

Taking back their neighborhood, sowing seeds of community pride Sandtown-Winchester residents work to tackle problem of vacant lots

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Sandra Smith grew up in Sandtown-Winchester when things were nicer - when vacant lots weren't scattered everywhere, magnets for trash and crime.

Yesterday, she and several dozen others attacked one of those pockets of blight and turned it into a beautiful spot, vowing to do the same throughout the gritty community they love.

"We're taking back our neighborhood," said Smith, 52, as two of her young adopted sons raked beside her in the 1000 block of N. Carrollton Ave. "We'll get it done."

The lot, about 10,000 square feet of space where rowhouses once stood, was sometimes a site for drug activity, said the Rev. James Mullen. Mullen, pastor of Kedesh House of Prayer Christian Church, located next door, had a vision of trees, bushes and vegetables elbowing out the problems.

'New Beginnings'

"We called it 'New Beginnings' because this is the beginning of the changes around here," Mullen said. Assistance - expected and unexpected - arrived yesterday morning.

Civic Works, a Baltimore youth service corps, brought in workers, equipment, plants and piles of wood chips, mulch and stone dust. The two local founders of the Urban Conservancy, whose mission is to transform the city's drab vacant spots into green enclaves, also helped.

Children from the neighborhood shoveled dirt into wheelbarrows and patted it around newly installed spirea shrubs.

Firefighters driving by shortly after 10 a.m. slowed down to take a look, stopped their engine in the middle of the street and hopped out to lend a hand.

"These are our neighborhoods, too," said Tim Biermann, acting lieutenant with Truck Company 10 from the Lafayette Avenue station.

"Let's hope we don't get an emergency run," joked Brian Flanagan, a firefighter and paramedic, as he leveled out wood chips on a new pathway.

Their appearance reinforced neighbor Emma Middleton's belief that things will come together once someone starts the ball rolling.

"See what I mean about help coming out of nowhere?" said Middleton, co- founder of the Urban Conservancy.

Page 1 of 2 Taking back their neighborhood, sowing seeds of community pride - archives | baltimores... 6/29/2007
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Planting pride

The seeds for this work were sown - literally - in 1999, when neighbor Justine Bonner decided to plant vegetables in her back yard. The project grew, taking over a vacant lot a block away from the one getting a makeover yesterday.

"Now it's a source of pride," said Bonner, a master gardener.

Yesterday was a block party of sorts: people laughing, people talking, a few singing over the roar of the auger that punched holes into the ground. Some took photographs. Others walked around with hand-held video cameras.

John Ciekot, projects director with Civic Works, said this is what Baltimore needs - many times over.

"The city has 5,000 vacant lots under city ownership alone, not to mention private ownership," he said. "The task in front of us is large."

But yesterday a neighborhood made the problem one lot smaller.

[Illustration] Photo(s); Caption: 1. Myiesha Jones, 7 (left), Jasmine Daniels, 9, and Ieisha Jones, 10, rake crushed stone that will serve as the base of a walkway for a vacant lot beautification project in the 1000 block of N. Carrollton Ave. 2. Samuel Bacote (left), Stephen Dillard and Latarsha Johnson prepare to plant a bush as a part of the New Beginnings project, which aims to beautify lots with shrubbery.; Credit: KIM HAIRSTON : SUN STAFF PHOTOS

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Page 2 of 2 Taking back their neighborhood, sowing seeds of community pride - archives | baltimores... 6/29/2007

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