

Up, down and up again in Sandtown

Marta Hummel, The Examiner



BALTIMORE - Terrorists hijacked the phrase “religious radical.” But Baltimore needs a lot more of true religious radicals to pull itself from the mire of murderous streets and heroin and perpetually low expectations plaguing it since the 1950s when population started to decline.

Or at least we need a lot more like Allan and Susan Tibbels and their family, neighbors and compatriots in Sandtown. The Tibbels and their two daughters moved to the West Baltimore neighborhood in 1986, trading a 4,000-square-foot rancher on 13 acres in Howard County for an abandoned row house on an abandoned block in an abandoned section of town. “People thought we were crazy,” Allan said.

They are not the kind of people for whom more “work force housing” - the backbone of Mayor Sheila Dixon’s plan to lure more people to the city - would matter.

God called. They answered.

They believe Christianity requires three R’s: Relocation, reconciliation and redistribution.

Radical.

But they didn’t move to create some hippie God colony. They did not come to save so much as to suffer with neighbors, to transform lives and neighborhoods brick by brick, child by child, ex-convict by ex-convict. It’s called Church-based community development.

Whatever it is, it’s working. Slowly. But it is working.

Some of the branches of the New Song community they launched are New Song Community Church, Sandtown Habitat for Humanity, New Song Academy (a K-8 public school) and Eden Jobs, many of whose clients recently returned from prison. Antoine Bennett, co-executive director of New Song Urban Ministries, himself an ex-con from the neighborhood, estimates they’ve placed about 250 former inmates with jobs. The whole operation costs about \$5 million a year with funds from government, corporations, foundations and private donations.

When they arrived, none of that existed.

Residents first fled then trickled away from the 72 blocks starting in the 1960s as a result of desegregation and the 1968 riots following Martin Luther King’s assassination. Most of those who could afford to leave did. Forever.

When the Tibbels and the Rev. Mark Gornik, who has since moved to Harlem to start another New Song community, came, 1,000 abandoned properties dotted the 15-block section of their neighborhood. Drugs and prostitution drove the economy.

A basketball accident sent Allan to a wheelchair in 1981. Street corners and blocks aren't exactly American with Disabilities Act approved in the neighborhood, but he navigates them like a race car driver.

Everyone knows him. Everyone. They wave hello to Mr. Allan. School children in plaid uniforms run to hug Miss Susan. Everyone is Mr. or Miss so-and-so.

Sandtown Habitat has so far rehabbed or built about 225 homes, half acquired from the city, with the help of many longtime volunteers and pro bono work from local corporations and other groups. About 10 homeowners have stumbled making regular payments, but there has never been a foreclosure.

LaVerne "Beanie" Stokes, who co-heads Habitat with Allan Tibbels and grew up in the neighborhood, credits the economic performance to tough love. "I tell people, 'I love you as Beanie. But I collect as LaVerne.'" Since everyone lives next to one another there is no escaping, she said.

Allan says some of the homes are valued at up to \$150,000. They sell for \$55,000 to \$75,000. Still, vacant properties and lots ring the neighborhood. Gardens erupt with weeds. Drug deals go down blocks from the community center, built in 2001. Except for one coffee shop, plans for small businesses remain just plans.

It's part of the reason Allan said, "I've been down every day for 20 years. The need is so excruciatingly deep."

But nothing seems to get him down enough to leave. He and his family didn't leave after he was brutally attacked in the '90s, and he said he has never considered moving.

Susan runs the school, which turned public in 1997. Eighty-six percent of its 15 students graduating each year go on to graduate from high school, a remarkable number. Some studies place the city's overall graduation rate at less than 40 percent. Full or partial scholarships are available for all students with good behavior and grades higher than 70 percent. She attributes performance to high expectations, the fact that as the only "New School" she has more control over the curriculum, and that 40 percent of the staff live in the community, many in Habitat homes.

It's hard to leave the neighborhood. Even though you must leave for gas and food, and so many crumbling shells pockmark the blocks. Maybe it has something to do with what LaVerne Stokes said.

"We celebrate. We have a good time. When a person is moving in, I'm moving in all over again."

Baltimore could use more religious radicals like this.

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