

Chestnut Hill East

Albert S. Dandridge III

I have been riding the Chestnut Hill East train to and from Center City Philadelphia for more than 40 years. The Chestnut Hill train station is literally around the corner from my house. On a pleasant evening with the windows open I can hear it pull into and out of the station. It is less than a five-minute walk from my house to the train.

The station, obviously, is located in the Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia - Zip Code 19118. The station, which is at the end of the line, is located at the intersection of Chestnut Hill Avenue and Bethlehem Pike, in the far Northwest corner of the city. It was built by the railroad barons in the 19th century. The area has been dubbed one of the five most desirable neighborhoods in the country. It is a neighborhood of large and stately houses and an idyllic shopping district along Germantown Avenue.

Depending upon what is happening at the office, I am generally on the 7:19 a.m., 7:45 a.m., or 8:03 a.m. train out of the station headed for Center City, usually the 8:03 a.m. Many times, I drop my dry-cleaning off at shop across the street from the station. Every morning, I wave at Barbara, the station master who has been there longer than I have. She is always busy dispensing tickets or exchanging quarters for paper money to those commuters who park at the station and then catch the train. It is a 33-minute ride from that station into Suburban Station in Center City.

When I board the train, as when most people board the train, you see the regulars. Some of them you do not know, but you generally know who they are. The regulars include a

Common Pleas Court judge, a former dean of a local law school, the former managing partner of a major local law firm, law professors at local law schools, assistant United States attorneys, assistant district attorneys, and many partners from major local law firms. Also included are businesspeople, doctors, and

other health care professionals.

Many live in Chestnut Hill and walk to the train. Others fill the parking lot after they drive from Montgomery County municipalities, such as Flourtown.

Besides myself, there is usually one other person of color, an attorney who was a senior manager at a legal services organization.

When the train takes off traveling south and east to Center City, the next stop is Gravers, which is also located in Chestnut Hill. Boarding at this stop are lawyers and businesspeople who live predominately in Chestnut Hill. None of them are persons of color.

The next stop is Wyndmoor. Here a huge crowd awaits the train. There are very few persons of color and most of the people drive to the Wyndmoor station from Wyndmoor, Montgomery County to catch the train.

The next stop is Mount Airy. Again, the station is surrounded by old large stately homes, and again, very few persons of color.

The next stop is Sedgwick, which is located in the East Mount Airy section of the city. On one side of the station, again, are large

old stately houses, and on the other side, neatly kept row houses. A large crowd boards the train, now looking for seats. Almost all are persons of color. Clerks, secretaries, managers, support staff, and government workers. The next stops—Stenton, Washington Lane, Germantown, Wister, Wayne Junction—all follow the same pattern as Sedgwick—neatly kept row houses, middle managers, persons of color.

The train empties out at Jefferson Station and Suburban Station. Clerks and lawyers, government workers and businesspeople walking to their respective destinations.

This was the pattern until mid-March of 2020. Covid-19 hit, and the rhythm of the Chestnut Hill East came apart. The line was shut down for months. I no longer heard the train pull into the station at night when I had my bedroom windows open. It resumed operating again in late August. Life changed for some, but not all. I occasionally take the train to come into the office. I now

walk into the station to make sure I speak to Barbara. She no longer has a line in front of her window. There are no stacks of quarters. The parking lot is empty. No one is driving to the station from Flourtown. No more judges, prosecutors, law professors, attorneys walking into the station or catching the train. I alone could not support the sweet seamstress at the dry cleaning shop with my business—although I tried. After more than 35 years, she had to close her business on Halloween—the Chestnut Hill East let her down.

I catch the almost empty train now—wearing my mask—having no one else to recognize. The train pulls into Gravers, and no one gets on. They are all now working from home. A few might drive into Center City now, fearful of the train. Same story at Mount Airy. The train now pulls into Sedgwick, Stenton, Germantown, Washington Lane, Germantown, Wister, and Wayne Junction. Although not like pre-March, there are cars in these parking lots. There

are people getting on the train—people of color, people who cannot telecommute. They all now have seats.

I always knew that the Chestnut Hill East line displayed a divide in our society—I just did not realize how stark. ■

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