

From Clay Street to the Sailboat Show

Telling the stories of a city at work



“Oh my Lord, thank you. I never thought I’d live to see this day,” gushed Mrs. Beatrice P. Smith, 89, of Annapolis, after throwing her arms around former President Jimmy Carter on Pleasant Street, just around the corner from — but out of sight of — downtown Annapolis.

October 5 was the kind of day that evokes enthusiasm. The 86-year-old former president and his wife Rosalynn Carter were not only visiting the Clay Street neighborhood. They were also bringing the 27th annual Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Habitat for Humanity Work Project to the heart of Annapolis’ black community. With the Carters — indeed in advance of them — came a force of skilled laborers, volunteers and soon-to-be homeowners to continue the construction of 10 new homes in the center of the Clay Street community.

Ophelia Matthews, 27, also felt the joy. “I’m excited to be working on my own home. Today’s the first day,” said Matthews, who expected to be “banging nails” on the home she’ll move into come March.

City Alderman Kenny Kirby, who grew up a stone’s throw away in Obery Court, felt pretty good, too. An old neighbor was another of the expectant homeowners building his future on this workday. “He’s driven a cab all his life, been in the trenches,” said Kirby. “So it’s good to see him rewarded with the American dream, first-time home ownership.”

Annapolis Mayor Josh Cohen beamed as the Carters visited each home site and work crew, shook hands all around and presented each homeowner with a new Bible. “It’s energizing to see all these volunteers,” said Cohen. “To have the president come helps shine the spotlight on the work volunteers are doing and the difference it’s making in the community.”

Were it not for that spotlight — shown by news media drawn by the president’s historic visit — you might well miss the excitement. All that nail banging makes a lot of noise, but it might never reach your ears. Did you know that Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake has worked on Clay Street since 1999, helping build a dozen homes? Did you know that since 1982, Habitat has built over 200 homes in Anne Arundel County, housing more than 800 people?

The homes and their human stories are real whether or not they’re witnessed, reported, broadcast, heard or read. But once that happens, a little bit of each story belongs to all of us. Hammers and nails aren’t the only tools that build communities.

Hammers are also ringing just blocks from Clay Street's Habitat worksite, on City Dock, where a city of sailboats is under construction. For the 41st year, the U.S. Sailboat Show, October 7 thru 11, gives Annapolis five days as the undisputed sailing capital of the nation, bringing in hundreds of sailboats and thousands of sailing accessories and necessities. It's the place to be if you love spectacle. If you love sailboats as well, it's your candy store, with 12 dozen boats from 10 to 150 feet, most in the water and open for your inspection.

There's no counting the number of stories collected in such a gathering — but that number's sure to double as the U.S. Powerboat Show follows almost before the sailboats can get out of town, October 14 thru 17.

Often, the stories tell how people make a living. The boat shows put millions of dollars into circulation, much of that amount into the marine trades, but no inconsiderable amount into the very local economy. The city of Annapolis takes in about half a million dollars. On top of that, says Mayor Cohen, the boat shows are "better than Christmas for city restaurants, hotels and shops."

The windfall goes further than you might imagine. Alderman Kirby remembers working the boat shows as a gofer as a kid. Looking around his old Clay Street neighborhood, he reflects that such jobs still exist. "Eight or 10 unemployed people here will get jobs for the two weeks of the boat show," he says.

In one week, the city has more stories than you could ever write. From this good week, we've plucked a couple for your reading in this week's paper.

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