

Building up a community

Sandtown Habitat homeowners among the volunteers

By Sarah Fisher Baltimore Sun reporter June 26, 2009

Twenty years ago, Sonia Street stuck her head out of her public housing complex window and was surprised to see two men who looked out of place wandering through her Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood. It was obvious they weren't from the streets she knew all too well, so Street figured they were police officers looking to bust a narcotics dealer and went about her business, expecting never to see them again.

But over the next couple of weeks, she kept seeing them. "Don't they know they could get hurt out here?" she said she

remembers thinking. At the time, she had been a drug dealer for five years, selling marijuana on the street and trying to support her three daughters. Finally, her curiosity got the best of her, and she approached the men.



Donald Smith sweeps dust from sanded drywall during Sandtown Habitat for Humanity's "Summer Building Week." Over 20 years, the group has renovated 265 rowhouses. (Baltimore Sun photo by Jed Kirschbaum / June 25, 2009)

They introduced themselves as Allan Tibbels and Mark Gornik, and they had plans to stick around Street's neighborhood for a long time: They would soon found Sandtown Habitat for Humanity. And thanks to their organization, Street became a homeowner just a few years later.

The group is celebrating its 20th year of service and has renovated 265 rowhouses in Sandtown with another 25 under construction. Tibbels and Gornik also founded New Song, a nonprofit organization that includes Sandtown Habitat along with a school, health center, job-placement program and church.

While volunteers work throughout the year at New Song, this week is Sandtown Habitat's 18th annual "Summer Building Week." During the event, about 300 volunteers from the Baltimore region and the East Coast hammer, put up drywall and paint as they help build homes for low-income Sandtown residents.

When the group got started in Sandtown in 1989, Street, now 47, was looking for a new way to live.

"I [had] been seeing a lot of my friends get killed by guns," she said. "I thought if I change, God might help me. And he did."

She heard of Sandtown Habitat through her church, New Song Community, and applied to the program, which recruits eligible Sandtown residents to own a newly renovated home. They must display a need, be able to pay the interest-free mortgage and put in 330 to 430 hours of "sweat equity"; that is, be willing to help build their own house. Street's application was accepted, and in 1992 she became the owner of her first home.

Gerry Palmer, 43, who was born and raised in Sandtown, became a Habitat homeowner in 2007. He recently opened a smoothie and snack shop in the neighborhood, with the help of Tibbels and Antoine Bennet, New Song Urban Ministries' co-executive director.

Palmer's shop, called Gerry's Goods, is New Song's first economic development project. The group owns several other corner buildings that it will also turn into stores.

Palmer got pulled into what he calls the "bad boy" lifestyle at a young age, after his father died, his mother went to jail and he was left to tend to his two little sisters. He and some friends formed a small gang, selling cocaine and fighting over turf with two other Sandtown gangs. Palmer said he reached the point where he "just couldn't take any more of the street life." He said he witnessed too many of his friends get shot and kept thinking, "I'm next."

Owning a business was something Palmer always wanted to do. After leaving street life behind, Palmer worked at New Song's job-placement program, Eden Jobs, for eight years. He brought the idea to start a business to Bennet, and the two were given the go-ahead by Tibbels to own and operate the shop out of one of New Song's corner properties. Gerry's Goods opened in December. It employs six Sandtown residents, and its strawberry smoothies attract neighborhood kids.

Street will be paying off her home in April. In 1992, when her home was being built, she promised she would work with Habitat for Humanity every year. She has kept her promise and has traveled to Los Angeles, Michigan and Georgia to build homes. This November, she will go to Thailand to work on houses for a week.

"Just sticking your head out the projects, you learn a lot," Street said with a laugh. "My life changed."

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