Residents, volunteers steer turnaround in Baltimore

By Susan Dunn-Lisuzzo

The early morning rain had moved on by the time volunteers arrived at the Jefferson Street build site Wednesday to start their assigned construction tasks. With half the number of volunteers, the site was almost quiet after the current of energy that ran from one end of Jefferson Street to the other during the Carters' visit Tuesday.

But volunteers were hard at work inside the homes, demolishing old plaster walls, constructing internal frames for new walls, and patching cracked mortar on the brickwork. Rehabbing homes is not easy work, but it can be rewarding.

Towson University seniors Logan Turner (left) and Brian Eurice work in house No. 1 on Baltimore's Jefferson Street. In addition to building, the urban anthropology students will be interviewing neighborhood residents this semester to learn about the area's history and to help plan its future. ©Habitat for Humanity/Gregg Pachkowski

Rodney Payne, the Jefferson Street project manager at Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake, has a great deal of experience rehabbing properties, from his 32 years of construction experience and two years of working on Jefferson Street.

Payne estimates that 50 percent of the homes in the 2100 block were vacant before Habitat started working here. The two Carter Work Project houses on this block were in the "worst shape of the 10 [Carter] houses," he said. For Taja Cole's future home, "everything but the front of the house had to be rebuilt. The roof was gone, and everything inside was rotting."

There is still a great deal of work to be done on Cole's house, but Payne estimates that the 10 houses that are part of this week's Carter Work Project, all at various stages of rehabilitation, will be completed by June 2011.

Signs of hope after years of decline

Glenn Ross, a community advocate and activist, couldn't help but be drawn to the activity taking place around the corner from his house. Ross, who has lived in East Baltimore for much of his life and raised two daughters in McElderry Park, said, "This neighborhood is turning around now, and that has a lot to do with Habitat."

Surrounded by news clipping and certificates earned over the course of his lifetime, Glenn Ross points out his neighborhood on the map of Baltimore hanging on his living room wall. Photo courtesy of Meghan Dunn

In the 1990s, 10 years after Ross moved his family into a row house on Milton Avenue, this neighborhood started a downward slide, he said, bottoming out at 50 percent of the homes being vacant or abandoned. "Behind every decaying city needs to be a redevelopment plan," he said. And as the 13th District's City Council community liaison and past president of the McElderry Park Community Association, he has played an instrumental role in planning a bright future for this neighborhood.

Changes to the neighborhood

"I grew up about five blocks from here," said Jamal T. Evans, a teacher at Edmondson-Westside High School who is working on Stacey Gray's house this week with seven students. "I could walk down the block and tell you everyone who lived in the houses. I knew them, and they knew me."

Homeownership is a stabilizing force in a community. When crime moved into this neighborhood in the late 1980s and '90s, it set in motion a series of events that accelerated the downward spiral, including the flight of homeowners seeking a safer environment for their families.

"I see so many abandoned houses when I drive through Baltimore, but I like what I see here," Evans said.

Edmondson-Westside High School teacher Jamal Evans (right) instructs senior Najee Banks at house No. 2. Evans grew up near the Jefferson Street neighborhood where Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake is working during the Carter project. ©Habitat for Humanity/Gregg Pachkowski

The academic approach

Urban anthropology students from Towson University in Baltimore County are working on Maria Gonzales' house this week as part of their course's field work. Under the leadership of professor Jana Kopelentova Rehak, the students are working on a semester-long project in partnership with the Chesapeake Habitat affiliate.

"As an anthropologist, I'm interested in exploring Habitat's relationship with the neighborhood," Kopelentova Rehak said. "In particular, learning how to bridge the relationship between long-term neighborhood residents and new homeowners."

Based on the previous semester's work with Habitat, she says it is important to create "a community ritual for the neighborhood to gather around, like a community garden—something that keeps the community together."

Jana Kopelentova-Rehak is an anthropology professor at Towson University and Loyola University-Maryland. She and her students will be studying Habitat's relationship with the East Baltimore neighborhood where the Carter Work Project rehabs are taking place. ©Habitat for Humanity/Gregg Pachkowski

Students will be interviewing neighborhood residents, including Habitat homeowners, pastors and community association members, to learn about the neighborhood's history and help plan for its future. Their final project will be submitted to Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake in December.

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