

Community's reputation starting to fade: resident

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being a low-income area. Fact is, you can't tar the whole community because of a few issues."

Nonetheless, he says the vernacular spawned from realtors: "Back then, if you had a house that couldn't sell, it was called a dog. There were a patch of them here."

The two men dismiss the idea the term was derived from Al Capp's comic strip, *Li'l Abner*, published in an era well before political correctness took hold. The Appalachia hillbillies in *Li'l Abner's* town of Dogpatch were poor, houses were ramshackle and inhabited by slow wits, scoundrels and thieves.

"Hey, could be," laughs resident Wayne White, who has rented in the area since 1997. "That comic was about rednecks. We have some of them."

Mr. White speaks candidly yet kindly about the community, a common trait among residents.

"We got a bad rap as having bad neighbours, fights and crackhouses," he says. "Sure, sometimes people get a little wild and get carried away with the drinking. Sure, there are young people here who like to show how tough they are."

The community's mean street reputation was regrettably and indelibly etched in the public eye with the 2004 murder of 19-year-old Michael Thornhill. His mother believes the family's move to the area played a direct

'We got a reputation as being a low-income area. Fact is, you can't tar the whole community because of a few issues.'

John Dowson
Newmarket Heights Community Association

role in her son's stabbing following an altercation in the parking lot of the Tim Hortons at Davis and Longford drives.

The family had fallen on hard times and was approved for social housing but ended up in a lower-end townhouse in a neighbourhood overrun with drug dealers, Laurie Thornhill says. "The police were there every night. It was hell and it ended in hell."

But, according to York Regional Police Chief Armand La Barge, "We monitor call histories and, statistically, Newmarket Heights is no worse than any other area. It doesn't deserve its reputation."

As a resident of the community in the 1970s, Chief La Barge is in tune with the neighbourhood's personality.

"I get upset when I hear negative comments," he says. "I still have friends there. The (Michael Thornhill) homicide brought a lot of attention to the community. That's not to say there aren't issues, but we've worked hard with community partners."

In 2007, the force focused on investigating houses suspected as drug operations.

"We're seeing a shift in attitude. There's a gentrification. We're seeing a transition and, like all of Newmarket, there's a strong sense of community in the neighbourhood."

Ron Westwood, owner of a tidy Sheldon Avenue house, along with his wife and three young children, shakes his head sadly when reminded of the 2004 homicide.

"That kid worked for me briefly," the auto

parts supplier says. "It was shame. It was a fight. I heard it was a drug deal gone bad."

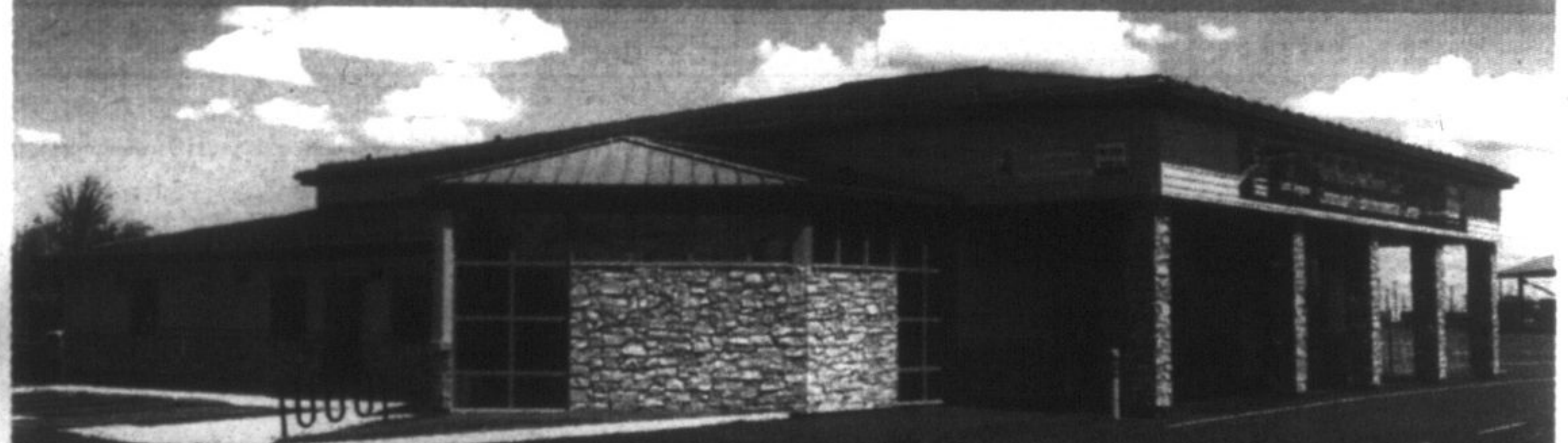
Still, after renting on a nearby street, he opted to buy in the community he has come to love.

"There are family values here," he says. "One day, 20 kids are playing in my driveway. The next, they're across the street. We watch out for one another. The teachers at Maple Leaf (Public School) are excellent. Everything's around the corner."

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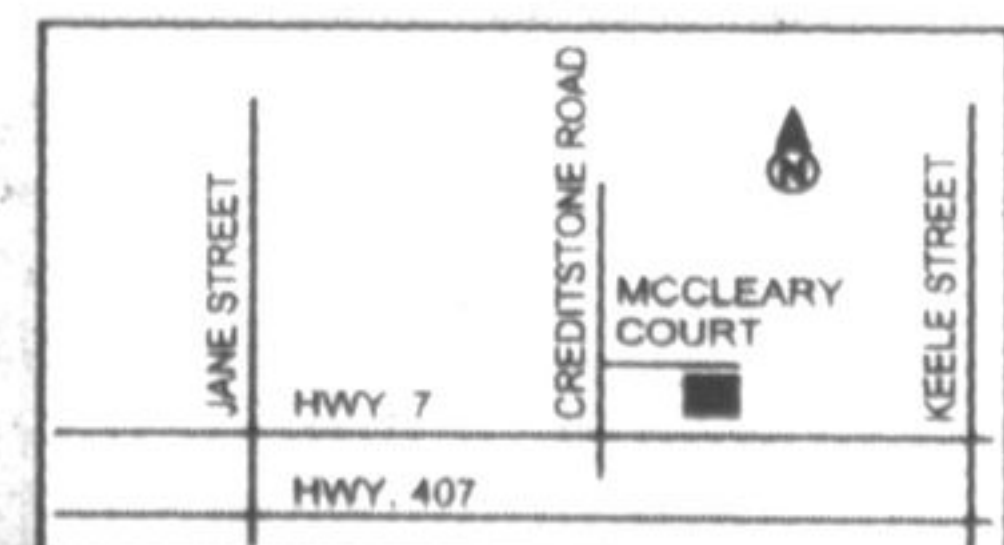


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