



Photo by Maggie Kane

Profile: Alison Johnson, Housing Justice League member, report author

“My family started out in what is now a nearly forgotten neighborhood of Buttermilk Bottoms, a largely white neighborhood at the turn of the century. A fire in 1917 destroyed many of the houses and most of those that remained were the rental properties housing the Black families that worked in houses in the area. My great grandfather was a chef to a family that lived in Ansley Park, about three miles away from his house. He raised my father and my uncle when their mother married and moved with her husband up north to Detroit, looking for a better life during the great migration era.

By the 1960s the neighborhood was a working class Black neighborhood with a strong social and cultural life but also known for needing substantial improvements to the infrastructure and housing. I remember my father reminiscing about finding his grandfather standing outside of their rundown apartment with only the things he could gather when he came from work to find that their building had been condemned without warning and they were to leave the property immediately. My family moved a few blocks up, lived there for nearly five years, only to be told the exact same thing—they had to leave again. This time because of the construction of the highway. This history was not uncommon for Black Atlantans. Buttermilk Bottoms, completely razed in the 1970s, once home to 3,000 Black residents, is today the site of the Atlanta Civic Center and the accompanying businesses and parking lots.

When they left Buttermilk Bottoms, the only area they could afford was the neighborhood of Summerhill on the city’s Southside. Yet with this move tragedy struck: only six months after leaving the only area my great grandfather knew as home he died. My father always equated his death to the stress of being forced to move and with each move his travels by foot to get to work got further and further.

Soon after the move to Summerhill, my parents met and married really young and began to rent a shotgun home. After about three years of renting, they were thrown out in the Leon Eplan era of “getting rid of the slums.”¹¹ They moved in with family members but just after moving learned that their relatives were also in the process of being displaced via eminent domain as the Fulton County Stadium was being built. Again they were forced to migrate out of the community to a nearby area where the homes were somewhat affordable, but the school system was failing and jobs were rare. Our family suffered a lot because of the instability of not having a secure home.

Fortunately, after moving to Kansas to support his family by obtaining his GED and a commercial driving license, my father moved back to Atlanta, settled in Peopletown, and was employed by the City of Atlanta as a sanitation worker. Eventually he gained his rank within the City. Because of his hard work and dedication to his job, my parents were able to become first generation homeowners.

But, sadly, my father died early, and basic family survival became a struggle. Survival continues to be a generational issue for Black families in Atlanta, and it is made even more difficult with past histories and future threats of displacement. Today we still live in the Peopletown area but are being threatened by the big squeeze of the BeltLine and Turner Field developments. Which leaves many of us wondering where we will go if price hikes drive us out yet again.”