

Revitalization of Durham shifts focus to community

Residents say the New York Times' 35th best place to visit is an even better place to live

By Kelcie Landon
Staff Writer

It is unseasonably warm for January, and people are taking advantage of the break from the cold. Folks are sitting on their porches, chatting with neighbors who walk by. One man gets his foot tangled in a newspaper and pauses to kick it off the sidewalk.

The paper, an old and tattered copy of the New York Times, ruffles in the wind. It remains unnoticed by people who are not typically affected by its stories of the stock market and the war on terror. But on Jan. 7, this international newspaper hit home when it listed Durham as the 35th best place in the world to visit in 2011.

The article commended Durham's downtown food scene, which landed the city a spot above Kosovo and Miami. However, it takes a trip off Main Street to truly experience everything this growing and revitalized community has to offer. Durham is best seen through the eyes of the people who call the city home.

Australia Clay, a volunteer fundraiser for Duke Hospitals, summarized it best when she said, "A new history is being made in Durham."

The city of Durham was once a thriving tobacco town. Clay emphasized that the houses that are now being torn down were once someone's home, where they lived, raised a family and had Christmas dinner.

Now, this history is making way for a new culture, which bears a resemblance to a new-age Renaissance. This culture is what permeates the parts of the city that are still battling crime and poverty. Residents say that this culture of community makes Durham not only one of the best places to visit, but also one of the best places to live.

Wendy Garrett has remained in Northeast Central Durham for the past 57 years precisely because of this sense of community.



Staff photo by KELCIE LANDON

Dee Blake, left, and Australia Clay enjoy a meal at Joe's Diner, which is located on the corner of Angier Avenue and Driver Street in Durham.

"We have a family-oriented lifestyle," Garrett said. "We try to look out for each other. We have a heart for people and each other."

Interconnectedness and an intense sense of pride for the town fuel the fire that has led to the burning revitalization of Durham.

"They're bringing the city up to speed. They've torn down a lot of bad neighborhoods and built nice houses," said Lee Clayton, an employee of Durham Public Schools.

He's right. Every couple of blocks the grayish-brown monotony of city life is interrupted by an oasis of pastel, brightly colored houses, contrasting lawns that are green even in the coldest winters. These neighborhoods, which have replaced housing projects but are still traditionally low-rent, have been built true to Durham community form, complete with wrap-around porches that foster meaningful relationships with neighbors.

But there is more to a town than nice houses. The restaurants of Northeast Central Durham are being revitalized as well. As Clayton put it, "You're in hot dog country now."

Historically, the corner of Angier Avenue and Driver Street was not the place to spend the day. But talk to some of the guests at Joe's Diner, home of the one-pound hot dog, and those days seem to be a distant memory.

Dee Blake, director of development for Duke HomeCare & Hospice and first-time customer at Joe's Diner, was just as drawn to the atmosphere of the restaurant as she was to the food.

"It's like an old-time diner where people just stop and talk to you. People are just warm and friendly."

Tyrus Thomas, who moved to Durham in November 2008, helped with the demolition to clear the corner lot that would eventually become Joe's Diner.

"When I was coming here in 2005, it was just bad," Thomas said. "I met Joe in '08, and he wants to do greatly for the community. You can get good food here, and just think, there aren't many restaurants within walking distance around here."

It might take a quick walk off of Main Street, but the residents of Northeast Central Durham know how to bring Renaissance home.