATMOSPHERE

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A few years back, a freshly engaged Alfreda Howard began the giddy but stressful process of planning her wedding to Devon Keck. Her fiancé lived in Philadelphia, so it fell to her to seek out a local venue, and she had her heart set on Kensington Court Hotel near the Briarwood Mall. She wanted to, as the property’s website touts, “glow in Ann Arbor’s largest, most elegantly-appointed ballroom” and “enjoy the added touch of our open-air courtyard.”

Trouble was, Howard couldn’t get anyone there to call her back. She filled out the walk-in inquiry form twice and left numerous unreturned phone messages, but it would be weeks before she’d get the chance to even tour the hotel. Twice she secured a 10-day hold for her desired wedding date, but those holds expired before the wedding coordinator returned her calls to affix a contract.

Eventually, there was litigation. Along the way, the Fair Housing Center of Southeastern Michigan built a case of systemic racial discrimination by testing Kensington with undercover agents. The Kecks, who postponed their wedding date, married elsewhere and now live in Pennsylvania, would be tied up in a discrimination court case that would be thrown out, reinstated by a federal judge and ultimately settled on undisclosed terms.

Yet perhaps the most extraordinary moment of the saga, which dragged on for more than five years, was a 2006 letter from the hotel company’s attorney to the Kecks’ lawyer. In it, Detroit-based lawyer Howard Belkin, in an early response to the Kecks’ complaint, offered some counterpoints before he concluded: “Lastly, the city of Ann Arbor is probably one of the most liberal cities in the United States. The thought that there is some sort of racism in businesses located in Ann Arbor is ludicrous and insulting.”

Rare is it that anyone says out loud or in print that any place where humans congregate is free of bias, let alone use such a claim as the foundation of a legal argument. But Belkin’s zinger wasn’t the mere ranting of an out-of-towner reflecting the view of Ann Arbor from Detroit. It was, in fact, an unusually blunt articulation of a broader consensus that racism is simply not an issue in a place so famous for its liberal politics. Ann Arbor is a town so modern and progressive, the thinking goes, that such instances must be the product of, at best, honest misunderstandings and, at worst, overzealous, profiteering litigators.

Yet, there’s more to it, as there always is when the topic is as fraught and complex as racism. Long gone, of course, are the days of actual separate-but-equal facilities; of minority job candidates or housing seekers hearing bluntly that they aren’t wanted, of the most abject and
ambiguous manifestations of racial discrimination. And when something obvious arises, such as a Facebook invitation in late October for a Theta Xi fraternity party at U-M featuring a black man holding a wad of cash and speaking in urban gangsta lingo, the outrage is palpable and the consequences swift. (The party was canceled.)

But there's also a palpable sense that the town is so advanced that matters of discrimination are of little concern in everyday life. "There's a preciousness to the Ann Arbor mentality," said Dr. Kevin Gaines, a U-M professor of African-American and African studies and 14-year local. "People here have this image of Ann Arbor as this paradise of good schools and good living and a bulletproof economy and an absence of any kinds of social problems."

"There's a smugness about Ann Arbor, and really it comes from people who are really affluent and are able to take advantage of the best Ann Arbor has to offer."

Fair Housing's Pam Kisch agrees: "People would like to think of Ann Arbor as this progressive place, that we're kind of beyond that. It's just not true."

Quantifying "racism" is a fool's errand. The county sheriff is black and the County Commission is comprised of a majority of racial minorities, including a North African man representing most of Ann Arbor. Yet the City Council is all white with one exception and blacks make up about 7 percent (and falling) of Ann Arborites, underrepresenting their share of the national population.

The Fair Housing Center logged 151 complaints of housing discrimination based on race between 2000 and 2012 within the city limits, but it's hard to tell whether that's a lot and, anyhow, Kisch insists that's "just the tip of the tip of the iceberg." Data on hate crimes, EEOC complaints and income disparity could all be brought to bear -- and no clear conclusion would emerge anyway.

Fact is, racist attitudes can often be in the eye of the beholder, especially in this seemingly more enlightened era. A bit of race-consciousness fatigue has set in among members of the majority who believe themselves to be people of goodwill and good faith but who nonetheless dismiss most complaints made and offenses taken by minorities.

The case last year in which a group of fifth-grade students at Burns Park Elementary found a black doll hanging from a tree with a chain around its neck illustrates how differently the same incidents can be viewed. Several African-American leaders were alarmed at what sounded like an allusion to lynchings in the South in the pre-civil rights era. The district's spokeswoman said the doll's position "did not resemble a hanging," but debate raged for weeks in the comments section of Ann Arbor.com.

"There were no pictures taken so we don't know, but blacks were up in arms and if you read the comments on the Net, they were asking, 'How did you know it was a racist thing?'" recalls Leslie Krauz Stambaugh, the head of the Ann Arbor Human Rights Commission, a volunteer advisory panel organized by the City Council.

"Each side saw it differently."

Indeed, if one incident in recent years crystallizes the persisting divide, activists say, it is the outcome of a melee following a football game between Pioneer and Huron high schools. The Oct. 12, 2012, brawl involved dozens of students and was triggered by arguments between the teams' head coaches, but when the dust settled Washtenaw County Prosecutor Brian Mackie, who is white, charged three teens -- all black. Even after the Ann Arbor School Board voted 6-0 to urge Mackie to dismiss the cases and other civil rights leaders expressed their concerns, the charges were nonetheless pursued and all three were either convicted or accepted plea deals that involved probation.

It was, to many, an open-and-shut proof of the differences between how blacks and whites are treated under the law. "I can see where he would bring some charges, but when pressed and questioned about why there were only African-American kids charged in that case, I would have expected a little reflection," said Susan Baskett, a school board member and recently appointed member of the Ann Arbor Area Transportation Authority board.

And even though in at least one of the cases tied to the melee the youth was promised to have his record wiped clean, it will nonetheless follow him and harm his future, says NAACP of Ann Arbor President William Hampton. "I know a young man who graduated from U-M who wanted to be a police officer," Hampton said, referring to an unrelated situation. "He applied at one of the police departments here and he was denied. Know why? Because when he was a senior in high school, he was arrested for disorderly conduct and public intoxication. He was released to his father, who happened to be a well-known African-American guy, and he was told his record would be cleared. However, when he applied for this job, guess what popped up?"

Packed in these cases is the realization of the fears and suspicions of law enforcement that minority Ann Arborites share with their brethren across the nation. The black kids, Stambaugh and others say, rarely get the benefit of the doubt that white kids do.

When Baskett's son, whose skin is
significantly darker than hers, entered high school; she insisted he carry the business card of a lawyer friend of the family. "The rule was, if there's any trouble at school, you call the attorney first, he will contact me and then we'll take it from there," she says. "I didn't want my kid to not have a little bit of power. Some other kid could be blond-haired and blue-eyed, redheaded and green-eyed, they could all be doing the same thing. But who's most vulnerable? My kid. They assume from my kid's nature – he's a big black child – that he has nothing so they're not going to ask if his mother has a college degree or an attorney."

What's most striking about the denial of the presence of racism in Ann Arbor is the fact that the city and the university's history of rampant bias is not all that far in the past. As recently as the 1980s, U-M refused even to observe the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday and state legislators swooped in amid ongoing black student protests to hold hearings about the school's discriminatory practices. Just 20 years ago, when U-M President James Duderstadt made more progressive policies a priority, did the school's reputation change. And now the school is at the other end of the same debate, finding itself currently battling at the U.S. Supreme Court for the second time in a decade to continue to consider race in admissions in an effort to produce a more diverse student body.

Reaching even further back to the region's segregationist history also informs the modern day circumstance, much as some would like to forget it. Ypsilanti is 30 percent black, according to census data, despite bordering the exponentially whiter Ann Arbor, a legacy of segregated housing. Indeed, the most obvious, persistent, socially acceptable and barely veiled racism in Ann Arbor is found in its residents' open disdain for all things Ypsi. Patty Gardner, a 60-year-old white woman whose Old West Side home was tagged with racist epithets for no obvious reason last year, says she hears derogatory remarks about Ann Arbor's easterly neighbor that are laced with both racist and classist streaks.

"The older I get, the more I see classism integrated with racism," Gardner said. "It used to be easy for the bigots among us. Now that it's less acceptable to be so racially biased, it's easier to fall back on classist prejudices."

Ann Arbor also cashes in on racial bias toward Detroit, Gaines says. The local bars teem on weekends with suburban Southeast Michiganders, who trek west on I-94 rather than head out to drink or dance in Motown because "they wouldn't think of going to Detroit." Lest they did, though, it's worthwhile to note that Ann Arbor clubs routinely emphasize in advertisements in regional magazines that their areas offer "safe
Ann Arbor is known for its diversity. Have you noticed any problems with racism here?

Lisa McDonald, owner of Teal Haus

"After moving here from Europe, I found Ann Arbor to be a great place to be for diversity and yet I still see that Ann Arbor has a lot of integration issues. I would like to see more socioeconomic diversity in our schools as much as cultural diversity. I find that in Ann Arbor you walk in and it seems so diverse but then really it's not very socioeconomically diverse."

Jack Spivey, musician and barista

"Yeah, it's everywhere. I see it every day. There's no avoiding it. As far as the idea of Ann Arbor being diverse, I'd have to disagree with that, after living here my whole life. I don't know where that idea of diversity comes from – I think culture might be a better way to put it. There's racism everywhere."

Gayle Martin, teacher

"It's such a hard question, because I personally see it as an every-other-day situation, having grown up in Ann Arbor. I'm an African-American but I'm an albino, so I get it from both sides. So it's a little different for me. But I know. From people pulling their kids away because they think they can catch albinism, to people coming up to me and saying 'boo' because they think it's funny. It's here! My parents have been here for over 60 years. We moved into the Penberton area and they egged our house because we were the first black family in the neighborhood. And it's still today."

Chris Joseph, preschool teacher

"For people of color there's just certain stereotypes that go along with each race group that are just as prevalent as they were 50 years ago. People still think the same stereotypes. They're still alive, it's still a factor for people. It's hard to progress when people view a certain group the same way that they always have. Because in Ann Arbor a lot of people are transplants from other places (so) it's a constant thing. Because there's constantly new people here, it's always fresh in people's minds."
parking” and other code words designed, it would seem, to draw a marketable comparison to the big, bad metropolis on the river.

Even so, it’s not simply the less affluent and powerless who feel the lash of racial intolerance. Washtenaw County Commission Chair Yousef Rabhi says even now he hears anti-Arab or anti-Muslim remarks from people who disagree with his political positions – even though he’s not Muslim and his family hails not from the Arab world but from Algeria.

“There was one time specifically during the first campaign when the first article ever written about me on AnnArbor.com appeared,” he said one afternoon over coffee at B-24’s in Ypsilanti, a favorite hangout. “It was a general article, just a few quotes from me. One of the comments was, ‘Let’s make sure he’s not an apologist for Islamic terrorism.’ That’s something they based solely on my name.”

Yet in Rabhi’s experience, too, is a positive note about racial perceptions in these parts. He did ponder whether his foreign-sounding name and his appearance – he sometimes sports very long hair and a handlebar mustache – might harm him when he ran for election. He wondered, as many minority candidates do, whether people might tell him they would support him but act differently in the secrecy of the ballot box. In the end, he won and went on last year to be re-elected, too.

And, indeed, creating laundry lists of racial incidents and anecdotes may be an unfair way to measure a community’s racial attitudes. If racism is a constant and present even in the most well-meaning of environments, then a better way to assess the state of things may be not by what happens but how the community responds. On that score, Burns Park Elementary Principal Chuck Hatt believes Ann Arbor does better than the many other places he’s lived prior to arriving here. “The people I’ve known in Ann Arbor and work within the community and public schools are willing to have The Conversation,” he said. “They have a tolerance for ambiguity, the awareness to know that some of our problems are not going to be easily solved in a second or by giving it a few soundbites.”

Hatt’s view is supported by a recent incident in which a local Indian-American mother, Anuja Rajendra, wrote an essay in the November issue of The Ann describing racist remarks her children heard from classmates. The piece was widely circulated among Ann Arbor School District leaders, and Hatt plans to pair up with other administrators for a forum this January for parents and community members that will feature a luncheon, speakers and a screening of “American Promise,” a new documentary about black children who attended Dalton, an upscale New York academy.

Similarly, Gaines, who from 2005 to 2010 was director of U-M’s Center for Afroamerican and African Studies, said he’s routinely impressed by turn-out among white residents whenever the Michigan Theater offers special screenings of films on racial topics. One, a 2008 showing of the hard-hitting documentary “Killer of Sheep” about East L.A. after the Watts riots, was standing room only with locals to hear filmmaker Charles Burnett talk about the work. “All of these screenings are packed, and it’s folks from the community,” Gaines said. “There’s a deep hunger, curiosity and interest for these programs. The University Musical Society brings in jazz and world music programs and they’re always well-received. It’s a cultural oasis for Ann Arbor.”

And even some of the most concerned Ann Arborites note that younger people locally are so aggressively post-racial in their choice of friends and mates that they actually worry about a reverse problem – the discovery upon leaving Ann Arbor that the world isn’t always quite so accepting. “We as parents know the history of real and perceived racism, so we shelter our kids because we don’t want them to feel that, but we often see our kids grow up and have an ‘a-ha’ moment when they realize Ann Arbor is a little bubble,” Baskett said.

Gardner, too, saw this when her son, who is also white, went out of the area for college and discovered that blacks and whites there did not play or socialize together. “His generation here, it’s way easier, way more comfortable,” she said. “They’re not as aware as people my age, the guilty liberal generation. When they left this community, it really hit them in the face. Other places weren’t as open and accepting as they were accustomed to.”

Still, even these positive notes don’t negate the broader issue, Hatt says. “As a white man in American society, there are certain things that are granted to me,” he said. “If I’m driving 5 or 7 miles over the speed limit passing the stadium, I don’t worry about being pulled over or I know if I do it will be because I was going fast and not anything else. Nobody follows me around in a department store wondering about what my motives are. That’s why it’s important to remember if you are not a minority that no matter where we are, race is always operative. We are naive not to acknowledge the intractability and complexity of the subject, the idea that if we can all just have a couple of nice conversations or elect a person of color that we’re past it all, that we’re not going to have lots of work. We will still have lots of work to do. And generations of it.”