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Covering the Heights, Garden Oaks, Oak Forest & the neighborhoods of North Houston

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INSIDE.



Oak Forest residents give a new 'leash' on life for stray dogs, cats

The OFAA, a non-profit organization, is part of a community effort to help combat the immense number of stray cats and dogs in and around the area. The group, started by Adams, president Lisa Junco, vice-president Nora Loera and other residents, seeks to provide a foster system to help give stray and abandoned animals a chance for a better life.

See 3A

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Taking a step back



Contributed photos

Above Patrick (Buddy) Swayze and Cookie Joe, at age 16, where Joe was a former student at Swayze School of Dance. At the corner, a poem by Patrick Swayze to Rhonda Meyer Harris, a St. Rose classmate.

Swayze started the time of his life in Oak Forest

By Betsy Denson
betsy@theleadernews.com

It's not every day that a neighborhood can claim a world famous performer as one of their own. But Oak Forest certainly has ample bragging rights. Except they knew Patrick Wayne Swayze as Buddy Swayze, or Little Buddy, to distinguish him from his dad Jesse, also known as Big Buddy.

On August 18, 1952, Patrick Wayne Swayze was the second child and first boy born to Jesse and Patsy Swayze at St. Joseph's Hospital in Houston. According to Wendy Leigh's biography, *One Last Dance*, Swayze was born six weeks premature and his survival initially uncertain. However, he rebounded quickly and settled in with his parents and older sister Vicky at their home in the 1300 block of Wakefield Drive.

Brothers Don and Sean followed in 1958 and 1962. Sister Bambi was later adopted from Korea. According to Sean Swayze, the whole family was extremely athletic: "Buddy could do the iron cross (a strength hold performed on gymnastics rings) at seven years old." Patrick writes in his autobiography *The Time of My Life* about swinging from the trees behind his house on Wakefield – in a Speedo bathing suit – with brother Donny, pretending to be Tarzan.

Patsy Swayze's athletic prowess had its fullest expression in dance. A dancer since childhood, Patsy founded the Houston Jazz Ballet Company and also had her own school, the Swayze School of Dance. Some of her other well-known students included Debbie Allen, Jaclyn Smith and Tommy Tune.

After several moves around town, the school found an Oak Forest home on Judiway in the former club Pagoda A-Go-Go. Former student and Swayze friend Cookie Joe remembers that all of Patsy's dancers helped paint and remodel the location. Later, the school moved to Ella Plaza, where Suchu Dance now resides.

Swayze wrote in his autobiography that he and Vicky "studied dance with our mother from the time we could walk."

That's where Cookie Joe first met him. Now a dance teacher with her own studio and company in Sugar Land, Joe started at the Swayze School of Dance as a nine year old. It was the start of a long and warm

See **Swayze**, P. 5A

Parker: Not changing historical commission

By Jonathan Garris
jgarris@theleadernews.com

The development of the Heights is not just an issue important to residents who live there. Even Mayor Annise Parker knows the area's growth has included a few controversial consequences.

Last week, Parker spoke at the Greater Heights Chamber of Commerce's inaugural Gateway to City Government lunch, and she defended a highly publicized disagreement between some homeowners, home builders and the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission.

"The system appears to be working," Parker said. "Ninety-three percent are approved coming through the chute."

The HAHC consists of 13 appointed members who are tasked with approving major renovations or construction in the city's historic districts. All districts in Houston, except the Heights' three districts, have specific guidelines that tell homeowners what they can and cannot do to historic homes. The controversy has been over HAHC's ability to subjectively approve homes and deny "Certificates of Appropriateness," which legally allow work to begin, in the Heights.

Parker said she didn't see the need to revamp the HAHC, as it is filled with people who provide a variety of specialized expertise and skills.

"What we didn't do right was make sure that everyone who came on the commission had a thorough grounding of what was in the ordinance, and that everyone understood what the rules were," Parker said.

The city subsequently had training sessions for HAHC staff and said she and other officials were surprised with the results.

"It was amazing," Parker said. "Two people could look at a single ordinance and come to different conclusions."

Rather than dismantling the HAHC, Parker likened the process to hitting a reset button.

"We've taken a look at people who were there, particularly those that never could figure it out, and we're working to replace them."

Just last week, however, members of the Houston City Council did hit the reset button on a decision by HAHC. A homeowner in the Heights purchased a lot on Cortlandt Street and asked HAHC for permission to move the current home on that lot.

HAHC denied the request, presumably because they believed the house was a contributing structure to the historic era. Despite evidence to the contrary, the homeowners were overruled and told they could not move the home. Those homeowners then appealed to the city's Planning Commission and, again, they were denied.

For the first time, a homeowner challenged the two rulings to the Houston City Council, and this time, they were successful. Councilmember Ellen Cohen asked her colleagues to overturn HAHC's ruling, potentially setting a precedent for others to make further appeals to Council.

See **Turmoil**, P. 2A

Local artist recreates Heights family memories

By Christina Martinez
Christina@theleadernews.com

Tucked away in the Heights is a taste of New York City. A Heights backyard is home to a few New York themed paintings by a local artist, Charles Burwell, that capture some of the families fondest memories.

The painted backyard started as a Christmas gift for the husband. Burwell was contacted to see if he could help the wife with the project in time for the holidays.

"I live in Montrose and she asked me if I could help with the family project," Burwell said. "The NY skyline was our first project. She suggested some ideas and that's where it all began. It started as a Christmas gift for her husband. I had no idea how it would progress."

After the holidays, the family continued to work with Burwell. Next on the list was to turn three dreary looking windows into something new. One standout piece that Burwell recreated was a Macy's Day parade painting. The Heights couple was engaged in New York at the parade years before and it was something they wanted displayed.

Burwell went on to paint four large murals for the family. A subway scenery, Yankee stadium, a map of the families future and past endeavors, and a marina where the husband once lived.

The family added special lighting and New York antiques to compliment the space which has become a popular setting for frequent gatherings.

Charles Burwell is retired and thinks of the family paintings as a big milestone. He says we was "very happy to work with them."



Photo by Christina Martinez

Two murals by artisit Charles Burwell that capture family memories of a Heights family.



Swayze, from **P. 1A**

relationship with the Swayze family.

"Buddy and I would go to school and then head to the studio in the afternoon to dance or to clean it for others who would rent it out," she said. "It was our home away from home."

There was a core group of female dancers, including future girlfriend, Nikki D'Amico, who were very close to Patsy. Close enough that they often had slumber parties at her house in the 2300 block of Del Norte, where the Swayzes moved when Buddy was 10 years old.

Joe gives Buddy credit for saving her life when she almost drowned in the swimming pool behind the Judiway studio where he was a part-time lifeguard.

"Buddy was like a big brother to us," she said. "We were all his friends."

Another dancer, Leanna Sparacino, who worked with Patsy in California and performed at her memorial, was four years younger than Swayze but remembers him with equal fondness.

"Buddy was my first male dance partner," Sparacino said. "He was awesome even back then. He could sing, dance, he was intelligent and had manners. There was nothing not to like."

Interestingly, there was one other thing that Cookie Joe and Bob Logan, a friend of Vicky's who also danced with Patsy, remembered about the future star of Dirty Dancing – he wasn't always that crazy about it.

"He was a reluctant dance student," said Joe. "He was very physical, but dance was not (initially) his passion. He was a strong male who could lift." Logan remembers Patsy "having a fit one time because he couldn't be found for dance class."

But it was something he eventually worked hard at – hard enough to earn a scholarship to the Harkness Ballet in New York City – and regularly enough that he caught plenty of flak from his peers about his dancing.

Swayze relates several incidents where he fought back against those who bullied or taunted him, but Sparacino remembers one night at Ella Plaza when the company was rehearsing in front of the plate glass window. A group of boys hanging out on bicycles sat outside watching, and making fun of the boy dancers.

"At first Patsy told the boys to just ignore them, but finally they couldn't stand it," said Sparacino. "Buddy and some others went out and people were flying off bicycles. They didn't come back though."

Dancing also gave Swayze another gift – his future wife Lisa Niemi. "She came to Patsy's at 14, became a lead dancer and then Buddy's partner," said Joe. "He was smitten."

School Years

Swayze began his elementary school career at St. Rose of Lima Catholic School where his family also went to church. He apparently honed his romantic persona there too. St. Rose classmate Rhonda Meyer Harris recollects him calling her house, but her father wouldn't let her come to the phone. Undeterred, Buddy typed her the following poem which the family unearthed at her grandmother's home a few years back:

"I know a girl named Ronda, / She is the girl of my dreams. / She reminds me of a girl in El Fonda, / When she fixes her face in those creams. / She has a heart of gold / And her teeth are just like pearls. / She is only nine years old. / She is not like the other girls. / Her personality is so sweet, / And is always so neat. / Love, Buddy Swayze."

After St. Rose, Swayze attended Frank Black Middle School where classmate Leslie Bay Curran said they ran in different crowds but remembers him as a "big time jock." Others wrote on Facebook of their memories of Swayze and pal Nikki D'Amico in the school's production of Carousel. "Once saw a revival of Carousel on Broadway and left thinking ours with Buddy and Nikki stood up pretty well," wrote John Askins.

At S.P. Waltrip High School, Swayze was one of the leads in West Side Story, which his mother choreographed. However, he was also an athlete. According to his autobiography, he "ran track, swam...and took up diving, which I did well in thanks to my gymnastics training." In the Waltrip yearbooks, he is pictured with both the football team – Swayze writes he was named All-City Halfback – as well as the drama and folksinging club.

Oak Forest's Carol Obenhaus was in the folk singing group too and very aware of him, like many girls at Waltrip. "It was a social group," she said. "We didn't really sit on campus. There were rotating parties where we met at various people's houses."

Leslie Bay Curran recalls that at tryouts for one of the drama productions, Swayze got out his guitar instead of being accompanied by pianist Danny Ward. "We thought that was pretty cool."

Rhonda Meyer Harris was at Waltrip too, but didn't know Buddy well by then. She knew his clandestine nickname though – Body Swayze.

Class of '70 graduate Sal Salazar got to know Swayze through sports. "I was a track runner and he was playing Junior Varsity football," he said. "We would hang out after school and shoot hoops." Salazar said that Swayze helped him after he was disqualified in the HISD District Track Meet because of his age.

"He gave me moral support and the encouragement I needed not to give up running. So I continued training on my own and my coach entered me in the Texas AAU Junior Olympic Summer Games. After some victories, I (got) a Track Scholarship at Sam Houston State. Buddy Swayze was a true friend."

Rise to fame

As Swayze recounts in The Time of My Life, a football injury in a game against the Yates Lions ended his days on the gridiron. After rehabbing, he went to San Jacinto Junior College on a gymnastics scholarship and then to New York with Harkness Ballet. He played Danny Zuko on Broadway in Grease and then with wife Lisa, made the decision to move to Los Angeles. The rest is entertainment history.

Bob Logan, who went on to work in management at Astro-World, was watching television one night and immediately recognized the young Confederate soldier in the mini-series North and South.

"I thought wow, this was the little kid who didn't talk very much," he said.

"He went to the top in everything he tried," said Sean Swayze, a former Marine, who took some tumbling classes from his mom too back in the day before immersing himself in sports.

He said that by the time he was at Waltrip, his big brother was well known outside of the neighborhood and that he got a lot of questions from his teachers.

He also recalls the night John Travolta came to dinner at the house on Del Norte when Patsy was choreographing Urban Cowboy: "Friends would hide in the front yard and try to look through the windows."

Even today, people are still smitten with Swayze. "Every once in a while we get some European tourists at Mytiburger because they heard he hung out here," wrote Shawn Salyers on the Oak Forest Association Facebook page. "Somewhere in France there's about 10 minutes of documentary footage with me winging it on questions about him."

He did in fact eat there, according to Sean who remembers riding bikes to Mytiburger. Doyle's was a popular place for pizza with the Waltrip crowd too. Other hangouts like the Chuck Wagon and Alfie's in Ella Plaza are long gone. The house on Wakefield no longer stands but the one on Del Norte does.

Most tragically, the man himself is no longer here. Swayze died in 2009 of pancreatic cancer.

What does remain though are the memories of those who knew him way back when. "Buddy always remained down to earth and just as happy to see you," said Leanna Sparacino.

In 2006, Cookie Joe was in New York to receive a teaching award at a banquet where Swayze was the keynote speaker. "I hadn't seen him in 30 years and waited 45 minutes to meet him. Everyone else was calling him Patrick but when I got up there I said 'Hi Buddy.' He started crying and we held up the line. We took 15 minutes just to be Buddy and Cookie again."

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