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49/63: Neighborhood's numbers add up to success

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Forgive Susan Kurtenbach if she's a little sensitive about the condition of her neighborhood sidewalks.

You see, when the weather is nice enough, she strolls barefooted through her neighborhood east of Troost Avenue.

In the past, she had to step around broken bottles, cracked concrete and scattered trash. Now the sidewalks are clean and smooth. Acorns and sticks cause her more concern than rubble or litter.

The fact that a woman feels comfortable there walking alone and barefoot goes a long way toward explaining why The Kansas City Star found the neighborhoods of 49/63 to be one of the top places to live in Kansas City. This cluster of neighborhoods takes its name from its boundaries, between 49th and 63rd streets, from Oak Street to the Paseo.

It's all part of The Star's research into the most livable residential areas in the city.

We are profiling the top-performing cluster in each section, one section each day. Today's section is the Southeast Side, generally from Brush Creek to 85th Street.

In that section, 49/63 finished best in The Star's analysis because 49/63 is almost a textbook example of what good urban neighborhoods are supposed to be.

It has aged well -- the middle-class homes have gone through a wave of rehabilitation, and the streets and sidewalks have been kept up.

It's diverse -- one of the few neighborhood clusters that straddle Troost Avenue.

It's got a personality -- kind of a mini college town around the campuses of Rockhurst University and the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Plus, it offers the kind of urban milieu where people are often on the streets, walking. College faculty members walk to work. Commuters walk to bus stops lining Troost and the Paseo. And dog owners like Susan Kurtenbach go for evening strolls.

One warm fall evening, this rail-thin artist and Pilates instructor journeyed up and down the hills of Troostwood with her dachshund and Italian greyhound in tow. She pranced lightly on her toes -- walking barefoot may seem eccentric, but it feels natural and healthy to her. She passed homes with lushly landscaped front yards or wrap-around front porches or rehabbing work being done.

"People generally think 'east of Troost,' and they don't know how nice the neighborhood is," Kurtenbach said. "But there's a lot of good here."

How it's stayed that way serves as a lesson for other city neighborhoods.

Southeast Side

Kansas City's Southeast Side falls between UMKC on one corner and Swope Park on another. Besides 49/63, it includes six other clusters of neighborhoods:

Blue Hills, Town Fork Creek and the Swope Parkway Corridor, East Meyer, Swope Park's environs, the Sports Complex/Eastwood Hills, plus East Blue River between the Blue River and Raytown.

The Southeast Side can be picturesque -- blocks of neat, tidy, colorful bungalows line the wide, grassy Paseo. But it's been down on its luck, even in ways it can't control: Within the urban core, the Southeast Side has the most water-main breaks from old pipes.

Yet signs of improvement abound in this part of town, The Star found.

It's had some success luring new retailers. Last year, the Swope Parkway Health Center complex added The Shops on Blue Parkway, a red- and brown-brick strip resembling the newest centers in suburbia. The Swope Parkway Corridor neighborhood cluster, in fact, had the ninth-best increase in the entire city in retail and service businesses this decade.

Now residents like Becky Forrest don't have to drive upward of 10 miles just to get to a grocery.

"It's just great, a lot more convenient than Hypermart (off 87th Street)," said Forrest, president of the Town Fork Creek neighborhood.

The Southeast Side also is making inroads on crime. Three of the city's top 10 declines in the rate of property crimes such as burglary and vandalism occurred in Southeast Side neighborhood clusters. The property crime rate in any Southeast Side cluster is now better than in downtown or in midtown.

"It used to be, you didn't sit out on your porch after 4 p.m.," said Patricia Keeling, president of Blue Hills for most of this decade. "Now I'm out there after dark and I'm comfortable."

Still, when it comes to the complete package of quality-of-life measures used by The Star, all the neighborhood clusters finished about average or below overall -- all, that is, except 49/63.

The 49/63 cluster is nestled between Brookside and Blue Hills. It's charming and quaint, its streets generally lined with airplane bungalows (with a second-story "cockpit" room on the back) and two-story Midwestern stone shirtwaists, shaded by giant leafy oaks and ginkgo trees.

In a statistical sense, 49/63 didn't excel, but was consistently good across the board.

It had more restaurants and bars, on a per-person basis, than other Southeast Side neighborhood clusters. It ranked in the top 10 in street conditions while most others were in the bottom 10. And it had the only above-average ranking in Bridging the Gap's litter index across this decade.

It is, in a nutshell, a well-balanced place. And its residents have remained vigilant over the years to keep it that way.

49/63's battles

Ever since 49/63 formed 35 years ago as a coalition of about a half-dozen neighborhoods, it's been in battles.

In the 1970s, the battle was against blockbusting, when real estate agents used racial scare tactics to flip houses. Neighborhood leaders pressured real estate companies to stop driving white families away.

In the 1980s, the battle was against crack, with neighborhoods organizing "sit outs" against drug houses. In the 1990s, the battle was against blight, and the neighborhoods not only preserved blocks of homes from UMKC but also worked through City Hall to get those homes rehabbed.

Throughout all these years, the names of activists may have changed but the goal remained the same: maintain stable neighborhoods.

And so it continues this decade. Now the battle is against bad landlords. They let their homes get rundown and don't mow or clean up trash. But there have been sporadic successes. One was with a commercial business, a car wash.

It's located in the 6000 block of Troost. On weekends, it turned into a spontaneous late-night party spot. Cars parked in the wash bays and the concrete walls amplified their stereos. People mingled, drank, even danced on car hoods. Cars parked in the middle of Troost to be a part of it. Police would try to disperse the crowds, and they would come right back.

After a couple years of this, 49/63's president struck a deal last year with the car wash's owners: The owners put up a gated fence and neighborhood volunteers close the gates at 9 p.m. weekend nights and open them at 6 a.m. the next morning. The trouble vanished.

The lesson: "It's persistence," said Ruth Austin, the COMBAT drug-tax coordinator for 49/63. "You have to look at creative ways to solve problems."

Added Donovan Mouton, the city's former "neighborhood czar" under Mayor Kay Barnes: "They are people who know how to get things done."

Proof of what's gotten done is quite visible. Susan Kurtenbach sees it regularly in her barefoot walks through her little neck of 49/63.

A block where she helped organize a cleanup some years ago, still pristine. A row of houses, saved from UMKC's

wrecking ball and rehabbed, still neat and tidy. A former drug house, still not causing any more trouble.

On a recent stroll, Kurtenbach paused by that house. "It's quiet now," she said. "It's a success story."

So is the entire neighborhood.

In Rating Our Neighborhoods, The Star compared clusters of neighborhoods in different sections of town. Today's section is the Southeast Side, and the top-performing neighborhood cluster there is 49/63. That cluster includes these neighborhoods or homes associations: Troostwood, Crestwood, Troost Plateau, South Park, Astor Place, Rockhill Crest and Rockhill Ridge.

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In the Southeast Side, 49/63 is the top-rated cluster. To see 49/63 and Southeast Side maps, go to Page A8.

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NEIGHBORHOOD SNAPSHOT

It's home to the University of Missouri-Kansas City, Rockhurst College and the Stowers Institute for Medical Research.

49-63 is ranked No. 2 among all neighborhood clusters in its range of housing prices and apartment offerings.

It's one of the few groups of urban-core neighborhoods whose boundaries bridge Troost Avenue.

The 49-63 Neighborhood Coalition was founded in 1971 with a goal of maintaining the neighborhood's racial diversity.

Troostwood, one of 49-63's neighborhoods, features stone walls from limestone originally quarried right in the neighborhood.

At the beginning of the decade, some residents thought their neighborhood slogan could be "Boombboxes and Bullets." Not anymore.

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