

# Furor hurts, mystifies family

Order to vacate leaves longtime residents reeling

**BY MARY SCHMICH**

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The Harris family's life began to unravel around dawn on the last day of August.

R.J. Harris, who is 77, was in bed when a noise jolted him awake.

Bam. What was that?

Bam. It sounded like an explosion.

Bam. The front door swung open and officers in masks swarmed inside, pointing rifles.

Police! Hands up! Police!

Harris' wife, an aunt, a son, a grandson, a granddaughter, a great-grandson and a cousin all bolted awake. From the floor above, where one of the Harris daughters lives with her family, came the blast and stench of smoke bombs.

Mr. Harris, standing in the middle of the house that he bought 41 years ago, that has lodged his large family through the neighborhood's gentrification, kept thinking: All you had to do was knock.

Outside on Sheffield Avenue, more officers gathered, shooing away neighbors. One neighbor described the scene on her blog.

"I felt like I was on 'The Wire!' Fantastic," she wrote. "... The neighbors hung out near our fence, trying to appear as nonchalant as possible, you know, as if this sort of thing happens every day in Lincoln Park. I watch 'Breaking Bad,' yo, I know about meth. I bet they were totally cooking in there."

No meth was found inside the Harris home.

The police did arrest two family members on animal-related misdemeanors, and took away four dogs. But they found no evidence of the crimes some neighbors had suspected, the kind that typically call for 40 officers.

No drugs. No guns. No dogfighting.

The 40 officers on the scene — from the Chicago Police Department Animal Crimes Unit, two SWAT teams and the Cook County Sheriff's Department — left.

The raid was over.

For the Harris family, however, the shocks had just begun.

As the smoke cleared, a building inspector arrived. The Harrises knew that their house was run-down. In a neighborhood of new mansions, it stood out, with its bedraggled American flag, the window fan, the brown wooden steps that sloped straight to the sidewalk.

But they had never been issued a building code violation.

Now the inspector wrote down dozens of infractions and made another list for an adjacent home

where two of the Harris daughters live. Bad wiring, clogged gutters, torn siding, broken plaster, rotting window sashes, unsanitary living conditions.

An emergency order to vacate was issued.

And just like that, out of the blue of a summer morning, the Harrises lost their home.

"I never seen so much hate build up in one minute," Mr. Harris says. "For what?"

Now as they pack to leave this week, not sure where to go, that's the question that burns in them and some of their neighbors: For what?

What did they do that merited this kind of force and such harsh, swift punishment?

**W**hen R.J. Harris bought two houses on Chicago's North Side in 1970 — \$65,000 for the pair — the neighborhood was not yet one of Chicago's most coveted.

The shopping empire that would eventually rise on nearby Clybourn Avenue — Whole Foods, Patagonia, Bed Bath & Beyond — was years away. The residents were Puerto Ricans, Italians and Germans, but most, like the Harrises, were black.

The neighborhood had its troubles, but it was better than the Wentworth Gardens public housing project, where Mr. and Mrs. Harris started out raising their seven children.

"We had a dear friend said, 'You don't need to be in the projects with these children,' " Mrs. Harris says. " 'I have a house I'm going to sell you.' "

R.J. and Josephine, who married in 1954, met in St. Louis after Mr. Harris, who grew up picking cotton on an Alabama farm, had come north at 14 to look for work that paid.

Through the years, he found it: dumping rocks, loading ice, piling huge water jugs on skids. For 25 years he worked as a custodian for the Chicago Housing Authority and left on disability only after he blew a disk in his back carrying a 55-gallon garbage container. Mrs. Harris worked as a file clerk.

From the beginning, friends and relations were in and out of the Harris house on Sheffield. Mr. Harris masterminded the community garden. Friends sat out front talking, drinking and playing checkers, customs the family maintained through the decades, sometimes to the consternation of new neighbors who conducted their social lives in the privacy of back patios and decks.

As new, mostly white people moved in, and almost all the other black families moved out, the Harrises sometimes felt marginalized. Still, when developers knocked, they said: Not for sale.

Houses weren't just real estate. They were homes.

Besides, it was safe here, and the men of the

family could find odd jobs with the new neighbors, shoveling snow, mowing lawns, fixing cars.

Some of the Harrises' offspring got in trouble, from the minor to the major. More than once, Mr. Harris ejected his son Michael — who has been in and out of prison for such crimes as burglary and shoplifting — but he always let him come back because that's what families do.

He fretted over his kids who didn't work, but felt good that most did and that as his grandkids grew up, most made it to college. He and his wife were proud that in a time of fractured families and hard finances, they kept their family together.

And then came that August dawn.

**H**ere's how the police see it. In July, Ald. Scott Waguespack's aides contacted the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy office for the 18th District. The alderman's email noted that some neighbors had complained about unleashed dogs and drugs in tiny Privet Playlot Park. The playground is separated from the Harris home only by a vacant lot.

While the alderman himself says that he had not focused on the Harrises as a major problem — he was more concerned about nearby empty lots and vacant houses — his office also forwarded to CAPS a complaint letter that had arrived with a photo. In the photo, a little girl stands in the playground staring down at drug paraphernalia.

The CAPS office told the beat officers to be on alert.

Soon afterward, at a beat community meeting, some neighbors expressed similar concerns.

A few days later, an anonymous caller to 911 reported an ailing dog on the sidewalk. The man with the dog was the elder Harrises' son Michael.

According to the police, Michael took the dog to

the vet that day, but it was malnourished and had suffered heatstroke and it died; the vet gave his report to a police officer.

From there, the case went to the Animal Crimes Unit, which, after surveillance, felt there was sufficient cause to enter the Harris home and to do it with enough force to protect its officers.

After the raid, a news release about it appeared on the 18th District CAPS website.

The release, noting that citizens had complained of animal cruelty and "gang/drug sales," concluded with the statement: "This is an excellent example of the police and citizens working together."

What the release did not note, however, was that no one was charged with "gang/drug" sales.

It did not note that Michael Harris was arrested only for the largely unknown misdemeanor of being a felon in possession of non-neutered dogs. After he got out of jail, he collected money from neighbors to have one of the dogs, Kiki, spayed and returned to the family.

Meanwhile, the case against one of the Harrises' grandsons, Andrew, 21, remains in court. According to the misdemeanor charges, his two pit bulls were malnourished and mistreated. According to the family, they were fed and watered daily and never used to fight.

As for the dog that died in Michael's care, the family insists there was a misunderstanding. Kiki was treated in July for heatstroke and survived. Around the same time, the family's old dog, Snow, died. They buried her in the side yard.

**I**n the days after the raid, unsubstantiated rumors bubbled through the neighborhood. Tales of Harris pit bulls attacking neighbors' dogs, of dogfighting, Gangster Disciples filling the house, children who didn't go to school.



ALEX GARCIA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

R.J. and Josephine Harris are being ordered to vacate their home over code problems after an inspection that came on the heels of a police raid that they say surprised and confused them. They bought the house in 1970, and the neighborhood changed. They don't know where they'll end up.

Strangers, family members say, drove by and shouted curses, perhaps fueled by a radio news report that had mentioned dogfighting and neglected to report the raid's outcome.

Neighbors who have known the Harrises for a long time were aghast.

"I've petted a couple of those pit bulls," says Wendi Taylor Nations, who is active in animal-rescue causes and whose front window looks out on the tot lot and the Harris homes. "I've never seen abuse. Had there been, I would have been ahead of the police. We're just heartbroken for them."

"They're good people," says neighbor Chris Swindells. "I'm just so sad."

Some neighbors feel the Harrises are the target of a small, unhappy group, but even the family's supporters understand why others might be perturbed. The family's young men hang out in the gangway. Their friends visit. They can be loud. And not every neighbor sees the same things.

"It's not an easy time in this city," says Dorothy Collin, a Harris neighbor and former Tribune reporter distressed by their treatment. "Every time you turn on television you see things about shootings and crime. I also understand people are worried about their property values. What you've got is a different way of life, an old Southern way, or the old South Side of Chicago way. Now it's surrounded by the new way of life. It's a real collision of cultures."

Shortly after the raid, one of the Harrises' daughters, Yvonne, stood up at a CAPS meeting.

"I said: 'If you all had a problem with us, all you had to do was knock on the door. Let me know. I will address it.'"

She recalled the meeting as she sat in her parents' living room last week, surrounded by packing boxes.

"We're not the cream of the crops here," she said. "We didn't have the money to fix up the property like other people fixed up theirs. We living. We try to maintain here as a family, keep our parents comfortable."

At the CAPS meeting that night, several people who had complained about the family were in the audience. None of them said a thing.

"Sometimes," said Mr. Harris, with a weak smile, "you just have to move on."

"I'd move on," said his wife. "But I just don't know why. Why? And we got nowhere to go."

It was a gray morning. In the mess of clothes and boxes, Mrs. Harris, who is 80, slowly folded a pair of pants.

They could come back to the house if they fixed it up in the next nine months. They have no cash to do it. They're sitting on a fortune in land, but the million or more they might eventually make by selling doesn't pay a rental deposit this week.

Maybe a new place wouldn't be so bad, somewhere fresh with a garage, a garden. But they can't buy before they sell.

And no amount of money will erase the humiliation.

"Do you know how bad you feel when you come out and everybody's laughing at you?" Mr. Harris said.

The family doesn't blame the police. They have nothing bad to say about their neighbors.

Mostly, they're hurt and mystified and convinced, as some of their supporters are, that they are up against forces of development too big to fight.

Mrs. Harris propped her head on one of the boxes. She gazed out the window, silent, toward the playground, where on Sunday several neighbors will throw them a farewell party.

"It's not the dogs," she finally said. "It's not us. They just want this property."

The facts in this case can be argued. So can what they mean.

But what happened to the Harrises should not have happened, not this way. To banish a family from its longtime home, so abruptly, without mercy and without help and with no proof of great crime, is simply wrong. It divides a divided city even more. Chicago is better than that.