

COLUMBUS
monthly

November 9, 1977 • \$2.50

Gene Watts,
the mouth that roars
Bulldozers vs. blue herons
A search for simplicity

Who killed South Campus?

The party's over
as the famed
High Street strip
prepares for
massive change



The death of South Campus

(as we know it)



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL BARBER

The drinking age, crime, the Papa Joe's fire. This grungy strip of High Street bars—an institution with Ohio State students and alumni—ain't what it used to be, as massive redevelopment begins to take hold.

by Jeff Long

Ah,

the memories. Dragging a drunken numskull from West Virginia (I think he was a friend of my brother's; all I remember is

that he was from Parkersburg and he worked on the railroad) away from the corner of 11th and High before the cop with the baton let him have it. He had it coming, really, yelling terrible Appalachian epithets at the cop while literally standing in his own vomit.

A girl whose name I forget asking me to dance at Mean Mr. Mustard's, a first for me. She turned out to have some very liberal ideas, that girl.

Watching my diminutive buddy get tossed from the sidewalk by a bouncer outside the Travel Agency right toward the line of cops in riot gear lining High Street after the win over Michigan in 1979. He hadn't done anything, but that didn't keep him from getting bounced right back toward the bouncer when he rebounded off the riot shields. We had to grab him off the curb before he landed back in the arms of those vicious thugs.

That was the night they set an old car on fire right in the middle of High Street.

Muddy Waters at the Underground; the Fleshtones at Mr. Brown's; David Johansen, Carl Perkins, Burning Spear and too many other great shows to remember at Crazy Mama's.

Amateur comedy nights at Apollo's. Never saw one comedian on that stage funnier than the hog-drunk hecklers in the audience.

Hanging out at Capitol City Records with the Captain, bullshitting, talking baseball—anything but actually buying a record.

Al DeSantis, the one-time real estate king turned felon, who once referred to the people who lived on campus (many of whom were his tenants) as "50,000 pigs," replete with gold chains and chest hair, strutting around his bars.

Chris the Anarchist, parking cars in the Big Bear Bakery lot, cursing, struggling, fighting with bemused drunks who didn't want to pay the \$2. Chris was an angry guy, anyway, so it's good he had a place to channel all that hostility.

Gone now, all gone. South Campus, my friends, is dead.

There won't be much mourning for South Campus, I suppose. No right-thinking adult could do anything but applaud what Ohio State and its Campus Partners group, with aid from the city, have done to rescue that booze-

Looking north on High from 10th Street, in the area called South Campus.



"Many students started refusing to go there because of concerns about safety, women especially. And if women won't go there, then the men won't go there."

—Steve Sterrett, director of community relations for Campus Partners, which now owns this vacant lot, once the site of Papa Joe's

soaked, crime-infested, debris-strewn area around High Street south of Chittenden and north of, oh, Ninth and High. The boundaries aren't rigid: The Kroger store at Seventh and High, open all night, was a vital element of South Campus life, but 12th Avenue should not be lumped in.

It's barely recognizable now as the riotous center of bacchanalia that reached its zenith (or nadir, possibly) in the '80s. If tumbleweeds blew in Central Ohio, you'd expect one to come rolling by as you stand late at night by the vacant lot that was once Papa Joe's. It's dark, empty except for the neighborhood kids, the omnipresent police and the handful of students brave or desperate enough to venture there.

There's a strange quiet you'll only notice if you remember the madness: thousands of kids packed into one or two blocks every weekend night (Tuesday and Wednesday nights weren't bad, either), music blaring from every bar, a half-dozen fights going on at any given time.

Big fun.

It was a great time to be alive and be an irresponsible young fool. The '80s: cocaine, casual sex, terrible music, \$2 pitchers of beer . . . and South Campus was the place where you could let your taste for that kind of thing run free.

Not everyone remembers South Campus's golden age so fondly. You talk to Columbus police Commander Steve Gammill, who worked the area for 13 years, first as a rookie patrolman then later as precinct commander, and you start to feel a bit guilty for waxing so nostalgic.

"They'd get drunk, get beaten up by bouncers in the bars who'd just throw them out into the back alley, and that's where we'd find them, unconscious," Gammill says. "There'd be blood, vomit on them, and they'd just be lying there in the alley. We spent all our time taking kids on runs to the hospital to get their stomach pumped. A lot of officers would be tied up to patrol two blocks of bars, and our job was basically just to babysit drunk kids."

Steve Sterrett is somewhat amazed that anyone would say they miss the good old days on South Campus, which shouldn't be too surprising. He's the director of community relations for Campus Partners (if Ohio State is an 800-pound gorilla, Campus Partners is its 400-pound offspring), perceived by campus denizens to be responsible for pretty much everything that happens down there, up to and including the weather.

"I think we have to think hard about a student culture so concentrated on drink-

ing," says Sterrett, who's worked at OSU since 1978, when asked if there isn't anything about the old South Campus that will be missed. Well, sure, Steve, but it wasn't all bad, was it? "Oh, I can understand why former students, graduates, have fond memories of that area."

"Some people forget what it's like to be young," says Charlette Parker, who understands very well why someone might miss the old South Campus. She misses it. Parker's family owns Papa Joe's, the bar/pizzeria chain whose site near High and 10th was the heart and soul of South Campus.

It's a scene that must have been repeated many times this fall: a big car or minivan rolls slowly south on High Street, full of thirtysomethings in town for an Ohio State game; the driver has insisted they cruise down here before they tailgate or go to the Varsity Club. "Oh, man, I gotta show you guys this place. See this scar above my right eye? Six pitchers and 12 shots of schnapps and I don't even remember leaving the bar, let alone getting punched. We used to come in here at 9 in the morning before a game and the place would be packed. Papa Joe's. It's right here. . . . Jesus! Where the hell is it?"

Papa Joe's was the symbol—for good or ill, and sometimes its reputation was

undeserved—of what South Campus was. It's a symbol now for what South Campus has become, awaiting a fate that will be determined by Ohio State.

The place burned to the ground in April, 1996, in a fire that arson investigators ruled accidental, caused by an electrical malfunction. At a time when Ohio State was looking to buy property in the area, and Campus Partners was going full tilt in its drive to clean up South Campus, it was an amazing coincidence.

I was down there the morning after the fire, as the smoke was still rising from the ruins of Papa Joe's and Waterbeds 'n' Stuff and the Off Campus bar, adjacent businesses also lost in the fire. The arson guys weren't even able to get in the building yet, but the crowd of onlookers already had decided—joking in a way that wasn't all that funny—who the culprits were. If you were looking to signal the beginning of the end of South Campus in dramatic fashion, you couldn't do much better than burn down Papa Joe's.

Sterrett bristled when I asked him later that morning about the kind of comments I'd heard in that crowd, things along the lines of, "Well, that's one way to start clearing out South Campus. Does anybody know where Gordon Gee was last night?" He offered a warning about even mentioning Campus Partners in connection with the fire.

Gee isn't one to get defensive; the nimble president of Ohio State University was ready. "I was home with my wife last evening," he joked as he addressed the board of trustees that morning. He got such a laugh that he brought the jest out again at another university function later that day: "My wife has given an affidavit that I was at home last night."

Forgive Charlette Parker if she still doesn't think that's funny. "That was in-

sensitive," she says. "I guess he didn't realize the impact [the fire] had. We lost three-quarters of our income and we had to put 35 people—students—out of work."

"I think a lot of people miss Papa Joe's," Parker says. "I miss being with the people down there, they're not bad kids. Years later, you run into them and they're lawyers and doctors and accountants and they'll talk about what a great time they had in college at Ohio State and Papa Joe's was part of that."

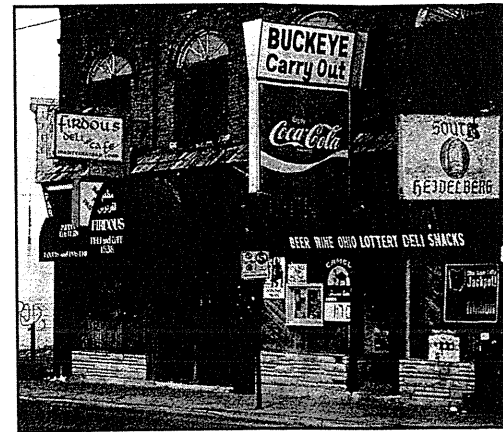
South Campus without Papa Joe's is like the Beatles without John Lennon. In the year and a half since the fire, whatever vitality might have remained in the South Campus scene has drained away. "One bar feeds off another," Parker says. "When Papa Joe's went, it hurt a lot of other businesses."

"I think we're in a limbo situation right now," says Louie Makkas, owner of Apollo's, which opened in 1975 and is something of an institution itself. "Our building might go, it might not go. What can you do?"

"We'll survive somehow. If I have to go someplace else on campus, I will," says Makkas. Not quite so philosophical about the future is Earl Webb, who managed Mean Mr. Mustard's (yet another institution, now defunct) for 10 years before opening Skully's downstairs from Apollo's about three years ago.

"Honestly, if I could do it all again I might go someplace else. I could do better," Webb says. He wonders if the derision that greeted his opening on South Campus in '93 wasn't wisdom after all. "People said I was crazy. People I knew would come in and look at some of the things I'd done and they'd say, 'That'll get smashed, they'll trash that.'"

But, "I knew the area, I knew what we could do here. People doubted me but I



The black door to the right of Firdous was the entry to Crazy Mama's, for the better part of the last 20 years, the center of alternative rock on south campus. It had a brief run as the Kool Kat Klub before closing this year.

knew there was a market for it."

Webb's concept, essentially, was to create the kind of bar/diner that thrives in the Short North or Grandview. It's a clean place with good food of the sandwich/appetizer variety, reasonable drink prices, a killer jukebox and kitschy décor with lots of great old posters touting Mamie Van Doren movies. Skully's, just the kind of place Sterrett talks about attracting to South Campus, should be doing better.

The empty sidewalks and uncertainty about what's going to happen to property in the area have torpedoed the kind of optimism with which Webb opened Skully's.

"No one wants to sink any money into their business. No one wants to put any money into their building because it might get knocked down," says Webb, who's rooting hard for Campus Partners to follow through on its plans for South Campus. "Are you kidding? I would love to have a T.G.I. Friday's down here, a Drexel theater on the corner."

Webb typifies the ambivalent attitude a lot of South Campus types display toward Campus Partners. "They keep talking about how they like what I'm doing here, but you don't know what goes on behind closed doors with them. I'm like most people down here: I don't want to get forced out, but I don't want to take on somebody that's too big to fight."

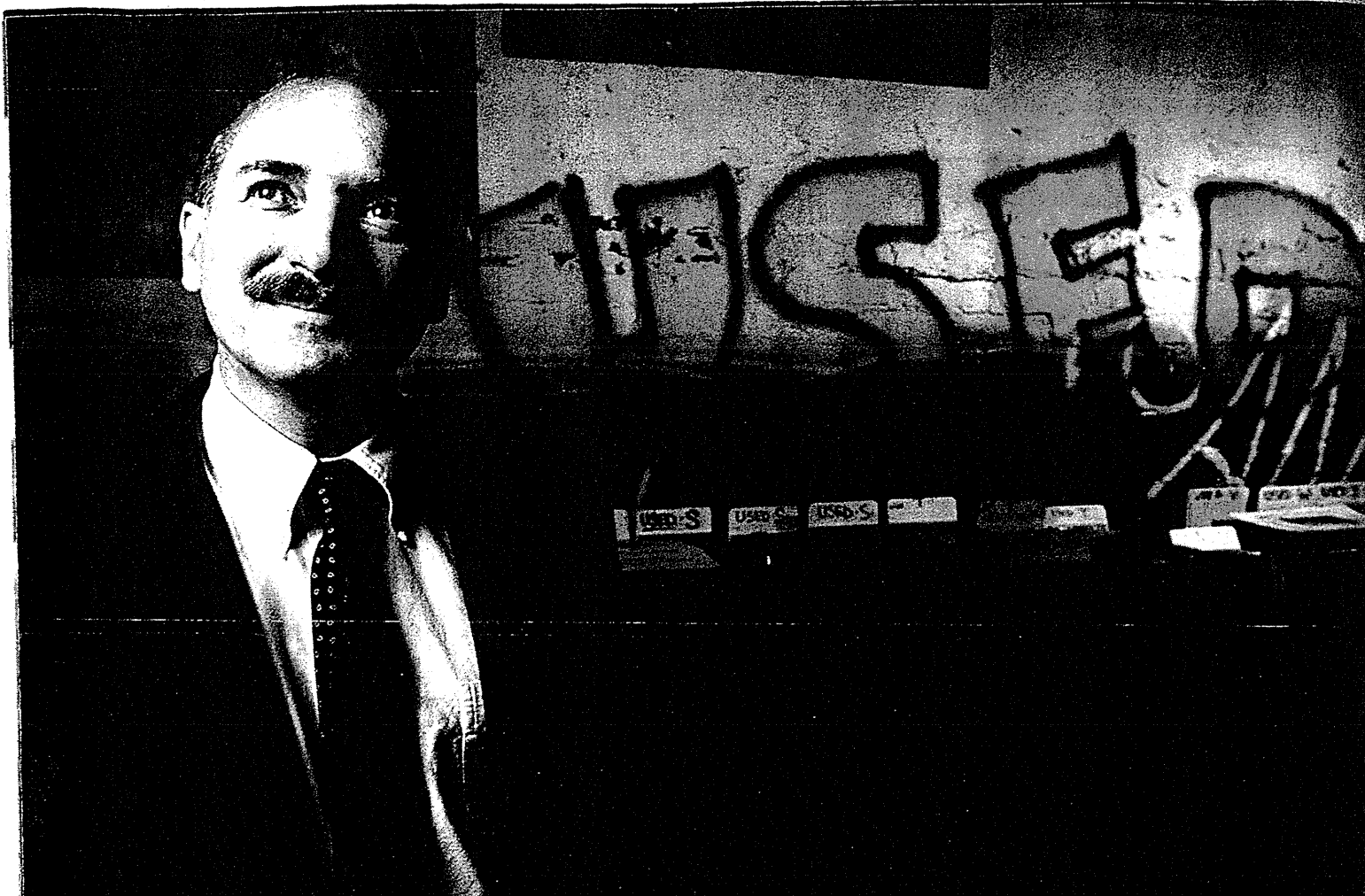
Chuck Kubat, owner of Magnolia Thunderpussy records (opened in 1970, most certainly making it another campus institution), says South Campus has been in decline for two decades, but he doesn't expect Campus Partners to be its salvation. Kubat's store was damaged in the fire, but he takes pride in reopening a mere three days later. He doesn't buy into the popular belief that Campus Partners can do whatever it wants, even if it decides to seize the whole neighborhood through eminent domain and not leave a brick standing.

"They want to do it, but they're not going to do it," Kubat says. People who see Campus Partners as omnipotent are "hyp-



The rubble of Papa Joe's, the day after it burned in April, 1996. The bar/pizzeria near 10th and High was a campus institution.

JEFF LONG/COURTESY THE OTHER PAPER



"The building across the street is for sale and the owner's asking a million and a half dollars. Blighted. I think they should declare City Hall a blighted area."

—Chuck Kubat, owner of Magnolia Thunderpussy record store

notized," he says. With the Campus Partners plan, "What are you going to get? A bunch of concrete-and-glass structures that look like . . . well, whatever. This campus area sucks, anyway."

"I don't see Campus Partners as this monster devouring everything that's good and classic," says Mike Hobbs, who caroused on South Campus as a student in the '60s and has owned a number of bars there, including the still-in-business Not-Al's Pub, the South Berg and NotAl's Rockers, one of the last of the big bars on South Campus. Hobbs was once a partner with Al DeSantis—their drinking palaces dominated the bar strip at one point in the '80s—but don't get him started on that. Suffice it to say that Big Al's problems with the law (tax and fraud charges have plagued him in recent years) make Hobbs very happy.

"We all wax nostalgic, but come on, folks," Hobbs says. "Sometimes I think, wouldn't it be nice to get a pitcher of beer for a quarter—which is what they cost when I was a student—you know, fish the cigarette butts out, run out to the sidewalk and throw up. You know, the good old days weren't all that good and the future won't necessarily be all that bad."

"Show me any part of society that

doesn't have to be dragged kicking and screaming into the future. I wish I had a nickel for every time I heard somebody talking about 'glass-and-concrete.' Come on. The building where Mustard's was, the building where Skully's is—what is that, early turd-era architecture? Those buildings don't have shit architecturally," Hobbs says.

"Campus Partners is not Sherman marching to the sea. They're not the be-all and end-all. I don't see that attitude from them but that's the perception around here. Does campus have to change? Sure. What's the alternative? The buildings falling down around you while you try to keep making money out of a rathole?"

No, Campus Partners didn't kill South Campus. The federal government did.

When the feds muscled Ohio and other states into raising the drinking age to 21 (threatening to cut off highway dollars) in 1987, it spelled doom for the South Campus bar circus.

Ask any South Campus veteran when the decline set in and among the myriad factors cited you'll always hear about the

change in the drinking age. Hobbs estimates that a good Saturday night now draws less than half as many people to South Campus as a busy night in the mid '80s.

"All those bars couldn't be supported without all those 18-year-olds," says Bob Deis, a longtime resident and Realtor in the campus area and a member of the University Area Commission.

The effect of the age change wasn't immediate. "Frankly, the police division kind of turned a blind eye to the underage drinking down there for a long time," admits Gammill. Though many say the police didn't begin aggressive enforcement until the Campus Partners era, Gammill says credit goes to Patrol Chief Tony Lanata, who decided "four or five years ago" to crack down.

"Certainly," says Gee. "we have received tremendous cooperation from the Columbus police. I know students complain that they're too vigorous. You see a very heavy police presence and I'm gratified by that. You get a feeling of safety."

"The police really started hammering the campus bars," Deis says. "So what you got was kids going into the neighborhoods to drink at keg parties, which led to the kind of situations you have on 12th Avenue." scene of a number of beer-fueled

riots last year, riots reminiscent of the old days on South Campus.

Charlette Parker says, "The problem is, they couldn't drink until they were 21, then when they were 21 they wanted to get off campus."

The federal Section 8 housing program, which brought thousands of low-income people into the area, also comes in for a fair share of blame from some campus folks. The favored terms for some of the newcomers are "undesirables" or "the criminal element." The fact is, South Campus is as vulnerable to crime as any place that abuts a poverty-stricken neighborhood like the one to the southeast of campus.

"Right around 1984, 1985, when crack came to Columbus, that's when that area really started changing," Gammill says. "The crack trade up around Fourth [Street], it spilled over to High Street, people coming up to rob people at Ninth and High. It had a reputation as a crime haven. We used to say it was a target-rich environment for criminals: women walking in an alley at 2 in the morning, drunks just ripe for the picking, students who wouldn't want to bother to press charges if their car was broken into."

"Many students started refusing to go there because of concerns about safety,

women especially," says Sterrett. "And if women won't go there, then the men won't go there."

Crime concerns, the changing nature of college students, plus an apartment boom in northwest Columbus fueled an exodus of students from the campus area, Deis says.

"Places like Olentangy Commons, Governor's Square, all along Kenny, Bethel Road, they decided to start attracting students," Deis says. "The whole aura of campus life has changed. More students work now, they have cars, they go to school part time. Go into one of those sports bars on Bethel Road on a Saturday when there's a football game now and look at the crowds. . . . There's a tremendous amount of drinking in those places."

Sterrett has the statistics that back up Deis's assertion: In 1986 almost 50 percent of the student body lived on campus, Sterrett says; in 1996 it was about 40 percent.

Kubat traces the beginning of the end for South Campus back even farther: "The problems started when they took the parking off High Street about a dozen years ago. This used to be a viable business district, small stores, clothing stores, whatever. They took the parking off and all you ended up with was bars."

Columbus officials paid little attention, many campusites will tell you. "The city has always treated the campus area like a stepchild," Deis says. "An area that is one and a half percent of the land area of the city has a daytime population that's equal to 17 percent of the population of the entire city. And the city has treated it for years with benign neglect. Why? Because there's no votes down here. Students don't vote. If OSU hadn't stepped in. . . ."

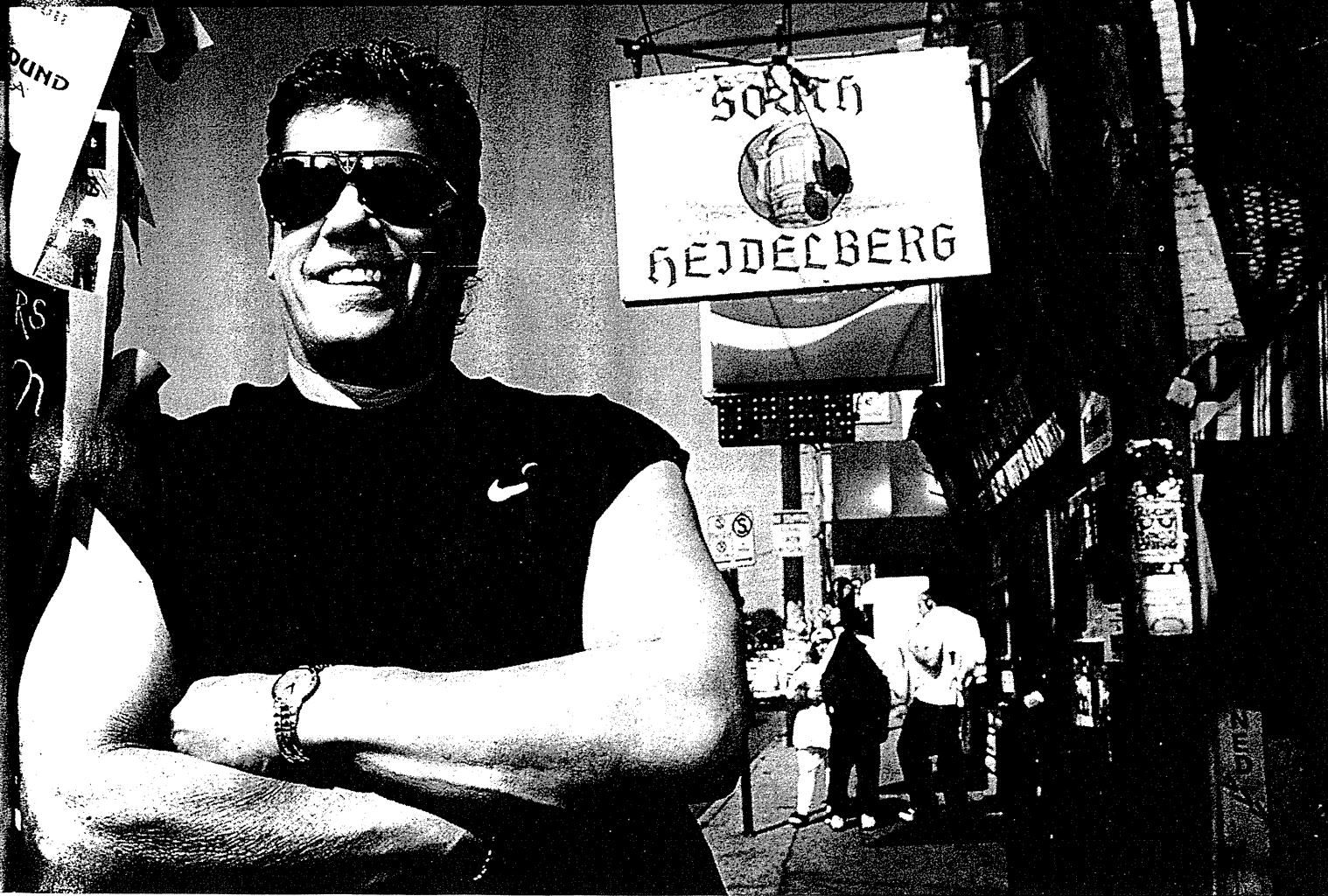
Charlette Parker believes pressure from alumni forced the administration to act: "I think the overall appearance of campus was an embarrassment. Alumni would come back for a game, maybe they'd come up to Papa Joe's for a beer, relive the old days, and the way the place looked was such a disappointment. I think the alumni really pressured Gordon Gee."

Often mentioned as the catalyst that got Ohio State out of its ivory tower and into the neighborhood across High Street is the abduction and murder of OSU student Stephanie Hummer in 1993. Gee says his concerns started much earlier.

"The first day that I drove from downtown where we were staying in a hotel—I'd never been on the Ohio State campus before—I looked at [South Campus] and

"Does campus have to change? Sure. What's the alternative? The buildings falling down around you while you try to keep making money out of a rathole?"

—Mike Hobbs, campus bar owner, former partner of Al DeSantis



realized that we had the potential for a very grave problem," Gee says.

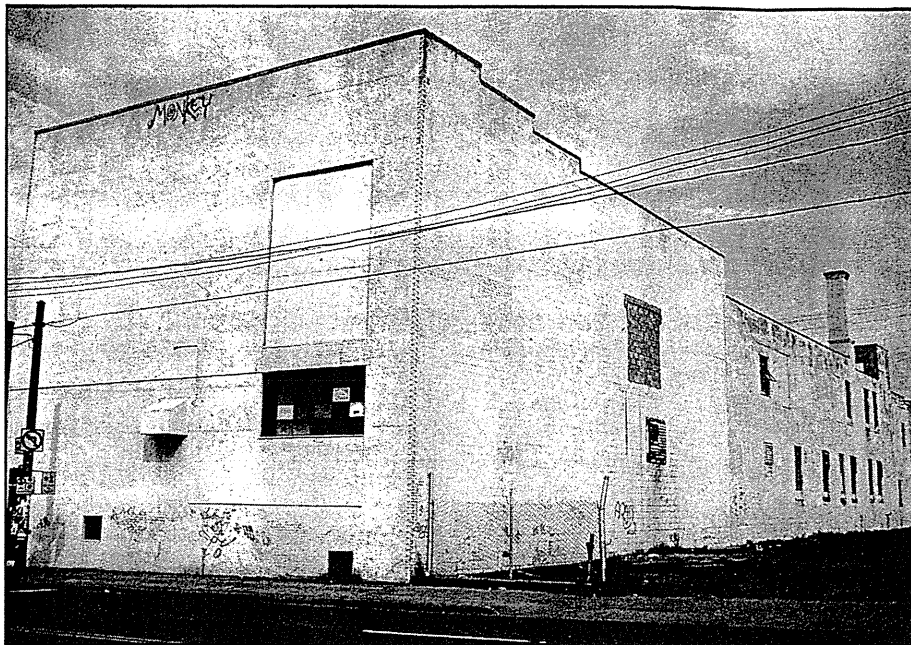
If you don't know the Campus Partners story by now you just haven't been paying attention. It's a nonprofit "urban redevelopment" group set up by OSU. It overcame early skepticism and flat-out mistrust to win over some of the campus-area critics, mainly by holding endless public input sessions in which it actually allowed the public to have some input.

What gives Campus Partners its power is a \$25 million allocation by the university trustees to acquire property in the area. Ohio State bought the Papa Joe's site (to the chagrin of the Parkers, who thought they had a deal with the property owner to rebuild on the location they'd been in since 1970) as well as the old Big Bear Bakery across the street; two big parcels in the center of South Campus.

And Ohio State wants more.

"We have become very aggressive landowners," Gee says. "I don't think \$25 million is that significant when you have almost a \$1 billion endowment. If we invest that money in the community rather than IBM, we may not see the benefits in the short term, but in the long term, I think it will be a great benefit. It affects our academic reputation, it affects our recruitment."

While some property owners won't comment and others won't respond to reporters' phone calls these days, sources say a cat-and-mouse game is under way between OSU and the owners. OSU doesn't want to pay inflated prices to owners looking to make a killing, but reluctant sellers might be swayed by City Council's apparent willingness to declare parts of South



Earlier this year, Campus Partners bought the old Big Bear Bakery, a large property in the center of South Campus.

many businesses that will feel cheated or who will feel that they were treated unfairly."

As for demolition, it sounds inevitable. If you feel fondly about any of the buildings down there, go take a last look. "I don't know of any buildings that have any real historical value," Sterrett says. "We're not talking about the kind of housing stock you have down in Victorian Village or Italian Village."

Campus Partners has two design firms from Boston (including Sasaki Associates, the same group working on the Riverfront

Campus will be one of the great legacies of the Gee era at Ohio State. Gee says, "I think there has been an encouraging impact, and I'm glad it occurred on my watch. We have a vehicle through which the university can interact with the city and with the community. Yes, I'm very proud of that."

Kubat does not take a rosy view: "They're going to come in here and spend a lot of money to fix things and they're just going to make it worse."

Deis has his reservations about Campus Partners, but he's optimistic: "Hey,

"No one wants to sink any money into their business. No one wants to put any money into their building because it might get knocked down," says Webb, who's rooting hard for Campus Partners to follow through on its plans for South Campus. 'Are you kidding? I would love to have a T.G.I. Friday's down here, a Drexel theater on the corner.'"

Campus a blighted area, which would justify taking the property through eminent domain.

"There are very quiet, behind-closed-doors negotiations going on," says a source who asked not to be named. "I think the owners are being somewhat intimidated by the fact that they can't do anything until they come to some kind of agreement with the university."

Such talk angers Kubat. "I pay \$3,400 a month rent. You pay that kind of rent in a blighted area? Think about it. The building across the street is for sale and the owner's asking a million and a half dollars. Blighted. I think they should declare City Hall a blighted area."

Sterrett says, "I think we're heading toward council declaring a portion of the area as blighted. Now, how big a portion that will be I don't know. There will be some property owners who will have no problem selling. Other owners may have problems. I don't think there will be very

plan) hatching some architectural standards for High Street. Sterrett promises that we won't see a suburban cookie-cutter motif when new construction emerges, citing High Street's "eclectic" architecture. He talks more about usage: housing for law and graduate students on the west side of High Street on property OSU owns along 10th Avenue; clothing stores; bookstores; restaurants, and, yes, bars.

"I'd love to attract a Stache's back to the university area," Sterrett says, talking about the rock club that recently moved to the Short North. It's too early to talk about a definite timetable; the hope is that the private sector will follow Campus Partners' lead. "Oh, I can see new construction in three to five years. Nothing is going to happen overnight. On the other hand, I think that as things begin to improve there's going to be a lot more business owners who can respond to opportunity more quickly than Campus Partners."

Sterrett says the rejuvenation of South

the city has blacktopped the alleys, trash collection has improved. It's going to be a slow process. I'm glad to see it happen."

Louie Makkas says, "I'm behind Campus Partners 100 percent. Since they came in, there's less drinking, less trouble. I'm all for it."

Hobbs says he won't worry about what he can't control. "We have a long-term lease, but who knows what can happen? Could our landlord decide to sell? She might. Sure it would be sad if the South Berg had to close. You want to talk about an institution—that place is exactly the same as when your dad drank there. Sure there are things you lose in the pursuit of progress that you would like to have back."

"I don't think this is the end of South Campus," Hobbs says. "It's just a new era." ■

Jeff Long is a contributing writer for Columbus Monthly.