

## Bridging the gap between Us vs. Them

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Demetri Williams knew his new home in East Stroudsburg was nothing like his old haunts in downtown New York City — especially when he stood waiting for the school bus and saw a family of turkeys crossing the street.

"I thought, 'This is going to be rough,'" said Williams, now 24, recalling his experience eight years ago when his family left its two-bedroom apartment in Lower Manhattan for a brand-new home built by LTS Builders. "There was nowhere to go and people didn't do anything."

It took some time for his sense of isolation to ease.

As a junior entering East Stroudsburg High School-South, Williams said he dwelled on the margins for most of the year, as his parents commuted back to New York City for their jobs (they have since found work closer to home), and he fled there on weekends to visit friends.

"It was lonely," Williams said. "As a newcomer coming here, you're already standoffish. Nobody is saying, 'Hi, welcome.' They're saying, 'What are you doing here?'"

"It kind of came off that I was a threat," he continued. "It was a bit hostile."

Williams' account is part of the story of change in the Poconos. Two decades of rapid population growth has strained infrastructure, crowded roads, bulged schools and driven up property taxes. But perhaps most of all, it has created sometimes uneasy exchanges between long-standing residents and those who have arrived more recently, as well as a catalog of grievances on both sides.

For the next four days, the Pocono Record will attempt to bring into focus the phenomenon we call Us vs. Them. We'll be exploring how it plays out: in crime rates, the cost of housing, and how the image the region presents to prospective new residents differs from reality. Along the way, we'll be holding up some long-held assumptions to the light of evidence.

These articles will build up to a public, town hall-style meeting being held Thursday featuring panelists with perspectives on the divide. The Pennsylvania Newspaper Association and Pennsylvania Cable Network are jointly organizing town-hall meetings about topics of importance to communities throughout the state. PCN will televise the event.

The two organizations asked the Pocono Record to recommend a subject of keen community interest. Since every story we cover these days seems somehow to come back to Us vs. Them, the subject felt both timely and unavoidable.

"Us vs. Them is very fundamental," said Ray Muller, associate professor of sociology at East Stroudsburg University, who has been researching people's sense of attachment to the area. "It's almost necessary for identity formation — to define yourself (as) against."

On the other hand, relying on the most obvious of differences also can exact a larger price, Muller added.

"It's easier, cognitively, to process Black vs. White and Us vs. Them than it is to process the gray areas. But I think it does a disservice to the community," he said. "Is there really this great divide?"

## Hot story or old news?

In a sense, the dispute between locals and newcomers has lingered in the area for centuries. In 1804, one of the area's founders, Daniel Stroud, sat down to write a letter to a friend. In his postscript, he expressed wariness of the newcomers of his day.

"Our neighborhood, I'm informed, is forsaken by the Methodists, who indulge themselves in defaming Quakers as well in their public haranguing," wrote Stroud, who himself converted to the Quaker faith. Then he despaired of the arrival of the Presbyterians and Baptists, who, he said, "made a great noise."

If Stroud's words carry any lesson to us more than two centuries later, it is that tension between insiders and outsiders in the Poconos has always existed.

"Back as far as then, there were little waves being made," said Amy Leiser, executive director of the Monroe County Historical Association.

But for years after Stroud's time, the Poconos remained mostly homogeneous, especially compared with the areas nearby. The Poconos tourism industry, farming, tanning and ice harvesting did not attract the large labor force that eventually settled to the north and south, where slate, steel and coal concerns once thrived.

"Unlike the rest of rural Pennsylvania, it did not attract all those immigrants to work in the coal and steel mills. It remained WASPy," said Lawrence Squeri, professor of history at East Stroudsburg University and author of "Better in the Poconos: The Story of Pennsylvania's Vacationland."

"The Poconos were different. It remained what it was up until the 1970s."

And locals treasured what it was: close-knit families, deep roots and knowledge of who your neighbors were. "Everybody knew everybody and what they were doing, and everyone was related," Leiser said.

"The underlying feeling is that we do have a rich heritage of hard-working people, and that's what longtime residents want to be respected," Leiser added. "We're not backwards and we're not hillbillies."

Newcomers, in turn, generally want a little more tolerance and understanding. "The biggest misconception is that we're all here for trouble," Williams said. "When something happens, the problem is that they're from New York."

People also tend to seek out what is familiar and to idealize the past. "That's a definite tendency of people — especially in times of change," said Erin Reilly, assistant professor of sociology at Northampton Community College. "In some ways, the transplants are being scapegoated for sprawl

and other problems that are not their fault."

## **Change arrives**

Some observers mark 1990 as the beginning of the area's transformation into a bedroom community serving nearby New York and New Jersey. It brought the first large-scale diversity along racial, class, ethnic and cultural lines.

Census data bear this out. Over the past two decades, the population has increased nearly 75 percent. Its share of black and Hispanic residents, which barely reached 4 percent in 1990, now comprise an estimated one-quarter of the county's population.

The number of poor residents also increased. County residents receiving some form of public aid has nearly doubled since just 2001, far outpacing the rate of growth in the general population, according to an assessment of the county's needs.

And whereas most exurbs, which the Poconos has become, tend to be homogenous and middle class, the area's mix of races, ethnicities and classes also has added variability to the picture.

"When you talk about outsiders coming in, basically you have a racial divide," Squeri said. "On top of outsiders coming in, you have nonwhite outsiders coming in. That complicates it."

While some see distinctions between us and them, or newcomer and local as code words for race and ethnicity, the fault lines run in far more nuanced ways.

"Absolutely, race and ethnicity and increased diversity have a lot to do with it," Reilly said. "But I think there's something else — cultures, subcultures and ways of life — going on. To boil it down to just race would be to oversimplify."

## **Alienation and divided loyalties**

Young people moving to the area and meeting long-standing residents in schools may well experience these tensions the most acutely. As students grow older, it becomes less likely that they will have come willingly. Trapped in what some call green prisons, some young people are left alone without familiar support networks and less contact with commuting parents. They have nowhere to go, nothing to do and no way to get there.

The sociological term to describe the dynamic that arises is called "place alienation." It describes a negative view that people who have been moved involuntarily feel about a place.

The palpable sense of resistance from peers that Williams described does not make matters easier for the newcomer. "If somebody's not going to want you to be there, what kind of effort are you going to put into softening and understanding their perspective?" Reilly asked.

She often has her students probe the topic of Us vs. Them, which is never far from the surface. "It won't just be in terms of race and ethnicity," Reilly said. "Students who have been here for a while say,

'They're coming in and changing everything,' or 'If they hate it here they should go home.'"

But practically speaking, that is not an option for many newer residents. Some start to feel connected and want to stay, like Williams did. Others' relationship to the area can remain complicated.

"For kids whose parents commute every day, their sense of place is really fractured," Reilly said. "They have family life and friends here. They have hopes, friends and plans for the future there."

## Seeing it from both sides

One newcomer, Ebony Hardin, sees the issue from both sides. Hardin, 23, moved here 1½ years ago to stay with her parents while she attends NCC.

"It's got potential," she said of the area as she sat in Starbucks on Main Street in Stroudsburg recently, "but they're still kind of stuck in their ways."

A self-described sufferer of what she termed "city detachment disorder," Hardin moved from Charlotte, N.C., and still laments her lack of ready access to sushi, nightspots and high fashion. At the same time, she is resigned to reality.

"I'm no longer in that environment," she said. "If I want to be happy, I'm going to have to change. This area's not going to change. This is where I live."

But she also knows that her taste for the cosmopolitan life and fashion, and her aspirations to act professionally will not keep her here for long.

"I try to look at it from both sides," Hardin said. "That's just a human thing — some people are afraid of differences. Some people embrace them."