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LIFESTYLE

Woman's Goal: Transformation of Southeast Houston

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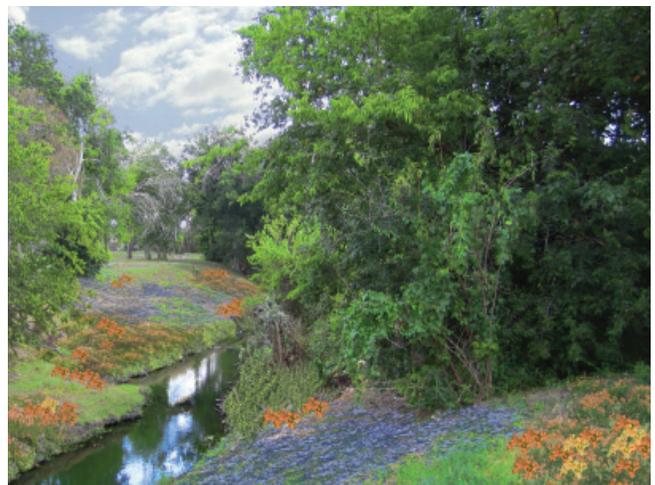
Carroll Parrott Blue stands in a neighborhood that is being redeveloped near Griggs Road and Grace Lane Friday, Feb. 8, 2013, in Houston. Blue is advocating a resurgence in southeast Houston. (Brett Coomer / Houston Chronicle)

Carroll Parrott Blue stands by a waterway on Martin Luther King Boulevard near Griggs Road that she said has had problems with flooding. Blue is advocating a resurgence in southeast Houston.

I met Carroll Parrott Blue a few years ago, when I was writing about Emancipation Park, and, though she didn't figure prominently in the story, I mentally filed her as a Very Useful Person to Know: a writer and filmmaker who'd grown up in the Third Ward and seemed to know everything about the place.

So I was happy last month to see her name in my inbox. Carroll, I thought cheerfully, is going to tell me a good story, and all I'll have to do is transcribe.

Instead, I could barely make sense of her email. She was pitching a story about something called SEHTA. Whatever it was, it had a long list of supporters, partners and programs, many with their own inscrutable acronyms. There was a lot of bureaucracy, a lot of gratitude and hardly anything that I could grasp.



(Patrick Peters / Tara Mather)

Normally I'd just delete an email like that. But I had faith that Carroll, a writer and a filmmaker - a professional storyteller, for crying out loud - could, if pressed, tell me what the story was, why this SEHTA thing had captured her imagination, who was behind it, why anyone should care.

So I pressed. I asked in an email whether I could focus the story on a single place or a person.

She responded with a bombardment of reports, press releases and acceptance letters. More acronyms. More thickety dullness. I figured out that SEHTA stood for Southeast Houston Transformation Alliance. But otherwise, I despaired.

Finally, the email I'd hoped for arrived.

She'd been thinking, she wrote, about my request. And finally, she realized that the person readers could identify with was ... her.

"I am slowly realizing," she wrote, "that this story is my story."

Race woman

Carroll was born in 1943, when Houston, like the rest of the South, was sharply segregated. Ten years ago, in "The Dawn at My Back," an autobiography composed of stories, poems, photos and letters, she described what it was like to grow up in that world.

"My mother," she wrote, "was a race woman. Being a race man or woman in the 1950s meant you had dedicated your life to uplifting the Negro race. Your decision also meant that you had consciously endangered yourself. Your surrounding environment would always be hostile and perhaps violent because of your commitment." Lynchings were a vivid possibility.

Carroll's mother, Mollie Parrott, was steely, more a teacher than a nurturer. Almost every night of the week, little Carroll accompanied her to some meeting or another. "At 7, I was convinced that my mother belonged to every kind of organization on the planet Earth.



Carroll Parrott Blue stands in a neighborhood that is being redeveloped near Griggs Road and Grace Lane Friday, Feb. 8, 2013, in Houston. Blue is advocating a resurgence in south-east Houston. (Brett Coomer / Houston Chronicle)



(Emily Peacock)



(Emily Peacock)



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Carroll Parrott Blue stands near new development near the intersection of Griggs Road and Beekman Road Friday, Feb. 8, 2013, in Houston. Blue is advocating a resurgence in southeast Houston. (Brett Coomer / Houston Chronicle)



(Raul Baez)

In addition to teaching full time, she was on the board of the Negro YWCA, cofounder of the Garden Club, and a member of the Texas Negro Democratic Party, the NAACP, the 1906 Club, the Ladies Auxiliary of the Dr. Charles A. George Dental Society, many church groups ... , various school committees, the PTA and other teachers' groups, along with numerous interfaith organizations, interracial organizations, the Book of the Month Club, the Girl Scouts and Jack and Jill."

Groups such as those formed the backbone of the civil rights movement. And women like Carroll's mother were its indispensable worker bees. Years later, browsing a bookstore, Carroll found a book titled "Black Texas Women: 150 Years of Trial and Triumph." She felt a thrill: The story of the civil rights movement was Mollie Parrott's story. But when Carroll turned to the index, she didn't find her mother's name. "Historically," Carroll wrote, "she is faceless."

Transformation

Carroll suggested that we rendezvous at Sunshine's Vegetarian Deli on Martin Luther King Boulevard, firmly in the part of southeast Houston that she aims to transform. When she came in the store, it took me a few seconds to recognize her. In the past few years, she's undergone a transformation herself: Exercise and a diet heavy on raw organic kale have taken pounds off her tiny frame. She has

the glowing, translucent skin of a vegan, and looks nowhere close to 70.

She brings a similar commitment to southeast Houston. At a Formica table, while I drank a smoothie, she whipped out her MacBook and began explaining how a couple of years ago, as a University of Houston research professor, she'd spearheaded a National Endowment for the Arts "Our Town" grant application, one intended to bring artists, architects, planners, landscape architects and other such professionals into big civic projects, where they could change their communities for the better. In her application, Carroll argued that southeast Houston needed not just change but transformation.

The NEA agreed and awarded Carroll's SEHTA \$100,000 - enough to spruce up a little park, maybe, but hardly enough to transform an area east of Texas 288 and southwest of Interstate 45. Still, Carroll was ecstatic. "I'm a filmmaker," she said. "I know how to leverage things."

So she began building all those coalitions she takes such pride in - partnerships with other professors and departments at the University of Houston; partnerships with park people, hike-and-bike-trail groups, neighborhood organizations, gardeners, civic clubs, city agencies and pretty much anyone else she could think of.

She will be disappointed that in this article I don't name every last one of her collaborators and, at wearisome length, relay her undying gratitude to them all. Such are her instincts: one part Southern graciousness and self-effacement; one part canniness as a grant applicant. Her mother, I suspect, would be proud.

We left Sunshine's and drove around, looking at things that gave Carroll hope (the little Griggs Terrace houses designed by owner/architects Mark Schatz and Anne Eamon; Palm Center Park's spiffy renovation; flood-prone Kuhlman Gully, its banks seeded with wildflowers) and things that needed to be fixed (falling-down houses, a toxic-looking industrial site, bedraggled Palm Center). Everywhere she saw promise: stories that needed to be told, art-filled parks waiting to be born.

She talked about the evolution of the neighborhoods. Many of the east side's neighborhoods were entirely Caucasian in the '50s; then after desegregation, they suddenly turned black. Now the African-Americans who live there are mostly elderly, their adult children moved to places such as Sugar Land. More and more, southeast Houston's young people are Hispanic.

As we drove down Martin Luther King Boulevard, Carroll pointed to Peck Elementary. Two years ago, she said, the school's students were 98 percent African-American. But a new, larger building just opened, built to serve children from a larger area. Now, Peck is 52 percent Hispanic.

Carroll smiled as she said that. She's interested in the neighborhood's racial change, not at all opposed to it. In her relentless organizing, she reminds me of her mother. But the basis of Carroll's organizing is entirely different: It's based on place, not race. She aims to uplift not an ethnic group but a geographic area: one whose history she's lived, and whose future she likes to imagine.

Her mother was a race woman. Carroll is a place woman.

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