

At the celebration, Judge Cordell Meeks reminisced about growing up in the Turtle Hill area of Kansas City, Kan.



The Schlagle High School Marching Stallions paraded down Nebraska Avenue toward the Willa Gill Center for the Turtle Hill Neighborhood 120 Year Celebration on March 26.

Posted on Wed, Apr. 06, 2005

Turtle Hill looks to next 120 years

Neighborhood near downtown celebrating revitalization

By KERRI FIVECOAT-CAMPBELL
Special to The Star

Cordell Meeks Jr. was raised in a home in the Turtle Hill neighborhood that his father had once dreamed of owning as a boy. He returned to his old neighborhood on March 26 to celebrate the revitalization of an area that has seen its share of ups and downs.

“In its heyday, this was the Normandy West and the Piper Estates,” Meeks said, referring to two modern-day, upscale subdivisions in the western portion of the city. “This is really a re-birth of my old neighborhood.”

The Turtle Hill Neighborhood Association used the day to kick off a yearlong celebration of the area's 120th anniversary. The event featured remarks by civic and government officials, as well as music performed by local high school students and food at the Willa Gill Center. Meeks was the keynote speaker for the event.

Meeks' mother, Cellastine, still lives in the 1890s-vintage home that her husband dreamed of buying as a child in neighborhood bounded by Fifth, Seventh, Washington and Freeman streets, just north of downtown Kansas City, Kan.

Cordell Meeks Jr. moved from the area years ago, when it became infested with crime and blight.

“Even during urban renewal, they tore some of the houses down and we were excited about the possibilities,” said Meeks, who now lives in the western part of the county. “But we had to wait 40 years before any building occurred here. If I was in the market today, I would consider building here myself.”

Evelyn Hudson, president of the Turtle Hill Neighborhood Association, represents the reversal in the trend of moving from east to west. She moved from western Wyandotte County in 2000 into the northeast community.

“Many of the officers on our board are new to the area,” said Hudson. “There is just so much history here and the collaboration between the Turtle Hill Neighborhood Association and City Vision Ministries has made this a really pleasant neighborhood.”

In the first half of the 20th century, the Turtle Hill neighborhood was one of the premier areas in which to live. Meeks remembers a neighborhood filled with children, caring neighbors who knew each other's children, treating them as their own. And he remembers the charming aesthetics.

“We had these globe street lamps that were popular targets by the kids to shoot out,” said Meeks. “That was the biggest crime we ever saw in the neighborhood then.”

However, in the 1960s through the 1980s, crime and blight took over. Drug houses popped up; citizens fled.

“The transformation started about nine years ago, when City Vision Ministries came up with a redevelopment plan,” said Hudson.

According to Hudson, City Vision Ministries developed 35 new homes in the area, where home-ownership rates increased from 60 to 85 percent. The housing abandonment rate dropped from 20 percent to less than 3 percent. The neighborhood also received about \$1 million in street, sidewalk and lighting restoration.

“The houses that were built retained the architectural integrity of the older homes already here,” said Hudson.

Meeks said one of the nicest things about the newer Victorian style homes are the large front porches.

“It's not only the physical structures that have come to life, but the neighborhood is alive again,” said Meeks. “Neighbors can sit out on their front porches and they know one another.”

In 2000, the community celebrated the opening of the 58-unit Turtle Hill Townhomes, the first multi-family development in the area in more than 30 years. Such was the interest generated in the townhomes that prospective residents had to get on a waiting list.

Molly Ekerdt, community services director for City Vision Ministries, said the organization was happy that such a historic neighborhood was being revitalized.

“I think the community has done a really good job,” said Ekerdt.

City Vision Ministries still owns some lots in the neighborhood and they hope build more homes.