

JOHNSTON SHOOTING AFTERMATH: ENGLISH AVENUE COMMUNITY: Unity emerges from tragedy

Notorious killing prompted businessman from Buckhead and preacher from neglected part of town to join forces against deprivation, crime and despair.

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Shortly after 92-year-old Kathryn Johnston was shot and killed by police in her northwest Atlanta home in 2006, a prominent pastor in her neighborhood received a telephone call from an unlikely source offering assistance.



Buckhead resident John Gordon, a business owner active in Atlanta civic affairs, wanted to help residents in the English Avenue community combat what he considered overall disrespectful treatment by some police officers toward citizens.

The Rev. Anthony Motley was busy, had no idea who Gordon was, and didn't return the call.

But Gordon called again. And again. And again.

Gordon's persistence wore Motley down, and the two men eventually talked. The conversation blossomed into a friendship based on a shared goal: to revitalize a troubled community where sellers of drugs or sex flag down motorists in broad daylight and where others routinely dump their worn-out furniture.

"The death of Kathryn Johnston created a whole new energy in the community," said Motley, pastor of Lindsay Street Baptist Church. "Her death has brought a reawakening not only in the community, but in the city to communities like English Avenue."

The two men point to the Johnston home — where she was gunned down two years ago Friday — as an example of that new energy. On a recent drive through the neighborhood, they noticed a newly painted mural

of Johnston and President-elect Barack Obama on the front of her small bungalow-style home. The mural wasn't there two weeks ago.

Their vision for the English Avenue community includes a park, a community center, a school and fixing up the dozens of burned-out and abandoned homes that seem to welcome vagrants and criminal activity.

The task won't be easy. Others, including Motley, have tried before with mixed success.



English Avenue lies in the shadow of Georgia Tech, about a mile west of the Georgia Aquarium and the World of Coca-Cola. It was included a decade ago in an empowerment zone designed to create housing, businesses and jobs in some Atlanta neighborhoods. But in 2000, state officials released a report that found the program didn't help as some had envisioned.

Councilman Ivory Lee Young, whose district includes English Avenue, has watched some developers build homes here, only to never see them occupied.

Young believes English Avenue's challenges are part of a citywide problem. Atlanta, he says, needs a "comprehensive," affordable housing policy that brings more homeowners who can turn around English Avenue and other neighborhoods such as Grove Park and Hunter Hills.

Young people left

Before Johnston's death, Gordon, who has lived in Atlanta for 30 years, said he "never realized the community was here." Now, he's one of English Avenue's biggest boosters.

"There's so many good people who've lived a lifetime here that go to sleep afraid at night," said Gordon, who owns a document imaging company in Marietta. "We don't believe people should live in that kind of fear."

Motley and 21 churches in the community recently created a ministerial alliance to attack the community's problems.

So far, members of Gordon's church in Buckhead, Peachtree Presbyterian, volunteered with Motley and others in a community cleanup on Mother's Day weekend.

In August, more than a dozen neighborhood residents came to an Atlanta City Council meeting to complain about the dozens of vacant homes in the area.

About 4,000 people, most of them African-American, live in the English Avenue neighborhood, according to a 2006 Georgia Tech study.

One-half of the residents live at or below the poverty level, the study found. Last year, 83 newly constructed properties were either vacant or boarded up, said Tracy Bates, executive director of the English Avenue Community Development Corp. The neighborhood has three unpaved roads.

The first step to revitalization, Motley says, is to rid English Avenue of crime.

Forbidding-looking young men stand on many of the neighborhood's corners during the day. The pavement of an abandoned house is littered with heroin needles and used condoms. In September, the most recent month such data was available on the Police Department's Web site, there were two homicides, five robberies, nine aggravated assaults and six homes burglarized in the English Avenue neighborhood.

Andre McDaniel, 41, says English Avenue changed in the early 1990s, when many elderly residents died and their children, him included, left for the suburbs. Drug dealers, he said, bought new homes and plied their trade.

When someone stole his mother's television set a couple of years ago, McDaniel said two neighborhood drug dealers offered a "bounty" to find it.

His mother politely declined.

"In some odd kind of way, [the dealers were] some kind of neighborhood security," said McDaniel, who moved back in with his mother in June.

Young said English Avenue needs more young people to stay in the neighborhood. The revitalization of other Atlanta neighborhoods, he noted, often begins with younger people investing their money and care in their community.

"Working families can stabilize a community," the councilman said. "If they were to occupy these homes, you'd see a change in the community."

Most Atlantans paid little attention to English Avenue until Nov. 21, 2006, the night Johnston was shot. A rogue Atlanta police drug squad burst into Johnston's Neal Street home, saying they thought drugs were being dealt inside. A frightened Johnston fired a revolver at the intruders. The officers fired 39 shots. Two hit her in the chest, killing her.

The shooting stunned the city. Three officers were later convicted of crimes stemming from the case. Police Chief Richard Pennington dismantled his department's drug unit and rebuilt it with different officers. Some civic activists said the Johnston case embodied the distrust many Atlantans have toward the police, including Gordon, who had his own minor run-in with the police about five years ago.

Gordon got a ticket at Lenox Square mall for parking in a handicap spot. When he approached an officer to say that he didn't think the space was for the handicapped, he said the officer became belligerent and called other police. Gordon, who was briefly detained, filed a complaint against the department and began paying greater attention to media reports of alleged police wrongdoing.

“I want to trust the police,” Gordon said in Motley’s church one morning. “But in order for us to trust them, they have to earn our trust, and they have a wonderful opportunity to earn our trust. They need to get the drug dealers and the prostitutes off the streets.”

Gordon and Motley talk at least once a week. Gordon occasionally attends Motley’s church.

When Motley and Gordon first met at a diner, they discovered some similarities; they’re both Ohio natives and enjoy a good chicken fried steak. And they shared more.

“There was a kindred outrage,” Motley recalled. “He was so hurt and so outraged. I believed him.”

Gordon came to a neighborhood meeting shortly after the Johnston killing. A woman approached him afterward.

“Don’t forget about us when this is over,” she said.

“I won’t,” Gordon replied.

Gordon thought about his answer: “Wow, I just made a promise.”

A call for action

Motley and Gordon attended several City Council meetings to demand action in the wake of Johnston’s death. They joined others in successfully lobbying city leaders for a civilian review board to investigate possible police misconduct.

Gordon wanted to help, but he recognized that many residents in the predominantly black neighborhood were suspicious of a brown-haired white man who lived in Buckhead. Motley used his collateral as a longtime pastor in the area to help Gordon, taking him to other churches to gain their trust.

Sometimes, it’s Gordon who’s building bonds with Motley and others.

“I wouldn’t talk to you unless John was with you,” Motley told a visitor.

The pastor later explained his fondness for Gordon.

“John practices ‘love your neighbor,’ ” Motley said.

Gordon has similarly kind words for Motley.

“I have come to admire Rev. Motley,” Gordon said. “He’s inspired me to want to stay involved.”

The next step, they say, is continuing to organize the neighborhood and put together their plan to help the neighborhood. After that, Gordon said, they will reach out to donors and civic leaders who can help turn their vision into reality.

Their mission is steep.

And if nothing else, Gordon said, "at least I have a new friend."