

Boarded-up houses make way for roses

Drug dealers ousted, Oliver community plants gardens

By Stephen Kiehl | Sun Reporter

July 12, 2008



A second coat of paint is applied to a mural that spans Holbrook Street near Green Mount Cemetery. The art connects two gardens that are being planted where a dozen abandoned houses were demolished. (Sun photo by Amy Davis / July 8, 2008)

An urban oasis is rising from the rubble of vacant rowhouses in East Baltimore. Cherry trees and dogwoods have been staked into new dirt. Beds of sedum, rose, sage and yarrow have been planted. Wood-chip walkways wind through lots neighbors once feared to enter.

Hard against the old stone wall of Green Mount Cemetery, two new gardens are part of a movement by Oliver residents to reclaim their neighborhood. They got police to clear drug dealers from a courtyard, and neighbors now gather there for lunch. They lobbied the city to tear down a dozen vacant houses to make way for the gardens, which were



planted this week.

"We can come out and sit on our steps if we want and not worry about something happening to us," said Carolyn Lawson, 62, who lives in a bow-front rowhouse on Holbrook Street. She laughed and said the change was good "because I can't get up to get in the house fast enough anyway."

Until last fall, her block had more vacant houses than occupied ones. The blight made it impossible for remaining homeowners to sell. Lawson and her neighbors, with the help of the social action group BUILD, got the city to tear down the vacant homes this winter.

"I said, 'I don't want an empty lot. It would be nice if we could get some flower gardens,'" said Martha Best, who was careful not to ask for vegetables because they attract rodents. She put in a special request for roses.

She's getting them. Six of the vacant houses that came down were on the east side of Holbrook, six on the west side. Both sites are now being transformed into 70-foot-by-70-foot gardens, with stately hornbeam trees marking their entrance. Crape myrtles and beds of flowers and plants - including agave, flax and black-eyed susans - are set off by cobblestones. A colorful mural painted across a street connects the two refuges.

The gardens are the most tangible sign of progress in this corner of Oliver, a community where the median household income is \$18,700 and about half of the working-age population is unemployed. Six years ago, seven members of the Dawson family were killed in a fire set by the drug dealers they were battling on East Preston Street. Since then, residents and civic and philanthropic groups have joined forces to build new houses and clean up the streets.

"Now gangsters know the people in the neighborhood will call the police on them," said Martin Truesdale, 40, who lived on Holbrook Street from 1997 to 2000 but moved because his grandfather kept getting mugged on the way to the bus stop. Now, he said of the neighborhood residents, "They're not scared anymore."

Truesdale is one of four AmeriCorps participants assigned to Civic Works, Baltimore's urban service corps, which is taking the lead in creating the gardens. After the vacant houses were demolished, huge piles of rubble and debris remained. Truesdale and three other AmeriCorps workers spent two months removing 120 tons of rubble.

By this summer, they were ready to plant. The Jewish Funds for Justice, a foundation based in New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore, raised \$10,000 for plants, trees and supplies, and in the past two weeks has provided about 10 high school-age volunteers to do some of the work. Civic Works enlisted an artist to design and paint the street mural, which depicts vibrant flowers and connects one garden to the other.

The artist, who goes by the name of Emily C-D, says she believes it is the first street



mural in Baltimore. She used traffic- marking paint and solid deck stains in shades of yellow, orange, red, green and blue. "It's a clear indication that something is happening here," she said.

This week, the Jewish Funds for Justice volunteers, who came to Baltimore from all over the country for a two-week program, were busy digging holes for the trees, planting flowers, spreading soil and mulch, and putting a second coat of paint on the street mural. Many, from comfortable suburban homes, were not used to such intensive labor, but they tackled the job without complaint.

"I have a really strong belief that one person can change the world, and I want to inspire other people to that belief," said Jesse Rabinowitz, 17, from Norfolk, Va. He is in Baltimore for his second summer and is a leader of the volunteer group.

The Jewish Funds for Justice is contributing \$1.2 million toward rebuilding in Oliver - matching the sum raised by African-American churches in the area. The money is largely going to finance dozens of new homes that are to be built in the next few years. But smaller projects, such as the gardens, are also getting funding.

"You really get to see a different perspective," said Evy Brown, 16, from Houston. "I'm not just here having fun. I'm here having fun and doing something worthwhile."

Civic Works plants about a dozen gardens a year, and the ones in Oliver are among the biggest the group has attempted. Key to the gardens' success is getting an agreement with the community to maintain the garden after Civic Works and the volunteers move on.

"If you plant a garden in the middle of a community, to think that it's going to be maintained as a spontaneous demonstration of goodwill, that's not going to happen," said Ed Miller, supervisor of Civic Works' community lot team. But in Oliver, neighbors like Martha Best say they are committed.

The courtyard in front of her home, where she's lived for 35 years, used to be a haven for drugs. The dealers had knocked down the streetlights so they could operate in darkness. But now the lights are up and the dealers are gone, replaced by kids playing. She can see the courtyard and the new garden from her front windows.

"It's going to be real nice," said Best, 76. "We won't get to see it bloom too much this year. But next year, God willing, it should be real beautiful."

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