

The Miami Herald

Found on Miami.com
The Miami Herald

July 18, 2004 Sunday FINAL EDITION

A SIGNATURE STREET

By DANIEL de VISE

Seventh Avenue, the gritty, gray-market economic engine of blue-collar Miami-Dade County, begins its journey in the soft shadows of Frank Gonzalez's poincianas.

His father planted the trees 30 years ago, when Gonzalez was a boy pedaling around the Miami Roads community. Now they, and the neighborhood, are in bloom.

It began, sometime after 1896, as Avenue L, a dirt road through Miami's first suburbs. Today, Seventh Avenue runs from the southern edge of the Roads through East Little Havana, skirting Overtown and Allapattah, through Liberty City and on toward the northern edge of Miami-Dade. It's a succession of provincial Main Streets, a scattershot collection of shops, small companies, service stations, diners and historic homes.

Commuters know it as the antidote to a gridlocked Interstate 95. Road planners know it as U.S. 441, an alter ego that is lost on most who drive it.

The southernmost resident of Seventh Avenue is Lidia Del Moral. She bought the peach ranch house in 1973.

"Me quedo aqui," said Del Moral, 71. "I'm staying here."

At the southern edge of the Roads, houses sit behind pointy steel fences, locked gates and security markers. European sedans zoom by at incautious speeds. The sidewalks and yards sit virtually empty, except for the occasional yardman.

Developed largely in the postwar 1940s from a pine forest owned by Mary Brickell, the Miami Roads managed to retain much of its value and allure through decades that were unkind to urban America. It held on, according to local historian Paul George, because of its unique layout: sturdy homes set on generous lots on unusually wide streets, the entire grid set at an angle to surrounding streets. Home prices now go up to \$1 million.

"This is all post-World-War-II boom. Everything here," said George, who lives near the Roads. "It's never gone down in value."

Nearby, homeowner Frank Gonzalez returns from dropping his son off at Coral Way Elementary, the school that he himself attended when Richard Nixon was president.

His family settled at the corner of Southwest 23rd Road in 1967, six years after arriving from Cuba. His father planted three poincianas and a mango tree, now said to produce the best such fruit in the neighborhood.

Gonzalez surveys his lawn, a battleground between competing species of grass. One, the thicker St. Augustine variety, was planted by his parents. The other, thin golf-course turf, invaded from the neighbor's yard. Gonzalez's mother fought with the neighbor for 30 years over his encroaching grass. When

his mother moved to a condo, he forgot the invader. It has overtaken the lawn.

"Now I understand why she ripped it out," he said.

At Southwest 11th Street, the northern perimeter of the Roads, Seventh Avenue turns sharply north. The avenue narrows, houses give way to apartments, grass becomes gravel, and the sidewalks spring to life with pedestrians carrying tattered umbrellas.

The median household income is \$41,000 to the south of 11th Street, \$14,000 to the north. The college graduation rate dips from 34 percent to 9.

In the Roads, bicycles are for exercise. Here, for many, bikes become necessary transportation. One cyclist stops to pick through splintered cabinets and cracked toilets.

Jesus Garcia, a local for 25 years, drops by a Seventh Avenue apartment to visit his elderly mother.

"On Seventh Avenue, you have tranquilo people," he said. "They get up in the morning, they leave for work, they come back at night."

Most of the action, as it turns out, is down the street, at the Little Havana Activities and Nutrition Center on Calle Ocho. The center opened 18 years ago in the former campus of Belen Preparatory School, an exile institution that moved to suburban West Miami-Dade in 1979.

Inside, memories echo. Elderly couples dance to a procession of the old favorites pumped out by a woman at a Roland organ: El Barbero de Sevilla; Almendras; La Mujer de Antonio. A man clicks castanets. On rows of folding chairs, women sing and clap along. The men read periodiquitos (literally, little newspapers), such as Libre.

Beyond Calle Ocho sits the oldest core of Seventh Avenue, a century-old neighborhood that began as a Miami suburb. Historic Riverside was developed about 1904 by "the same sort of people who live in suburbs today," an assortment of downtown business people and civic leaders, said Arva Moore Parks, a historian and author.

Riverside became viable in 1906, when the Tatum brothers built a bridge across the Miami River and enlisted a trolley to make regular crossings. The enclave would become predominantly Jewish, then Cuban. Now, it houses a new wave of Central American immigrants.

Some of the oldest homes in Miami sit on this avenue. George, the historian, worries that they may soon give way to the wrecking ball.

To the north sit jewel after architectural jewel: hip-roof bungalows built from Dade County pine and coral rock, homes with beveled glass doors, open porches, in the style of the 1910s.

To the south: a 1920s courtyard at 536 SW Seventh Ave., once known as Druid Court, now decrepit; and a 1940 apartment building at 523 SW Seventh Ave., built with a circular entryway in the Streamline Moderne style.

The centerpiece of the old neighborhood is Ada Merritt Elementary School, rebuilt from the plans of the original 1923 Mediterranean structure. It once housed the first junior high school in Miami. Decades later, thousands of Cuban refugees learned English there. The school looks out on old Riverside Park, now Jorge Mas Canosa Park.

Three-year-old Bernabe Ramirez was shot dead in Riverside Park nine years ago, hit by a stray bullet in a gang war. The killing came to symbolize the decline of Miami neighborhoods.

The community erected a statue of a weeping angel in the boy's honor. Last year, someone made off with it.

Just visible across the park is the Riverside Commercial Building, at Southwest Fourth Street, built in 1926 by the Ku Klux Klan, a reminder of the community's Old South roots. The longtime headquarters of Klan Chapter No. 24 later served as a Nazi front organization, and after the war, yet another white supremacist group met there, according to George. Paradoxically, it later housed Teatro Marti, producer of satirical Cuban plays.

Seventh Avenue deteriorates further as it approaches the Miami River. La Libertad Cafeteria, at Flagler Street, feels like a final outpost. This busy walk-up place has served the West Flagler district for 40 years.

"The entire city passes by here," said Maria, behind the counter, taking lunch orders. The special, this morning, is ropa vieja for \$2.99.

A sign reads, Hoy no fio. Manana si. No credit today. Tomorrow, yes.

Herald database editor Tim Henderson contributed to this report.