

Shaw Streets

BY RALPH BRABHAM

Couple To Enliven Forlorn Corner

Sometimes the word “welcome” is not nearly expressive enough. Such is how the Shaw neighborhood feels when it comes to embracing incoming neighbors Lauren Neely and Ryon Beyer, an enthusiastic young couple who recently purchased a house that has been vacant for decades.

Longtime Scourge

Corner properties have a tendency to set the tone for an area. Well-kept ones are pleasing gateways; derelict ones are uninviting signals of neglect and decline. Unfortunately, 1543 Eighth St. NW has been the latter.

Some estimate that the brick Victorian row home has been vacant for over 30 years. In that time, it has sat ominously dark, boarded and decaying over the intersection. Contrasting the surrounding area’s marked renewal, 1543 Eighth St. has been a magnet for graffiti, trespass and, on occasion, lurking criminals.

To the relief, surprise and elation of many, longtime owner Shiloh Baptist Church placed 1543 Eighth and a property on the opposite corner, 1600 Eighth St., both for sale in August 2009. The hope of changes in ownership and potential for revitalization of the historic properties kept everyone excited. In December, 1600 Eighth sold, and it will be redeveloped into condominiums. After months of rumors, the sale of 1543 Eighth became final in March.

Two Seek Homely Adventure Together

Engaged to be married this fall, Lauren and Ryon love adventure. Together, they have traveled throughout Cambodia, Turkey and Peru. Typifying their relationship, their marriage proposal occurred while hiking the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu.

Adventure is what Lauren and Ryon sought in a first home. Ryon has had a lifetime of interest and practice in carpentry and home renovations. He has long dreamt of buying a building in shell form, on which he could do a complete renovation. Lauren liked the notion of designing



yon Beyer and Lauren Neely in front of 1543 Eighth St. NW. Photo: Drew Porterfield

Preparations underway to commence construction at 1543 Eighth St. NW, which has been vacant for decades. Photo: Drew Porterfield

a totally new and modern layout complementary to her needs and lifestyle.

The search for a fixer-upper drew them to Shaw about a year ago. They quickly became enamored with the neighborhood. Lauren says, “We discovered how young, energetic and diverse [Shaw is]. ... We can really see how far the neighborhood has come and the potential for how far it can go. We love the architecture of all the old houses and the history of this area. ... And it doesn’t hurt that we love Ethiopian food.” Another draw to the couple was the sense of community they felt, “especially on Eighth Street.”

They spotted 1543 Eighth fairly early on in their hunt. They saw the inherent beauty of the historic brick structure, despite its disrepair. “We immediately were able to envision where certain rooms would be [and] how we would design our cook’s kitchen, which is really hard to do with a boarded up shell. So we knew this was something special,” says Ryon. When it became available, they seized the opportunity and began the purchase process.

New Life Coming to the Corner

Lauren and Ryon largely designed the renovation of the house themselves using Google sketch-up, with their plans overseen and formally translated by an architect. They will keep the structure a single family home, completely restore the structure’s historic exterior, and implement a contemporary interior. Their layout will be flexible for future changes, with minimal interior load bearing walls and plumbing roughed in so that extra features (like a wet bar) can be added later if desired.

When complete, the house will be ideal for entertaining. It will feature open floor plans and a chef’s kitchen. Additionally, in order to maximize entertaining and outdoor space, they plan a fabulous roof deck. They have designed a stairwell that will run from the basement all the way to the roof facilitating flow from floor to floor.

Lauren and Ryon plan to inhabit the house by September. Although the timeline sounds aggressive given the dilapidated current condition of the house, they think it is doable. “Our goal is to have a minimum grade finish by September,” says Lauren. Ryon will thereafter execute much of the finish work, and together the couple will tinker on other odds and ends.

When asked about what has surprised them in the process to date, Lauren notes, “We’ve been pleasantly surprised how fantastic our new neighbors have been and just how excited the entire community is about our renovations.” Given that the neighborhood has awaited Lauren and Ryon’s arrival and this new chapter in 1543 Eighth’s story for several decades, the community’s excitement cannot be overstated. ♦