

Library exhibit seeks to share understanding of the discriminatory 'redline'

“Powerful” is the word county library spokesperson Christie Lassen returns to again and again to describe interactive exhibit on loan to the Central Branch on the banned practice of racial discrimination in mortgage investment that was once known as “redlining.”

Trent Day Hall, a community outreach specialist who will lead a final reflection session Feb. 26 for those who have toured “Undesign the Redline” — which was held over through February due to high demand — said the monthly discussions about the present-day impact of redlining on communities frequently bring him and participants to tears.



Community outreach specialist Trent Day Hall will lead a “reflection session” on Feb. 26 for those who have toured “Undesign the Redline” at the Howard County Library System’s Central Branch. (Photo courtesy Howard County Library System)

By **Janene Holzberg**
The Baltimore Sun

Debbie Gottwals, a Howard County real estate agent, said a recent group tour with colleagues left them all reeling in shock that the federal government played a role in encouraging segregation in housing for more than 30 years.

Redlining embodies a process that transformed explicit racism into structural racism,” reads an opening panel of the exhibit created by Designing the We, a New York-based design studio that focuses on social change. So begins an introduction to the color-coded maps created in the mid-1930s by the now-defunct federal Home Owners’ Loan Corp. to indicate the risk of mortgage investment in 239 American cities.



A “reflection session” for those who have toured “Undesign the Redline” at the Howard County Library System’s Central Branch will be held Feb. 26. (Photo courtesy Howard County Library System)

“The geography and wealth gap these maps helped create largely still exists today,” the narrative continues.

Neighborhoods that were home to lower-income, minority residents were marked with red ink and labeled as “hazardous” areas for investment, Lassen said. Communities marked with green ink were deemed “best,” those outlined in blue were considered “still desirable,” and yellow ink signified “definitely declining.”

The Fair Housing Act of 1968 banned racial discrimination in housing, Lassen said. Yet, half a century later, the ramifications of redlining are still being felt. Many redlined communities remain home to minority populations whose members continue to face bias.

The implications of 1934 still resonate and have impact today,” she said, referencing the year when the federal loan corporation was formed.

“We still transfer wealth through home ownership,” observed Lassen, who, like other library employees and volunteers, was trained to give tours of the exhibit by Designing the We personnel.

“Many residents [of redlined communities] couldn’t obtain mortgages and had to rent instead, sometimes at inflated prices, while their neighborhoods continued to decline,” she said. “It’s impossible to untangle what happened then to what’s happening today.”

“Undesign the Redline” begins with a focus on New York, but expands to address national and local issues and includes Howard County panels for display locally. There are maps where people can place pushpins indicating where they live and places to post handwritten sticky notes describing their feelings about the exhibit.

“What’s interesting is that Columbia began [in 1967] as an integrated community, but maps show it has become segregated,” Lassen said. She added that in Howard County and elsewhere across the country, “people have their own prejudices about certain areas and tend to self-select where they want to live.”

Lassen said the exhibit focuses on one question in the end: “How do we work toward ‘undesigning the redline’ and toward creating a more equitable society?”

Hall, an employee of the county department of community resources and services, said he has been leading monthly reflection sessions since August “to help people process the exhibit.”

The Feb. 26 reflection session, geared to those who’ve toured the exhibit on their own or with a guide, is set for 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at Central Branch. Preregistration is required at hclibrary.org.

“As a person of color, I understand the awkward nature of having a race conversation,” said Hall, who is African-American. “I help people wrap their minds around what they’ve learned and to talk about what they’re feeling because it can be hard to process in the moment.”

“There’s a heaviness to what they’re feeling, and that can turn into anger, guilt or shutting down,” he said. “There’s a benefit to uncovering wounds that have been continually covered up.”

A worksheet distributed to session participants organizes the often-raw discussion into four segments: expressing initial and lingering thoughts, expressing emotions, connecting to personal experiences, and sharing concrete ideas for moving forward.

Sometimes people want to focus on negative experiences, but Hall works to steer people away from that tendency.

“If we truly want to move forward, this isn’t about pointing out who’s bad,” he said.

Gottwals, who works for The Wendy Slaughter Team of Next Step Realty in Columbia, said agents learn about the history of redlining in real estate classes, but what they’re taught about the practice that was outlawed 50 years ago “literally scratches the surface.”

Gottwals said eight of the company’s agents took the tour in December and were taken aback by what they learned from the exhibit, which she described as “so powerful and so overwhelming.”

The group gathered in a library study room after their tour to dissect their emotional reactions.

“If you had asked 10 agents if federal programs caused segregation [before they toured the exhibit], none would have said there was any correlation there,” she said, while emphasizing that agents follow laws and a code of ethics that prohibit steering potential buyers toward specific communities.

“We felt that we didn’t have a thorough understanding of redlining and we were shocked,” said Gottwals, adding she found many of the findings “disheartening and hard to stomach.”

“We came away with new knowledge about an ugly truth. There are policies in place that perpetuate the problem and we’ve got to change that,” she said.

Lassen said the library system devoted episode 19 of its monthly HiJinx podcast series to redlining with interviews of Richard Rothstein, author of the 2017 book, “The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America,” and with Braden Crooks, co-founder and partner of Designing the We.

Rothstein is slated to give a talk May 30 at the Miller Branch library in Ellicott City.

On March 5, Debby Irving, racial justice educator and author of “Waking Up White,” and Lisa Gray, associate director of student diversity and inclusion at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, will give a related Choose Civility presentation at the Miller Branch. In addition, recommended reading lists for adults and for kids are available on the library’s website.

For Lassen, believing that society can and will finally change is key.

“We all have room to grow,” she said, “and as long as people are interested in these topics and want to move forward, we will.”

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