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MILDRED COUNCIL, RESTAURATEUR KNOWN AS MAMA DIP



Charles Vinson, seated, a retired taxi driver, and Tommy Swann no longer have outdoor tables and chairs to sit in. 'It was a good place for people to gather,' said Fred Battle, a long-time local NAACP leader.

STAFF PHOTO BY HARRY LYNCH

A favorite gathering place is lost

Outdoor seating removed as part of plans to expand Chapel Hill McDonald's

BY JESSE JAMES DECONTO
STAFF WRITER

CHAPEL HILL — "You talked to Tom?" they ask one another as they sit down with their coffee.

One of their own is in the hospital, and McDonald's on West Franklin is the place to catch up on the latest news.

Every morning they come. Some at 6 a.m. Others around 9. They might be retired maintenance men from UNC-Chapel Hill or carpenters working into their late 60s, even 70s, picking up day laborers for the morning's job.

"I call them when they don't show up," said Mary Kwawu, who has worked at the McDon-

ald's eight years, the last three as a shift manager. "You have to see them every day. It's almost like a family."

It has been 50 years since West Franklin Street was the black end of town, lined with black-owned businesses such as Charlie Mason's cafeteria and Betty Hunter's grocery store.

Thurman Atkins' old taxi stand is now 411 West Italian Cafe. The Neal homestead is now the Patio Loco Mexican restaurant and McDonald's.

The McDonald's carries forward a tradition of spaces where Chapel Hill's African Americans have gathered, whether it was a bench in front of the Jones Fu-

neral Home on Graham Street or tables at the Hardee's restaurant, now Panera Bread Co., at Franklin and Mallette.

"There always has been a place in Chapel Hill up on the West End here that the blacks did [go]," said restaurateur Mildred Council, better known as Mama Dip.

Until earlier this year that place had been McDonald's.

"It was a good place for people to gather," said Fred Battle, a long-time local NAACP leader. "As a matter of fact, they just about had a McDonald's Club."

McDonald's cited expansion plans when it removed all four concrete tables from a street-

side patio that had served as something like a front porch for part of the local black community.

Some of the men still sit inside the restaurant, lean on railings along the sidewalk, or squat on the flower beds near McDonald's front door. But they miss the outdoor tables — and their friends who have stopped coming.

"I think they need tables out there, especially in the summertime, so people can have a place to go and sit and eat in the fresh air," said Robert Craig, 65, one of the regulars. "A bunch

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of people don't come in here like they used to."

His adult niece, Sandra Theard, added, "Y'all take that away, it's like taking away their spot. ... There are some things you should just leave alone."

McDonald's wants to replace the Franklin Street building with a new one, expanding the floor area from 2,100 to nearly 3,500 square feet, and adding 15 indoor seats to replace the 20 that had been outside.

The documents the company submitted to the town actually include a photo of some of the retired black men sitting at an outdoor table, but that image will disappear into nostalgia when the patio is walled-in and roofed-over.

Crime on the menu?

Some of the retirees blamed McDonald's decision on younger black men without regular jobs who loiter outside the restaurant.

"I can understand their moving [the tables]," said Melvin Farrington, 73, who joins the crowd for breakfast two or three days a week.

Leroy Peralta, who owns the Patio Loco restaurant next door, said removing the tables was a good business decision.

"If you were a business owner, how would you feel about a lot of people loitering in front of your business?" Peralta said, surveying some of the younger men leaning on the railing where the tables used to be. "That right there was a cancer."

Since the beginning of 2001, police have responded to the McDonald's address 116 times for crimes ranging from stolen cell phones to assault with a deadly weapon. By comparison, Patio Loco has had 24 police calls over the same period.

"Certainly, the majority of them are there to get something to eat and hang out with friends," Chapel Hill Police Maj. Brian Curran said. "We have noticed that some of the folks that we see there are people that we deal with professionally from time to time."

Peralta complained particularly about drug-dealing at McDonald's, but police records show only four drug-related calls since 2001 and none since 2004. Far more common are trespassing and panhandling charges.

Someone broke the windows on Kwawu's own Dodge Caravan this year. Even so, the McDonald's manager, an immigrant from Ghana, denied that crime was behind removing the outdoor tables, though she did say some younger people would stand and jump on them, especially during street festivals.

Outside chance

McDonald's has 54 seats inside, and the town is limiting its expansion to 15 more based on traffic concerns.

The restaurant has no plans for replacing the concrete tables, even though Town Hall encourages outdoor dining downtown.

"It's not something we're going to hold their feet to the fire on," senior planner Kay Pearlstein said.

The Town Council will need to approve the final expansion plan.

"I can't make them put tables outside," said Bill Thorpe, the only black member of the Town Council, "but I would like to see them outside."

Members of the "McDonald's Club" are resigned to losing their front porch.

"You can't stop progress," said James Foushee, 47, one of the regulars. "Things change, you know."

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