

Old Timers' Corner

It is 4:30 p.m. on a Monday, and Joanita Vines knows there is only one place she wants to be.

“I just come down to Barry Farm. You know, where the basketball court and the pavilion are in the back of the Barry Farm Recreational Center to, you know, enjoy myself and to bring back the memories,” Vine said.

Vines, who lived in Barry Farm from 1990 to 2015, has been coming to the same spot since she first moved into the neighborhood. This spot, called “Old Timers’ Corner” by locals, functions as something like a town hall to the community. While the origin of the name “Old Timers’ Corner” has been lost in the history of Barry Farm, the corner in many ways embodies the spirit of the neighborhood itself.

To an onlooker, the Old Timers’ Corner is just an unspectacular piece of land. As Vines describes, it is tucked between the Barry Farm Recreational Center and Suitland Parkway, a busy Washington, D.C., highway that connects the north and south sides of the Anacostia river. The Corner is a stretch of alleyway that consists of a small pavilion, a run-down basketball court, and an open lawn area. Those landmarks sit side-by-side to one another, forming an unassuming patchwork of space where people congregate, talk, and listen to the most recent stories in the neighborhood.

Barry Farm is a place of rich history. The neighborhood was first given to freed slaves after the Civil War so that they could become self-supporting. Over time, Barry Farm gained the reputation as one of the most prominent and successful African American communities in

Washington, D.C., In 1943, the Barry Farm Public Housing Project was built at the site, adding another 432 housing units to the neighborhood, some of which are still occupied today.

This housing expansion turned Barry Farm into a contentious spot for school desegregation in the 1950s. The Supreme Court case *Bolling v. Sharpe*, the outcome of which prohibited segregation in the District's public school system, was started in 1954 by a few families in the neighborhood. Emboldened by this victory, activists brought *Brown v. Board of Education* to the high court a year later. Barry Farm is thus enshrined in the history of the United States' Civil Rights Movements as the birthplace of school desegregation.

The Old Timers' Corner, which has been around since the 1970s, has a history of its own. The first part of the corner, the basketball court, was built for the Goodman Basketball League—a summer basketball league that began in 1977, organized by three members of the Barry Farm Housing Projects – Ervin Brady, Morty Hamond and Carlton Reed. The League drew attention from local residents, who helped organize and volunteered at the event. At some point, a pavilion was constructed next to the basketball court, and the volunteers began to gather there to socialize.

Gradually, the pavilion and the empty patch of land on the right side of the basketball court became the designated year-round gathering place for the Barry Farm community. Nowadays, there are anywhere between ten and twenty participants at a typical gathering which, weather permitting, could happen every day during the week. Vines come here as often as she can. She finds herself surrounded by friends and neighbors, some of whom she has known for more than thirty years. People come here to drink, dance, smoke cigarettes, and reminisce about the time in the neighborhood when everyone still lived together.

In 2006, an unwelcoming development started happening in the neighborhood. The D.C. City

Council approved a redevelopment project for Barry Farm. This project, which started slowly, ended up getting stalled for many years, leaving its mark on the Old Timers' landscape: just across the road from the corner sits an empty and fenced-up construction site, surrounded by boarded-up houses, blocked roads, and broken excavators.

To accommodate the construction of the Barry Farm Redevelopment Project, the developers relocated a number of residents to different parts of D.C. and Maryland. For those affected by the relocation like Vines, being told to move felt like they were being uprooted from their communities. To the old timers, the Old Timers' Corner and Barry Farm are theirs. This is the only place they ever known to call home. Many did not wish to move out of the neighborhood but ended up moving nonetheless because the developers promised that they could move back to the neighborhood once construction is over.

Despite this promise, few are optimistic. There have been conflicting reports of when affected homeowners will be able to move back to their rebuilt homes, or whether there will be housing units for affected residents at all. There is a broad sense of anxiety among members of the community, which is sometimes evident at the corner's gatherings, when the discussion around the table turns to the future of the neighborhood. Some fear that even the Old Timers' Corner will be broken up because new residents who move into the neighborhood will not understand its culture.

"I don't know what is happening. I heard they're making it into military housing units! I heard there's gonna be NSA employees here. I just don't know, not the same people we have here," Vines complains.

Regardless of what happens in the future, when Vines enters the corner, it is all here and now. She is here to have fun. At one point, a DJ blasts loud music on his portable speaker and people

begin to dance. Someone brings a grill to the pavilion, and food and drink are served to everyone. Go-go music plays. Vines dances with a friend. She then goes to a corner to smoke and join a group conversation, while a group of men move to the open area and start playing cornholes.

When Vines comes to the Old Timers' Corner to hang with her friends, life is simple and good. Gone is the worry of her daytime job, or uncertainty over the future of her residency. She is here to party. At one point, she has one too many drinks and gets into an argument with a fellow Barry Farm community member. The argument becomes very loud, but then, as abruptly as it started, it ends. To Vines, this is all good fun. She is comfortable being herself, loud and excitable, under the roof of this very pavilion. She does not talk like that to her neighbors in Kenilworth. This pavilion, and this community, is home to her.

On the nearby basketball court, some teenagers and young adults, like Lalik Miller, gather and show each other their phones. They too are having their own party. Miller and his friends talk about their latest tiktok videos and where they are heading out for the night.

Lalik Miller was born in Barry Farm and grew up practically around the Old Timers' Corner. He is the nephew of one of the Goodman League's organizers. His earliest memory of hanging around the basketball court and meeting neighbors at the pavilion was at a young age. "Since I was a child, I just remember people were just here and this place was packed. There were people out by [the pavilion] and there were just so many people that people had to stand up and move around," Miller recalled.

This is where Miller first met many of his childhood friends. He recalled his time at the pavilion seeing people doing different things, such as his earliest memories of seeing a few Muslims in the

neighborhood praying. There were a few children around this group, whom Miller met and became friends. When he was 12, Miller volunteered at the Goodman League and really started to feel at home at the corner. He recalled, when his family was forced to move away, how much he missed the place. Now, he returns once every few days, sometimes stopping by the site of his former home. Standing outside the boarded-up house that he spent his childhood in, Miller feels a general sense of resentment toward the developers because, he says, his family was sold a false bill of goods.

“[the redevelopment project] is turning out to be something different than they told us,” Miller said.

Growing up, Miller had hoped that one day he would be able to revitalize the neighborhood. He dreamed of buying his own property here and maybe opening a retail business to help his own fellow residents, since there were not many shops in the community. Ironically, his dream of having businesses open in Barry Farm is being realized by the developers, albeit not in a way that benefits Miller or his family. Instead, Miller fears new businesses may end up breaking his own community.

The Barry Farm Redevelopment Project has been controversial because many people feel either the project does not live up to its original intention, or this intention is a facade. The D.C. Council approved a plan to redevelop Barry Farm back in 2006 when assessing a need to bring new opportunities to a long-neglected neighborhood. The goal of the project, as the council first stated, is to transform the neighborhood into a mixed-income, mixed-use community that lifts people out of poverty. According to the Office of Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development’s website, the new housing project will allow former residents to have access to “high-quality housing options affordable at all income levels.”

Based on the plan submitted to the City Council by Preservation of Affordable Housing, Inc., (POAH) and the A&R companies (A&R), two developers hired to oversee the planning and construction of the project, the redeveloped community will include up to 1,100 new residential units, new retail options, and a cultural and community center. To facilitate the rezoning of the land area, the developers bulldoze more than 300 existing housing units and relocate nearly 90 percent of Barry Farm tenants and homeowners to new residencies outside of the neighborhood. Most former residents were resettled in other parts of Washington, D.C. and Prince George's County, Maryland

Additionally, the redevelopment project creates a massive construction zone that, to those still living in Barry Farm, makes the environment unfit to live in. Kesha Davis, a resident whose house sits on the edge of the bulldozing site, noticed the impact of the project as soon as construction began.

"I noticed the first day they rolled the bulldozers in here, and it was very loud. And I thought to myself, is there a bomb that goes off or something," Davis recalled.

As soon as construction began, people gathering at the Old Timers' Corner noticed how much it affected them. According to Davis, the construction noise was loud, and road closure meant that access to the pavilion and the basketball court was sometimes cut off for cars.

Far beyond the physical impact of this project, such as relocation or an unfriendly environment, it has changed people's lives emotionally and spiritually. To Vines, Miller, and many others, Barry Farm is more than a place they call home. It is a family, one that they feel as though they have been told to give up. Most still come back to Old Timers' Corner because it is the only place they ever knew. To some, this place has real sentimental value, and their journey to the corner is akin to a pilgrimage.

“There are just so many memories here I could not imagine never being able to come back here again,” Vines said.

What many Barry Farm residents think the regional development companies fail to understand is that this is not just a place that can be demolished and rebuilt. There is history in this community that the redevelopment project is oblivious. This is the reason some seek to derail the progress of the redevelopment project.

In 2019, the Barry Farm Tenant Association partnered with Empower DC, a nonprofit organization advocating for low-income DC residents, to seek designated historic landmark status for Barry Farm from Washington’s Historic Preservation Review Board. The petition brought the Barry Farm redevelopment project to a halt. Development companies were not allowed to take further action at the site. No demolition or construction activities occurred for nearly a year and the project began to resemble an abandoned property.

Behind the lack of development at the site, however, there was a real fight between the developers and Barry Farm community leaders over the future of the redevelopment project. The Barry Farm Tenant Association feared that the development company would erase the history of Barry Farm. Regardless of whether former residents can move back in, some say the emergence of new retail options and renovated housing units will make Barry Farm unaffordable to future generations and gentrify what is one of the city’s last African American communities.

“We are asking for protection of these buildings because they are more than just buildings to us. It will ensure our history is protected and our stories are told.” Detrice Belt, president of the Barry Farm Tenants and Allies Association, said in a statement.

The year-long legal battle over the status of Barry Farm as a historic landmark came to an end in

January 2020 with a legal victory but a practical defeat for the tenant association. The designated area to be preserved encompasses only five buildings out of the 32 requested, meaning that most Barry Farm's 432 dwelling units are still slated for demolition. More significantly, the site that has already been bulldozed does not gain protection status, and construction resumed almost immediately after the board's decision.

Feeling defeated, Barry Farm residents seem to have given up the fight and can only hope that the developers will keep their promise of returning people to their homes, and that the project will finish sooner than later.

"I feel like most of the older people will be dead when they finish with this place," Vines said. Lalik Miller, not as pessimistic as Vines, thinks some good may come out of this project. But only if it gives Barry Farm residents opportunities to improve their lives, and those opportunities happen sooner rather than later.

"I feel as though [the opportunities] should be here by now. People shouldn't have to wait years and years down the line for the opportunities to be here."

For now, Vines and Lalik continue to find joy at The Old Timers' Corner. As long as this gathering is still happening, life is good in Barry Farm.