

# In an area as affluent as Chapel Hill, some forget that there exists another side to the town — a side that is not wealthy, but is rich in its sense

# BOTTOM OF THE HILL

## Landfill neighbors share plight, continue to battle for change

BY ROB NELSON  
CITY EDITOR  
AND MEEGAN P. SMITH  
STAFF WRITER

Some nights Marvin McPherson puts up a gate in front of his driveway, not to protect his property from burglars but to stop trash from piling up in front of the place he calls home.

"At night some people come around here when the landfill is closed and decide to drop off their trash in front of my house," he said.

"They don't care." But for McPherson and the many others who live in the area surrounding the Orange County Regional Landfill, apathy isn't an option.

The operation of the landfill and the impact it has had on residents has been an ongoing issue since the site opened in 1972. The landfill is maintained by Chapel Hill, Carrboro, Hillsborough and Orange County.

In recent years the battle has intensi-

fied as residents who have endured living in the area have pushed harder to make their issue public and to get local government bodies to respond.

Many residents are currently fighting for the passage of a 14-point compensation package to provide services to those residents who have lived in the area for so many years. One of the key points of the package is the extension of water and sewer lines to the area.

But residents championing this cause said they have been frustrated by what they perceive as a lack of expediency on the part of government officials in granting their requests.

*"At night some people come around here when the landfill is closed and decide to drop off their trash in front of my house. They don't care."*

MARVIN MCPHERSON  
Landfill area resident

Many of the landfill neighbors said they believed action had been slow because the area was primarily inhabited by low-income residents.

"Urban renewal has passed this area by," said Robert Campbell, president of the Rogers Road Community Development Committee. The development committee is made up of Rogers Road residents and works to improve the living conditions in the landfill area.

"Most people out here are low-income to poverty level who work for UNC, Chapel Hill or Orange County.

"Most people out here figure that if this was any other neighborhood all of this would have been handled a lot better," Campbell said. "Residents in this area are not informed or consulted about decisions about the landfill," he said. "They contact us after decisions are already made."

A resident in the area since 1973, Campbell has experienced his fair share of landfill-related difficulties. He described numerous problems with living in the area, from the stench of the trash and the loud sounds of trash trucks early in the morning, to problems with dumping in the area when the landfill is closed.

"People come around here and drop off dead animals in trash bags," he said, adding, however, that the primary concern was still water services.

"Getting clean water is still a problem for the majority of the neighborhood out here," he said.

Similar battles have been fought by Mildred Rogers, who has lived in the area since 1946.

Rogers said she remembered a time when dumpsters alongside the road led to unwelcome surprises. "The dumpsters would draw all types of rodents



Russell Suitt and his family live near the Orange County Regional Landfill. Russell's mother Latricia said garbage trucks constantly drive in front of their house and that their tap water is undrinkable.

and insects," she said. "I had rats eat holes in my house."

Rogers said a decision was eventually made to move the dumpsters off the roadsides and, in general, the situation had improved over the years.

"There are still a lot of buzzards and crows around here, but the smell has gotten better and my water is fine because I am not close enough to the landfill for it to be affected."

Rogers credited the improvements to

time. "It's been slow-coming," she said. "It took a long time to come this far and there is still a long way to go."

But as the issue continues to progress, answers will not be easy, said Carrboro Alderman Jacquelyn Gist, who serves on the Landfill Owners Group. The LOG, which is comprised of government officials as well as landfill area residents, serves as a vehicle to take the issues most pertinent to the area and bring them to governmental attention.

Gist said she disagreed with some residents' perceptions about local government's handling of the situation.

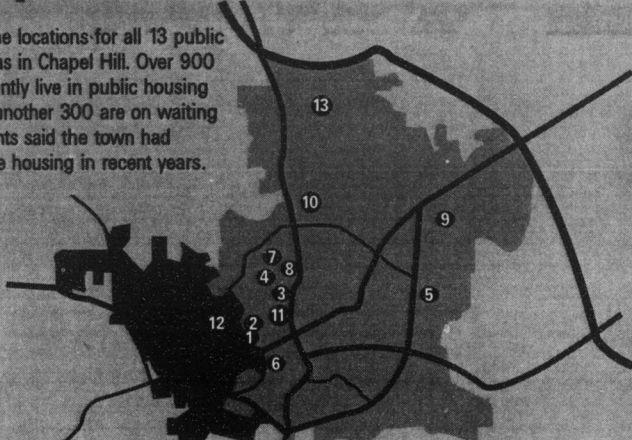
"As one of the strongest advocates for the neighbors of the landfill, I do not believe that this is a simple cut-and-dry issue of the government's taking advantage of the people," Gist said.

"There's no evil intent here even on the part of the people whom I really

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## Going public

Below are the locations for all 13 public housing areas in Chapel Hill. Over 900 people currently live in public housing units while another 300 are on waiting lists. Residents said the town had improved the housing in recent years.



Complex Name	Number of Units	Type of Units
1 Craig - Gommans	40	family, elderly and single adult housing
2 Linsay Street	9	family housing
3 North Columbia Street	11	family, elderly and single adult housing
4 Trinity Court	40	family and single adult housing
5 South Estes Drive	44	family housing
6 South Roberson Street	15	all elderly
7 Pritchard Park	15	family housing
8 Airport Gardens	26	family housing
9 Colony Woods West	30	family housing
10 Eastwood	32	family and single adult housing
11 Caldwell/Church Street	20	elderly and disabled housing
12 Oakwood	30	family and single adult housing
13 Rainbow Heights	24	family housing

## Public housing provides strong community

■ Residents say they are proud to call public housing home and have no desire to leave.

BY NICOLE WHITE  
STAFF WRITER

Myrtle Degraffinried says she loves her neighborhood. She has her daughters and granddaughters around her and is proud of the community she has helped to create.

"I love it here," said Degraffinried, a South Estes Apartments resident. "It's a nice place to be. If I didn't say I loved it, I would be telling a story."

Degraffinried has lived in the apartment complex, one of the 13 public housing developments scattered throughout Chapel Hill, for 27 years. Her daughter Gloria Degraffinried shares her apartment and another daughter lives in an apartment around the corner.

Every afternoon, the playground across the street from Myrtle Degraffinried's home swarms with kids just coming home from Estes Elementary School who then shoot hoops and play on swings.

Gloria Degraffinried said she preferred South Estes Apartments to other neighborhoods she had looked into because it welcomed her children. "You have to think about your kids," she said. "It's very safe to me. No matter where you go, there's something bad going on in the neighborhood."

Gloria Degraffinried said the best way to cope with problems in a community regardless

of location or income, was through respect and keeping problems in perspective.

"I try to worry about myself and my kids," she said. "You can start up a big commotion, but I can't worry about that."

Myrtle Degraffinried's 8-year-old granddaughter Jerrica, a third-grader at Estes Hills Elementary School, said she also loved the neighborhood. "It just has a lot of kids," she said. "I like playing with them. We go to the center and do our homework and then we come outside and play."

Jerrica and about 20 other elementary students frequent the after-school center funded by the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Public Housing Residents Council. The teacher at the center, Regina Futrell, said the program worked well and was popular with the kids. "It helps kids with their homework and keeps them out of trouble."

However the living has not always been so good in public housing. Joann Shirer, a South Estes resident for 13 years, said the conditions in public housing communities used to be much worse. With four children to raise, Shirer said she refused to accept the conditions of the public housing apartments when she moved in.

"There were apartments that hadn't been painted in 19 years, water running from upstairs down the outside walls, tiles coming up from bathroom floors and sewage backed up and coming out of the kitchen sinks," she said.

As a former volunteer and now paid director of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Public Housing Residents Council, Shirer said she has seen those conditions change. All of the apartments are now meeting standards, and communica-

tion has improved between residents and the housing department, she said.

"The town has put a lot of effort into improving apartments overall in the last four years," Shirer said.

But for all of the improvements some residents said they still did not feel like public housing was a true home. "It's like we don't have freedom here," said Germaine Mitchell, another South Estes Apartments resident. "The police patrol through here and just ask you questions. They're trying to make it seem like there is something going on here."

Gloria Degraffinried said she appreciated the police patrolling and excepted it as just another aspect of the community. "That same policeman might have to save one of your children," she said.

While public housing has both pluses and minuses, just as any community, town officials said that the system worked well overall.

In terms of facilities and service, Chapel Hill Housing Department Director Tina Vaughn said Chapel Hill's service was excellent. She said most applicants were pleased and surprised at how welcome the department made them feel.

Ironically, though, this record of success can lead to some problems. Vaughn said there was a long waiting list for spaces in public housing. Only a small percentage of the applicants will be placed in a home next year because so few families, who feel comfortable in their communities, move out of public housing.

In Chapel Hill, a community noted for its

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## POOR

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less people moving in and out makes even an estimated guess futile, but Inter-Faith Council for Social Service Executive Director Chris Moran said the number was high.

The Inter-Faith Council Community House shelters between 500 and 600 men, women and children each year, Moran said. However, many other homeless people don't take refuge in the shelter.

Moran said he thought Chapel Hill's problem with the homeless was rooted in a growing division and separation between the rich and the poor.

"Because there are lots of wealthy people here, those at the bottom tend to be invisible," he said.

However invisible the homeless might seem, the Chapel Hill Police Department sees some of them often. Police Spokeswoman Jane Cousins said officers had made 45 arrests since Jan. 1 in which the home address of the offender was reported as 100 West Rosemary Street, the address of the IFC shelter. However, not everyone arrested tells the truth, Cousins said.

She said there was really no way to know how many homeless people were charged with crimes. "Some say no

address, some lie and some say 100 W. Rosemary Street," she said.

Most of those who listed the shelter's address committed minor crimes, Cousins said. An injury occurred in only one of the 45 crimes, and most of the arrests were for trespassing or violations of city ordinances such as public urination or open container.

"They're not what is classified as major crimes," she said.

But whether the crimes are minor or not, area residents and businessmen still say a problem exists. They complain particularly about panhandling by the homeless.

Robert Humphreys, director of the Downtown Commission, said store owners and shoppers had complained to him about being asked for money.

Unless panhandlers break the law by being too aggressive or being intoxicated, nothing can be done, he said. But when the law is broken, the police are called.

"We wouldn't want the right to make someone move on just because we didn't like what they're doing, but if they cross the line we have to do something about it," Humphreys said.

As for McCall and Drew, life has been looking up lately. The two will be moving at the end of the month to South Carolina, where McCall has

found work with his twin brother's construction company. The move will allow the couple to be with their daughter, Ashley Michelle. Drew also plans to find a job. "I like Chapel Hill," she said. "I'm going to miss it. It's a good place to stay."

Gerald will continue to look for work. After coming to Chapel Hill from New York in 1985, he worked for five years at Blue Cross Blue Shield and had no criminal record. Then he was incarcerated for selling stolen property at a pawn shop. "I was forced to resign," Gerald said. "It caused problems with my wife and family, and after I was released I had to leave home."

Gerald said he had taken classes at several colleges and had earned a degree in food preparation.

But the last time he applied for work at a local restaurant, he was turned down for being overqualified.

"They wanted to refer me to a managerial training program," Gerald said. "But you have to have a driver's license, and I can't get a driver's license because I need to pay tickets that I don't have the money to pay."

He said his wife and five children live in Chapel Hill, and his oldest son goes to Georgetown University.

Gerald said he sees a cycle in the problems many homeless people have.

"It's very easy to get into the cycle of shelter life. They're fed every morning, every afternoon, every evening," he said. "There's no accountability in life, no one to answer to, no hope. Whatever opportunity they have to escape the reality of the situation, be it through drugs or alcohol, they'll do it."

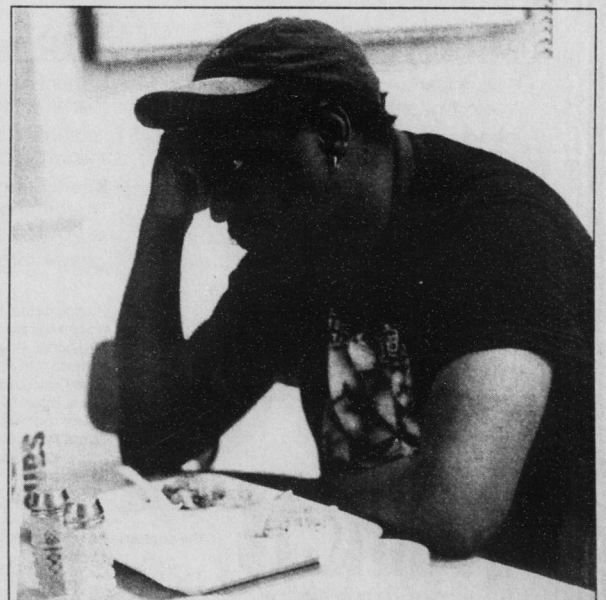
For now Gerald said he had a place to sleep but has to spend his days job hunting or at the shelter. "As long as I diligently seek employment and stay clean, I have a place to lay my head on a temporary basis."

Chapel Hill Town Council member Edith Wiggins said she thought poverty posed a problem in Chapel Hill. She said the Town Council tried to help by making sure it paid a living wage that was competitive with other businesses.

"We have an added challenge in Chapel Hill because it takes more to live here than it does in neighboring counties," she said.

Moran said the struggle to overcome poverty in Chapel Hill would continue until income equality was achieved.

"As long as there is this widening gap between the rich and the poor, as long as there are people paid between \$5 and \$7 an hour, and as long as there is a lack of public housing, there will be a problem with the poor and homeless in Chapel Hill."



Anthony Badgett eats his evening meal at the Inter-Faith Council Community House. The IFC shelters 500 to 600 people each year.