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Cover Story: Building Hope In The City

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(Photo Andy Cook)

Felicia Antoinetta McKoy gazed up into the sky to watch with pride as her new home gently floated to the ground. She was surrounded by a crowd of about a hundred cheering politicians, community members and housing activists who gathered with her in May to watch a crane set this building onto its new foundation. They were there to witness the birth of Preston Place Homes, a new affordable housing project in Oliver.

Lying between Greenmount Cemetery and the northernmost stretch of Broadway, Oliver is a classic example of an impoverished Baltimore City neighborhood. Plagued by drugs and violence, the neighborhood has been in decline for years. The evidence is so dramatic that HBO chose this neighborhood to film much of its series “The Wire.” But today, its streets are filled with a renewed sense of optimism.

“In this neighborhood where ‘The Wire’ was filmed, we stand here claiming that [it] has had its last episode,” preached Reverend Calvin Keene, pastor of Memorial Baptist Church, which stands just across the street from the new homes.

The philanthropic organization [Jewish Funds for Justice](#) (JFSJ) has raised \$1.2 million for this project, matching funds raised by [BUILD](#) (Baltimoreans United In Leadership Development), a coalition of largely African-American churches (including Memorial Baptist) attempting to better their neighborhood. A Philadelphia-based group called The Reinvestment Fund (TRF) is managing the project.

Founded in 2006 as a merger between Jewish Fund for Justice and The Shefa Fund, JFSJ’s mission is to address the root causes of economic and social injustice across the United States. Their programs are numerous and varied, though they focus on raising money and encouraging volunteerism in the Jewish community. The group has offices in Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York.

According to JFSJ Baltimore’s Executive Director Maggie Gaines, the organization has really taken off not only because of the merger, but because pre-merger it hired “the dynamic Simon Greer” as its president and CEO.



Rev. Calvin Keene is a BUILD leader and a key player in the inception of the housing initiative. He is the pastor at Memorial Baptist Church (behind him to the right).
(Photo Andy Cook)

Mr. Greer calls the kind of philanthropy happening in Oliver “The Baltimore Model.” “[The Baltimore Model] is gathering support from local philanthropists, national foundations, local residents, and bringing them together across faith and across race,” said Mr. Greer. The interfaith, interracial angle is key, he says.

“One of the major purposes of JFSJ is trying to fashion ‘Town Square Judaism,’ with the idea that being Jewish means integrating ourselves into American Life. We have a blessing in this era that we can be Jewish and participate in social change,” said Mr. Greer.

Mr. Greer says it was the scope of the endeavor and the urgent need in the community that drew him to the project.

“The ‘Aha!’ moment came a year and a half ago when I went on my first trip with BUILD and TRF through the neighborhood. I thought ‘Oh my goodness, the vacancy rate is breathtaking,’” he said.

And it is. The fresh new buildings of Preston Place serve as a stark contrast to the burned-out and boarded-up row houses just across the street.

The last time the Oliver neighborhood made significant news was in the fall of 2002 when drug dealers firebombed the Dawson family house, killing Angela and Carnell Dawson, along with their five children. A teen center now stands where that house used to be, but it has been one of the scarce signs of progress in the neighborhood, until now.

“BUILD called us after the Dawson fire,” says Bob Rosenthal, vice president of The Reinvestment Fund, while ambling through one of the Preston Place homes.

TRF is a 23-year-old organization that specializes in financing neighborhood revitalization in places that have been all but forgotten by city governments and investors. Their aim is to use capital in a strategic and street-savvy way to maximize its financial and social impact. Mr. Rosenthal says BUILD came to TRF because of its reputation for “lending money where no one wants to lend money.”



Martha Best stands proudly in front of the garden that has replaced the vacant houses at the end of her block.
(Photo Andy Cook)

A Philadelphia native with family ties to Baltimore, Rosenthal has worked in neighborhood development for most of his career. He came to TRF two-and-a-half years ago to make a difference in urban areas and “help the market help itself.” “When we [the Jews] came here to Baltimore at the turn of the century, we lived in neighborhoods like this... It doesn’t matter what religion or what color, we need to invest in the entire community,” said Mr. Rosenthal.

To Reverend Keene, this is a welcome perspective. “To have a diverse involvement gives us a broader perspective on how people view Baltimore. We were moved to see that this touched other people’s interests outside of our community and our faith group,” he said.

Not Just Giving

Another important facet to Mr. Greer’s Baltimore Model of philanthropic giving is that it’s not just giving. JFSJ boasts the only national Jewish program for community investing in low to moderate-income neighborhoods where contributors can make loans instead of grants. They call this program *Tzedec* (after a Hebrew term for righteousness and justice).

“This kind of philanthropy comes from Maimonides [the 13th Century Egyptian philosopher], who said the highest level of help is helping people reach self-sufficiency,” said Mr. Greer. “The Tzedec fund is the only fund that allows Jews to lend money to help make change instead of just giving it away. This allows your money to be specifically a Jewish investment.”

“Sadly, for a lot of people there is a great deal of cynicism about if this kind of project is even possible. Hence, educating donors and allies in the Jewish community about this is important, as is bringing collaborators together to meet face to face. We’ve enlisted the Meyerhoffs, the Maxes, the Goldsekers, the Blaustein Foundation... It’s a pretty good cross section of Jewish philanthropy,” said Mr. Greer.

All the funds JFSJ are raising for the Preston Place housing project get funneled through TRF, which in turn plans to earn the money back over 10 to 15 years through mortgages on the new affordable homes. Each unit will cost between \$135,000 and \$150,000.

It took 36 months to acquire the land. It took eight weeks to build the houses and set them up. This is only the first phase, with 50 total units— 40 being new, 10 being rehabs of existing vacant structures. To date, six homes have been purchased. BUILD has a \$10 million, 500 property, 10-year plan to rebuild the neighborhood.

Land, Plan, Capital (and Tzedakah)

Jewish involvement in Oliver doesn’t end with the money. JFSJ arranged for volunteers from [Habonim D’ror](#) and [BBYO](#) to spend the summer working on community gardens in the neighborhood with Civic Works, a Baltimore-based non-profit service affiliated with Americorps.

On a Wednesday in late May, *THE BALTIMORE JEWISH TIMES* caught up with the Habonim D’ror group, hard at work on converting a vacant lot into a garden at the corner of Lanvale and Holbrook streets.



These burned-out vacant homes stand just a block from the new ones at Preston Place. They too have been acquired by BUILD and are slated for demolition. (Photo Andy Cook)

Yonah Meiselman, 19 and a University of Maryland, College Park sophomore, said that this program exemplifies the Habonim D’ror ideals of responsibility, social action, education and community. Mr. Meiselman has been a Habonim member since age 9 and he is the incoming regional co-director of Habonim, Maryland.

“When we get together throughout the year we do a lot of talking, a lot of critical discussions of issues. This is doing, this is *tikkun olam*, this is what we most love to do,” said Mr. Meiselman. He and his peers helped clear the remains of the vacant lot, put down topsoil and planted trees, flowers and shrubs.

The Habonim group spent its afternoons speaking with community activists, touring the area and volunteering at Oliver’s Bernard Harris Elementary School. JFSJ has been sending Johns Hopkins students to volunteer at the same school one afternoon per week

for the past year and this year they will extend the program to Goucher College students too, for more than one day per week.

“We visited an after-school program and saw their community in action, helping themselves. We’d been hearing about the drugs, the gangs and the poverty. It was important for us to see these kids in a safe place, in a positive setting,” said Mr. Meiselman. “We can take this experience with us throughout our lives and be more sensitive to poor communities in need. I know I will,” he said.

This was Habonim Maryland’s second annual service learning trip, the first having taken place in Biloxi, Miss. “We wanted to do something closer to home, and this seemed to be a place with possibility for doing a more sustainable project,” said Jamie Beran, youth leadership director with Habonim D’ror, who lives in Brooklyn, N.Y. and works in the Habonim national office in Manhattan. Her fellow Goucher College alum, JFSJ Program Associate Adam Rothstein, cued her in to the Oliver idea.

Ms. Beran grew up in the movement, and she said the Oliver trip supported Habonim’s ideals because it is all about “service in a responsible way... We’re getting to know the community we’re working in...It’s important for us to challenge our place of privilege and to get our hands dirty,” she said.

The Habonim student volunteers were so inspired by the service learning project in Oliver that a number of them organized a sequel to the trip. A group of incoming high school seniors who are also the leaders of their local Habonim chapters came to Camp Moshava in Silver Spring from five different Habonim D’ror camps around the country for a 3-day seminar, and they toured the group’s original Oliver project and worked on a nearby garden for their one day devoted to service learning.

Later in the summer, Liz Benz, a 17-year-old volunteer with BBYO, was on her hands and knees painting a mural to connect two gardens on either side of Holbrook Street. She is considering college in the Baltimore area and saw this project as an opportunity to learn more about the city.

“I went to New Orleans with JFSJ and helped clean up there because people don’t realize how hard up they still are,” she says. It was her first exposure to Jewish community service, and it left her wanting more. “I learned [in New Orleans] that when you get a group of people determined to change the world, you can do it. You can see people pass by and smile, and you know you’re making a difference.”

Ms. Benz came to Baltimore from Philadelphia as part of a 44-person group of predominantly incoming high school sophomores from all over the U.S. This was BBYO’s sixth year in a row spent in our city for their annual two-week service learning trip, known as Operation Shema, in part due to a lasting bond with JFSJ.

BBYO members were broken up into two groups and rotated between one week of work on the Oliver gardens, and one week volunteering with elementary to high school aged students in the nearby Reservoir Hill neighborhood.

“We worked with Civic Works, weeding, mulching, planting trees and picking up trash,” explained 17-year-old BBYO teen coordinator Jesse Rabinowitz of Norfolk, Va. who had also done the trip last year. “You’d wake up, and yeah you’d be sore, and you might want to sleep a little more, but when you got to the site you’d realize how much your help was needed and then you’d really wake up; you’d get pumped up by your friends,” he said.

Operation Shema participant Nora Padison, 15, came to Baltimore from Gaithersburg. She explained how the mural artist asked the Oliver residents to choose between different themes for the painting.

“They liked flowers, so we painted these huge flowers all over the sidewalk. At first it was just a blue outline. At the end of our first day it was bright and vivid. And after the two weeks were over, it was beautiful. We saw the change, and it felt great,” she said.



Volunteers from Habonim D'ror work on building flower beds at the new community garden on Holbrook and Lanvale.
(Photo Andy Cook)

BBYO also found time to go door-to-door around Oliver with BUILD members, encouraging residents to join in a discussion about the building of a new grocery store. “Getting to know ... the people from BUILD was really nice,” said Ms. Padison. “It felt right, working together to help them on things that would last a long time. I learned that nothing’s going to be done for you. You have to do it yourself,” she said.

“This is just the beginning” for JFSJ’s involvement in Oliver, according to Simon Greer. “We envision growing a bigger and bigger volunteer base in Baltimore. And of course building housing begs the question of schools and jobs. Once the funds for housing are locked in, we hope to work with the same groups to tackle education and infrastructure in these communities,” he said.

According to Ms. Gaines, JFSJ “will continue to stay involved with the community as engaged partners who will work towards a sustainable needs-based project.... We will continue to be an active investor of social and financial capital [in east Baltimore] and to eventually have our four signature programs implemented here: the Tzedec program, congregation-based community organizing, the Selah leadership development program, and a combination of service learning travel programming and local service learning in collaboration with local organizations. We hope for this to be a long-term relationship.”

From her door on the 1700 block of Holbrook Street, Martha Best watched much of the work being done by the volunteers this summer. It was in fact her voice that helped

inspire it. Ms. Best is a 35-year resident of Oliver, an active member of BUILD and a staunch advocate for her neighborhood. At a city planning meeting in 2007, Ms. Best brought attention to the high vacancy rate on her street, sparking a flurry of demolitions and rehabs. Gesturing toward the volunteers she says, “The neighbors and I wanted to see gardens instead of vacant lots for dumping grounds... We are so appreciative that this is happening.”

But the work, she explains, is far from over. Looking south from her home on Holbrook Street, you can see 59 vacant homes BUILD is attempting to get rehabbed or demolished. With the help of Baltimore City, JFSJ and TRF, BUILD hopes to see big changes over the next decade. “We’re trying to bring the city back again,” she says.

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