

## Petworth

Rebecca Kern

Fifty years ago, if you walked along the sidewalks of Upshur Street in the Petworth neighborhood of D.C., you would find a community where the core businesses- the small grocers, barber shops and funeral homes- were almost all owned by African Americans. Today, with more diverse ethnic groups moving into the neighborhood, Upshur Street is seeing new development and revitalization. This influx of new ethnicities can be seen in the diversity of stores on Upshur Street where older black-owned businesses are now neighbors to businesses as wide-ranging as Scandinavian and Salvadoran restaurants to white-owned antique shops.

This block of Upshur Street, between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Streets in Northwest D.C, appears to be a microcosm of many of the larger demographic and economic changes that have occurred in Petworth over the past decade.

With several new apartment buildings going up and a variety of new businesses opening, property taxes and real estate prices have increased in Petworth. These changes in market prices have drawn more white and Latino populations from upper middle class backgrounds into the primarily African American working class neighborhood, said Joseph Vaughan, a Ward 4 Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner and long-time Petworth resident.

While new businesses and populations are rejuvenating the neighborhood, they are causing some tensions with the older business owners and residents, said Vaughan, who's lived in Petworth since he was a student at Howard University in 1989 and now lives in a house with his family.

Vaughan said the influx of Latinos into Petworth is a reflection of the increase in size of

the Latino population across the United States. “African Americans have been viewed as the primary minority for so long, and now Latinos outnumber them,” he said.

The main tensions Vaughan said he sees in the neighborhood result from cultural differences between Latino and African Americans, as Latinos tend to have larger families and therefore have more cars causing traffic. He also said Latinos tend to paint and decorate their homes in different, brighter colors based on their cultural heritage, which some older African American residents say degrades the appearance of the neighborhood.

Bentley Keller, a white business owner of a new antique shop on Upshur, said he has heard both residents and older businesses say they dislike some of the new and larger “big box stores” businesses and apartment buildings moving into the neighborhood, as well as businesses that sell alcohol to patrons that could violate peace and order in the neighborhood.

In addition to some of the tensions between the new businesses and residents, Vaughan said that many of the new populations don’t understand or appreciate the African American history of the neighborhood, which leads to a loss of “a sense of community.”

### **History of Petworth**

These demographic changes have been recurrent throughout Petworth’s history as one of D.C.’s largest and earliest suburban subdivisions. Originally, the land was composed of rural estates from two wealthy white landowners- the 183-acre estate of Marshall Brown and the 204 acre-estate of Washington’s elite Tayloe family, which were both sold to the city between 1887 and 1888. Today, the Petworth neighborhood’s boundaries are Georgia Avenue to the west, North Capitol Street to the east, Rock Creek Church Road to the south, and Kennedy Street to the north.

A housing shortage in D.C. in the early 1920’s sent developers building housing

throughout the District. Petworth benefited greatly from this housing boom as hundreds of rowhouses, apartment buildings and stores were built along Georgia Avenue. Many of the first residents were Jewish families who had moved from Southwest or downtown D.C. The 1930 census found 1 percent of African American residents in Petworth.

But by the 1950's, with desegregation, black families moved into Petworth, with several dozen living in the southern end of the neighborhood. By the 1960's, 77 percent of population was "non-white" according to the 1960 Census. By the 1980s, Petworth was primarily an African American community, with the white population making up only 3 percent, and Latino populations making up only 1.4 percent.

In the last three decades, there have been major shifts in demographic populations residing in Petworth. The 1990 Census found the neighborhood to be 88 percent black, 5.8 percent white, 4.8 percent Latino and 0.5 percent Asian. While, the 2000 Census found the neighborhood was 77 percent black, 5.4 percent white, 16 percent Latino, 0.9 percent Asian.

The Latino populations, which have grown exponentially in the past decade, are primarily from countries in Central America, said David Ventura, owner of El Torogoz, a Salvadoran restaurant near the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and Upshur Streets. Ventura, who moved to D.C. in 1977 from La Union, El Salvador, said there is a large Salvadoran population in Northwest D.C., especially in Petworth, Adams Morgan and Mount Pleasant.

According to Census data from 2002, Latino populations made up close to 13 percent of D.C.'s population with about 53,000 Latino residents. This number is expected to increase to 70,000 by 2010, according to Census estimates.

Vaughan estimates that currently the neighborhood is approximately 10-12 percent Caucasian, 30 percent Latino and 60 percent African American.

“The large movement of Latino populations to Petworth is because folks move to where their families and friends are once there is a thriving business community that can support them,” he said. There is a large number of Spanish speaking stores and shops in Petworth and there is cheap housing available for them, Vaughan said.

He said the people purchasing homes in Petworth are getting larger and better quality homes for what they are paying. He also said many young people and baby boomers are moving to Petworth because it is close to downtown and other restaurants and entertainment in Adams Morgan and Columbia Heights.

### **Reactions to New Developments from Local Businesses**

Most locally owned businesses on Upshur Street are pleased with the new housing developments and businesses being built, but acknowledge gentrification and demographic shifts can lead to tension between businesses and residences.

William Hairston, the African American owner of William's, a barber shop on the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and Upshur Streets, said the new businesses have been a major improvement in bringing in different clientele into the neighborhood businesses.

“I’ve always believed you’ve got to stay on top of change,” he said. “You either get with it or stay away from it. You’ve got to go if you don’t keep up with change.” A 40-year resident of Petworth, Hairston’s worked at this barber shop since 2001, and had previously worked in a similar barber shop up the block since 1981.

His shop services primarily African American clientele from Petworth and nearby neighborhoods. Walking into the shop, one will usually see several older African American men sitting in chairs with their backs against the front window. They often are chitchatting over the drone of the TV about last night’s football game or the changes in the neighborhood.

“The neighborhood is getting older,” Hairston said. “The younger kids want to get away from home, and mom and dad. The new people moving in, they’re from upper mobility and bigger money. They have more potential to develop the neighborhood,” Hairston said, leaning back in one of his older, cushioned barber chairs

Down the block from William’s is Domku Bar and Cafe, an example of one of the newer businesses that serves clients from the neighborhood and the clientele from newer “upper mobility.”

Kera Carpenter, the Asian-American owner of Domku, located at 821 Upshur Street, acknowledges the new housing and business developments, while good for business, also lead to gentrification of the neighborhood. Her business serves Eastern European cuisine in a large room filled with natural light and mismatched cushioned chairs, couches and tables. The restaurant tends to stick out from the older, smaller shops on the street as it is the only sit-down restaurant on the block. Carpenter said the restaurant has been open since 2005 and that it attracts both locals and clientele from across the city and country.

“The clientele is really mixed,” Carpenter said. “We have every kind of customer you can think of- young, old, moms with strollers, old neighborhood African American crowd.”

“This neighborhood has definitely gentrified more and more,” she said. “It is still a really fast moving real estate market relative to other parts of the city. The new condos are going up all along Georgia Avenue and that can only bring in new people and businesses. It will probably push some older people out of the neighborhood, but I think that’s the just nature of development, for better or for worse.”

Sara Pette, a Domku employee and George Washington University graduate who moved to a house on Decatur and Iowa Streets in Petworth last October, says she thinks Domku’s

clientele is not as diverse as it could be, claiming that the majority of the customers she sees are white and somewhat “Yuppie.”

“People who live in the neighborhood who aren’t white, rarely come into restaurant,” Pette said. “Sometimes it is really difficult working at Domku because the whole place pretty much screams gentrification.”

She said the price of the food is a more expensive than the other restaurants in the neighborhood, and this may be the reason they don’t get as many locals. “It’s a class issue,” she said. “Not just a race issue.”

Dan Silverman is a white resident of Petworth since 2003 whose blog Prince of Petworth is one of the top read blogs in D.C. In his blog, he writes about the changes going on Petworth. Silverman frequents Domku, but also says it is relatively expensive.

“Domku caters to the new people moving in with higher salaries and expendable incomes,” he said.

As a relatively new business, Carpenter said she experienced some difficulty in the beginning from residents and local churches because they objected to her obtaining a liquor license to serve alcohol.

“Change is always hard for these old neighborhoods,” she said. “Sometimes the neighborhood is a little closed minded to change.”

D.C. Ward 4 Councilmember Muriel Bowser acknowledges the difficulty adjusting to change in the Petworth neighborhood as well, and said it is her job to “do the right thing for the most people.”

“There’s always a healthy tension when you talk about changing the neighborhood,” she said. “People who have lived in the neighborhood want rightfully for their fingerprints to be on

the change. A lot of the development that has grown up in Petworth has been guided by the community.”

### **Giving Back to the Community**

Change is something elderly Italian couple Philip and Loretta Calabro have witnessed over and over again throughout their 42 years at Philip’s Shoe Repair on 808 Upshur Street.

“The neighborhood has gone from good to bad to good over time, but things have been stabilized now for the past six to seven years,” Loretta said, tending to the front counter of the small shoe shop while her husband nails a new heel onto a black leather boot in the back. Philip is the second owner of the shoe repair shop that opened in 1924. He was recruited from his home in Sicily, Italy where he owned his own shoe store making orthopedic shoes.

He said that despite the many changes and shifts the neighborhood has gone through over the years, his neighborhood customers have always been loyal. D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty is one of these loyal customers. He has been getting his shoes repaired at Philip’s Shoe Repair since he was a D.C. Councilmember, Philip said.

“I feel like I’m in my hometown in Italy,” Philip said in his thick Italian accent as he artfully polishes a pair of chocolate brown loafers with his old, leathery hands. “People are so nice to me. They make me feel good about my work, telling me to never leave them. They still don’t forget me, even though they don’t need work done, they just drop by to say hello.”

The newer businesses opening up on Upshur Street hope to give back to the Petworth community as much as the older businesses like Philip’s Shoe Repair.

Yvonne Diallo, an African American who has lived in D.C. 20 years, and her husband Papin Diallo, an African immigrant from Mali who has also lived in D.C. 20 years, wanted to bring healthier food options to the neighborhood with their restaurant Seafood & Things at 847

Upshur Street, which opened in December 2008.

Yvonne said they noticed the neighborhood had a lot of fast food restaurants like McDonalds and Chinese take-out restaurants, but there was a lack of fresh, food healthier choices.

“We wanted to bring healthier food and more variety than what was already offered,” she said. “We also wanted to offer pizza by the slice and calzones because you had to drive all the way to Adams Morgan to get them.”

Thus, the name Seafood & Things was born. “It was our creation of wanting to serve seafood, but a little something else too,” Yvonne said.

She said that while most restaurants in the area only offer fried fish, at Seafood & Things, “every fish you can get fried, you can also get grilled.” She said the most popular dishes their primarily carry-out restaurant sells are Whiting Fish, Croaker, grilled Tilapia, and spinach, olive oil and garlic.

She said their customer base is very diverse, serving African Americans, Latinos, Caucasians, Indian Americans, and Asian Americans.

Yvonne said the neighborhood has been very welcoming towards their business and they are happy to a give back to the “absolutely wonderful community where people embrace and look out for their new neighbors.”

“The blessing has been the neighbors,” she said. “We were so focused on the food in the beginning, we don’t have time worry about the clientele, and they have been awesome and loyal.”

She said she is also excited about the new housing developments. “I think the new developments are bringing in new energy and professionals to the neighborhood,” she said.



“They’re going to positively impact our business with more foot traffic to the street and neighborhood.”

Like Seafood & Things, Ventura, the owner of El Torogoz, said he hopes to provide diverse food options at his Salvadoran restaurant, which serves Italian and Mexican dishes as well.

Ventura said his background is actually in Italian cuisine. He was the head chef for Il Radicchio, an Italian restaurant in Capitol Hill, from 1997 to 2004.

“I love Italian food, especially Northern Italian cuisine,” Ventura said with a slight Spanish accent. “To tell the truth, I’m very good at it.”

In 2004, he bought the property that is now El Torogoz, which is the name of the national bird of his home country El Salvador. He has combined his love for Italian and Salvadoran food, by offering both on in his thick, bound menu, as well as some Mexican dishes.

Ventura’s restaurant reflects this variety of cultural influences, with pale yellow and fuchsia pink walls donned with Sombreros, maps and flags of El Salvador and other Central American countries, and Corona beer posters. Spanish music blasts from the juke box, competing against the fútbol game on the two corner TVs. Latina waitresses tend to several Latino customers at the small bar and eight small tables.

He said his clients come mainly from the neighborhood and they cater to the growing Central American population in Petworth. However, he said, “American people love to eat here too. We have a mix of people.”

He said he’s observed the demographic changes in Petworth, especially the growth of the white population. “Before the Metro was built in 2001, I didn’t see white people in the area,” he said. “Now I see a lot of white people moving in.”

Keller is another relatively new business owner who has observed the changes in Petworth. He owns Bentley's Vintage Furniture and Collectibles at 810 Upshur Street, across the street from Seafood & Things and Domku.

The small store, which has been open a year and several months, is crowded with antique chairs, jewelry, paintings, hats and many other "lost treasures from others' pasts," Keller said.

"Our customers are from all ethnic backgrounds and from all age groups," he said. Keller describes the neighborhood as "a real mixture of people who have lived here 40 to 50 years and those new younger couples who have just bought their first homes. It's much more of a neighborly neighborhood than I've ever been in."

He said he chose to open his business in Petworth after working in Foggy Bottom, Dupont, Adams Morgan and Columbia Heights.

"I noticed the width of the street and the wonderful residential and commercial feel of the neighborhood. It was just a very charming place to open up a business," Keller said.

Keller said he's also noticed more gay populations moving into the neighborhood as well, saying, "They seem to be as at home in Petworth as any place else."

Like Yvonne Diallo and Philip Calabro, Keller said also likes the friendly feel of the neighborhood. "When people from the neighborhood come into the store, it's almost always like meeting a new friend. They know the neighborhood; they feel they're part of the store."

He beckons all of his customers into the store with welcoming greetings. To first-time customers he pleasantly says, "Hey brother," or "Hey sister." But to long-time customers he personalizes his greetings, saying, "What's up dog? How's the business?" or "How you doin' sweetheart? Are the kids well?"

Overall, Keller said he thinks the older neighbors are happy with the new people moving

into the neighborhood, and he's pleased with all of the neighbors, new and old, who visit his shop. "I've gotten tons of support from my neighbors," he said.

### **Interactions with New Ethnic Populations**

Keller said that while most of Petworth's residents are African American, he has noticed more Latino, Caucasian and African populations moving into the homes and businesses. He said with the greater diversity, he's also noticed greater acceptance of his business.

"It is a welcoming, diverse cultural neighborhood," Keller said. "What's really the best part of that diversity is that people have no problem coming into a white-owned store."

While many residents say Petworth is a welcoming community, Pette said it is the responsibility of the new people moving in to make an effort to meet their neighbors.

"The tensions of a white person living in a neighborhood that is primarily black are not bad if you express yourself in a friendly manner to your neighbors," she said.

Pette said she doesn't feel much tension living in this neighborhood because she said she chooses to represent herself in a positive, friendly way.

"People are most receptive to this, and this is the kind of thing that makes people transcend race and just focus on human-to-human interaction," Pette said.

Silverman also expressed the importance of meeting neighbors. He said the "porch culture" of Petworth, where many people gather on their neighbors' porches in the warmer weather to socialize, helps neighbors get to know one another.

Silverman said that he thinks it is easier for new people moving into homes to get to know neighbors than people moving into apartments.

"I happen to be a social person, so I was accepted by 95 percent of the people right away," Silverman said, who lives at 4<sup>th</sup> and Upshur Streets. "I made a bit of an effort. If one

makes the slightest bit of effort to respect elders, take care of your house and yard, you will be accepted by your neighbors,” he said.

Grace Eng, an Asian-American resident at 817 Upshur, next door to Domku, said she has lived on Upshur Street all 66 years of her life. She said she dislikes the new businesses and residents who do not respect their homes and yards.

Eng lives in one of the three remaining residences on the block of Upshur between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Streets and says growing up there were many more residences.

“When I was a child, things were much quieter then,” Eng said. She said she misses the older days and complains that new businesses, Domku in particular, create more loud noise, traffic and trash on the streets. She also said that her neighbors are not as considerate of their elders and do not take their yards as well as previous tenants.

Eng said her parents opened a Chinese-American restaurant in 1938 next door to where Domku is now. But it turned into the Town and Country Market in 1957, which is still open today. She said her parents moved into the home where she lives now in 1943, where she and her 102-year-old mother still reside.

In terms of interactions with other ethnic groups, Christine Taylor, an African American employee at Bentley’s Vintage Furniture and Collectibles, said she’s seen a lot of Latino and African immigrants moving in her block at 8<sup>th</sup> and Kennedy Streets in the Brightwood neighborhood, just a few blocks north of Petworth, where she’s lived for over 25 years.

She said that for the past 20 to 25 years, her neighborhood has been mainly African American residents, but as they get older and die, their children are not holding onto their properties. Therefore, these new Latino and African populations move in, but she says she doesn’t socialize with them very much.

“Most of the new populations are working people who are out and about. Latino and African immigrants seem to have more control over their children,” Taylor said. “So you don’t see as many kids running around as you used to see in the neighborhood.”

Vaughan said he has received complaints at ANC meetings in Petworth from residents about disturbances from Latino populations practicing cultural traditions from their Central American countries like El Salvador.

One of these complaints is that some Latino families grow ten foot tall corn stalks in their back yards. Another complaint is about illegal rooming houses, where a landlord will buy a single family home, and then rent it to ten or 15 person Latino families. These families will chain their bikes trees in the front yard and have several cars taking up parking space from their neighbors, Vaughan said.

Vaughan, who’s lived on the 1300 block of Shepard Street NW since 1999, said he has personally witnesses several cultural differences from his Latino neighbors that differ from his lifestyle as an African American.

“When I first moved into my house, I kept hearing these chickens clucking,” he said. “Three weeks past, and I was sitting on my neighbor’s porch when I heard them again. It turned out the family next door had eight chickens living in their basement.”

He said Salvadorans like to eat fresh chicken and so they were raising their own chickens to eat. However, it is illegal to have livestock in D.C., so Vaughan said he had to notify the police. For Latinos, these ways of living don’t seem odd, Vaughan said. He said he thinks these are some of the cultural difference between African Americans and Latino populations.

However, Vaughan said that by and large, the Latino populations have made positive contributions to the neighborhood.

“Latinos have a very strong sense of family,” he said. “I speak Spanish. I have many Latino friends in the community. They are extremely hard working people and they want to improve their homes.”

As for the Caucasian populations moving in, Vaughan says, “They’re not the same people we used to know. Most white people used to be afraid to walk the streets at night. The urban white population now is more diverse in their views. They’re more willing to talk to different diverse groups.”

Overall, Vaughan said, “Many Latinos and Caucasians want to be a positive source of change in the community.”

However, Vaughan said a sense of the traditional community is lost with these new populations moving into Petworth. “These new white and Latino populations don’t have an appreciation for the African American history of the neighborhood.”

He said he hears his African American neighbors, who’ve lived in Petworth for over thirty years and grew up with their neighbors since they were kids, saying, “I don’t know anyone here anymore.”

While some of the new white families are desensitized to racial barriers and make an effort to socialize and meet their neighbors, there are still white families moving in who are fearful, he said. These families most likely come from suburban environments and have perceptions that urban environments are “violent,” which may have been true in the past, but are no longer accurate for Petworth, he said.

### **Housing Availability**

As Petworth becomes a more popular place to live for diverse groups, the cost of buying a home is increasing based on median sales prices from the D.C. Office of Tax and Revenue.

The median sales price for a home in Petworth in 1999 was \$161,000. But by 2007, that median price increased to \$465,000. However, these prices are still below the average home sale price in D.C., which was \$550,000 in 2007, according to the D.C. Office of Tax and Revenue. Vaughan said he purchased his home for \$150,000 in 1999, and said homes on his street are selling for \$600,000 today.

Yvonne Diallo said she worries about the elderly in the community and the rising real estate prices.

“There are a lot elderly people in the community and the developmental growth has caused real estate to increase,” she said. “All these elderly people have is their properties and it’s getting harder for them to pay these increasing taxes.”

To address these increasing real estate prices, housing developers are looking into creating affordable housing units in Petworth. The three major apartment developments going up in the Petworth neighborhood off of Georgia Avenue, near Upshur Street all contain at least some affordable housing. The Residences at Georgia Avenue, which opened this past March, and the Heights at Georgia Avenue, which will open in 2011, are constructed by the Neighborhood Development Company. They both contain 100 percent affordable housing units.

Adrian Washington, the president of the Neighborhood Development Company, said the main factor that determines affordable housing is the Area Median Income (AMI) for Washington, D.C. The units will be sold at 60 percent of the AMI, Washington said. The monthly prices will range between \$1,000 and \$1,300, he said.

The Park Place Apartments, being built across from the Petworth Metro, will contain 20 percent affordable housing units at less than 60 percent AMI, and are expected to be completed this spring, according to the Office of Planning Development. They are built by Donatelli

Development, which has created two similar apartment complexes in Columbia Heights Metro and one at the U Street Metro, according to their Web site.

Washington said that both of his apartment complexes will improve the physical appearance of neighborhood as they were built on previously vacant lots.

“The apartments bring affordable housing to the neighborhood for people who live here and want to live in better quality housing that is affordable for long term. Ours are guaranteed to be affordable forever as they will adjust annually to the Area Median Income,” he said.

Silverman, who has been monitoring the changing developments of the apartment buildings built in Petworth on his blog, said, “You can’t argue that the new apartments are kicking people out because they are often filling up vacant lots or buildings. You want to bring foot traffic that benefits all, and these places will do that.”

Washington said they will open a Yes! Organic Market in the bottom of their Residences at Georgia Avenue. “Petworth is really a neighborhood where there is certainly not a lot of healthy shopping options. Yes! Organic Market sells healthy foods that are moderately priced.”

Bowser said the city has additional plans to create more businesses in Petworth along Georgia Avenue in the near future. She has been pushing for the Safeway on Georgia Avenue, several blocks from Upshur Street, to make upgrades as it hasn’t made any since it opened 50 years ago.

“I think what people want to see is more neighborhood amenities that they can walk to and stay in their neighborhood to buy coffee or go shopping,” Bowser said. “People favor neighborhood serving retail, they want their neighborhood to serve them.”

Residents and businesses say they are looking forward to more businesses that serve the community of Petworth.



Pette said she was attracted to Petworth because the businesses are locally owned and sustained. “The allure of the neighborhood is that it is locally owned businesses patronizing local businesses,” she said.

Keller said he is also encouraged by the future economic developments of Petworth. “The type of businesses that are coming into the neighborhood are very important for the future of a small business like myself.”

Keller seems to sum up what many local businesses and residents feel about the changing developments that are bringing in such a diversity of people into the neighborhood.

“I don’t know if I, as a new business, am the cause of bringing in the new people, the diverse group, or if they are just in this neighborhood and I happen to be lucky enough to be here too. Either way, it seems to be a very nice blend of businesses and residents.”

Vaughan sees the population changes in Petworth as part of a national trend, saying, “Petworth is just a microcosm of the demographic changes going on in the country now.”