

**Urbanite #49 July 08**

By: Donna M. Owens

A walk down Pennsylvania Avenue on any given day reveals a multihued portrait of urban life: Dealers peddle heroin paces from a post office; street vendors hawk pirated DVDs near a chain drugstore. Teenage girls push baby carriages past young men shooting dice on the sidewalk. Old-timers swap tales about the now-demolished Royal Theatre and the era when "The Avenue" was the thriving hub of black Baltimore.

Amid this stands a graceful rowhouse trimmed in white that since 2000 has housed Martha's Place, a drug treatment facility for women who have completed detox programs but need help transitioning to a more stable lifestyle. The brick doublewide at 1928 Pennsylvania Avenue has become an oasis for both recovering addicts and for its surrounding neighborhoods: Sandtown-Winchester, Upton, and Harlem Park.

"I have lived in Sandtown all of my life—fifty-eight years—and I have a grand fondness for this community," says "Elder" C.W. Harris, a service engineer and lay minister who founded Martha's Place. The name was inspired both by his late mother and by the New Testament's Martha, sister of Lazarus and symbol of hospitality and service.

It's not his first foray into community activism. In 1996, Harris and his wife, Amelia, co-founded the nonprofit Newborn Holistic Ministries to meet the needs of this struggling community. Despite \$60 million in revitalization funds pumped into Sandtown in the 1990s, the area continues to grapple with poverty, substance abuse, crime, and broken families; 2006 figures from the Baltimore City Data Collaborative show that 77.9 percent of Sandtown/Harlem Park households are headed by single parents with children under 18.

Martha's Place grew out of a community meeting. "A young lady stood up and said, 'We need a place for women. There aren't any,'" says Amelia Harris, former executive director of the facility and now chair of the board of Newborn Holistic Ministries, parent organization to Martha's Place. "And when we began to do research, [we found] there were no in-house, inpatient places for women in recovery in the area. There were loads of houses for men, but none for women."

According to 2007 figures from Baltimore Substance Abuse Systems, Inc., nearly 40 percent of the more than 21,000 people treated for addiction last year at publicly funded facilities were women. Dr. Tony Tomasello, director of the Office of Substance Abuse Studies at the University of Maryland, says women have unique challenges that can hinder their long-term treatment success: "For instance, who will care for a woman's children or family while she is undergoing care?"

Elder Harris acquired the dilapidated rowhouse—a former bagging house for drug dealers—in 1995. Staff and volunteers restored it with \$100,000 from private donors

and various in-kind support, and today its tidy rooms and serene backyard meditation garden welcome up to forty clients a year. Most are African American; many bring a history of physical or sexual abuse or other issues, such as homelessness. A staff of seven offers addiction and spiritual counseling, plus employment and life skills training. "I learned to love and embrace myself here," says Angela Long, a 2004 graduate who was named executive director of the facility earlier this year. "And it's not easy because the enemy sometimes whispers in your ear, saying you can't do it. But my journey brought me here for a reason, and that's to help other women."

The national completion rate for such programs is about 30 percent; at Martha's Place it's 50 percent. "Some programs define their success as someone who leaves and has one relapse," says program director Todd Marcus. "Here, we say our ladies are successful when they leave clean and sober, with a job and housing."

Harris envisions a future facility that can serve both women and their kids, and the organization is growing in other ways: Newborn Holistic Ministries now owns four rowhouses on Presstman Street where program graduates can transition into affordable, long-term housing. It is also past the halfway mark in raising \$1 million to create the multipurpose Harris Market Center in a former Pennsylvania Avenue antiques store; the space will host a new program called Jubilee Arts, offering dance, music, and arts classes for children and adults.

"They don't just work behind the walls of the facility," says State Senator Verna Jones, who helped shepherd a bond bill through the recent legislative session in Annapolis that will help build the community center. "They're transforming lives."

—*Donna M. Owens*

Share your thoughts at [www.urbanitebaltimore.com/forum](http://www.urbanitebaltimore.com/forum).

Check out the web extra article, "The Power of a Gesture", concerning the mosaic at Martha's Place [here](#).

Copyright 2007 Urbanite Baltimore // [contact@urbanitebaltimore.com](mailto:contact@urbanitebaltimore.com)  
Created & Powered by [Mission Media](#)