

## How history is helping keep a community alive

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SARASOTA — The old Ace Theater is where Wade Harvin had his first kiss more than half a century ago. The kiss had a lasting impact. Harvin and Carlene Jean were married for 52 years. But the black-owned movie theater is long gone. It got a facelift and was turned into an art gallery.



Retired educator Dorothy Smith takes a moment to laugh during her interview with Vickie Oldham. Photo courtesy / Vickie Oldham.

It's an increasingly familiar fate in the historically African-American community in Sarasota. Before the area just north of downtown was renamed the Rosemary District, it was known as Overtown, and it housed Sarasota's first documented black community. A large number of properties in Newtown are now owned by absentee investors, with residents who had deep ties to the area relocating elsewhere.

Sensing an impending encroachment, former Sarasota mayor Fredd Atkins dreamt of a project that would help preserve the stories of the place where he grew up. Before it became unrecognizable. His dream finally took flight last year when city commissioners funded the Newtown Conservation Historic District Project.

Rebranded as Newtown Alive, the project's first phase was just completed and is awaiting the green light from commissioners to begin phase two, which involves the creation of a website and a mobile app to make the team's research widely available.

In a period of eight months, a team of historians and volunteers compiled a 351-page report detailing aspects of Newtown's history from 1914-2014. Chapters transcribe interviews with community members such as Gwen Atkins, a nurse who treated black patients at a time when Sarasota Memorial Hospital wouldn't even send ambulances their way.

Another section houses an inventory of impressive homes built by Newtown residents themselves. In a chapter titled "Recommendations," there is a suggestion to award rehabilitation funds that would help owners preserve and renovate properties that were deemed to have historic value by architects Dave Baber and Chris Wenzel, who were part of the team.

Like many other Newtown residents, you will never catch Project Director Vickie Oldham calling Overtown the Rosemary District. She was born and raised in Newtown, to a family largely born and raised in Newtown. She interviewed more than two dozen community members for the project. They made her laugh, and cry. But most of all, she said, they inspired her.

"Around the country, communities like ours are beginning to leverage their African-American history, and they've changed their communities through that history,"

Oldham said. “We’re hoping to do the same.”

Oldham and her team will present their report to the Sarasota City Commission today at 2:30 p.m.

### **Attracting a younger audience**

The city of St. Petersburg sponsored the African American Heritage Trail two years ago, a similar project that looked at the the city’s 22nd Street neighborhood. They created a two-mile route covering 100 years of St. Petersburg’s African-American history. An accompanying website made the history accessible to non-black residents who had never stepped foot in the community due to negative perceptions of the area. The project increased foot traffic, and eventually paved the way for renewed interest and investment.

The Newtown Alive team hopes that a website and mobile app will also attract a younger audience. Oldham moved away in 2006 for a job as marketing director for Fort Valley State University in Georgia. But there was always that pull to come home.

“It’s way overdue that we trained a new generation of leaders and community organizers,” she said. The team is looking to make a book out of the report and Oldham is interested in producing a documentary based on the research they’ve uncovered.

Etienne J. Porter, 36, owns the production company Drummerboy Entertainment in North Sarasota. Porter was one of the youngest people interviewed for the project. “Hopefully it will bring excitement and pride to the Newtown community and help bring back some of the young people who’ve moved away,” he said.

While Porter grew up listening to his parents’ and grandparents’ stories of a very different Sarasota, his own reality, he said, is very different. Although Newtown has a ways to go, he added, he has been able to create opportunities for himself right here in Sarasota.

Shoneji Robison, owner of the Los Angeles-based Southern Girl Desserts, is a Newtown native who has found success on the West coast. Although she was not a part of the project, she followed it closely on Facebook. “I think it’s phenomenal to see growth happen in the city — it’s growing by leaps and bounds,” Robison said, adding that these days, she needs a GPS to get around when she comes home. “It’s nice to see that Newtown is growing along with the city.”