

# Through green-colored glasses

OAES and OCES assist Tulsa's Greenwood District

On the evening of May 31, 1921, smoke filled the air as hatred, prejudice and race riots transformed a north Tulsa district, once referred to as "The Black Wall Street of America," into a mass of disaster and devastation.

Thriving, successful businesses in a 35-block area were burned to the ground and ultimately became ashes of the past. The area faced bleak chances of survival. However, after 20 years of near dormancy, the cooperative efforts of a few key individuals have transformed this once-desolate neighborhood from mere ruins into a thriving business district, now known as the Greenwood District.

Reuben Gant, Greenwood Chamber of Commerce president, is one of the key players who continues to overcome the past and improve the future for the Greenwood District.

Cooperative efforts from several Oklahoma State University agencies helped turn Gant's vision into reality.

"My vision is to create a one-stop shop for those frequenting the Greenwood District," said Gant.

The Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station and the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, both a part of OSU's Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, were influential groups in the revitalization efforts of this district.

"Because OSU was developed as a land-grant university, the OAES and OCES place significant importance on celebrating the heritage that makes this university so unique," said D.C. Coston, OAES associate director and former interim associate director of OCES. "Our programs strive to establish a strong economic base and improvement opportunities for Oklahoma neighborhoods."

Gant and the OAES share similar visions. Gant, a former OSU student and football player, seeks out his lifelong mission of providing civic and economic leadership to improve his childhood community, while the OAES is dedicated to creating "healthy communities."

"Healthy communities are established on a three-pronged approach, including the devel-

*Greenwood Chamber of Commerce President Reuben Gant (left) enjoys reuniting with Greenwood District customers. (Photo by Brooklyn Turner)*

opment of a diverse and resilient economy, effective and efficient infrastructure, and local leadership," Coston said.

The Greenwood District supporters decided the area needed to develop actual physical, brick-and-mortar projects to build a strong economic base. In accomplishing this goal, early developers solicited the help of OSU in creating the master plan for the Greenwood area. OSU provided the latest technological research and assistance needed for re-establishing the district.

In 1983, the area from Archer Street to the I-244 overpass on Greenwood Street was renovated. The initial renovation efforts were made possible because of the collaboration among the Greenwood District, the city of Tulsa and the Economic Development Administration.

"At that time, only one business tenant was located in the two-block district," said Gant. "The OAES made significant contributions in the areas of strategic planning, conceptual design for growth and expansion, research, as well as tenant retention and attraction."

The buildings that house current businesses were rebuilt, in part, from the salvageable brick remaining from the 1921 riots.

"The Greenwood District focuses its effort toward strengthening the community, which is shown by the district using resources already in existence versus consuming new land to rebuild the same district," Gant said. "Today, the district is at 98-percent occupancy, which is an economic accomplishment that brings much pride to the district."

Among other businesses, current Greenwood tenants include the Oklahoma Vital Records Office, the Long-term Care Authority, Oklahoma Visual Services, a barbershop, a restaurant and the Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services.

Gant said these businesses provide the necessary traffic that will serve to heighten awareness of the area and the deliverance of quality goods and services.

In addition, the Greenwood District borders the OSU-Tulsa campus.

"Current business enterprises help create foot traffic for this area, but OSU-Tulsa's presence has brought some attention and visibility to the Greenwood District," Gant said. "OSU has done far more than just provide the educational facilities for us to conduct our micro-enterprise program. OSU, to us, has been a real community partner."

The micro-enterprise business program is a service offered to minorities, as is the small-business incubator program. Gant said Greenwood is the only state-certified, small-business incubator and is one of two certified community development financial institutions in Tulsa.



"This district is the only full-blown micro-enterprise program in Tulsa," Gant said.

The micro-enterprise program involves a mix of current business owners, people who want to start a business and those who are unsure of whether they want to start a business. Following the micro-enterprise class, the Greenwood District also provides an after-care program that is designed to offer participants continued services.

"The micro-enterprise program is not advertised, and we never have a problem filling up a class, so we must be doing something right," Gant said. "This overwhelming demand demonstrates that the micro-enterprise business and incubator programs remain successful."

Greenwood District strives continually to expand. Gant said the number of programs offered to the public is expanded on an annual basis to serve all interested parties.

"Future projects under discussion include the construction of a hotel, a museum commemorating the race riots, a children's all-sports facility, a movie theater, as well as a multi-family housing facility," Gant said.

He said the city could benefit from the present development of the area, as could Greenwood itself.

As it did with the Greenwood District, the OAES helps communities develop strategies and obtain the resources for community improvement. This is another manifestation of the land-grant tradition in helping local Oklahoma communities succeed.

"We want to retain students in Oklahoma as working professionals, and OSU helps make this possible by allowing people to fulfill their personal desires of improving their hometown communities. Keeping qualified, energetic people in Oklahoma strengthens our prosperity as a state," said Coston.

Coston said community internship opportunities are a great starting point to help students plan their futures while still working on their educational careers.

As agriculture continues to evolve into more of a service industry, Coston said, there is an increased number of vitally important skills OSU must instill within students. These include the ability to apply technical skills, increase emphasis beyond the technological field, and enhance communications, public speaking, management and leadership.

"The OAES encourages students to light a fire under their parents so that small Oklahoma communities maintain their vitality," Coston said. "As history proves, generations want to leave the world a better place, but this is not possible if leaders do not ignite and feed the fire."

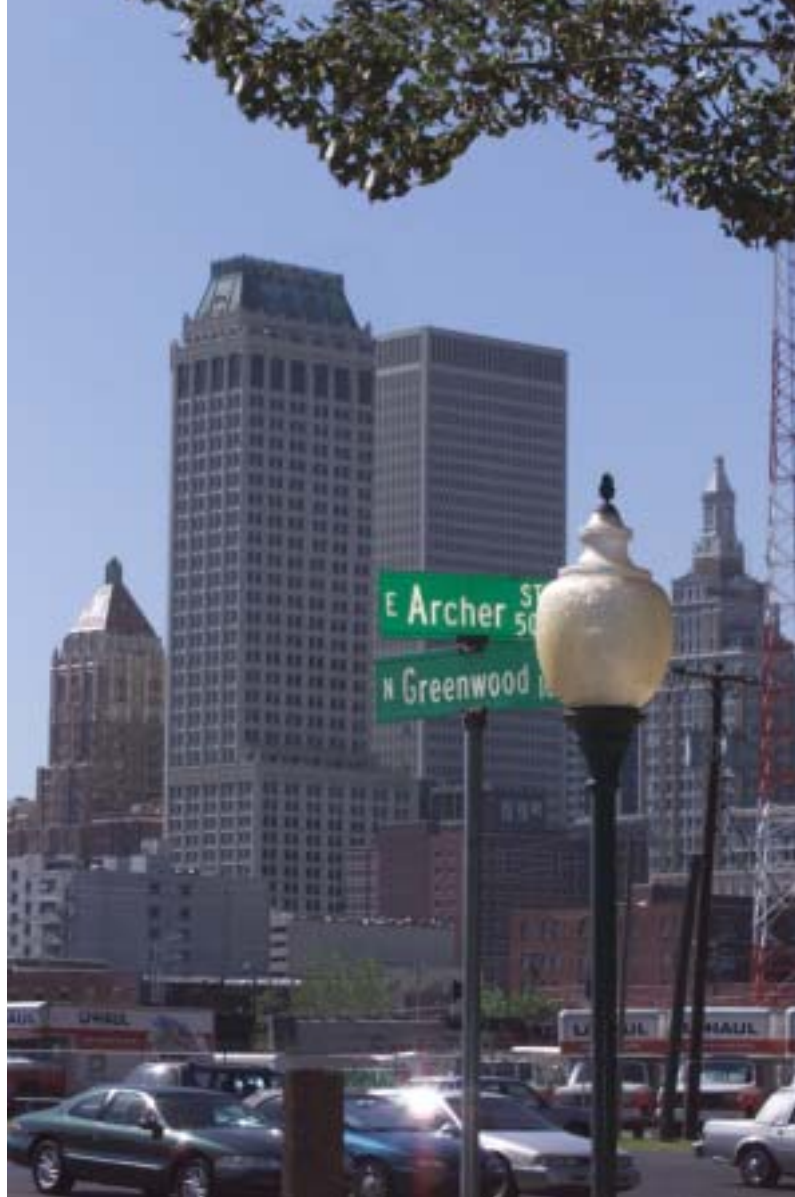
Coston said the Greenwood District has achieved and fulfilled the OAES's three-pronged requirement.

The OAES strives to provide the catalyst for others by creating leadership opportunities for all OSU students who have a burning aspiration to improve the local Oklahoma communities and neighborhoods where they were raised.

Gant strives each day to extend his leadership skills to those visiting the district. It is common to find Gant visiting with supportive community members on the streets of this revitalized area.

"OSU-Tulsa brings back memories of the OSU-Stillwater campus, which makes it even more moving to work at fulfilling the ultimate goal of creating a district that serves its people as a one-stop shop," Gant said.

The Greenwood District is in the final stages of attaining authorization needed to break ground on a 90-room hotel that may be used by hospitality management students on the OSU-Tulsa campus.



*The Greenwood District is just minutes from downtown Tulsa. (Photo by Todd Johnson)*

The OAES focuses on student development by educating students to become better community leaders.

"The agency also places emphasis on the fact that agriculture is not only about food, feed and fiber production, but rather, agriculture is also very much a service industry," Coston said. "In our service to Oklahoma's citizens, OAES is dedicated to establishing collaboration among researchers, professionals, community leaders and the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service staff.

"The Greenwood District has clearly demonstrated agriculture as a service industry because it is an urban district that initially relied heavily upon the services provided by the OAES."

The Greenwood District is just one example of a former OSU student, Reuben Gant, being dedicated to serving others through his lifelong commitment of improving his Oklahoma community. OSU's Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources allows and challenges students to envision their local Oklahoma communities through "green-colored" glasses in much the same way Gant sees the Greenwood District. As a result, OSU students will continue becoming tomorrow's leaders – today.

*By Brooklyn Turner, Amber, Okla.*