

# RACE, CRIME AND POLITICS IN ATLANTA

One couple's story of hazing and heartbreak



Nehemiah Haire stands outside his house on Eastridge Road in January. He expects foreclosure in March.

BY STEPHANIE RAMAGE

On Jan. 4, Nehemiah Haire stood in the bone-chilling cold and waited to be let into the Atlanta Civic Center for Mayor Kasim Reed's inauguration.

As he stood there, just as he was to stand in line to speak at public meeting after public meeting over the following month, he was the owner of several properties, one of them his own home, slated to go into foreclosure this March. While the entire country has seen a wave of foreclosures in the past few years, Haire and his partner Tamara Toth blame their losses largely on two things with which Atlanta has a unique connection: racial unrest and crime.

Since moving to the city in the late '90s, the Ohio natives have buried a child and have resurrected four rundown houses in what they call "Atlanta's secret neighborhoods" in the area between Cascade Road and Campbellton Road, only to see those houses robbed of every countertop, scrap of wiring and inch of tile. They estimate they have lost more than \$1 million. They believe that an inadequate police force and an indifferent city government led by ineffective elected leaders are to blame.

Tamara is a chemical engineer and Nehemiah, until recently, was a contractor.

They met at Ohio University. She was from Cleveland, he was from Youngstown. She was studying chemical engineering, he was studying sports management. She is white and he is black.

Back home in Ohio, their interracial relationship didn't seem like a big deal. They didn't think it would be a big deal in the town Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called home, either. Surely here, they thought, they could build a good life for themselves and the children they dreamed of having.

In 1999, when Nehemiah found a well-built fixer-upper in a predominantly black neighborhood on Eastridge Road, he admitted it was going to take a lot of work, but he was ready for the challenge. They moved in and he transformed the place, building a trellis for wisteria, tiling a walkway, and converting an attic into a playroom for the hoped-for kids.

Tamara discovered she was pregnant.

They purchased three other houses, another one on Eastridge, one on Westridge, and one on nearby Harbin Road, to rent out. Nehemiah figured the area, part of Neighborhood Planning Unit R, was on the upswing.

But the neighborhood was not what it seemed.

It was not merely home to older residents living on fixed incomes, he says. It was also home to their younger relatives, who

were hooked on crack and willing to steal to support their habits. And the man next door was a convicted child molester.

The neighbor hadn't been caught when

**"They said they didn't think it was right for a white woman to have a black man's baby and they didn't want us living there."**

—Tamara Toth

Nehemiah and Tamara first moved in, so nobody knew. And there was a day care center right around the corner. So, how was it possible that, given Georgia's tough law prohibiting convicted sex offenders from living in close proximity to establishments that serve minors, a sex offender could live there? But he did.

**"I HOPE YOUR BABY DIES LIKE THE FIRST ONE DID"**

When they found out, Nehemiah called the cops about enforcing the law. Nothing happened, aside from the couple tipping off the neighbors that they knew about the sex offender living in their midst. The offender's

family, they say, began collecting feces from the four dogs they kept on a side porch and throwing it into Nehemiah and Tamara's driveway. Nehemiah reported the way the dogs were being kept, and the novel use of their feces, to the police, animal control, and code enforcement, without result.

Soon after, the couple's son was born. Less than a month later, he died. His was one of those mysterious infant deaths that fall into a wide range of medical categories. Did he "fail to thrive," as doctors describe it, because of prenatal stress? Tamara isn't sure.

"I was so sad, I don't know if what the doctors were saying even really sunk in with me," she says.

That was 2003, the year their trail of reports in the Atlanta Police Department's Zone 4 begins. In December 2003, Nehemiah was keeping an eye on a neighbor's house while the neighbor was out of town. It was broken into. Nehemiah talked to the cops, reset the alarm and fixed the busted door. He didn't give the incident another thought.

Meanwhile, Tamara had become pregnant again, just three months after the loss of their first child. She says the black women who lived next door—the wife and daughter of the convicted sex offender—would stand in their yard and harangue her.

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"They would chant, 'I hope your baby dies like the first one did,'" she says. "They said they didn't think it was right for a white woman to have a black man's baby and they didn't want us living there."

A police report dated April 2004 shows that Nehemiah called the cops on the neighbors' adult son, who had threatened to get his gun and was "yelling over to the victims that he was going to kill them and their unborn baby. ... The victims [Nehemiah and Tamara] stated that this has been going on for a couple of days now." The man's mother, according to the report, "stated that all she was doing was standing on her porch removing dog poop."

Tamara refused to continue living in the house, and the couple moved to the house they owned on Harbin Road. Their intention was to rent out the house on Eastridge, but no one reliable wanted to live next to a sex offender. They felt obligated to inform the would-be renters, hoping that someone without a child wouldn't mind, but it was a factor more often than not.

In 2005, one of Nehemiah's tenants stole his credit card information and used it to pay utility bills. He filed charges, and the tenants left in the middle of the night. Now, no one was renting any of his properties.

Two years later, the couple had two children: a girl, born a year after the death of their first child, and a boy. One afternoon in July 2007, Tamara smelled something unpleasant in the laundry room in the basement of their home. She found a rank-smelling pair of underwear that didn't look like the kind Haire usually wore. She confronted him, and he was as puzzled as she was. He'd never seen them before. But they had both, from time to time, had the creepy feeling that someone was in the house with them, or watching them.

Later that month, they discovered a man in their home who had apparently broken in and used their laundry room several times before. Startled, Nehemiah grabbed a mop and beat the man before calling the police. According to APD reports, when the cops arrived, the man had wounds on his head, arms, legs and back. He was, they told Nehemiah, possibly the same man who would occasionally break into houses in the area and stand naked at the foot of women's beds. He was fairly harmless, they said.

The next year was the one that broke Tamara and Nehemiah.

Police reports dated February, March, April, August and September 2008 detail a string of burglaries that claimed basically everything, including kitchen sinks, from their three rental properties on Eastridge and Westridge, as well as from their home on Harbin Road.

The reports list "PVC piping, water heater, drywall, electrical wires and outlets, ceiling fixtures, insulation and drainpipes,

carpet, padding, ductwork, doors, mirrors, floors, furnace, cabinets, countertops, sink, faucet, showerhead ..." as items damaged or stolen from Nehemiah's property.

A window was also stolen. The neighbor who bought it off the neighbor who stole it identified the seller to Atlanta Police, who arrested the thief on a Fulton County warrant for another, unrelated crime.

Over and over again, the police didn't see the point in taking fingerprints, or said that conditions were not conducive to getting clear prints. The police did not pursue a warrant to search a house in the neighborhood, although eyewitnesses pointed it out as the stowaway house for the loot.

Nehemiah doesn't hold the beat officers responsible. They, after all, were running from call to call. He would, however, like to file a formal complaint against Maj. Moses Perdue, who was commander of Zone 4 for much of the duration of the couples' tribulations. The trouble is, that complaint would have to be filed with the Office of Professional Standards (OPS)—the unit assigned to investigating cops accused of not doing their jobs. And thanks to the Jan. 5 reorganization of the police department under Acting Chief George Turner, OPS is now under the command of Maj. Perdue. A list of questions from The Sunday Paper to Perdue, and to Zone 4's new commander, Maj. Khalfani Yabuku, were not answered as of press time.

#### THE REAL COST OF CRIME

Each time the houses were stripped, the couple would file insurance claims to replace the stolen items. The replacements would then be stolen, too. Eventually, says Tamara, their insurer, Nationwide, dropped them. They were, for all intents and purposes, uninsurable because of the area's off-the-chain crime and the city's apparent inability to do anything about it.

Bank of America, their lender, began providing insurance for the properties in which its money was invested. The cost of bank-backed insurance, says Tamara, is four times as much as the insurance they previously had with Nationwide. Already drowning in debt from financing rental property no one would rent, their expenses climbed even more. They see this as a direct result of the city's crime problem.

State Insurance Commissioner John Oxendine (who is running for governor) can see the relationship between crime, insurance and foreclosure, too.

"If you have a lot of claims as a result of crime, this is seen by the insurance companies as an increased risk," says Oxendine. "They are essentially saying, 'Wait a minute, this is not what we thought we were getting into.'"

He adds, "Public safety is the No. 1

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responsibility of local government, and when they don't provide it adequately, it affects everything. A bank is not going to loan money on a property where it thinks its investment is at high risk. There are parts of South Atlanta where it is very hard to get a loan, and it is the same with insurance."

Oxendine says Atlanta's poor neighborhoods are doubly victimized, both by crime and by its cost.

"People who live where I live in Gwinnett County and in north Fulton County will likely have lower insurance rates than someone in Southwest Atlanta, because when you look at the crime figures, there is a big difference," he says.

Tamara and Nehemiah have noticed other disparities. In a letter to city officials, Tamara writes, "I have lived in Southwest Atlanta and in North Atlanta, and I can attest to the fact that the services provided to the Southside are substandard. The grocery stores carry expired food, the schools have low graduation rates, the crime is high and the expectations of the community are low. Until the City of Atlanta is willing to address the racial divide in the city, the complacency of the residents and the lack of equal services, the city will not move forward."

She blames racial resentment for much of their hardship. Nehemiah agrees, but thinks part of the problem is that people in his neighborhood are related to people who work for the city, whereas he and Tamara are outsiders with no political strings to pull, aside from their votes.

"They are the same people who have been there for 30 years," he says.

Nehemiah and Tamara have tried to be part of the solution. In January 2009, Tamara attended a community meeting where City Council President Lisa Borders spoke. Tamara liked what she heard, so she e-mailed Borders and offered her help in the neighborhood. An aide acknowledged the e-mail and said they'd be touch, but Tamara never heard from Borders or her staff again.

By mid-2009, Nehemiah had stopped reporting thefts, although the thefts hadn't stopped. There was no point that he could see in calling police and going through the hassle of making a report when, to his way of thinking, they never did anything. There was no point in replacing what was stolen, because it would only get stolen again. The properties were broken into and damaged over and over again. When the couple failed to scrape up money to pay for the repairs, the neighbors, possibly still rankled by Nehemiah's earlier attempts to have the sex-offender law enforced, reported them to the city's code enforcement office.

Fortunately for Nehemiah, just as code enforcement didn't do anything when he

reported some neighbors for having a construction trash bin in their yard for 10 years, he says the office also failed to do anything regarding the reports against him.

Then, in June 2009, Nehemiah was arrested. He had been painting over a vandalized wall at the house on Westridge when he heard someone pounding on a window on the back of the house, as if they were trying to break it. He went to the window and saw a neighborhood crackhead standing outside. The crackhead said he'd left a bag in the house the night before.

Nehemiah went outside and beat him up. The man went down the street to his family's house and called the cops, who arrested Nehemiah for simple battery. The police did not pursue trespassing charges against the man, because he claimed he sometimes worked for Nehemiah. Nehemiah strongly denies the man has worked for him.

**"Public safety is the No. 1 responsibility of local government, and when they don't provide it adequately, it affects everything."**

—State Insurance Commissioner John Oxendine

The charge against Nehemiah was eventually dismissed by the courts. But it's on his record, and has cost him time and money.

About six months later, at the Atlanta Civic Center, Nehemiah finally got to meet the man he had voted for in hopes of a better city administration, Mayor Kasim Reed. He shook his hand and said quickly, before Reed moved on, "I'm with you and willing to do my part."

That was a little more than a month ago. Weeks later, Council President Ceasar Mitchell facilitated a meeting between the couple and their City Council representative, Cleta Winslow. This did not reassure them. Over the years, they say, they have talked with Winslow many times without result.

On that day in mid-January, Tamara took a deep breath and said tensely, looking Winslow in the eye: "I am not happy with my council representation."

"I understand," Winslow replied. Nothing was accomplished.

Tamara and Nehemiah's home and other properties are expected to go into foreclosure in March. Nehemiah's business has failed and he has turned to his hobby of custom stained glass for support. Tamara and the kids no longer live in Atlanta. SP