



ON THE BOULEVARD: WHY I LOVE THE COURTYARD CORRIDOR

I have the most beautiful apartment in Oak Park. I know this because I've seen a lot of Oak Park apartments throughout its 4.25 square miles. And I have lived in the OP almost my entire life: I grew up here, went away to college, moved to Denver – and came back. When I first saw this building in 2008, I knew it was “the one.” Then I met an amazing man and we decided to get a place on our own outside of Oak Park, where we could afford more amenities. It was all honeymoons, central air, and garage spaces – until I started to miss my *community*. Oak Park is where my heart is home.

We finally moved back into my – now *our* – favorite apartment. Where is this incredible place? Why, on Austin Boulevard, of course. Please don't shudder. I love my home. I love my neighborhood. I am proud to live where I do and have no qualms bragging about it (obviously). No, I'm not afraid I'll be shot or mugged. Yes, I am aware that crimes are committed – by the way, that happens everywhere. My neighbors and I watch out for each other and take pride in the appearance of our building. I have no hesitation about recommending my neighborhood.

"It really takes me when someone says 'I don't want to live on Austin,'" agrees my friend and neighbor, Art Murnan. "Like, what? Why? Especially when it's someone who's just arrived from somewhere like Camden, New Jersey. How

does this person know about Austin? They've listened to somebody they don't even know when they said it's a bad neighborhood or it's a little iffy or something like that. And they just automatically believe them."

Art's right. I hear it all the time. People critique our neighborhood without ever setting foot in it. "Austin Boulevard is to me what Oak Park Avenue is to somebody else, or Jackson Boulevard or Cuyler. It's just a good place to live," Art explains. "The best part of living on Austin Boulevard is because I live there, I can say to other people, 'It's okay to live here; I've lived here 25 years—and I'm not crazy.' There are lots of good reasons to live on Austin! It's just a good place to live. I like where I live. I like the convenience to the L, the convenience to the expressway. I like being right on the Lake Street corridor."

Although Art has lived in Oak Park for more than 43 years, the last 25 have been in the same building on Austin Boulevard, as the resident manager in his building of 31 units. Of those units, at least half have housed the same long-term tenants for more than five years. Some have lived there ten, even *twenty years*. Art's community is arguably unparalleled.

"I see building a community as part of being a resident

manager," he tells me. "But part of that is, whether I was resident manager or not, I want to live in a community. So I am going to advocate community. As a resident manager, I have a position of power to advocate that more. So I host parties in my building, and we've had cookouts. We've done little field trips, like to Taste of Chicago and some concerts. Little things like that create community. And I make sure to introduce neighbors to each other. Make sure your neighbors know who their neighbors are: who belongs in your stairwell, your locked courtyard? Because if you know who belongs you know who doesn't."

Don Rutledge was also a resident manager for a building on Austin Boulevard for ten years before he bought his home in northeast Oak Park. "I liked that it had an urban feel," he remembers. "There was a hustle-and-bustle to it."

He fondly recalls his relationships with the tenants in his building and the one next door – Art's home. "I liked that I knew my neighbors, even though it was a big, 45-unit building," Don says.

Don purchased my building on Austin Boulevard more than a decade ago. "I knew what great work the Village and the Housing Center did to help buildings become communities where you'd want to live," he explains. "I knew I could definitely turn those buildings into successful places."

And Don has achieved his mission; I've seen it, *lived in it*, first-hand. I am so grateful to be able to enjoy my lovely dwelling (again) within Don's building and re-connect with my neighbors along our block, including my girl scout troop leader from elementary school who still lives in the house next door. Ours is a vibrant, beautiful community.

"We're all aware that stuff happens," Art comments. "But it happens everywhere. In my 25 years at my building, I don't think I've ever had anyone move out because they were worried or scared or fearful. I've had people move out because they got laundry in-unit, or they got a bigger apartment, or they got a garage parking space. Or they've lived on Austin for five years, now they want to live in Downtown Oak Park just for a different experience. But people don't leave fleeing, they leave by choice."

Art has even had tenants move away - and then *come back!* Awhile ago, a tenant moved out of Art's building. She called Art about a year and a half later. "Please tell me there's an apartment available!" he remembers her imploring. "She told me: 'We've had our bikes stolen; we've had our laundry taken. When I lived in your building on Austin Boulevard, I always felt comfortable and safe, especially in my building. I had neighbors who watched out for me, cared about me, watched out for my daughter, *babysat* my daughter. I didn't have any of that when I moved to a different building.'"



As a longtime Oak Park resident, I treasure every inch of my community, including the "Courtyard Corridor."

Art smiles, "So, to me, she was showing that she missed the community aspect of the building, the *family*."

"You know it's funny," Art continues. "Just today, I was showing an apartment in my building and one of the neighbors from the RK building next door saw me and said, 'Oh, is she going to join the family?' And [the prospective tenant] was real impressed by that."

Although I wouldn't say all of my neighbors are like family (and yes, my parents are still rooted in Oak Park, too), I *will* say many are my friends or we exchange pleasantries often. Whether we know each other's names or simply recognize faces, we know our neighbors. I am happy to live where I do, and have that sense of everyone watching out for each other.

Oak Park's Austin Boulevard has three miles of beautiful courtyard apartments and is home to thousands of Oak Park residents. It is the historical gateway to Oak Park, welcoming you to the Arts District, and mingling with Berwyn, Chicago, and Cicero.

So I ask you, dear reader, please don't tell people to stay away from me – I mean, Austin Boulevard. It is not a more dangerous place than anywhere else in Oak Park. As an Oak Park resident, I treasure every inch of my community - and so should you! Besides, the more amazing people that live here (like me, Art, Don, and you), the better our community will become. Great people make great communities!