

Why I Love Midtown.

-Jim Guy

I grew up in College Hill, in a house built by my grandfather after the great crash of 1929. Grandfather was considered a curious fellow, though, by the rest of the family. They, after all, were happily settled in Midtown. My great-uncle had built the great duplex at 12th and Bitting, facing the river. My great-aunt and her daughter had built a wonderful bungalow on the East side of the 1100 block of Bitting, in 1912. At the time of the Crash, my grandfather gave up a contract he had to purchase a house on Lumberman's Row, at 12th and Broadway, and bought the much cheaper new house in College Hill. But, nonetheless, every weekend during my childhood had meant a visit to what is now the Bitting Street Historic District. It was a fun place to go. It was like a mini-vacation, where the family sat in the garden of the extra-wide lot on Sunday evenings, and the quiet drone of well-bred voices mixed with the drone of cicadas and the rustling of the breeze in the trees and the high, unmown grass. It seemed as close to Heaven as a boy could get and still be in Wichita.

Because of this history, when I came home from school in 1970, I decided that Midtown needed to be my permanent home. Within easy walking distance of four parks, I settled that year at 1121 Pearce, in a newly-remodeled house that I could afford on my first year legal associate's salary. I also wanted to live within quick access to a bus route, so I could quickly get to my office downtown and leave my wife our car during the day (the bus, in those days, stopped regularly at 11th and Bitting and dumped me out in front of my office at Market and William).

Once there, I could not possibly imagine living anywhere else. College Hill certainly had tree-lined streets and wonderful old houses, but where else could one find a community that was quickly growing, filled with involved young adults and a very diverse group of people? Midtown, in those days, had at least one of every kind of person, often occurring in each and every block. Houses long derelict were being rebuilt. Parks were being re-envisioned. Even long-term residents were sitting up and taking notice.

Soon it seemed as though the only things that were missing were a common voice and a concerted plan, and it was then, in 1972, that a group of neighbors came together to see about forming an Association to bring that common voice to the attention of City government. Though I was not one of the original group called together at the first meeting at Donovan and Carol Rutledge's wonderful U.G. Charles-designed house at 1425 N. Park Place, someone soon mentioned what was happening and, by the time the organization was actually incorporated in 1973, I was a part of the group. Indeed, when they passed the hat to collect the money for filing-fees to form a corporation, Mike Gragert and I made up the difference and Mike did the incorporation as pro bono work for his new law practice. And so Midtown Citizens' Association came into being.

Once established, Midtown wasted no time in bringing itself to the attention of the City Fathers. Those were heady days when we fought the battles of zoning and recognition. Indeed, we lived for the time when one of us would go to the City Council meeting on some certain subject and be recognized from the bench not as an individual person, but as the representative of a group of people struggling to improve their neighborhood. Soon, we were there, recognized, listened to and even deferred to simply because we were organized. Eventually the Council's advice to someone with a neighborhood problem was to form an Association, like Midtown.

After that, who could possibly consider living anywhere else? All around us were heard the words, "Don't move, improve" and nearly everywhere houses once feared lost were found, and bought, and renovated, and then opened to the City at large once a year in a free tour to show what could be done with planning, representation and good, hard work. It was the tremendously exciting time of the "Urban Pioneer" and life would be dull when those days were over. But, you know, the area which had come to be known as Midtown would never outlive its challenges, never grow dull and staid and boring. The same spirit imbues the Midtown of today as challenged the Urban Pioneers of yesterday, and there is no lack of problems yet to solve. The only real problem we have today that we did not have then is apathy and that can be resolved by re-imagining our Association, and, like those Midtowners of old, devoting oneself wholeheartedly to the cause.

In the words of one of us Urban Pioneers, we have never forgotten that "You don't have to move to have a better neighborhood." All it takes are organization, commitment and good, hard work.