

South Shore: Lakefront views for less

By Janice Neumann, Special to the Tribune, April 9, 2010

Community Profile: Chicago

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South Side neighborhood attracts buyers with affordable homes & open space

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Watching the sun come up over the lake from her South Shore home helps Kalisha Buckhanon get into a creative mode for writing a novel. Her cozy second-floor quarters in a century-old A-frame stucco house also sets the mood for living comfortably in an urban neighborhood that sometimes feels like a suburb.

"To see that sun come up or when the first snow falls, it's just gorgeous," said Buckhanon, author of the novels "Upstate" and "Conception." "Sometimes in the city all you need to lift your spirits is to get away from the concrete and metal. ... The view of the lake brings nature right to your window," said Buckhanon.

Buckhanon, who happens to be writing a novel set in South Shore, also likes having neighbors who are friendly and keep up their homes. She had been living in an apartment in Hyde Park until six months ago, when she found the second-floor rental that felt like the North Shore but at a more affordable price.

The lake is one of the biggest attractions to this South Side neighborhood about nine miles southeast of the Loop, along with the affordable, attractive homes and convenient access.

Bounded by 67th and 79th Streets to the north and south and by Stony Island Avenue and Lake Michigan to the west and east, the community is accessible by Metra, several CTA buses, and Lake Shore Drive. A bike trail runs along the lakefront.

The neighborhood is known for the South Shore Cultural Center, a lavish former country club with large ballrooms, an art gallery and the Parrot Cage Restaurant with international cuisine. Numerous community classes — yoga, ballet, country western line dance, drumline, African dance, ceramics, cooking, painting and more — make this a popular place with residents. Cultural events include South Shore Opera Co. of Chicago's performances, an inaugural blues festival July 8 and a jazz festival Aug. 7 and 8ust. On the 58-acre site, you'll also find a nine-hole golf course, tennis courts, banquet facilities, horse stables, a nature center, the Paul Robeson Theatre and the Washburne Culinary Institute.

Built in 1906, the former country club was purchased in 1974 by the Chicago Park District. The Mediterranean Revival-style building has been rehabbed over the years and was recognized as a Chicago landmark in 2004 and placed on the National Register in 1975. The building also was the site of President Barack Obama and Michelle Obama's wedding more than a decade ago. The

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first lady grew up in the neighborhood and her mother, Marian Robinson, still has a home there.

"It's really a great spot to take a walk through the natural habitat and look at some of the council rings where you can build a fire. There's a magnificent view of downtown Chicago," said Ald. Leslie Hairston, a resident whose 5th Ward includes northern South Shore. Hairston, who loves to run, bike and swim on the lakefront, is a member of the South Shore Cultural Center Advisory Council.

Another hot spot is Rainbow Beach and Park with its walking trails, gym, club rooms and fitness center, soccer field, and tennis, handball and basketball courts.

"I have a lot of events at Rainbow Beach because I want people to come there to see what a jewel it is," said Ald. Sandi Jackson, whose 7th Ward includes a small eastern portion of South Shore. "It's a beautiful, quiet vista where you can go and take the children, put down a blanket and enjoy the lake without feeling millions of people lying beside you," said Jackson. The alderwoman has lived in a 1923 bungalow near the lake for about 17 years and touts the community's beautiful old homes and parks.

The affordable houses, condos and apartment buildings are a big draw for many residents.

Dona Crane, a real estate agent with Keller Williams Realty Lincoln Square, said housing styles here include Dutch Colonial Revival bungalows and Chicago-style bungalows, Georgians, American Four Squares, Prairie Style and more modern two-stories and A-frames.

Sale prices for four-bedroom houses sold in the last six months have ranged from \$3,900 for a foreclosure to \$330,000, with two-bedroom condos ranging from \$3,700 for a foreclosure to \$175,000, according to Crane.

"There's less inventory to be sold this year than last but of the ones on the market, there are often multiple parties trying to purchase," said Crane. Buyers are looking at the community because it's close to transportation, they like the housing options and the prices are reasonable compared to other neighborhoods, she said.

Crane said that before the downturn "South Shore was really considered kind of like a Beverly of the East Side." Median sale prices were down by roughly 53 percent from 2006 to 2009, though the dip has waned, she noted.

One of the most exclusive sections of the community is Jackson Park Highlands, which is bordered by 67th and 71st Streets and Creiger Avenues, an historic district with century-old spacious homes and price tags to match.

The community has almost a dozen public schools, most struggling academically, and several private schools.

The Public Building Commission in Chicago is constructing a new "green" school to replace the aging and overcrowded Adam Clayton Powell Paideia Community Academy, a K-8 public

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school. The new three-story, steel frame and masonry building, which could be complete by the end of summer, will have natural sunlight throughout.

Retail strips are along 71st, 75th and 79th Streets, Jeffrey Boulevard, Exchange Avenue and Stony Island, with grocery stores and many smaller shops like Anna's Linens or Ace Hardware. Popular eateries include L&G Restaurant, a neighborhood diner; Soul Express, which serves Southern-style food; and Exchange Cafe.

Crime has been a rising problem for parts of the community in recent years. According to the Research and Development Division of the Chicago Police Department, there were 468 crime incidents between Feb. 1 and March 7 for police districts 3 and 4.

In response, CAPS holds monthly meetings to raise awareness of recent crimes. Hairston is working with CAPS officials and block clubs to organize community police beat meetings outside this summer with refreshments and games for kids, with participants handing out information on HIV awareness and summer youth programs.

Ald. Jackson's office runs a crime advisory committee with residents and business owners to discuss crime and safety. Jackson said a number of parents, business owners and community organizations also volunteer to walk students to and from some schools as a safety measure.

"We try to encourage people to embrace their community, to really pay attention to the neighborhood and try to recapture the sense of community we all had when we were children," said Jackson.

The South Shore Chamber Inc. along with the city oversees a beautification program in some portions of the neighborhood, cleaning sidewalks, taking down signs and hiring off-duty police officers and state troopers to patrol some streets.

To help engage teens and other residents, Victoria Brady founded Ray of Hope Center of the Arts in 2001. The center offers multicultural art programs, including an intergenerational theatrical group and singing, music production, drama and dance training for youths. Teens at the center are also putting on an adaptation of "The Wiz" on April 17. It's called "There's No Place Like Home" and deals with animal abandonment and abuse.

"We're using the play to create a higher awareness that animals need to feel safe and secure like people," said Brady, who is also executive director.

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