

THE GETAWAY CARTS

How Golf Carts Disrupted Peace and Exposed Privilege in an Austin Neighborhood

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Photos by Blair Kinsey, 4 Dec. 2020.

Drawings by Levi Kettl, the 3-year-old who lives across the street from me, 5 Dec. 2020.

I've lived in Balcones Woods my entire life.¹ Situated in northwest Austin, Texas, this is where I made my first friends, rode my first bike, and learned to swim.² I've lived here long enough to bear witness to one of the neighborhood's more intriguing trends: the rise of golf carts. It started slowly a few years ago, but by the time the pandemic rolled around, golf carts were a regular sight here. With little to do but go on walks and contemplate life, golf carts became a topic of conversation within my family. We were confused; my neighborhood doesn't have a golf course, and few, if any, of these golf carts were being used for golf-related purposes. People were spending thousands of dollars just to drive to the pool or aimlessly through the neighborhood in a pseudo-car with no real doors and no real regulations. Golf carts are efficient, sure, but they're definitely not essential in a neighborhood that spans less than one square mile.³ Back in mid-March, the main question surrounding golf carts was: are they really worth it? And my principal attitude towards them was one of confusion. All of that was before I really considered the implications of golf carts, and before they became a central player in a neighborhood-wide controversy and an accomplice to petty theft.⁴



Before we delve into the scandals of Balcones Woods, let's establish what a "neighborhood" is. According to sociologist Albert Hunter,⁵ a neighborhood is "a social/spatial unit of

social organization... that it is larger than a household, but smaller than a city" (qtd. in Taylor 225). Geographically determining the boundaries of a neighborhood is often an ambiguous task, but the fluid nature of these boundaries aids in developing community and assimilating different groups (Taylor 226-27). Interestingly, my own neighborhood's boundaries are very clear. A powerline draws a hard line between Balcones Woods and the adjacent neighborhood. Balcones Woods is a deed-restricted neighborhood, so every homeowner is required to belong to, and pay dues to, the Homeowners' Association (HOA). The definite geography and self-contained nature of my neighborhood creates a sense of unity, but it also excludes people who, in some cases, live right next door. And to Taylor's point, more ambiguous or overlapping neighborhood boundaries can foster a wider sense of community.

Within Balcones Woods, there's familiarity and, often, compassion among neighbors. It's the kind of neighborhood where you know your neighbors and help them if they need it. If you get halfway through making mac and cheese and realize you don't have milk, you knock on your neighbor's door and ask to borrow a cup. For years, I babysat the kids who live across the street, and even their rats. Each Saturday from May through July, the neighborhood gathers to cheer on the Blue Wave, our swim team. Every neighborhood four-year-old is recruited, and nearly every kid joins, many of them participating until they graduate high school. I fondly remember sharing doughnuts before swim meets and playing in the park before practice.⁶ Families often stay here for decades, which is proof of our strong community and the enjoyment people get from living here, as explained in Coulton et al.'s study on residential mobility (58).

Demographically, Balcones Woods is fairly homogeneous; the vast majority

of residents are white and middle class. Regardless of this, after George Floyd's murder, one African American mother in Balcones Woods asked neighbors to purchase and display Black Lives Matter signs she'd designed, with the hope that seeing them would be meaningful to her 12-year-old son.⁷ In the end, over 100 of my 500 neighbors displayed the signs, and these were signs of our compassion.



According to Edward Goetz et al. in their study on primarily white, affluent neighborhoods, racial segregation by neighborhood fosters hostility between racial groups and perpetuates inequalities. Segregation of this kind also leads to more "self-interested investments" by the affluent and white populations who, surrounded by similarly advantaged people, see less necessity in spending their money to benefit the entire community or the less privileged (Goetz et al. 102). Golf carts, usually costing \$5000-\$7000, seem like a perfect example of one such self-interested investment.

Because of the deed restrictions, in Balcones Woods, you can't leave your trash cans on the road for more than a few days or have a large, eye-sore rock in your front yard without getting a reproachful letter from the HOA. Sometimes, just by driving 35 in the neighborhood, you'll get a scathing review in the neighborhood Facebook Group. Here, we take care of each other, but we also keep each other in check, and that's how, I assume, the majority of my neighbors like it. They like to foster a compassionate community in which everyone behaves with neighborliness. It

¹ Ethos: credibility & connection to topic

² Pathos: appeals to nostalgia, childhood

³ Logos

⁴ Building suspense

⁵ Ethos: credibility of sources

⁶ Pathos: personal anecdotes

⁷ Pathos: appeal to values of equality, caring for children

makes sense then, that multiple larcenies, made possible by golf carts, very quickly had my neighbors up in arms.

It's unsurprising that Balcones Woods has a distinct character. In 2015, Markus Jokela and four colleagues conducted a study with 56,000 Londoners to investigate correlations between geography, personality, and life satisfaction (Jokela et al. 725).⁸ The most important findings of this study, as explained by Shigehiro Oishi, were that neighborhoods do, in fact, have different "vibes" due to the personalities of their residents, rather than just demographics, and that there is a correlation between an individual's life satisfaction, their personality, and the personality of the neighborhood they live in (645-46). Furthermore, higher levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness were found in areas at the outskirts of the London metro area, and these areas also had lower rates of openness to new experiences (Jokela et al. 726-27). This corroborates the conjectures I've made about my neighborhood -- the people here are happy to help each other, but relatively resistant to certain new experiences, in this case, having golf carts on our streets.

The problem that many of my neighbors had was not simply with the presence of golf carts.

Rather, real complaints arose when children started driving them. Jodi Schrobilgen, who's lived in Balcones Woods for 26 years and raised three children here, has lots of opinions on this.⁹ "I don't have a problem innately with golf carts," Schrobilgen said. "I have more of an issue with the fact that kids drive them that are clearly not old enough to be driving them, and it doesn't seem that there are very specific laws governing the driving of golf carts on city roads.

And there's a lot of them now." She's right; there are a lot of them now. A brief search through the Balcones Woods Facebook Group yielded over ten posts that described kids driving golf carts recklessly, with calls for golf cart-owning parents to monitor and educate their children. While I understand the desire to let your children explore, it's clear that this trend is unsafe. In fact, recently in a Houston suburb, a 12-year-old boy was killed by a 16-year-old golf cart driver (ABC13 Houston). Golf carts may be smaller than cars, but that doesn't mean they're less deadly or dangerous, especially with an inexperienced driver behind the wheel.¹⁰

According to the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles, it's legal to drive golf carts on neighborhood streets or even highways, as long as the speed limit is less than 35 mph and they don't go farther than two miles from their home. Even so, isn't it illegal for children to be driving them completely unsupervised?¹¹ Apparently, there's no agreement on the answer to this question, at least not in Texas. Jermaine Kilgore of the Austin Police Department said, "It is not illegal for a 10-year-old to drive a golf cart on an arterial roadway. A golf cart is not considered a motor vehicle as defined in the Transportation Code. A Texas driver's license is not required to operate a golf cart" (qtd. in Bassman). But the Texas Department of Public Safety takes the opposite view, claiming a licence is required to drive a golf cart on publicly maintained roads (Bassman). Without a clear understanding of the legality of children driving golf carts, there's little chance any law will be enforced.¹² Golf carts are, as Schrobilgen noted, not really governed by specific laws, and within the

neighborhood, golf cart owners act like anything goes. This attitude doesn't stop at parents giving their children free reign of the streets; in one case, the parents themselves decided to take to the streets on carts and cause some trouble.

Nine days before the 2020 presidential election, roughly fifteen Biden-Harris political signs were stolen from the yards of Balcones Woods residents. Soon, the Facebook Group was teeming with disgruntled posts about missing signs. Unluckily for them, the thieves were not very stealthy. They were overheard discussing their master plan right outside one of their victim's fencelines. Soon,

everyone knew, at least generally, what had happened: three (or possibly four) drunken dads stole Biden signs, with their golf carts as their getaway cars. With such an emotional election drawing closer, this was an interesting move on the part of the Drunk Dad Squad, and one that very quickly had many neighbors fuming, ultimately leading to some of the most prolific Balcones Woods Facebook Group arguments to date.

Since Austin is a liberal city, I've always assumed a majority of my neighbors are Democrats. Still, there's certainly been a sizable Republican population in Balcones Woods, and for the most part, my neighborhood tries to avoid political discussions. Despite the fact that there's nothing overtly bipartisan about a tiny, door-less bench on wheels,¹³ with the night of partisan theft, there emerged a tangible connection between politics and golf carts. Organized Biden sign-stealing less than two weeks before a highly-anticipated election certainly came across as a politically-motivated attack. After that night, golf carts became a symbol of conservatism. "As far as the politics of the golf carts, I think that's kind of unfortunate that it seems to be



⁸ Ethos: establishing credibility of sources
⁹ Ethos: establishing credibility of sources

¹⁰ Logos
¹¹ Rhetorical question
¹² Logos

¹³ Descriptive imagery

skewing very right,” Jodi Schrobilgen contended. “I know that some of the more vocal folks definitely have right-wing political leanings.” According to Schrobilgen, the sign stealing wasn’t necessarily politically motivated. Allegedly, it was done as a prank with the intention of “relocating” the signs to the yard of a conservative friend of the Drunk Dad Squad. Regardless, it’s fairly obvious that organized political sign-stealing is ill-advised. As Schrobilgen put it, it’s “horrible decision-making out of anyone, but especially out of adults.” Such an obviously inflammatory action could certainly be proof of the drunkenness of the Squad and their lack of concern for consequences.

Another indicator of their inebriation was that when they realized the error of their ways, they returned the stolen signs to the neighborhood pool because, as they admitted, they were too drunk to remember which houses they had robbed. It was with this same level of impairment that they were driving around the neighborhood and endangering their neighbors. Like sign-stealing before an election, drunk driving is universally seen as reckless, ill-advised, and of course, illegal.

On multiple fronts, the Drunk Dad Squad messed up.¹⁴ Naturally, people were interested in IDing them and receiving apologies and replacements for the signs. Luckily for the outraged victims, our pool has cameras, so whoever dropped the signs off there could easily be discovered. Many neighbors asked the HOA president to check this incriminating footage, which he did. But he didn’t publicly identify them nor force them to apologize. Rather, there were covert offers to replace signs from people who were apparently not involved. It seemed that the HOA president stepped in merely to cover up for the perpetrators and appease the victims of the theft. What *should* the HOA have done in this scenario, according to the deeds and

covenants?¹⁵ As a two-time HOA Board member, Schrobilgen clarified the HOA is intended to intervene only in conflicts related to covenants violations. There’s no covenants related to stealing signs or drunk driving, and given this, the HOA should not have been involved at all. “This situation makes me feel that the HOA board stepped outside their scope of work or that the board president chose to intervene as a friend of those who did the deed,” Schrobilgen noted in the Facebook Group. “The optics are pretty bad when anyone from the board is publicly and privately smoothing feathers and making offers of amends on behalf of a small group of neighbors who screwed up with other neighbors, but not with the HOA.”



In the end, the culprits were never publicly identified nor did they publicly apologize. Realizing they couldn’t outrun or out-drive their mistake, a few of them personally apologized to their victims (or sent their wives to do so). Many signs were eventually replaced. This took days of shaming via Facebook and public outrage at the lack of responsibility on the part of the thieves. The whole controversy became much uglier than necessary, with neighbors fighting over the need for a public apology, the role of the HOA, and the most appropriate resolution of the conflict. No one will soon forget the Drunk Dad Squad and the drama which their political pillaging¹⁶ caused. Nor will

anyone forget the role that golf carts played in the heist. In the neighborhood Facebook Group, Liem Nguyen, a non-white, long-time Balcones Woods resident, expressed:

As someone who has been profiled in my life, as others have been (and probably more painfully), I now feel very sorry for every adult white male who drives a golf cart in the BW. Because of some acts of a few, people will now start looking at you all kinda funny. You will be the recipient of stares and whispers and finger-pointing wherever you go. Security guards will follow you in their own golf carts... You will be accosted on a public sidewalk. Your actions will be forevermore viewed as “suss,” as your kids might say.

Golf carts changed Balcones Woods. Now, it’s a place where you have to watch out for 10-year-old drivers and protect your yard signs from being “relocated.” Golf carts, frankly, are asinine in such a walkable neighborhood, not to mention dangerous considering many drivers are drunk, too young, or reckless. During a worldwide pandemic, when what we needed most was compassion and understanding, golf carts divided Balcones Woods. Months later, with the pandemic still looming and an exhaustingly emotional election¹⁷ approaching, they proved to be a vector for the greatest neighborhood-wide distress Balcones Woods has seen in a long time. Golf carts don’t necessarily cause problems, but in Balcones Woods, they allowed privileged drivers to break rules with little to no consequence. In our country today, where social upheaval has become something of a norm, abusing privilege exaggerates divides and fosters more hostility. Right now, whether or not we have golf carts, we need compassion, generosity, and neighborliness.

¹⁴ Purposefully simple wording

¹⁵ Rhetorical question
¹⁶ Alliteration

¹⁷ Alliteration

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