

# ENQUIRER IN-DEPTH: Saving Avondale

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## About this story

### From reporter Mark Curnutte:

I covered minority affairs for the Enquirer beginning in 1993 with the Unity Award-winning series “A Polite Silence,” which foreshadowed the race-based violence of 2001. I spent a lot of time in Avondale throughout the 1990s and again since returning to Local News from the Bengals beat in January 2009.

Avondale’s grand history, rapid changeover, deterioration and potential fascinate me. Today, I begin ongoing coverage of Avondale, a strategically important Cincinnati neighborhood, and its latest attempt to rise up from decades of physical decay and the effects of concentrated poverty.

## Partner organizations

These companies, nonprofits and institutions are part of the new Avondale Comprehensive Development Corp. This effort is the first in Avondale in which all of the neighborhood’s major stakeholders and institutions are invested:

Avondale Coalition of Churches, Avondale Community Council, Avondale Concerned Clergy, Avondale Running Club, Avondale Youth Council.

Center for Closing the Health Gap in Greater Cincinnati, Cincinnati Children’s Hospital, Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden, City of Cincinnati, Corryville Community Development Corp.

Every Child Succeeds, Greater Cincinnati Foundation, Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati, JP Morgan Chase Corporate Responsibility, JP Morgan Chase Foundation.

Local Initiatives Support Corp. (LISC) of Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, NeighborWorks America, North Avondale Neighborhood Association, Place Matters, PNC Bank, Rockdale Academy.

SC Ministry Foundation (Sisters of Charity), Haile/U.S. Bank Foundation, UC Health, United Way of Greater Cincinnati, University of Cincinnati, Urban League of Greater Cincinnati.

Reading Road never recovered after it burned – once in 1967, then again in 1968.

Rioting along Avondale’s main street accelerated the decline that had taken root a decade earlier.

Rush-hour traffic speeds south on Reading every morning and north at night as an alternative route to Interstate 71, but the in-between hours are eerily silent. A car dealer used to sell Buicks from behind now-boarded display windows shattered during the riots. Shin-high brown grass stands rigid, not bending to the wind, in the front yards of foreclosed four-family apartment houses sealed with plywood. The big stone Gothic Catholic church closed its doors two summers ago. A payday lender and Burger King are among the most active businesses on the strip.

The jobless rate in Avondale is 40 percent. There's not a single grocery store or pharmacy in this community of 12,466. One-third of its kindergartners are overweight or obese. A quarter of housing units are vacant.

Crime is up 16.1 percent from 2000, despite a decline in each of the past two years. Gunfire is so frequent that some residents say their dogs stopped howling. Many residents have grown complacent and fearful of reporting criminal activity for fear of reprisal.

"There's nothing here," said Donna Jones Baker, president and chief executive of the Urban League of Greater Cincinnati, located a few doors south of Avondale's major crossroads, Reading and Rockdale. "There's an absence of vibrancy that makes a community strong."

Still, there is hope.

And this time, hope is backed with money. Hope that Avondale won't continue on a path toward more unemployment and daytime drug dealing but will be restored to its place among Cincinnati's most desirable neighborhoods, one with a mix of incomes and races and safe streets, where new businesses provide not just goods and services but jobs to the people who live here.

Harnessing the hope and addressing what ails Avondale is the job of Ozie Davis, named executive director in October of a neighborhood development organization unlike anything Avondale has seen. The Avondale Comprehensive Development Corp. has a professional staff and the mandate from a group of funders to pull together divergent neighborhood interests. With about \$430,000 a year coming in from this group of generous yet demanding organizations – including the United Way of Greater Cincinnati – the nonprofit Davis leads has the resources to help turn around one of Cincinnati's most strategic neighborhoods.

The blueprint goals of this holistic approach – known as Place Matters – are to attract new businesses, investment and housing to Avondale.

"Never before have we had the partners. Never before have we had the cooperation," Davis said. "We have a lot of work to do, but we will bring a renaissance to Avondale by 2019."

Davis, 46, is an Avondale leader and Avondale resident, living with his family on the same street – Eden Avenue – that he grew up on.

"We understand now it's urgent," he said. And holy. "Our job is very much like the work of Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem."

Some stones of hope are in place.

Hope in the improved infant and new mother health thanks to the Every Child Succeeds program in the basement of Carmel Presbyterian Church.

Hope in Carmel and the 51 other Avondale churches that are socially vigorous and draw as many as two-thirds of their members from outside of the neighborhood.

Hope in the popularity of the farmer's market and demand for urban gardens at the new Gabriel's Place

community center.

Hope in the gleaming new Cincinnati Herald building on Burnet Avenue on the other side of the neighborhood.

Hope in the high three-year job retention rate of workers who went through an Urban League landscape apprenticeship program.

Hope that 39 units of abandoned housing on Glenwood Avenue and another 50 in the castle-like Ambassador on Gholson Avenue will be renovated within the next two years and rented with little or no subsidy.

Hope that enough change can be shown in Avondale to persuade suburbanites who work within a mile or two at Cincinnati Children's or University hospitals that their time and money would be better spent rehabbing an empty Victorian than on long commutes.

"It's important that the people working in the city come to view our close-in neighborhoods as viable places to live," said Cincinnati Vice Mayor Roxanne Qualls. "We have the chance to make Avondale great again."

### **Adding residents a major goal**

If people with choice can't be brought back to Avondale, the city's population will continue a decline that has seen it shrink almost 25 percent from 385,457 in 1980 to 296,943 in 2010. During that time, Avondale's population fell 37 percent, from 19,845, to 12,466.

The population isn't there now but the jobs are, 50,000 of them – the second highest concentration in the region – at the hospitals and the University of Cincinnati and throughout an area of the city known as Uptown that includes Avondale. The reality check is that most of those jobs are out of the skill reach of the people who live there.

Davis, his team and increasing numbers of residents, he said, envision a vibrant urban community, one that's safe to walk and even more diverse than pre-war Avondale.

That's when car dealers, groceries and pharmacies lined Reading Road to the east and Burnet Avenue to the west. Almost a dozen synagogues dotted a neighborhood that was the heart of the Jewish community and home to 24,000 people in 1940. Black professional and middle-class homeowners moved there by choice from over-crowded conditions in the West End.

Yet it was that presence of African-Americans in Avondale that convinced city planners to force thousands of low-income black families there, when all-white city neighborhoods and first-generation suburbs rejected attempts to build new, scattered-site public housing for displaced blacks. The southern part of Avondale turned black and poor and officially "blighted" in 1956 by the city.

White families, and the black families that could, got out. Jewish families and mobile blacks moved to the other side of Clinton Springs Avenue, into what became known as North Avondale, or farther north to

Paddock Hills. Many Jewish and other white families went out even farther, north on Reading Road to Roselawn, then filling up new suburbs such as Sharonville, Springdale and Amberley Village – which became the center of Jewish life and culture.

For the people who couldn't leave Avondale then or can't get out today, they'd like to see their quality of life improve but are resigned that it won't – even as they agitate for a amenities most communities take for granted, such as a grocery.

What remained of Avondale's once-thriving retail strips burned during the urban violence of June 1967 and April 1968. Growing frustration about the lack of fair employment and housing opportunities for African-Americans ignited the first outbreak, the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King the second.

Today, about 89 percent of Avondale's residents are African-American, making it Cincinnati's third-highest concentration of black population, behind Bond Hill and South Cumminsville-Millvale.

Yet Avondale is bigger and more populated. It's 2.2 square miles that borders on Xavier University to the east and the hospitals, zoo and University of Cincinnati to the west. Location is its major asset.

"My belief is that in a large number of minds, that so goes Avondale so goes much of the city," said city council member Wendell Young, an Avondale native who worked as a police officer in the area from 1967 through 1992.

Revival of urban neighborhoods like Avondale would benefit the region in the global economy, said William Julius Wilson, a noted Harvard University sociologist.

"If you are looking to relocate to Greater Cincinnati or expand your business, you want to see a well-educated, strong workforce," said Wilson, who spoke at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in February. "The stronger the urban core, the stronger the suburbs."

Another national urban expert, New York City-based criminologist David Kennedy, who has worked on anti-crime initiatives in Cincinnati since 2007, is consulting with Avondale leaders on their latest effort to reduce violence in the community. Avondale and Over-the-Rhine led the city with 11 murders each in 2011.

"Avondale has become one of the places we are trying to create a national breakthrough," said Kennedy, who is in contact with what he calls "troubled" communities across the country. "We will learn from Avondale. They're figuring out how to do things."

Reducing violence would go a long way toward helping turn Avondale back into a neighborhood of residential choice.

"Imagine (Avondale) with 7,000 to 8,000 more people and what that would do to the schools and businesses," said Liz Blume, executive director at Xavier University's Community Building Institute, a group of professional development consultants affiliated with the local United Way.

"Avondale has everything an urban neighborhood needs to be successful – it's dense, you can walk it, it has deep church institutions, major employers as anchors and beautiful architecture. If we can't get it right here, where are we going to get it right?"

## **Avondale native Davis seeks common ground**

Getting Avondale right is a challenge Davis embraces.

Spending two days with him touring Avondale gives one the impression that he knows everybody. Davis has put together a board that gives everyone in the neighborhood a voice – the churches, Urban League, residents, banks and perhaps its two best-known institutions, Cincinnati Children’s Medical Center and the Cincinnati Zoo, which draw millions of people to the city each year and, for many, are the face of Cincinnati.

The zoo played a part in beginning the cleanup of the Mitchell Avenue-to-Vine Street entrance to Avondale from I-75. Zoo officials spent \$30,000 in 2011 on a project to clear 1 acre and dilapidated housing at Vine Street and Forest Avenue. A new gateway sign built from stone welcomes visitors to Avondale and the zoo. New curbs, sidewalks and landscaping were put in.

“It’s a perceptible change, but we want to clean up the access to the zoo,” said Bill Witten, an Avondale resident and former Procter & Gamble executive who works as a paid consultant to the Avondale Community Council and the comprehensive development corporation. “We want to sell Avondale.”

It’s a tough sale for many suburbanites, who consider the two-mile drive from the Mitchell Avenue exit through Avondale a dangerous gantlet.

The zoo, which covers 70 acres of Avondale, supports the youth council and neighborhood community gardens and is an educational partner with nearby Rockdale Academy elementary. Cincinnati Public has a 50-student magnet school at the zoo.

On the route to the zoo, on Vine Street, near Glen Este Place, Davis and Witten pointed out three vacant apartment buildings they plan to develop.

## **Avondale wants building projects**

Place Matters funding has been used on several projects in Avondale since 2007.

The difference is the region’s two other Place Matters communities, Price Hill and Covington, had established professional development organizations, and some of the Place Matters money went to building staff that could manage projects and attract outside investment to the neighborhood.

Place Matters invested directly in social improvement projects, such as mother and child health and job creation, through the volunteer Avondale Community Council. Avondale Comprehensive Development Corp. replaces the council as the neighborhood’s lead Place Matters agency.

“It’s going to be our bricks and mortar,” said Fulton Jefferson, community council vice president and another key figure in developing programs funded the past six years by Place Matters.

With 25 percent of its 7,600 housing units vacant, Avondale is a hole in the city’s tax pool but ripe as a place of redevelopment for workforce housing. The five founding members of the Uptown Consortium – the University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati Children’s, TriHealth, UC Health and the Cincinnati Zoo – employ nearly 50,000 people with a collective payroll of \$1.4 billion.

The consortium heads development efforts in Uptown, which consists of Avondale and six other neighborhoods: Clifton, Clifton Heights, Corryville, Fairview, Mount Auburn and University Heights.

The consortium led efforts to first put up the Cincinnati Herald Building in 2009 and Forest Square senior housing in 2010 along Burnet Avenue. A Subway sandwich shop opened in October on the ground floor of the Herald Building.

“Ozie’s group brings resources, energy and an additional partner to help with development in areas we’re not in now,” said Beth Robinson, consortium president and chief executive.

The consortium supports a planned I-71 interchange at Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, scheduled for 2015 completion if state and federal money are available. It would improve access to the hospital jobs and spur commercial development in the southern edge of Avondale.

It’s just one of Davis’ many wish-list projects. On the modest end, he is pursuing a restaurant/reception hall to buy the former St. Andrew Catholic Church building on Reading Road, closed by the Archdiocese of Cincinnati in 2010 because of dwindling membership.

### **Children, food desert could get federal help**

On a larger scale, Davis traveled to Chicago this month to meet with the Community Builders, a national nonprofit that is applying for a major federal grant on behalf of Avondale Comprehensive Development Corp.

The Choice Neighborhoods Implementation grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development would bring as much as \$30 million over five years to Avondale. In August 2011, HUD awarded its first grants, worth \$122 million, to stimulate neighborhood revitalization in Boston, Chicago, New Orleans, San Francisco and Seattle.

Another four or five HUD Choice designations will be made in December. The focus is to improve housing and property management and to link those upgrades with improvements in transportation and education, including early childhood programs.

HUD money could connect to the Avondale Every Child Succeeds Home Visitation Program, which has received Place Matters funding since 2007. Another local program to build on is Gabriel's Place, in the former St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church. Dedicated in September and preparing for its first growing season, Gabriel's Place is a limited source of fresh fruit, vegetables and fish while Avondale leaders continue to lure a grocery store. The last one, Aldi’s, moved out of the Avondale Town Center in November 2008. Urban apparel retailer Citi Trends has since leased the space.

Without a grocery, Avondale is considered a "food desert" because healthy food is not available to residents at a full-service grocery. Four-by-6 foot garden plots are available for \$20 annually at Gabriel's Place. Fruits and vegetables – lettuce, potatoes, onions, apples, oranges and bananas – are brought to Gabriel's Place and available at a farmer's market on the first and third Thursday each month.

### **Doctor's family chooses Avondale**

If the Avondale Comprehensive Development Corp. succeeds, more people like Geno Griffith and Johnie and Kenneth Davis will call the neighborhood home.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis, no relation to Ozie, brought up three daughters in the home they've owned on Forest Park Drive since 1984. Their cul-de-sac of two dozen houses has had little turnover. The street is freshly paved with new curbs. Lawns are neat. The housing stock is a mix of ranches and two-story Tudors.

"We are really happy here, we have great neighbors," said Mrs. Davis, an active volunteer at her church, Carmel Presbyterian. Her husband is a trauma surgeon at nearby University Hospital.

"Unfortunately," she said, "when bad things happen in Avondale, everything good here gets painted negatively."

Griffith, 18, lives in an apartment on Wilson Avenue with his mother, Gina, and younger brother, William, 17. He can walk the 15 minutes to Xavier University in neighboring Evanston, where he is on full academic scholarship. A graduate of Withrow International High School, Geno is a biology major and plans to become an anesthesiologist.

"There is a stigma to coming from Avondale that you don't have with Indian Hill or Blue Ash," said Geno, who attended Rockdale Academy in his elementary school days and would like to some day live in a healthier Avondale.

The family had moved to Mount Auburn for a short time after they were evicted. The bank foreclosed on their landlord on Alaska Avenue. They returned a year ago. Gina Griffith, 53, has worked in environmental services at nearby Cincinnati Children's for 15 years. She has introduced her sons to doctors and other professionals there.

"We could live elsewhere, but why?" she said. "Avondale is home."