

# THE BEST THAT WE'VE GOT

Staking a claim in a contested zip code

BY ROSALIND BENTLEY

WE ALWAYS KNEW WHITE PEOPLE would come.

When I say “we,” I mean the black people who reared me in our very black neighborhood in Tallahassee, Florida. They would say it all the time: my mother, Mr. Ford who lived across the street, Mrs. Caldwell next door whose house smelled of 7Up pound cake rising in the oven or neckbones stewing on the stove. Ours was a neighborhood of janitors, secretaries, public school teachers, evangelists, mechanics, civil servants, the unemployed. Our homes were cinder block ramblers painted Kool-Aid blue, bubble-gum pink, batter yellow; wooden shot-guns teetering on bony haunches of concrete blocks and little brick ranchers with clotheslines out back. Those houses lined streets named for black celebrities: Calloway, Ellington, Joe Louis. One day, the elders said, white people would want this pocket of town.

They would want it—and likely get it—because location is everything. Our neighborhood, Griffin Heights, sits less than a mile north of Florida State University.

Evelyn Nims sits in the Griffin Heights home where she has lived for more than sixty years.

When I was growing up, head coach Bobby Bowden built FSU into a football powerhouse. People want to be winners. That desire brought more students, more tuition money, more power. The main campus is surrounded to the east by the state Capitol and downtown, to the south by Florida A&M University, and by Tallahassee Community College farther to the west. What lay north of FSU was us: a cluster of working-class, low-income black people on desirable land.

I think I was in elementary school

when I first heard the older folks say we would be displaced. Their prediction frightened me. Would we have to move? Whom would I play with? Would there be a neighborhood store like Bennett's, where we bought cherry Now and Laters and Golden Flake potato chips with our dimes and quarters? By the time Bowden took the team 11-1, the elders' prediction had long been a refrain.

Turns out, dislocation wasn't swift. Instead, it crept, year by year, block by block, house by house, an erosion.

Photos by Willie J. Allen Jr.



A tall wooden fence separates a traditional Griffin Heights home from a new complex inhabited by Florida State University students.

On a visit home this spring, I stood on the front porch of the petite, cinder block ranch my mother bought long ago on a secretary's salary. A sprawling, gated complex of new, luxury student apartments loomed a block away. Up the hill, two more off-campus developments crowded around my elementary school. Every time I visit, the changes make me wonder, *What will become of the neighborhood that I knew?*

What I knew was an imperfect place of abundance; of okra stalks towering over homemade fences. It was a place where older neighbor ladies sold five-cent paper cups of frozen Kool-Aid in summer, the juices slithering down our fingers red, purple, and sweet. It was a place where my best friend, Audra, stood forlorn in her front yard for so long one afternoon we went out to see what was wrong.

"Muh, muh, Mama's making chit-lins!" she sobbed.

Their funk was flagrant, and she needed relief. Audra stayed at our house until they were cleaned, cooked, and plated. (Even now, no amount of hot sauce will convince her to eat them).

Yes, there were burglaries and the occasional shooting in our neighborhood. Yes, drug houses sprouted up. Yes, we were poor. Yet day to day, we didn't define ourselves by lack. We defined ourselves by how we helped a neighbor if we had enough to share. Care was slices of warm pound cake from next door or an offering in return of fresh peanuts for boiling.

Late last year, the president of the Florida Chamber of Commerce announced that 32304, the zip code that holds Griffin Heights, is the poorest in the state of Florida by almost every

measure. Just under 50 percent of children, and 50 to 70 percent of all residents, live in poverty. Shocked and embarrassed, local politicians and business leaders launched a series of "Prosperity for All" community summits. The police department and the city recently started a "clean-up" initiative in the neighborhood. The project targeted trash, crime, and neglected properties. I couldn't help feeling it also meant us.

Each time I read an article in my hometown paper or watch a news clip about



**We didn't define ourselves by lack. We defined ourselves by how we helped a neighbor if we had enough to share.**

Griffin Heights, the story is grounded in need, want, and woe. FSU sits directly in what should be our zip code, but it has its own postcode, 32306. The last digit officially walls it off—in us but not of us.

In their book, *Gentrification*, Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly identify a language for gentrification which includes terms like *revitalization*, *renewal*, and *rejuvenation*. The words suggest something better can replace what's there. They fail to acknowledge the value of what already exists. The city

But as the new residents come, where do the old neighbors go? What is lost when they depart?

of Tallahassee employs these terms now as it tries to figure out how to bring “prosperity” to the neighborhood where my mother and father brought me home from the “Negro” hospital decades ago. Their generation is dying out. Mine isn’t moving back. Some descendants sell. Others allow emptiness and neglect to ravage their homesteads. Developers buy the properties, fix them up or tear them down, and rebuild cheap, nondescript houses or duplexes. They rent them, it

seems, mainly to FSU students. That is their right. This is how capitalism works.

It’s less unusual now to see a white person jogging or walking a dog. But as the new residents come, where do the old neighbors go? What is lost when they depart? Who will share the bounty of their gardens and tables?

Three neighbors showed me.

FOR THE LAST sixty-four of her eighty-five years, Mrs. Evelyn Nims has lived

in a little bungalow with white siding and russet-red trim at the end of a dead-end street.

There, she and her first husband reared their sons, Barry and Billie, and daughter, Barbara, just three blocks from Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Church, where our families worship. Barbara, Billie, and I sang in the youth choir together. If I still lived in Tallahassee, I’d probably be a member, too.

Mrs. Nims, my mother, and other members of Philadelphia’s Seasoned Saints senior group volunteer at the church’s food pantry once a month. But the neighborhood need threatened to outstrip the larder. So the church started serving Sunday breakfast for some of the kids in the neighborhood—eggs, bacon, grits, and fried fish. In summer, when that wasn’t enough, Barbara told me, the church started feeding the children two meals each weekday.

On Sundays, the little ones stay for services. Inside the sanctuary, their gazes likely wander, as mine did, across a series of Biblical wonders painted on the walls: the search for room at the inn, the crucifixion and resurrection, the catch of 153 fish. In the frescoes, everybody is black and radiant: Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the disciples. Their afros are buoyant, though the woman at the well has a long, wavy perm. Over on a wall in the amen corner, the Devil—hazel-eyed, cloven-hooved, winged, and blond—is tempting a white-robed Christ.

It was hot the day I went to see Mrs. Nims. She, Billie, my mother, and I sat in her backyard under a patio-table umbrella. A few yards away, young tomatoes, okra, and peppers sprouted. Mrs. Nims grew up on a farm on the edge of town.

Ed Duffee Jr. grows crops like okra and sugarcane in his Griffin Heights garden.



A garden in her life is as essential as Scripture. Her grandfather taught her how to grow things. He had learned from his grandfather.

“He’d say his grandfather came from *way across the water*,” Mrs. Nims told me. In that moment, I realized this soft-spoken, elegant woman was still farming as her enslaved great-great-grandfather had. Here, in this backyard, were living ties to the Middle Passage.

Many years ago, she brought back some Meyer lemons from a visit to Ft. Lauderdale. She can’t remember what she cooked with them, but she saved the seeds. As the saplings grew strong, she gave some away, then planted one in her backyard. It’s almost as high as her roof now. At Christmas, there are no sweeter presents than those Meyers. The day I visited, both trees were laden with tiny green fruit, promises of gifts to come.

Once a quarter or so, Mrs. Nims gets letters from speculators asking if she wants to sell her house. No need to fix it up, they say. They’ll pay cash, as is. FSU students have moved into the house next door. Five blocks south is a student dorm and a string of duplexes. A wooden fence separates the Nims’ house from more apartments.

“They want this area,” Mrs. Nims told me. “It’s closer to FSU, but I’ve gotta have somewhere to go. I might as well stay in my home. I’m not going anywhere.”

As my mother and I rose to leave, Mrs. Nims passed along some of her grandfather’s gardening advice. Take the collar stems after you remove the leafy parts, poke a row of holes in the soil, drop in some fertilizer, bury the stems vertically at a depth of roughly half their height, and keep them watered. “And you’ll have plenty of greens,” she assured us.

I’d never thought about starting greens from cuttings. I usually buy them, fully grown, from the grocery store. Maybe this fall, I’ll try it her way.

MR. TONY OSBORNE lives kitty-corner from my mother’s place.

A thick layer of rust-colored mulch covers a strip of ground that runs alongside the length of his driveway. Atop the mulch stand two big barrel grills and one kettle grill, ashen from use.

It was just past dusk when I knocked on his door. Though we didn’t know each other well, he invited me inside. He is a relative newcomer to our street, living there just three years. Based on the cars that routinely stop at the house, and on the stream of young black men who gather there, a couple of neighbors wondered if he or one of his kids sold drugs. This despite the fact Mr. Osborne owns a lawn service, one prosperous enough to afford him a shiny, new, black trailer with his company’s name emblazoned on the sides. The weary way he folded his body onto the couch, his already dark skin rendered ebony from constant labor under a scorching sun, reminded me of the husbands and fathers I grew up around, bone-tired from work.

His girlfriend, Lovey Harris, a nurse, sat working at a computer in the dining nook. Two of Mr. Osborne’s sons lingered outside under the carport, talking with their girlfriends. Earlier that day, I’d told him I wanted to talk about how the neighborhood was changing, but before I got started, he asked me about my mother. Just a few days earlier she’d had surgery. At eighty-three years old, she still cuts her own grass, but Mr. Osborne felt it was time for him to step in and do it free of charge, at least until she healed.

“I’m gonna take care of it because that’s my neighbor,” he told me. There was finality in his voice, and also care.

As we talked, he told me of the ups in his fifty-two years of life: He once made \$65,000 a year as a manager at a grocery distribution center. He told me of the downs: He lost that prosperity to drug



Griffin Heights resident Tony Osborne operates a lawn service and hosts regular barbecues for young men in the neighborhood.

addiction. Now he is back on his feet with the goal of expanding his lawn service.

Looking across the living room into the kitchen, I saw a run of counter space in spices and condiments. I asked about the grills out front.

“There’s a criminal part of the youth that nobody’s doing anything for and I try to counsel them. Because I been in that life,” he said.

Every so often, he soaks ribs or chicken in white vinegar, pats them dry, and dusts the meat with a rub and maybe some garlic powder or onion salt. Then he fires up the grills.

“I keep that vinegar on it and it brings that smoke and keeps it tender so when you taste it, you don’t even want no barbecue sauce,” he said.

He takes a plate next door to Mr. Harris, whose children I grew up with and who used to bring my mother rutabagas

from his garden. The rest of the barbecue feeds some of those young men in the neighborhood still in the life. Mr. Osborne is a Freemason given to quoting Scripture. (“Like God told Peter, ‘Dust your feet off. Keep it moving.’”) His goal is to turn the informal counseling he does at the cookouts into a formal community mentoring program.

“I say, ‘We eatin’ today. We ain’t drug-gin’ or doing none of that. We feedin’ the soul today,” Mr. Osborne told me.

Then he told me about the group of young white men who moved into the house on the corner not long ago. He said they are FSU students. The father of one of them bought the place because it’s close to campus, Mr. Osborne told me. Mr. Osborne cuts their grass. Another group of white students lives in a house across from his backyard. They don’t come to the barbecues, and Mr. Osborne admitted



A home for sale in the neighborhood, August 2019

he had not invited them. They seem nice enough, he told me, but he knows they aren't going to be long-term neighbors. The white students need him to perform a service. The black young men he feeds need him for something more.

"People keep putting on these blind-folds, but if you don't deal with it now, you gon' deal with it later," he told me, referring to the young men he mentors.

For him, looking away isn't an option.

BEFORE I LEFT Mrs. Nims' house, Billie asked if I'd been "up to the farm" yet. Just a half mile away, and still in the neighborhood, it's a verdant, hillside double lot I had passed every day growing up, but never entered. A chain-link fence and NO TRESPASSING signs are supposed to dissuade anyone who might want to help themselves to the crops without permission. If anyone could help me get inside, it was my old neighbor, Mrs. Mary Caldwell, maker of the chitterlings. She told me Mr. Ed Duffee Jr., a deacon at her church, owns the farm. All it took was a call from her and he was ready to give me a tour.

The scent of compost and overripe Japanese plums smothered me as I entered the gate. Mr. Duffee was there waiting in the shade of one of his equipment shanties, cobbled from scraps of corrugated metal and wood. He'd actually been there for hours before I got there, an eighty-one-year-old early riser who long ago learned the cool of the morning is best time to get the most done.

Mr. Duffee, who grew up in Griffin Heights, did what many of us did when we got older: He moved out. A lawyer for many years, he was one of the first black people in the mid-1970s to integrate Killlearn Estates, back then an upper-middle-class, country-club development on the north side of town. Yet even as he moved on, he kept a foothold in his old neighborhood. He did what developers do now: He bought up a few old homes and rented them out. The tenants were African American.

More than sixty years ago, his late uncle-in-law broke ground on this lot. Since then, season by season, it has produced in abundance. In 2004, when Mr. Duffee retired, he started working

on this lot. Much of what he grew he gave away.

Today he sells plums, red and white potatoes, okra, collards, beefsteak tomatoes, ("Top of the line," he told me), navel oranges, ("The sweetest there are,") purple figs, watermelons, cucumbers, grapes, Blue Lake beans, five pecan trees, and rows and rows of sugarcane he grinds and sells at the Frenchtown Farmers Market. (Frenchtown, an adjacent, historically-black neighborhood, is also being "revitalized" with mammoth apartment complexes for FSU students.) Lilies, elephant ears, boxwoods, begonias, and azaleas huddle in the southeast corner of the lot to form a small nursery. Mr. Duffee does a lot of the work himself. He gets some help from younger men in the neighborhood who know little about farming but need short-term work.

While we were talking, his phone rang. I could hear the person on the other end making a produce order. The caller lived in the apartment complex across the street from his garden. The building is different from others in the neighborhood; it's a senior living facility primarily occupied by African Americans. From their windows, they can watch Mr. Duffee work.

Developers offer to buy this farm. Mr. Duffee said it's the land they want, not the plants. He won't sell.

"White people buying houses like mad," he tells me. "Mama and daddy buy it for them, renovate it, and let them live there while they're in school, rent it back out.... Those kids aren't trying integrate into the neighborhood and get to know people."

The plums' nectar, the grape arbor thick and green with leaves and young clusters of fruit: These are precious.

These are gifts. These are ties to an agrarian past first born of force, then nurtured by necessity, and, finally, expressed in choice and joy. Mr. Duffee expects to be the last generation to farm on this hill. When he's gone, he says, maybe it will be sold, the sugarcane plowed under and more student housing erected in its place.

After our conversation, as I worried about what might happen, Mr. Duffee got back to work. There were beans he had to cover with rich earth, okra sprouts to water, bags to fill with potatoes and onions, and the neighbor's order to fill. It was time to share some of the best our zip code had to offer.

WHAT WILL BE different the next time I go home? Who will be gone? Mrs. Caldwell has moved in with Audra and her husband across town. The Caldwells' old home, where Audra stood outside bereft over swine innards, is empty. Mr. Ford, who lived across the street, died a year ago. His grown daughters have said they don't plan to move into his house. Maybe they'll rent it. For now, it's vacant. As my mother gets older, we talk about what I should do with her place when she's gone. She thinks I should sell. My life plays out 275 miles away now. A permanent return to Griffin Heights is unlikely. And if I do decide to sell her house or rent it out, who will live there? Will they smother chicken gizzards and serve them over rice as we did when my mother's money was tight? Will they plant a little potager out back and share the surplus with their friends and neighbors? Will they want to know anything about the people who came before them? Or, will the house and the neighborhood be a short stop on their road to someplace else, someplace "better?" 🐦

---

*Rosalind Bentley is a Smith Fellow with the Southern Foodways Alliance and a senior writer at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Follow her on Twitter @rozrbentley.*