What Is It About Youngstown?

The thing about Youngstown is that it holds you like a well-worn comforter that you always remember, whether you left or whether you stayed.

That’s a singularly impressive truth for two Morrison family members, a family that is as much a part of Youngstown history as the city is a part of their lived history. In this interview, both Michael Morrison and Suzanne Fleming (nee Morrison) talk about their experience of the city and what it means to them.

Michael and Suzanne are cousins close in age (same birthday), he born in Youngstown in 1946, and she in Columbus in 1947, and although there are shared memories, each has a unique perspective about the changes the city has undergone over the last 75+ years and the direction in which it will step into the future.

“I was born in Youngstown, but then we moved to Hubbard, then to Cleveland, then back to Youngstown for 7th, 8th, and 9th grades,” said Michael. So, his “formative” years were not spent in Youngstown, and he later left to live in Maryland and then Florida, and yet, it’s Youngstown he considers home.

Suzanne returned to Youngstown at age 4 when her father finished med school at Ohio State., After graduation from Ursuline she attended Georgetown for a year, returned to Youngstown and graduated from Youngstown State University. She has continuously resided on the North Side, blocks from her parents’ and grandparents’ homes, with her husband, Alfred Fleming, who is also a local boy.

Both Michael and Suzanne remember how the whole town revolved around the mills, and both remember Jenny, the blast furnace, and the beautiful pink sunsets she so unwittingly provided, tinged with the smell of sulfur.

Their grandfather (Michael’s namesake) who went to work in the mills at the tender age of six, started as a water boy, and ended his career at 65 as a supervisor. His job was to handle a bucket the size of a small house and watch the process of melting and re-melting steel at the blast furnace at Youngtown Sheet and Tube.

There were four Morrison brothers, two who stayed in Youngstown—Dr. Frank, Suzanne’s dad, was a family doctor and Dr. Bob, who was a dentist. The other two relocated to the DC area, Ray (Michael’s dad who had an IRS career) and Jack, who was an attorney. For decades the brothers alternated as the Thanksgiving host in Youngstown or in a Maryland suburb of DC. The Morrison brothers and their wives had 24 children and the Thanksgiving numbers grew exponentially as those children married and had children of their own. It was wonderful to stay connected.

For both these natives, as for the residents of all four quadrants in Youngstown, life was all about family and community.

“My strongest memory, besides all the fierce football rivalries, was of Crandall Park. We’d catch crayfish in the creek and most days in the winter, we’d ice skate right after school,” said Michael.

There is a great You Tube video about Youngstown in its early days, which shows many people ice skating along the park (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jj_fizMVGJM>).

“It’s true,” Suzanne agreed, “but that’s not possible now. The water is too warm and the lake doesn’t freeze anymore.” Was this a result of the climate change the mills unknowingly helped to create all those years ago or the rerouting of sewers through the park lake?

Other changes were more dramatic. When the steel mills closed, people began to move out rather rapidly. The population of Youngstown plummeted from 130,00 to present day 60,000. Houses stood empty as people chased jobs elsewhere. Some abandoned houses were destroyed by the city to curb their use as havens for drug users and dealers.

“It was sad to see when I’d go back for visits. I’d go around to the places I knew, to my grandparents’ house, and the landscape was so different,” said Michael. He wanted Youngstown to be restored to its 1950s and 1960s former self, when the city rivaled Pittsburgh in size and vitality.

But Suzanne, deeply involved in the revitalization of Youngstown, has a different perspective. “Yes, I have some of the same memories, but it’s not possible to go backward. Rather, we want to create a new Youngstown built on the family-friendly foundation that still exists.”

Indeed, the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation has sought to address the many challenges in housing, infrastructure, and economic development. In addition, the Youngstown Jubilee Urban Development (Youngstown 2030) group is focused on creating vibrant places to live and work, remaking the urban core architecture and “inspiring others to invest in the city.”

Leaders from Youngstown State University, city and county government, healthcare institutions and business have worked together to reinvigorate the community and attract new residents. The Youngstown Business Incubator, America Makes, Vallourec Star, BRITE Energy Innovators, Ultium Cells, and electric vehicle production are a few of the key players working to build a new and better future.

All these initiatives reflect the ability of Youngstown to reinvent itself—while retaining the best things about it, the close-knit family feel, the neighborhood pride, the many diverse ethnicities, religions and cultures, the reasonable cost of living, and a great location for access to many major cities—and become a place where families can make new memories and preserve the past while moving forward into a new kind of future.