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Residents and supporters of Pittsburgh's Homewood neighborhood are reinvigorating the



Modest homes like these on Hamilton Avenue are common in Pittsburgh's Homewood neighborhood, but they belie the innovation and promising economic development occurring within the community.

community and boosting hopes for its brighter future. By Elwin Green

A

sk Homewood's longest-term residents what the neighborhood was like before 1968,

and they will tell you about not having to leave Homewood for anything. All they needed was on Homewood Avenue, including two movie theaters and a G.C. Murphy department store.

Over time, the neighborhood's population shrank somewhat from its postwar high as communities across Pittsburgh lost residents to the suburbs. Homewood's complexion also changed with an influx of Hill District residents displaced by construction in the early 1960s of the Civic Arena, a venue that hosted concerts and was home to the city's hockey team until it was razed and replaced more than 50 years later. Meanwhile, Homewood, once a mix of German, Irish, Italian and African American families, became majority-black. And at the beginning of 1968, it was still thriving.

Then the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered. Homewood Avenue went up in flames.

The loss of the business district exacerbated the continuing loss of residents through the 1970s, and conditions worsened as the American steel industry imploded, taking the Pittsburgh region's major revenue source with it. In January 1983, unemployment in the Pittsburgh metropolitan statistical area reached 17.1 percent. Over the next few years, the job of steelworker—one of the few occupations that would allow a black man in Pittsburgh without a college degree to support a family—disappeared, sparking further outmigration.

During that same span, the crack epidemic emerged, along with the War on Drugs, which resulted in a disproportionate number of neighborhood residents being incarcerated.

But most did not surrender to crack or fall into crime. They worked what jobs they could find and raised their children. They attended the two-dozen-plus neighborhood churches. They participated in block clubs, a mainstay of the community's Operation Better Block (OBB) that was formed in 1970 to promote neighborhood improvements. Over time, the smaller clubs reconfigured into larger clusters as OBB

expanded its community organizing activities along with its housing and youth programming revitalization efforts.

Homewood residents also patronized the remaining neighborhood businesses, and just as Pittsburgh's economy was bottoming out in 1983, the owners of three of those businesses—Sarah Goode of Goode's drugstore, Sara Trower of Trower's Cleaners and Neil Dorsey of Dorsey's Records—formed the Homewood-Brushton Revitalization Development Corporation. In a surge of activity, the agency built new homes, brought new businesses to the neighborhood, published a newspaper, operated a radio station—and then folded, its ambitions having outstripped its finances. That organization was followed in 1999 by the Homewood-Brushton Comprehensive Community Organization. HBCCO created a neighborhood strategic plan, but never implemented it because of a number of factors including a lack of funding.

With the turn of the century has come two shifts in Homewood: an increasing amount of activity focused on rebuilding the neighborhood—carried out by individuals and organizations in the absence of an overarching strategic approach—and a renewed effort to create a comprehensive neighborhood plan. In both cases, longtime residents find themselves joining hands with newer residents or non-residents, including government officials, nonprofit organizations, and members of the philanthropic community such as The Heinz Endowments and the Richard King Mellon Foundation. These individuals and groups are responding not only to Homewood's challenges, but also its opportunities.

“Our focus is on how much strength we can build from within Homewood,” explained Scott Izzo, director of the Richard King Mellon Foundation, which has invested \$30 million in the neighborhood in the past 10 years.

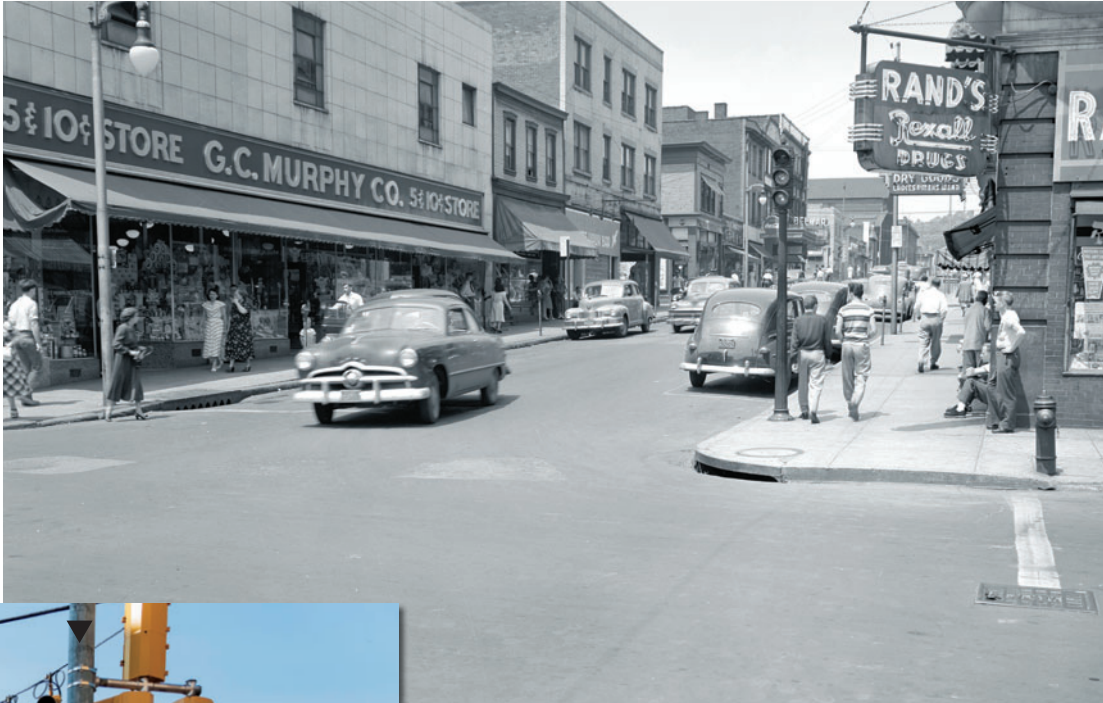
And the community is becoming stronger, contends Homewood native John M. Wallace Jr., a University of Pittsburgh sociology professor and pastor of Bible Center Church who has helped to launch educational, environmental and business ventures that have taken root in the neighborhood.

“I think Homewood is moving forward in a positive direction,” Dr. Wallace said. “We continue to have challenges, of course, but as



1950s

Homewood's business district was bustling in 1950, especially on the main drag of Homewood Avenue, which was dotted with familiar commercial fixtures such as G.C. Murphy and Rexall Drugs stores along with neighborhood-specific businesses like the Nite Hawk Bar and the Belmar Theatre. Homewood also was predominantly white, though a significant African American population lived in the community.



Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh, Library System

1970s

By 1970, Homewood was a mostly African American neighborhood that was trying to regain its footing after the despair that followed the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A key player in this effort was Operation Better Block, which was established that year to revitalize the Homewood-Brushton community with programs that included street beautification projects such as tree plantings along with housing and youth initiatives.



Allegheny Conference on Community Development, Heinz History Center



Sam Fairchild

2018

While Homewood Avenue is not the bustling commercial center it once was, it still is the site of significant community institutions. These include Community College of Allegheny County's 32,000-square-foot Homewood-Brushton Center, left, which houses a Learning Resource Center; a reading lab; two fully equipped computer labs; two e-learning rooms; a science resource room; and a state-of-the-art science lab for classes in anatomy, physiology, chemistry and microbiology.

I look back over the last decade, things are definitely [moving] in an up and to the right direction.”

The most visible projects are new construction, particularly housing. In 2005, Building United of Southwestern Pennsylvania, a nonprofit developer, built 20 homes in the neighborhood. The houses, priced between \$135,000 and \$145,000 and partially financed with federal and city subsidies, sold quickly. Over the next 13 years, projects by Building United and other developers would include a senior housing complex with retail space on its first floor, new rental housing, rehabbed homes and other single-family home construction.

While there is momentum for housing in Homewood, Building United’s executive director, the Rev. Samuel Ware, believes that the neighborhood is not yet at the point when market momentum will make for-profit development feasible without subsidies.

“In order to get to the tipping point, I believe you need to do an additional 200 [units of housing], minimum, and probably closer to 500 to really change things,” he said.

And he cautioned against focusing exclusively on affordable housing, which some consider key to community development. “You can’t grow a community in a positive direction if everybody in the community is on government subsidy,” he noted.

On the commercial development side, nonprofit lender Bridgeway Capital purchased in 2013 what may be Homewood’s largest building, a five-story, 150,000-square-foot former Westinghouse warehouse that Bridgeway renamed 7800 Susquehanna in recognition of its street address. The building is now home to several small businesses—mostly startups, created by young entrepreneurs—as well as the Trade Institute of Pittsburgh, which offers a 10-week program in the building trades, and the University of Pittsburgh’s Manufacturing Assistance Center, which provides a 14-week program in machining.

Homewood also continues to build on its legacy in the arts. The neighborhood home of jazz composers and pianists Billy Strayhorn and Ahmad Jamal now has multiple venues for pursuing music education. The Afro-American Music Institute (AAMI) has taught music to pupils of all ages since it was established by Dr. James Johnson and his wife Pamela in 1982. Likewise, the Jazz Workshop Inc. has used the Homewood branch of Carnegie Library for classroom space since 1973, as well as offering a weekly series of jazz concerts there each summer.

Just a block away from AAMI and the library, the newly renovated Homewood-Brushton YMCA hosts the arts-focused Creative Youth Center, and is one of eight branches remaining in the Greater Pittsburgh YMCA system after the organiza-

tion filed for bankruptcy and closed several other branches. With its focus on youth engagement and outreach, the Homewood-Brushton Y is a good example of how the YMCA provides programs according to the wants and needs expressed in each community.

And a half-mile or so from the YMCA, artist Vanessa German sculpts, paints, writes poetry and teaches children to express themselves through art in her Art House, which is elaborately adorned with her own colorfully creative work and that of neighborhood youth.

Homewood’s challenges and successes cannot be entirely isolated from those of the city and of the region. Perhaps that is nowhere more obvious than in matters of health and the environment. Initiatives are underway to help residents learn about and address indoor and outdoor air pollution, and to increase healthy eating options and physical activity.

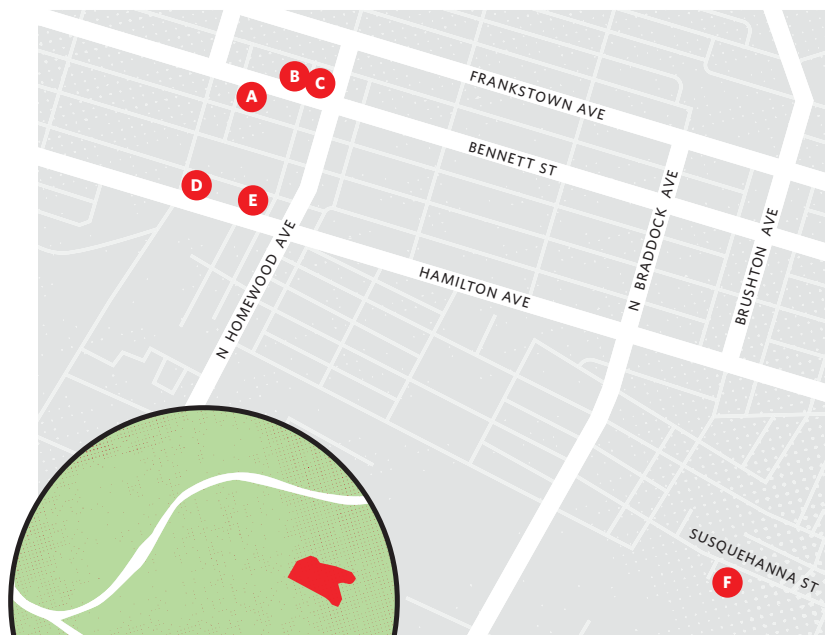
One experiment to model green electricity generation and food production is Oasis Farm and Fishery, an urban micro-farm, where a greenhouse contains aquaponic and hydroponic

systems for growing vegetables and fish. The entire operation runs on direct current provided by solar panels, making it independent of the grid. Dr. Wallace joined with John Camillus, a professor at Pitt’s Katz School of Business, and Bopaya Bidanda, a professor at Pitt’s Swanson School of Engineering, to conceive the project.



Sam Fairchild

Completed in 2014, these houses constructed by Building United of Southwestern Pennsylvania transformed a former vacant lot on Finance Street in Homewood.



HOMWOOD NEIGHBORHOOD ANCHORS

Once a wealthy community in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Homewood experienced periods of prosperity, anguish and promise during the last century. And for nearly two decades, despite continuing challenges, the community has been steadily building on its promise with support from neighborhood organizations and institutions that have provided the foundation for later development.

A Similar to its neighborhood home, the **Homewood-Brushton YMCA** has evolved over the decades, most recently developing a youth arts focus to meet the needs and interests of the community.

B **Operation Better Block Housing** was one of the first organizations committed to revitalizing Homewood after rebellions following the 1968 assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. crippled the business district.

C As one of the community's newer institutions, the **Homewood Children's Village** has become a key player in revitalization efforts with its focus on improving neighborhood children's educational and life outcomes.

D More than a book repository, the **Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh-Homewood** has served as a gathering place for community forums, exhibits, plays and musical performances.

E The **Afro-American Music Institute** started in 1982 in a church in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood, but moved six years later to Homewood, where it provides music education and personal enrichment to local youth and adults.

F **7800 Susquehanna** may be a commercial enterprise but, as Homewood's largest building, it stands out as a representation of the neighborhood's hope for economic growth through entrepreneurial initiatives.

At the Homewood-Brushton YMCA, a fitness center serves the branch's 700-plus members, who can work out solo, participate in group exercises, or use a personal trainer, said Executive Director Julie Motley-Williams. The YMCA's health fairs are open to everyone, and other activities include a bike ride for children in June. The Y also grows fruits and vegetables on site, which a chef uses to prepare fresh meals daily during the school year for 125 children, some of whom help to grow the food.

Another neighborhood institution with a wellness emphasis is the Homewood Children's Village, which created an Office of Child and Community Health after realizing that academic performance is deeply affected by children's physical well-being. The department sponsors an annual 5k run/walk and health expo, and has published a 33-page "Healthy Food and Gardening Access Guide" for the neighborhood.

Seeds for the Village were planted a decade ago when Dr. Wallace and Aliya Durham, then-executive director of Operation Better Block, led a group on a trip to New York to observe the Harlem Children's Zone, a comprehensive educational and community services initiative famous for helping Harlem children to escape cycles of poverty and failure.

Mr. Izzo of the Richard King Mellon Foundation was in that group. When they returned to Pittsburgh, "everyone was committed to trying to do something positive in Homewood," he said.

The Homewood Children's Village launched in September 2010 with a focus on improving children's educational outcomes and continues to serve Homewood's families with increasing success. Its 2017 annual report states that 82 percent of Homewood graduates were accepted into post-secondary institutions in the 2016-17 school year.

As different initiatives provide new opportunity and optimism in Homewood, Dr. Wallace noted that the foundation for the steady progress was laid before examples of success were evident.

"I think there's a lot of things bubbling up. People will say it came from nowhere," he said. Then he added with a smile, "Nowhere, or 15 years of work!" **h**