


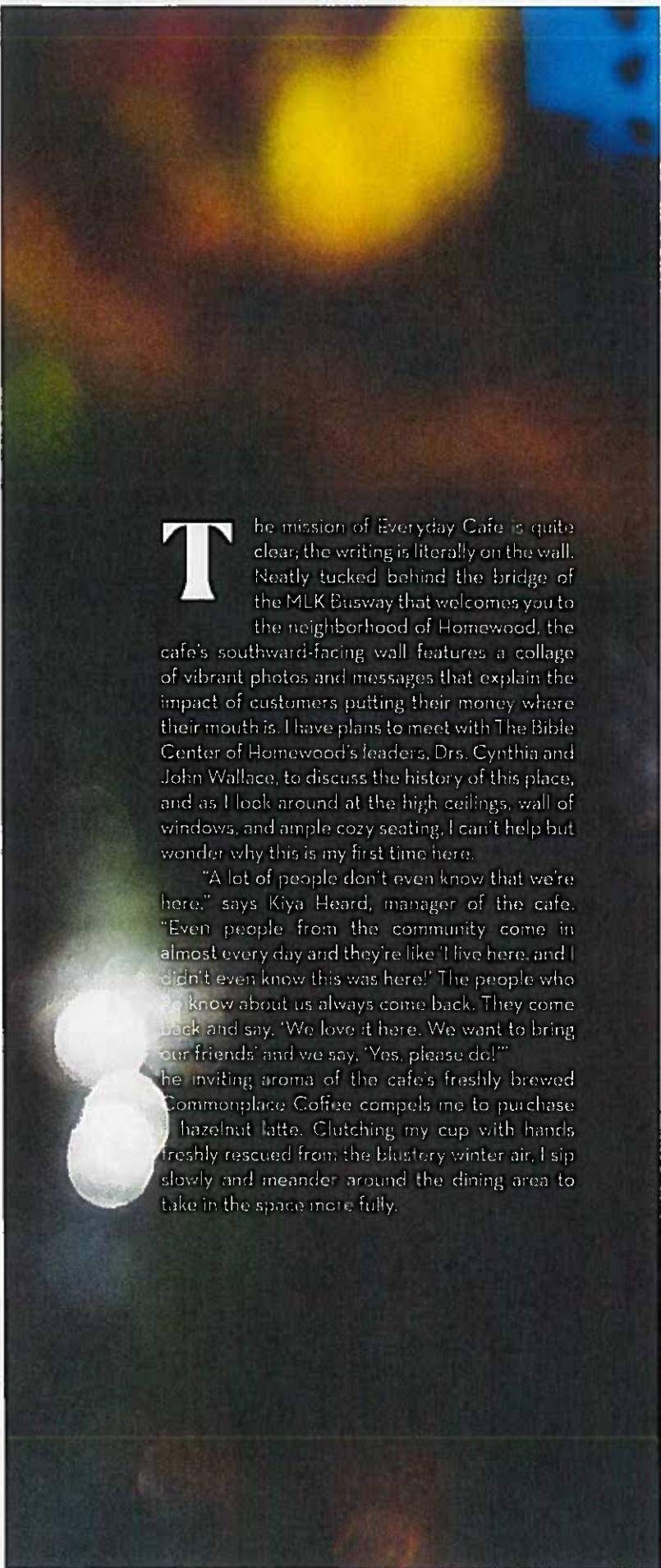
# A LITTLE MORE LIKE HEAVEN

THE BIBLE CENTER OF  
HOMEWOOD REVITALIZES ITS  
COMMUNITY THROUGH THE  
OASIS PROJECT IN A QUEST  
TO MAKE THEIR CORNER OF  
THE EARTH BETTER. IN THEIR  
WORDS: *THE CHURCH HAS  
LEFT THE BUILDING*. CHATHAM  
UNIVERSITY LENDS A HAND ON  
THE JOURNEY UPWARD.



Dr. Cynthia Wallace, co-leader of the Bible  
Center of Homewood, the parent organization  
behind Everyday Cafe.





**T**he mission of Everyday Cafe is quite clear; the writing is literally on the wall. Neatly tucked behind the bridge of the MLK Busway that welcomes you to the neighborhood of Homewood, the cafe's southward-facing wall features a collage of vibrant photos and messages that explain the impact of customers putting their money where their mouth is. I have plans to meet with The Bible Center of Homewood's leaders, Drs. Cynthia and John Wallace, to discuss the history of this place, and as I look around at the high ceilings, wall of windows, and ample cozy seating, I can't help but wonder why this is my first time here.

"A lot of people don't even know that we're here," says Kiya Heard, manager of the cafe. "Even people from the community come in almost every day and they're like 'I live here, and I didn't even know this was here!' The people who do know about us always come back. They come back and say, 'We love it here. We want to bring our friends' and we say, 'Yes, please do!'"

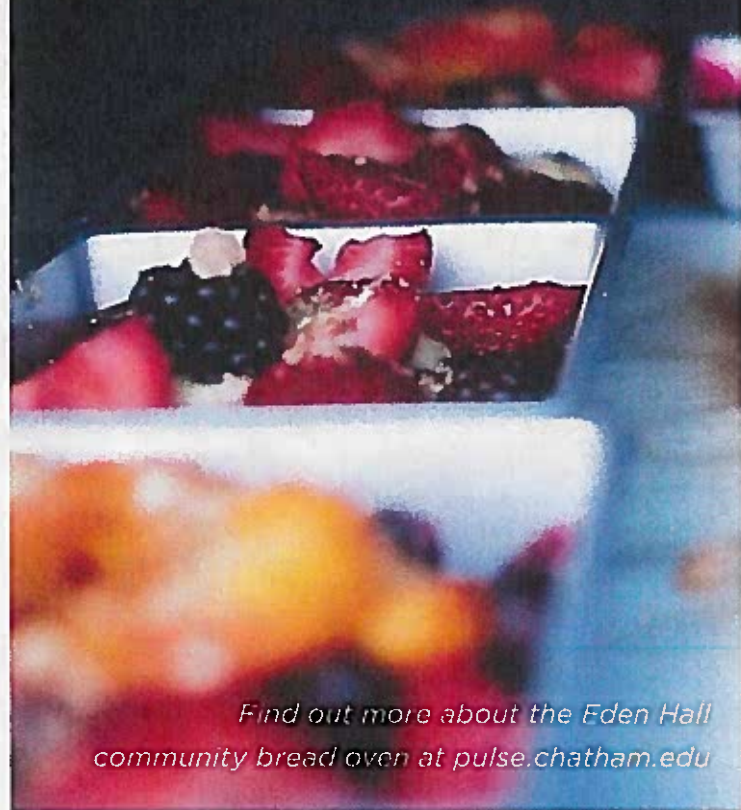
The inviting aroma of the cafe's freshly brewed Commonplace Coffee compels me to purchase a hazelnut latte. Clutching my cup with hands freshly rescued from the blustery winter air, I sip slowly and meander around the dining area to take in the space more fully.

A brighter, healthier tomorrow

"Food brings people together—I think that's one of the best things about the Eden Hall community bread oven."

— Frankie Williams

*Fire Master and  
Master of Arts in Food Studies student*



*Find out more about the Eden Hall  
community bread oven at [pulse.chatham.edu](http://pulse.chatham.edu)*

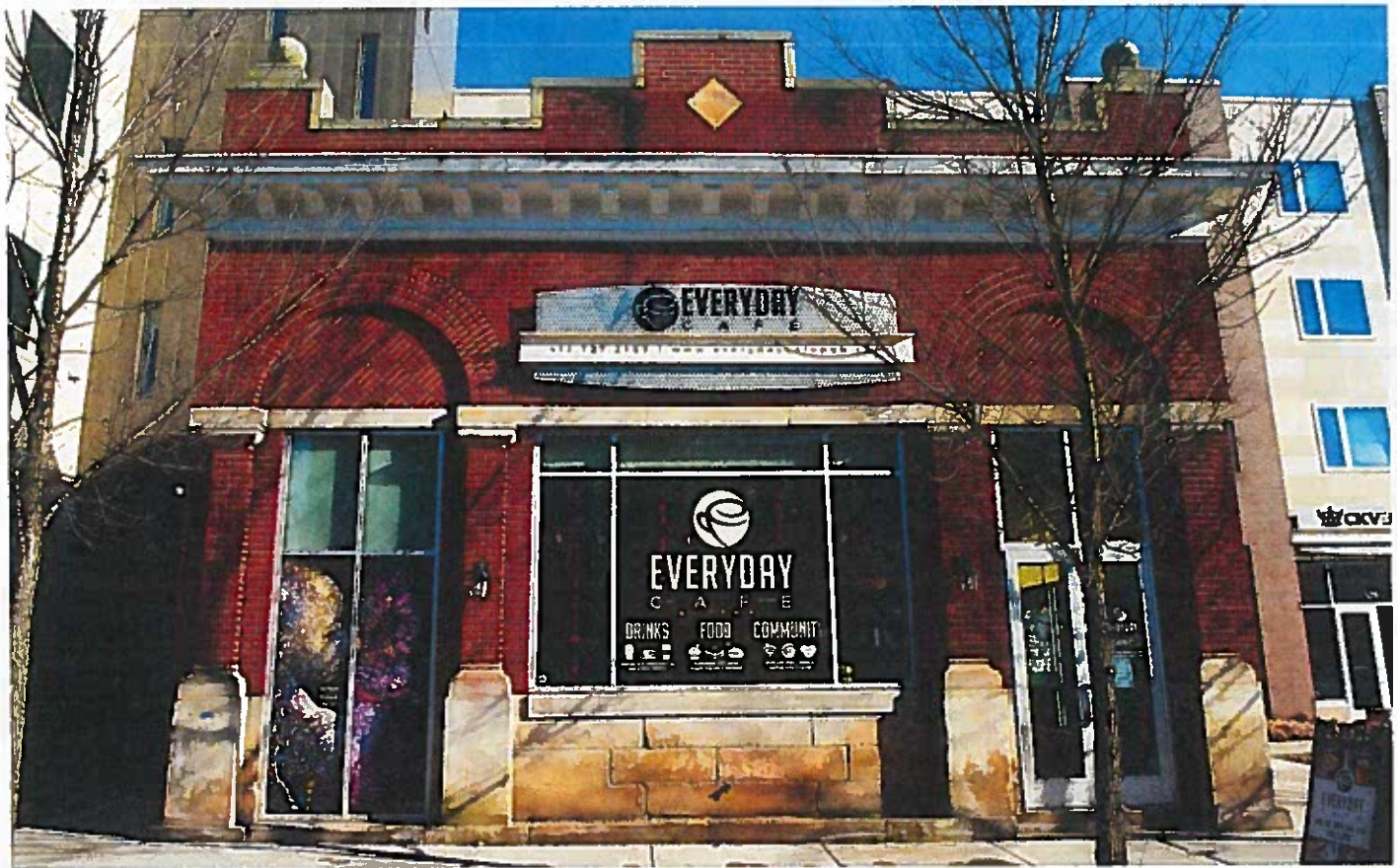


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## LOCAL HEROES



**T**he initiatives of the cafe's parent organization, the Oasis Project, comprise the collage that I mentioned earlier. Dr. Cynthia Wallace shares that the creation of this display was intentional. "The cafe is five years old and originally we had Teeny Harris prints of Homewood in the 1940s and '50s on display to connect the space with the history of the neighborhood. Then we worked with someone in marketing and they told us that you really have to help people connect their cup of coffee to everything else that's going on," says Pastor Cynthia. Photos from The Maker's Clubhouse, On Our Own, and other aspects of Oasis' mission branch out from the Bible Center Church placard.

The Oasis Project works to improve the lives of Homewood residents by focusing on community and economic development. These efforts have materialized in the formation of several organizations that reach residents where they need the most support: education, employment, and entrepreneurship. "It made sense to have the other pieces of the Oasis Project represented here on display so people would know that it's not just a cup of coffee. It's helping an afterschool program, it's supporting the transportation company, it's helping entrepreneurs launch their businesses. It's so much more than just a cup of coffee," says Pastor Cynthia.





## LOCAL HEROES



**T**he cafe, known for “serving coffee with a cause,” was formed to address the community’s need for a third space (neither work nor home) and provide a safe environment for local youth to enter the workforce. Manager Kiya was an alum of the project’s job-training program, Literacy for Life. She explains, “I took a couple of classes and then they offered internships within the Oasis Project. We got to pick, so I chose Everyday Cafe because I love to cook.” Kiya performed so well in her internship role that she was later offered a position as a barista. In a short amount of time, she worked her way up to assistant and then general manager of the space. “Everything happened so fast, but it was amazing! I learn quickly, so I was able to use my common sense and make it happen. I’ve always had a dream to have my own restaurant and so I just treated EC like it was my own.”

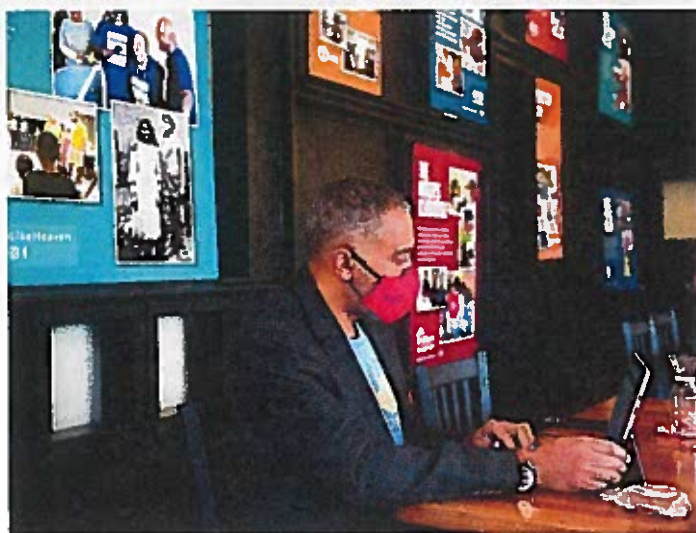
Many ingredients are sourced from Oasis Farm & Fishery, another initiative created in response to a lack of food access for the Homewood community. The farm and fishery provide fresh, local produce to the neighborhood and emphasize the importance of growing one’s own food by providing farming education classes for all. The property even includes an African American Heritage Garden that serves to grow culturally relevant foods for its Black community members. Most food items are cooked and/or prepped at The Oasis Project’s Community Kitchen, helmed by Rondale Harper.

Nicolette Spudic, the Food Innovation Lab manager for the Center for Regional Agriculture, Food, and Transformation (CRAFT) at Chatham University, helped the Oasis Project research equipment availability and pricing for the Community Kitchen build-out. When a menu revamp was needed at Everyday Cafe, she brought her experience as a food consultant and Chatham’s perspectives on space planning, sourcing, and staff training into the mix. The collaboration resulted in a menu of best-sellers and crowd-pleasers with strong nutrition profiles, locally prepared items, and good flavors. COVID-era safety measures informed some decisions, such as sealed oatmeal breakfast cups which could be safely stored with only a dash of hot water needed to complete the preparation.

A quick scan of the Everyday Cafe dining area reveals a clientele as diverse as the menu. Students huddled over laptops in the corner plan their attack for conquering final exams; an older gentleman carefully sips his piping-hot beverage while reading a book whose title is just out of my view; a lovely couple exchanges coy smiles and sweet glances from the confines of their booth.

“It’s a great spot, it really is,” says Kiya. “There’s good energy in here. You meet people from all over. I love it, I really do,” she says. I can feel myself falling for the inviting space and the warm people within it. Maybe it’s the abundant natural light that generously floods the cafe, the decadence of the sausage on my breakfast sandwich, or the smooth jazz playing gently over the loudspeakers that puts me at ease. I cannot be sure. Either way, I feel at peace in this gem of a cafe and make mental plans to turn this space into my personal haven of productivity.

“There’s a Bible passage, Matthew 6:10, which is a part of the Lord’s prayer. It says ‘your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,’” says Dr. John Wallace. That is where he and his wife Cynthia got the idea to create the Oasis Project; they wanted to make Earth more like heaven. “While I’ve never been there, my sense is that some people think that there’s this place called heaven



that’s better than earth. Our thought is that when there is a mismatch between how we think God would like to see things on Earth and the reality of how things actually are, we work to make them better, or a little bit more like heaven,” explains Pastor John.

Their aspiration has revitalized the Homewood community in multiple ways. I learned from both pastors that making Homewood more like heaven involves redeeming abandoned properties by turning them into aesthetically pleasing community spaces and hiring muralists to bring vibrance to the landscape. It looks like serving over 200,000 meals during the pandemic to address issues of food insecurity for the neighborhood’s residents. It means implementing a Neighborhood SCHOOL (Strategy Created to Help Optimize Online Learning) by turning the church’s sanctuary into a classroom for an entire year so students would not have to complete homework assignments on their cellphones. It entails supporting the entrepreneurial dreams of its community members by providing classes and resources through its program On Our Own.

“Remember the church is not a building. The church is people. Churches are not independent of the neighborhoods that they’re nestled in. We have a responsibility to not only pray for the community, but to also actively seek prosperity and the wellbeing of the neighborhood as well,” says Pastor John.

**P**astor Cynthia espoused a similar sentiment: "We very much believe that churches should be at the forefront of community and economic development. Churches are not just for Sunday morning; it's not just about what you learn in a church service, but also how you live out that faith, how you impact your community, how the community is different because of the fact that the church is there. We are engaged in this revitalization because that's God's will being done in this community."

I also spoke with Dr. Christopher Murakami, a professor at Chatham University, who shared more about the Oasis Project's partnership with the Falk School of Sustainability and Environment. Dr. Murakami explained, "There have been student projects in Agroecology, Urban Agriculture, and Learning Through Food where we work in mutually beneficial association wherein students and I help with ways to engage in authentic scenarios with Oasis to work in a co-learning environment that also works on different project opportunities that serves the priorities of Oasis Farm & Fishery." Mutually beneficial, indeed. "The students learn in richer depth how the principles and practices of these courses are relevant in real-time and real-world settings. The hope is to affirm identities of participation for learnings and build stronger relationships between Oasis and Chatham," expressed Dr. Murakami.

**"THERE'S A BIBLE PASSAGE, MATTHEW 6:10, WHICH IS A PART OF THE LORD'S PRAYER. IT SAYS 'YOUR KINGDOM COME, YOUR WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN,'" SAYS DR. JOHN WALLACE. THAT IS WHERE HE AND HIS WIFE CYNTHIA GOT THE IDEA TO CREATE THE OASIS PROJECT; THEY WANTED TO MAKE EARTH MORE LIKE HEAVEN.**

I learned that the ties between the university and the Oasis Project run even deeper. Popping Mustard Seeds, a South Indian cooking class business, and Wild Rise Bakery, a gluten-free establishment, are both run by Chatham alumni who rent space at the Oasis Project's Community Kitchen. (See page 74 for a profile of Oliver Pinder and Wild Rise Bakery.)

After being supplied with plenty of evidence of the deeply impactful work that this organization is doing, I couldn't help but wonder what this group of empowered people would like to see next for their community.



"The Bible uses the word 'shalom' to describe holistic peace and prosperity," says Pastor John. "Here in Homewood we have issues of poverty, crime, and lack. That's why I think that the reference to heaven is good. We may never get there, but we're constantly striving to make things better. We would love to see more affordable housing, an economically integrated community, good quality schools, increased access to food, you know, all of those things," he says.

Pastor Cynthia adds, "We see it time and time again. People in this community are so proud of this space." Many customers who grew up in the neighborhood are pleasantly surprised with progress that has been made by the Oasis Project when they return to Homewood. "They're like 'Okay, I see you Homewood!' The fact that the community kind of owns the cafe in that sense means a lot to me. I love it when people bring their loved ones and they show off the cafe like it's theirs. It belongs to the community," says Cynthia.

We see you Homewood. We're proud and we're ready for more.

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