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WHEN HELEN SMALL'S RETIREMENT WAS announced in the city's major media a while back, most of the city recognized her as the 11-year president of the American Pianists Association, an organization they knew little about except that it stepped in six years ago to save and operate the Indianapolis Jazz Festival.

When long-time Lockerbie Square residents read the same announcement, they realized the Downtown neighborhood had reached a kind of milestone.

Because it was Helen Small who was – 35 years ago – the first president of the Lockerbie Square People's Club. When she and her husband, Bobby, came to Indianapolis two years earlier, in 1971, they became one of those very few urban pioneers who led the resurgence of the city's oldest surviving neighborhood, the neighborhood which for 12 years was the city's only historic preservation district.

"We felt like pioneers, like we were in an outpost," Small said recently from the recently renovated patio behind the Small's 1888 Queen Anne-style house they moved into when Bobby was still in law school and Helen was mothering a 14-month-old daughter, Ann.

"It was very lonely," she said. There were few neighbors – Lockerbie had more than its fair share of empty lots, as well as dilapidated, unlivable houses. "Conditions were not like they are now," she said. "No trees, no brick sidewalks,



▲ Helen Small in her Lockerbie Street home.

broken curbs." But plenty of rats.

That was the subject of the first neighborhood meeting called by former resident Jean Spears (who would move on to become a pioneer in another historic neighborhood, Ransom Place). In a story published in the April 2005 edition of *The Lockerbie Letter* (precursor of *Urban Times*), Reid Williamson, retiring president of Historic Landmarks

Remembering the earliest days of Lockerbie Square's revitalization

 Urban pioneers

This is the first in an occasional Urban Times series on the people who helped make our Downtown neighborhoods the successes they are today.

Foundation of Indiana, remembered going to an early meeting of the Lockerbie Square People's Club to talk about historic preservation.

"I never got on the agenda," Williamson recalled with amusement at his then-self-importance. "All they talked about was rat eradication. It was much more life-threatening."

Historic Landmarks Foundation, it turned out, played a key role in the revitalization of Lockerbie Square.

Williamson said the success of Lockerbie Square laid the groundwork for future success in the city's other historic residential districts which had lost their luster during the suburbanization of the 1940s and '50s.

How the Smalls, both native Hoosiers then living in Philadelphia, came to Downtown Indianapolis can be laid at the feet of Ken Stroud, who has lived in the house next door, at 538 Lockerbie Street, since those early days. Stroud, then a law clerk for Indiana Supreme Court Justice Roger DeBruler, came to know the Smalls through a mutual friend in Philadelphia. He convinced the friend, John Cole, and the Smalls to join him in the pioneering effort back in Indianapolis.

That group teamed up to buy three adjoining properties from the Day Nursery Association, which operated out of the huge 2½-story house at 542 Lockerbie St., the house which the Smalls would call home. Stroud and his wife, Diana, bought the smaller 1863 house next door, while Roger and Karen DeBruler decided to build a new house on the Day Nursery's playground to the north, which fronted Vermont Street. That house, completed in 1973, was the first new construction since the Indiana General Assembly had approved the creation of Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission in 1967.

The first obstacle faced by the Smalls was the sheer size of their new home, which featured a full gymnasium which had been added to the rear to service the Day Nursery. Professionals took that down, but the Smalls spent hours tending to the many other restorations inside their handsome home.

At first, the Smalls shared the house with Cole, with the only real structural change being the addition of an interior

door upstairs to give both families some privacy. There was a tenant in the basement of the gymnasium, and the DeBrulers bunked in for a while, awaiting completion of their new house. "It was kinda like a boarding house," Helen said.

She remembers toting her young daughter aboard her bicycle over to Military Park, which in those days featured some playground equipment. But there was no Downtown grocery store. Not many other retail stores, either. "You had to drive somewhere to do anything," she said. "Those were very unfavorable circumstances – but it was always safe."

Helen dealt with the solitary circumstances while Bobby finished law school and then snared a job as the director of what is now the Indiana Criminal Justice Institute, where he directed a complete revision of Indiana's criminal code. That job led him to top-level posts in the administrations of two



◀ One of the many "before" photos of the former Day Nursery Association facility which the Smalls began renovating in 1971. Note the addition at the right (with railing on top), which was removed. It was not original to the house.

governors until he retired five years ago.

Then, some social relief. Terry and Carolyn Bradbury moved into an historic house on East Street, less than a block away, and Dennis and Patti Wright did the same just down from the DeBrulers on Vermont Street.

The Smalls had lived in Lockerbie for four years when the neighborhood received a major boost from the Bicentennial Committee of the Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee, which renovated the historic Holler cottage just across the street from the Smalls' house, facing Vermont Street, and by using it as its field office.

That same year, Helen remembered, a major contribution to neighborhood revitalization came from the Garden Club of Indianapolis, which collaborated with the People's Club to throw two "garden parties" on the lawn of the James Whitcomb Riley Home, which sits just two doors west of

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the Smalls' house.

Helen remembers the help she received from Melissa Goldsmith, a marketing professional who with Lorraine Price and Brenda Houston was the first outside investor in the neighborhood. Those three renovated the Park Avenue house now owned by Patti Chunn and Larry Wallace. "Melissa helped us design the poster and gave terrific advice," Helen said.

Helen remembers another milestone, three years later in 1978, when civic leader Tom Binford built his house just down the block. "When Tom invested in the neighborhood, and a Supreme Court justice had – that's when everybody knew."

Not that she ever thought the Lockerbie experiment wouldn't work. "I was always very optimistic that historic preservation would catch on here," she said. At the time, and a bit earlier, others weren't so sure.

After the Lockerbie Square Historic Preservation District was first created in 1967 (in a smaller configuration than exists today, limited to the area bordered by College Avenue and Michigan, East, New York streets), most thoughts were tilted toward a Williamsburg-style enclave to be known as "Lockerbie Fair," complete with Victorian-era businesses and anchored by the Riley Home.

The Smalls and others, however, saw Lockerbie as a liv-

ing, breathing residential neighborhood. In 1976, 22 Lockerbie residents united to form Lockerbie Square, Inc., to fill many of Lockerbie's vacant lots with endangered historic buildings from other areas of the city. (One of those houses, now home to Bob and Patsy Cram, is considered to be the oldest home in the city, once the residence of James Brown Ray, the third governor of the state.) Historic Landmarks Foundation, meanwhile, continued to buy and rehab the exteriors of many Lockerbie homes in a process known as "flipping," selling those livable structures to buy other dilapidated ones.

While Helen had confidence in Lockerbie's future, she confesses surprise – and pride – in the fact that the historic preservation effort has spread well beyond the Lockerbie boundaries.

"Because Lockerbie's a small enclave," she said, "I thought there would be enough people to find it attractive. But the thing that is remarkable to Bob and me is the success of Chatham Arch, the Old Northside, Herron-Morton Place. I can't tell you how happy I am to see it just keep growing out," Helen added.

"That's been the most remarkable and gratifying thing."

– Bill Brooks



▲ A brick gymnasium was one of the additions to the Day Nursery facility which was removed. Note the exterior fire escapes on the house.



▲ An "after" photo, taken when the restoration was complete, but long before the trees of Lockerbie Square reached the maturity they enjoy today.