

# UP FRONT



## NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

### Deutschtown

In 2012, shortly after Gina and Corey Grone moved to James Street, a neighbor invited Gina to attend the Community Council meeting for the neighborhood of East Allegheny, also known as Deutschtown. “I thought it might be a group of people sitting around in a church basement, but I went and it was so eye opening. There were updates about things I never would have found out about. They were talking about landscaping at Giant Eagle and I thought ‘these people have impact on what kind of plantings the grocery store has!’” Gina joined and is now the president of the East Allegheny Community Council.

At monthly meetings, residents learn about local concerns, hear reports from people representing the city, the business district, and the board who has, over the years, purchased and overseen the restoration or new construction of more than 80 homes. The Council has an understanding with developers and builders that historic standards will be maintained.

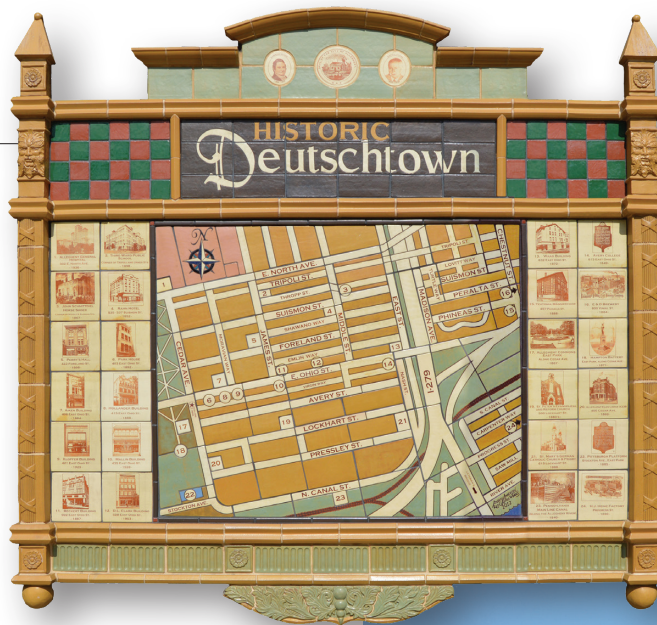
The North Side neighborhood, three blocks wide and nine blocks long, is compact and manageable, but it was not always so. In the 1970s and '80s, PennDOT halved the neighborhood that originally ran from Allegheny Commons to Troy Hill to create the East Street Valley Expressway, part of what we know today as Interstate 279.

Barbara Burns, a lifetime resident of the neighborhood, was active in the community at that time. “In 1976, we had a simple neighborhood organization, but we were lacking in leadership and cohesiveness.” They were not prepared for the upheaval they faced with the coming of the highway.

“It was the largest earth moving project in Western Pennsylvania history,” Barbara said. Bob Baumbach, an architect whose business and home are close to the bisected area, has studied the maps before and after the bisection. “They dug out a gorge to build that highway,” he said. About 6,000 people were displaced as PennDOT acquired 1,300 homes, schools, churches, and businesses in the effort to provide a fast and convenient connection between Pittsburgh and its northern suburbs, according to an article by Len Barcoucky in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. “We had huge issues facing us: destruction, chaos, and polarization,” Barbara said.

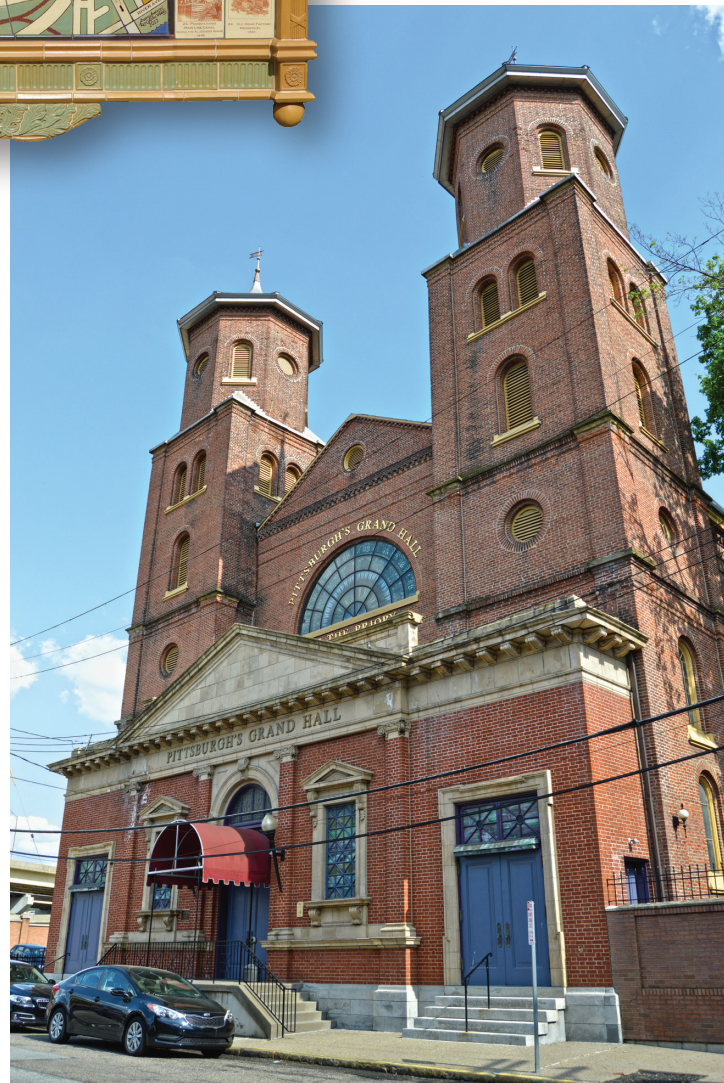
People saw the construction either as

their ticket to be bought out, or if they were committed to staying, they faced uncertainty. Banks were willing to take deposits from the residents, but weren't lending money. People were hesitant to make improvements in their



Located at the corner of Cedar Avenue and East Ohio Street, this map of Deutschtown was designed by East Liberty tile artist Anders Anderson in 2013.

Photos by Liz Simpson, 2018.



The former St. Mary's Church, once in danger of demolition for construction of the highway, is now the Grand Hall, part of the historic boutique Priory Hotel.





Arnold's Tea on East Ohio Street, Pittsburgh's first full-service tea shop, opened in 2015. The spray-painted *Lady Deutschtown* mural by Jeremy Raymer was added in April 2018.



Avery Street is lined with charming homes and is part of the City Historic District.

homes, like putting in a new furnace or roof, the usual things that maintain homes. Those early community meetings were tumultuous. City officials who came swore they would never return.

Residents also faced uncertainty about the iconic institutions in the neighborhood. The churches, schools, and even the old brewery, which we think of as being in Troy Hill, were in limbo. PennDOT had also bought St. Boniface in the East Street Valley and St. Mary's on Lockhart and planned to tear them both down. The inured resistance of the congregation at St. Boniface led PennDOT to sell the church back to the Diocese, and reroute the highway. A group of parishioners, led by their pastor, went to Washington, D.C., and got the church placed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The plan to route the highway in the path of St. Mary's became too costly, so Mary Ann and Ed Graf bought the building and remade the monastery into The Priory Hotel, a resplendent boutique hotel. They created the Grand Hall from the sanctuary, a venue for weddings, large meetings, and recently the filming location for a Hollywood movie.

The uprooting of a thriving community in the East Street Valley brought the question of eminent domain to the forefront. "If someone had a simple clapboard house, its value didn't come near the cost of a house somewhere else. The lack of housing necessitated the building of the Pressley Street High Rise apartment building. "They had to have some place for those people to go," said Barbara.

Now the neighborhood is stable with two historic designations. The streets to the south of East Ohio Street plus Cedar Avenue are a City Historic District, with guidelines for any proposed changes to the exterior. The entire neighborhood is a National Historic District and that is another matter. That designation offers a 20 percent tax credit on improvements made to income-producing properties, following federal standards for historic preservation. Residents are a diverse mixture, young people who like living close to the city with a park nearby, and older residents whose needs are met within the area. "Our strength is in our diversity," said Gina Grone, "and appreciation of the diversity. A lot of younger people would not want to live in a neighborhood where everyone is the same. We

are in a position to refresh and revitalize our community."

Barbara Burns is now the owner of Sweet Time Cafe on East Ohio Street, and gives proof to the words of Jane Jacobs, the author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, "there must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street." Barbara has her eyes on the street, looking out for what she calls her favorite subject, her neighborhood. "I am so happy," she said, "to go to neighborhood meetings now and people are talking in a positive way about what we can do."

Jacobs also compared the activity on the street to a dance, "an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole." That quote resonates with Gina Grone, who is optimistic about the future, with East Ohio Street preparing for several new businesses. "I think we've achieved critical mass here. We're going to have feet on the street as well as eyes on the street." ☀

**Bette McDevitt** is a freelance writer and a longtime contributor to *Western Pennsylvania History*.