

## Village vistas

Locals say Forest Hill's charm is in its history

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Get Michael Walker talking about growing up in Forest Hill, and his memories come flooding back.

He remembers how his big brother -- seven years old at the time -- helped himself to some candy at a local store and was hauled into the basement of the police station to get a good look at a jail cell. He laughs when he thinks of how he and his friends used to scavenge through the dump behind Holy Rosary Church to search for "quality garbage" fit for a kid. And he gets serious when he recalls how his teachers at Forest

Hill Public School noticed he couldn't read, discovered he had dyslexia, and worked tirelessly to help him succeed.

Today, that little boy is a senior citizen who proudly oversees Forest Hill and neighbouring Chaplin Estates as councillor of St. Paul's riding. Get him started and it's clear Mr. Walker can't get enough of the historic architecture, institutions and greenery that grace his stomping grounds, and he's not surprised others feel the same way. Increasingly, he says, the children and grandchildren of original owners are moving back and taking over the family home because they have an emotional connection to the 'hood and can't get it out of the system.

"People are comfortable here," says Mr. Walker. "It's like the chair that fits. But it's not just an old chair that's worn out. It's security, a comfort level and pride (that brings people back)."

Forest Hill took its moniker from John Wickson's summer residence built in 1860 at Eglinton and Old Forest Hill Road (it has since given way to apartment buildings). Well before he arrived, native Indians roamed the forests and hunted deer -- perhaps that's why the village crest, created in 1924, is a deer with an arrow piercing its neck (check it out atop Fire Station No. 135 at Chaplin Road and Eglinton Avenue, built in the late 1920s, and then ask about the jail cell in the basement). The village was incorporated in 1923 and was one of the last independent villages to be annexed by the City of Toronto in 1967.

Today, Forest Hill is divided into two distinct sections.

There's the Upper Village north of Eglinton, where 2,000-square-foot, four-bedroom, 1950s and '60s homes on 40- and 50-ft lots go for \$900,000 to \$2-million, depending on their condition. Many of the original owners are now empty nesters and selling up to couples in their 30s and 40s with school-age kids who frequent Eglinton's busy shops and eateries.

But the heart of Forest Hill, as the locals know it, is the Lower Village along Spadina Road, south to Lonsdale Road. Many of the Georgian and Tudor homes on 50- to 75-ft. lots date to the 1920s and '30s and boast beautiful stone fronts, leaded windows and large gardens that scream prestige ("People ask us to take off our boots," chuckles firefighter Doug Irwin).

Naturally, it's a magnet for Toronto's rich and famous. Old Toronto names like Basset, Eaton, Rogers and Weston mingle with newer celebrities such as singer Nelly Furtado, Toronto Argonaut co-owner Howard Sokolowski and his wife, Linda Frum, and hockey hero Mats Sundin. Former residents include authors Alice Munro, Dennis Lee, Robert Fulford and Irving Layton.

The real action is on two short, busy blocks with boutiques, restaurants, groceries, videos, galleries, hairdressers,

banks and more. In fact, it's this stretch -- and the friendly neighbours -- that kept empty nester Estelle Kosoy and her husband from leaving the area when their four children left home. The thought of moving to a downtown condo "made me feel lost, that I wouldn't belong to a community," she says, so she was thrilled when they stumbled upon a suitable duplex in the area that had everything they needed. Despite the impressive homes, she finds Forest Hill "quaint and secluded" with a European flavour and charming people ("even dogs on leashes seem to greet each other," she laughs). The only thing that is missing, she says, is a movie theatre. The popularity, though, is

bringing with it controversy as new residents buy the big old houses for several million dollars and then bulldoze them to make way for custom-built 6,000-sq.-ft. replacements with below-grade garages (there's an 11,000sq.-ft., 10-bathroom mansion currently up for grabs -- on sale for \$9.3-million, with city taxes at \$57,000).

Jeffrey Wagman of Forest Hill Real Estate, explains while the original houses have solid foundations, the single-pane windows and poor insulation prompt buyers to knock down and start anew. Many lots are currently boarded up and coffee trucks feed the steady stream of tradesmen in the area. There are even a couple of low-rise seniors residences on the go catering to longtime homeowners who want to stay close.

Jennifer Kennedy, president of the Forest Hill Homeowner's Association, says the zoning bylaws are problematic while the renovations, new builds and proposed high-rises create unnecessary tension. "It's a community destroyer when you have to take your neighbour to court," she says.

Councillor Walker agrees, saying the mammoth homes "destroy the streetscape and look bad." He would like to see "more sensitive" structures that preserve the look and feel of the area.

"This neighbourhood is special," Ms. Kennedy says. "It's full of trees, it's got beautiful homes, so you have to have a sense of stewardship."