



**Myth #1: Detroit is a prototype for post-industrial failure, a violent and dangerous city only filled with abandonment and urban decay.**

There is no dispute that it has become “cool” to like and support the city of Detroit if you live anywhere near Southeastern Michigan. Between the Midtown and Downtown boom, Detroit sports fans, and the growth in suburban day trippers to visit new restaurants on Corktown’s Michigan Avenue, you see a lot of interest from outsiders who will frequent t-shirts like these—glorifying Detroit’s grit and promoting positive attitudes about the city.



Even with all this apparel, you don’t actually see any of these people living in the city. Why is that? A significant percentage of today’s Michiganders only know Detroit as a model for post-industrial failure, a dangerous place that you wouldn’t even consider raising a family in. It is likely this subset of the population still recognizes Detroit as a place that *once* had historical significance. Perhaps they associate Detroit as the birthplace of Motown and the automobile, or have heard stories from an older family member about when Detroit used to be “good”.

Despite its steady population declines since the 1960s (even losing over 200,000 residents between 2000 and 2010), Detroit is still the largest city in Michigan—well over three times the size of the second largest. What do the 700,000 people currently living there have to say about this population's periodic distant support, yet blatant and complete dismissal of a safe, functional, and normal community? As expected, life-long residents and new-comers of the city engaged with this myth from different perspectives.

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"I just don't understand how people don't get it, we are all the same! We are all human. We all have the same desires to have a nice neighborhood to raise our kids in!" We had been having a pleasant and stimulating conversation over tea, when suddenly I was unsure how to respond. My immediate reaction was to shake my head and think, "Of course, of course! How could anybody not get that?" But soon I became aware that I was only kidding myself, and despite my interest in the city and active engagement with this project, *even I didn't get it*. Outsiders have a mindset that there is no locus of control over social forces in a struggling urban community like Detroit. Social forces like the safety of the neighborhood you live in, to the quality of public schools that are available for your children, and everything in between. Residents like Dolores Slowinski understand that there is control over these factors, and that other residents are equally invested in improving them. If the neighborhood that is *home* to your family doesn't align with ideal standards, you don't automatically give up and walk away.

Dolores, a second generation Polish American, grew up in Detroit's former west side when the neighborhood was predominantly comprised of Polish immigrants. Unlike most of

her classmates and first cousins who started moving to western suburbs like Redford or Westland when the neighborhood culture began to drastically shift, Dolores stayed. And so did her parents and sister. After living with her parents in the house she grew up in for four years, Dolores and her husband had saved up enough money to buy a house in Aviation Subdivision, a nearby West Detroit neighborhood where her sister and brother-in-law had recently moved to.

Dolores described her and her husband's experience raising a white daughter in a predominantly African American neighborhood as terrific. "The neighbors acted as second grandparents, and there were other children in the community the same age. There were always boys out playing basketball at their houses." After graduating from Renaissance High School, Dolores' daughter got a full ride to an architecture school in Brooklyn. She lived in New York for seven years, but as Dolores predicted, it didn't take long for her to come back to Detroit.

Currently, Dolores resides in Aviation Subdivision, living in the house she raised her family in. An established artist, she also owns the house next door, which she uses as a studio. Upon returning from Brooklyn, Dolores' daughter bought the home that her grandparent's had spent their entire lives in, the house where Dolores grew up. Dolores' sister still resides in Aviation Subdivision as well, only one block away.

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Casey Sullivan, a student at Oakland Community College and delivery driver at Hungry Howie's who has been living in Midtown for six months, described his experiences with the culture shock moving from the suburbs. "People love to talk to you. Everyone in my building

always greets me and asks for my name when we cross paths in the lobby. The same thing happens walking around the streets. There just aren't that many people outside, so you often see the same people walking around and eventually become acquainted with them." He reports that this wasn't exactly the kind of culture shift that he expected from moving into a larger, more urban environment. Nonetheless, he has enjoyed this aspect of living in the city, and it has helped make his transition smoother.

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I quickly lost track of time listening to the stories from life-long residents of Southwest Detroit, Adam and Mary Cantu. From the stories of growing up in different parts of Southwest, to the story of how they first met and got married, and the stories about raising their own kids in Southwest, I was constantly intrigued. If there's anything I've learned from talking one-on-one to Detroiters, it's that their geography of the city is impeccable. Fortunately, I happen to be obsessed with city maps, so even if I hadn't been to many of the places that were discussed, I recognized the street names and their relative locations.

Adam, a Mexican American whose family came to Detroit from Texas, explained some of the complex ethnic tensions in Southwest Detroit. Unlike African American culture, the Latino community in Detroit is fragmented. Each individual culture thinks they are superior to the other. This feud is particularly strong between the two dominant cultures, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. Adam and his wife Mary, who is Irish, also face issues being a mixed couple. Mary recalled, "I still get looks from all the Hispanics when I'm out in public with Adam, even though I've been here longer than they have!" She added, "Adam and Katy [our kids] definitely

struggled in school being mixed. Adam [my husband] also has two sons that are half Puerto Rican from a previous marriage.”

At one point, the couple recounted the time in the late '80s when their family was the victim of a drive-by shooting where an automatic rifle took out nearly an entire floor of their house. Cops eventually came, and after surveying the scene responded, “Yep, the passenger was shooting with one arm out of the window and over the car so they could reach the bedroom floors, somebody definitely wanted you dead.” They later learned that one of Adam’s sons had gotten into an altercation with a gang member, and the drive-by shooting had been their retaliation.

When I asked Mary why she never left the city despite some of the difficult experiences that her family experienced, she gave a very memorable answer. “Once you establish yourself in a community it’s hard to leave. It’s [your] home.” She wasn’t off put by my question, but her answer made it clear she valued the community of the city. She also explained that while there is some prejudice in Southwest, the prejudice in the suburbs is much worse—another reason they never considered moving.