

**TIME-MACHINE MILLIONAIRE,
EPISODE 3:
“PUBLIC SCHOOL & INFORMAL SEGREGATION”**

A young white-American couple, Scott and Julie Seamon, have twin boys that just started kindergarten two weeks ago. Scott is a young finance lawyer (not yet making big money), Julie is a part-time event coordinator. They live in upper Manhattan, New York City, way past the fancy Chelsea art district, closer to Harlem. The community is diverse and poverty is high.

Over the last year, the Seamons have had several arguments about where to send their boys to school. They both value education. Neither were excited about the boys attending their neighborhood school, Bloomingdale’s Public School 145. A quarter of the students at PS 145 live in temporary housing, only 15% of the third and fifth graders passed their state assessments. Julie has heard stories about violence at the school. Last year a fourth-grader brought his dad’s handgun to class for show-n-tell. Both parents searched for a better school, maybe a magnet, but learned that the only way for them to make the transfer would be to move so they could be in another district. But Scott likes walking to work and they do not have the savings for a major move. So they sent the twins to PS 145.

But now it is September and, just a month in, one of the boys came home with a black eye. This after two weeks of tears because of second-grade bullies on the playground. And the parent-teacher interactions have not been good either. So Julie is bringing up the conversation again: she wants to move.

In episode 3 of Time-Machine Millionaire, we will meet Julie and Scott, who will have a conversation with the principal of Public School 145, Natalia Russo, a Dominican (second generation) woman who is committed to diversity in her school, by which she means that she wants all classes and cultures represented. She has been frustrated by what she has seen in the last ten years: white families continuing to move houses, transfer kids, apply for gifted programs, and switch to charter schools. Natalia joins her voice to many scholars and educators across the nation: she argues that this is a situation of “informal segregation,” and #systematicviolence. The declining enrollments leave her school with less funding. The loss of middle-class and upper-class families brings a loss of many of the volunteer parents that had helped run after-school programs, safety patrols, and other aspects of school life. But she understands Julie and Scott’s fears: bullying has increasingly been a problem at her school.

This wasn’t the first time that bullying had happened in the neighborhood of west upper Manhattan. Just a few blocks from the Seamon’s apartment, (but more than a hundred years ago in 1900) there occurred the Tenderloin Riot, in which blacks and white spent 24 hours pushing, shoving, knifing, and shooting each other over the death of white police officer. This was one of many violent encounters at the turn of the century that gave rise to a movement that most of us don’t fully understand: racial segregation.

We think of segregation as a project intentionally designed to limit the opportunities of black and brown Americans (and don’t forget that Mexicans, Native Americans, Chinese-Americans, and immigrants often faced similar experiences of segregation). But here is what we fail to see: there were many liberal progressives in the period that believed segregation was necessary in order to end violence. And maybe they were right, in part: within ten years of Plessy vs Fergusson, annual estimated rates of lynchings had been cut in half.

So this coming week we will meet the historical lawyers and judges involved in the supreme court case that argued that segregation was constitutional (Plessy vs Fergusson). We

will learn what the judges thought, and how they hoped that “separate but equal” would help the country. We will also hear from the Southern Progressive Edgar Gardner Murphy who wrote about the possibility of segregation not only ending violence, but also providing the African-American community with the stability and space needed to gain education and health.

Your assignment is to listen to the voices of the past and then ask the question of the comparability of the time periods. Are the Seamons taking part in #systematicviolence if they move? Finally, help them decide what to do: should they stay or move? And if they stay, how should they proceed?

Mandatory Reading:

Excerpt:

“Plessy vs Fergusson” by HW Brands & “Shield of Segregation” by Michael McGerr

Works Cited (important stuff to read, especially for the present-day actors):

Alvin Chang, “The Data Proves that School Segregation is Getting Worse.” March 5, 2018, Vox.
<https://www.vox.com/2018/3/5/17080218/school-segregation-getting-worse-data>

Will Stancil, *The Atlantic*. “School Segregation is Not a Myth.” March 14, 2018.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/03/school-segregation-is-not-a-myth/555614/>

Kate Taylor, *New York Times*. “Family by Family, How School Segregation Still Happens.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/28/nyregion/school-segregation-nyc-district-3.html>

Richard Rothstein, “Why Our Schools Are Still Segregated.” *Educational Leadership*, 70, 8, (May 2013): 50-55.

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may13/vol70/num08/Why-Our-Schools-Are-Segregated.aspx>

Characters:

Scott Seamon (parent)

Julie Seamon (parent)

Natalia Russo (principal of PS 145)

Supreme Court Justice Henry Billings Brown (for segregation) (2)

Southern progressive reformer Edgar Gardner Murphy (for segregation) (2)

Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan (against segregation) (2)

NYC Lawyer Albion Tourgée (against segregation) (2)