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MOVING IN FOR GOOD

## Transplanted gardener takes root in the city

Great price on house after riot sealed the deal

July 23, 2007

BY CASSANDRA SPRATLING  
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A day or so after the riot started, Sharon Zammit and her then-husband, Peter Zammit, learned the looting had spread to Livernois Avenue, about a mile from the house they lived in on Indiana Street in northwest Detroit. That's when they decided to leave. They had a 14-month-old daughter and Sharon was nine months pregnant with their second child.

They packed up a few things and went to stay with her mother, who lived in La Salle Township in Monroe County, about 50 miles south of Detroit. They stayed until order was restored in the city.

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A year later, the Zammits, who are white, bought a house in the city.

"We got a good deal because housing prices in the city dropped after the riots," Sharon explained. "And you can't beat the quality of the homes."

They bought a six-bedroom house on a double lot in the University District, then a heavily Catholic community named for its proximity to the University of Detroit Mercy. The Zammits were attracted to the neighborhood because it is near their church; it has easy access to the city bus lines and is within walking distance of the university where her husband studied psychology at night while working at Ford Motor Co. during the day.

And there was the house itself -- a brick beauty with plenty of space for her children to play and

for her to indulge in her favorite pastime: gardening.

"I'm a gardener," said Sharon, 66. "I immediately liked the prospect of creating my garden on this lot. And there was a pond in the middle. In the winter, the children could ice-skate on it."

The Zammits have divorced, and the six children they raised are grown and gone -- all moved to suburban communities. The youngest, Raphael, 34, spends a lot of time at his mother's and is considering where he'll buy a home. Recently, after a great deal of reflection, he ruled out Detroit. In fact, he's not even sure he'll stay in Michigan.

"I love it. This neighborhood was very influential on me. There were all kinds of kids here. I grew up living Dr. King's dream," said Raphael, a car designer for General Motors Corp. "Over the last few years, I've snooped around to see what's available, mostly downtown, in Brush Park and the Woodbridge area. ...

"But the chances of me moving into Detroit are very slim. I'd be rolling the dice with hard-earned money. The city is trying to grow, but it seems that as one thing opens, another shuts down," he said. For example, he noted, Compuware opened its headquarters in downtown Detroit, but a few years later Comerica Bank announced it was moving its headquarters out.

And it's not just the city that concerns him. His job requires him to work between Michigan and California so he could

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(Photos by ROMAIN BLANQUART/Detroit Free Press)

Sharon Zammit, 66, tends to her Detroit garden with the help of her son Raphael, 34. Sharon and her then-husband bought the six-bedroom house on Wildemere Street in 1968.

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settle in either state.

"I have big questions about the economy of the state," says Raphael, who's currently renting in Madison Heights.

His mother said she had no qualms about remaining in the city even as it became predominantly black.

"We have good neighbors here," Sharon said. "Actually, I stay in part because of the people. We always watch out for each other."

And her large house and gardens offer a perfect gathering place for the family that has grown to include 13 grandchildren.

"I don't want to leave my garden, and the house with so many memories," she said.

Contact **CASSANDRA SPRATLING** at 313-223-4580 or [spratling@freepress.com](mailto:spratling@freepress.com).

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- Obituaries
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