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My Neighborhood

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FIVE OAKS

My husband, Michael, and I, along with five children and a dog arrived at 807 Neal Avenue in the Five Oaks Neighborhood of Dayton, Ohio, on August 8, 1963. Michael had just gotten his Doctoral Degree from the University of Florida and had accepted a job at the University of Dayton in the English Department

Fortunately, good friends, Bud and Anita Cochran, who were already at UD volunteered to do house hunting for us. We traveled from US-25 (I-75 had not yet been constructed) to N. Main Street and Neal Avenue. My heart sank! The houses were very close to each other, the front yards were postage-sized and treeless. Further on up the street there were more trees and larger front yards, but still the houses were



what seemed like an arms-length apart. Growing up on a farm in Wisconsin I was used to space and distant neighbors. However, we had signed a rental lease for one year. I told Mike, “After a year we are out of here.”

It was a challenging first year. The neighbors on our block were mostly 70- to 80-year-old widows who welcomed all of us warmly. Maybe, partly because of our UD connection. We were the kind of family they were comfortable with. But there were no children on the block for my kids to play with, except for one little boy who didn’t much come outdoors. Again, our friends, the Cochran’s and their three children who lived six blocks away came to our rescue.

At the end of the first year when Mike and I began looking for a different house, our landlord, Mr. Trout, offered to sell us the house. What a decision! Move or stay? We had become comfortable with our neighbors, Corpus Christi Church and School and Longfellow Public School. And, most especially, we asked each other, “Do we really want to pack up five kids and a dog, again after only a year? And most importantly, we were by now very much a part of the UD family and as such were granted a loan for the mortgage down payment. At that point, my ultimatum of “one year and out” became a “53”-year-stay.

SLOWLY THE NEIGHBORHOOD BEGAN TO CHANGE. WE SAW NATIONAL GUARD JEEPS DRIVING UP AND DOWN OUR STREET DURING THE RACIAL RIOTS. OLDER FOLKS DIED AND YOUNGER FAMILIES MOVED TO THE SUBURBS FOR “MODERN” KITCHENS AND BATHS AND A HOUSE THAT WAS MORE THAN AN ARMS-LENGTH FROM THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR. Rental properties became the norm. In most cases neither the landlords nor the tenants maintained the properties. Unlike before, there were now kids everywhere, many unsupervised as parents worked two jobs.

During this early transition of the neighborhood, the Means grandparents from Wisconsin were visiting us. While we were sitting down to dinner one of the teenage girls from the family across the alley came running in to ask if she could use the phone because her brother had just shot the stepfather who was abusing his mother. We assured Mike’s parents that this was totally unusual; it had never happened before. Unfortunately, this was one of the first African-American families in the neighborhood; more incidents did happen and more and more people left the neighborhood.

The real change came in the early 90s when crack-cocaine invaded the neighborhood. Where in an apartment building across the street little

old ladies once would call to alert us “that our little doggie was out” or ask a kid to drop a letter in the corner box for a nickel, now three or four emaciated young women wrapped in shawls sat on the steps waiting for a dealer or a john. Their drugs came from a grandmother who lived in the house next door. She kept the children of daughters who were in jail, amidst their boyfriends who kept drugs flowing in and out of the house. This was when I was most scared in my neighborhood. Gun flames from a drive-by shooting directly in front of my house, aimed at that house made me hit the floor with my heart thumping. Another time while I was meeting with our community based police office a car drove by, this time they shot into the air. Not all that exciting.

I worked with FONIA, our neighborhood association, for Five Oaks to become a gated community in an attempt to keep out drug traffic and other sorts of criminal activity. Unfortunately, in the long run it didn’t help and more people moved out. Absentee landlords from as far away as Hawaii and Portland, Oregon purchased foreclosed property online. More houses deteriorated beyond repair.

FIFTY-THREE YEARS ON NEAL AVENUE AND THIS IS STILL MY NEIGHBORHOOD! THERE WAS THE NATIONAL

GUARD DRIVING DOWN NEAL AVE. DURING THE RACE RIOTS, THE CRACK EPIDEMIC, THE GATES TO DEFEND US COME AND GONE, AND BLOCKS OF VACANT HOUSES. I AM NOW THE OCTOGENARIAN ON THE BLOCK, STILL LIVING AN ARMS-LENGTH AWAY FROM MY NEIGHBORS OF THIRTY SOME YEARS. I’m still working to make a difference in this, my neighborhood, and still not ready to leave. So much for that one-year ultimatum!