

Community of partners puts new face on Baltimore street

By Susan Dunn-Lisuzzo and Meghan Dunn



More than 300 students from Stevenson University fanned out along Baltimore, Maryland's Jefferson Street and the surrounding blocks Saturday in what Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake called a "community partner day."

This corps of volunteers helped rehabilitate homes, clean up litter from the neighborhood and line Jefferson Street with a row of trees during a day of building and neighborhood beautification.

Habitat of the Chesapeake staff members Leila Kohler-Frueh, director of community engagement, and Jessica Drake, youth engagement coordinator, worked with Stevenson University and local stakeholders to coordinate the event. Among the local partners were Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Banner Neighborhoods, Civic Works and the Monument-McElderry-Fayette Association.

More than 300 Stevenson University students gather before starting work in the Jefferson Street neighborhood of Baltimore, Maryland, during the final day of the 27th Jimmy & Rosalynn Carter Work Project. ©Habitat for Humanity/Gregg Pachkowski



"It felt like the perfect model for how the city can come together to help itself and to fill what had been left abandoned with life instead," Kohler-Frueh said. "It's a powerful testimony to the positive, revitalizing spirit of this neighborhood that we had everyone from children to seniors—neighbors both near and far—take up a hammer, paintbrush or shovel in the effort of creating community together."

"The idea is that Habitat helps leverage revitalization through housing," said Mike Mitchell, CEO of Habitat of the Chesapeake. The affiliate hopes to "build the neighborhood's capacity to access capital, in this case, people resources."

Stevenson University freshmen Stefon McCray (left) and Joe Hindle help plant trees along Jefferson Street in conjunction with Baltimore's Parks & People Foundation. ©Habitat for Humanity/Gregg Pachkowski

Among the “people resources” Saturday were Stevenson University’s football team. Ed Hottle, the head football coach, thought bringing the players out today would build teamwork and provide an opportunity for the players to get to know each other a little better. “We have guys who grew up in this neighborhood,” he said.

Donnell Brown, a sophomore football player, volunteered for the first time with Habitat, sanding, priming and painting. He said he was “excited to be part of it,” and to come back to the place he calls home. When asked if he would volunteer with Habitat again, Brown said, “Yes ma’am, most definitely.”

Change is coming



“When the area was at its worst, it looked like a war zone,” said Ernest Smith, president of McElderry Park Community Association and co-chair of the Monument-McElderry-Fayette redevelopment plan. In his 23 years in this area, he has seen this neighborhood at its best and worst.

Ernest Smith is president of the McElderry Park Community Association, which has been working with Habitat to revitalize the Baltimore, Maryland, community. ©Habitat for Humanity/Gregg Pachkowski

“When I moved into the area, every house on the block was occupied, but over 20 years there has been a steady decline to the neighborhood,” Smith said, referring to the drugs, the crime and the boarded-up and dilapidated properties that characterized Jefferson Street for so many years.

No one factor can be credited with the decline, but absentee landlords surely played a role, along with “people buying properties and not putting money back into them,” Smith said.

At one point, Smith recalled, “only two families on the entire block were left.” He encouraged those families to hold on, telling them, “Change is coming.

In 2007, about the time the MMF redevelopment plan, in which Smith played a large role, was submitted to Baltimore City, Habitat reached out to the McElderry Park Community Association with a desire to work in this community.

Smith’s hope was that if Habitat for Humanity would rehabilitate “a number of the vacant and abandoned properties, other investors would see the work and fix up other properties.” That is exactly what is happening in the 2400 block of Jefferson Street. Now, Habitat has spread out across several blocks, increasing the impact of its efforts.

Smith describes Saturday’s Community Partner Day as “part 2 of having Habitat in the area.” He can barely contain his enthusiasm when he talks about the hundreds of volunteers and community residents joining together to bring the neighborhood back to life. His excitement is contagious.

Susan Dunn-Lisuzzo is national communications manager for Habitat for Humanity International. Meghan is a volunteer at the Jimmy & Rosalynn Carter Work Project.