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One neighborhood waits, works for Reading's renaissance

By **Erinn Connor**
Reading Eagle

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Frank Bryson's porch looks like many others in late autumn: dried leaves crowded on the stoop and summer vines wilting as they surrender to the coming cold.

It could be a porch in any area of Berks County: Leesport, West Reading or Exeter.

But Bryson lives in the 300 block of South Fifth Street, smack in the middle of Reading, in the South of Penn neighborhood. He's lived there for 34 years and doesn't want to live anywhere else.

"I feel comfortable here," said Bryson. "I've always been an urban-oriented person and I feel at home here."

Bryson is part of the South of Penn Neighborhood Association, a group of longtime city residents who are hoping to see their neighborhood revitalized in some way, whether through more people moving in or new businesses coming in.

"Everyone's mindset is on the suburbs," Bryson said. "But maybe people should take a tour of downtown Philadelphia and see how many people have improved the city by moving back into it and developing it."

In the past, the association hosted events such as neighborhood cleanups and block parties to boost interest and help the neighborhood reach its full potential. Most importantly, they want people to know the city isn't a place to be afraid of.

Association President Candice Mayton has lived on South Fifth Street for six years. She and her husband moved from Maiden Creek Township after all their children went to college.

"When we moved here, our house was inhabitable, but through a lot of hard work we made a beautiful home," Mayton said. "When I look down my street I think of (the book) 'A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.'"

Mayton said she can picture corner grocery stores or florists or coffee shops moving into buildings that are currently abandoned and dirty, buildings that people walk by without giving a second thought.

Visitors still can tell that the empty homes in the area were, at one time, beautiful. The city boasts a variety of different architectural styles, from Victorian to Federal to Colonial.

The Callowhill, Prince, Centre Park and Penn's Common historic districts are regulated by the city's Historical Architecture Review Board. The board oversees any type of building improvements or exterior work to homes to ensure they maintain their historical integrity.

This requires Mayton to get permission to paint her shutters a certain shade of green, and makes her neighbor Heather Hanna get someone to approve the type of windows she wants to put in.

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South of Penn Neighborhood Association

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South of Penn Neighborhood Association members Frank Bryson and Candice Mayton stroll down South Fifth Street. Bryson has lived in the neighborhood 34 years, and Mayton, the association's president, moved there six years ago from Maiden Creek Township.

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When Hanna opened City Espresso in the 100 block of South Fifth in 2003, she found some of the regulations of operating a business restrictive.

"Every time I turned around I felt like there was a fee or a code for something," said Hanna, who closed her business about three years ago.

"I believed it was something good for the community," she said of her business. "We had film screenings and open mics. But we couldn't afford to keep it open."

'Neighborhood by neighborhood'

Despite such difficulties, the city says it is constantly trying to attract new businesses, not only to the South of Penn area but to Reading as a whole.

Adam Mukerji, executive director of the Reading Redevelopment Authority, said he's always trying to entice business into the city, but it isn't always easy.

"Reading has its impediments," he said. "And in this economic climate, you don't just need technical skill to achieve economic development; you have to be willing to stay positive and keep trying."

The Redevelopment Authority owns a few pieces of land in the South of Penn neighborhood, including the former market house site at Sixth and Bingaman streets and a parcel of land on Canal Street currently being used by nonprofit PermaCultivate as an urban garden.

Mukerji said as much as the Redevelopment Authority and city residents want the city to be revitalized, it won't happen overnight.

"I do believe Reading can be a renaissance city," he said. "Slowly but surely I think it will happen. We just have to go neighborhood by neighborhood."

No place like home

Heather Hanna still lives down the street from her old business, and said she wouldn't live in any other neighborhood.

"I like that when I walk out my front door there's a 90 percent chance I'm going to see somebody who I can say hello to," Hanna said. "Even amongst things that aren't so nice like drugs and trash, when you get to say hello to a neighbor, it's like it wipes the slate clean, even if just for a few minutes."

The neighbors acknowledge that there are some not-so-nice parts of their neighborhood, and that some crime does occur. But they all agreed they feel safe walking the sidewalks and do not regret living in Reading.

They easily walk places and don't have to rely on cars. They know their neighbors. Their houses are antiques in and of themselves.

Mary Ryan, who moved from a farm in Douglassville to her South Fifth Street home 19 years ago, said she wishes her friends in the suburbs felt the same way.

"I have a number of friends who will not come into the city to visit me," Ryan said. "I know they're afraid, and they're not the only ones. But I feel privileged to live in my beautiful house and the neighborhood that I live in."

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