

Bobbie Raymond, 80, Visionary on Racially Integrated Housing, Dies

By Sam Roberts

May 17, 2019

Bobbie Raymond, whose visionary strategy for curbing white flight from her suburban Chicago village was embraced as a national model for racial integration in housing, died on May 7 in Chicago. She was 80.

Her son, Charles D. Raymond, said the cause was congestive heart failure.

Ms. Raymond was a young woman with an academic background in sociology in the 1960s when residents of her village, nearly all-white Oak Park, Ill., could warily see resegregation going on right before their eyes — across the boulevard that divided the village from Austin, an increasingly blighted community on Chicago’s West Side.

Austin, with its compact private homes and bantam bungalows, was undergoing a tumultuous, virtually overnight transformation — from predominantly white to 95 percent black and Hispanic.

Oak Park, home to about 50,000 people at the time, had also begun to change, if inauspiciously, in the 1950s, when the research chemist Percy Lavon Julian and his family blazed a trail as the first black people to move there; their house was firebombed several times. The challenge from Oak Park’s white residents eventually abated, but it did not end altogether.

“Apartment owners by and large were very skeptical about integrated buildings,” Ms. Raymond told *The Chicago Reader*, an alternative weekly newspaper, in 1988. “They felt Austin was black; Oak Park was white; and if you let blacks in, Oak Park would become all black.”

Inspired by her research for a master’s thesis on how the racial transformation of a neighborhood can be hastened by unscrupulous real estate agents and frightened homeowners, Ms. Raymond lobbied village trustees to pass a fair housing law, among the first in the country, in 1968. And she founded the Oak Park Housing Center, an advocacy group that worked to discourage white flight, lure white migrants to the village and guardedly promote integration with black and Hispanic newcomers.

The housing center and a village Community Relations Commission collaborated to monitor mortgage lending to prevent racial steering through redlining; to discourage new minority group residents from congregating in apartment houses near Austin; and to bar real estate agents from using so-called blockbusting tactics, in which they would persuade white residents to sell their homes at lower prices out of fear of incoming minority residents.

The collaborators also encouraged the formation of interracial community groups; offered incentives to landlords to integrate; placed advertisements appealing to prospective white buyers and renters; expanded the police force and required new recruits to live in the village; and created an equity assurance program to protect property values.

“For a quarter of a century Oak Park has worked assiduously to maintain its racial mixture, to defuse internal tensions and to guard against the segregation and decay that have festered next door;” David K. Shipler wrote in “A Country of Strangers: Blacks and Whites in America” (1997). “To cross Austin Boulevard, Oak Park’s border with Chicago, is to move between what America might have been and what America has become.”



Ms. Raymond in the mid-2000s. The journalist David K. Shipler called Oak Park, Ill., the site of Ms. Raymond’s fair housing fights, an “enclave of integration.” via Wednesday Journal

Today, Oak Park is about 60 percent white and 20 about percent black. It “has succeeded in maintaining a public culture that takes pride in racial diversity,” the Encyclopedia of Chicago wrote.

Mr. Shipler described it as an “enclave of integration adjoining the predominantly black slum of Chicago’s West Side.”

The Oak Park strategy was embraced decades later by the Obama administration as a condition for localities to receive federal assistance for fair housing.

In 2015, the administration said its new reporting requirement for how localities use federal funds to reduce racial disparities was aimed at encouraging the development of affordable housing in more desirable neighborhoods, and improving housing stock in lower-income communities.

“This rule makes it clear that the fair housing obligation isn’t just being able to say, ‘I didn’t discriminate,’ ” Rob Breymaier, who was executive director of the Oak Park Regional Housing Center until last May, told The New York Times in 2015. “It’s also saying, ‘I’m doing something proactively to promote an integrated or inclusive community.’ ”

Roberta Lee Wolin was born on Nov. 16, 1938, in Oak Park to William and Rosemary (Lubin) Wolin. Her father was a teacher and Air Force consultant. She grew up in Oak Park and Chicago.

Ms. Raymond worked as an actress in radio, television and films in New York under the name Roberta Alden before returning to Illinois and becoming an advertising copywriter. She graduated with a bachelor’s degree from Drake University in Des Moines and received a master’s in sociology from Roosevelt University in Chicago in 1972 after writing her thesis, “The Challenge to Oak Park: A Suburban Community Faces Racial Change.”

When she started the housing center in the basement of what is now First United Church, she thought her role would be only temporary. “I never had planned to do it myself; I put the idea forward, and found myself heading it up — voluntarily — for a ‘limited period of time,’ ” she said.

In 26 years as executive director (she retired in 1996), the housing center was the subject of television documentaries and newspaper and magazine articles and received civic awards.

Ms. Raymond was also a national vice president of the Oak Park Exchange Congress, a coalition of fair-housing groups from several states founded in 1977.

She later wrote children’s books and took up painting.

Ms. Raymond’s first two marriages — to Geoffrey Hall Raymond and Dr. Wallace W. Kirkland — ended in divorce. In addition to her son, from her first marriage, she is survived by her third husband, Richard G. Larson, and a grandson, who is a fifth-generation resident of Oak Park.

A version of this article appears in print on May 18, 2019, on Page A27 of the New York edition with the headline: Bobbie Raymond, 80; Helped Curb White Flight