



Photos by JEAN SHIFRIN / Staff

Gennie (left) and Monja Bowens have lived in their home in the Oakhurst neighborhood for 31 years.

O A K H U R S T

# Changing times

By David Goldberg  
STAFF WRITER

Gentrifying  
Decatur  
neighborhood  
struggles with  
how to continue  
its comeback but  
retain racial and  
economic  
diversity

**E**lizabeth Wilson well remembers the last time Decatur's Oakhurst neighborhood was "in transition."

That was 30 years ago. She and many former neighbors had found the prewar Craftsman bungalows in Oakhurst a comfortable landing place after Decatur's Beacon Hill, a close-knit African-American neighborhood of shotgun houses, churches and a school, had been demolished for what they called urban renewal.

"When I moved in in 1966, I had white neighbors on both sides," Wilson said. "We woke up the next morning and they were gone."

More than 30 years later, Wilson is mayor of Decatur, and her Oakhurst community is again being transformed. It's part of a now-familiar cycle in urban America: the white flight from intown neighborhoods as blacks moved in, followed years later with the rediscovery of the area by white "urban pioneers" looking for time-chiseled character and short commutes.

What makes Oakhurst different is it's in the city of Decatur. A town of 4 square miles and about 18,000 residents, Decatur is proud of — maybe even obsessed with — its diversity. The perception of Decatur as a unique metro Atlanta community where black, white, gay, straight, rich and poor people live harmoniously in proximity is an essential ingredient of the town's identity. With a respected school system, the city sees itself as a place where even the least-advantaged can succeed.

Oakhurst, located in southwest Decatur, is a critical aspect of that story line.

"If you really want to talk about diversity in Decatur, you're pretty much talking about our neighborhood," said Jason Sipe, Oakhurst resident and co-owner of Joe, a year-old coffeehouse that fired the starting gun in a race to rejuvenate Oakhurst's commercial district.

Oakhurst is home to the vast majority of

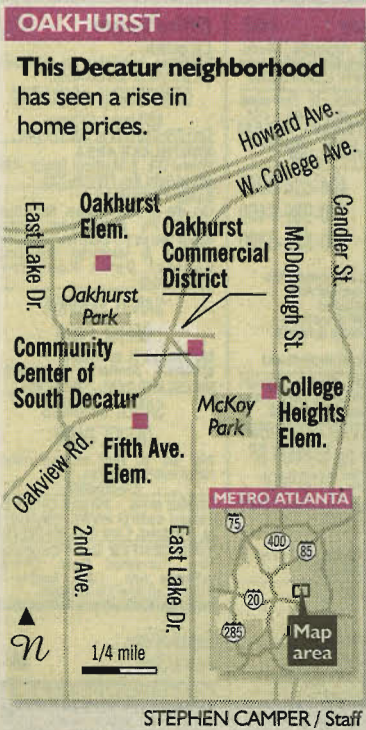
Decatur's black residents, who account for nearly 40 percent of the city's total population. It contains most of the city's lower-income housing and has also been popular with newly arriving gay residents, Wilson said.

Change has been slowly building in the area for several years as young, mostly white, professionals have discovered the classic housing stock. But this past year, the trickle became a flood that has seen dozens of older homeowners bought out for renovations that then sell for vastly higher prices.

An area where foreclosures could be purchased for a dollar 20 years ago now regularly sees home prices in the \$200,000 range. At the same time, low-income and subsidized apartments are being renovated and converted to market-rate housing beyond the reach of the previous tenants.

"The property taxes skyrocketed after the white people started moving in," said Gennie Bowens, 70, who moved to Oakhurst's Madison Avenue with her husband, Monja Bowens, in 1967. "People say they're going to raise the taxes so high that we can't pay them and we'll move. The first six months of this year our tax was \$658. When we paid in December it was about \$1,600."

► Please see **OAKHURST, E5**



STEPHEN CAMPER / Staff



**Robert Soens** is president of the South Decatur Community Center (background), which has been housed in part of the old Scottish Rite Hospital. The site is now scheduled for redevelopment.

