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BUSINESS

The legacy of Black-owned businesses in Driving Park



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Herbie Johnson had dreams of opening his own dairy bar ever since he saw a filling station being torn down at East Whittier Street and Lockbourne Road in the early 1970s.

He worked out a payment plan to purchase ice cream machines, but ran into some hurdles trying to get a loan from the Small Business Administration.

“The first thing the man asked me was, ‘Have you ever had any experience running an ice cream place?’” Johnson, 82, of Gahanna, said.

“I said, ‘Well, you don't really need that much experience because every time I go in an ice cream place, they have teenagers doing everything.’ ... He reached in the drawer and pulled out a stack of papers. He wanted to get rid of me. He said, ‘Fill out all of these.’”

Johnson, who is Black, filled them out, brought them back, and was given even more paperwork.

“It took me a year and a half to get that loan,” he said. “They found out that I wasn't going to give up.”

Johnson and his wife, Sandra, built H. Johnson's Dairy Bar, later known as H. Johnson's BBQ, into a neighborhood mainstay from 1975 to 2019, when Johnson retired. He is just one of many resilient Black entrepreneurs who thrived in Driving Park from the 1960s through the early 2000s. Their restaurants, record stores and other establishments are fondly remembered by people across the city.

In recent years, though, as entrepreneurs grew older and passed away and people left the predominantly Black neighborhood, the number of businesses has declined significantly.

Residents cite disinvestment from the city and ongoing infrastructure issues as contributing factors.

Black Business Spotlight: Willis Beauty Supply owners reflect on nearly 55-year history

Consider: About 20 years ago, there were more than 70 businesses on East Livingston Avenue between Parsons and Rhodes avenues, according to a directory compiled by local organizations, including the Livingston Park Neighborhood Improvement Association. Today, there are 46.

Empty storefronts dot East Livingston as relics of a bygone era for Driving Park, a neighborhood bounded by I-70 to the north and east, East Whittier Street to the south and Parsons Avenue to the west (excluding the Southern Orchards neighborhood south of Livingston).

These businesses may be gone, but they are not forgotten. A Dispatch review of more than 20 enterprises from the area — both past and present — shows how the legacy of Black entrepreneurs endures in Driving Park, as well as the hope current ones present for the future.

Black-owned businesses of Driving Park, mapped

A neighborhood challenged by traffic and crime: What happened?

As one of the busiest thoroughfares in Columbus, Livingston Avenue is an ideal location for businesses. But they can't flourish without traffic-calming provisions and other improvements to infrastructure.

Jason Reece once lived in the neighborhood, but left due in part to its limited walkability.

"It's a huge impediment pedestrian-wise," said Reece, an assistant professor of city and regional planning at Ohio State University. "You have pretty substantial safety concerns. There's little to no shoulder in terms of the sidewalk, and you've got these cars barreling down Livingston at 50 miles an hour."

Danger on Driving Park: Crashes, speeding on East Livingston Avenue in Driving Park get Columbus officials' notice

It doesn't help that city investment has been underwhelming compared to other areas like Parsons Avenue, Reece said.

"There's been all this residential investment, but you haven't really seen the investment in the commercial properties there," he said. "Think about some of those storefronts that have been abandoned for some time that could be reused. I always felt like there was so much potential. ... For whatever reasons, the Livingston corridor has been pretty much ignored."

A representative for the city said there have been investments into the neighborhood, including the \$4.6 million renovation of the Driving Park Community Center, street trees and some traffic-calming infrastructure.

"We have heard the residents of Driving Park," said Melanie Crabill, director of media relations for the city. "But we know more is needed, and we will be announcing additional improvements to the Livingston corridor in the State of the City in March."

Even if that investment occurs, however, there will likely be fewer Black residents. Long-term home owners are already seeing property taxes skyrocket as neighboring houses sell well above \$200,000. There is widespread concern among residents that Black families will eventually be replaced.

Crime is another challenge for some residents and business owners. Last year, there were more than 5,500 incidents of crime in Precinct 11, which includes the Driving Park neighborhood, according to the Columbus Division of Police.

"I think that the city has decided that this area can be OK with crime," said Sherman Willis, 76, of Berwick, who is co-owner of Willis Beauty Supply, a business that has been open in Driving Park since 1969. "You call the police, they don't come. You go east on the other side of Nelson Road, you don't have any issues. That's going into the white community. It's depressing that a cop tells me, 'Well, you need to start carrying a weapon.'"

Crabill said there has been a spike in violent crime across the city and that officials "are committed to stemming the violence in every neighborhood through prevention, intervention and apprehension."

H. Johnson's has had its share of close calls in the neighborhood; the family recalled white men throwing bricks and shooting through windows in acts of racism.

But Herbie Johnson Sr. said he really noticed a turn when drugs came into the community in the 1980s. After living on Kelton Avenue for 30 years, he moved away to Gahanna. While he kept running the business, he stopped keeping the doors open until 4 a.m. on the weekends.

“We had to cut that out,” he said. “It was getting too rowdy around here.”

Music shops bring Prince, Lil Wayne to Driving Park

Despite these challenges, Driving Park has had its fair share of typical neighborhood businesses over the years, including barbershops and beauty shops. Some of the Black-owned enterprises, though, were truly unique.

Before Black-owned record stores dried up in Columbus, Driving Park was home to at least four over the years, including B&B Records, which residents visited in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the 1980s, Donna Terry opened The Record Emporium and caused a sensation in 1982 when musical superstars Prince, The Time and Vanity 6 visited the shop while they were in town for a concert.

“We had the largest traffic jam,” said Terry, 64, of King-Lincoln/Bronzeville. “It was from 18th Street to Nelson Road. It scared me because there were so many people outside. I was afraid they were going break the glass, there were so many people pressing up against it.”

About 20 years later, in 2000, Mario Gibbs, Ryan “Hollywood” Hood and Rodriccos “Rowdy Rod” Williams opened Mean Mug Records at 1029 E. Livingston Ave., the original location of Resch’s Bakery.

The trio also ran Mean Mug Entertainment and filmed a video with rapper Juvenile on Carpenter and East Whittier streets.

In 2004, they shut down East Livingston to make a video featuring Hood and rapper Lil Wayne.

“That was a dream come true,” Hood said. “I used to look at these guys on TV, and to be able to bring them to where we grew up, that was a big blessing.”

Mean Mug Records closed about six months later as the crew’s music career took off.

Black-owned businesses that made their mark in Columbus

At one point, Driving Park may have had the city's only Black-owned camera store, which Wayne White opened on East Livingston in the late 1950s. White's Camera Shop, which closed in 2000, sold cameras, projectors, darkroom materials and other equipment.

Former employee Jay Badders, 72, of Lancaster, said customers included noted Columbus photographers Kojo Kamau and Chance Brockway, aka "Mr. Buckeye Lake," who was famous for his work with Ohio State sports teams.

And while daycares are a dime a dozen in any neighborhood, not many are owned by famous basketball players. Granny's Child Care Center stood out on East Livingston because it was owned by former Ohio State and NBA player Granville Waiters, who was a friendly presence in the neighborhood.

According to Dr. Clayton Hicks, 78, of the Far East Side, who has been operating Driving Park Vision Center in the neighborhood since 1970 and who counted Waiters among his patients, the athlete who died last year was "effervescent" with a deep, booming voice. He also drove a mini-car, despite his nearly 7-foot frame.

Monster burgers and sweet potato pies

Restaurants are often cornerstones of a neighborhood, and Driving Park eateries —most of them gone now — remain alive and well in the memories of its residents.

Just ask the fans of H. Johnson's BBQ, known for its ribs, po' boys, Monster Burgers and Monster Chops (pork chops on sub buns). Johnson's 51-year-old son, also named Herbie, said people still ask him about the food on Facebook.

"Can you open your dad's spot and make me a Monster Chop?" one person wrote.

For his part, the storeowner's son recalls the ice cream. "We used to hand-dip (it). It would get hard as a rock. You'd have to put some dynamite in it just to make a scoop."

People also recall the "down-home cooking" at Don-Nita's, which Donald Carroll opened with his wife, Juanita, in the 1970s.

"That was the place to go to eat," Hicks said. "I'd have lunch there probably two times a week and then dinner on the weekends. They had fried fish. I mean, the fish was off the hook."

Later, in the early 2000s, patrons from all over town would dine at Buckeye Fried Chicken inside a dome-shaped building, constructed to resemble “the Horseshoe” stadium at Ohio State University.

“We started doing a million dollars a year,” said owner Andre Bryant, 56, who now lives in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he operates a restaurant called Burger Boys. “My biggest pleasure was hiring all the kids. Seeing them get their first check, helping them buy cars and just keeping (them) out of the streets.”

If you wanted food as part of your nightlife experience, Club Tropicana was the place to go. If you wanted something sweet, My Mama’s Sweet Potato Pie Company had you covered.

Today, the takeout-only FishBurger is the only Black-owned restaurant in Driving Park, which doesn’t have any dine-in restaurants or grocery stores within the neighborhood boundaries.

Longtime Driving Park resident Beverly Barrett, who is in her 80s, said she wishes the neighborhood had a coffee shop.

"We had a walking club, and a lot of times we didn't have any place to go after we got through walking," she said. "It would be nice, if we ever could get back to walking, to have a place to sit down and just have a cup of coffee, pie or dessert."

Barrett and other residents are also hoping that restaurants will be included in the plan for 134 low-income apartments at an old industrial site across the street from FishBurger.

Entrepreneurs as servant leaders

The loss of neighborhood businesses has come with the loss of something more than places to buy goods or services. It's affected the sense of community.

“Every time you put a Black business into a neighborhood, the neighborhood is going to claim it,” said Scott Woods, 51, of the East Side, who used to be a patient at McKoy Dental Center Inc., a longtime Black-owned business that Dr. Victor McKoy opened on East Livingston near Oakwood Avenue.

“You're going to become the bulletin board. This is all before social media or even the internet. Most Black businesses would be stuck with a board full of business cards or a board full of flyers and funeral programs.”

Businesses also became breeding grounds for civic engagement, something that's been lost over time as these sorts of places have disappeared, according to Hicks, who served as president of the now-disbanded Livingston Avenue Collaborative for Community Development.

Rising rents threaten Driving Park: As Driving Park home values skyrocket, concern that Black residents will be forced out

"We don't have the political muscle that we used to have," he said. "People would go down to City Hall and raise all kinds of hell. We don't have that anymore. Those days are gone."

The next generation: Businesses that are still standing

In multiple cases in Driving Park, businesses faded away after owners died and their children decided against taking over.

"We don't appreciate entrepreneurship like we used to," Hicks said. "And there are a lot of other, new opportunities now. Back in the day, you didn't have a lot of opportunities to do other things but stay in the family business, and that provided you with income and security. That's changed a lot."

Mustafaa Shabazz, who has owned Ujamaa Bookstore since 1997, said his grandsons will probably take over the shop, which centers on Black readers.

"Sometimes, it skips a generation," said Shabazz, 61, of the Far East Side.

More: Ujamaa Bookstore seeks to uplift Black experience, community in Driving Park

In other cases, it's the industry, not the owner, that is fading away.

Willis Beauty Supply has weathered the changing landscape for over 50 years, and co-owner James Willis brought on his son, Brian, to help. But they aren't sure how long they will last, now that salons are limiting their services, and larger competitors have pushed out smaller companies.

"We have some assets," said Brian Willis, 61, of Berwick. "We own the building. ... We'll do it as long as we can."

If Driving Park does become the business hub that it once was, FishBurger promises to do it with an appreciation for the Black-owned businesses that came before.

Owners Randy Keyes and Demetrius Howard grew up in the neighborhood and remember visiting many of the old establishments, which they plan to honor with a mural inside the restaurant.

More: Black Business Spotlight: FishBurger to continue legacy of entrepreneurship in Driving Park

“We’re happy to be here,” Howard said. “We plan to hopefully have a legacy as long as theirs.”

This story is part of the Dispatch's Mobile Newsroom initiative, which has focused on Driving Park, Northland and the Hilltop and is now in Whitehall. Read related stories and sign up for the Mobile Newsroom newsletter at dispatch.com/mobilenewsroom.

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