



New life for Atlanta's English Avenue

One of the city's most troubled neighborhoods is starting to rebound thanks to an unusual coalition that hasn't lost hope.

By [Patrik Jonsson](#), Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor / December 11, 2008 Atlanta

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Rough neighborhood: Bertha Hayes feeds stray dogs in Atlanta's English Avenue neighborhood, where half the 4,000 residents live at or below the poverty level.

Businessman John Gordon admits that, until the shooting of 92-year-old Kathryn Johnston by rogue Atlanta drug agents two years ago, he had never heard of the English Avenue neighborhood – or "The Bluff," as it's often called.

Not so for the Rev. Anthony Motley, who has spent more than 20 years in Atlanta's roughest 'hood – dumping ground for old furniture, haven of rabbit-size rats, and scene of broad-daylight drug dealing and



pimping – trying and failing to rein in lawlessness in a forgotten corner of a city more known for its glitzy black middle class, Coca-Cola, and hip-hop impresarios.

Today, the two men from opposite ends of Atlanta's social sphere are part of a black-white coalition determined to find "angel investors" and bring together local businesses, neighboring Georgia Tech, and church leaders to inspire not just city and private investment, but also to light a spark of hope among law-abiding residents – many of them older people fearful of the streets outside their front doors.

Already, their unusual friendship has helped inspire two massive clean-up efforts, a small but significant drop in crime, and glimmers of fresh paint and clean-swept front walks.

"Don't underestimate the power of this tragedy," says Mr. Motley, pastor of Lindsay Street Baptist Church.

Nationally, Ms. Johnston's death in a hail of 39 police bullets exemplified to many civil libertarians the futility and danger of SWAT-style drug raids. Based on a dubious tip and a fabricated search warrant, officers broke into Johnston's home in November 2006. They found the scared and fragile woman seated in a chair with a rusted revolver in her hand. Believing the armed, black-clad officers were intruders, she fired one shot. The officers fired back.



Since then, the Atlanta Police Department has rebuilt the drug unit with new officers, and the City Council formed a civilian police review board to investigate complaints. Three of the officers have been convicted and are awaiting sentencing.

Mr. Gordon, who lives in the upscale Buckhead neighborhood, says what he saw in the Johnston tragedy matched his own observations of police behavior and tactics. "I didn't feel like this was just an attack on the black community, but ... an affront to everybody who lives in Atlanta and believes in freedom," says Gordon.

But for the 4,000 residents of this deflated neighborhood of burned-out houses, hulks of wrecked churches, and empty school buildings, the shooting presented a paradox, says Tracy Bates, director of the English Avenue Neighborhood Association. Yes, she says, the drug unit made a horrible mistake. But its intent was to do what's proved impossible so far: rid the neighborhood of its drug culture and dismantle what has essentially become a sort of impromptu technical college for young criminals.

"This incident revealed both the level of corruption within the PD and the level of corruption within the community itself," says Ms. Bates.

Now that many are satisfied that justice was served, the onus is falling on the residents of this old railroad community. Past efforts to include the area in a redevelopment "empowerment zone" largely failed as mortgage fraud grew rampant in the last few years. There have been two murders in the area in the past six weeks.



"This is a very tough nut to crack," says Motley.

Yet Motley and Gordon – walking side by side through the area's narrow streets – say they've just gotten started. From Motley's perspective, Gordon's involvement symbolizes the fact that English Avenue's woes threaten even the walled-in neighborhoods of Buckhead.

"Buckhead needs English Avenue and English Avenue needs Buckhead," he says. As for Gordon, "I've fallen in love with this neighborhood," he says.

Two major clean-up efforts this year have filled eight construction-size trash trailers, drawing 170 black and white volunteers from throughout the city. Crime is down 6 percent, but Bates says an "us versus them" attitude remains among both police and residents. A community survey is under way to learn what homeowners need to help improve their lot.

Two weeks ago, residents held a small parade through the neighborhood to commemorate Johnston's death. Nearly 30 percent of those at the service were white, compared with almost none the year before. On Tuesday, the group held the first meeting of a "stakeholder alliance" made up of local business owners, pastors, and residents.

Perhaps most significant, organizers say, is that a growing number of residents are taking renewed pride in their properties, and the alliance's lobbying of the city's zoning department has sped up efforts to demolish five burned-out houses – an accomplishment at a time when the city has laid off more than 200 employees, including many in the building codes department.

The other day Jimmy Houston, a 20-year resident, spent the day painting a friend's picket fence, inspired in part by Motley and Gordon. Johnston's death, he says, "didn't affect just this city, it affected the whole country."

Andrea Ashmore, who oversees Georgia Tech's community partnerships, says the university wants to build on the successes of other tough city neighborhoods where bike patrols and other measures have cut crime by 50 percent.

"This is the beginning of a real profound movement," says Ms. Ashmore. "Up to this point, it's been like dog nails on linoleum trying to get traction."

"They have a chance to do something, but they just need to do it," says Luler Favors, who has lived on top of The Bluff for 65 years. "This is my corner, and I keep it clean," she says, clearly meaning more than the leaves.

Through English Avenue's years of trouble, she's never given up. "There's still hope here," she says.