

IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

Jacqueline Dupree and Elise Bernard

Bloggers with a sense of community

BY JOSHUA GRAY

Not much has changed since 2005 for Jacqueline Dupree. She still works for *The Washington Post*, she still lives at Third Street and South Carolina Avenue, SE, in the house she and husband Bill Walsh bought in 1995 and her blog, JDland, (www.jdland.com/dc) still charts the progress of change on the Near Southeast waterfront.

JDland itself, however, has changed, at a pace far exceeding even the most bullish predictions. When *Voice of the Hill* visited JDland two years ago, Near Southeast re-development was a hatchling project. Now, even Dupree is overwhelmed by the transformation.

"In 18 months, it's like a gold rush," she says in a mid-afternoon moment stolen away from work. "Everything that I was thinking — back in the day — would take 10 to 20 years, a lot of it is happening in five."

Just blocks away, Elise Bernard is also watching a once-beleaguered neighborhood's occasionally difficult reinvention. Like Dupree, Bernard chronicles the process in a popular Web log, *Frozen Tropics* (frozentropics.blogspot.com).

Just as D.C.'s neighborhoods are defined by differences both subtle and significant, the voice that she brings to these chronicles is uniquely her own. Still, there is more similarity than distance between these two women who harness the immediacy of new-media in a fresh kind of hyper-local reportage.

Jacqueline Dupree is a rare D.C. native, born on Capitol Hill. Her coverage of Near Southeast began in 2003 as a personal project. As waterfront development gained momentum, so too did the currency of Dupree's online brainchild. Before she knew it, the site was getting over 1,000 hits a day.

Elise Bernard came here from her home in Tulsa, Okla., by way of Iowa's Grinnell College. It's a familiar story — D.C. was only supposed to be a pit stop en route to New York City, but the District's unique flavor had a powerful attraction, and within a year and a half,



Elise Bernard keeps neighbors up to date on Trinidad and Near Northeast.

Bernard was a homeowner, an urban pioneer in Trinidad, long before Metro and XM Radio made the area's transformation a *fait accompli*. She began her online coverage of H Street's renaissance late in 2004, initially an offhand exploration of a new notebook computer's capabilities.

Both bloggers express some surprise at the popularity of their online presences. Veteran Dupree reflects: "People can't get this kind of coverage from the *Post* or other newspapers, so there is this niche for somebody who wants to make the commitment. They don't have to be nearly as obsessive-compulsive as I am ... My husband is a Near Southeast widow," she laughs.

Careful to cast herself as "neither an activist nor an advocate," Dupree is fastidiously issue-neutral. As a

result, JDland has become a go-to resource for parties on all sides of the city's development debate. Real estate developers and government agencies regularly campaign her for input. They're sent packing. With a documentarian's sensibility, she's conspicuously unopinionated.

In *Frozentropics*, Bernard gives more emphasis to everyday life in the neighborhood. Nightlife, dining, and entertainment venues get plenty of coverage, as well as the meatier issues of revitalization, gentrification and the thin dividing line between. Though the third-year law student's busy schedule sometimes limits original input, Bernard always posts links to articles and sites both lightly entertaining and thoughtfully reflective. The corridor's colorful streetlife and evolving cityscape are documented often in striking, original photography.

In common with Dupree, Bernard is bullish on change in general. "I think we're headed in the right direction," she says. "I just want to see a balance ... I think one of the things that's so special about over here now, it really does have that neighborhood feel. You go out on the street and you inevitably see people you know; they bring their kids, their dogs. I would like to see more people out on H Street. So many people live just south a couple



Jacqueline Dupree blogs on Near Southeast development.

blocks, and they still don't come out here. It's surprising to me how much that's true."

That embrace of D.C.'s rich menu — and the desire to sample and share — is the common thread that runs through both JDland and *Frozentropics*. Each blogger brings unique spice to the mixture. Where Dupree takes a very literal historian's perspective — almost aggres-

sive in its lack of color — Bernard is more like a social anthropologist, charting both the substance and texture of change, with a liberal pinch of interpretation and commentary.

Like that shifting urban tableau, the blogosphere is an emergent realm, and it's changing the nature of both journalism and community. As Jacqueline Dupree says, "The difference is the medium allows everybody to be a publisher, and to get the megaphone." In this new incarnation of the town square, news happens on a different kind of macro-scale, and everyone is a reporter. While some may question the unvetted town criers, no one can ignore their impact.

"It's kind of like if you're watching a TV show and you get involved, you can't get up and leave," Bernard says. "It's really getting interesting at this point."

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