



## A step back in time

Established in the 1920s, Ottawa Hills' character and history retains long-time residents and draws former residents back.

BY MARLA R. MILLER



Michelle and Fred Davison

Growing up in the 1960s, Frederick Davison and Tom Ellis walked the streets of Ottawa Hills and played pick-up games in the open areas around Pontiac Field.

Fast forward 40 years to 2005. Davison had returned to Ottawa Hills and had been living there for nearly 20 years — and he was getting a new neighbor across the street. The guy who'd just bought the house had put letters in the mailboxes of neighborhood homeowners saying he wanted to buy their house if they ever decided to sell.

Turns out, it was Ellis, Davison's childhood friend.

"I knew by stuffing the mailboxes, if someone called back, it was a house I wanted to live in," Ellis said.

It's a familiar story: Ottawa Hills draws back people who grew up there. Others enjoy living in the neighborhood so much they never leave. Many long-time homeowners upsize or downsize within the winding streets of one of the city's earliest subdivisions.

"Once they are in the neighborhood, they kind of stay in the neighborhood," Davison said. "People take care of each other. They take care of their lawns, their properties."

With fewer than 300 homes, Ottawa Hills is one of the city's

smallest neighborhoods, established on the eastern outskirts in 1922. Its boundaries include Franklin Street on the north, Grand Rapids city limits on the east (roughly Cadillac Drive), Hall Street on the south, and Giddings Avenue on the west.

Retired schoolteacher Mary Carolyn Matteson, 75, has lived in the neighborhood all but a decade of her life. She and her husband bought the five-bedroom home she grew up in on the corner of Chippewa and Mackinaw in the late 1970s.

"The neighbors do my walks, my lawn. There's a lot of camaraderie with everybody. We watch out for each other," she said.



Dan Haveman, president of the neighborhood association, grew up in Ottawa Hills and returned in 2001 to raise his family.

"It's one of those places where we have young families to retirees," he said. "A lot of the kids that I grew up with are all back in the association. It's always been one of those hot spots — houses turn over pretty quickly."

Home to doctors, lawyers, former mayors, city managers, judges, attorneys and other prominent residents, it's historically been one of the more affluent and desirable areas in Grand Rapids. Nearly all of the homes are owner-occupied — often sold before a real estate sign goes up, and residents say it is a special place for its diversity, tradition and community pride.

"It's a great walking neighborhood, a very stable neighborhood with unique architecture and a lot of character and history," Haveman said.

Philip Balkema, a former city attorney and vice president of the neighborhood association, has lived in Ottawa Hills for 44 years, moving from Alexander Street to Pontiac Road in 1982.

"Everybody pretty much

knows everybody," he said. "Our sense of community makes us a little bit different. We still have neighborhood parties and get-togethers."

The site of a farm and then a nine-hole golf course around the turn of the century, Ottawa Hills was viewed almost as a suburb in the early 1920s, with streetcar service extending downtown to Reeds Lake, Ellis said.

"The affluent people who wanted to get out of the city thought, 'Hey, this Ottawa Hills thing is going to be good,'" he said. "The beauty of Ottawa Hills is every house is completely different from the next one."

There are many features that add to the neighborhood's charm and character. The streets — many of them named after Indian tribes and chiefs — feature old-fashioned lamp-posts and lots flanked by tall oak and maple trees.

Most of the stately, two-story brick homes date back to the '20s and '30s, with some built after World War II, Ellis said. The architectural styles range from French Chateau, English Tudor, Mediterranean Villa and Spanish Colonial to Art Deco, stone cottages and bungalows.

"The architecture is really



unique and very cool," said Jon Kok, who bought a house in Ottawa Hills two years ago and enjoys reading original ads for the housing community. "It was the first big development in Grand Rapids with wide streets, nice lots and utilities in the back. The streets are all kind of winding and follow the old fairways."

A new public school also attracted early residents. Ottawa Hills High School opened in fall 1925 in the center of the neighborhood on Iroquois Drive. In 1931, an elementary wing was added, and the building housed students from kindergarten through grade 12 for several years.



Many of the unique two-story brick homes in Ottawa Hills date back to the '20s and '30s.

Below, Jon and Becky Kok moved to the neighborhood two years ago with their children Will and Cameron.



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— Jon Kok





### NEW SCHOOL WITH OLD ELEMENTS

When demolition crews started dismantling the historic Ottawa Hills High School, it was a bittersweet scene for neighborhood residents.

The massive brick building, which some residents describe as a fortress, had educated thousands of children and anchored the Ottawa Hills neighborhood for nearly 85 years.

The building served as Iroquois Middle School until 2005 and had been vacant for a few years, so it was a relief when Grand Rapids Christian Schools purchased it in 2009 to open a new ele-

mentary school. The district selected the site to combine its Oakdale, Millbrook, Sylvan and Creston elementary schools.

Initially, local residents had hoped the original building would be spared. But it proved to be too big and too costly to renovate.

Working with A.M.D.G. Architects, GRCS sought input from neighborhood residents on the design of the new school. It even formed a neighborhood committee to provide feedback throughout the demolition and construction process, said Tom DeJonge, GRCS superintendent.

"The building we built in its place has architectural detail that reflects that neighborhood," he said. "It's a wonderful neighborhood and we feel blessed to be there."



The district took great care in razing the old building, salvaging and reusing some of the building's more historical and decorative architectural features. Some of the marble scrolls, capitals and terra cotta tiles from the high school entrance found a new home inside the elementary school.

"We used whatever we could," DeJonge said. "Some were damaged in

In 1972, the high school moved to Rosewood Avenue, but the large brick building continued to serve as Iroquois Middle School until 2005.

Many residents have fond memories of attending school when the building included all grades.

"We used to play kickball and football out there," Davison said. "The park is only two blocks down from any direction. I grew up on those tennis courts."

Decades ago, there was a strong school rivalry between the Ottawa Hills Indians and East Grand Rapids Pioneers, reflected in their mascot names, said Ellis, who considers himself the unofficial Ottawa Hills High School historian and a

proud 1964 graduate.

The school property has always been an anchor and focal point for the neighborhood, and residents wanted it to stay that way, Balkema said.

"Having a school nearby is always a good thing for a neighborhood," he said.

When Grand Rapids Public Schools was thinking about selling the vacant building to developers, the neighborhood association and resident attorneys did their research and found the original deed and property covenants stipulated it should remain a school and park, Davison said.

Grand Rapids Christian Schools bought the nine-acre campus, razed the old building in 2009, and built a new

Before the old Ottawa Hills High School was demolished, Grand Rapids Christian Schools salvaged some of the building's decorative architectural features and repurposed them in the new school.



Romanesque Revival style included elaborate carvings and stonework around the exterior, and marble columns and stairs inside.

Reflective of the school's name, designs taken from Indian pottery, blankets and rugs were used in a terra cotta border around the main entrance. Directly above the door was an Indian head, which became the symbol of the school.

The new school reused decorative lampposts and an original fireplace and mantle from the kindergarten room, which is in the school's media center.

"Many students remembered the fireplace with great fondness," DeJonge said. "It's now a cozy reading corner in the library."

School officials also purchased an artist's rendering of the original entrance submitted as an ArtPrize entry; it currently hangs in the school.

Peter Baldwin of A.M.D.G. modified roof lines and other building features in response to residents' concerns that the plan looked too modern. The interior colors from the original school also were incorporated into the new one.

GRCS saved two playgrounds, the soccer field and tennis courts that were part of the original school property and hold fond memories for former students. Pontiac Field is a walking destination for residents, as requested at neighborhood meetings.





elementary school. They worked with the neighborhood to develop the site and incorporate original architectural features from the old school into the new one.

The new school includes a playground area, tennis courts and a walking track, known as Pontiac Field, open to neighborhood residents. The neighborhood association sent out one flyer and raised more than \$20,000 to help with park improvements, Balkema said.

Ottawa Hills also has one of the city's oldest neighborhood associations. Formed in the early 1970s to protect the integrity and interests of Ottawa Hills, residents banded together to prevent a few realtors from "blockbusting" — trying to get people to sell their homes quickly and cheaply.



Since 1934, the annual Hollyhock Lane Independence Day Parade has featured kids, politicians and fire trucks.

"We wouldn't stand for that kind of scare tactics," Balkema said.

The association remains all-volunteer with annual dues of \$10. Block captains welcome new residents.

One of its most well-known events, the Ottawa Hills Annual Garden Tour held in June, celebrated 20 years in 2013. A dozen or so homes open their yards and gardens to visitors, Haveman said.

Proceeds from dues and donations from events are used to beautify the neighborhood. The association has planted more than 70 trees in the area, purchased signs identifying the neighborhood and put in ornamental street lights.

The association hosts an ice cream social in August, but neighbors often gather for happy hours, chili cook-offs and backyard barbecues. They organize an Easter egg hunt, and Hallow-

een is a big holiday for the children, Haveman said.

Another neighborhood tradition, the Hollyhock Lane parade, offers a slice of Americana on the Fourth of July. It includes children riding bicycles, local politicians, old cars, emergency vehicles, Uncle Sam and the Statue of Liberty.

Although there are few businesses, Ottawa Hills is convenient to shopping and dining in Eastown and East Grand Rapids' Gaslight Village. The Ottawa Hills Branch library opened in the 1950s and offers programs to the community.

The neighborhood's East Congregational United Church of Christ moved to its present site at 1005 Giddings Ave. SE in 1929. Today, the church provides space for a neighborhood yoga class, AA meetings, Kiwanis Club, Boy Scouts and bridge clubs, and is home to the Siloam Spirituality Center. Thrifty Treasures is a resale shop staffed by church volunteers.

A highlight of the neo-Gothic structure is the sanctuary's stained glass windows. They came from Chartres Glass Studios in France, one of only two churches in the country with windows from that studio, said Rev. Ruth Fitzgerald, who is new to Grand Rapids and joined the church in October.

"One of the things that really attracted me to this church is that it is a neighborhood church," she said. "My hope is that we will be an anchor for this neighborhood again. This building and this community of faith can be a real contributing factor to the neighborhood."

With its well-kept homes, landscaped yards and family-friendly activities, Ottawa Hills is like revisiting the 1950s, Kok said. An attorney in Grand Rapids, he and his wife, Becky, who chairs the ice cream social, are among the growing number of families with young children.



Mary Carolyn Matteson and Chase

*"The neighbors do my walks, my lawn. There's a lot of camaraderie with everybody. We watch out for each other."*

— Mary Carolyn Matteson

"It's like you walk back in time," he said. "It's a tremendous place to raise a family."

It's something people like Davison and Ellis know well.

Davison, an attorney, ran into a former classmate after he bought his home, and she gave him the original blueprints as a gift from her mother. His family moved to Ottawa Hills when he was 5 years old, and his mother still owns her home there.

Nearly 100 years later, Ottawa Hills remains an ethnically diverse and friendly place, with a strong sense of unity and family, he said.

"Everyone really recognizes that in all the events that occur. It's a unique area that's weathered some storms, but it's very close-knit."

Ellis grew up outside "true" Ottawa Hills, but had many friends in the neighborhood.

"I knew every house," he said. "All the homes are still very much there. These homes, the people — they're my friends."

After living in other parts of the country, Ellis appreciates coming home to a neighborhood that holds great memories — a place that remains quaint, safe and pleasantly unchanged.

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