

Wave of hate crimes upsets diverse El Sobrante

By [Otis R. Taylor Jr.](#)

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Photo: Noah Berger, Special To The Chronicle

Mataio Tupuola-Mair poses for a portrait at a memorial for murder victim William Sims on Thursday, Dec. 1, 2016, in El Sobrante, Calif. Investigators said Sims, a 28-year-old African American musician, was targeted because of his race.

El Sobrante was a predominantly white town when [Becki Cohn-Vargas](#) and her

family moved there almost three decades ago.

Inside her house she found a stack of old newspapers. One had a derogatory headline about Japanese families moving into nearby Richmond.

A lot has changed in El Sobrante, an unincorporated city of about 13,000 residents, as people have gravitated to it in search of affordable housing.

According to the [2010 census](#), the racial breakdown in El Sobrante is 50 percent white, 16 percent Asian, 13 percent African American and 8 percent mixed race.

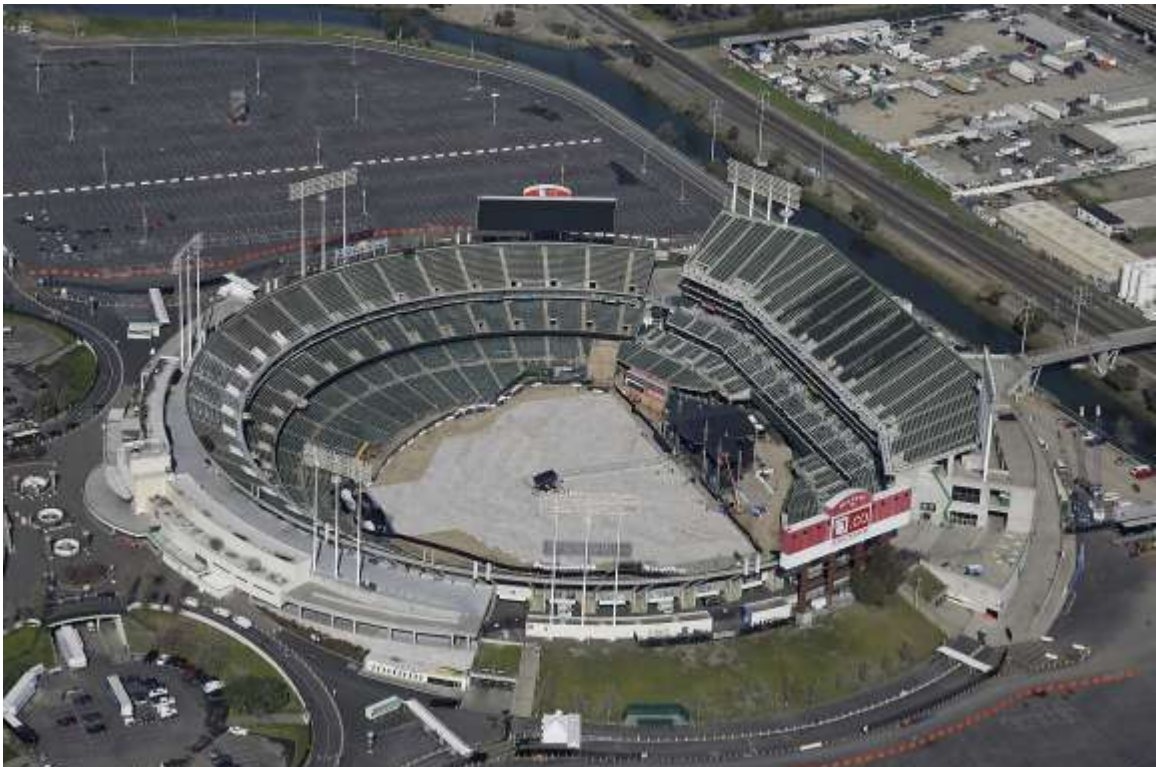
Twenty-four percent of the population is of Hispanic origin. Hispanics are included in multiple categories because they can be of any race, according to the Census Bureau.

“It’s got this amazing diversity,” Cohn-Vargas, 64, told me. “I feel like it’s one of the best-kept secrets in the Bay Area.”

Her neighborhood of three-bedroom, flat-top houses is rich with culture. Cohn-Vargas, a former Oakland Unified School District teacher and principal, is white and Jewish. Her parents were Holocaust survivors, which has influenced her lifelong pursuit of social justice. Her husband is Nicaraguan.

Some of their neighbors are Mexican American, Guatemalan American, Filipino American, Indian American, African American and European American.

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The killing last month of William Sims, a black man, has upset a town where it's

not odd to see a horse and rider clomping up the street.

Cohn-Vargas lives within walking distance of the Jack in the Box on San Pablo Dam Road, the restaurant Sims told a friend he was stopping at on his way home.

Sims, 28, a local musician and Richmond native, never made it home after a night of karaoke and bar-hopping with a friend. He was found barely conscious on the street outside the Capri Club on Appian Way. He had been beaten, and there was a gunshot wound to his forehead.

Three suspects — Daniel Porter-Kelley, 31, of Richmond; Ray Simons, 32, of Hercules; and Daniel Ortega, 31, of Novato — have been charged with murder, robbery and a hate-crime enhancement that could get the death penalty.

“It was shocking that it was right in my backyard,” said Cohn-Vargas, the director of Not in Our Schools, a program of Not in Our Town, an organization that advocates for inclusive communities. “I was really upset.”

So were the hundreds who, like Vargas, attended an antihate forum on Dec. 10 at the Boys and Girls Club of El Sobrante. The forum was held in response to the [increase of hate and intolerances](#) since the presidential election. The wave of hate has made this part of Contra Costa County sensitive after the slaying of Sims — which occurred the weekend after the presidential election — and the [beating of Maan Khalsa](#), a Sikh man who was attacked Sept. 25 after leaving a Richmond Walmart.

The assault left Khalsa with sheared hair, nerve damage, a black eye and broken teeth. A pinkie finger was amputated.

“People don’t want to be characterized as a community that allows racism and hate to prevail,” said Cohn-Vargas, an [author](#) who has lectured on identity safety in schools. “It’s our community speaking up.”

Keith Passmore, who has lived in the neighborhood across the street from the Capri Club for six years, agreed.

“You don’t want to push it under the cover,” said Passmore, who is black.

“Everybody needs to talk about it, because so much has surfaced.”

Because the prosecution has revealed little about what led to the hate crime charges, something I’ve been [reporting on](#), residents have been left to circulate rumors on social media sites.

El Sobrante is a languid, semirural town of auto body shops, pet groomers and beauty parlors. There isn’t a vociferous mayor like Tom Butt in Richmond. And there isn’t a take-to-the-streets attitude of action like in Oakland. But residents did stop mansions from being built on Clark Road.

At the El Sobrante Stroll, the annual 23-year-old event that shuts down San Pablo

Dam Road, there are more than 150 vendors. Churches, environmentalists and the local schools share in the festivities with the Hells Angels and the National Rifle Association.

On a recent visit, I stopped at Thrift Town on San Pablo Dam Road, a store that boasts processing an unbelievable 4,000 items per day. In small towns, thrift stores provide a snapshot of the community. Thrift Town is where Cohn-Vargas' husband shops for stuffed animals their dogs can shred.

There was a drop-top Mercedes in the parking lot. Inside, Cat Stevens' version of Sam Cooke's "Another Saturday Night" and James Brown's "Get on the Good Foot" played on the stereo. A woman in a headscarf shopped with her family as a few older black and white women shuffled behind carts. Several Latino employees rang up coupon-clutching shoppers.

I bought a vintage, flower-print shirt for \$3. As I walked to my car, I overheard a conversation between a black man and a white woman — employees taking a smoke break together, standing just a little cozier than friends might. He was complaining about his girlfriend.

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