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At USC Dorm, a Broader Definition of Black

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Ericka Thomas knew from the moment she heard about USC's Somerville Place that it was the dormitory for her. One of only a few black students in honors classes at her Little Rock, Ark., high school, Ericka graduated as valedictorian last June . . . but only after her parents threatened to sue school officials over allegations that grade tampering had pushed two white students ahead of her.

She'd prepared for college by spending every summer at enrichment programs on local university campuses. But she had grown tired of the rude stares, ignorant questions, racist remarks from white students who considered her unworthy of the accolades she'd earned. "I had felt the sting of racism, and I thought I might not survive" college, she says. "I didn't know if I could stand to room with a white person."

Justin Dae was not so sure he wanted to spend his freshman year at USC living in Somerville. "I just couldn't imagine what an all-black dorm would be like."

The son of a Peruvian mother and a black father, Justin will tell you that he considers himself black. But the schools he's attended, the neighborhoods he's lived in . . . they have been virtually all white for most of his life. Was he ready to go from that world to the environs of Somerville . . . all black, all the time? Natasha Pendergast was intrigued but wondered how she'd fit in . . . and knew she'd have to battle her mother for permission to live in an all-black dorm.

Her father was Puerto Rican and black; he was not a part of her life, and that is all she knows of him. Her mother, who raised her, is white. Natasha had never been considered black, wasn't even sure what "black culture" meant. Still, there was a longing she felt, a need to connect to a part of herself she's been separated from all her life.

"This is not something my mom understands," she says. "It's not something I really understood, until I started living here."

To them--and the two dozen other students who call Somerville home--life in USC's "black dorm" has been a homecoming of sorts . . . and taught them lessons they never imagined they'd learn inside USC's ivy-covered walls. It is a place that both shrinks and magnifies their differences . . . makes them aware of how much they share and how little of each other's lives they know.

At first glance, it seems counter-intuitive. You come to college to broaden your horizons, then hole up in a dorm with 30 other students who are just like you. It is both simpler and more complicated than that. So-called "theme housing" has been a fixture at many colleges for years, peaking in popularity during the '70s and '80s when ethnic identity was a rallying point on campuses nationwide.

Six-year-old Somerville, a single floor in USC's Fluor Tower, is one of several "special interest housing" arrangements offered at USC. There are dorm floors set aside for business majors, cinema students, women studying science and engineering. There is a Latino floor, an international floor, Shalom House, Muslim housing.

'Some People Want to Call This Segregation'

"Some people want to call this segregation, to say it's racist for blacks to have a [dorm] floor of their own," says Nikiyah Williams, a USC junior who serves as an advisor to Somerville students. "But do you know how many floors there are at this school with not a single black student? Does anyone call that segregation?"

Named after the first black dentist to graduate from USC, the floor provides housing for freshmen in two suites--16 girls live in the eight double rooms that surround one lounge, and 15 boys live in the eight rooms at the other end of the hall.

The dorm is not restricted to black students--many residents are of mixed race, and at least one white student has called Somerville home--but it focuses on the celebration and promotion of African American culture.

"It's really grown beyond its stereotype, into a place that provides a full range of support services for black students . . . everything from workshops on how to get along with a roommate to sessions on study skills," says Corliss P. Bennett, director of USC's Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs.

Still, some families have reservations.

"You have parents saying, 'I don't want my child being isolated,'" Bennett said. "But we've got students who were one of only three or four black kids in their entire high schools. You can't get more isolated than that."

In fact, Somerville has proven to be an antidote to the isolation that comes from being one of only a handful of blacks--195 among this year's 2,840 freshmen at USC--on a large, impersonal college campus.

"These kids can spend all day being the only black student in a chemistry class or English class . . . the one that stands out," Bennett said. "Here, at least, they can come home and talk about that experience with other people who understand."

Some parents worry that their children will lose touch with mainstream culture, will disappear into a haze of rap music and baggy jeans. "My dad was pretty uncomfortable about this," says Jasmine Simmons, daughter of a Silicon Valley business executive. "He wanted me to live with white people. His view is you've got to know how to deal with them . . . to succeed in the world.

"Now, every time I come home on vacation, my dad says, 'Soooo . . . did you make any new white friends?'" Her roommates laugh and nod in recognition.

Jasmine says she has met enough white people to last a lifetime. What she needed at this point in her life was to meet black people, to figure out where and how she fits into a culture she has come to know as much through television as through real life.

"There were four black people--four--in my graduating class of 730, at a school with 3,600 kids," she said. As a result, most of her friends were white.

Would she be considered "white-washed" here, she wondered, in the company of folks undeniably blacker than she? Would she be teased about the way she talked, the music she liked, the kind of clothes she wore?

"I felt like I knew what it was to be black, but I wondered what they would think. Would I be able to kick it with them . . . or would they keep me on the outside?"

What she found was that many of the black folks she'd be kicking it with had grown up under similar circumstances: "They were people just like me . . . that I don't have to change myself to fit in." What she discovered is what her dorm mates learned as well: There is no one-size-fits-all black identity, no litmus test for what blackness should be. That for all the talk of black community, black culture, there is as much diversity among black folks as there is in the world at large.

That they, as a people, are not defined by skin color, hairstyle, speech patterns, family pedigree . . . but linked by

something more profound, that crosses lines of class, gender and geography. Growing up in Anaheim, Marcel Hall figured most black folks "were pretty much the same."

"I never met a black Catholic, never met somebody who listens to Britney Spears . . ." He ticks off the revelations of his freshman year in Somerville. It has been enlightening, he says. "Everybody I know back home is just like me."

Indeed, Somerville has broadened its residents' perspectives in ways you might not expect in a dorm based on the notion of common interest and shared heritage.

Peers With High Hopes, Definite Goals

Freshman Donald Hale came to USC from a gritty urban high school in Sacramento. "The guys I went to school with were just happy to graduate. You get a job paying \$10 an hour, you're set." The friends he's made at Somerville have helped him to raise his sights. "Until I met [his roommate] Justin, I never knew any black person who wanted to be a doctor. Never. It's the first time I've been around this many people who really want to do things with their lives."

For some, like Davina Price, it has been humbling to live with so many self-assured, privileged black youths. "It's been hard to adjust," admitted the soft-spoken young woman, who sports an eyebrow ring. "It's intimidating to be around people who come from private schools, from the upper classes. It's made me feel not as smart as everyone else." It has been a liberating experience for others.

Pendergast--part white, part black, part Puerto Rican--had never found her footing in the multicultural terrain of her San Francisco Catholic high school. "There was this big group of black kids who hung around together, but I didn't join it. I didn't feel like I was black . . . or white. I felt like I didn't belong anywhere."

Somerville, she says, "is the most accepting place I've ever been. It's done a lot for me, made me feel like part of a family."

And life in Somerville has challenged others, forcing them to confront their own stereotypes. It has also allowed them to drop the burden of being special, of feeling bound to carry the aspirations of less-accomplished blacks on their shoulders.

"You hear so much about our failures, sometimes you look around and believe that's all there is," said Tiffany Purnell, who went to a high school near Detroit that was overwhelmingly poor and black. "I was surprised just to come here and find all these young black people who were capable of having intelligent conversations. . . . It made me realize how narrow my life had been."

Ayesha Williams was the only one among her circle of friends to be in honors classes at her San Diego high school. "The only black in honors' . . . that's how they know you. It made me feel I had to live this dual identity. I was one person in class with all the white kids, and I had to be someone else outside of class with my friends.

"Here, I've learned that I can just be who I am . . . that there is a range among black people that I never imagined. Some of us are poor, some are rich, some have parents who have traveled the world, some have never left home before . . . and together, we're like a family. And this is our home."

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