

The Future as Past Tense

Norwood Heights: A look at Norwood today

Reporter Wetzel: Hello everyone, this is independent investigative journalist John H. Wetzel reporting on this the last day of September, Saturday the 30th, 2073 from the Southside of Indianapolis on the lot where Norwood's Pride Park neighborhood center used to be.

I am here with special guest Laquanda Richmond and other local Black Americans celebrating the 50th anniversary of Norwood--now a gated community known as Norwood Heights, formerly Norwood Place, and before that of course, Norwood. The name was changed to Norwood Heights around 40 years ago in 2033 by the urban settler class of mainly European Americans who had completely colonized Norwood through gentrification.

As many know, Norwood Heights is about 3 blocks east of the entrance to the jail which is part of the Criminal Justice Campus, a 2019-2022 \$571 million project also housing the Assessment and Intervention Center, and the Marion County Courts which moved here from the downtown Indianapolis City-County building.

Back in the early 21st century, downtown Indy had Jail I and II. These jails were closed and torn down after the new jail opened out here. Each downtown parcel of land now has a 5 story building with luxury condos, apartments, shops, and parking.

Today, as you know, downtown Indy is completely gentrified. Indy's low-income citizens are stuck at the Joseph H. Hogsett Transit Center, the hub for the new Indy Way transportation system. The wealthy of all colors have reign over downtown. The poor of all colors stand out. They have no reason to be downtown. They just can't afford it. Most are shooed away, back to the transit center or what they call, "Joe's Place."

We're talking to Laquanda Richmond who used to live in Norwood, a basic 4 square block area on the southeast side.

Laquanda, tell us about Norwood.

Laquanda: First of all John, thank you for inviting me to discuss the history and culture of my old neighborhood. People today need to know what happened and they need to know from people who were there.

This is why I consider this interview as a chance to make a "witness statement" which is a legal term implying a crime has been committed. Although what happened to Norwood did not break any laws, from the Black perspective, what happened to Norwood did violate global social justice morals...and basic human rights around human dignity. What happened to my old neighborhood was grossly transactional. I can summarize it as simply a variety of "business deals."

As far as Norwood, well...most of my family and friends grew up and lived in Norwood. Many still lived there until what we call "the extinction" or the racial cleansing by gentrification of Norwood occurred. Norwood was one of the last of the city's Black areas to exist. Ransom Place, Babe Denny-Concord, Riverside, Haughville, East 16th St. and the College Avenue-Bellefontaine-Roosevelt neighborhoods were already gone. The more tragic area, Hosbrook St. in Fountain Square, was systematically erased by this group called SEND (Southeast Neighborhood Development) which we came to call "Southeast Neighborhood Destroyers."

SEND became the city's leading cause of urban refugees displaced by the organization's gentrification of the southeast side. What is tragic, we were unable to prevent the Destroyers from enabling the colonization of Black Norwood the way they did Black Hosbrook St. This is in spite of--we will see--the fact that in the early 2020's, Norwood residents were specifically told by SEND during public meetings that this would not happen. Where were SEND's scruples?

I am now 78. I lived here over 50 yrs ago. Back in 2022-23, the Community Justice Campus opened. As I mentioned, it was made up of the Marion County Courthouse (a 12 story building) and the Adult Detention Center--the jail, which we, the original residents of Norwood, called "The Incarceration Hotel." The entrance was down the street from Norwood on Prospect. We also called the jail, "The Poor People's Hilton" because that's who are mainly housed there...poor people. Built for 3,000 beds, 50 years later it now houses close to 4,000 "beds" in the same but now more compact area.

About 10 years after the extinction by gentrification started, the Black history and culture of Norwood was erased. Remember, Norwood is on Prospect Street and Prospect Street was the place of the direct entrance to the jail. And the jail both cost too much and provided too many high paying jobs. My point here: Norwood and its people were in the way of "progress." Again, it wasn't personal, just business. You know what I'm saying?

The woman called Linda Johnson headed up the Norwood neighborhood organization which was influenced by the Destroyers. The long-time majority white and middle-class SEND board had been grooming her over a 5 year period to go along with the project. What she did not realize was the selling out of the neighborhood to those who were basically college-education white urban settlers.

Counselors, lawyers, social workers, jail staff, police, judges, clerks, instructors, administrators, etc.--just imagine who worked there and who could afford to live in the gentrified Norwood that was so close to their job they could even walk.

What's interesting is around 2035, a liquor store, casino, and butcher shop opened in the "Heights." We figured the alcohol and gambling relieved some of the stress from the job and the fact that for some reason the people who ended up working at the campus, cooked and ate a lot of red meat.

Reporter Wetzel: Barrington, the neighborhood just south of Norwood Heights, did not get gentrified. Laquanda, why was Barrington different?

Laquanda: In 2023, Barrington residents organized and elected a city county councillor who looked out for Barrington. They also got rid of the charter school that was placed there by Mayor Hogsett, and created their own community organized and administered public school, the Barrington Freedom School. It was not like the previous neo-liberal charter and had an elected school board of Barrington residents. It's still a leading K-6 school.

Reporter Wetzel: Laquanda, let's get back to Norwood.

Laquanda: But also by 2035, almost all original African American residences had been displaced. This is part of the reason why we're having a 50th anniversary celebration of the self-described "Memories Keeper Project." And, if we knew what we do now, we would've realized this "project" was an effort to sidetrack the original residents from their displacement, and that Linda Johnson was SEND's chosen gaslighter.

Of course, SEND's majority white middle-class staff and board, and leader Millie Smith could not allow themselves to see this as colonial; they were too invested in taking over the Twin Aire-Norwood narrative to their own advantage.

Like the 2018-19 self-styled "Pre-Enactment" ploy used to camouflage the colonization of East 16th St, "Memory Keepers" was actually a transactional manipulative project.

Reporter Wetzel: What do you mean?

Laquanda: It was not a sincere or authentic program. In was done in the guise of the sustainability of Norwood and its Black history and culture when in reality it was a way to manipulate us so we'd go along with the gentrification of our own neighborhood and the extinction of the way it had always been for over a century.

The grassy space where we are now was the Pride Park center. It also housed the Norwood “chapter” of Twin Aire Neighborhood Coalition (TANC) Memory Keepers Project. We called TANC “The Twin Aire Neighborhood Conspiracy” because over a 5 year period (2020-2025) gentrification was enabled by LISC, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation which we called Local Initiatives Support Coloniality. LISC used such ploys as the Quality of Life Plans or the colonial-minded Great Places 2020 ploy to advance the displacement of the original residents of long-time Indy neighborhoods.

These types of history recovery programs, which on the surface seemed innocent and in good faith, were actually the signs of the end of several historically Black Indianapolis neighborhoods.

Just like in the past when pioneers settled Indian Territory, some took down the oral histories of the Native Americans. Of course, this was done in order to save these stories because the settlers knew that these communities would not be around. This happened as well with European anthropologists in colonized territories around the world who also made sure that the history of Aboriginal peoples were recorded--a sign that these groups would not be around as they were.

If there is anyone who is still confused or wondering what happened to historic Black Indianapolis during the second decade of the 21st Century, just look at the gentrification of Norwood and how Black residents were manipulated into giving away their own power and control over their own destiny!

Reporter Wetzel: Please, tell us more Laquanda.

Laquanda: Over the first 20 years (2033-2053) the population of Norwood Heights doubled. Previously empty areas and empty lots where homes had stood are now, as you can see, 3-4 story apartment buildings. The former mostly elderly residents are gone. They couldn't afford the higher property taxes, other expenses and of course the pressure from developers. Consequently, their homes were mostly bought out. They were taken over by the families of the professionals who worked at the campus. Many of them had previously lived outside Marion County and now avoided the time consuming and sometimes dangerous drive into the city.

Reporter Wetzel: Interesting. What else Laquanda?

Laquanda: Joe Hogsett was mayor from 2016-2032. And I believe he had a lot to do with the racial cleansing of many Black Indianapolis neighborhoods. You'd think he would not want to displace and also replace his Indianapolis Black constituents because they were mainly Democrats and voted for him. But gentrification changed all that. You see, the voting habits of the gentry were also mainly Democrat. Nonetheless, Hogsett wanted to get the vote of any of the local gentry who were Republicans. So, he enabled gentrification (racial cleansing) and continued to support his boutique charters which appealed to both middle-class Republicans and Democrats of all colors.

My social-rights lawyer and I will be discussing this angle next week with our current city leader, Mayor Sharon Ogbonaya.

Reporter Wetzel: Where did the children of the gentry go to school?

Laquanda: I'm glad you mentioned that. Yes. Let's talk about it. What is interesting, is that the Twin Aire-Norwood Heights area had a charter school. Named the Twin-Aire Neighborhood School, the K-6 school is closed now. There were lots of changes in demographics over the years. The population of gentry just got older.

We, some of the original residents of Norwood, didn't call it a charter school. We called it a “barter school” because those with money in the area had to and were able to “barter” their way in due to the limited enrollment the school had.

Although on paper, it was a public school and so was open to everyone, the truth is only certain families or parent/s who had the wherewithal (connections and/or persuasive acumen) to get picked

were enrolled. As well, those families who did not have the required gravitas, though enrolled, didn't last long and were "counseled out" and soon left to other charters due to such persuasion.

John, I just remembered, I think it was around 2021 or '22 when I attended a meeting at Pride Park where Linda and Nelly presented, to a small group of Norwood citizens, their plans for developing new homes in Norwood. I think I was around 25 or 26. I remember, like it was yesterday, that I was just astonished that these new homes cost \$150,000.

My concern at that time was why didn't the SEND "Destroyers" spend money fixing up the dwellings of homeowners first and then the rented homes? Also, why didn't they make pocket parks and urban gardens out of the many empty lots in Norwood instead of building expensive homes? Why didn't they restore and revitalize Norwood rather than bring in the outlandish and obviously out of place 2 story homes that represented gentrification and colonization all over town?

It was obvious to me and others why...it was the raw coloniality of SEND's efforts--efforts they professed and acted out, with the approval of the local establishment, as colonizers of Norwood.

Reporter Wetzel: Remarkable!

Laquanda: Oh! John, there's this one more issue I want to mention. From 2021 and before and until now and most likely into the future, here on the Southside there have not been hardly any Black men involved in community change. One exception was R/ROS (Redevelopment and Revitalization of the Southside) which today is called CR/ROS or Continuing Redevelopment and Revitalization of the Southside.

I'm not saying that Southside Black men did not attend 1 or 2 meetings here and there over the years, but they were not involved and are still not involved in leadership due to gentrification in ways that brought both the radical healing and the following radical change manifested by CR/ROS.

Here was the issue: Black folks in general, not just males, knew as soon as the jail was planned, the forces of power and money would be ruling Norwood.

For example, the SEND "Destroyers" were never able to get even one Black male to be on their board or on their staff. Yes, they tried, but nothing worked out for long.

Indeed, SEND staff and board took the then popular anti-racism classes. SEND even took the training that became to be known nationally as "Humanity Training." These self-imposed efforts to make their SEND organization moral and more humane, and help them appreciate the humanity of each Black American didn't work well. Why? This training was transactional and turned out to be just a salve for their conscience.

The Destroyers knew the racial history of Indy' Southside. They knew who was in charge and that they were beholden to those behind the ugly money and social politics of the new jail.

Let me finish here: the intersectionality of state and local historical factors with gender, class, and economic neglect due to power and greed--all mixing with the nationally distinct Hoosier style of systemic racism--had a lot to do with why the century-old Norwood no longer exists today.

Reporter Wetzel: Thank you Laquanda. I learned a lot.

Laquanda: Your welcome John. Thanks for giving me a chance to tell the story of my family, friends, and neighborhood, and, in fact, the story of our Indianapolis.

Reporter Wetzel: This is John H. Wetzel reporting from the Southeast side of Indianapolis. And this was a glimpse at the past of our city, a glimpse that is both tragic and enlightening. I hope my report will let future Indy residents know what really happened here on the Southside.

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