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## Fifty years after the Newark riots, residents (mostly) optimistic about the future

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Less than a mile from where the Newark riots began in 1967, Levon Putney tends to a small garden of oregano and cilantro in the alley of his modest home on South Jacob Street in the city's Central Ward.

"I knew from the news business where I was when I bought this house five years ago," said Putney, 43, the overnight news anchor for a prominent New York City radio station. "The riots are interesting. But they're not going to stop people from coming here."

*This is the fourth article in a four-part series on the 50th Anniversary of the Newark riot.*

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For fifty years, Newark has been trying to plant the seeds of its revival in ground blighted by blood and ashes from the 1967 unrest. For those who are now moving to Newark, and for those who chose to stay, there is a distinct opportunity to build a burgeoning community, finally ready to bloom.

Putney, hoping to own a home when he moved from Jersey City, didn't mind cleaning the syringes out of his newly bought vacant house. The opportunity was just too good.

"Don't get mad now, but I bought this house for \$30,000," said Putney, smiling as he described the benefits of getting a Federal Housing Administration loan. "All the folks on this block own their homes. I'm not the only one who got a good deal and who is taking advantage of it."

Erin Sweeney, 33, a native of rural Sussex County in far northwestern New Jersey, opted for city living six years ago. She has looked at Newark as her portal to the world ever since her childhood, when she went to the airport to fly out for family vacations.

She now works as the executive director for the Newark branch of Schools Than Can, a national non-profit organization that works to improve education in public, charter and private schools.

Paying \$2,000 a month for a large one-bedroom apartment in the Eleven80 apartment building diagonally across from Military Park in downtown Newark, she knows she has a good rent deal compared to friends who live in Jersey City and Manhattan. But she wonders how long her good deal will last.

“I look at [the One Theater square luxury apartments] going up down the block, and I know I can't afford that,” Sweeney said. “I hope I don't wind up getting priced out, because I'm excited about what's happening here.”

Meanwhile, Sweeney expresses her safety concerns about living downtown simply.

“I don't know if I should do yoga in the park before or after I go to Starbucks,” Sweeney said. “Now that could be dangerous.”

Crime was not on Tehsuan Glover's mind when he moved from Newark's South Ward, known for its relatively high crime rate, to Teachers Village. Instead, it was about convenience.

“I found myself to be in downtown Newark much more frequently because of my job,” said Glover, 37, the publisher of The Newark Times, an online, Newark-focused media organization. “I guess I'm part of the millennial trend – I want to rest my head where I work and play.”

“Revitalization can do a greater good if there are sustainable checks and balances on the process. Then the other wards will grow more and more attractive,” Glover added. “If not, the loud voice that says Newark still has a stigma will be the jacket that the city is going to continue to wear.”

Newark fits Marisa Vaccari Pedulla like a glove. It should – she's a fourth-generation Newarker. Her Italian immigrant family settled in the city's North Ward and had old-school jobs over the years such as fruit peddler, public school teacher and silver spinner at the former Tiffany jewelry factory in the city.

Now, Pedulla, 31, has a new-school job – she's a product marketer at high-tech Audible. To get to her job, she takes a 20-minute Newark light rail ride downtown. And she leaves every weekday morning from the home she recently bought with her husband in the Forest Hill section in the same North Ward where her family has lived for more than 100 years.

“This was not a hard sell. We fell in love with the neighborhood all over again,” said Pedulla about the purchase of her five-bedroom home. “Jersey City was out of our price scope. But people should be in

Newark because they really want to be in the city. My family was not part of the exodus after 1967. And now we're building on the roots that my family already put down."

The view from other parts of Newark points to a social fabric that is still badly torn.

Denise Williams, a South Ward resident, was visiting her relatives at a housing project in the Central Ward on Livingston Street between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Avenue earlier this summer. Her relatives live one block from where the exact spot were Newark ruptured 50 summers ago.

"We still need a lot of help out here," said Williams, 37, watching her nephews gleefully shoot each other with water guns on the same streets where in 1967 real guns did real damage. "All these killings are real. Drug selling is real. And a lot of these kids have to fend for themselves. But it's people that cause these problems to happen, not Newark itself. The riot is over. But people are still rioting within themselves."

"Newark is in worse shape now than in 1967 considering that the poverty rate in 1967 was 18 percent and today it's nearly a third of our city," said Marylou Bongiorno, a Newark resident who together with her husband Jerome Bongiorno made the critically-acclaimed documentary *Revolution '67*.

"If we don't reduce the poverty in Newark, no amount of building in the downtown or extra police is going to improve the city," she said. "And if Ferguson and Baltimore can erupt into riots, then Newark, with a far higher poverty rate, can easily do the same."

Then again, even for those locked into a cycle of violence, the events of 1967 lack immediacy.

"You tell some Bloods and Crips gang members about 1967, they don't want to hear it," said lifetime Newark resident Rasheed Mason, 34. "They can't believe tanks rolled down Springfield Avenue."

During an event to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Newark riots at Abyssinian Baptist Church, Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, the keynote speaker, gave the crowd a seminar about Newark history and the state of urban America.

He reminded the crowd that to him, what happened in 1967 was a rebellion, not a riot. Its purpose – to let democracy, powered by the people, address issues such as poverty, economic disparity, access to quality education, and combating crime.

"If you are alone, then you are defeated," Baraka said. "It is important that we build alliances, not isolate ourselves and destroy ourselves."

“It’s impossible for five days to fix hundreds of years of oppression,” Baraka told TAPinto Newark. “The narrative of 1967 diminishes what we’ve gone through. This is a protracted, generational struggle that takes us to where we are today.”

Back on South Jacob Street, two blocks from the same Springfield Avenue that was shattered 50 a half-century ago, Levon Putney stopped tending to his garden for a minute. He looked down the block at his neighbor’s home on the corner of Gold Street. He was jealous, yet determined.

“That guy is going crazy on his plot. He’s straight up harvesting veggies and melons,” Putney said. “Used to be there was no way in hell I was coming to Newark. Now look. There are roses growing up from the concrete.”

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