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NEWS

Can memories of Clarissa Street's golden age of Black business inspire a resurgence?



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What is the value of a neighborhood?

It may boil down to economics for real estate developers and government officials. For George Fontenette and Kathy Sprague Dexter, the real value of a neighborhood rests within the memories they share of Rochester's 3rd Ward.

On a cold Saturday afternoon, Fontenette, Dexter and a group of youth leaders from the community organization Teen Empowerment led a walking tour down Clarissa Street, a once historic African American community that was to Rochester what Greenwood was to Tulsa, Oklahoma.

In the mid-20th century, Clarissa Street was the central commercial district of the 3rd Ward, featuring vibrant businesses such as the Gibson Hotel, Latimer's Funeral Home, Ray's Barbershop, Scotty's Pool Hall, Smitty's Birdland, LaRue's Restaurant and Vallot's Tavern.

"It's a lot of history in this area," Fontenette told those on the walking tour starting the trek.

"It's changed a lot since I was a kid, but I still enjoy coming back and reminiscing about it," Fontenette said.

Known as the cornerstone of Black Rochester, Clarissa Street became famous for jazz clubs like the Elk's Club and the Pythodd Club, a venue famous musicians — including Wes Montgomery — had to play while making their way through town.

More: How a reporter and her puppy learned to navigate Rochester, beginning on Clarissa Street

"We are very proud of Clarissa Street," Kathy Sprague Dexter said when Fontenette passed her the microphone. "That's why we wanted you all to come down and take a look."

The nostalgia of the walking tour came with vividly-recalled stories and memories of a close-knit community, but as the elders reminisced, they also evoked what what was lost.

Microphone in hand, Sprague Dexter pointed to a grassy hill.

"That's where my family's house was," she said. "You know how that feels when you come down here and see where your parents' or grandparents' house was? It hurts because you stop and think, why?"

Tens of thousands of African Americans searching for employment and a better quality of life relocated to Rochester from southern states during the Great Migration of the early 20th century.

Government-mandated segregated housing for Black residents, known as redlining, forced many into neighborhoods like Rochester's 3rd Ward.

The rich culture of community established out of the concentration of Black families on Clarissa Street was overlooked when urban renewal plans overhauled the neighborhood in the 1960s. Today, the 3rd Ward is a suburban-style development known as Corn Hill.

That combination of redlining, urban renewal and white flight aided by the construction of superhighways like Rochester's Inner Loop, eradicated similar Black neighborhoods throughout the country. Now those same formerly Black neighborhoods are ripe for renewal.

"It's apparent that nationally we're seeing a boom in downtown development," said Calvin Eaton, founder of 540WMain, a nonprofit organization focused on creating change through community-based connection and antiracism education.

"Now we see a return to the city. I think it's a good thing to develop and redevelop, but the issue is with the families and descendants of folks who were pushed out when those homes and communities were demolished."

As the Clarissa Street walk continued, youth leaders from Teen Empowerment used a tablet to show those on the tour vintage neighborhood photos.

"At least we have those memories," Sprague Dexter said. "It shows some pictures of our family members many years ago. That brings some happiness to me when I see that."

As present-day developers and officials contemplate plans for the areas now occupied by highways, companies like FordMomentum hope conversations about what makes neighborhoods valuable are reconsidered.

FordMomentum offers companies sustainable communication strategies through a mix of cultural inclusion, creativity and data science.

"For me and my firm, one person is valuable," said Maya Ford, founder of FordMomentum. "So be it one person who was displaced, or a million people who are displaced, the one was enough."

In 2016, Ford's firm assisted Houston's Midtown Redevelopment Authority in turning wary community members into advocates when it came to redeveloping urban blight.

A significant portion of Ford's work revolves around getting communities to recognize their value extends far beyond dollars and cents and showing big business and civic leadership the actual value of Black neighborhoods before they decide to redevelop.

"There are so many currencies at play in the 21st century," Ford said. "Rochester is a great example of cultural currency for the reasons that Black people moved to Rochester since the days of Frederick Douglass; and why they continue to stay well after him."

According to Ford, using data to identify these cultural currencies can help fight against gentrification and assist Black communities in using available resources to improve conditions.

Ford referenced a 2016 Nielsen study on spending habits showing Black people who make more than \$65,000, spend a significant amount of money in urban corner stores.

"When we talk about food deserts, why are we always asking for a big-box grocery store?" Ford said. "Why wouldn't we establish what people need in bodegas? We already see how their patterns work with the data."

More: 'We aren't fearful.' Respect, warmth part of the bargain at this neighborhood corner store

"Connectivity is an actual currency because it allows you to share your resources in a stronger way," Ford said.

According to Fontenette and Sprague Dexter, Clarissa Street had that connectivity.

"If you did something wrong, by the time you got home, your parents knew it and you were in trouble," Dexter said.

That accountability was lost when the 3rd Ward was decimated and Black people spread through the city.

Eaton of 540WMain believes the rise in gun violence is tied to the loss of connected communities.

"All these issues are tied together," Eaton said. "When it comes to the correlation of poverty and violence in communities, we know statistically, communities in which residents own their homes have less instances of violent crimes. I think people want to see true investment in homeownership. I think that's a big conversation. There needs to be affordable housing that the community has ownership over. Even for people who don't want to own or aren't able, they still want to be able to afford rent."

As conversations about strengthening communities continue, Ford said she believes the only way to improve conditions within Black communities is teamwork.

"We have to figure this out, and everyone has a part in it," Ford said. "We go together or we die alone."

Check out Teen Empowerment's documentary on Clarissa Street which which has won 4 national media and film festival awards so far : www.clarissauprooted.org

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