

community



Karim Shamsi-Basha is documenting a year in the life of Homewood.



# Artistic Homewood

Why do so many of the state's talented writers and artists call this over-the-mountain neighborhood home?

By Loyd McIntosh

Imagine American literature without the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, or the Beat Writers of the 1950s. Would the cultural landscape of American forms of fiction and verse writing be as rich and as vibrant if a group of African Americans had never journeyed to New York in the last days before the Great Depression? Or if a bunch of social mavericks, such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsburg and Williams S. Burroughs, never managed to find each other at Columbia University? What would we think of other great literary cities like Jackson, Mississippi without Eudora Welty, Key West without Ernest Hemingway, or even Alabama's own literary capital of Monroeville without Harper Lee?

Even as students of American literature pay homage to these great literary scenes of the past, we are always on the lookout for a new one burgeoning in the next unlikely city, a special group of young writers working on the next new thing.

A true literary movement does not sprout overnight, and rarely is it planned. Furthermore, there is often debate over what does or doesn't qualify as a genuine arts movement—a dialog which only adds to its vitality.

Take for instance what's happen-

ing in the city of Homewood. Many of the state's best writers and artists call the little town to the south of Birmingham home. Homewood has within its borders two of the area's most successful independent bookstores, Alabama Booksmith and Little Professor Book Center, and one of the best small publishers in the region, Crane Hill, was located in Homewood for years before moving to the Southside. In addition, many emerging writers are looking to Homewood for inspiration as they begin their careers and gain confidence in their craft.

Whether or not what is happening in Homewood can be classified as a bona fide literary flowering, it is undeniable that something unique is happening. However, even those at the heart of Homewood's literary and artistic community have a hard time explaining exactly why.

"I'm not really sure why there seems to be so much creative energy in Homewood. It might be because it's convenient, or it might be because of that eclectic neighborhood feel that creative people like," says Karim Shamsi-Basha, a freelance photographer who lives in Homewood with his wife and three children.

Shamsi-Basha, a native of Syria,

moved to Homewood a decade ago after graduating from the University of Tennessee with a degree in mechanical engineering. During his senior year he became interested in photography and landed a job at the *Knoxville Journal*, moving on to the *Birmingham Post-Herald* soon after. Shamsi-Basha has received major awards for his work published in such magazines as *Sports Illustrated*, *Time* and *Southern Living*. He was also the photographer for a book about Southern beauty parlors, *The Beauty Box*, written by Kathy Kemp and published by Crane Hill.

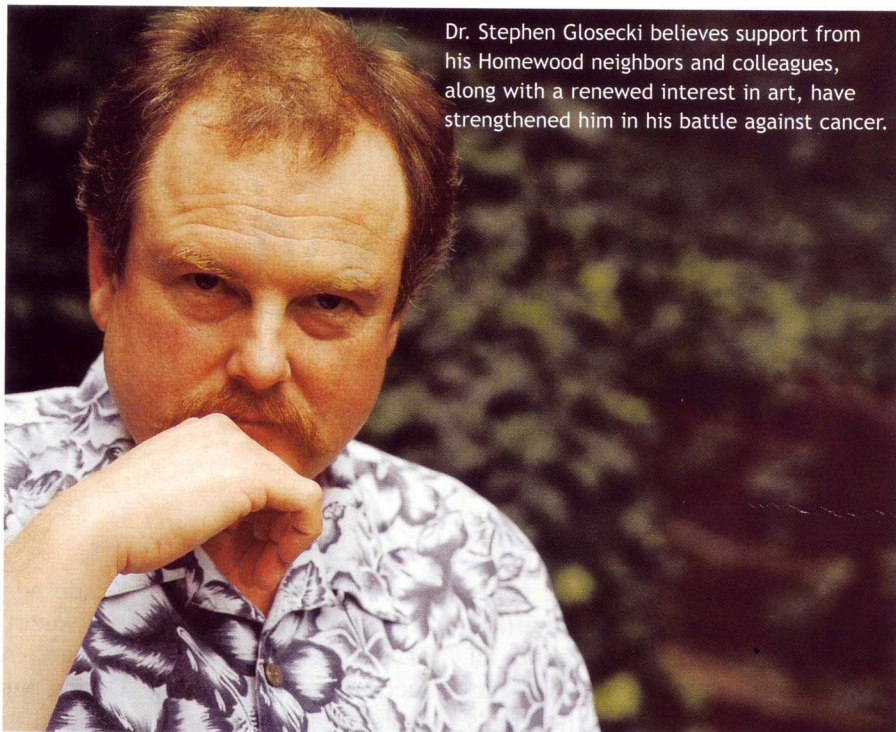
Shamsi-Basha is so inspired by Homewood that he is currently working on a project documenting an entire year in the history of his hometown.

"I am working on a book called *It's 2001, Y'all: A Year in the Life of Homewood*. It's going to be a mix of black-and-white and color portraits and day-in-the-life type pictures of Homewood over the whole year," Shamsi-Basha says. "People ask me why, and I tell them because it's the first year of the millennium. So, I'm going to preserve this year."

A photographer who has spent a lot of time and energy documenting life in the Deep South, Shamsi-Basha believes a vital and active communi-



## community



Dr. Stephen Glosecki believes support from his Homewood neighbors and colleagues, along with a renewed interest in art, have strengthened him in his battle against cancer.

B. Gustafson

ty life is essential.

"I don't like to look out of my window and see nothing, unlike some other people who pay for that. They don't want to see any other houses from their windows. I would rather it be the other way around," Shamsi-Basha says. "We live across the street from a school and there's a carpool line in front of my house twice a day and I kind of like it. I walk to my car and wave to people. It might be something about creative people that like a sense of closeness."

Remarks author and poet Charles Ghigna, "There's something about Homewood that draws us in. I think it's the fact that we live in a storybook world. There are many red brick houses and the best school system in the state. We have a great library and excellent park and recreation facilities for sports, and I like my neighbors."

Ghigna has carved out for himself a successful career writing books of poetry for children as well as adults. He recently published a volume of poetry for adults titled *Haiku: Travelers of Eternity* with illustrations

by Armor Keller. Ghigna, who has been one of the Birmingham area's most beloved writers for years, was surprised by the turnout during a book signing for *Travelers of Eternity*.

"I sold over 100 books in two hours at a book signing back in May at Alabama Booksmith," Ghigna says. "I thought that was just amazing to sell that many books in such a short amount of time. I've been all over the country with this book, but for it to do what it did in my hometown was wonderful."

Of all the writers and artists currently living in Homewood, Ghigna and wife Debra, herself a writer, have been there longer than anyone, over 20 years. Living and working in an environment where children are in abundant supply is a source of inspiration that Ghigna is careful not to take for granted. His morning hours are normally spent listening to children at a nearby elementary school as the fuel for his creativity.

"My office is upstairs, and I usually leave the sliding glass doors open. I'm only able to see the treetops but I can hear children's voices," Ghigna

says. "Every morning I take my children to school and I run to the top of my stairs and I think, 'What can I get into next?'"

For the artist or writer living in Homewood, getting a feel for the community and finding one's place in it are important aspects that cannot be ignored, particularly, says novelist and writer Vicki Covington, for a fiction writer. Covington is the author of four novels, including *A Night Ride Home*, which was recently re-released by Baylor University Press, and has published short fiction in many well-known magazines and journals, including *Southern Living*, *The New Yorker* and *Shenandoah*.

Today she is working on a fictional account of the women's clinic bombing in 1998 and has also completed a memoir about the deaths of her parents, also in 1998.

For Covington, Homewood is the place where she turns for clarity and insight.

"In writing, place is the most important element," Vicki says. "Actually Eudora Welty once said that God first created Eden before He made the characters to inhabit it. Therefore, I believe place is critical to a story."

"Homewood is earthy and sensual. You drive around and count how many gardens you see and how many people give a damn about how their yards look, and it's not just to keep up with the Joneses," Covington adds. "It's because they really love to handle flowers and to dig in the dirt."

That feeling of community and closeness can be a double-edged sword, particularly for a writer or artist who treads into controversial territory. None may be more in tune to that pitfall than Vicki and her husband, Dennis Covington.

In 1999 Vicki and Dennis, author of the books *Lizard* and *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, teamed up for the book *Cleaving*, an honest and open account of their marriage in which



they made public many deeply personal experiences throughout their 20-plus years together. The book details, among other things, the couple's spiritual, psychological and sexual journey, from their teenage years to a point in their marriage in 1997. Even though the book focuses on many aspects of both writers' Christian mission drilling fresh water wells in Central America, a large amount of public scrutiny was focused on their somewhat strange personal relationship in which each has admitted to extramarital affairs throughout the years.

For Vicki, who along with Dennis was a deacon at a local Baptist church, the incredibly public backlash against them was one of the toughest periods in her life. And, Vicki explains, living in a smaller town only magnified her growing sense of isolation and frustration.

"The one thing that is bad about living in a small place, when you write about something controversial, like *Cleaving*, is that the gossip—mainly among people who haven't read the book—is awful," Vicki says. "People who read books don't have time to gossip. That part of living in a small place can be frustrating."

However, Vicki says she believes that the unique community which has developed throughout Homewood, where people and neighbors tend to breed stronger relationships with one another, was a blessing, particularly as the Covingtons' lives were discussed and dissected on talk radio shows and other venues throughout Birmingham.

"It was our neighbors and folks from Homewood who called in to defend us and say, 'They're good people,'" Vicki says. "I was grateful to Homewood and to the people who really know us who defended us during that period, which was the worst thing I've ever been through, including my parents' death.

"It felt like most of the criticism

came from Birmingham at large, but the support came from Homewood," Vicki adds. "People truly know you for who you are." In the same way that Vicki's family, friends and neighbors supported her through an intense period of public scrutiny, another writer and scholar received support from Homewood during a personal and private battle.

Dr. Stephen Glosecki, a resident of Homewood for more than a decade, is an associate professor of English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, specializing in Anglo-Saxon art and literature. His most engrossing creative effort of late has been translating *Beowulf* into modern English.

In 1999, Glosecki was diagnosed with colon cancer. He underwent surgery and other forms of treatment and was pronounced "cancer free" later that year. However, earlier this year, Glosecki's cancer recurred, forcing him to undergo more surgery and

even more aggressive chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

Glosecki has also turned to poetry and painting as part of his healing process. Always fascinated with folklore and the traditions of shamanism in art and literature, he has begun incorporating some of these ideas into what he calls his "cancer wars." Glosecki says his doctors are elated with his progress, and his prognosis looks excellent. He believes the support from his friends, colleagues and neighbors, along with a renewed interest in his art, helped throughout the healing process.

"A couple of years ago I would have said I'm a lone wolf," Glosecki says. "But, during this second bout of cancer I've received tremendous support throughout the entire community. There are a lot of people who are aware of the disease I'm going through."

He has been encouraged by Dennis Covington, himself a cancer



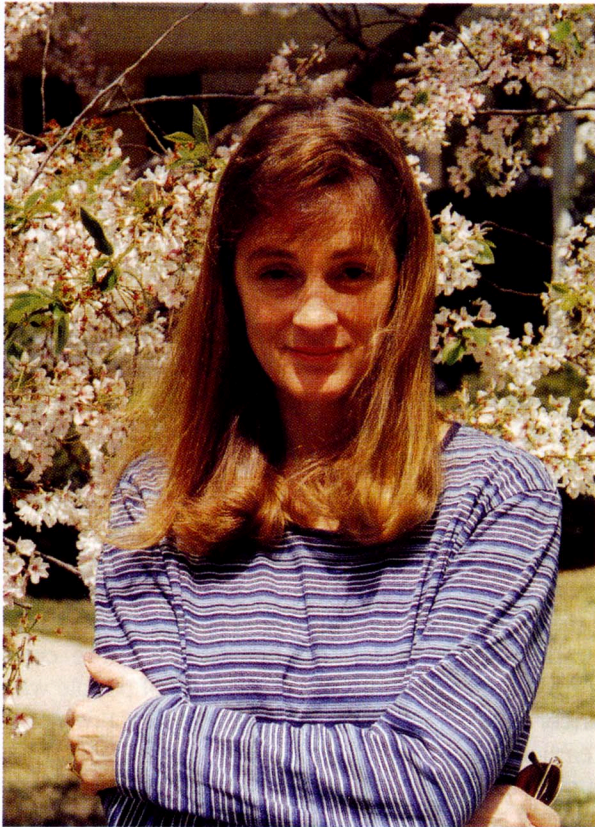
Karim Shamsi-Basha

B. Custalson



# community

"In writing, place is the most important element," says author Vicki Covington.



D. Covington

survivor, to document his experiences through words for the benefit of others in similar situations. "He said, 'Don't organize any of it, just get your experiences down.' I consider it almost a sense of mission to share my experiences with people who are facing the same monster and help them understand the sources of strength I've found."

## "A Culture by Itself"

Homewood's relative proximity to Birmingham proper and its attractiveness to young families of all backgrounds make for some surprisingly diverse neighborhoods. Diversity, defined in ethnic, religious and economic terms, is a key reason why many creative minds find Homewood a good place to live and raise a family.

"For me, (diversity) is important to my life and to my writing," Vicki says. "Writers can write about a provincial place, but only if they have a world view, and, in that way, it's good here."

A feeling of acceptance toward people of different cultures was an important selling point to Shamsi-Basha. After graduating from college, he settled in Homewood, but had no intention of staying in Alabama long, because of stereotypes of the state he'd heard while living in Tennessee.

Homewood's cultural tolerance was a welcome surprise.

"Homewood also has incredible diversity. You have a restaurant from just about every corner of the world, and that tells you something," Shamsi-Basha says. "For diversity to happen, it needs friendliness among people from other cultures. I am

from another culture. I moved to the middle of Homewood among all these white people, and everyone came and welcomed me.

"I don't feel like an outsider here, but I do in other parts," he adds. "I drive all over the country taking pictures and in some places I feel like an outsider in a humongous way. Homewood is a culture by itself."

If Homewood is truly experiencing a small but powerful Renaissance, will it last?

If the state of the city's schools is any indication, Homewood should be a breeding ground for talented artists, writers and photographers for many years to come, but only if they decide to stay.

"Time will tell if Homewood is a breeding ground," Vicki Covington says. "There are two more already—Laura and Ashley Covington (the couple's daughters). But, on the other hand, Homewood is a small town, and for the kids it feels like growing

up in a small town. My own kids can't wait to get out of here, because they feel that there's no privacy."

As for other writers, the future is now. Such is the case with Jack Owens. Owens was a 30-year veteran of the FBI before retiring in 1999 to focus on his writing full time.

Owens has written a book about the FBI titled *Hooked on the Bureau*, which is currently under consideration by several major publishing houses. In *Hooked*, Owens tells personal accounts of various cases and situations in which he was involved, with a sense of wonder and retrospect from a man proud to have spent 30 years in law enforcement.

Among the cases Owens was involved in were the Atlanta serial murder case of Wayne Williams in the late 1970s and the mail bomb assassination of Federal Judge Robert Vance.

Recently, Owens has been trying his hand at fiction and hopes to publish a short story in the near future. He has also published two magazine articles this year, one in the March issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* in which he discusses FBI challenges in recruiting black females to the bureau, and another in...*Cats and Kittens* magazine?

"I woke up around four in the morning one day with my cat on my mind and I rolled out of bed and wrote the story," Owens says. "I sent it off to a magazine and they published it. That just proves I should get up early more often."

And, although, he recently moved to the Southside, he still feels a special connection to Homewood, where he lived for over 30 years.

"My children all went to Homewood schools. My wife teaches at Homewood High School and is head of the science department. I love Homewood," Owens says. "Writers are interested in writing and reading and scholarship, and it's a good town to raise your kids."