



Photo by Maggie Kane

Profile: May Helen Johnson

When May Helen Johnson moved to Atlanta, she spent 19 years in Summerhill and then eventually settled in Peoplestown. For May Helen, Summerhill was a beautiful community and she describes it as an exemplary neighborhood of the past because it “had so much during that time—the grocery store, libraries, the hospital, church, post office, schools, and the ice cream parlor. We had just everything you need to stabilize your neighborhood. You really didn’t have to leave your neighborhood and everything you needed was right here.”

Long settled in Peoplestown, she feels fondness, appreciation, and hope for her neighborhood. Specifically, she values “the people in this community who have worked hard, strived, raised their kids and who still give input and have roots here.” It’s clear that May Helen knows her community well and has demonstrated dedication to neighborhood organizing from the 1996 Atlanta Olympics to now, holding a leadership role on the Peoplestown Revitalization Corporation and working at the Emmaus House.

May Helen is responsible for preserving and sharing the history of Peoplestown but also for realizing the vision of the community, and doesn’t want to see the BeltLine disrupt her neighborhood any further than what other development projects have already done.

With the stadium on one side and the BeltLine on the other it feels like we’re being compressed between these two giants and my thing is what are they gonna bring to the neighborhood, what are they gonna offer us? Are we gonna be able to stay in the neighborhood or are we gonna be able to rent, to buy, to play, to stay, to worship in the neighborhood?

May Helen needs her city council to come to the neighborhood and sit down with community residents to hear these concerns and understand what programs are needed. Promotion of and assistance with home-ownership, financing options, and property improvements will keep elderly and lower-wage earning residents from being pushed out of Peoplestown and displaced further south from all they have worked for, all they have strived for. With city council and developer cooperation, she believes that Peoplestown can be a model neighborhood for democratic decision making and they could work with other BeltLine communities to achieve fair and just development.