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By Judy Belk  
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It wasn't so long ago that schools were segregated and indoor plumbing was a luxury.

A recent federal census study ranked my hometown of Alexandria as one of the 10 richest communities in the nation. Well, I grew up in Alexandria before it made the big time -- before Watergate's John Dean put it on the map by calling it home, before it became a tourist destination, before the Metro line came roaring through, before Old Town became a new town of quaint boutiques and before indoor plumbing was standard equipment in every home.

That's right -- indoor plumbing. I spent the first 12 years of my life in Alexandria trekking back and forth from an outhouse and taking turns with my older sister Vickie carrying water pails from a well we shared with our neighbors. It's not that we were terribly poor; we weren't. Still, raising six kids on a limited income without benefit of an indoor bathroom or running water must have been challenging for my parents.

Twenty-six years later, it's hard to believe that a few yards from where my old outhouse stood is a swanky development of \$400,000-plus homes, complete, I'm sure, with two or more bathrooms.

But there have been other more significant changes that have taken place in Alexandria during the past 26 years.

One of my most vivid memories is of standing alongside Braddock Road in 1959 in the bitter cold with my sister, Vickie, waiting for a school bus that seemed always to be late. Ours was one of the last stops the bus would make en route to a "separate, but equal" black Lyles Crouch elementary school located about eight miles away. Once on board, we would curiously press our faces against the window to watch other school children on their way to an all-white Minnie Howard, another elementary school located about a block from our house. It was a school we were forbidden to attend because our skin was black. This was busing, segregation-style; 15 minutes from the nation's capital and five years after the Brown decision. At that time, Alexandria was less of an affluent suburb of Washington than it was a northern outpost of the Old South clinging desperately to old values and fears.

But today's Alexandria has a new updated image. People now know where I'm from. When I went away to college in 1971, I used to describe my hometown as a place near

the District, or if I was in a patriotic mood, as George Washington's hometown. Neither made much of an impression.

Now when I tell folks I'm a native of Alexandria, they tell me they spent their last vacation there. They want to know if I ate at this restaurant or browsed through that antique shop. Usually they go on and on about how cute the street names are -- Queen Street, King Street, Princess, Prince and so on.

When I think of King Street, I think of humid summer days playing in Grandma Ada's backyard, which was just down the street from Oakland Baptist Church where I was baptized, married and later attended Vickie's unexpected funeral.

My Aunt Claudine and Uncle Milton still live on Queen Street, which years ago was the hub of black social life. It's where I went to get my hair pressed and spent Saturday afternoons at the old Carver Theatre, which for years was the only movie theatre blacks could attend in Alexandria.

Looking around Alexandria today, it's hard to believe the changes that have occurred during the past 30 years. Many have been good. Vickie and I eventually were allowed to attend Minnie Howard school, but not before my parents joined with other black families in demanding changes. Today, most Alexandria public schools are fully integrated.

In 1964, my parents scraped together \$500 for a down-payment on a new house in a city-sponsored urban renewal project in "Mud Town," an affectionate reference to its dirt roads, which flooded during the rainy season. The project provided the unique opportunity for 22 black families to either transfer their homeownership to newly constructed modern homes or, as was the case with my family, for others to become first-time homeowners. Today the neighborhood, adjacent to T.C. Williams High School, is still home for many of the original 22 families.

Of course for the Belk Family, the real treat was to finally have indoor plumbing.

Other black neighborhoods near the downtown area haven't been as fortunate. In the city's zest to capitalize on Alexandria's historical past, it's chipped away at an important part of its African-American heritage. Each year it seems, more and more of the black neighborhoods surrounding Old Town are being eroded in favor of more boutiques, more shops and more expensive housing. There's a joke in the black community that ordinary row houses, when occupied by blacks, magically become historical and expensive town houses when the Yuppies move in. I guess that's one way a city can make sure it's always included on the "Top 10 list."

There's no escaping the fact that the Alexandria I grew up in is different from the city I go back home to visit. It's probably a sign of aging on both of our parts. But one can't escape one's past. Alexandria will always be a part of me. No matter how far I stray it will always be home. Some of the people I cherish most in the world live within its borders. Growing up in Alexandria taught me to appreciate the big things in life, such as

the importance of the black family and the black community. It also taught me to appreciate and never underestimate the little things in life, like an indoor bathroom. --  
Judy Belk now lives in California.