All dressed up with no place to go

A lonely tone for many black newcomers

By Howard S. Meltzer

Triumph in the ghettos is minimal, but many black newcomers have found little support in the city.

"I'm not exaggerating or working hard to make this point," says a white man who lives in downtown Chicago, "but the blacks are just not there."

"The situation may not be as bad in other cities," he adds, "but it's still a problem here."

For many blacks, coming to Chicago from the South means leaving behind a sense of community and belonging. In Chicago, however, they may feel isolated and alone.

"When we moved here, we didn't have any family or friends," recalls a black woman who has lived in Chicago for 10 years. "It's been tough, but we're making it."

Many blacks feel that the city is not friendly to them. They say they are often treated differently than whites.

"People treat us as if we're inferior," says a black man who has lived in Chicago for 20 years. "It's not fair, but it's true."

Some blacks feel that they are not welcome in certain neighborhoods. In others, they feel they are not safe.

"I don't feel safe in some parts of the city," says a black woman who has lived in Chicago for 5 years. "I'm afraid to go out at night."

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Nightlife
from 1B

sit around waiting for local blacks to welcome them to the city. She says black newcomers have to do some "scouting around" for events for blacks.

And she disagrees with those who say local blacks are cliquish.

"I guess because I've lived here all my life, I don't feel that way," says one. "But I've heard a lot of people come here and say it's a cold town. I think Grand Rapids is basically a warm town: You just have to start talking to people," she insists.

"Go somewhere and meet somebody and talk. I'm not an outgoing person, but once I start talking, I open up. When I talk to somebody they'll tell me something (that's happening)," she says.

Singles probably have the best chance of meeting through an introduction by mutual friends, she adds.

While agreeing that Grand Rapids offers a limited amount of entertainment for blacks, Greer said there are some advantages to the city.

"I've always felt that Grand Rapids is a nice place to raise a family. But now we go back to how do you meet somebody with whom to rear a family," she says, laughing.

Organizing black clubs for entertainment is nothing new in Grand Rapids, says local attorney Alphonse Lewis Jr., former member of Le Joie De Vie (The Joy of Life), probably one of the oldest black clubs here. Founded in 1948 primarily for black couples, it still exists.

Dr. W.W. Plummer, 58, a local black dentist, agrees that "The social life here in Grand Rapids is mostly confined to private homes and private clubs. The places like lounges and bars just don't exist here," he admits.

"Our society in Grand Rapids is a little stratified," says Plummer. "The educators are off to themselves (and other groups are off to themselves)."

Plummer, whose office is at 1426 Wealthy St. SE, is a member of two black male clubs — The Gentry Club and The Link Club, both groups of professionals and educators. To become a member, an individual has to receive an invitation to join from a member, he explains.

Private clubs seem to always have dominated the black social scene here, but long-time residents remember when there were more of them and more of other kinds of places for blacks to meet and socialize.

John Bankston, editor and publisher of the Grand Rapids Times, recalls a period when blacks could choose from a bigger variety of "in" spots owned and operated by other middle-class blacks.

The time: The 1950s.

"It was a little different then. You had more private clubs and more togetherness (people helping each other)," he says.

Bankston rattles off the names of the string of clubs once frequented by Grand Rapids' black "Who's Who" — Barnett's Bar, (50 Ionia Ave. SW); the Horseshoe Bar, Elks Club, (over Brown's Drug Store at the corner of Ionia and Smith Court SW) the Bellman's and Walter's Club (upstairs on Ionia and W. Fulton Street), Club Desire (on Grandville Avenue SW) or a private club on Williams Street SW, both owned by Frank LaMar.

"The town was mixed then — white and black were mixing," Bankston says, citing, for example, places like the American Legion which gave several big name black entertainers their starts.

"The American Legion would have shows here. Della Reese got her start here and Brook Benton and the Four Tops (performed here). Every week they (the Legion) would have some of the best acts out of Detroit and Chicago," Bankston recalls.

Pat Wallace, who returned to her native Grand Rapids recently after 22 years in Philadelphia, also remembers big names coming to Grand Rapids when she attended high school.

"Something happened. All of a sudden it stopped ... It was here," she laments.

Bankston blames several things for the demise of social life for middle-class blacks. Blacks stopped going to black bars when integration allowed them to patronize white clubs. And black clubs were not carried on after the bar owners' deaths.

After the '60, he adds, the attitudes of local blacks changed.

"There is a lack of togetherness and no interest — the generation gap. The town changed. There were no stickups or shooting like you have now," he says.

Attorney Lewis said that when his club, Barnett's Bar closed in 1966, the night life ended too for some middle-class blacks.

"Barnett's closed in '66, and some people haven't been out since."