

A Simpson Street reunion celebrates the bonds forged in the once troubled neighborhood

'Everyone looked out for one another'

Judith Davidoff on Thursday 08/16/2012

On a hot, sticky July morning, Lake Point Drive is quiet, peaceful and, in parts, shaded by mature trees. Diane Small, who has lived in the neighborhood for more than two decades, shows me the nearby community gardens where she grows tomatoes, collard greens and pole beans. Walking back to her small house, we pause at the intersection of Lake Point Drive and Fayette Avenue. Small says the decision to change the name of Simpson Street to Lake Point Drive took her by surprise.

"When I found out, I said, 'Where is the lake?' I walked and walked and walked and walked and eventually found the lake."

More than 10 years later, the new name has still not taken hold with longtime residents like Small - or many of those who have since left.

"We still call it Simpson Street," says Small, who is known as "Ms. Diane" in the community.

And it's why the third annual reunion of the neighborhood, set this year for Aug. 18 at the Dream Park Shelter in Monona's Winnequah Park (8 a.m. -10 p.m.), is called the "Simpson Street Family Reunion."

"From the outside people thought it was a notorious neighborhood, but for us it wasn't," says Mike "BigMike" Bell, 27, who grew up on Simpson Street and was one of the first to float the idea of a neighborhood reunion. "I don't think the residents were aware of the stigma. It was just home for us."

But in the early 1990s, the area - bounded on the north by Lake Monona, south by West Broadway, east by Bridge Road and west by the John Nolen corridor - was arguably the city's most troubled neighborhood, with escalating drug activity, police calls and neglected housing. As early as 1986, in fact, the city had targeted the "Broadway/Simpson/Waunona" neighborhood for "development activities" due to the high concentration of low-income families living in the large complexes along Broadway and Simpson Streets and, among other things, "the existence of acute social needs."

But to Small, 57, and others who moved from Chicago and elsewhere, it was a suburban oasis.

"When I landed here it was really nice," says Small, who arrived in Madison in 1988. "I said to myself, 'Wow, I finally found something that reminded me of South Carolina.'" Small grew up in Chicago, but spent some cherished school years with her mom's sister in South Carolina.



Simpson Street has meant stability for Diane Small.

Credit:Judith Davidoff

With her three kids in tow, Small crashed with her sister, who had four kids of her own, in a three-bedroom townhouse in the Monona Shores apartment complex. After about six months, she found her own two-bedroom apartment down the block. In 1990, her fourth son was born.

Small was on public assistance but also worked, first as a security guard and later, after going back to community college, at Glendale Elementary, where she moved up from lunchroom supervisor to family community liaison. One year, when she was determined to cover the rent on a city-subsidized single-family home, which she now owns, she says she filed six W-2 forms with her income tax returns.

Through it all, she was looking for the kind of permanence she never had in Chicago, where she had lived in 19 apartments.

"I never had stability before," Small says, her eyes welling up with tears. "It's emotional just to say this."

Bell says the mantra "It takes a village to raise a child" was in play on Simpson Street before it came in vogue.

"You had a mom, but you also had 100 other moms," says Bell, a former Madison radio host who now divides his time between Milwaukee and Madison, where he works at the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County. "Everyone looked out for one another."

But that's just part of the story. Joe Balles, now the captain of the South Police Station, was the area's neighborhood officer from 1989 to 1993.

By that time, he says, the area was undergoing "significant transition."

And much of it revolved around the neighborhood's many large apartment complexes. Between Bridge Road and 2100 Simpson St., says Balles, there were 1,100 apartments, 300 in Monona Shores alone.

Simpson Street became increasingly challenged when public housing in Chicago - whose residents were predominantly African American - came under siege from gun violence, drug trafficking, poverty and neglect. Crack cocaine first showed up in Chicago in 1988, and by 1989 it arrived in Madison, says Balles: "We started seeing a refugee population of mothers and kids fleeing Chicago and making their way to Madison."

By 1991, Simpson Street had become "one of the most dangerous places in the city," says Balles. "We had several people shot down there."

In the early 1990s, the Community Development Block Grant funded a planning grant and real estate study to prepare an inventory of housing in the area. Hickory Hurie, the former head of the CDBG who is now back as its interim director, and Percy Brown headed up a staff team that worked with police, building inspection and public health, among others, to put together a revitalization plan for the area.

Step one was to target the biggest apartment complex on the street - Monona Shores.

"The thinking was if we could get a toehold there, we could influence the rest of the neighborhood," says Hurie.

The Community Development Authority purchased the troubled apartments and renovated in phases so that residents could be relocated to other units during construction. This was possible, says Brown, because by the time of renovation - 1998 - 75% of the apartments were vacant. More than 100 apartments were razed.

Brown says the city's revitalization efforts often get criticized for displacing people from the neighborhood. But he says families were already on the move.

"They became afraid of what was going on around them," he says.

Small, who worked as a leasing consultant and property manager for Monona Shores at the time, says families left before and after redevelopment.

Families had to reapply for rental units, and some were denied because they weren't in good standing with the landlord or had drug issues, says Small.

Brown insists the efforts in the neighborhood were done sensitively, and with the buy-in of residents.

"I wouldn't have been able to live with my own conscience if we had put innocent people out," says Brown, who had friends from church in the neighborhood.

However, few of the former residents of the three-bedroom townhouses by the shores of Lake Monona could afford to purchase units once they were turned into condominiums. Small says only one African American couple was able to purchase a unit in what became known as Waunona Woods.

But Small, like Brown, says the efforts paid off and saved Simpson Street.

"It created a better neighborhood for everybody," she says.

Police activity has certainly dropped. According to police department records, "calls for service" reached an all-time high in 1993 with 4,115. About half that many calls are logged these days: 2,050 in 2010 and 2,212 in 2011.

Police Chief Noble Wray, who lived in Monona Shores from 1984 to 1987 and was the area's first neighborhood police officer in 1987, says the revitalization efforts were a success. But he calls it "fair criticism" to say that efforts to clean up Simpson Street might have pushed crime into other neighborhoods.

Wray says the effort to turn Simpson Street around had a number of things going for it, including strong neighborhood groups like the Mothers of Simpson Street, who organized and marched against the shootings and drug activity in the area. The support of nearby homeowners along Waunona Way who realized they had a stake in seeing Simpson Street succeed was also critical.

Wray and others say longtime south-side Ald. Tim Bruer was instrumental in, among other things, getting nuisance abatement laws passed so that the city could purchase and renovate buildings that had fallen into disrepair.

Bell and Small don't deny the bad times on Simpson Street, but say some of the good was lost in the glare of negative publicity. Bell says the bonds he forged there are the reason he wanted a neighborhood reunion.

Though he moved from the area a decade ago, Bell kept in touch with many people, including one elderly neighbor and her disabled son.

"She taught me the value of money," he says. "As a kid I'd go and she'd have me take out her garbage and read to her. She paid me an allowance."

Bell says that his own mom was going through a hard time, and that "Mary's house was like a safe haven."

And that is exactly what Simpson Street has been for Diane Small. "It's stability. I didn't always have it. I had to learn it."

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