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Showcasing one community – and all communities

By Patrick T. Reardon on Mon., 10/21/2009 –7:20 am.

Joe Graber of Oak Park is delighted to see the solid, well-appointed, well-maintained three-flat at 8201 S. Elizabeth St.

It's where his father grew up.

“And he was a member of this parish,” Graber says as he walks into St. Sabina Church at 1210 W. 78th Pl., an elegant Tudor Gothic structure erected in 1933.

When Graber's father lived in this South Side neighborhood --- called Auburn-Gresham --- it was filled with Irish immigrants and their children. Indeed, it was in this community along 79th Street, its main drag, that the city's St. Patrick's Day parade was held annually. Then, in 1960, the festivities moved downtown.

That was just before this community, like many others across the Chicago landscape, went through a wrenching shift in the racial make-up of its people.

In 1960, virtually all of Auburn-Gresham's were white. By 1970, the neighborhood, with the exception of the blocks west of Ashland Avenue, had turned completely African-American. And, by 1980, that western section was black as well.

“It was called white flight,” says Carlos Nelson (below), “but I call it ethnic succession.”



8201 S. Elizabeth St.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)



The drastic changeover hurt the 79th Street business strip as, up and down the blocks, store-owners closed their doors, and many of the shops weren't replaced. But the story was different on the quiet sidestreets.

"On our residential streets," Nelson says, "the people who moved in, they all maintained their houses well." And they still do, as Nelson is quick to point out.

Strutting their stuff

Nelson is the executive director of the non-profit Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corp. And, on this Saturday morning in October, he's leading a tour of his neighborhood for a dozen or so people --- some from as far away as Scotland; most, like Graber, from in and around Chicago.

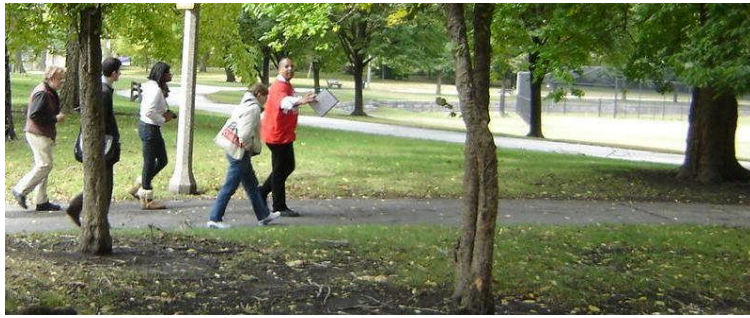
The tour is called "Rebuilding a Classic Chicago Community," and it's part of the Bold Plans Big Dreams Community Showcase through which six city neighborhoods get to strut their stuff for visitors. In addition to Auburn-Gresham, the others include Pilsen, South Chicago, Albany Park, West Ridge and the Quad Communities (North Kenwood, Oakland, Douglas and Grand Boulevard).

Think of the buses that drive tourists around Chicago --- or any other major municipality, for that matter --- with tour guides who play up the beauty, history and character of the city.

That's what these tours do, only on a neighborhood level.

Under the Showcase, created by the Burnham Plan Centennial Committee and funded by The Boeing Company and Local Initiatives Support Corp./Chicago, community leaders were trained in putting together

downtown, but we're taking the opposite approach --- from the ground up."



A universal story

The tours play up the individuality of the neighborhood. But what strikes me during the Auburn-Gresham tour is how universal the story of a city community is.

For instance, early in the tour and then near the end, the bus passes through the intersection of 79th and Halsted Streets, and, each time, Nelson points out a handsome terra cotta-faced building on the southeast corner.

"That was the Old Walgreens," he says.

Every neighborhood in the city has an Old Walgreens, or something similar --- a humble landmark that everyone knows and that has functioned as a visual anchor of the ebb and flow of the community's life. Every community has beautiful places, and historical places, and a fair share of fun facts.

For those who aren't residents, a neighborhood can seem foreboding. If you're a South Sider, do you have much of a feel for what life is like in Albany Park? Or, if you're a North Sider, what's Mount Greenwood like?

The reality is that Mount Greenwood and Albany Park are both, in myriad ways, like the neighborhood you live in.

And, if you live in the suburbs, the same holds true. Auburn-Gresham might not seem much like Clarendon Hills or Port Barrington, but it is.

"If people work together"

In those towns and in that South Side neighborhood --- and in your town, for that matter --- there's pride in the community, in its past and in its future. There are hopes and dreams, and problems that have to be faced. And a lot of hard work being invested.

As if to highlight this, several of the people on the Saturday tour are on scouting missions. A couple workers from the city's tourism department are there to learn from Nelson how to run this kind of neighborhood visit.



A couple businessmen, including Graber, a former banker, are from the North Avenue Business Association in Oak Park.

“We came to get ideas about what other communities are doing,” Graber says. “We’re learning what a community organization can do.

“You can accomplish a lot if people work together.”

A lot in a neighborhood. And a lot in a region.