

West Tulsa man cleaning up his neighborhood

MICHAEL OVERALL World Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, November 18, 2012 12:00 am

On a vacant lot near Don Comstock's house in west Tulsa, the weeds used to grow 10 feet high, blocking his view of a neighbor's house.

"Well, it never bothered me," Comstock said. "I don't own it. I mean, it's none of my business."

An elderly woman lived on the other side of the weeds. And one evening, while she was taking groceries out of the car, Comstock introduced himself.

"If there's anything I can ever do for you," he said, just to be friendly.

And she mentioned the mice and the snakes and the bugs. And what if there was ever a grass fire?

"Well, ma'am," Comstock told her, "I'm going to do something about it. I don't know what, but I'm going to get this thing done."



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Don Comstock smiles as he talks about his work while taking a break. JOHN CLANTON / Tulsa World



Two days later, he paid a guy \$100 to brush-hog the lot, then Comstock himself spent the next two weeks clearing debris and picking up trash.

"Boy," the old woman came out to tell him, "when you say you're going to do something, you really do it." She had no idea.

Sitting on his porch, sipping coffee every morning while enjoying his recent retirement, Comstock started looking around.

"There was trash on the side of the road. Weeds growing up everywhere. Houses running down. Just a lot of junk all over the place."

The neighborhood had been that way for years, but he had been too busy to notice. Or maybe it just wasn't his problem.

"Well, I'm going to do something," he told himself.

And, boy, when he decides to do something ...

'Just disrespectful'

Following Charles Page Boulevard out of downtown Tulsa, the old Sand Springs Railway ran parallel to the road in some places, separated by just a thin strip of grass.

The trolley system died when Comstock was just a kid back in the 1950s. But the rails are still there, and the neighborhoods are still named after the old passenger stops - Bruner Hill, Cotton Patch, Lake Station and so on.

"The people out here, especially my age, call it 'the Line,' " he said. "We're living 'on the Line.' "

A post-war suburb, the Line became ground zero for the Baby Boom, where veterans settled into civilian life with large families, new homes and manicured lawns.

Comstock shared a three-bedroom house with 10 brothers and sisters, the youngest girls sleeping on pallets in the living room while the boys squeezed into bunk beds and a trundle.

"A couple of the old-time neighbors didn't like us too much because we were the poor people," Comstock remembered.

"My dad left when I was about 10, so my mom pretty much raised 11 kids by herself. And she had health problems out the wazoo."

Sometimes she couldn't even afford a light bulb, and the kids would go next door to borrow one.

"Our yard would get pretty tall," Comstock said. "Everybody kept their places really nice back then, but we were kind of the trashy ones."

After he grew up, the Keystone Expressway killed the commuter trains. And home-owners moved out to newer suburbs, leaving behind mostly renters with absentee landlords.

Charles Page became largely industrial, with a few scattered gas stations and boarded-up storefronts.

By the late 1980s, when Comstock moved back into his boyhood home after his mother died, the neighborhood seemed almost unrecognizable.

"How can you own property and not take care of it? Not even try?" he said. "To me, it's just disrespectful to the people around you."

'Meaningful'

A couple of years ago, after cleaning up the first vacant lot, Comstock focused on an abandoned house a little farther down the street.

The grass stood 3 or 4 feet tall in the front yard and twice as high in back, full of trash.

Tax records led him to the landlord's front door, in an upscale part of Sand Springs.

"What do you want me to do?" the man asked.

"Clean up your property," Comstock told him. "Show some respect to the neighbors. We don't want to live next to that mess."

"Well, I'm doing all I can," the man insisted.

A couple of days later, Comstock mowed it himself and spent the weekend hauling away trash.

Technically, it was trespassing.

"They're not going to take you to jail," he shrugged. "I mean, for what? Weed-eating?"

After that, he started picking up trash that people dumped on the side of the road.

He takes care of weed-eating on a stretch of Charles Page and several other streets.

He keeps sidewalks clear, cleans up vandalism and has adopted several vacant lots, calling them "my properties," without ever asking anybody's permission.

He even mows the grass for Neighbors on the Line, a nonprofit group in the neighborhood, where the landscaping had been neglected for a while.

"The grass was 2 foot tall," he said. "Man, this place just looked pitiful."

But he always does it on the weekend, while the office is closed. It took them months to figure out who was mowing.

When they did, the Neighbors gave him a Volunteer of the Year award.

"That was meaningful to me," Comstock said. "Extremely meaningful. I know what I'm doing is little compared with what some people have done."

'It's contagious'

Frustrated that he wasn't making much of a dent on his own, Comstock organized "Clean Up Days" and went door-to-door to round up volunteers.

The largest and most recent effort focused on Lake Station, near Charles Page and 81st West Avenue last September.

"Get off my property," one older man told him. "I don't want to hear nothing about a clean up."

Turning to his neighbors, the man warned them not to expect much.

"They ain't coming back. You won't see them again."

That weekend a hundred volunteers turned out, collecting enough debris and garbage from around the neighborhood to fill several huge Dumpsters.

And the man who kicked Comstock off his property?

He used his tractor to haul debris to the dump site, working harder than almost anybody.

Toward the end of the day, he came up to Comstock with tears in his eyes.

"I owe you an apology," he said. "I never should have talked to you that way."

Comstock wiped a tear from his eye, too.

"If you help people," he said, "in my experience, it's appreciated. And it's contagious."

'Just wanted to help'

In the summer of 2010, without calling first, Comstock walked into the county commissioners office and asked to see Karen Keith, who represents his part of Tulsa.

The secretary wrote down a message, but six months went by without hearing back from anyone.

So Comstock called. And this time, Keith invited him downtown.

"Really?" He couldn't believe it. "Can I really come down there?"

Sixty-two years old and retired from the heating-and-air trade, he has a tangled beard that he hasn't trimmed since last winter.

And he never seems to leave the house without a pair of suspenders.

"Look at me," he said. "I know I'm not exactly the type to be hanging around politicians."

Actually, his twin brother is an elected official in Arkansas. But Judge Jon Comstock shaves more often.

"Yeah, Don is one of a kind," Keith said. "But I could just tell right away that he was a good soul."

She helped him organize the Clean Up Days and got the county to provide Dumpsters for free.

Then she roped him into volunteering with Habitat for Humanity and even started taking him to Rotary lunches.

Next Keith hopes to set up a permanent Dumpster on county property for him to use anytime he needs it.

"I should put you on the payroll," she told Comstock.

"No," he said. "Then it's a job. And a job is no fun."

In a sort of scrapbook file in his kitchen, Comstock keeps a campaign pamphlet that Keith put together last year.

It has a picture of him working on one of "his properties," with the title "Neighborhood Hero."

"When your 10-year-old grandson sees that and says to you, 'Papa, Papa, you're our neighborhood hero,' that puts you on top of the world."

Comstock had been walking back from his grandson's house when he stopped to talk to his elderly neighbor who had complained about the overgrown weeds and got him started on all this.

"If I had known what I was getting into," he said, "I might have kept walking."

But he's kidding.

"Seriously, I just wanted to help a little. I didn't think it would amount to much."

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SUBHEAD: neighborhood hero: the cleanup man Westsider takes it upon himself to clean the area

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