The Soul of a Neighborhood

Located within city limits, but neighboring suburbia, Rogers Park has a blue-collar essence that is masked by white-collar scenery. Households that line the twenty-one and twenty-two hundred blocks of Lunt Avenue in the Chicago neighborhood vary in race, religion and income. No two houses are the same, adding to character. Stay-at-home parents exist only because they lost their jobs and can’t find work. Helping hands are always extended and usually taken, but never in shame. It is the textbook definition of a neighborhood.

That’s how I remember my childhood home of 2130 West Lunt Ave. in Rogers Park. Times changed and families moved away, including my own. Now I live in Evanston, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago that borders Rogers Park. A handful of people from my youth still remain on the elm tree-lined blocks, but returning to my old neighborhood years later out of curiosity, it was evident that it’s a changed place. The lawns were overgrown, kids weren’t playing outside and there was a colorless ambiance.

Flashes of the past bolted across my blank gaze. The sunny afternoons when I would come home from school and run into the house only for a split second just to drop my backpack off and race out the door to play with the other kids. Like a nagging sibling, the Lewis’ massive side yard would beg for the Lunt Avenue kids to play wiffle ball and Red Rover on it. Games that I usually dominated, or at least that’s how I remember it. Every decently nice afternoon, we were over in the Lewis’
yard, obliviously turning the lawn from a deep green to a sloppy brown.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, it was paradise.

In Rogers Park, different was my normal. Only after moving to a predominantly white suburb did I come to realize how diverse of a neighborhood I had lived in. Out of the fifteen-to-seventeen houses that I knew, seven of them were white; four were African American and the rest were a mix of Hispanic and Indian. Needless to say, our block parties were a cultural overload.

The flashes quickly fade as the reality of viewing my old neighborhood crashes into the picture. Could it have always looked this bad? Maybe the reality of Lunt was masked by the title of “home.” When the mind wanders from a task, it becomes lost in thought. Everyone daydreams occasionally, but more often than not mine are claimed by memories.

Every other Sunday night, my family would have dinner with the Gonzalez and Kanner family. Kosher and por favor was in my vocabulary, before I was even allowed to cross the street by myself. The dinner location would rotate from time to time, giving everyone a glimpse into everyone else's home life, but for the most part it was held at the Gonzalez's. On more than a few occasions, the Smith’s, an African-Amercian family that was a late addition to the neighborhood, would join us. These Sunday dinners were a cultural, racial and ethnic splotch painting.

The Gonzalez family lived at 2133 West Lunt in a large green house, just across the street from us. Dinners there were, by far, the most memorable. Mrs. Gonzalez, Lori as she made me call her, was the matriarchal figure of the block. She always did the majority of the cooking, forcing the other mothers into the living
room and out of the kitchen. The meals often had a Hispanic touch, which few complained about. Mrs. Smith would bring a plate-full of buttered noodles for her youngest, Mike, to eat because he didn’t do well with the spices. It was funny how those noodles always tended to evade Mike’s plate and instead work its way into the dinner rotation.

Following prayer, both Catholic and Jewish, we all took our seats at the tightly positioned tables in the living room, but not next to the person who you sat next to at the previous dinner. A stupid rule enforced by Mrs. Kanner that I only grew to appreciation as I aged. Everyone got to know everyone on a level that isn’t typical outside the family dynamic.

Dishes waited until Monday morning, as the mothers sat around a dim-lit table turning wine bottles upside down. The kids assumed their hide-and-go-seek game, while the fathers occupied the Gonzalez’s front porch to enjoy an end-of-the-weekend stogie. Simplicity found perfection in the company of our neighbors on Lunt Avenue those Sunday evenings.

As I got older, I’d split my time between the games and the fathers’ conversation. It was like walking a fine line between innocence and reality. Talk would cover sports, politics and, of course, trash talking. Sometimes the conversation would shift to more serious subjects like financial situations, racial issues or marriage relationships. When these shifts in conversations happened, I always was tempted to leave, but my father’s look compelled me to stay. He wanted me to hear the realities of the world. To grow up with the notion that not everything is going to be perfect and sometimes stuff like people getting laid off happens. He
wanted me to observe that it’s not the end of the world when life has you down. “We are lucky people,” my dad said to me one night as we crossed the street after a Sunday dinner at the Gonzalez’s. “Surrounding yourself with good people is one of the best things you can do for yourself in life. You can only get so far on your own; the help of loved ones will bring you what you need.” I don’t know what happened on that night to make him say that, and to be honest, I had disregarded it at the time. What fourteen-year old child would have been interested in a conversation on that topic, anyways? But I guess those words survived in my unconscious.

Only years later, when I returned to the old neighborhood, did I remember what my father said me on that Sunday evening. The words flooded my mind when I took in the disappointing sights of the current state of Lunt Avenue.

The Lewis’ side yard was gone and in its place stood a very modern-looking house. No character or vibe. It was clearly not a home. All three families that used to gather for Sunday dinner had moved away. To where? I’m not exactly sure. I did know the Gonzalez’s moved further out into the western suburbs, but it came as a shock to see that the Kanner’s and Smith’s weren’t still occupying Lunt Avenue. Life got in my way when my family picked up and moved to Evanston. The neighborhood was gone, and to a certain extent, so was my hometown.

It was in that state of disbelief that my father’s words of wisdom made sense. It wasn’t the physical aspect of the neighborhood that made it such a great place, but rather it was the people who made up the community. They were the ones who gave the neighborhood a soul. While it still stung a little that the place wasn’t what it used to be, I came to the realization the neighborhood’s values were my own. Lunt taught
me many life lessons and influenced my character. People are the most important thing in the world. Those that let judgments of differences get in the way are missing out on connecting with potentially great people. My childhood not only taught me to be accepting of one’s differences, but also to seek out those differences. Having experienced such diversity at a young age molded my belief that we are all equal, but our differences are what highlight us. For these reasons, I knowingly carry the soul of my neighborhood with me in my daily life. Rogers Park widened my gaze.