

One Nation INDIVISIBLE

Stories From the Field

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Life in 98118

Seattle's Rainier Valley – One of the Nation's Most Diverse Zip Codes

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY WENDY CALL

At least once a week, my five-year-old goddaughter Lesley and I explore our neighborhood together. We start walking at the south end of the business district, close to her house. We pass a Hawaiian restaurant, the Rainier Valley Chamber of Commerce (in a building that also provides housing to formerly homeless men), a holistic health center, the Burqaa halal grocery, an all-you-can-eat Ethiopian buffet, Seattle's oldest African American men's social club, and a new music hall. Then we stop for pizza at Tutta Bella. The host wraps Lesley in a bear hug, as he has since the first day he met her. His Italian-accented vowels long and chewy, he bellows, "I love this little girl!" Stomachs full, we stop at the Andaluz gift shop – where "98118" bumper stickers are one of the best-selling items. Lesley tries on imported scarves and fingerless gloves while I gossip with the owner about which businesses are changing hands and whether the paintings at last month's art walk were worth seeing. Lesley and I continue north, past the British-style ale house, Senegalese craft shop, sleek Jüs bar, massage therapy studio, "Jamerican" – as the owner describes it –

Caribbean restaurant, and rowdy-but-kid-friendly bar, heading for the only family-friendly fine art gallery I've ever seen. There, Lesley carefully pulls out long drawers to admire acrylics, photographs, textiles, and ceramic tiles created in nearby garage and basement studios.



On Wednesday afternoons in summer and fall, we visit the farmers' market. Lesley glues dyed macaroni into a crooked mosaic and dances to fiddle and panpipe music while I buy a week's worth of blueberries, sweet corn, goat cheese, and smoked salmon. I maneuver through a crowd of customers in bright biking Lycra, flowing hijabs, or jeans and T-shirts. Some hand over EBT cards for huge bunches of collards and carrots, others pull out twenties for forest-foraged mushrooms and tiny hand-wrapped salted caramels.

Nearly everything I need for day-to-day living is within walking distance of my house. Since I usually work at home, I've gone for up to a month without leaving my zip code.

On the way home, Lesley and I stop at a playground one block from my house. I step to the sidelines with the adults. Lesley recruits kids for hide-and-seek. Over the traffic drone on Rainier Avenue, adults call to their children in Amharic, Chinese, English, Khmer, Korean, Somali, Spanish, Tagalog, Tigrinya, and Vietnamese. Sometimes, the only English at the playground comes from children speaking to each other. Like Lesley's parents, I speak to her in Spanish.

My partner, Aram, and I met Lesley's parents, Jaime and Elena, before their daughter was born. They lived across the street from us, in a house that had long been home to a frequently changing group of recent arrivals from Mexico and Guatemala. When Jaime and Elena learned that we could speak Spanish they sought out our friendship. Over that first year, we shared vegetable seedlings, backyard barbecues, and pots of winter stew. After Elena became pregnant with Lesley, they asked us to be her godparents.

People often ask me how Aram and I became friends with Jaime and Elena. Quite often, they seem perplexed by the fact that an author and an electrical engineer are godparents to the daughter of immigrants who clean offices and hotel rooms for a living. We grew close, I tell them, because we used to live across the street from each other. Having grown up in the multiracial, multiethnic world of U.S. military bases, I didn't quite understand why people found our relationship with Lesley and her parents to be so interesting, or even strange. Only recently have I come to understand that it's not so common for immediate neighbors to have such different back-

grounds. Our relationship with Jaime, Elena, and Lesley isn't just the result of being neighbors, of course. I lived for several years in Elena's home state in Mexico. We share interests like gardening and cooking. But in much of the United States, our friendship wouldn't have happened at all, because we would have never met. Our ties are a direct result of the place we call home: Rainier Valley, in Seattle's south end.

I have lived in Rainier Valley since 2004 – the longest I've stayed in a single zip code in my life. When I arrived here, at age 35, I'd lived in fourteen towns and cities in nine different states. I settled here in part because this neighborhood reminded me of the cultural and racial mix of the military enclaves where I grew up.

In 2010 my adopted home attracted national attention. The U.S. Census that year found that the 23,000 households of zip code 98118, whose borders are nearly the same as Rainier Valley, spoke 59 different languages. By that measure – if such a thing can be measured – 98118 was one of the most diverse zip codes in the United States. Even I was surprised. A neighborhood in *Seattle*? Not Chicago? Or New York? Both those cities do boast zip codes of high language-diversity: Chicago's Albany Park (60625), Brooklyn's Kensington (11218), and Queens' Jackson Heights (11372). The list of highly diverse zip codes is short. Even

as Rainier Valley reflects the increasing racial, cultural, and economic diversity of our nation, it remains an outlier in the U.S. and in Seattle for its level of integration.

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I first moved to the Emerald City in 1990, right after college, living in a Central Seattle neighborhood that was home to an almost equal share of African Americans and whites. Two years later, I left Seattle to follow a job to Boston. A dozen years later, I moved back to Seattle and found my old neighborhood transformed. Three-story mansions had replaced small, worn cottages; most of the faces were white. In that way, the neighborhood had become like much of Seattle: Only five U.S. cities have a higher percentage of white residents than Seattle does.

So, like many people from my old neighborhood, I moved south. Rainier Valley's six square miles—bounded by Lake Washington to the east, Seattle's southern city limit, and Interstates 5 and 90—are highly diverse even at the city-block level. That is to say, many streets in 98118's ten neighborhoods (Brighton, Genesee, Columbia City, Hillman City, Holly Park, Othello, Pritchard Beach, Rainier Beach, Seward Park, and South Beacon Hill) look like mine. My seven immediate neighbors are a 98118 microcosm. In addition to the Spanish-speaking group house where Jaime and Elena once lived, my block is home to a young, white, professional couple who recently bought their house from a Filipina widow who had raised her family there; an African American family who has lived here for 30 years; an African American master gardener who bought her house 15 years ago; a developmentally disabled white woman who has lived in the same dilapidated home all her life; a Head Start program operated by an AME church; and a public health clinic.

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Seattle's overall population but comprise 69 percent of Rainier Valley's residents. This segregation, of course, was created by design. Until the 1960s, titles for homes in many Seattle neighborhoods had covenants that barred ownership by people of African, Asian, or Jewish descent. Typical wording stated: "No property in said addition shall at any time be sold, conveyed, rented, or leased in whole or in part to any person or persons not of the White or Caucasian race." That particular covenant included all the houses in a large North Seattle

development owned by Bill Boeing—founder of the aerospace multinational that, ironically, spurred much of the African American migration to Seattle. A Supreme Court decision outlawed such restrictive

racial covenants in 1948, but they continued to be used until the Seattle City Council banned them in 1968. Such restrictions were far less common in Rainier Valley, so generations of immigrants have come here.

A couple of years after I moved to Rainier Valley, I organized a series of bilingual English-Spanish cultural events. I looked for other bilingual writers and artists to join me and got to know Felicia Gonzalez, a Cuban-American poet who has lived in 98118 since 1996. When she first moved to Seattle in 1992, she worked at El Centro de la Raza, a Latino community organization based near Rainier Valley.

Last year, Felicia and several other local artists, writers, and activists founded "Represent! 98118," a

project to record community life through art, capturing “what it means to be at home among different cultures.” At the cooperatively run Columbia City Gallery, “Represent! 98118” mounted a photography exhibit that recorded “A Day in the Life of 98118.” One wall displayed large photographs taken by volunteers on October 5, 2011, one day in the life of a zip code. A local writer snapped an image of a Somali family buying flowers at the farmers’ market. An elementary school teacher captured a group of her students, heads bowed together as they worked at a large desk. Along the other wall, a grid of close-cropped portraits showed those who live and work in 98118. The portraits smiled out onto the street through the gallery’s floor-to-ceiling windows. People walking by outside paused to point out their middle-school teacher, post office worker, musician neighbor, or local restaurant owner in the images.

Felicia says, “Walking down the street you see Eritrean teenagers, and the Orthodox community in Seward Park going to shul, and then you have the yuppies with strollers in Columbia City. People are living vastly different lives but in very close proximity. It happens in 98118 in ways that it doesn’t really happen elsewhere in the city.”

In Rainier Valley, dramatically different housing types exist almost side by side, thanks to Seattle’s famously folded topography. Because of Seattle’s many hills (even more than San Francisco), properties with breathtaking views stand next to lots with no view at

all. Just a few blocks northeast of my block’s vinyl-sided bungalows, huge houses with views of Lake Washington and the Cascade Mountains sell for more than a million dollars. Some of Rainier Valley’s ridgelines and waterfronts have only high-end properties, but most of 98118 is a low-lying housing hodgepodge. My block is fairly typical: one large, turn-of-the-last-century farmhouse; a handful of 1920s Craftsmans, some of them less than 800 square feet; several humble, boxy houses built post-World War II; and two tall, slim houses towering over the rest, recently squeezed on subdivided lots. This mix fosters economically diverse neighborhoods.

A few days before Aram and I bought our Columbia City house in November 2004, the

Rainier Valley Historical Society (RVHS) hosted “Double Exposures,” a then-and-now photographic exhibit. The rooftop peak of our bungalow appears in one vintage image. When the photo was taken in 1925, our house was brand new and cable cars ran down the center of Rainier Avenue in front of curved-front commercial blocks. The cable-car tracks have long since been paved over and the storefronts razed. Our second-story window now looks out over a vast parking lot and homely strip mall: a karaoke bar, furniture showroom, and Chinese banquet hall that hosts many Cambodian and Ethiopian wedding celebrations. The sense of continuity offered by “Double Exposures” appealed to me. Having grown up without a hometown, I liked the idea that I might be able to adopt one that had strong roots, even if I didn’t.



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At the exhibit reception, I met RVHS's director, Mikala Woodward, and bought a cookbook she had recently edited. In 2002, Mikala had organized high school students to interview their neighbors, transcribe oral histories, and collect family recipes. She tested dozens of recipes: Juneteenth red velvet cake, Ethiopian doro wote stew, sweet Italian pizzelles, and deep-fried Filipino lumpia rolls. Having grown up on lumpia and buñuelos (a sort of Mexican pizzelle) at military-family potlucks, this cookbook helped me feel right at home.

Mikala, who directed RVHS until 2009, braided the recipes and interviews with historical context, creating *Rainier Valley Food Stories Cookbook: A Culinary History*. She considered the cookbook a friendly way to strengthen community, for people to learn more about Rainier Valley's long history as a home for new immigrants. In the last two decades many Guatemalan, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Mexican, and Somali families have arrived here. Before that, Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese immigrated to 98118. A half century ago, Filipino immigrants and African Americans from the South settled here. And more than a century ago, Italian and Japanese workers came to clear old-growth forests, build roads,

and begin farms. Mikala and her colleagues knew that few people would read a dense history text, so they wrapped the lessons of Rainier Valley's past (and present) in food.

"Anybody living in Rainier Valley is *not* in the majority," says Mikala, who has lived here since 1994. "We all have to get used to people who are different." One-third of 98118's residents were born in Washington State, one-third elsewhere in the U.S., and one-third in another country.

The Rainier Valley Historical Society has not always embraced the community's growing diversity. The organization evolved from a largely segregated group, the "Columbia Pioneers," founded in 1891 by the white settlers who had purchased the first lots platted in Columbia City. Into the 1980s, membership was open only to people who could prove they had fifty years of family history in Rainier Valley. Since the area had been 98 percent white until World War II, this excluded most current residents. In 1993, the "Pioneers" reorganized as a historical society that welcomes all Rainier Valley residents and celebrates our varied histories and backgrounds.

In some ways, those varied backgrounds are a microcosm of the United States. The income distribution of the 23,000 households in 98118 mirrors the nation's, though we have fewer households in the wealthiest bracket. The median household income is \$55,717, about \$6,000 more than the national median. As it does at the national level, this median masks extreme inequality. My two-person household (a self-employed writer and a telecommunications engineer) has an income several times that of our goddaughter Lesley's family of six.

In other ways, Rainier Valley does not resemble the rest of the country. A larger share of people who live here did not finish high school *and* a higher share attended graduate school. In terms of education, Lesley's parents, my partner Aram, and I represent our neighborhood quite well: one PhD, one master's degree, an eighth-grade education, and a third-grade education.

The U.S. population is 64 percent white, but only 31 percent of Rainier Valley residents described themselves that way in the 2010 census. While we look different from today's United States, we look more like the country we're becoming. The 2010 census reports that Rainier Valley's residents are 26 percent of African descent, 32.5 percent of Asian descent, 1.5 percent Native, 9 percent multiracial or "some other race," and 8 percent Latino. By 2050 America will look more like 98118. One of five U.S. residents will be an immigrant. Whites will no longer hold a majority. Barely one third of children living in the United States will be white. We don't know whether people will live in neighborhoods as integrated as 98118 in that future America. Current trends tilt sharply against it, but I think they just might be happier if they do.

They might be safer, too. The overall crime rate (property and personal crime rates combined) in

98118 is lower than it is for Seattle overall. In American cities, crime rates tend to be lower in highly diverse neighborhoods than they are overall in the cities where those neighborhoods are located. Albany Park's crime rate is lower than Chicago's city-wide rate; the same is true for Brooklyn's Kensington and Queens' Jackson Heights. People tend to look out for one another in the Rainier Valley. We became friends with Lesley's parents during a period when Aram and I were often traveling. Jaime and Elena watched our house when it was empty and brought over pots of soup after we returned from long trips.

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Rainier Valley's businesses and non-profit organizations tend to be community-oriented, too. With few wealthy residents, it's not a particularly lucrative place to open a restaurant or retail shop. Those who do are usually local residents deeply invested in the neighborhood. In the entire Columbia City business district, there are only two chains: Starbucks and Subway. The Starbucks opened thanks to a 50 percent investment from basketball star Magic Johnson. Part of Johnson's effort

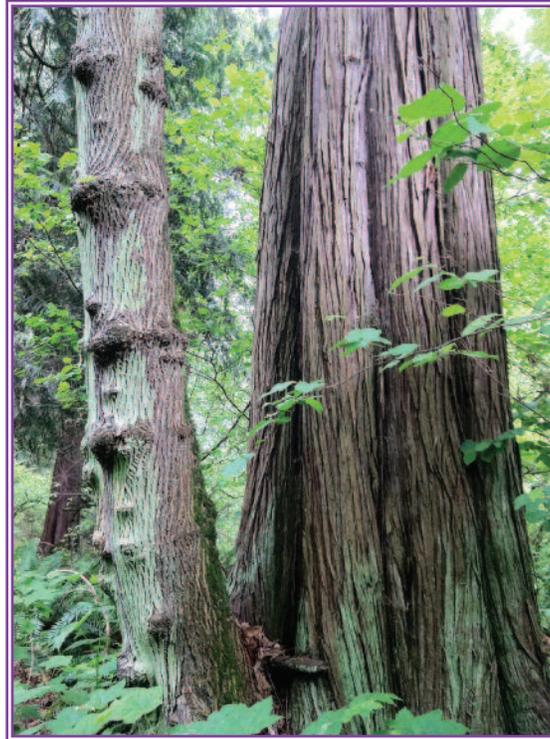
to bring retail services to urban neighborhoods, the Columbia City Starbucks came after Johnson-Starbucks ventures in Culver City, California and Harlem.

Rainier Valley is also home to community organizations that, as Mikala Woodward puts it, "reach across difference." That is to say, rather than serve a particular demographic or self-selected group, they work consciously to bring together people of different cultures, ages, income levels, or languages. The Rainier Valley Historical Society is one example; it left behind its exclusionary past to become a resource for the entire community.

Even at the age of five, Lesley has benefitted from Rainier Valley organizations that are reaching across difference. She attends an inexpensive summer day

camp offered by Arts in Motion, a school that enthusiastically fulfills its daunting mission: To provide high-quality performing arts education to Rainier Valley residents, “without regard to age, artistic aptitude or ability to pay.”

Lesley and I often spend Saturdays at Seward Park, a green peninsula jutting into Lake Washington, just two miles from my house. We occasionally bump into poet Felicia Gonzalez there. She calls Seward Park “our amazing forest in the city.” Its 277 acres are almost all that’s left of the landscape that the Native Lushootseed Salish hunted, fished, and managed for at least 4,000 years, until white settlers arrived in the 1850s. The Seward Park Audubon Center offers free (or nearly free) nature walks, workshops, and a lending library with children’s books and field guides in Spanish. One Saturday, Lesley learned how to track the park’s barn owls by the pellets they leave at the bottom of Douglas fir trees. Other Saturdays, she built a birdhouse out of recycled cardboard for her backyard, and sowed sunflower seeds in milk cartons. Later, she and her father transplanted her sunflower seedlings into a garden bed he built with soybean waste from the tofu factory across the street from their house. Neighbors have stopped to pose for photos in front of Lesley’s eight-foot-tall flowers. The



same mix of people that lives and works along Rainier Avenue spends weekends enjoying Seward Park’s forest and beach. Mikala Woodward, the local historian, says, “I love that there are big Latino family barbeques, and African kids playing soccer on the field, and everybody, but *everybody* is there.”

During my eight years in Rainier Valley, I’ve wondered whether the neighborhood’s deep integration will persist. Or, will it splinter into areas of gentrified prosperity and others of deep poverty? Most neighbors I talk to wonder

about this, too. Recently, Mikala Woodward introduced me to Georgetown University professor Sheryll Cashin’s book, *The Failures of Integration: How Race and Class are Undermining the American Dream*, published in 2004.

“It’s hard to create a *stable* integrated community,” Mikala says, summarizing Cashin’s premise. “There are

moments of integration between ghettoization and gentrification.” Mikala realizes that a culturally, racially, and economically diverse future in Rainier Valley is far from assured. Between 2000 and 2010, the overall population of 98118 increased by nearly 2,000 (five percent). Meanwhile, the percentage of people of color in 98118 decreased slightly, while the white pop-



ulation grew by 15 percent. Still, Mikala is optimistic, because 98118 is lucky to have the three factors that Cashin has found stable, highly integrated communities to possess: a range of housing to serve a variety of income levels; more than two races, so that no single group dominates; and institutions that consciously bridge cultural divides. Institutions like Represent! 98118, Rainier Valley Historical Society, Arts in Motion, and even the Audubon Center are precisely such bridging organizations. In fact, Cashin profiles Rainier Valley in her book as a successful example of integration that might serve as a model elsewhere.

Like Mikala, I'm hopeful about our community, because Rainier Valley wasn't always so highly integrated. From the 1890s until World War II, Rainier Valley's population changed little: 98 percent of its 35,000 residents were white. The defense-industry boom encouraged the migration of African Americans to Seattle, quadrupling the city's black population. Many of those new residents moved to newer federal housing projects built in the Rainier Valley, close to the major employer, Boeing. (This happened even as Mr. Boeing built white-only developments in North Seattle.) Now, many waves of immigration later, 98118 retains the mixed housing stock, thriving local businesses, and vibrant community institutions that attract a wide variety of people.

"Multicultural islands" like Rainier Valley, Sheryll Cashin writes, "go against a tidal wave of classism that is evident and growing in the rest of the country." Though 98118 earned national attention for linguistic diversity, other measures of diversity and integration seem at least as important. Our income distribution reflects that of the whole country; our range of educational backgrounds is even wider than our nation's. All this, in one of America's whitest cities. Here in Rainier Valley we seem glad to go against the tide, everyone living with neighbors who look, speak, dress, worship, eat, work, and celebrate in dramatically different ways. 98118, one of the country's most diverse zip codes, shows that a strong, inclusive, and (we hope) stable community can be built. My predecessors in Rainier Valley built it here

in less than half a century. In another half century, the faces of today's 98118 will strongly resemble the faces of our entire nation. We have just enough time.

Wendy Call is a writer, editor, translator, and teacher of creative writing. She has become something of an itinerant Writer in Residence, in 2013 at Everglades National Park, in 2012 at Joshua Tree and North Cascades National Parks, and in 2011 at Cornell College of Iowa, the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park of Vermont, and The Studios of Key West. She has also been Writer in Residence at the New College of Florida (2010), Seattle University (2009) and Seattle's Richard Hugo House (2006-2008). Wendy's narrative nonfiction book, *No Word for Welcome* (University of Nebraska Press), won Grub Street's 2011 National Book Prize for Nonfiction and the 2012 International Book Award for Best History / Political Book. *No Word for Welcome* explores how economic globalization intersects with village life in a region of southern Mexico called the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

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