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21st Street's evolution a source of hope, unity

I travel along East 21st Street between I-135 and Hillside most every day to and from work. As the area tries to rebound economically, I try to imagine what used to be there. A dry cleaner. Grocery stores. A hamburger stand. A couple of gas stations.

I even imagine what will be there. A bookstore? A hotel? A drugstore?

The one thing I can't imagine is 21st Street not being there. This narrow corridor of life for decades has been the path to wide possibility for me and for others.

I found myself reminiscing about the street recently, after I learned that the 2007 Downing Concert Series -- featuring R&B royalty Earth, Wind and Fire -- would benefit three organizations along East 21st Street: the Center for Health and Wellness; the Boys & Girls Club of Wichita; and the Opportunity Project.

My mother shopped at both of the grocery stores, Jabara's at Grove and Razook's at Piatt.

The matriarch of our family worshipped at Macedonia Baptist Church on the southwest corner of 21st and Grove.

Next door to the church, in the Madison Square strip mall, Bobby Kinnard and Hercules Finley cut my hair at Professional Barbershop, where the men who lined the walls argued politics and sports.

Madison Square hosted teen dances and a sit-down restaurant where Barry Sanders' Heisman Trophy sat on display for weeks.

There used to be an Otasco store on the southeast corner of 21st and Grove, where my mother bought me the flashlight I used in nightly sweeps of the dark corners and closets of our house, checking for monsters.

Almost every school day, kids on my block rode the bus out to west Wichita, which seemed like the edge of the Earth back then.

It was comforting to know that the same road that took us so far also could lead us back home.

But even before anyone my age bounced along 21st Street on school buses, Henry Roe Cloud planted seeds of education there.

Roe Cloud, the first American Indian to graduate from Yale University and the man for whom Cloud Elementary was named, founded a school just north of what is Wichita State University today.

Roe Cloud thought his all-male school, built on more than 100 acres, would help American Indians learn to compete socially and intellectually.

Years later, the Institute of Logopedics, now Heartspring, began helping children with multiple disabilities west of Roe Cloud's school.

Still, for all of the hope that bloomed there, the street also has seen tragedy and strife.

A KC-135 with a belly full of fuel plunged to the ground a block south of 21st Street in January 1965, killing 30 people.

A riot broke out there in the summer of 1980. I can remember watching the national news and seeing curls of smoke from burned-out cars and police stomping by in riot gear.

About 10 years later, another near-riot broke out after miscreants pelted more than a dozen vehicles with bricks and chunks of asphalt at 21st and Grove.

This little stretch of 21st has stumbled. Retail there has flickered and faded.

But it has begun to right itself.

With an \$8 million Boys & Girls Club providing guidance, the \$3 million Opportunity Project preschool aimed at helping families break the cycle of poverty, and the Center for Health and Wellness pushing prevention, a renaissance waits on the horizon.

Bringing in Earth, Wind and Fire to benefit this work feels like providence; entertainers identifying themselves by basic elements of life helping others who bring the essentials of life such as education and health care to people in our community.

And they are people connected to all of us. If ever a street connected a city, 21st Street connects ours.

It connects folks from the new Northeast to WSU, to a slice of African-American Wichita, to the stockyards, to the heart of Hispanic Wichita, to an Asian shopping plaza, to the 1950s ranch homes of old west Wichita, to the new suburbs of far west Wichita.

From professional class to working class, from Tallgrass to no grass, this street has long been a place of hope and aspiration. It remains a place where hope springs eternal.

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