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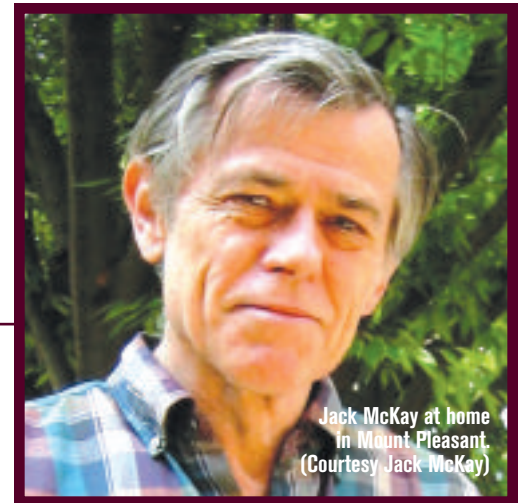
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Jack McKay

A Passion for Mount Pleasant

BY KENDRA LANGDON

To truly love anything or anyone – a spouse, a child, a pet – is never a simple task, even when that love is for a place and community. Jack McKay, proud resident of Mount Pleasant, proves that loving a community is challenging but fulfilling work.

McKay has been many things in his life: student, physicist, government contractor, husband and grandfather, to name a few. In each role he has devoted himself to his responsibilities, considering the effects of his actions and lifestyle on those around him. This aspect of his character is especially evident in his commitment to his vibrant community. Although this devotion is currently most evident in McKay's involvement with Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1D03, his intentional commitment to Mount Pleasant began 35 years ago, when he and his wife, Emily, first came to the neighborhood.

The couple moved to Washington, DC, after living in Pittsburgh, where McKay studied physics at Carnegie Mellon University. In Pittsburgh they had intentionally integrated an inner-city neighborhood, so when they moved to DC, they consciously sought out a racially diverse community.

"It was a very different world then," McKay explains. "Segregation was still the rule, so Washington was white west of [Rock Creek P]ark and black east of the park. There were very few integrated communities. This was one of them, even then."

They bought the house they still live in for \$21,000 dollars in 1972, when the area was, according to McKay, "totally undesirable" for real estate agents and prospective homeowners. McKay has seen a lot of changes since then and is particularly excited by the influx of young people to the area in recent years.

"People are moving back [into the city], which is marvelous," says McKay. "I'm really in favor of that. It's really revitalized the city. But you've got to make some adjustments, too, and we're having to deal with that."

McKay cites crime and parking as obvious issues that newcomers have to deal with in the city, but he also highlights more difficult sacrifices that have to be made by everyone in an urban environment.

"Diversity doesn't just mean people who look different or speak a different language," he explains. "It means people with different standards, different habits, different ways of life. And sometimes there can be some friction because their habits, their ways of life may not be ours. You need to appreciate the diversity and not let it drive you nuts."

McKay learned early on in life to value the interaction and teaching that occurs

between people of different backgrounds. As a young boy, he moved to Hawaii with his family and had to adjust to a radically new culture in which he was a white, English-speaking minority. Learning to appreciate unpopular positions and to empathize with others across boundaries of culture and race has made McKay committed to a Mount Pleasant that exhibits true – not cosmetic – diversity. Although the neighborhood is proud of its ethnic and economic variety, McKay fears that the depth of that diversity could be threatened by forces that might suppress the values and traditions of other residents by “trying to create...their model of an ideal neighborhood.”

“In a way,” he explains, “we’re destroying the city in the process of saving it.”

He uses the example of Bancroft Elementary School to illustrate how this trend is already affecting neighborhood institutions. McKay fondly refers to Bancroft as “a perfectly decent little school,” where teachers use the advantage of their location to make all their students bilingual in English and Spanish. But he laments that many new residents aren’t enrolling their children there.

“The consequence of every motivated parent getting their kids into better schools is that our neighborhood school is not our neighborhood school. And yet it could be with more investment from people who come to Mount Pleasant.”

McKay began putting that kind of investment into his community after retiring from his physics career. He first ran for a position on the ANC in 2002, after a dispute over a vacant lot next to his house. Since that time he has been devotedly working on issues of crime, parking, historic preservation and education, in what he considers to be his new full-time job.

Like any labor of love, McKay’s opinions and aspirations encounter critics and challenges. He acknowledges that many of his positions are controversial and unpopular. But this doesn’t stop McKay from doggedly pursuing a safe, enriching and vibrantly diverse environment in Mount Pleasant.

“It’s been all consuming,” he says with a smile, “but rewarding.” ■

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