The Mount Pleasant Miracle

How one D.C. neighborhood quietly became a national model for resisting gentrification

BY JEFFERSON MORLEY
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From the artist: I used to consult my horoscope each week, but these days I need higher powers to satisfy my curiosity. Yet none of my usual sources have come close to guessing what the first weeks of January had in store. Perhaps weather wizard Phil could try?
On the cover: Photos of, clockwise from left, Katie Flegal dancing at an outdoor party in Mount Pleasant; Irving Street and Mount Pleasant Road NW; singer Karen Wilson, center; children at a concert; performer Baba Ras D by Lucian Perkins.
Can the cannabis industry be an agent of social justice? Or is it just another big business?

BY DONNA M. OWENS

Jason White has created dazzling advertising and marketing campaigns for Nike and Disney, the World Cup and Olympic Games, to name a few. But when the Georgetown alumnus told his parents he was exiting Apple-owned Beats by Dre for the cannabis industry, the announcement landed with a thud. “What they heard was, ‘You’re going to sell weed,’” the 44-year-old said, laughing.

White is now chief marketing officer at Curaleaf Holdings Inc., which says it is the world’s largest provider (by revenue) of legal medical and recreational cannabis. While some liken legal pot to a gold rush, White — who is African American and Cuban — talks of repairing communities harmed by the war on drugs. “Some are very wary of cannabis, having seen people arrested and their voting rights taken away,” he says. “But as cannabis has become more mainstream, others don’t see harm, but opportunity. I want to use this platform to help improve society.”

I first interviewed White at a Baltimore hotel in February 2020. Curaleaf has dispensaries in Maryland, and his team had flown in from the company’s Los Angeles office. With his gracious manners and clean-cut looks, he’s a wholesome ambassador for Cannabis sativa, the plant from which marijuana is derived. Indigenous cultures used cannabis for healing and spiritual rituals, White told me, until it became criminalized amid a “larger story of oppression.”

America is the world’s largest cannabis market, but the use, possession or sale of marijuana over certain amounts remains illegal under federal law. Still, state laws are shifting, according to data from the National Conference of State Legislatures. Following ballot measures in November, cannabis will be legal for adult recreational use in 15 states and
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Washington, D.C. Medical use will be allowed in 36 states. For some, the irony of marijuana becoming a big business is cruel. Decades of disparate drug arrests and sentencing have ravaged Black and Brown communities. “While many large companies are making millions, many people remain imprisoned because of the historic classification of the plant as a Schedule 1 drug in the very same states where adult use is legal,” says Stormy Simon, executive director of the board for Mission Green, which is part of the Weldon Project — a nonprofit that pushes to free those incarcerated for nonviolent cannabis offenses. It strikes her as hypocritical that cannabis dispensaries were deemed “essential” operations amid the pandemic in some jurisdictions yet the drug remains illegal in others.

The day of our hotel sit-down, White and his team invited me to what one might call a “pop up” legal clinic in West Baltimore. The event was sponsored by Curaleaf and Possible Plan; the latter is a nonprofit that White co-founded to help fund organizations tackling reparatory justice and equitable access.

Nearly 200 people flowed through the Liberty Rec and Tech Center for free legal services. Pro bono lawyers Tonya and David Baña advised clients while their pooch napped. Staff from the Baltimore City State’s Attorney’s Office offered informational pamphlets. Community organizers and then-Baltimore Mayor Bernard C. “Jack” Young stopped by to express support. “It’s always rewarding to help people rebuild their lives,” said Anthony P. Ashton, at the time vice president (now president) of the board of the Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service. White later posted on Instagram: “Over 500 charges will be expunged. That means people get a new shot at life.”

Yet some are skeptical of the cannabis industry’s altruistic motives. Kevin Sabet is a former senior drug policy adviser in the Obama administration. He and former congressman Patrick Kennedy (a son of the late Ted Kennedy) co-founded Smart Approaches to Marijuana (SAM) in 2013. “Pot legalization has failed to deliver for communities of color. Disproportionate arrests and steady incarceration rates persist in legal states,” says Sabet, who serves as president of SAM. The policy nonprofit favors decriminalization instead of legalization. “We can go much further by referring people to job programs, treatment and intervention,” he says. SAM’s 2020-2021 report “Lessons Learned From State Marijuana Legalization” notes that marijuana shops are disproportionately located in low-income or Black neighborhoods.

Will Jones, an outreach associate with SAM, lives in a community where stores are plastered with cigarette and alcohol ads. “These same industries have invested billions” in cannabis, he points out. “They will continue their exploitative practices in communities of color with marijuana. That is not social justice.”

Others, however, see a more positive role for the marijuana industry. Brittany K. Barnett, a lawyer and co-founder of the Buried Alive Project, which advocates for justice reform, wants to see “bold, brave” action from cannabis companies and legislation at the federal level. “Marijuana justice,” she says, “means everyone has the ability to achieve economic equity, health equity and general social equity.”

In early December, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act. Among other things, the bill would remove marijuana from the controlled substances list. Its fate in the Senate could rest with the new 117th Congress.

White believes that cannabis and the industry itself can provide societal benefits — be it for veterans with PTSD or entrepreneurial opportunities for people of color. “One day,” he says, “we’re gonna learn as a culture and society to use this plant. Not over-consume it. Use it respectfully.” He adds: “Big cannabis can be good cannabis.”

Donna M. Owens is a writer in Baltimore.

One of them uttered the magic words: Taylor Swift

Once upon a time there was a young man named Jay White. He was 24, lived alone in a studio apartment during a pandemic and was slowly sliding back into the dating scene after a breakup.

One day the Silver Spring, Md., native got a text from his mom that had no words, just a single URL. He clicked on it and was directed to the Date Lab application. “She wasn’t even like, ‘Hey, have you heard of Date Lab, here’s the application,’” said Jay, who works as a project manager in Virginia. “A clear message was sent.”

Experience had taught him not to defy his mother, so Jay applied and a few weeks later he was scheduled for a virtual blind date. “Best-case scenario you find somebody and worst-case scenario you have a good story to tell,” he said.

Plus, virtual dates were a cakewalk for Jay. “Whether or not I am successful at it I don’t know, but I feel like I can talk to pretty much a piece of driftwood,” he said.

Aidan Markey, 23, moved to the Washington area from Chicago in late August figuring if he could make it here, he could make it anywhere. This PR guy, who grew up in Bowling Green, Ohio, was looking to work with nonprofits focused on suicide prevention or LGBTQ health-care reform. He also hoped to find out more about himself.

Aidan, who came out publicly in early 2018 and has had one long-term romantic partner, didn’t hold much hope for a successful pandemic dating life. But the weekend after Election Day, he went out to get a Sunday newspaper. “I wanted to ... read through all the coverage talking about Kamala [Harris] as the first woman vice president,” he said. Luckily for us The Washington Post Magazine fell out and Aidan discovered Date Lab.

To prep for the Zoom date, Jay worked on lighting and furniture placement before turning to himself. “I put on a whole outfit,” he said. “I did my hair, I put on some fragrance, I tried to gussy up a little bit.”
Aidan zhuzhed it up too, with a “lovely” sweater that was light blue on top and dark blue on the bottom paired with white pants. “I have been trying to pick more bold colors in my wardrobe because I am like violently pale and if I can have a darker or more bold piece to contrast to my skin I feel like that makes for a better fashion moment,” he said.

Jay grabbed a glass of pinot noir. His mind was racing because the D.C.-area gay community is small and he wondered if he already might know Aidan. He and his friends had spent time doing some recon work on a few Aidans hoping the date would be more of a squint instead of completely blind. But when the screen popped up Aidan turned out to be a cute man Jay had never seen.

There was some initial nervousness then the usual small talk: what do you do, where do you go, who do you know, why Date Lab. Zoom kept going in and out, but the two managed to keep things flowing, laughing and bonding over pop culture interests.

Their rapport was easy, according to Aidan, and it helped that Jay was handsome, smart, funny and quick to hit back with jokes. “I think we have frighteningly similar interests, two sides of a coin,” he said.

And then out popped two magic words, sparkly and bright: Taylor Swift. “I am a Taylor Swift fan, but when I’m on dates with people I want to underplay that because people have strong feelings about [her],” Jay said. “I mentioned her, and he was like, ‘I have seen her in concert four times.’”

Yep, call it what you want, but Aidan was a Swiftie, too. “It’s like literally the gayest conversation I have ever had,” Aidan said.

The date wrapped up without an exchange of numbers, but the two did decide to follow each other on social media. “This is always kind of the kiss of death: ‘You can follow me on Instagram,’ ” Jay said. “And in my head I was like, ‘Okay, so it was nice to meet you, see you never.’” However, Aidan immediately messaged and they chatted some more.

Ready for it? “I sat on it after the date and ruminating on it, I realized I didn’t necessarily feel a romantic connection,” Aidan said. “I just had a really good time.”

He wanted to be honest and transparent so he messaged Jay and told him as much, suggesting they do a socially distanced hangout after the holidays. Jay was cool with it.

**RATE THE DATE**

**Jay** 3.5 [out of 5].

**Aidan** 5.

**UPDATE**

A week after the date Aidan said the two were still messaging on Instagram with loose plans to hang out as friends after the holidays.

Tanya Ballard Brown is a stand-up comedian and an editor at NPR.
‘I Don’t Want It to Be U Street or Adams Morgan or 14th Street’
As gentrification sweeps across D.C., one neighborhood has found a way to preserve its diversity and character. How did Mount Pleasant do it?

STORY BY JEFFERSON MORLEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LUCIAN PERKINS

On Monday afternoon, June 1, the city of Washington was on the brink of a nervous breakdown. Seven days after the killing of George Floyd, scenes of mobs, flames, cops and chaos looped endlessly on screens large and small, interrupted only by images of boarded-up windows and now the spectacle of a phalanx of uniformed soldiers routing peaceful protesters from Lafayette Square across the street from the White House.

I was sitting an 11-minute drive north of the mayhem at the carryout end of the Marx Cafe bar in the neighborhood of Mount Pleasant. The regulars who lined the bar — masked and (sort of) socially distanced — stared up in appalled silence at a TV as the president hoisted a Bible. The country was disintegrating during happy hour. Mayor Muriel Bowser’s 7 p.m. curfew order was fast approaching. The crowd thinned.

Across the street at the Best World supermarket, co-owner Young Pak was closing early. Pak and her husband bought the store a decade ago and have served the neighborhood ever since in economical style. The store’s large, unprotected plate-glass windows looked vulnerable to the worst of intentions floating in the Washington air that night. Pak locked herself in, and I hurried home.

I couldn’t help but think of the Mount Pleasant riot of May 1991. That was the last time Washington had seen widespread civil disorder. A police shooting of a Salvadoran immigrant had triggered several days of window smashing and car burning, a cataclysm that made the neighborhood notorious for years to come.

“I had heard about that riot a long time ago,” Pak later told me. When the Pinks bought the supermarket in 2011, the front windows still had iron grates installed for self-protection by the previous owners. Over the years, as Mount Pleasant recovered and thrived, the memories of the riot faded. At the suggestion of a neighbor, Pak had taken down the grates a few years before, figuring she would never need them. On the night of June 1, she regretted her choice. “I wished I had them now,” she said, laughing.

By nightfall, the nation’s capital was engulfed in a wave of looting and vandalism, some of it of targeting national chains. Across the District, more than 200 businesses were damaged. At least six CVS stores from Capitol Hill to Friendship Heights were looted or burned. The disorder, the Washington Post reported, spread to “normally tranquil residential neighborhoods.”

Not Mount Pleasant. There was no CVS to loot; thanks to neighborhood activists, the pharmacy chain’s plans to open a store on Mount Pleasant Street had recently been thwarted. Where a new CVS might well have stood, the humble Best World supermarket was unscathed. In fact, on Mount Pleasant Street, not a single store was damaged, not one pane of glass broken. On the most tumultuous day in Washington in three decades, the neighborhood that breathed tear gas in 1991 saw no violence, no disorder, no arrests. Call it luck. Call it design. Call it Mount Pleasant.

“I call it the real America,” Frank Agbro, musician and host of a biweekly porch concert, told me. “The American Dream, where people from all over the world, all religions, all different backgrounds come together to make a community that works.”

In recent decades, a tide of gentrification has swept across America’s urban centers. In Washington, office blocks have sprung up along North and South Capitol streets, while whole new neighborhoods have been created around previously underused real estate: Union Market in a Northeast warehouse district, Nationals Park on the Anacostia River waterfront. And some communities have all but vanished: From 1980 to 2010, Shaw went from being 80 percent Black to 30 percent.

Mount Pleasant, meanwhile, has followed an unusual trajectory: It hasn’t changed much at all. It has long been a haven for immigrants, activists, punk rockers, entrepreneurs, revolutionaries and returning Peace Corps volunteers — and it still is. The residential streets sloping down to Rock Creek Park are thick with do-gooders: social workers, wonks, economists, immigration lawyers, musicians, ministers, artists, florists, yoga instructors, divorce lawyers and even the odd journalist.

The apartment buildings along Mount Pleasant Street are more diverse: home to busboys, cooks, cashiers, waitresses, teachers, security guards and esquineros (corner guys), the older Latin men who drink coffee and play dominoes outside the paint store.

The neighborhood has 12,644 residents, according to the latest Census Bureau figures: 57 percent White, 17 percent Black, 13 percent “other race,” 6 percent multiracial and 3 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. Twenty-seven percent of residents identify as Latino; a quarter are foreign-born. It’s less wealthy than Cleveland Park to the west, quieter than bustling Columbia Heights to the east, more staid than rambunctious Adams Morgan to the south. “It doesn’t have the White privilege vibe of Capitol Hill,” says Rob Robinson, a former aide to Marion Barry when he was mayor, who has lived in both neighborhoods.

Expensive restaurants are one of the major symptoms of gentrification, but Mount Pleasant Street has always had a healthy ratio of affordable to high-end food. The neighborhood has one trendy eatery, Elle, but I prefer the offerings of five less-expensive establishments on the same block, a veritable United Nations of carryout: SabyDee (Thai and Laotian), Taqueria Nacional (Mexican), Corado’s (Guatemalan), Don Jaime’s (Salvadoran) and Angelico (Italian).

Mount Pleasant Street has two national chain stores (a 7-Eleven and a Subway) and three places to wire money to your home country. It has a boutique grocery (Each Peach) and a market for immigrants (El Progreso). It has a gym, a dollar store, two nail salons, three hair salons and a jewelry store.

It is home to El West, a clothing store owned and run for the past 25 years by an immigrant from El Salvador, who selects and orders her eclectic apparel herself. Down the street, I get my shoes patched in the oddly shaped Leon’s Shoe Repair shop, run by Randy Leon. The son of a Guatemalan cobbler and Salvadoran mother, he grew up in the neighborhood. Sometimes I sit for a coffee on the blue velvet stools at Addis Paris, a cafe owned by Menem (Amy) Solomon. After she was born in Ethiopia, her family moved to France. She came to Mount Pleasant to pursue her dreams of building a business with Afro-Parisian style.

Then there is the iconic Raven Grill, a cozy neighborhood bar owned by Merid Admassu, an accountant, also from Ethiopia. Admassu first came to the Raven to drink with African American buddies in the 1990s. He stuck around to buy the place. Merid’s genius was to change very little, besides expanding the choice of dollar-a-bag potato chips.

In search of wine, I go to Irving Wine & Spirits, owned by Jesse Chong. He’s a former Web designer, the son of the Korean immigrant who opened the corner store 35 years ago. Next door, at Haydee’s Restaurant, owner Haydee Vanegas of El Salvador and her staff specialize in pupusas and fajita platters while hosting performances by Rock Creek Jazz, a multinational ensemble anchored by a white-maned bass player recently retired from the Department of Energy. The music is on hold for the duration of the pandemic, but you can still eat at the curbside tables.

Before the pandemic, Marx Cafe often burst with the sound of live music and Latin DJs. Co-owner Harris Dallas is sometimes dejected by the pandemic, which has turned his once lively tavern into a streamlined carryout service, but he never wavers on Mount Pleasant. “I don’t want it to be U Street or Adams Morgan or 14th Street,” he says. “It’s a beautiful place.” Indeed, unlike so many other D.C. neighborhoods, Mount Pleasant has quietly made itself into a model for urban America: It’s a place — a collection of citizens — that has managed to maintain a degree of diversity and an attractive sense of community in a city that, swamped by gentrification, seems to be losing both.
The devastating death toll from the coronavirus is a reminder that Mount Pleasant was born in another national catastrophe: the Civil War. “I see a train of about thirty huge four-horse wagons, used as ambulances, filled with wounded, passing up Fourteenth street, on their way, probably to Columbian, Carver, and Mount Pleasant hospitals,” the poet Walt Whitman wrote to a friend in June 1863. The Union soldiers mangled by Confederate bullets in the siege of Richmond were brought back to Mount Pleasant’s hospital, a 1,600-bed pavilion-style building on what was then the pastoral outskirts of the nation’s capital.

The hospital stood near the estate of Samuel Brown, a paymaster in the U.S. Navy Department. Brown had just bought an adjacent property, known as Pleasant Plains, from a Confederate sympathizer who had fled town. He subdivided his property, laid out new streets and started selling lots. Houses began to sprout on the hillside sloping down to the valley of Rock Creek. Brown shrewdly gave his domain a more enticing name: Mount Pleasant.

The opening of a trolley line to downtown Washington in 1903 sparked a building boom. The streets of Samuel Brown’s subdivision were soon lined with new rowhouses. Walter Johnson, the great pitcher for the Washington Senators, lived on Irving Street in the 1910s. Sen. Robert La Follette, the progressive senator from Wisconsin, lived on 18th Street in the 1920s. Mount Pleasant was dubbed Washington’s first “streetcar suburb.”

Racism, however, ruled the streets. A map created by the D.C. Policy Center shows that by 1927 virtually all the homeowners in Mount Pleasant had signed deeds with racial covenants forbidding sale to African Americans. As the city grew with Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and the coming of World War II, those rowhouses were converted into boardinghouses, many occupied by single women. They were the so-called government girls who worked as secretaries and clerks in federal offices.

After the Supreme Court ruled in 1948 that racial covenants were not legally enforceable, the all-White neighborhood began to change. In 1950, Robert Deane, a physician at Howard University’s hospital, bought a seven-bedroom Georgian Revival mansion on Park Road. The Mount Pleasant Citizens Association sued to block his purchase and lost. As residential segregation barriers fell and White residents left for the suburbs, Black families in the heart of the city moved north. By 1970, Mount Pleasant was 65 percent Black.

Today’s Mount Pleasant dates to the 1970s, when the neighborhood slowly became not just an address but a kind of collective identity. Among the newcomers were a couple of second-generation immigrants, named Jan and Phil Fenty. Jan came from an Italian American family in Buffalo. Phil was the Afro-Caribbean son of a barber from Panama by way of Barbados. Around the corner from them was the group house of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, a hangout for soldiers returning from Vietnam, including the young John F. Kerry.

The neighborhood was a “real rainbow,” Phil Fenty told me over the summer on a Zoom call with his wife. “The kids learned that they could be outside all the time. ... It was fantastic for them and for us.” The
Fentys’ son Adrian would grow up to become mayor of D.C.

In 1973, the Community of Christ, a lay-led Lutheran group dedicated to social justice, bought the biggest building on Mount Pleasant Street and made it available rent-free to peace activists, pro-immigrant groups and musicians. In the 1980s, the group house scene flourished. The Embassy was a house associated with the punk rock band Nation of Ulysses. Hoover house hosted a band of the same name. “These places were somewhere between boardinghouses and communes,” says Ian MacKaye, leader of the band Fugazi, now a popular as a private college. When a room came open, dozens of people would apply to move in.

At the same time, Mount Pleasant was attracting a very different group of newcomers, starting with a stream of people from a small city near the Pacific Ocean in El Salvador called Intipucá. Intipequeños, as the residents are known, had been coming to Washington since the late 1960s, recruited by embassies, hotels and restaurants. But the civil war that engulfed El Salvador in the 1980s fueled emigration of ever more people seeking a safer life. The Community of Christ provided sanctuary to undocumented refugees fleeing the war. The Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN) helped the newcomers with asylum applications and immigration issues. By 1990, Mount Pleasant was 27 percent Hispanic, up from less than 1 percent two decades earlier.

It was a volatile mix. Longtime residents, Black and White, were bewildered by the undocumented newcomers who didn’t speak English. For the Salvadorans, holding one or two or three jobs was no guarantee of a good life. Some felt harassed by police officers who couldn’t speak their language. All of which culminated in the Mount Pleasant riot, a two-day cataclysm of property violence that traumatized the neighborhood yet also strengthened it in the long run.
It started on the early evening of May 5, 1991, when two police officers, both new to the job and neither of whom spoke Spanish, arrested an inebriated Salvadoran man, Daniel Gomez. In handcuffs, he struggled to pull a knife from his pocket. One of the officers yelled, “Freeze,” then shot him once in the chest. Gomez was taken away in an ambulance. The growing crowd shouted that police had killed a man for no reason. Years of pent-up resentments exploded. Randy Leon, watching from his father’s shoe repair store, saw rocks and bottles raining down on police officers standing in the middle of Lamont Street. Jesse Chong, then 11 years old, was watching the TV news when he saw police in riot helmets lined up on Irving Street outside his father’s liquor store.

As the police retreated, crowds of young Latinos smashed windows and looted. “I have covered a lot of stories in this town,” wrote reporter Hamil Harris in the Washington Afro-American newspaper, “but I have never seen and experienced the hell which transpired in the Mount Pleasant community tonight.” (Harris later became a reporter for The Post.)

The riot galvanized residents and the D.C. government to take remedial action. “The city started paying attention to the Salvadoran community,” recalls Catalina Sol, then a staff member at CARECEN, now director of the La Clínica del Pueblo, which has long had offices in Mount Pleasant. Juan Romagoza, the first director of La Clínica, did trainings for the D.C. police, which began to hire more Spanish-speaking officers. The mayor created a Latino Task Force on Civil Rights and bolstered the Office of Latino Affairs. Under the leadership of Maria Tukeva, a Mount Pleasant resident, the D.C. public schools expanded Bell Multicultural High School on 16th Street to educate students who didn’t speak English as a first language. La Clínica gained funding for health services. The nonprofit Latin American Youth Center catered to young people seeking after-school programs and general equivalency degrees. With a little help from the city, the newcomers gained a stake in the neighborhood.

Over the years, the city government also became an asset to the neighborhood in the area of affordable housing — thanks in no small part to David Clarke, chairman of the D.C. Council who was, not coincidentally, a resident of Mount Pleasant. Clarke, one of the flawed giants who loomed large in D.C. politics in the late 20th century, grew up in Shaw in the 1950s. He was White, but many of his friends and neighbors were Black. In church, he absorbed a biblical conviction in social justice and went on to earn a law degree from Howard University. He moved into a clapboard house on 17th Street NW, rode his bicycle to work and become known for defending poor people. After home rule came to the District in 1973, Clarke was the first elected council representative for Ward 1, which includes Mount Pleasant, Adams Morgan and Columbia Heights. And he believed with a passion in affordable housing.

Plenty of people can play a role in resisting gentrification — immigrant entrepreneurs, cultural creators, community activists, historical preservationists — but no single factor is more important than affordable housing. In 1980, Clarke co-sponsored a model law to help low-income D.C. tenants become homeowners. The Rental Housing Conversion and Sale Act created the legal basis for the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, known as TOPA. One of the most progressive housing measures in the country, the law gives tenants in the District the right to buy their apartment building if it is put up for sale. TOPA buildings became an anchor for Mount Pleasant, keeping working-class people in the neighborhood.

The tenants of the historic Kennesaw (now Renaissance) apartments, a magnificent seven-story limestone and buff brick apartment building on 16th Street NW, were able to get title to the building with help from Clarke. Half a block away on Mount Pleasant Street, a 34-unit building was about to be sold to developers in the mid-1990s when the tenants decided they wanted to stay. With the help of the Latino Economic Development Corp., a city-funded agency, the tenants bought the building as a co-op. The Adelante Mount Pleasant Cooperative is still going strong two decades later.

In the early 2000s, the Martinez family, living in the St. Dennis Apartments on Kenyon Street NW, confronted an owner who they believed was trying to empty the 32-unit building with buyouts and poor management. Eva Martinez, along with her two adult daughters — Anabel and Eva Aurora — filed suit, eventually reaching a settlement that allowed them to buy the property in 2008. The National Housing Trust, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving affordable housing, helped the tenants acquire and renovate the building. The St. Dennis reopened in 2011 with all apartments reserved for households earning no more
than 60 percent of the D.C. median income. Eight units are set aside for families who pay no more than 30 percent of their income as rent. The biggest achievement was one of the neighborhood’s largest apartment buildings, the Deauville. The 85-unit building went up in flames in 2008, the city’s first five-alarm fire in nearly 30 years. After the flames were doused, the tenants sought to take control of the building, which allegedly had been mismanaged for years. Under Mayor Fenty, the city bought the building and turned it over to the residents. Again, the National Housing Trust supplied financing and legal help.

“The residents were so eager to come back to the neighborhood that they stuck together for six years,” says Priya Jayachandran, CEO of the National Housing Trust. “For 36 families to move back into the building six years later is impressive.” In 2014, the building was reopened under a new name, Monsenor Romero Apartments, in honor of Salvadoran archbishop Oscar Romero, a tribune of the poor whose assassination in 1980 marked the beginning of the Salvadoran civil war. All 63 apartments in the Romero are rented at below-market prices.

In a community of under 13,000 people, all of these buildings have made a real difference in fostering a livable and diverse neighborhood. Meanwhile, Mount Pleasant’s tradition of activism conserves as it renews. In 2016, the aging membership of the Community of Christ over to La Clínica del Pueblo. A grand building that in another neighborhood might have become a high-end restaurant or retail outlet.

“...and to encourage our family friends to do the same.” More than 60 percent of the D.C. median income. Eight units are set aside for families who pay no more than 30 percent of their income as rent.

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In a community of under 13,000 people, all of these buildings have made a real difference in fostering a livable and diverse neighborhood. Meanwhile, Mount Pleasant’s tradition of activism conserves as it renews. In 2016, the aging membership of the Community of Christ decided to dissolve its congregation — and voted to turn the building over to La Clinica del Pueblo. A grand building that in another neighborhood might have become a high-end restaurant or retail outlet.

“In Mount Pleasant you feel like you’re standing with ghosts, layered on top of each other,” La Clinica’s Sol told me. “If you’ve been here a long time, you can see the layers. It still feels like a place where the history of our community is not just visible, but real.”

The peace that reigned in Mount Pleasant on the troubled night of June 1, 2020, could be traced back to a single moment in 2018 — when a gimlet-eyed neighborhood activist (who asked that I not use his name) noticed what looked like a camera mounted over the plexiglass doors of the Best World supermarket at 3178 Mount Pleasant St. NW. The device, he discovered, was something called a people counter. “Who wanted to know about how many people were coming and going from the Best World?” he told me he wondered. He checked in with his friends, Young and In Pak, who own the store but not the building. They said they didn’t know anything about it.

The activist started to ask questions and learned that CVS was interested in the location. The prospect of a chain store in the middle of Mount Pleasant was anathema to him and just about everybody he talked to. Before long, there was a petition on the counter at the Mount Pleasant Care Pharmacy across the street declaring that a CVS store would be an “eyesore and completely out of scale.” The signatories affirmed their intention “to boycott any CVS that would be built at this location, and to encourage our family friends to do the same.” More than a thousand people signed, 9 percent of the neighborhood.

A design firm for CVS made inquiries at the Historic Preservation Office in the city’s Office of Planning, according to a spokesman for the office. The company was told that demolition, signage and other plans would have to be reviewed in more detail to ensure compliance with the character of the historic district. CVS never submitted a formal application.

The tradition of neighborhood activism may have made a difference. For more than a decade, Historic Mount Pleasant, a group led by a formidable retired lawyer named Fay Armstrong, has watched over the neighborhood’s historical architecture with a vigilance that the planning office and developers have learned to respect. Historic Mount Pleasant wasn’t directly involved in the CVS issue, Armstrong told me. But the group’s activism may well have figured into the company’s calculations.

Historic Mount Pleasant, sometimes derided as “design Nazis” by more freewheeling neighbors, had previously struck not one but two blows against gentrification. In 2003, developers proposed building condominiums to replace the former gas station occupied by Wilson Amaya’s Mount Pleasant Auto Repair at the south end of Mount Pleasant Street. Historic Mount Pleasant pointed out the building was the last of the three gas stations that had dotted the street in the 1940s. The city rejected the plans in 2003 and a similar plan in 2015. Instead of $300,000 condos, Amaya’s auto repair shop stayed. Amaya, who emigrated from El Salvador in the 1970s, has now worked on the street 34 years, enabling him to put his three kids through college.

District Bridges, a nonprofit organization funded by city agencies and private donors that is active in Mount Pleasant and five other Northwest Washington neighborhoods, played a role in the CVS controversy, too. The organization provides support and advice to small-business owners as a way of fostering healthy communities. Brianne Dornbusch, its executive director, recalls that the group made its views known to CVS. “A CVS might be a great fit in another neighborhood,” she told me, “but not in Mount Pleasant where it would displace a neighborhood supermarket and threaten other locally owned businesses.”

In the face of an organized community, CVS decided at some point in 2019 not to pursue a Mount Pleasant location. (A spokesman said CVS had no comment.) Best World stayed in business — and the ripples spread. When the threat of a CVS went away, the Paks’ next-door neighbor, Alberto Ferrufino, also averted likely extinction. He owns and runs Don Juan Restaurant, a big, airy place that occupies one corner of the building that houses Best World. Mount Pleasant Pharmacy across the street also benefited. The pharmacy opened in 1983, run by Tony Majeed, an immigrant from Suriname, and his wife, Joan. Last year, the Majeeds retired and sold the business to Anil Kadari, a pharmacist originally from Hyderabad, India.

“The neighborhood feeling is there,” Kadari says of Mount Pleasant. “Normally in big cities you don’t see a loyal customer base. Here we recognize people on the street. We can make exceptions. We can waive co-payments. We can make decisions for our customers at the store itself. Those are things that don’t happen at CVS.” Thanks to one observant neighbor, three locally owned businesses stayed put and an out-of-state corporation took a hike.

And then along came the coronavirus pandemic to rearrange everything. The convenience stores are busy, and, according to Jesse Chong, business at the liquor store is just fine — but everywhere else, fortune is mandatory. Merid Admassu, owner of the Raven, told me in the summer, “It’s a very scary time for an older guy like me.” When I contacted him again recently, he admitted to being bored and depressed. “Business is really, really, really bad,” he said. He sounded miserable until I asked him about the future. He perked up. “I think we’re going to be around for many years, once this thing is over. The Raven has been there for over 80 years. I’m not going to give up now.”

In the Best World supermarket, Young Pak told me that the grocery business in the time of covid is “just okay, not great.” On the corner of Mount Pleasant and Irving streets, Randy Leon still runs the family shoe repair shop, but he admits to feeling bleak about the future. “I just remind myself this isn’t crushing just me,” he says. “It’s crushing everybody.”

All the while, the demand for urban residential real estate continues to increase, which drives ever-rising property values, a boon to longtime Mount Pleasant homeowners and a bane to anybody paying rent. As an attractive place to live, Mount Pleasant inevitably draws people with
money. The kind of rowhouses that the likes of Jan and Phil Fenty paid $30,000 for back in the 1970s now sell for $900,000.

Can the Mount Pleasant miracle last? There are certainly some ominous indications. A public notice taped to the window of one of Mount Pleasant’s two laundromats currently says that the building is scheduled for demolition. A wash-and-dry emporium used by immigrant families will be replaced by a four-story, 15-unit condominium building, with just two apartments set aside for lower-income families.

Indeed, while affordable housing has been a bulwark of the neighborhood, its future is far from assured. The federal government has sponsored very little construction of affordable housing since the 1980s when the Reagan administration cut most funding, and there simply are not a lot of apartment buildings that renters could take over. Plus, TOPA only gives tenants the right to match the market price set by developers, a bar to tenant ownership that rises ever higher. Priya Jayachandran says affordable-housing advocates need to look at the smaller apartment buildings that dot the neighborhood. “The next frontier for tenant ownership is ‘small TOPA,’ meaning the conversion of buildings with eight to 12 units,” she says. “It’s harder to do, but that’s where the people are.”

It would be naïve to expect Mount Pleasant, alone among neighborhoods, to create protections against the pressures of the real estate market and the realities of unequal America. And yet, it has done far better than most. At least for now, it remains a model for city dwellers who want to live in a real community, not a collection of marketing niches. “Mount Pleasant is a resilient place,” says Mark Aguirre, owner of two apartment buildings and the head of the neighborhood business association. He should know. He and his partner, Wayne, closed on the purchase of the two buildings on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001. Two decades later, he and Wayne are still in Mount Pleasant. In fact, they just moved into one of their buildings. “We always wanted to live here,” Aguirre told me. “That was always the plan.”

I recently stopped in La Bahia, the newest restaurant on Mount Pleasant Street, wondering what kind of brave soul would open a business in the middle of a deadly pandemic and economic depression. The answer: Juan Antonio Hernandez, a native of El Salvador who came to the United States in 1987. Hernandez, 45 years old, told me in Spanish that he worked as a cook for 23 years at a Salvadoran restaurant on the south side of Capitol Hill. No, he didn’t get fired. He always wanted to run his own place, and the time had come. “I want to give it a try,” he said.

Hernandez named his establishment after Bahía de Jiquilisco, a beautiful bay in El Salvador, near where he grew up. Why come to Mount Pleasant? “I always liked the neighborhood and I saw that it was getting better.” Why start a business when so many are closing? “I want to give it try,” he repeated behind his mask. “We have to be optimistic.” That’s not crazy, I thought. That’s Mount Pleasant.

Jefferson Morley is a Washington writer and author of “Snow-Storm in August: Washington City, Francis Scott Key, and the Forgotten Race Riot of 1835.”
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In those days, Miami was known as the Casablanca of the Caribbean, the nexus of drugs, spies, arms and cash for innumerable conspiracies and plots, a dark underworld beneath a sunlit, pastel-toned, tropical glamour. “In the Air Tonight,” Phil Collins’s moody, brimming-with-menace anthem, was our theme song, and “Miami Vice” provided our style guide. In my mind, it was all spy vs. spy. The drug agents and prosecutors pursued the smugglers, the good guys against the bad guys, but everybody seemed to switch sides at some point. The smugglers got caught and became government informants, the prosecutors went into private practice and took the drug lords as their clients, and agents became private investigators, sometimes working for the bad guys. And I got to expose it all: the murk, the intrigue, the moral ambiguity. I fancied myself something of an intelligence operative myself.

In 1989, my partner, Guy Gugliotta, and I had written “Kings of Cocaine,” a book about our two-year investigation that exposed the murderous Medellín Cartel to the world. Heck, I had even named them “the Medellín Cartel,” in an article I wrote in November 1985. I had started tracking them 11 months earlier, before I knew who they were, fascinated by the codes — like “007” and “CIA” — that they scrawled on their kilos of pure cocaine powder, tightly wrapped in waterproof covering and known as “footballs.” I wanted to crack the codes and follow the drugs to the source. Spy vs. spy. Two years later, I got the federal government to seize Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar’s $1 million mansion on North Bay Road in Miami Beach and his $10 million apartment complex in Broward County, after finding his signature, “Pablo Escobar Gaviria,” on warranty deeds that had been masked by Panamanian corporations.

And all that is why David came to see me.

These days, when a famous person you know dies, you hear about it the same way everybody else does. Through an alert on your phone. That is how I heard about David. Then the calls and emails came. A former high-ranking U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent. A former high-ranking U.S. Customs Service agent. The former federal prosecutor who indicted Manuel Noriega. My former city desk editor at the Miami Herald. They all wanted to recall the time we spent with David, two weeks in the summer of 1991 in Miami.

What bound us together with the 89-year-old from Cornwall-with-an-A, England, named David Cornwell-with-an-E? He may be better known to you as John le Carré. John the Square. A French pseudonym he chose when he was writing his first spy novels in the late 1950s, when he was still unknown and still a spy himself. The name stuck. He told me that story himself. Then he told me he had told so many stories about the name that he was not exactly sure which one was right anymore. But he was always just David to me. I never called him John.

I spent hours a day with him, every day, for that two weeks. He had the grandest manners. And the keenest apparatus I ever saw for studying and sizing up people. And the most penetrating insight, in general, into any given thing. I was lucky enough to see it up close, and to get to know him personally. Little things about him, like the fact that he had two whippets, Whisper and Mach.

Back then, I thought I had a pretty keen apparatus myself. I was 34 and had been an investigative reporter for years at the Miami Herald, covering the drug trade during the “cocaine cowboys” era of the 1980s. I spent my days and nights with drug agents and drug prosecutors, federal, state and local, and I had a Rolodex containing 200 of their names and numbers. I liked to think little moved in that world without me knowing about it. When I got my hands on the U.S. government’s secret draft indictment of Raúl Castro and the Cuban government for drug smuggling, I told the startled spokesman at the U.S. attorney’s office for the Southern District of Florida: “I don’t need you to confirm it. I just want to let you know, as a courtesy, that we’re going to publish what’s in it.”
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And all that is why David came to see me.
One day, the phone rang on my desk in the Herald city room. If you’ve seen the movies “The Mean Season” or “Absence of Malice” you’ve seen that newsroom, which has since been torn down.

“Jeff?” The voice was British, upper crust. “This is David Cornwell. Do you know who I am?”

I did know the name David Cornwell. I had read “The Spy Who Came in From the Cold,” “The Little Drummer Girl,” “Smiley’s People,” “The Honourable Schoolboy,” “Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy.” I cannot count how many times I had invoked his nom de plume to describe the Miami drug world. “It’s just like a John le Carré novel,” I would say, over and over again.

David said he wanted to learn about the Miami drug world and had been told I could help. Did I want to meet for lunch? I was out of my seat and on my way before I had hung up the receiver.

We met in the elegant dining room of Coconut Grove’s luxurious Grand Bay Hotel, a monument to ostentatious splendor in the shape of a Mayan pyramid with overhanging bougainvillea. Valet parking cost $13, a fortune back then. I met a New York Times reporter there once who told me that if what we had written in the Herald had appeared in the Times, everybody in the country would know our names.

David was 60, white-haired, distinguished, seemingly at the peak of life. He looked like the most authoritative judge you had ever seen. The British accent. The height of sophistication. He was unfailingly polite, kind and engaging, yet you never forgot the size of his reputation. I fell in love with him immediately.

I knew what he wanted. I had sat across from fellow journalists, magazine writers, book authors, Hollywood screenwriters, directors and producers, congressional investigators, talent bookers, all wanting to extract secrets about the Miami drug world. I was careful with the information. I gave interviews and whatever general insights I had to other reporters and investigators, but the good stuff, the particulars, the real details — I was saving that for my own book. Not “Kings of Cocaine,” but a novel I intended to write called “Highs in the Eighties.”

But David wanted the good stuff. And I could not resist him. Partly because he was so charming and so blindly famous, and I wanted to impress him, to get him to like me as much as I liked him. Partly because he was so indirect about it, so careful to lay the groundwork and prepare me for my confessions. (A good interview is like a seduction, somebody once said.) And, maybe most important of all, because I knew he would understand it as much as I did. Being understood is perhaps the ultimate vanity.

So, I told him everything I knew, slowly at first, but with increasing acceleration as time passed. I told him about DEA 6s and FBI 302s, the internal reports that are so hard to get your hands on. I told him about the codes on the footballs and how they represented the secret structure that hid the cartels, and how the drug trade was, when you got right down to it, nothing but a transportation business, wholesalers connect- ing manufacturing to retailing. I told him that the hardest job of all was laundering the money, because it weighed so much and it mildewed and rotted when left too long, or the rats would eat it. I told him about how bodies in canals always float face up, because of the gases that collect in the chest cavity. And I told him about the worst of the Colombian calling cards left at homicide scenes: the Cartagena necktie, wherein the throat is slit and the tongue pulled through the opening. Some of the material he used and some he discarded, but if you check in “The Night Manager,” you’ll find the necktie.

I was a long-term investigative reporter, with the freedom to roam and find my own stories, not tied to a beat or the constant thrum of breaking news. It was summer, the dead time for newspapers in those pre-Internet days, and I could afford to meet David every day and take him on field trips to meet my sources at the DEA, Customs, the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the U.S. attorney’s office, the Metro-Dade Police Department’s organized crime bureau and elsewhere.

Besides, I was never not working; while he gathered information for his book, I gathered information for my newspaper, from the same sources. I became his guide to the Miami drug world. My sources were thrilled to meet him. When I first took him to the DEA, to one of the smartest agents I knew, I introduced him only as David Cornwell. The agent was polite but unimpressed. Finally, I realized my mistake. I caught the agent alone and told him, “Don’t you know who this is? He wrote ‘The Spy Who Came in From the Cold.’”

“That’s John le Carré! Well, why didn’t you say so?”

The agent opened the vaults, showing David things he would have never shown me in a hundred years. Agents managing a wiretap, the most unobtrusive and secretive listening devices. The latest M-4 assault rifles that made M-16s look like relics. Ready rooms for DEA undercover groups full of walkie-talkies, bulletproof vests, blue raid jackets, link charts, color-coded files.

When we were leaving, we ran into the senior agent who had managed the Noriega investigation. We introduced him to David Cornwell, who we said was a writer.

“You look like a judge,” the agent told him.

David was not so interested in the tech, the calibers or the weaponry. “That’s easy to get, and I can fill that in later,” he told me when we were alone. He wanted the feel of the relationships between the characters, the casual talk, the unexpected detail that resonated or revealed new depths.

After one meeting with a powerful senior agent, David remarked on the man’s “dorsal muscles,” and how they revealed his inner tension, power and control, all in conflict and all finely balanced, as if on a knife’s edge. Another time David pointed out that one agent he had just met really disliked another at the meeting, his boss. It was all communicated through the body language, the tone and the silences that hung in the air. It was only years later that I saw the enmity between them emerge and I realized David had been right.

I arranged a dinner with a retired agent who I knew had gone on to do contract jobs for what we called “the agency,” or what the retired agent called “the Christians In Action.” You get the abbreviation. The master spy of the literary world would meet a real spy of the drug world. They got along famously in a lavish dinner that progressed to cigars and cognacs. David was paying and the cognac flowed freely, snifter after snifter. I no longer drank and lost count of how many they had. Six, eight, 10? They were impossibly drunk, but David still seemed as sober as a judge, if a bit more emphatic and red-faced. Even tight, nobody was more genial or better at extracting information. He was still in control.

Finally, the retired agent launched into an elaborate story about the
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"From the Cold," "The Little Drummer Girl," "Smiley's People," and on my way before I had hung up the receiver.

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words, so it came out, "He chopped me, he chopped me!"

Suddenly, I was seized by a fit of laughter, and the more I fought it, the worse it got. Apologizing all the way, I gave over to it, dissolving into mirth at my friend’s account of his near-fatal stomach wound.

David did not so much as blink. He and the retired agent, fortified by $1,000 of cognac and wreathed in cigar smoke, simply paid me no mind.

David knew not to interrupt a good story.

In the many hours we spent together, we talked of cocaine, espionage, journalism, the craft of writing. Looking back, I can see now that our conversations always centered on the nuances and where the nuances led you. He spoke of how he liked in his writing to begin indirectly, then work toward the center of things, from the nuances to the universal, from the particular to the general. When Karla drops the lighter at the end of "Smiley's People," so much has come before — so many nuances, all those particulars — that not just a silence shatters, but a world.

One anecdote from our time together aptly illustrates David's love of nuance. He had wanted the novel to turn on an epic arms-for-drugs deal, with his main villain a European billionaire arms dealer trading state-of-the-art weaponry for enough cocaine to make it worth his while. The problem was the finances did not make sense. The kind of heavy arms David was talking about — helicopters and such — would outweigh the value of even tons of cocaine.

This would be apparent only to people who really knew the drug trade. From newspapers and Hollywood, which was almost always wrong in its depiction of cocaine smuggling, the public got a very inflated impression of the value of cocaine. Large cocaine busts of 1,000 kilos or more were always described as being worth in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The problem was that the media was using the street price of a gram of cocaine, or rather the retail price, which only applied after the drugs had changed hands several times and had been cut by street dealers. At $50 a gram, cut to 50 percent purity, that would translate to $100,000 a kilo, and nearly $100 million for a ton, but the wholesale price of a kilo in Miami was about $20,000 back then, more like $20 million a ton.

David's villain did not have a drug distribution network to reap any retail profits; he would be buying in bulk and selling in bulk, like a wholesaler. No big-time smuggler got more than the wholesale price, unless he cut the drugs and sold them on the street himself. As the drug dealer played by Mel Gibson sarcastically said in "Tequila Sunrise," one of the more accurate drug movies of the time, when he heard a TV news broadcast describe a cocaine load as being worth in the millions on the street, "Yeah, whose street?"

But even that $20 million a ton was gross, not profit. Your profit after transportation costs, what you paid for the cocaine and expenses would probably be less than half of that. And a single Black Hawk helicopter cost more than $20 million. David wanted a deal involving hundreds of millions in arms. The number of tons of cocaine you would need to make a deal like that worth it to a man like David's villain would be considerably larger than the largest cocaine seizure in U.S. history, which was then and still is about 21 tons.

The arms dealer would be better off keeping his arms and selling
them at cost instead of taking a loss or taking on the risk of drug smuggling. How to make the numbers work? Finally, I noticed that the deal could make sense if David’s villain sent his own freighter loaded with arms directly to Colombia, cutting out the middleman, and obtained the cocaine at the manufacturer’s price, about $3,000 a kilo, known as the “airstrip price,” before it is flown into the United States and before any transportation fee or markup was attached. David’s eyes lit up. Look in “The Night Manager” and you will see a fleeting reference to airstrip prices. That was the kind of attention to detail that defined him.

As I drove him from appointment to appointment in my white Honda Civic, he would occasionally reveal what he was feeling. His favorite of his own novels was “A Perfect Spy,” because it was about his father, who had been a con man. David described having a lot of money as like having a big pile in the backyard, and every now and then you go get a chunk. Fame opened a lot of doors, but people tended to want to leave their mark on you in some way. It became wearying. You tended to tire of people, even people you liked who had once been fruitful collaborators. You were always in search of new ones.

I was astonished by his energy, his drive, his ability to go out there every day and trundle through the hours of interviews, lunches, dinners. I was a little more than half his age and I was exhausted. He never appeared tired, never was less than sharp and penetrating. He already had half a dozen No. 1 bestsellers and more money than he could ever spend. Why did he want or need another one? What kept him out there, as like having a big pile in the backyard, and every now and then you go get a chunk. Fame opened a lot of doors, but people tended to want to leave their mark on you in some way. It became wearying. You tended to tire of people, even people you liked who had once been fruitful collaborators. You were always in search of new ones.

I have known only one other person who combined such an overwhelming drive with such preternatural powers of perception. No surprise, that person is equally successful: Bob Woodward, who has a
dozen No. 1 nonfiction bestsellers.

Being an English literature major, I wanted to talk to David about how Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene had influenced him. But he had his eye on what was happening today, in 1991, and he spoke of John Grisham as if he was his real competition. He was impressed with Grisham’s command of plot and suspense, but even as he said it he radiated the knowledge that he, David, had more depth. Still, he talked of casting “The Night Manager” movie (he knew there would be one) with Daniel Day-Lewis and Julia Roberts. David referred to the actor simply as “Day-Lewis,” just as he referred to E.L. Doctorow as “Ed Doctorow,” as if he knew them in a sphere in which we did not, which he did.

At first it seemed beneath the author of “Smiley’s People,” a bit going Hollywood. The previous movies made from his novels had been carefully constructed art films. Then you realized that Grisham was the best-selling fiction writer on Earth and Day-Lewis was the best actor and Roberts the biggest actress, and that David’s ambition was not only literary, but ambition writ large, with a capital A. He already had all the literary acclaim one could want or need, and now he wanted the rest, whatever that was. It kept him going, and — it took time, but finally I realized it — you need that kind of ambition to be Conrad, to be Greene, to be le Carré.

At our last lunch after two weeks crisscrossing Miami, along the Dolphin and Palmetto expressways, down Biscayne Boulevard and up U.S. Route 1, from Calle Ocho to Ocean Drive, David gave me some free literary advice pertaining to my book, “Kings of Cocaine.” Early in our relationship he had praised it unreservedly. Now, with our friend-
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with arms directly to colombia, cutting out the middleman, and
known as the “airstrip price,” before it is flown into the united states and
before any transportation fee or markup was attached. david's eyes lit
up. look in “the night manager” and you will see a fleeting reference to
the eponymous night manager, finds himself embroiled in a situation
meant to win the confidence of the arms-dealer antagonist. the british
agents were working with the hero to fake an attempted kidnapping of
the arms dealer’s son. the agents, playing roles as bad guys, hold the boy
at gunpoint until he can be rescued by the hero.

government agents would never point weapons at a child, i told
david. that would come out at trial and the case would be thrown out of
court.

“oh, jeff,” david said, in our only disagreement. “i’m afraid you’re
going to have to give me some license here. you have a lot more trust of
government than i do.”

he kept the scene in. if you watch “the night manager” miniseries,
you can see it, though the location of the story has been transplanted to
europe and there is no cocaine in it anymore.

david signed six books for me and paid me a generous research fee. i
would have done it for nothing. in my copy of “the little drummer
girl,” he wrote, “for the great jeff with thanks.” well, thank you, david.
for the glimpse at true greatness.

jeff leen is the editor in charge of the washington post’s investigative unit.
Forgive me for writing about a place you can’t eat in, ever again. But Johnny’s epitomized the definition of a neighborhood restaurant. Wherever in town the owners served crab black during the pandemic. But the death of Johnny’s Half Shell hit hard, and she wasn’t inclined to deliver less than the “total package.”

His best friend conceived it. Sure, they could have sent seafood out in the restaurant’s permanent closure on Facebook on Oct. 30 — by unannounced in a proper obituary. Allow me to imagine how it might have opened:

Johnny’s Half Shell, the beloved Chesapeake-influenced seafood restaurant that was opened by James Beard award-winning chef Ann Cashion and business partner John Fulchino in Dupont Circle in 1999, relocated to Capitol Hill in 2006 and moved to Adams Morgan in 2016, served its last dinner March 14. Fulchino, who announced the restaurant’s permanent closure on Facebook on Oct. 30 — by chance, Cashion’s birthday — said the decision to shutter was based in part on the impracticality of operating the restaurant as he and his best friend conceived it. Sure, they could have sent seafood out in boxes, but as Cashion put it this month, “Johnny’s is an experience,” and she wasn’t inclined to deliver less than the “total package.”

Washington has seen a number of popular restaurants fade to black during the pandemic. But the death of Johnny’s Half Shell hit some of us especially hard. Wherever in town the owners served crab cakes and grilled squid, along with relaxed but informed service, Johnny’s epitomized the definition of a neighborhood restaurant. Forgive me for writing about a place you can’t eat in, ever again. But

The grilled lobster at Johnny’s Half Shell got a little help with a dusting of “Johnny’s spice,” a sweet-smoky blend of 20 ingredients long that resembled a more fragrant Old Bay Seasoning.

20 years is practically forever in the unforgiving restaurant business, and I didn’t want any more time to pass before paying respects to a standard-bearer that fed us so well for so long.

Yes, Johnny’s is gone. Forgotten? Not on my watch. How could it be? Johnny’s was typically the first place to pop into my head on a rare night off from reviewing, after returning from vacation or whenever visitors came to town. A day spent name-checking monuments and museums followed by a perfect piece of rockfish and some dish with the table-hopping Fulchino always left my guests with a good feeling about Washington. Wherever else in town I was eating fish or seafood, Johnny’s was inevitably the bar by which I judged it.

You can’t throw a net without snaring a crab cake in Washington.

A requiem to our heroes at the Half Shell
Forgive me for writing about a place you can’t eat in, ever again. But Johnny’s epitomized the definition of a neighborhood restaurant. Cakes and grilled squid, along with relaxed but informed service, some of us especially hard. Wherever in town the owners served crab black during the pandemic. But the death of Johnny’s Half Shell hit and she wasn’t inclined to deliver less than the “total package.”

Boxes, but as Cashion put it this month, “Johnny’s is an experience,” in part on the impracticality of operating the restaurant as he and chance, Cashion’s birthday — said the decision to shutter was based in 2016, served its last dinner March 14. Fulchino, who announced 1999, relocated to Capitol Hill in 2006 and moved to Adams Morgan Cashion and business partner John Fulchino in Dupont Circle in a restaurant that was opened by James Beard award-winning chef Ann

Dining Washington has seen a number of popular restaurants fade to a requiem to our heroes at the Half Shell it might have opened: unannounced in a proper obituary. Allow me to imagine how the recent passing of a longtime dining favorite went.

PHOTOS: ABOVE BY STACY ZARIN GOLDBERG/JOHNNY’S HALF SHELL; OTHERS BY DEB LINDSEY

The grilled lobster at Johnny’s Half Shell got a little help with a dusting of “Johnny’s spice,” a sweet-smoky with a “Johnny’s spice” that ran 20 ingredients long and resembled a more fragrant Old Bay. Really, a fan ran out of fingers counting the hits, which treaded beyond surf to include crisp chicken wings cooled with a creamy tarragon dip and rabbit dappled with Creole-mustard sauce.

Leave it to Cashion to come up with the hot dog of a ballpark’s dreams. Her all-beef sausage was billed as coming from “Baltimore,” although it originated in Chicago. Whatever. What I remember is a snappy, bursting-with-juices link tucked into a toasted poppy seed bun, accompanied by a pile of delectable crisp fries and toppings that included mm-mm-good blue cheese and shaved onions — a lot of joy for $6 in the early days. (The small kitchen in Adams Morgan wasn’t designed to accommodate the link’s hungry audience, except on typically slow Monday night, known as “Bun-day,” or if you were young enough to order off the kids’ menu.)

In keeping with Cashion’s simple but memorable style, pastry chef Valerie Hill offered diners banana cream pudding tufted with meringue and apple crumb pie lashed with golden cider sauce. Even after her departure from Johnny’s, though, the menu dared you to leave dessert crumbs — impossible in the case of her legacy lemon chess pie.

Modeled after some of the country’s cherished seafood haunts, notably Swan Oyster Depot in San Francisco and the late No Name Restaurant in Boston, Johnny’s Half Shell made a gentle splash with its design: Naugahyde-upholstered booths, a marble-topped bar and an aquarium at the original and a handsome raised bar and oyster counter in Adams Morgan. From beginning to end, the restaurant was a haven for people who live to eat and the occasional boldfaced name. Fulchino remembers carding a young Reese Witherspoon in Dupont Circle — “I had no idea who she was,” he says — and getting a hug from former U.N. ambassador Susan E. Rice when Johnny’s returned to Adams Morgan. The restaurateur, a former hockey player in his native Massachusetts who glad-hands like a pol and is never without a grin, considered himself the entertainer at Johnny’s. “I enjoy making people feel good,” he says. And so he did.

Sadly, some once-promising restaurants end their runs as shadows of themselves. But my debut review of Johnny’s pretty much mirrored my last; Half Shell was full bliss. I don’t recall seeing Cashion in the open kitchen on many visits to Adams Morgan, a reality explained by a daytime schedule that found her preparing for the night and a right-hand man, chef Jorge Rubio, who knew her taste and exactitudes. Rubio started as the salad maker in Dupont.
Circle and worked his way up the kitchen ladder, following Cashion around town. Twenty years teaches a guy how to master a menu. No restaurant is perfect, and I’d be remiss to gloss over some uneven meals during Johnny’s time on the Hill. As much as Cashion and Fulchino hoped to retain the neighborhood character in the move, some facts got in the way: The business ballooned in size, from 60 to 300 seats and from 1,800 square feet to 10,000. “Our goal was to move the Half Shell, not open a new restaurant,” Cashion told me after the change of address. The audience was different, too, indicated not just by the cheat sheet of politician’s names and faces at the host stand, but by the way the country’s representatives and others used Johnny’s more as a meeting hall.

“They didn’t understand the nuances of Ann’s cooking or my music,” Fulchino told me after the restaurant was moved to Adams Morgan. Sweetly, the digs were familiar, having previously hosted the owners’ former American restaurant, Cashion’s Eat Place, which they sold to veteran employees and which went dark in 2016.

Cashion and Fulchino are down to a single restaurant now, Taqueria Nacional in Mount Pleasant. (Its same-named sibling on T Street NW closed in December when the owners couldn’t come to terms with their landlord.) Fulchino recently bought a used car from his sister in Boston to assist with the taqueria’s delivery orders in Northwest DC. “He’s the driver and I’m the navigator,” says Cashion.

Is there any chance Johnny’s might return? While the owners say their landlord would like them back, whatever follows will not be a singular seafood restaurant. Fulchino says it wouldn’t be sustainable in a post-covid future.

The owners say they’re not the types to acknowledge their own special occasions. But they considered making an exception for their restaurant’s 20th anniversary and inviting fans for a party last April. The pandemic popped their balloon.

Cashion still wants to honor Johnny’s Half Shell. Her best, safest idea is to self-publish a calendar with a dozen photographs, plus recipes, of the late restaurant’s most popular dishes. We might never gather again in such a happy spot to eat some of her simply perfect dishes, but a record of its glory days would go a long way toward recapturing the flavor of the place. And yes, Cashion promises to finally share the recipe for her crab cakes.
Time to paint
BY RANDY MAYS

Find the 12 differences in the photo of paint supplies in Silver Spring, Md., in August.

PUZZLE ANSWERS
See them online now at washingtonpost.com/secondglance or in next week’s issue of the magazine.

SEE YOUR PHOTO
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ACROSS
1 Tool with a microfiber head, maybe
4 Driving instructor?
7 One who may hand down court orders?
12 Silly and immature
19 Saves the Day genre
20 Swabbie’s agreement
21 Ben, to Peter Parker
22 Entered with forces
23 Specialized cell that responds to stimuli
26 Of the peninsula connected to the Perekop Isthmus
27 Serengeti herd animal
28 Sailor traveling to Colchis, in myth
30 Going by, initially
31 “None” author Gardner
32 Hoodies can cover them
34 Palm places, perhaps
36 Candy with Tropical and Wild Berry varieties
40 Where you might see a father
41 Lukas of “Witness”
45 Portuguese wine variety
48 Mme., in Maine
49 Device for many an Apple Music subscriber
51 Extraction from igneous rocks, at times
52 Wingless stage
54 Push for an answer
55 French physicist Becquerel who discovered radioactivity
56 Pokhara’s nation
58 Somewhat
61 Firm boss’s deg., often
63 It’s between 6 and 15 on a dartboard
64 Washington’s secretary of war, 1789-1794
65 ____ Holmes Norton, congresswoman representing D.C. beginning in 1991
67 They move over sounds and waves
69 Stuff at dinner, say
70 Something picked up at an auto dealership
72 Object
76 Rotates, as tires
78 Opened, schedule-wise

79 Cat food flavor
80 Human dynamo’s quality
83 Like V, but not X
84 Question for puzzle solvers
85 Those celebrated on the podcast “Fantastic Geeks (and Where To Find Them)”
86 Sore and then some
88 Source of fusion reactions
89 Requiring balm, perhaps
92 Ghost in Super Mario games with a scary-sounding name
93 “Go through notes, say”
96 Growth area for reeds
98 Country music event?
100 Between ports
101 CNN correspondent Reeve
102 Encounters unexpectedly
104 Dehydrates
106 Many, informally
107 Hits, as in laser tag
111 Right/time precedence
114 Like activities that can get you out of trouble?
116 Ontario town with a stronghold that was besieged during the War of 1812
120 One striking a chord
122 C-SPAN 2 focus
124 “Don’t Let Go (Love)” R&B group
125 Financial investment
126 Seize
127 Greek letter written in Tibetan?
128 Was an extremely obsessive fan of, in slang
129 Having firm muscles
130 Black ____ (clandestine activities)
131 Jazz saxophonist Nistico

DOWN
1 Thanksgiving feast, e.g.
2 Dallas-based hotel chain
3 Cooking vessels
4 pal
5 One who wants things to go up in flames
6 Percolate
7 Breaking tool
8 In theory
9 Potential recipient of an NAACP Image Award
10 Jams in bathrooms
11 Rescue party?
12 He once said: “There is no past or future in art. If a work of art cannot live always in the present it must not be considered at all.”
13 Not lined, like some notebook pages
14 Summons in an inbox
15 The Egyptian god Khnum had the head of one
16 Reason for an aha moment
17 Reveal, as sensitive info
18 “The Gift of Southern Cooking” co-author
19 Simplicity
20 “Star Trek” or “Star Wars” creation
21 ____ sequitur
22 “___ Loves You” (Beatles hit)
23 Turn off, so to speak
24 Means of investing funds, for short
25 Old ship-coating material
26 Like a spacious room
27 Six-footers who’s only a few millimeters tall
28 “You ____ here”
29 One of a deadly septet
30 Shaolin Temple figures
31 T-shirt cannon setting
32 Office
33 Hard thing for a construction worker
34 Streaming data
35 Peeled, as potatoes
36 Fishing tackle
37 You ___ here
38 Financial investment
39 “Sixteette” star West
40 Colchis, in myth
41 Through
42 Org. receiving returns
43 Concrete mixer?
44 ___-diesel (engine option)
45 Shubert’s, perhaps
46 “___ Loves You” (Beatles hit)
47 Slangish term
48 Content, maybe
49 Russian president’s veto
50 Little bit
51 Cuban dance with enchafla turns
52 Spiritual life force
53 Common pet name
54 Book given a different cover, e.g.
55 Given a seat
56 “GoldenEye” star
57 Support, as a university
58 Samatha Bee’s cable show
59 Accused of causing offense, may be
60 C-SPAN 2 focus
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Moving on up to the least side

I am on the phone with Corinne Null, the great-great-great-granddaughter of Andrew Johnson, the American president who succeeded Lincoln — a hard act to follow, right from the get-go — and who then presided over a disastrously, racistly foul Reconstruction. He also opposed the 14th Amendment, giving citizenship to Black people.

Corinne is 74, a retired computer systems analyst. She lives in New Hampshire. She seemed to know why I was calling because she anticipated my question.

“Thank you, Donald,” she said.

We were talking two days after Donald Trump had essentially committed treason by inciting a mob to violent insurrection against the U.S. government, thereby cementing himself pretty clearly as the worst president in American history, moving Corinne’s great-great-great-grandpa out of that conversation.

Corinnne is a realist. “I acknowledge Mr. Johnson is not beloved by history,” she said. “He didn’t have the personality to deal with the complexities of his time.”

“He also had really bad hair,” I said. His tonsure looked like it had been fashioned by an impostor barber with a toenail clipper.

“Those were the styles of the time,” she sniffed, defensively. She is feisty. She feels her ancestor has been treated a little unfairly. His impeachment, she said, was over a trivial matter (it was), and he held fast to his principles, however wrongheaded, showing the sort of gumption lacking in some other presidents.

Fred Pierce, 58, a successful businessman from San Diego, also reacted with a modicum of defensiveness. Fred is an exceedingly distant cousin of Franklin Pierce; specifically, Franklin was the great-grandnephew of Fred’s great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother.

Franklin Pierce is generally ranked lower than Johnson. Pierce was so disrespected he was the only elected president denied renomination by his own party.

He also was a Northerner unoffended by slavery. There were some other problems:

“Are you also a hopeless drooling drunk?” I asked Fred.

“Well, I am a member of the board of directors of the Wine Business Institute at Sonoma [State University] and have a wine cellar in my home. So, there’s that.”

And his relative?

“I’m not going to deny that in most circles his reputation is not high.” But it is Fred’s fervent hope that the focus on Trump’s treasonous duplicity will cause a charitable reassessment of some low-reputation presidents. Pierce, he noted, did authorize the Gadsden Purchase from Mexico. It helped open up railroad routes to the West. I’ll grant him that.

Alas, Pierce was also partly responsible for the Dred Scott decision, which had the effect of institutionalizing slavery, the single worst ruling ever issued by a court in the United States.

Fred said: “Trump has been the worst actor, a horrible example of how to be a diplomat, and he will find his place in history.”

Nailed it. You know, that place with a toilet.

Email Gene Weingarten at gene.weingarten@washpost.com. Find chats and updates at wapo.st/magazine.
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