

# ALONSOVILLE VOICE

LOVE IS IN THE AIR!

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*(cover) Photo by Steve Ziger*

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## A Foxy Tale

The male trots along the stone wall, his bushy tail taut. After an autumn of rabbits, squirrels and doves (the birdfeeder serves as a buffet), he appears well fed. His coat is magnificent, almost regal. Below, his mate (let's call her Foxy) is inciting the golden retriever in the next yard. Teddy races back and forth. On hind legs, paws between spokes, Teddy barks and barks while Foxy lounges on the grass, preening her coat. Now and then she looks at her reflection in the round mirror at the bottom of the fence. That's right, sweetheart, you are beautiful. Teddy falls back. Time to eat. He trots to the kitchen door, barks, and Sara lets him in. Foxy leaps over the fence, snatches a tennis ball, and jumps back. Ball in jaw, she vanishes behind the line of pines. Somewhere there's a lair.



### Quote of the day

“Life without love is like a tree without blossoms or fruit.”

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~ Khalil Gibran, Lebanese American poet

## **Neetu Dhawan-Gray: Advocate for the Voiceless**

By David Bolton

She was born in north India, in the city of Kanpur in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Her parents divorced when the child was a year old. Her early years were spent in her uncle's house while Swaran, her mother, took the risk to pursue in the States her second master's degree. The family, including Neetu's grandmother, supported the decision. From the beginning, Neetu did not see herself as an only child. The extended family nurtured her. "I never felt like an orphan or fatherless," Neetu said in a recent interview. "My uncle, Narendra Mamaji, filled that role."

Her uncle decided that his five-year-old niece should go to Catholic school and stay with her Raj Massie during the school week and come home on weekends. "Sixty-five students and one nun. You knew the rules. The teacher was god." From a very young age, Neetu learned "acceptance, tolerance and respect." That did not mean one had to be subservient. "I didn't have to agree with my teachers and elders, but I had to accept my place in the world which was to learn and do my best."

The school taught a southern Indian language, as well as Hindi but the learning was all in British English. Being a child, Neetu did not know all the nuances of the English language and would often come home asking for the definition of words spoken by the nuns. Her grandmother did not speak English. As expected, Neetu conversed in three languages: English, Hindi and Punjabi. Dinner conversations were a mixture of the three languages.

In '62, Swaran graduated with a master's in social work and landed a job with Family and Children's Services in Baltimore. Time to send for her nine-year-old. Neetu traveled alone from India with eight dollars in her purse. She arrived at Friendship Airport on Saturday and Monday entered the fourth grade of Roland Park Country School. It was a "huge adjustment." She watched teachers being treated with disrespect. Students talked out of turn. The girls mocked the brown-skinned foreigner when she stood to answer a question. Her spelling of "neighbour" and "colour" had no place in English class. "I thought I knew what I was doing." When a teacher entered the classroom, she forced herself not to rise.



The following year the first black student enrolled, and she and Neetu became friends, a friendship that lasts to this day. She too was from a divorced household, which was shameful in some circles back then. “Mother raised me not to feel sorry for myself. Or as she said, have a pity party.”

At Goucher College, she wasn't sure what she wanted to do. That said, she did know how to have a good time, such as driving to Georgetown (the drinking age was 18) and returning at three or four in the morning with her friends. She threw her first party in the dorm. Three hundred showed up as the drinking age had changed in Maryland to 18 in 1975.

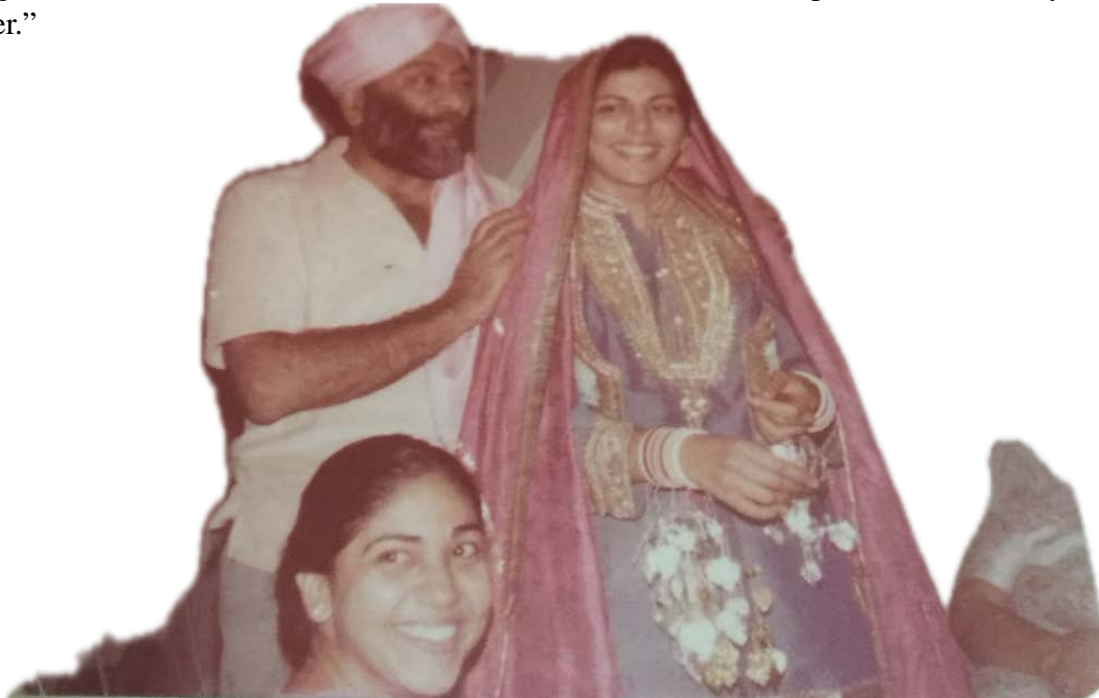
She settled on psychology as a major. As an intern at the Kennedy Krieger, she came into her own. “It was an exciting time in a wonderful, ground-breaking environment.” She had the opportunity to work with “a clinical team of neurologists, pediatricians, social workers, and psychiatrists, an incredible group devoted to the well-being of the child.” She earned 12 credits and graduated in '76 a semester early. She had great mentors who allowed a young college student to learn and give input, a profoundly life-changing experience that to this day brings a smile to her face.



Her mantra of acceptance, tolerance and respect would soon be tested. Having gone to school in the Roland Park community, Neetu thought doors would be open and welcoming. There were events, however, where invitations were not offered, or the venue was not open to having “foreigners.” She could not go to the wedding of a dear friend because the Maryland Club forbade the entrance of dark-skinned people.

A few months later, Neetu and a friend from Goucher were looking for a place to live. In a Deepdene Thrift shop on Wyndhurst, they found a rental notice on the bulletin board. She called the number and made an appointment. They met the landlord at the Deepdene house. Looking right at Neetu, the landlord said, “The house is already rented.” Twenty-two-year-old Neetu was stunned. “I’m a college graduate,” she protested, thinking that the ability to pay was the issue.

After departing, her friend asked: “What did you not understand? They don’t want you here.” Neetu told her mother what happened. Swaran shared her own experience of being denied housing in Catonsville because she was a divorcee with a child. “Accept it. You can’t let yourself be bitter.”



### **The Dynamo Spreads Her Wings**

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*“16,000 teenagers were sprinkled across the city working in all sorts of projects.”*

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Preferring to work in the “helping world” versus doing therapy, Neetu took a job as program coordinator for Meals on Wheels, a six-kitchen operation. The volunteers knew little about the people they served but were eager to help. She detected a lack of enthusiasm. Neetu plunged into

the field, interviewing hundreds of the elderly and disabled in their homes. For each person, she created a detailed profile. “Some of the people were poor and didn’t know how to ask for or were too proud to ask for help themselves. Some didn’t have money. Some had to stretch their meals....” Because of the profiles, the volunteers “felt better” and front-line people knew who to call. It was all about creating meaningful relationships and having voices heard.

After a year, she moved on to the State, working as a community mental health worker supporting families and young children in Federal Hill or South Baltimore. She initiated a project in an elementary school so children could have access to the mental health treatment they needed. Being recognized for her knowledge and compassion, Neetu was asked to be part of the State effort to create an in-patient treatment center for adolescents at the Carter Center.

All was not well with her employer, however. She was hardly around the building. Neetu was an advocate in the community and felt her work was to identify issues and find willing partners to develop solutions. As Neetu states: “It was in my inner soul to be out where the people were; it was best way to connect with the community.”

This did not fit well with the model of the center director, who believed people would come if and when they needed help. He was surprised when she informed the director of her plan to leave. The director called Neetu, now 24, “an arrogant young woman.” He said something about “learning a lesson.”

Replied Neetu: “I don’t want to be where you are when I’m 40.”

Face it, the place was crooked. “A psychiatrist asked me to do his notes. I told him no.” If she did the notes, he’d charge Medicaid. He also charged for hours he didn’t see

## NEETU & DENNIS: BUILDING FROM SCRATCH

Dennis Gray, a self-employed woodworker, lived across the street from Neetu, near No Fish Today, a bar off Paca Street. His shop was on the other side of St. Mary’s Park. He had successfully created a board game that sold nationally. He told her the story of how he designed the game. “Dennis was intriguing. He was passionate about his work.”

Dennis was not only charming, but also broad in his interests and curiosity. “He was unlike anyone else I had met. We shared a common sense of community engagement and a desire to explore new adventures. These attributes are still alive today after three years of living together and almost forty-four years of being married.”



*Photo by Jed Kirschbaum, The Sun*

patients. “I was to be well compensated,” but no way was she willing to compromise herself. Neetu does not see herself as better or above anyone, she simply did not wish to participate in fraudulent activities.

In Mayor Schaeffer’s Office of Manpower Resources, Neetu was advocating for the summer jobs program in the communities of Cherry Hill, South Baltimore, Locust Point and Hoes Heights. Working with the public and private sector, they came up with a long list of jobs, both in the neighborhoods and the offices. But you had to find the kids. Churches and community organizations made it happen. That summer, for six weeks, at minimum wage, 16,000 teenagers were sprinkled across the city in all sorts of projects. “It was incredibly satisfying work.” The joint effort of the public and private sectors was mutually beneficial, and its impact was visible for all.

### Creating Community Ties That Bind

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*“When she went to a hardware store to buy, say, 15 trash cans for a home improvement program, no one took her seriously.”*

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In ‘83, Neetu founded the Banner Neighborhood Community Corporation. “I was 26. I could take risks.” She started a home repair program for elders, supported by the Ford Foundation. “The idea was to allow people to age in place.” In neighborhoods of Patterson Park, Linwood and McElderry Park and Butcher’s Hill, Banner hired young people in the summer to do weatherization, security checks, code violations and fulfilling other needs.” Under Neetu’s guidance as Executive

In 1980, they gutted and rebuilt a row home in Pigtown. “When it came to reconstruction of our McHenry Street rowhouse, we were totally in sync about the design and materials.” They moved into the house once the roof was finished and the bathroom accessible. “There was no kitchen; for a year we managed with extension cords connected to the toaster oven and hot pot.” After four years of hard work during evenings and weekends, finally they could invite their families to see the finished product. “It was a wonderful creation with cherry and walnut floors.” On the third floor was a skylight and a cantilevered deck. “A gym floor from an old school found in the Baltimore Salvage Depot became our kitchen floor—absolutely stunning. Our neighbors were helpful in advising and sharing tools.

They also guarded our house and let visitors know not to walk up our metal steps when they had just been painted.”

They lived there for twelve plus years before coming to Alonsoville.



*Begin with Formstone, end with brick.*

Director, Banner kept everything simple, such as setting up a tool bank. She also established a not-profit brokerage where people paid dues; in return, should they need a plumber, for example, “we’d take care of it; they didn’t have to take off work.”

She ran a tight ship. “We vetted repair people.” But when she went to a hardware store to buy, say, 15 trash cans for a home improvement program, no one took her seriously. That disrespect drove her to get a home improvement license. During the exam, she sat in a room with 49 men glaring at her. “I was reminded of where I need to be or should I say not to be!” She was the first woman of color to have a home improvement license in Baltimore. “Now I can walk in, show them my license and order 100 trash cans.” The license allowed her to take advantage of the discounts and pass them on to the Banner residents.

Neetu uncovered a scam when she checked the Banner credit card receipt for \$30 of gas... three different licenses were noted with the same signature. Obviously, he had filled up his private vehicles. And he wasn’t the only one. “This was serious stuff... as they were using federal funds, and this could shut have us down.” Confronting the thief, she fired his entire crew and, with pillows to boost her, she drove the big truck away, her feet barely touching the pedals. Good thing she’d had her husband Dennis teach her how to drive this monster. Her next move was to change the locks in the office. She took no chances.

The non-profit is still around today, doing good in communities. She worked with Mary Pat Clark at Francis Scott Key, now Bayview Hospital on post discharge plan accommodations. Through Neetu’s collaborative and persuasive style, Banner received a United Way grant, not easy in those days if you were not already an approved agency. Meanwhile, Banner’s business plan for organizing communities was being replicated across the state with start-up state funds, with 19 programs flourishing.





## Commission on Aging & Retirement Education (CARE)

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*“I appreciated the opportunity of being at the Cabinet table, not a row behind.”*

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Appointed Executive Director by Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke, Neetu became the first Indian to serve on the Baltimore City Cabinet. She oversaw a \$12 million budget and 175 staff members. As the first-elected black mayor, there was pressure to appoint blacks. Despite his education and experience, he was not always understood nor appreciated for his work. Three months into her tenure, she was called into his office. “I hear you are being called a racist.” Some people in her department were trying to undermine her.

“I stand with you,” said the mayor. “Go out into the community, talk to them, let people hear you directly. It will change. I would not have hired you if I did not have confidence in my decision.”

In many ways, it was a dream job for Neetu. “I appreciated the opportunity of being at the Cabinet table, not a row behind.” Over a 14-year span, communities became strong supporters of CARE. She doubled the agency budget and headed the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, spearheading 800 offices across the country, including 200 Native American organizations. The organization advocated on national issues such as Social Security, Medicare/Medicaid, housing and other policies impacting elders.

She became a political force, working with Senators Ben Cardin and Barbara Mikulsky to pass the Older Americans Act. Neetu created Law Day for city seniors so they could learn about their rights. She drummed up support and got the courthouse to open on Saturday. “Several hundred people turned out.”



Local lawyers talked about wills, the rights of a child's guardian, social security, taxes, whatever advice was requested. She did a town hall meeting at the convention center. On stage she had the police and mayor's cabinet, ready to answer questions. Twenty-five hundred constituents turned up. Two years into the O'Malley administration, Neetu called it a day.

As an independent consultant, she had no problem drumming up business. Her reputation preceded her. She could not resist becoming executive director for The Ben Fund, created by Dr. Benjamin S. Carson. Who better to launch a non-profit than Neetu Dhawan-Gray? It gave her the chance to be creative. The goal? To provide accessible medical care to children without health insurance. Her strategic plan covered many fronts, local foundations and corporations, parents and families, potential donors, web design, grants and events, whatever it took to promote the Fund. The campaign raised over \$200,000 in eight months.



### **Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth (CTY)**

As coordinator for Baltimore City, Hartford, and Philadelphia, Neetu called her work “the epitome of advocacy.” Her 19-year advocacy on behalf of young people reached all the way to Hong Kong and Korea. Through Zoom and local events, she made sure the voices and stories of young people were heard. “I started my career with older people and now I work with young people, hiring older workers as temps. It was a nice way to end my career, stitching two generations together. I had a lot of fun.”

**Acrostic**

E as in echo  
V as in vase  
E as in everything  
R as in roar  
Y as in yes  
O as in the ox  
N as in never  
E as in elasticity

L as in library  
O as in optometrist  
V as in Vegas  
E as in egg  
S as in sagacious

You as in Yosemite  
O as in organize  
U as in ululation

~ Don Berger



## A Love Letter to Alonsoville

Leaving the McCrackens' after sitting for their son Jake, we noticed a realtor putting up a sale sign in front of 4419 Wickford. We bought the house the next day.

It was 1987, and we had been living in Hamden in our first house (purchased for \$25,000 which was a bit of a stretch at the time.) As architects, we had appreciated the beauty of Wickford Road even before Tom and Anne had moved here. We had studied its design as a model for the Villages at Homeland, which we designed in 1986.

At the time, the street still had many of its majestic elms that created a cathedral-like nave, lined on both sides with perfectly proportioned and beautifully scaled rowhouses grouped together to resemble stately Tudor manors. There was both variety and cohesiveness in the design of the street, much like the residents of Alonsoville; great variety, but amazing cohesiveness.

As a gay couple in the '80s, we were delighted and relieved to be welcomed with such warmth. This is a uniquely embracing community. We are honored to be living among such generous, creative, engaged, caring and friendly people.

We love it here so much that we bought the house next door. For decades, Michael and Brigid let Jamie park in their garage in exchange for mowing their lawn. This went on for many years until they decided to retire to a home we had designed for them in Western Maryland. Not wanting to lose the garage, we bought the house. So for the past 8 years we've been alternating homes, depending on the season. We know; weird. But fun.

As many of you know, after 37 years we will be selling both homes this summer and moving to Rockland. (Just north a bit, not Maine.) It was a very hard decision to make, but in the end we'll be on one floor as we age, in a modern house with a great garden, and still inside the beltway.

We will miss the park and wildlife, the irreverent slogans and daily greetings, the Alonsoville festival and crab drop, the singalongs and John's whistling, trick-or-treaters and dog walkers, narrow streets and impromptu gatherings, and of course these elegant homes. But we will miss our friends and neighbors most.

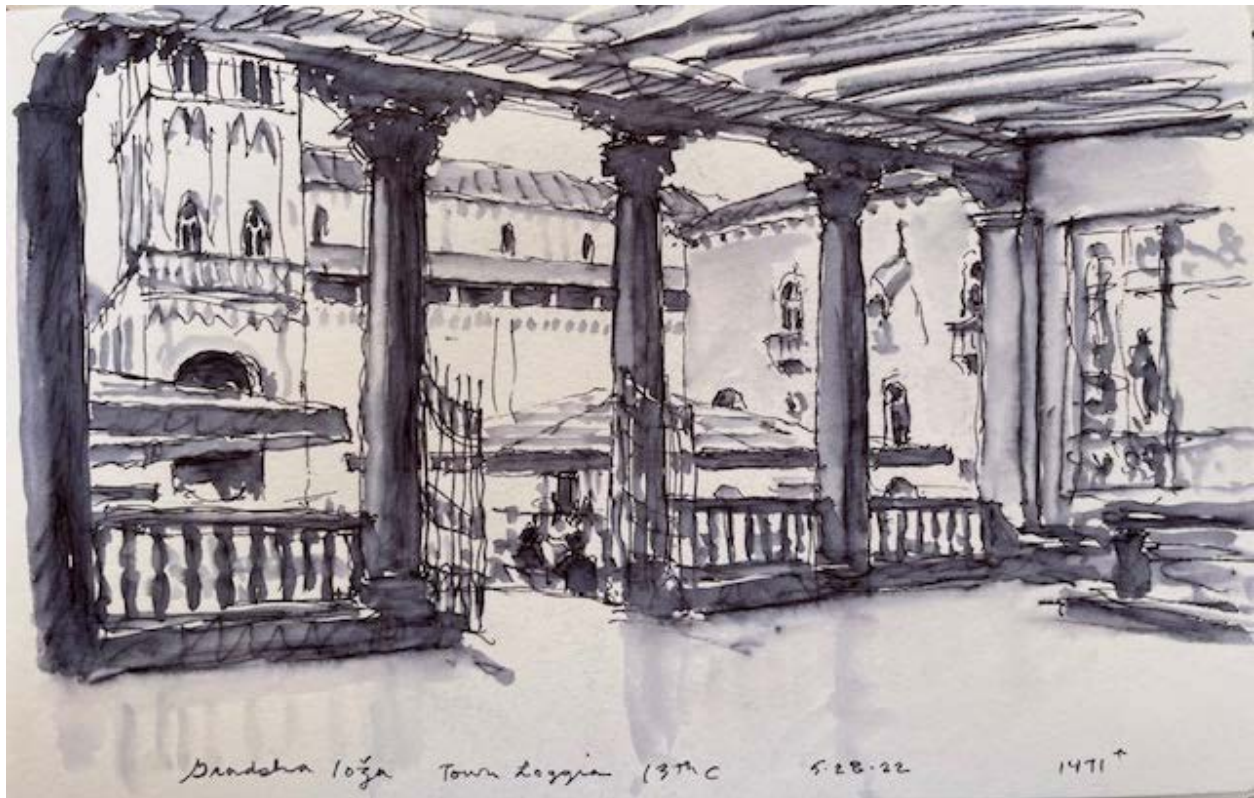
This is the *best* neighborhood. Thank you Alonsoville.

~ Steve Ziger and Jamie Snead



## From the Archives... “An architect who sketches...”

From their trips to both Peru and Bosnia/Herzegovina & Croatia, Steve Ziger using water-soluble ink.





Pred Dvorom Dubrovnik 6.5.22



Janie at the Franciscan Monastery Hill 6.5.22





Mostar  
5.27.22



## **Love Is**

Love is not confined by space and time

Love is not liberal, conservative, communist or fascist

Love is not an ornament, worn on occasion

Nor is it a technology, a gadget or the latest fashion

You cannot use up love.

~ Joe Kernac

## **Zoe's Meal Chair**

It looks like a perfectly normal highchair: economical, easy to clean, mass produced. But... when my grandkid Zoe sits in it, it is magic. She wiggles about in the seat impatiently, knowing the joys ahead: it may be hummus or tomato soup, pieces of chicken, or cantaloupe soup, curry or buttery egg salad. She will plunge her fists into the bowl if she can, filling her mouth so full she looks like a hungry squirrel—and I'll let her. However, when Charlene is the one in charge, there is more regulation, with an adult hand placed over the bowl until Zoe has finished chewing her mouthful. She looks at 'Nanna' curiously but without impatience, as Charlene models the chewing motion.

Our girl used to dislike the face cleanup after the meal, but then she learned that she could wipe our faces too, and the washcloth was a tool for peek-a-boo: take the cloth, put it over your face, then drop it, to the laughter of the old folks. Our laughter makes her giggle and kick her feet, and I so love this interaction.

~ Nick Sheridan

## **Once Upon a Time**

In 1928, Tom Bracken, one of four children, moved into a new house on 4413 Atwick Road. From 1940 to 1943, five of the Bracken children left home and joined the U.S. Armed Forces. "All five were welcomed back to 4413." In 1956, Tom and Addie Bracken bought the home from Mrs. William J. Bracken. They raised 10 children in that house. All 10 now have their own homes.

~ Tom Bracken, Keswick History Notebook, April 1989

## News & Notes

March 28, O's opening day  
May 14, Baltimore primary  
May 18, Flea Market, including dumpster  
May 26, Alonsoville Picnic

Please note that dues are now \$40, due to the high cost of insurance.

“Crossovers,” recent works by Eric Gordon, are now showing at the Metro Gallery (1700 North Charles Street). It's Eric's first solo show in Charm City. The exhibition will be up until March 21.



## Life in the City

On August 7<sup>th</sup> people from the Department of Public Works (DPW) did a video inspection of the City's sewer line for a string of houses on Wingate. The next day, Denise Bolton emailed Lawrence Osbourne, a DPW official, and asked when they would get the results. Thus began a cascade of emails back and forth between Denise and Mr. Osborne that would stretch into months. The video results from the contractor proved quite elusive. On November 12<sup>th</sup> the sewer backed up at 405 Wingate. The city cleaned out the line the following day. The ensuing video inspection showed roots in the line. The inspector advised a clean-out every two months. In the meantime, there would be "an evaluation" on whether to replace the line.



*Photo by John Dean*

On January 2, Denise asked if there was any news on "the sewer situation." Mr. Osborne said he had "good news." The sewer line would be replaced shortly.

The day before the project a BGE worker showed up. He needed to mark the gas line. In the basement, he touched the gas pipe with a sensor. Outside he used something like a metal detector to find the gas line leading to the street. Yellow spray-paint showed the way.

On Wednesday, January 12<sup>th</sup>, the subcontractor, Spiniello, showed up. They removed numerous blocks on the sidewalk, and the backhoe dug a six-foot hole near the cleanout. Denise was there the

entire time, keeping an eye on the work. I noticed a whiff of gas in the air. I was assured by the woman running the show that it was nothing to worry about. Sometimes there's gas in the soil. One man lit a cigarette.

Then it was discovered that the water line had been breached. At first, the woman said it had been leaking before they dug. They prepared to cover the hole. Denise protested. A couple of workers tried putting a brace over the line. No such luck. The woman asked if we wanted to call a plumber.

“A plumber? Your people broke the line. The dirt is not going back into that hole until the line is fixed.”

The woman sighed. She told the men that the City was liable because they had messed with the line. They tracked down a copper pipe, screwed it into the line, and filled the hole. At the end of the day, Denise emailed Mr. Osborne about Spiniello's work.

On Friday afternoon, I smelled gas as I was coming up the front steps. I called BGE. They were there within a half hour, three trucks, a half dozen men, all sorts of equipment. In the pouring rain, they searched for the source of the gas leak. Every 45 minutes or so, a man would knock to check in the basement for the seepage of gas. There was gas detected in our house and a neighbor's. We were told not to turn on the light near the meter. Outside a machine was sucking gas out of the soil. Next to it was a fire extinguisher, It sounded like a giant leaf blower, deafening. They changed crews at midnight. They did not leave until 7:30am.

Denise sent one more email to Mr. Osbourne. She has received no response.

BGE returned on Monday and found gas in our basement. They proceeded to vent the ground. Finally, no gas was detected. Now we wait for the City to repair the sidewalk.



*Photo by Denise Bolton*

~ David Bolton