



# 'A VIBRANT





# PLACE

One of Lexington's key corridors, North Limestone, is experiencing a residential, commercial, and cultural revival

By Vickie Mitchell / Photos by Rick Samuels



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Clockwise from top left, a mural on the side of Al's Bar; one of the oldest homes on North Limestone; kids at a neighborhood celebration; Whitney Simms, owner of Paper on Stone; the Night Market; urban art on the side of Minton's

Last fall, Grant Phelps and his wife were having dinner at Broomwagon, a combination bicycle shop, coffee shop, and salad and sandwich stop that had opened a year earlier at the corner of North Limestone and Loudon Avenue.

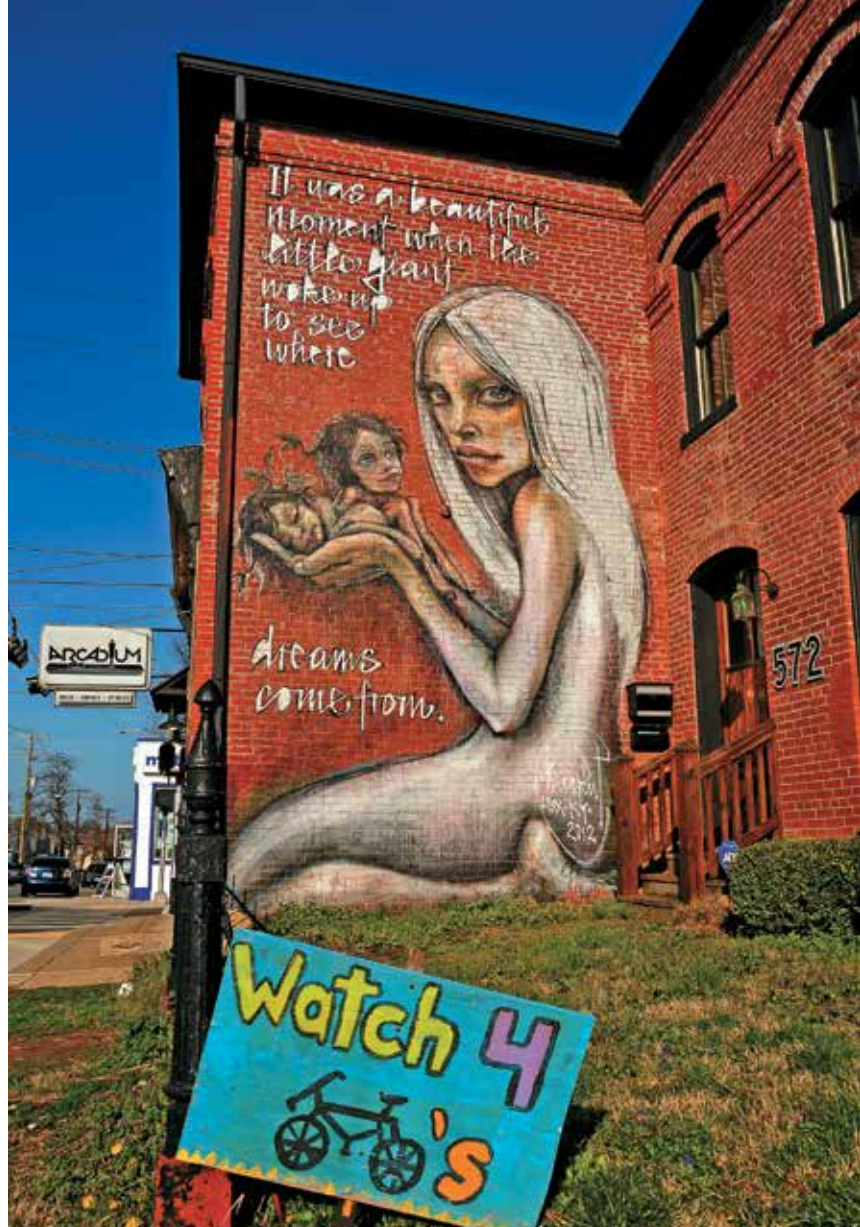
“She looked around and said, ‘This doesn’t feel like Lexington. It has a totally different vibe,’” said Phelps.

The observation is one Phelps hears often. He’s the president and CEO of the North Limestone Community Development Corp. (NoLi CDC), a nonprofit charged with helping those in the North Lime area improve their neighborhood as they protect and preserve its character and culture. “Our main fear is that we lose the history, culture, and the citizens,” said Phelps. “That is the community.”

Anyone who drives, bikes, or walks along the first seven blocks of North Limestone would notice the changes on one of Lexington’s oldest streets. Once-nondescript storefronts have been handsomely restored and are inhabited by new, locally owned businesses such as Fleet Street, a hair salon, and Arcadium, an arcade-themed bar. Murals brighten brick walls. Pocket parks interrupt pavement. New crosswalk signals protect pedestrians.



Broomwagon combines a bicycle shop and a café.



The Arcadium is an arcade-themed bar on North Limestone.

“It’s sort of a robust part of town,” says Lester Miller, who lives on North Lime and is among the owners of Al’s Bar at Sixth and Lime.

Miller is also part owner of Stella’s Deli on Jefferson Street. Some draw comparisons between what’s happening in NoLi — urban shorthand for the North Lime area — and Jefferson’s rebirth as a restaurant destination, but Miller detects differences.

“NoLi feels more do-it-yourself,” he said. “Business owners are a lot younger, grittier. Pretty much across the board it’s a first business, their first time attempting something. It is hip and cool.”

### A neighborhood with character — and characters

That exuberance appeals to Bob Elliston, Keeneland’s vice president of racing and sales. He and his wife, Sharon, bought a restored historic home in North Limestone’s 400

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block when they moved to Lexington almost six years ago so Elliston could help run the Breeders' Cup. After living in the northern Kentucky suburbs, they wanted to be in the city. Now, they walk to coffee shops, restaurants, and bars and meet people of all ages and economic circumstances, from students from Sayre School and Lexington Traditional Magnet School to street people making their way to the Lexington Rescue Mission in NoLi's 600 block.

"We enjoy the convenience and the variety of life that we encounter," said Elliston. "There are young professionals, some characters — there is character in the neighborhood as well as characters. It is a vibrant place. You see young people trying to make their livelihood with entrepreneurial ventures."

One of them is Whitney Simms, a 2005 Sayre School graduate who has opened a card and stationery shop and custom invitation business called Paper on Stone across the street from Sayre. She immediately noticed the difference in North Lime when she returned to Lexington in 2015. "It was completely changed," she said. "There's a young, more vibrant feel."

The transformation includes the storefront that houses her shop. When Simms was in school, the building was home to Whit-



Neighborhood improvements such as pedestrian crosswalks and pocket parks invite outdoor activities.

tington's Books, a rarely opened store where precarious piles of books covered the floor. Now, completely renovated, the storefront is a sleek showroom with wood floors, high ceilings, and sunlight streaming through big windows. "I don't feel like my store could be anywhere but in this place," she said.

Next door, at the gelato shop Sorella Gelateria, co-owner Alma Kajtazovic feels the same. Her shop, she says, is a perfect fit for an area where several businesses have European flair. The take-away pasta and sauce shop Bodega A Market by Lexington Pasta flanks Sorella; a half a block away French doors open to the bistro le Deauville; farther south, near Main Street, the new Corto Lima riffs on Spain and its famed tapas.

"I feel like this is an area where someone could come and hang out for half a day," said Kajtazovic. "These small businesses, they are staying in business and making these areas better."

### Cleaning up a longtime bar changed much for the better

Improving the neighborhood was what Miller and partners had in mind when they bought Al's Bar a decade ago. Among Miller's partners in Stella's is Griffin Van Meter, who also lives in NoLi, owns multiple businesses there, and was key in the creation of the NoLi CDC.



Rain barrels and free books can be found along the thoroughfare.

“Back then Sixth and Lime was the center of the red light district, and Al’s was a sanctuary for those activities,” said Miller. “The only reason we bought Al’s was that my family lived next door and it was a bad place. We felt that if the neighborhood was going to change, Al’s had to change.”

Although the partners never meant to stay in the bar business, Al’s became a popular hangout. After a first weekend marked by 17 fights, things started to simmer down. Live music became part of the mix, and before long the owners started noticing that their customers mirrored the neighborhood.

“Our partner Paul Holbrook’s favorite moment in Al’s history was when he looked around the bar and saw people from Gratz Park, day laborers, lawyers — a wonderful eclectic mix of people from every social strata,” said Miller.

### A diverse slice of the city

What Holbrook noticed was not an anomaly. The North Lime area is far more diverse than the city as a whole, according to



Sisters Alma Kajtazovic and Selma Sulejmanagic co-own Sorella Gelateria.

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statistics the CDC reports in its extensive cultural plan. The neighborhood's percentage of African Americans is more than twice the average for Lexington; the Hispanic population is also larger. Fewer people own their homes than in the city as a whole, 40 percent compared to 55 percent.

And the statistics also verify what those who live there are seeing. Affordability, convenience, and potential are bringing new people to NoLi, many of them young professionals.

Fifteen years ago a minuscule percentage of the neighborhood's population earned more than \$75,000 a year; now 10 percent do, far lower than the 32 percent for the city as a whole, but still a big jump. There's also been a significant increase in the number of homes valued at \$80,000 to \$150,000.

That's one reason the CDC has placed a major focus on affordable housing. It is starting the second phase of a home-building effort on York Street that has replaced substandard, mostly shotgun homes with new, small energy-efficient houses priced affordably enough that two of the three long-term renters on York have been able to buy their own homes.

The CDC's four-person staff is "connecting the branches of the community," said councilman James Brown, whose district includes NoLi and who serves on the CDC's board. "There are a whole lot of moving parts."

The neighborhood improvements the CDC has helped orchestrate go beyond the new homes on York Street. It has had a hand in the pocket parks, pedestrian crosswalks, lower speed limits, a youth music program, water quality projects, public art, and neighborhood gardens.



Art such as this organic guitar adorns the neighborhood.



Horseshoes make a unique fence.

## WANT TO GET TO KNOW NOLI? THESE EVENTS ARE FUN INTROS.

North Limestone's most popular regular event is Night Market, a pop-up street festival on Bryan Avenue in the 700 block of North Lime. Organized by the NoLi Community Development Corp., the market is the first Friday night of the month (May-December) from 6-10 p.m. It's a chance for local artisans and entrepreneurs to sell their wares and nonprofits to promote their services. Area food trucks supply food and drink; sponsor West Sixth Brewery hosts a biergarten.

Occasionally Night Market has a theme — May's edition, for example, celebrated Mexican culture as its dates coincided with Cinco de Mayo; in October the market will go all Hogwarts and Harry Potter as the CDC, for the second year, partners with the Lexington Harry Potter Alliance (Lexpecto Patronum). ([www.nolicdc.org](http://www.nolicdc.org))

Like most everything else along North Lime, the Night Market has flourished since the first one in the fall of 2014.

"There were 100 to 200 people at the first one," said Grant Phelps, NoLi CDC executive director. "Today we have more than 5,000 people, with about 45 vendors." Nearly half of those who attend live within a half-mile, and 70 percent of vendors are from the neighborhood, according to the CDC. The market not only brings the neighborhood together, it helps entrepreneurs move from "booths to bricks," said Phelps.

For those who can't make Night Market, there are weekly evening events at Broomwagon, a bike shop, coffee stop, and eatery. Mondays it's an old-fashioned jam session; Tuesdays, there's stand-up comedy; and Friday is Trivia Night. The shop is also starting point for a number of organized bike rides each month. ([broomwagonbikes.com](http://broomwagonbikes.com))

Al's Bar offers its free Al's Children's Series at 5:30 p.m. on some Fridays.

"Our goal is to expose children to music at a young age; some of the groups are composed of children so it gives kids a chance to perform," said Al's partner Les Miller. "And it is also a fun way for parents to hang out in a child-friendly environment with their friends and other parents."

Visit Al's website for upcoming dates. ([alsbarlexington.com](http://alsbarlexington.com))

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The fortunes of North Limestone Street have waxed and waned over the years, from prosperous in the 19th century to down at its heels during periods of the 20th. The new century marks an ascendancy for NoLi.

The CDC also is involved in developing plans for the former Lex-Tran headquarters at Loudon and Lime. One possibility is a public market, similar to Cincinnati's Findlay Market, which could supply fresh food and jobs for neighborhood residents.

The community spiritedness the CDC exudes is echoed in many of the area's new businesses. Broomwagon is a good example. It serves a neighborhood where for many, biking is less about exercise and more about economic necessity.

"There is a lot of pedestrian and bike traffic over here. Bikes are vital for those who don't have the means to have a car," said shop partner James Gonyer. "People had to have bikes repaired

farther away, and that was difficult."

The shop advocates for biking and has received grants to purchase and install bike repair stations and air pumps along the urban sections of the Legacy Trail. It's a meeting place for bikers and bike organizations. "We wanted to be more of a gathering place than a cold retail box," Gonyer said.

### Change continues to course along North Lime

Development along North Lime doesn't seem to be slowing down. Near downtown, a collaboration between Rooster Brewing and Gastro Gnomes food truck is expected in the old Merit Furniture building. Seven blocks away, Lucie Slone Meyer, who owned a la Lucie at North Lime and Barr Street for decades, has opened her long-awaited Red Light Kitchen and Lounge in a long, thin building decorated in the same eclectic style as her former restaurant, but is bigger, brighter, more casual, and moderately priced.

Back down the block toward downtown, there's a mishmash of small businesses — Feather & Blade, Rock House Brewing, professional offices, and neighborhood bookstore and gathering place The Wild Fig.

Miller, for one, believes change in NoLi will come more quickly than it did even on Jefferson Street.

"I think NoLi is on a compressed timetable. I don't think it is going to take 20 to 30 years for NoLi to catch up," he said. "There's a lot going on, and I think it is only going to improve going forward." **KM**



Transylvania University has long provided the neighborhood with a youthful dynamic.

## SIXTH AND LIME REMAINS DESTINATION FOR DONUTS

A lot has changed along North Limestone in the last few years with at least one reassuring exception: donuts remain the early morning attraction at the corner of North Limestone and Sixth Street.

Since 1934, with only a few years' interruption, people have waited in line at that corner for donuts. Until 2006, it was the no-frills Spalding's Bakery. Six years later, North Lime Coffee & Donuts stepped in to fill the void when Spalding's moved to new digs on Winchester Road.

North Lime is nothing like its old-

school predecessor. Where Spalding's stuck to the basics — glazed, iced, and cake — North Lime is exuberantly topping donuts with bacon, pineapple, and other exotic ingredients.

At Spalding's, customers grabbed their dozen and headed home or to the office. At North Lime they can settle in with family and coffee — at picnic tables beneath a metal-roofed porch or at tables indoors. The contrast in styles is a sweet way to sum up the transformation of North Lime from reliable but overlooked to hot and hip.



Aaron Kersey of North Lime Coffee & Donuts displays the goods.

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