

# One Reporter Goes Home To California And Hears Repeatedly That 'Richmond Is Changing'

By RICHARD GONZALES · SEP 2, 2017

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MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

And one more word from California. Over the summer, NPR reporters have been going home, back to the communities where they grew up to see how their hometowns have changed. NPR's Richard Gonzales grew up in the blue collar city of Richmond, Calif., just east of San Francisco. On his trip home, he found a city in transformation in the local businesses and the neighborhoods.

RICHARD GONZALES, BYLINE: I was 13 years old in 1967, when I thought Lou Rawls was singing to me.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "DEAD END STREET")

LOU RAWLS: (Singing) They said this is a big, rich town, but I live in the poorest part. I know I'm on a dead-end street in a city without a heart.

GONZALES: Of course, Rawls was singing about the South Side of Chicago, but it could have been describing the south side of Richmond, Calif., where we grew up on a dead-end street. Only a small handful of Latino families lived in our neighborhood. Back in the day of black power salutes and wide Afros.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "PAPA'S GOT A BRAND NEW BAG")

JAMES BROWN: (Singing) Papa's got a brand new bag.

GONZALES: But Richmond was still mostly white, its local economy and politics dominated by the local Chevron refinery. In 1967, more than a third of the city was African-American and only 7 percent Latino. But now, the phrase I hear over and over again is Richmond is changing.

RICHARD MITCHELL: We're on the south side here in Richmond, and we're going to drive up by...

GONZALES: I'm driving through the old neighborhood with a high school friend, Richard Mitchell. He's now the planning director for the city. We're cruising through what once was a fairly vibrant African-American business district.

MITCHELL: This was a grocery store, barber shop. A nightclub was right here on the corner where the cleaners was.

GONZALES: Some of the old shops are still here, but many black-owned businesses are shut down, as African-Americans have left Richmond.

MITCHELL: In our community, really, as people completed school, some went on to college. And then, again, opportunities develop elsewhere and people moved on.

GONZALES: They moved on to suburbs north of here, where their families could find homes with more square footage. By the 1980s, Richmond's African-

American population rose to nearly 50 percent, and Latinos were just 10 percent. But then the black community began shrinking.

ANDRE SHUMAKE: If any anything, it's being priced out.

GONZALES: The reverend Andre Shumake has watched this exodus. He says some people left when crime spiked in the 1990s. Others left as home prices and rents soared.

SHUMAKE: Folks choose to go somewhere else. And just as they start moving out, you start seeing all this reinvestment back into the inner city.

GONZALES: You can see that reinvestment along the Bay shoreline. Back when I was a kid, there was virtually no public access to the waterfront. Now, there are hiking and bike paths, a winery and two new brewpubs in town. And there are new homes and condos. This is John Gioia, the county supervisor representing Richmond.

JOHN GIOIA: Younger white progressive families who were living in Oakland or Berkeley and couldn't afford to stay there moved to Richmond.

GONZALES: And they aren't the only newcomers.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GONZALES: When I went back in May, there were thousands of people, mostly immigrants, lining one of the main boulevards - 23rd St. - for the annual Cinco de Mayo parade, one of the largest in the Bay Area. I ran into another old friend, John Marquez. He says that this parade wouldn't have happened when we were growing up.

JOHN MARQUEZ: Changes like you cannot believe it from the old days. Going back to the '70s and the '60s, we've gone through a big evolution here in Richmond.

GONZALES: Today, the city is now 40 percent Latino, 30 percent white and 25 percent black. The Latino plurality is mainly first-time homebuyers who, themselves, were priced out of San Francisco and Oakland. A few days later, I was taking a drive down 23rd St., chock full of Latino restaurants, bakeries and music stores with a new friend, Oscar Garcia. He points to one restaurant called Bionicos Yahualica.

OSCAR GARCIA: My family is from Yahualica, Jalisco, so distant family members opened that restaurant. So it's kind of a source of pride for my family because our little town has a restaurant on 23rd St.

GONZALES: Garcia is an exception. He's a chemical engineer who was born in Richmond and raised in the Iron Triangle, the city's roughest neighborhood, where he still lives because he says it's home. In his well-manicured backyard, Garcia's mother is cooking from scratch a large vat of pozole, hearty stew of pork, hominy and chili.

GARCIA: At the end, she adds the red sauce. That gives it the color and more flavor. And it smells amazing already.

GONZALES: It does.

(LAUGHTER)

GONZALES: The aroma of the pozole brings back memories of my long-deceased grandmother, who cooked just like this here in Richmond 50 years ago. The scent of the pozole is more common now. Richard Gonzales, NPR News, Richmond, Calif.

(SOUNDBITE OF RICHARD HOUGHTEN'S "SAVING A LIFE") Transcript  
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