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## NY Times Article: Waging a 10-Year Battle for a Place to Call Home

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# Waging a 10-Year Battle For a Place to Call Home

**N**EARLY a decade ago, after searching in vain for an apartment she could afford, Renee Coleman returned with her 10-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter to the Gordon Heights, L.I., house where her five brothers, her sister, her parents and her grandmother lived.

"After I divorced," she recalled, "I wasn't able to afford housing on my own so I moved back home with my parents."

Ms. Coleman's unsuccessful search became the basis for a lawsuit that could transform local zoning regulations and racial segregation patterns in New York State — if the Court of Appeals agrees to hear the case, fully eight years after it was filed.

Ms. Coleman first contacted Long Island Housing Services, an advocacy group, in 1983 after she read about a lower-income housing development proposed by the Suffolk Interreligious Coalition on Housing, a nonprofit group. When she was told that the Town of Brookhaven had rejected a zoning change to accommodate the projects in the villages of East Patchogue and Setauket, she agreed to be named as a plaintiff in the suit filed by the coalition against the town and its officials.

Ms. Coleman, who was a \$13,000-a-year nurse's aide at Kings Park Psychiatric Center, applied for a Federal housing subsidy voucher but was unable to find an apartment that met the Government's guidelines.

"Oh God," she said. "I went to real-estate offices. They told me they didn't accept Section 8. I went to apartments. They told me they didn't accept welfare, as they called it."

Outside of Gordon Heights and North Bellport — two enclaves where about half the town's blacks live — Brookhaven residents did not embrace either blacks or welfare recipients, who were often one and the same.

A decade ago the Housing Coalition proposed building 60 garden apartments in Setauket on 12 acres zoned for light industrial use and 160 apartments on 30 acres in East Patchogue zoned for a nursing home. After local objections, the East Patchogue project was pared to 60 apartments on 12 acres. But in 1983, the Town Council rejected both rezoning applications.

Brookhaven officials maintained that they had complied with all zoning mandates and had permitted multifamily housing — if unsubsidized — on other sites. Lower courts largely supported the town's position, and the Court of Appeals, the state's highest court, rejected a constitutional chal-

lenge to those rulings.

"Unless the Court of Appeals is prepared to hear the case and reverse a truly outlandish ruling by the lower court," said the plaintiff's lawyer, Richard F. Bellman of the Manhattan firm of Steel, Bellman, Ritz & Clark, "the suburban communities throughout the state will be given free reign to close out any and all future proposals for construction of low-cost housing."

But the court can still exercise its discretion and expand Federal court desegregation rulings against the Town of Huntington on Long Island and the City of Yonkers, by deciding that exclusionary zoning can discriminate on the basis of income as well as race.

Ms. Coleman's case meets a test set by the Court of Appeals five years ago when it upheld Brookhaven's zoning laws in a separate case — in part, because the plaintiffs then had mounted a broad challenge without specifying a site or a developer that had been injured.

When Ms. Coleman testified in 1988, the town of 365,000 people — less than 4 percent of whom, like Ms. Coleman, are black — had only 402 subsidized apartments for poor families. Most were in a Gordon Heights housing project called Homestead Village.

"And I went to Homestead Village because I was told that they definitely accept the Section 8," Ms. Coleman said. "But at that time my former husband was living in there. I really didn't want to move in there." In fact, she wanted to move out of the Gordon Heights section of Coram altogether.

"They're pushing all of those mental patients that they release from the hospitals out there," she testified. "There's a lot of drugs in the area. And, you know, it's been quoted 'a low-income black area' and that seems to be the area — that's where all the riffraff is coming.

"There's a lot of police action going on in the area for trouble for various reasons," she said, "and I don't feel that my kids should have to be raised around anything like that."

But in 1986, Ms. Coleman moved into Homestead Village where she lived until recently moving in with a friend.

She became a registered nurse and now makes 50 percent more than the median income on Long Island. She also changed her name back to Anderson. So far, though, her perseverance as a plaintiff has earned her a footnote in the annals of housing desegregation cases, but not a decent apartment.