

Southside ruminations (2)

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [Southside](#) April 20, 2021

 *The latest in a series of posts on the Southside* 

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ref: [Anna] [Smith's Song of the South\(side\)](#)

ref: [You tell 'em, Kim!](#)

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continued . . .

Installment 2

I had a lot of questions last time, which I posed for folks who might be inclined to think of the Southside as a place that needs “saving.” I got caught up in the public, commercial areas last time, as I thought about the assets that might be unfamiliar, or invisible, to folks who don't work, live or play on the Southside regularly — those who don't really know the people, spaces, and connections that exist here. But then I thought: what *about* the people, and how they live as a community, as neighborhoods of connected residents (or not!)? What about the spaces beyond the commercial corridors? Which leads me to more questions...

To start with, have folks who are predisposed to think of the Southside as a place that needs saving actually explored the neighborhoods *outside* the commercial district? Could they decipher the historical clues that tell us about life here in the past, as they explore residential life in the present (the ethnic churches, the corner stores, the gorgeous views of the city and The Steel from St. Michael's Cemetery)? Do they know where the original synagogue on the Southside lies, hidden beneath the white brickcoat façade of what is now an apartment building? Have they walked down the 400 block of Montclair to see the

impressive stone façade rowhomes built for merchants and professionals in the early twentieth century? Have they gone up Hayes Street, looking at CADCB-facilitated façade improvements that foreshadowed a 19% jump in homeownership on that block, to see the pride folks show in their homes (Flowers! gardens! Creative paint jobs! Porches with holiday displays all year long! Black Lives Matter flags! Trump flags! Pride flags! US and Puerto Rican flags!)?

Have they walked along the (very real) Southside street where you might notice the two mom's with the Pride flag on their porch, who regularly call out to passing neighbors, living next door to the black family with three grade schoolers who race bikes up and down the hill, next to the older couple with the adult son with an intellectual disability who calls to neighbors whenever he sees them, living next to the Latinx man who likes to chat with everyone, next to the neighbor with four-year-old twins who was inspired to try her first flower garden because of the flowers she saw planted next door, who lives next to the young couple with a baby who are bilingual and talk with neighbors in both languages, sometimes in the same sentences? Do they know about these neighbors and neighborhoods, and do they think about the residents as people? Or do they think of "Southsiders" as a monolith wrapped in poverty, crime, and ill intentions?

Are they aware of the way small business flourishes in vibrant neighborhoods, as the handyman who installed a door for a landlord soon was working on the nearby house after chatting with the residents? The cement contractor who gets the next job, a few houses down? The radon abatement guy who gets the job up the block, the roofer who repairs the place next door when he's done the big job at the neighbor's house?

Do they know about neighbors who have a texting group so they can share family news, flag controversial new development proposals and city council activities, watch out for a neighbor who has mental health issues, and send requests to let one another's dogs out?

Have they walked up State Street and met the Portuguese man who has two full lots of terraced gardens on the steep mountainside –full of vegetables, a grape arbor, a shrine to the Virgin Mary, and fruit trees –all

immaculately kept? Do they know about the extraordinary views up on First Terrace, and do they know that if you walk that street on the summer evening you will probably pass a young professional couple, he with dreadlocks to his waist, and she in professional attire, pushing a stroller as they walk from their home through Lehigh's campus? Or perhaps they would see a senior resident with the amazing deer proof gardens who grows a remarkable number of diverse foods and flowers. (Have they seen the four-legged neighborhood watch patrols, the herds of deer that wander through our allegedly "urban" streets?!) Do they know about the pileated woodpeckers and other remarkable birds that swoop through our neighborhoods – even the occasional bald eagle high overhead – and the woods on our hillsides, with trails for mountain bikers and hikers?

I'd invite skeptical or curious folks to visit with some of us Southside boosters: take a walk with us, grab a coffee, eat a meal over here. Or just go shopping and talk with merchants, buy things! Stop in a corner market to get a drink. But also explore the neighborhoods. Greet people and look them in the eye. Admire the yard ornaments as well as the grand historic churches, the cool old Victorian buildings, and the comfortable, connected twins and rowhomes . . . the gardens, the trees. Appreciate the porch life, the stoop-sitting, the parks filled with people playing and talking, the music, and the peaceful coexistence of diverse long-term renters, homeowners, short-term residents, and the occasional college students; feel the neighborhood vibe. If you do this often enough, you might feel like you belong. And maybe you'll begin to sense the assets – from our diverse residents to our historical and contemporary material surroundings, and from services and businesses to human connections – that make this such a positive place to live, work, and play.

Sure we have deficits, but let's try to identify assets, and enhance them, and then figure out what local residents may think the deficits are for their quality of life and their stable neighborhoods, and work as a community to develop positive, community-engaged changes. Please don't come here to save us; come here to join us. Then we can work on these things, together.

By the way, my apologies for repeatedly referring to folks who don't know the Southside well as "they," in my questions: it's pretty "othering" (as sociologists say), isn't it? We know a thing or two about that over here on the Southside. But we need to mutually rise above that polarization; I pledge to look for more asset-minded language to refer to folks who don't know what they're missing on the Southside. And asset-based reasoning suggests that if folks who are predisposed to be deficit-minded thinkers can get to know us and our part of town, Southsiders won't always be "those people." And then perhaps the Southside won't seem to require saviors anymore . . .

Kim

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