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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

8201 S. Elizabeth St.

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."

THE BURNHAM BLOG

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ABOUT THIS BLOG

This blog is about history, planning and the future. It's rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [MORE]

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 these sort of marketing tours --- how to tell their neighborhood's story; how to mix in the interesting, the significant and the odd; and even how to map out a route for the bus.

Bold Plans, Big Dreams. Community Showcase Tours. West Ridge (West Rogers Park) ndo-American Heritage Museum NEA Albany Park DARK North River Comission AUSTI EAST GARFIELI PARK **Quad Communities** uad Communities SOUTH Development Corporation BRID Lower West Side KINLE (Pilsen) The Resi n Project PARK RCHE BAGE PA HY WEST South Chicago CLER WEST CHICAG LAWN SOUTH ASHBUR Auburn Gresham Development Corporation WEST PULLMA

They end up hitting heavy on the past. Nelson, for instance, notes that Vincennes Avenue was originally, like many of Chicago's angle streets, an Indian Trail. He points out the studio where bluesman Willie Dixon used to record. He tells us that much of Auburn-Gresham was originally developed by William B. Ogden, Chicago's first mayor.

And they're heavy on fun facts: Did you know that the 79th Street bus route is the CTA's busiest? Or that Chicago Bulls point guard Derrick Rose attended Simeon High School?

And they highlight the neighborhood's most photogenic places, such as the Auburn Lagoons at Stewart and 78th Streets and St. Leo's church tower at 7750 S. Emerald Ave.

And they tend to give a lot of attention to the carefully crafted plans each neighborhood has for getting stronger, getting better. "So often," Nelson says during the Saturday tour, "planners are in their ivory towers 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.

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