



Rev. N.L. SCARBOROUGH
First Mayor of Bronzeville Est. 1937
Pastor of Trinity Baptist Church

EAST SIDE

STORY

Can King-Lincoln Bronzeville retain its central role in the life of Black Columbus as white residents and investment dollars pour into the neighborhood?

By Mark Ferenchik

On a Saturday afternoon in March, Ori Segev and Josh Nowak stand outside the Alebrijes food truck in a parking lot near the corner of Long Street and Taylor Avenue across from the Ohio State East Hospital. Neither is from the neighborhood. Segev lives in Southern Orchards, south of Nationwide Children's Hospital. Nowak came all the way from Powell. The 29-year-old Segev says he knows the artist who did the vehicle's vibrant artwork depicting coyotes and mythical creatures.

"This truck has some of the best tacos in town," says Segev, a filmmaker. "This is the main reason I come here. To me, this is a very authentic place."

He is talking about the mobile food vendor, but the same can be said about the surrounding King-Lincoln Bronzeville neighborhood, which, for decades, has been the heartbeat of Columbus' Black community. Change is coming, though, to the area, which proudly houses the Lincoln Theatre, the King Arts Complex and



the headquarters of the Columbus Urban League. Segev and Nowak are both white, much like the growing number of homeowners and renters flocking to the new apartments rising along Long and Atcheson streets and to the renovated homes on North 21st Street and Monroe Avenue.

Demographic data shows the changing racial makeup of the neighborhood, one of several on the Near East Side of Columbus. According to 2013 estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 78 percent of the population of the neighborhood's ZIP code, 43203 (which also includes neighboring Woodland Park), was then Black, while only 14 percent was white. By 2019, that estimate changed, the percentage of Black residents declining to 69 percent, and the percentage of white residents increasing to 25. The total estimated population also rose, from 7,297 to 8,014.

These population and development trends raise a question: As the neighborhood evolves, how will the changes affect its history and longtime residents? Property values are soaring. Homes are springing up on vacant lots. And those factors threaten to drive out the very people who are the soul of the neighborhood.

Catherine Girves says the concerns about gentrification are valid. Girves, who is white, worries about both cultural and housing displacement—and she's witnessed those issues play out on social media. When she moved to the neighborhood in 2013, she was asked to join the community's Next-door page. What she found on the website shocked her, with some posts running along the lines of, "Hey, there's a Black man in a hoodie walking down the street."

"That's somebody who lives here," she says.

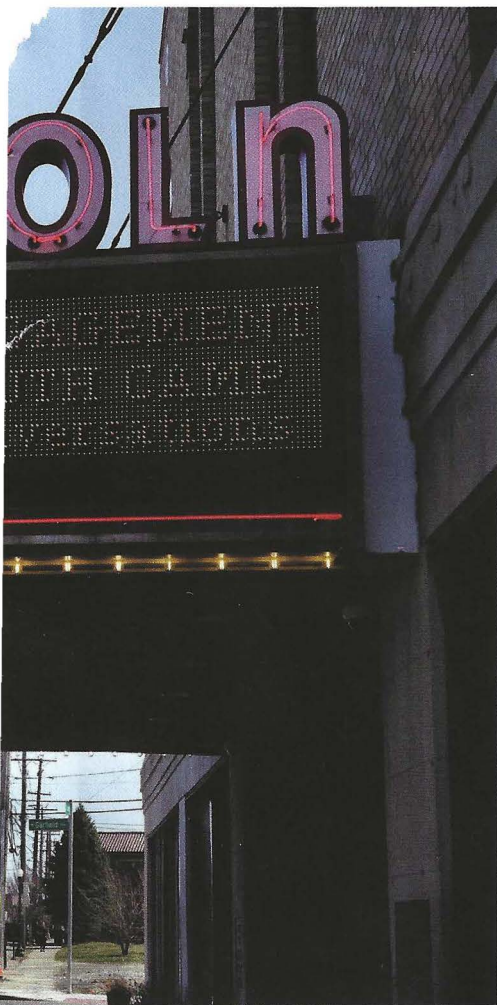
Reita Smith grew up on the West Side, but she was born on South 22nd Street and really spent her teenage years on Long Street and Mount Vernon Avenue, the two main thoroughfares of King-Lincoln Bronzeville, the area bordered by I-71, Atcheson Street/Mount Vernon Avenue, Taylor Avenue and East Broad Street. "Everything was there. ... And I felt safe," she says of this period in the late 1950s.

There were five theaters, including the Lincoln, the Cameo and the Empress. The neighborhood had its own bowling alley, a market, jazz clubs featuring singers such as Columbus' own Nancy Wilson. "Then there was Tyler's drugstore and the bakeries and the restaurants," Smith says. Black entertainers, such as Count Basie, Ella



Above, the Lincoln Theatre across the street from construction on the Adelphi Quarter on Long Street; below, MPACC BoxPark in King-Lincoln Bronzeville





Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington, stayed in Black hotels in the neighborhood such as the Macon and the St. Clair while in town to perform.

The dollars stayed in the community. “It was called the cultural and business center; it was labeled the million-dollar mile,” Smith says. “Back then, the physicians lived next door to you. The lawyer lived next door to you. Because of segregation, it was a self-supporting community.”

Then came I-71, which sliced through the center of Columbus almost 60 years ago in the early 1960s. The freeway displaced scores of Black residents on the Near East Side, cutting off the heart of the city’s African American community from Downtown. For decades, the area struggled with poverty, crime and depopulation.

The destruction of the neighborhood’s history continued through the years. Most recently, it was the Poindexter Village public housing complex, built in 1940 and dedicated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. It was

the first public housing project in Columbus and one of the first in the country. Smith raised a family there and joined the battle to save it when the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority wanted to demolish the complex. CMHA eventually agreed to preserve two buildings (one as a museum and the other as a cultural center), replacing the rest with a senior high-rise apartment building and the Legacy Pointe apartments.

The city of Columbus did turn its attention to this struggling part of town during Mike Coleman’s tenure as mayor. Almost two decades ago, Coleman and his administration rebranded the neighborhood as the King-Lincoln District—which later added Bronzeville, the historic name of the area—traveling to Kansas City, Missouri, to study what that city had done to revitalize its historic Black neighborhood. At that time, Kansas City had spent \$30 million in public and private money to rebuild the area.

Columbus came up with a King-Lincoln District redevelopment plan. From there, things slowly started to happen. The Lincoln Theatre on East Long Street was renovated with \$13.5 million, including \$6.3 million from the city, \$4 million from Franklin County and private donations. A developer built a three-story office building, a project Coleman supported, across the street from the theater at Long Street and Hamilton Avenue. (But a nearby condominium project, The Whitney, had to be bailed out by the city.)

And the city continues to pump money into the neighborhood. In March, Columbus City Council approved \$3.6 million for new storm sewers, water lines, sidewalks and streetlights along a section of Long Street.

Meanwhile, Partners Achieving Community Transformation, a collaboration of the Ohio State University, the city of Columbus and the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority, has been working for a decade to revitalize about 800 acres near Ohio State University Hospital East, including a \$200,000 exterior home repair program with average grants of \$14,000 that helps keep older residents in their homes. “People living in the neighborhood have stayed there for 20, 30, 40 years, and want to stay there,” says Autumn Glover, PACT’s president. “Our promise is a mixed-income community. We need private-sector developers to help us with that, working with the land bank and land trust to analyze where we are now,” she adds.

The investment was not only economic. The city tried to reconnect the Near East Side to Downtown with the Long Street Cultural Wall, which spans I-71 and displays 139 imag-

es related to the neighborhood, including musicians Bobby Floyd and Arnett Howard, jazz singer Wilson, former Columbus school board member Bill Moss and artist Aminah Robinson, all Black natives of the city.

A brick house in the 200 block of Martin Luther King Boulevard highlights the transformation of King-Lincoln. In 2004, the 1,400-square-foot house with three bedrooms and a bath and a half sold for \$55,000. In 2018, a couple bought the house, located just east of I-71, for \$142,000. After fixing it up, they are on track to sell it for \$248,000. It listed for \$245,000.

This economic demand offers both opportunities and challenges for longtime residents and businesses. Al Edmondson, a barber and president of the Mount Vernon Avenue District Improvement Association, says more residents means more business for local merchants. “My hope is that does happen, like back in the day when Mount Vernon thrived,” says Edmondson, who is Black. But what happens to longtime residents as prices rise? Will they still be around to get their haircuts at Edmondson’s barber-shop or patronize other stores in a thriving future business district?

Willis Brown, a longtime Near East Side leader in King-Lincoln Bronzeville, says gentrification is unavoidable: The area’s proximity to Downtown, the Short North and the freeways make it desirable. But he also sees a potential counter force: “The churches have land. The churches must build affordable housing for African Americans, non-African Americans, to live in that.”

Shiloh Baptist Church is planning to do just that. It has spent years acquiring property around its historic church on Mount Vernon Avenue, visible from I-71, to build affordable apartments, as well as market-rate units and senior housing, among other things, says the Rev. Otha Gilyard, the church’s pastor for 27 years. Construction could begin this year. Asked about gentrification, Gilyard says, “You have to look in terms of how we’re going to progress. All of the things that have taken place are very positive. We’re a church. We want to do housing so it will strengthen us to do ministry in a greater way. We cannot forget who we are in this neighborhood.”

Black social justice activist Kimberly Brazwell, who grew up in King-Lincoln Bronzeville, worries about the loss of history as the neighborhood redevelops. Sometimes people who have moved out of the area consider returning. But now many

Terrence and Kimberly Lawrence with their two young children, Sebastian and Quincy, at their King-Lincoln Bronzeville home



are priced out, she says, eliminating a link to the community's Black roots. "When you knock down brick and mortar, you also knock down history," she says.

Tyiesha Radford Shorts is less concerned that the neighborhood will lose its history. Her greater concern is that history won't be told accurately as the area evolves. Shorts is the program co-chair of the Maroon Arts Group, which runs the MPACC BoxPark on Mount Vernon Avenue, a community arts space anchored by three box containers, including one used as a stage.

A resident of the neighborhood for 15 years, Shorts says city and community leaders need to make sure that current and lifelong residents are included in the planning process. "What I've seen in the past is symbolic inclusion," she says. She points to meetings before Poindexter Village was partially demolished and those residents were moved out of the neighborhood. Some people were still fighting to save it, but the decision to tear it down had already been made, she says.

Lela Boykin, a Near East Side community activist who's lived on the same street for close to 40 years, says the neighborhood needs to have a sincere and honest conver-

sation about affordable housing and gentrification. "People need to talk with each other and not fight so much," she says.

Just south of Long Street on 21st Street

sits the house that Christian Minor and his wife, Shawna Windle, bought in 2008 for \$58,900. On the day they closed, someone broke into the house, ripping out and stealing the staircase. "All the architectural woodwork," says Minor, who owns a construction company, Capital C Masonry.

Today, Minor believes he and his wife could get \$450,000 for their 2,384-square-foot two-story with three bedrooms and a bath and a half. "We get calls about selling the house all the time. It's obnoxious," Minor says.

They're putting on an addition ("All I've done the past year-and-a-half is work on this godforsaken project," Minor jokes), and have no plans to go anywhere. "We love it," says Minor, who is white. He says the neighborhood is safe and welcoming. "We found out what a tight community it was," Minor says.

Many of those original neighbors moved away, he says, replaced by a lot of young professional families. "It's nice to see the

neighborhood come around," Minor says. But, he adds, "I don't want to see people in this neighborhood driven out."

Dana Moessner's family moved to North Monroe Avenue in 1993, a time when his was the only white family between Long Street and Mount Vernon Avenue. His father, an architect, noticed a house on North Monroe and bought it. He loved the neighborhood, and his father predicted it would rebound.

They arrived when the neighborhood was struggling with drugs, crime and poverty. "In the late '80s, early '90s, it bottomed out," he says. But even then, there was a sense that the neighborhood was special. "You had a lot of younger people, traditional Black families in this neighborhood," he says. Many of those younger people who inherited their parents' homes decided to sell. "A very large number of people left," Moessner says.

White families aren't the only ones moving in. Terrence and Kimberly Lawrence live with their two young children on North Monroe. They moved from Berwick into what had been a vacant house in late 2019 and have spent the past year fixing it up. The house is close to where Terrence works as a

recruiter for the Weiler Scholars Program at Columbus State Community College. Kimberly is a lawyer with the Thomas Ingram Law Group, based in the neighborhood. The Black couple plan to raise their children in the community. “Part of the reason we wanted to move over here, we understand the history, being a historically Black neighborhood,” he says.

But he doesn’t think everyone will embrace that. A year ago, he was working in the garden when a white woman approached him. “She wanted to move here because of the homes,” he says. “You could tell they have no idea of the history of the neighborhood. They see brick homes, the size of the homes. They don’t care what was going on.”

Developers say they recognize the importance of neighborhood affordability. But they also stress the importance of “balance.”

Brian Higgins of Arch City Development is building the \$15 million apartment development called The Frisbie on East Broad Street at Hamilton Park just east of I-71. He says 75 percent of the units will be affordable to people making 80 to 100 percent of the area median income. Another affordable project in the works is being developed by Woda Cooper Co. By November, the builder plans to open the \$17 million, 80-unit Atcheson Place Lofts, a four-story apartment complex financed with low-income housing tax credits and the Housing Development

Assistance Program through the Ohio Housing Finance Agency. Apartments will be available to people making between 30 and 80 percent of the area median income (between \$17,100 and \$67,350, depending on household size).

“I don’t think people want the neighborhood to stay overwhelmingly low-income,” says Higgins, who also has developments in Franklinton and on the South Side. “There needs to be a balance with middle income, high income, without displacing people.”

Boyce Safford leads Columbus Next Generation, a nonprofit that is helping to redevelop the Long Street corridor with The Adelphi Quarter, a 132-unit apartment complex. That project is transforming what had been a dead zone along the street with 9,400 square feet of ground-floor commercial space. It will incorporate the façade of the Adelphia Savings & Loan building, as well as include a plaza named after Ann B. Walker, the Black broadcasting pioneer who lives near Franklin Park. “Do you want a lot of vacant buildings and nothing’s happening?” asks Safford, who was Coleman’s development director at one point in his administration. “We’re bringing new stuff in, adding to the neighborhood.”

John Waddy has lived on Hamilton Park since 1991. In 2005, he co-developed with partners the Hamilton Park Place Condominiums, a project at Long Street and Hamilton Park that was one of the first of its kind in the neighborhood. “It was a commitment to the community for people who live here,” Waddy says. “It was an eyesore, a pivotal corner. The very first street into the Black community.

“We want the neighborhood to have all the progress that all the other communities are having,” says Waddy, who is Black.

But that means protecting longtime residents who might be pushed out because of higher property taxes or other reasons as homes are built around them—and as tired houses are renovated. Waddy imagines a scenario in which a new resident who just built a \$400,000 house asks why the 80-year-old woman living next door hasn’t done anything to fix up her house. “Don’t let economic racism be a basis for someone to lose their home,” he says. “Their home is as important to them as someone who just built a \$400,000 home.”

He suggests banks and community organizations come together and target older homes and buildings in disrepair to give homeowners some financial and other relief to remain in their homes. “I don’t want people to lose their homes because they are not as affluent,” he says. ♦

The Bronzeville Bird and Butterfly Sanctuary on Monroe Avenue

