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Finding Shelter From the Storm

SUSAN HAMILTON



A collaboration between the Gifford Street Community Press, Syracuse Alliance for a New Economy (SANE), and The Writing Program of The College of Arts and Sciences led to *Home: Journeys into the Westside*. We're pleased to publish a contribution from that collection by Westside community member Susan Hamilton.

My initial encounter with the neighborhood was accidental—I got lost on a street that veered off diagonally and took me to an unexpected destination. In the same way, I didn't really plan to live here. I owned a home on the Southwest side, and though I was dissatisfied with its lack of porches, its small yard, and the size of the mortgage payment, I was not actively looking to move. Then, an acquaintance who knows I like old houses urged me to tour one that was coming up for sale on Holland Street. The previous owner had died in her 90s, leaving this house something like a museum. Most of its Victorian splendor was intact, right down to the intricately wrought metal pulls on the pantry drawers, and I was immediately hooked. The area didn't frighten me; it reminded me of Deep Rondo, the inner-city, racially mixed neighborhood in St. Paul where I lived as a young child. I had been working as a community organizer on the Near Westside, so I already knew some of my new neighbors. But I wasn't blind to the problems, such as the drug house across the street and decades of neglect by local government. The lot next door, where a house had been set afire to cover up a burglary, had been vacant for more than a decade and used as an informal dump. When I bought my house, I began cleaning out the lot's trash and trying to mow the thicket of weeds, some taller than my head, with a push mower. When drug dealers would congregate at the curb, I walked around them, picking up the food wrappers and subtly giving the message that I too had a role to play and a claim to that space.

A little over two years later, early in the morning of Labor Day 1998, a freak storm blasted Syracuse. I was awakened by the shriek of a box fan being blown out of the window by 115 mph winds. I closed windows and laid back down on the bed, which moved as the whole house swayed. Lightning flashed green outside, like strobe lights, and thunder punctuated the sound of falling trees. When I



got dressed and went downstairs, I could not see out the windows because they were all streaked with rain. I opened the back door and could see only leaves where my car was parked. My dog Che, terrorized by the storm, cowered at my feet. Before I could decide whether to take refuge in the basement, the worst of the storm passed. The electricity went out—and would not be restored for a week. Peering out the front door, I could vaguely see the shapes of big trees on the ground, power lines snared in their branches. Then I heard voices from the darkness. A group of young men from the surrounding houses appeared, holding cans of beer and flashlights. They asked if I was OK, and I told them I was afraid that my car had been crushed. Disregarding the danger of fallen electrical wires, a couple of them scrambled over branches to reach the backyard and returned to report that the car was unscathed under a mound of small twigs. Then the guys moved on to the next house, calling out to the tenants to see if they needed help.

As I came back inside to comfort my dog, I realized that for the first time I really felt at home in this neighborhood, where people do look out for each other and pull together during crises. During the next week of post-storm recovery, people shared food from their freezers, told where ice could be purchased, helped one another cut up trees that littered yards, and cheered together when the Hydro Ontario trucks sent from Canada finally restored power to our streets. Though still neglected by local government, we could take care of each other.

Layout by Brooke Leone. Photos courtesy of Kimberly Wolfe.