

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - March 8, 2012

On shared driveways and class warfare in the Town of Chevy Chase

by Deborah A. Vollmer
Chevy Chase resident

"It is a terrible thing to see and yet have no vision." It is a quote from Helen Keller. It is also a message printed on one of several signs that I have posted on my lawn, some in my front yard, and others in the side yard facing the shared driveway.

My protest is aimed at builder/developers who, the way I see it, are destroying the nature and character of the Town of Chevy Chase, an affluent community in the Maryland suburbs by buying up lots with well-kept, modest-sized older homes, and replacing them with huge monstrosities, and destroying our tree canopy in the process. It is happening right next door to my home. So here I am posting signs. Welcome to Occupy, Town of Chevy Chase!

Posting signs seems natural to me. I grew up in the sixties, and was involved in the civil rights movement about as much as my parents would allow a sheltered teenager to be involved. My parents bought the house in 1947, the year before I was born. When I was growing up, our house was not yet a part of the Town. My father, Erwin P. Vollmer, a scientist who worked for NIH was also active in local civic affairs, and was one of several in our neighborhood to push for our little area to become a part of the Town. We were fighting excessive development at the borders of our neighborhood.

If my father were to know what was going on in the neighborhood now, I think he would be disappointed, and ashamed. Disappointed to see that the greed of builder/developers has taken solid root within the Town itself. Ashamed of the Town government, which on the one hand claims to be a protector of the neighborhood and the environment through its building ordinances, and on the other hand simply lets the builder/developers have their way.

I never thought of myself when I was growing up to be rich. Middle class, yes, perhaps upper middle class. But definitely not rich. Millionaires we were not.

I am definitely still one of the ninety-nine per cent. I am financially comfortable, but by the standards of the Town of Chevy Chase I am, at best, middle class. I certainly don't have an income of a million dollars a year, or anywhere close to it.

I can't say for sure whether those people, who had that nice house built in 1928 torn down to build that huge McMansion next door to me, are of the one per cent. I know that they own late-model cars--a Mercedes and a Lexus. I know they have had a house built which is about twice the size of mine, and that there is no longer a large grassy back yard or more than a couple of large trees left, because the house takes up all the room. I know that they came in with their architect, their builder, and their plans, and didn't have a care in the world about the effects of their plans on me, their neighbor.

Particularly problematic is the shared driveway, which dates back to 1928, is narrow, and was designed for simple front to back motion with no turning, to get from one's garage toward the back of the properties to the street in front. Each house had a detached one-car garage, and they sat, side by side, at the back of the driveway, like twins. As I was growing up, and later when I moved back to the family home in 1997 to stay with my father in his final years, the shared driveway was seldom an issue. It was understood that one neighbor would never block the driveway for more than a few minutes without notice to, and consent

of, the other neighbor. Over the years, there might be small disagreements over use of the shared driveway, but never anything major.

It was the idea of these new owners, to totally reconfigure the shared driveway without my consent and over my objection. They have built a two car garage at the front of their property, with a right angle turn onto the narrow driveway. It is inevitable that my use of the driveway will be impaired, because the apron will encourage parking on it, making it unsafe to back out. There have already been instances of such blockage, building materials left on the driveway or so close to it as to create an obstacle, and in one instance a delivery truck parking straddling the apron and the driveway. In short, these people have taken over the driveway, which is supposed to be shared. Wealth, it seems, has its privileges.

There have, of course, been lawsuits, over a period of over four years, and they continue. Not all have been resolved, although the house is nearly completed. We have appealed the County building permit based on a setback from the street which forms the corner on which the house sits. That issue has yet to be resolved by the Court of Special Appeals. Litigation concerning the driveway continues. In a countersuit, my neighbors sued me for three million dollars, a suit that was subsequently thrown out by the Circuit Court. I have spent a lot on lawyers fees, and I don't begrudge my lawyer, he is good. I have my own opinion of their lawyer, which is probably best left out of this narrative.

I don't know how all of this will end. The new owners appear to me to be very arrogant, but perhaps they are victims—to the builder and architect who sold them on a plan for their dream home, without advising them that the "shared" in shared driveway agreement does not give a newcomer the right to totally reconfigure a shared driveway over the objection of an established neighbor. Greed and profit are clearly at work here. Given the slowness with which the wheels of justice turn, I don't expect a resolution of this matter anytime soon.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net