

## Keeping Faith

*In a historic Baltimore neighborhood, housing plays a key role in community rebirth.*

It began with a commitment.

When Allan Tibbels and his wife, Susan, moved to the Sandtown area of Baltimore with a few friends in 1986, they renovated an abandoned rowhouse from top to bottom to live there. At the time, the area personified the stereotype of inner-city poverty: high crime, no jobs and block after block of vacant, blighted rowhouses. There was no way they'd recoup their investment without a dramatic transformation of the neighborhood. They felt called by God to live their faith in an unmistakable way, and they were committed.

But there was a commitment preceding theirs that has turned out to be more significant. Sandtown had at one time been a bustling, culturally thriving community, and though decades of decline had taken a toll, there remained a core group of residents who were committed to the place and each other.

"There are very strong extended family networks, a depth of faith, a very strong community spirit," says Tibbels, now co-executive director of Sandtown Habitat for Humanity. "It's almost like a small village. In spite of all the hard things, it's a place where everybody loves and cares for each other."

Sandtown Habitat operates under the umbrella of New Song Urban Ministries with other community development organizations such as a K-8 school, preschool, family health center and job placement agency. This holistic approach to neighborhood development, known as church-based Christian community development and spearheaded by New Song Community Church, recognizes the importance of housing in transforming neighborhoods.

"It creates an opportunity for people who love the community to buy into it and stay," Tibbels says. "It stabilizes the community and makes it a much nicer place to live and work and raise children. I do think it should be the first thing in community development — but not the only thing. We need jobs, and school, too."

New Song Urban Ministries has focused intensely on a 15-block area within the wider Sandtown community; Habitat has renovated or built 263 houses within this focus area. In the beginning, there were around 1,000 vacant houses, Tibbels says. Now, there are 90, and the investment Habitat is making in the community has been multiplied by the contributions of other community development organizations. The community still struggles with deeply entrenched poverty, but the physical neighborhood is beginning to resemble the resilient hopes of longtime residents.

"Now you drive around and see not only what Habitat has done but other new housing as well," Tibbels says. "There are still parts of Sandtown you would say, 'Well, Habitat hasn't been on this block yet.' There is a huge contrast in our focus area and those other parts of Sandtown that haven't seen any community development."

The affiliate continues to renovate abandoned rowhouses within their focus area, and when no vacant houses remain, they plan to expand concentrically, rebuilding social networks and human capital as they go. It is the work of a lifetime and requires all the faith the community can muster.

"On the front end, you have to have a long-term commitment, because you know going into it sometimes it will be two steps forward and one step back, or three steps back. ... Having a faith commitment is vital."



Photo: Kim MacDonald

***Community bonds run deep in the Sandtown area of Baltimore, Md.***

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