

Hope for Our City: Business owner invests in community he loves

By Meghan Davis Special to the News Sentinel

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Gary Gamble's allegiance to the community of Mechanicsville goes deeper than his pockets. The owner of Gam's Barbershop and Brothers Johnson and Sister BBQ on University Avenue, Gamble also grew up in Mechanicsville.

"When I was growing up, the community was more of a family, it was unified. Then the businesses left and crime came back."

Gamble is referring to a shift that took place beginning in the 1970s as people moved away from the inner-city towards suburban communities, taking with them businesses and vision.

"When I was a kid, there were several black-owned businesses. That has changed."

Growing up and seeing businesses in his community helped shape his vision to one day own one of his own. "It was always a dream of mine to own my own business. I just had no idea that it would land me on University Avenue," he laughs.

Gamble's career path towards becoming a barber began with his family. "Me and my brother used to cut each other's hair growing up, and then slowly I began to get some other clients in the community whose hair I would cut as well."

Gamble attended Maynard Elementary, moving on to Beardsley Middle School and then graduating from Austin-East High School.

His dream of owning his own business never disappeared after graduating, and in 1993, he began looking for a space to make his vision a reality.

He never expected that it would land him right back in the very community where it began.

He found an available building on University Avenue, which used to house a doctor's office and was now vacant.

Gam's opened its doors in 1994 and has remained a successful business in the community since. Gamble purchased the building next door and opened Brothers Johnson and Sister BBQ in 2011.

“Running a restaurant is a very different business than the barbershop,” Gamble laughs. “You have to really love cooking.”

Gamble never expected to remain in Mechanicsville, but in a community where businesses are few and far between, his presence is a bright spot in a neighborhood that has suffered.

“I really think it’s something that has been on my heart for a long time to be here in my community,” Gamble says about his decision to live and operate his business in Mechanicsville.

“I get confirmation every day that this is where I am supposed to be and what I am supposed to be doing. Kids come in off the bus and I get the opportunity to talk to them and mentor them.”

The presence of the Emerald Youth program in Mechanicsville has been a positive thing. “I would like to see that grow and expand for our young people.”

Gamble says that, moving forward, what he hopes for his community is for more businesses to pop up around him and for greater community support.

“We need for people within the community to begin reinvesting back.”

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