

Robbed in Prince George's -- of Our Peace of Mind

By Pamela Gerhardt
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About a year ago, during the week leading up to Christmas, I decided to check out the new Target less than a mile from my home in Prince George's County. We needed something. Sneakers. Toilet paper. And we'd maybe throw in a doodad designed by Isaac Mizrahi.

I knew the store would be crowded, our fellow shoppers a bit harried. My kids, aged 4 and 7 at the time, held my hands as we crossed the parking lot. As we neared the door, a group of 10 or so teenagers headed our way. At the same time, a middle-aged man left the store. The next thing I knew, the young men were on top of the older man, pounding his head. One of them shouted something like, "Don't ever cross in front of us when we're walking." I stood there, clamping on the hands of my children. The older man tried to get up, and when the younger men jumped him again, they all fell into my daughter.

That incident planted the seed of my doubts about where I live -- doubts that were heightened by last week's vandalism of 37 Prince George's County houses.

The statistics have been telling a story that is beginning to alarm all of us: As of May 2005, homicide was up 57 percent here over the previous year, carjackings were up 42 percent, rapes were up 25 percent, and robberies had more than doubled. In 2004, 18,000 cars were stolen (more than in any other county in Maryland), and in 2005 173 people were murdered, a record that easily surpassed the previous high of 154 in 1991.

When my neighbors and I hear those numbers, we wonder if this really is where we want to live, where we want to bring up our children, because the statistics form the somber backdrop to a story we all know and talk about: Last fall, a young man was murdered not far from our block in University Park because someone with a gun wanted his North Face vest. Most disturbing to me, though, was an incident a few months ago, which -- like the house vandalism -- seemed to come out of nowhere. And for no gain. Not even a vest.

A man (wearing a symbol of peace, a Rastafarian hat, no less) in the car next to mine threw a soda can at me and yelled profanities. I had four kids under the age of 11 in my car. Our windows were down. I got his license plate number. Back home, I dialed 911. The officer stood in my driveway and said, "You're lucky you're alive, in this part of town. He easily could have had a gun."

Hyperbole? Perhaps. The officer's body language called to mind a TV show my brother used to watch called "Cops." Still.

He could have had a gun. They might have pounded in his head.

That's what echoed in my mind last week after I read about all those front doors being broken down in Prince George's. It's not as if it was on my doorstep. But some of those homes were in Mitchellville -- a town of largely professional African Americans where my doctor and several of my kids' school friends live.

It all makes us think differently. A few years ago in a Thai restaurant in Cleveland Park a woman at the table next to us heard that we lived near Route 1 in Prince George's County and said, her fork in mid air, "Oh, my God."

We get this all the time, those of us who have chosen to live in the vibrant mix of Prince George's County but whose friends have selected tonier parts of town. In the past, we had fun laughing it off. We could only imagine the creepy fictions about crack dealers peddling to K-12 kids, the ring of gun shots. Today, we don't laugh.

Sooner or later every American must seek answers to the deceptively simple question: Where is home? In her book "Dakota: A Spiritual Geography," Kathleen Norris writes, "I suspect that when modern Americans ask, 'what is sacred?' they are really asking 'what place is mine? what community do I belong to?' " Surely, many people are asking this question with greater urgency in Prince George's County.

Like many middle-class Americans, I have moved many times as an adult. In my twenties, I moved more than 10 times and lived in six states. Before our move to Washington, my husband and I lived in a one-theater town in Texas for four years. We watched "Schindler's List" nine months after its release, butting elbows in the musty dark with descendants of cowboys on armrests waxy with age.

We were excited to come to Washington. We bought the "Places Rated Almanac" and found the city ranked No. 7 in the country -- No. 6 in health care, No. 6 in education, No. 3 in the arts. The ocean looked so close, the mountains just west, even the climate seemed good after Texas. And suburban Prince George's County seemed to offer the perfect combination of diversity and affordability.

Most of those rankings turned out to be paper calculations not really based on reality, but for many years, like our friends over in Mitchellville, we were more than content. My husband and I took jobs at the University of Maryland. We walked to work. We felt good about our new home.

A few blocks from the scene of the Target beating, my neighborhood, which is mixed and slightly more affluent than the surrounding areas, is as sweet and insular as Mayberry. Brick bungalows from the 1920s line narrow streets dense with old oaks. I walk into my neighbors' homes uninvited and sing "hello" like a television character of the 1950s. Most people walk their kids to the local school -- one where whites are the minority, and brown and black and white parents of all economic and education levels know each other well. We shovel each other's sidewalks. If someone is sick, we mow his or her lawn. We recently rallied together to successfully fight the county's proposal to change school

district lines. Throughout, we have been confident that we are giving our kids a good message about community and neighborliness.

Since we came here, positive economic changes in our part of the county too numerous to chronicle have rapidly altered the landscape. We got a Starbucks (well, several of them), an Old Navy, a Gap, a Giant, a Home Depot, an Atlanta Bread Co. and a Chipotle, as well as that Target. A few years ago we got Vertigo Books (formerly of Dupont Circle!) and -- the big palooka -- Ikea.

Many of us were thrilled with the development, the idea that aromatic Swedish cinnamon buns and Frappuccinos might put us on the map. But now this.

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Graphic artists in this newspaper and elsewhere have clearly demonstrated the spread of crime from the city border to the north, to the east. It's coming our way. It's here.

Each time a real estate agent pounds in a For Sale sign, the pot gets stirred again. People talk. So-and-so is hightailing it for Silver Spring or Rockville or Bethesda. People ask themselves: Will my children and family benefit more from our strong sense of community or from schools with bigger budgets? Will my son's friendships with children of all ethnicities, races and economic levels make him a better person? To what extent, I ask myself, can we or should we protect ourselves and our children from our own society? The Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset wrote: "Tell me the landscape in which you live, and I will tell you who you are."

Recently, I've been wondering just how dangerous is dangerous?

My children cried all night after the fighting men fell on them. We did not go to that Target for many months. Each child personalized the violence, made his or her own connections. My daughter is of Mayan descent, and she made note that the attackers were dark-skinned, as is she. My son, who is white and navigates the world with a fine-tuned moral compass, kept crying, saying, "Why did they hurt that man? Why? He wasn't doing *anything*."

One thing is certain. Whatever message we intend to send our children in this county -- or country -- they are constructing their own responses loud and clear.

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