

The Campus Was Our Country Club

By Don T. Whitaker

I did not realize it at the time, but my childhood was made special by the place my family lived: University Oaks, a small neighborhood separated from the University of Houston campus by Wheeler Street. The houses were well-seasoned, some a bit run down, a few luxurious, the majority comfortably middle class. Families, like mine, chose to live there because the University was a stroll away.

My father was a tenured engineering professor and my mother was a Class of 1944 alumna and a former editor of the Daily Cougar. Her mother lived in the second house from Wheeler on Rockwood Drive, where she made her living renting rooms to students. Our house was several doors farther down, a big frame house with iffy architecture, too few window unit air conditioners, and spotty heating. Its location made up for whatever disadvantages it had. Dad could walk to the office, there were cultural and artistic opportunities nearby, a world-class library, and, most important to me, the neighborhood kids had a world of entertainment and wide open spaces on our doorstep.

MacGregor Park and the Brays Bayou greenbelt were nearby, but the local sub-adult population spent its free hours on campus. We rode bikes on tree-shaded sidewalks and spent every summer day at the UH pool, growing overly tanned and testing the patience of the lifeguards, whom we knew by name. Over the years, we grew into teenagers there, evolving deep friendships, swimming and enjoying excellent burgers and cherry cokes at the Water Hole (we scrupulously did not swim for an hour afterward). We hit the Cougar Den after the pool, at first in the old gym next to the pool, then in the sleek, ultra-modern University Center (UC). It was air conditioned, and it had snacks. Life was good.

As the campus acquired new buildings, construction sites offered places to play. A lot of construction took place during the 1960s and 70s, and the contractors were not very diligent about securing the sites. I remember sneaking into the unfinished UC and watching the artist weld the sculpture in the atrium. Magic. (He yelled at us, but we stayed and watched). Climbing around in the Fine Arts Building, my sister and I encountered possums that turned out to be enormous rats. Somewhat less magical, but, what the hell? As long as we were not caught (or bitten), and our parents did not find out, all was well.

The campus was our country club, and the kids of University Oaks were our social circle. We led average lives with two exceptional differences: the University, and our highly educated parents. Most families in the neighborhood had at least one Ph.D. in the house, and everyone was expected to succeed at school, and, mostly, we did. Weighty talk sessions involved national and international issues

(the 1960s were full of them), as well as art and science, and often the adults around us got involved to challenge our preconceptions and opinions. We were encouraged to be little adults, intellectually, and we were. Again, magic.

University Oaks was separated from the world on all four sides, somewhat isolated from the dynamic social changes that went on around us. City green space or University property north, south, east, and west, and the socially progressive attitudes of the professors and their spouses in the homes, kept the white flight that caused massive demographic change in neighborhoods all around us at bay long enough for cooler heads to prevail. When families of other races began to move in, there was no massive reaction. Most families remained in place, in our place, in our idyllic island of sweet Southern scholastic bliss.

HISD zoning brought change in fall 1970. A few families exited the scene for the suburbs and some, like my parents, opted to stay and put their children in private schools. As I look back on that period now, two things strike me: the surprisingly large number of my neighbors who chose to make a stand for urban multicultural integration by sending their kids to school with people they may have been wary of, and the shockingly narrow world view of the suburbanites I was suddenly in school with.

My parents would not pick up and leave University Oaks for the few high school years my sister and I had left. It was too good an environment for them. They flourished in the social scene and Dad enjoyed walking to campus. In his later years, he did his part for democracy by serving in the civic club. As for me, I tried to make myself move out of the house after high school, but couldn't. As long as I went to UH, it made too much sense to stay there. The need to leave the nest, and finally having a full time job, finally launched me to my own place when I was a junior.

The neighborhood looks remarkably the same, today. A few houses have different paint, and the new light rail line took out the entire row of houses that faced Wheeler Street. Different people live in my grandmother's house. There are more buildings on campus now and fewer trees, and the pool where I whiled away entire summers is gone. But when I drive through University Oaks to my parents' house, it feels exactly as it did when I was riding a bike, and I hope the kids growing up there know how good they have it. There is a country club next door.

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