

Saint Francis Neighborhood News

Saint Francis Looks to the Future: New Direction for 37 Year Old Institution

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Neighborhood News is a quarterly publication of the Saint Francis Neighborhood Center.

We welcome your letters! *Neighborhood News* is designed to be a public forum for the residents of Reservoir Hill and the supporters of Saint Francis Center. If you have a story idea or would like to offer your thoughts in the form of a letter to the editor, please don't hesitate! Send your correspondence to:

Letters
 Neighborhood News
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 David M. Baker, Editor

Center Hires Fund Raiser

Citing the need to expand the programs of Saint Francis Neighborhood Center, Rev. Tom Composto announced earlier this month that he has hired a new staff member.

David M. Baker, a volunteer at the Center and a long-time friend of Composto, has been retained as a part-time fund-raiser (please see *A Letter to the Friends of Saint Francis* on page 2). Together with Composto and a newly revitalized board of directors, Baker has outlined an aggressive five year plan designed to increase the Center's presence in Reservoir Hill.

"We're making a concerted effort to partner with other community service organizations in Baltimore City to make this neighborhood a better place for its residents," says Baker. According to the last report from the US Census Bureau, Reservoir Hill is home to 15,000 mostly poor people. While the exact number of Reservoir Hill denizens is disputed, the grinding poverty in which most residents live is obvious. Row after row of boarded up, abandoned houses dots the landscape, jobless men and drug dealers patrol the streets, and a solid core of middle and working class residents are forced to look outside their neighborhood for essential services.

"In 1996 the neighborhood lost its center—all of its vital services were taken away and nothing has been done to replace that," says Baker. "We hope to bring at least some of the services back to the people who so desperately need them."

In the late 80s, planners for Baltimore City decided that the best way to deal with the drug trade on the 900 block of Whitelock Street was to raze the buildings on both sides of the street.

Ultimately, the city tore down not only the original home of the Center, but it also demolished a grocery store, pharmacy, barber shop, and several convenience stores. Meanwhile, the drug trade has simply moved from Whitelock Street to nearby Callow Ave. and Reservoir Street.

Part of the Center's five year plan, says Baker, is to start bringing services back to Reservoir Hill. By 2003, the Center hopes to have established a walk-in clinic for addiction counseling and referral; on-site HIV and STD testing, counseling, and referral; educational outreach including GED classes and tutoring; and services for senior citizens. While Baker acknowledges the plan is comprehensive, he is optimistic.

"We have a chance here to really make a difference," he enthuses. "I've met with several agencies that work with the city's indigent population and have received really enthusiastic responses. What remains to be seen is if we can get the funding we need to keep the momentum."

While funding remains a question, Baker reports that initial meetings with two Baltimore-based community service organizations have been very positive.

"Both Chase Brexton Health Services Maryland Community Kitchen have expressed an interest in a partnership with the Center," says Baker. "We are still working out the details of what exactly that partnership will entail, but the conversation so far has been very, very promising."

For more information on the Center's programs, or to find out how you can help, call David M. Baker at 410-669-2612.

A Letter to the Friends of Saint Francis

BY DAVID M. BAKER

I first met Tom Composto in 1987 at a Christmas party in Towson. Who could have guessed that a chance encounter 13 years ago would have blossomed into a friendship and culminated in a fund raising job? But that's how life works: You find your opportunities when you're not even looking for them.

Through the years that I've known him, I've watched Tom—and co-director John Taylor—guide the Center through the best of times and the worst of times. I've seen the Center grow and, sometimes, I've seen it stand still. Yet despite even the worst setbacks, I've seen Tom and John steadfastly and tenaciously pursue the mission of this small neighborhood center and keep one of the last vestiges of hope alive in Reservoir Hill.

That said, I think there are many opportunities to improve what we do at the Center. With Tom's help, I've delineated a plan that will propel the Center into the next phase of its existence and I plan to pursue my goals with the same energy, passion, and drive that Tom and John have demonstrated since the 1960s.

So, who am I?

I'm a person who cares deeply about the indigent and the marginalized. I'm a person with a long held belief that all people deserve dignity, respect, and opportunity. I'm a person who's tired of hearing about a "booming economy" while my brothers and sisters languish in the throes of deprivation, drug addiction, hopelessness, and depression. And I'm a person who believes that such desperation can be ended—or at least eased—in my lifetime.

Okay, so call me a pie-eyed idealist. But we stand poised between taking action and abiding the status quo. I have chosen the former as my option, and I sincerely hope that you will join me in that decision. Take a stand. Make a difference. Help us any way you can; time, money, prayers. As Dr. King said decades ago, "Now is the time to make real the promise of our democracy."

From the Director

BY TOM COMPOSTO

I wrote what follows three years ago. I just re-read it. The pictures are still true. One thing, however, has changed: here at St. Francis the waiting is gone. We're taking the war-zone and turning it into a new-zone. We're taking the detritus of drugs and indifference and processing it into the seeds of the future. The Phoenix is rising. Our five year program for St. Francis, described in this newsletter, shows you the map for our and our neighborhood's future. We've been here since 1963 and have a unique perspective on the complexity of social relationships, symbolic meanings, fears and petty power fights which eat at the social fabric of our community. St. Francis is respected, and with that power comes the ability to alter the future, one problem at a time. One of our principles is this: if you change any one of the elements in an entity, you change the relationship of all the other elements, much like the gears in an automobile transmission. Our programs, under the direction of David Baker, with the support of our board and supporters, are aimed at facilitating just such a change.

War Zone

3-5-98

Make no mistake. There's a war here. We have bars on windows, bombed out houses, helicopters up, shots in the streets, kids with guns, scared people peeking, only the brave or foolish out at night, cops in kevlar, vials in the grass, needles in dogs' paws, 10,000 plans for bare lots (*gardens*, for god's sake), long black fences with barbed wire to keep the tomatoes in, cat size rats, bottle shards in paper bags, all in a city that claims to read, while the city-state builds stadiums. Give them bread and circuses. It was good enough for the Romans.

Crack flows in the streets. Follow the crack lanes and find the corpses of kids and buildings and families and lives and dreams and futures. Ask the dealers why they sell: market demands, they say. You can't stop it, they say.

War Zone.

It looks like Dresden, WWII. Does anyone remember? In that war, you got dead by the single, well-aimed shot. In this war you get dead by the single, not-aimed shot. You were just in the way. There the fire came from the sky. Here it comes through the wall.

So soon dealers get dead. Check the graffiti. Hundreds of names on 30 foot walls. All those ex-kids. Can't you hear Dr. King weeping, *I died for you. What did you die for?* So much energy, so much life . . . snuffed.

Underneath is the tough and struggling remnant trying to keep family and friend and religion and spirit and mind and heart and body together.

Why underneath? Why not out on top. Why are we upside down? Here in our blocks, the perennial problem of evil is no problem at all. It flourishes. The real problem is the problem of *good*. It's alive and choking. It's also in major depression.

Outsiders have all the answers. We're their laboratory. They come in with their sociological prozac, their xenophobic zolof. *Tear down the blight*, they say. Why tear out the stores? *They're a blight on our investment*. Fine. What do you want in their place? *Just tear them down, then we'll see*.

We had some answers. Our own answers aren't good enough. What do we know? Except that we live here.

So, why do the good keep on keepin' on? There's lots of us. We try, we cry, we worry, we boost our kids, we dream their dreams. We pray together. We listen together. We talk together. But still we pull down the shades.

Maybe, like Harriet Tubman, we believe in the positive push of rightness and justice, that soon and very soon, a proper society, even if alloyed, even if yet unseen, will prevail. I just wish I could do more. I just wish it would come faster. I just want to see it before I can't anymore.

Jesus, it's time.

Kids Count, Too.

Growing up can be hard. Growing up in the midst of poverty, addiction, and crime can be, at times, nearly impossible. Fortunately for the kids of Reservoir Hill, there are places to go where hope, not despair, is the rule.

Last year, Saint Francis Center and Echo House Multi-Service Center—located in Southwest Baltimore—entered into a partnership to provide an after school program for the children of Reservoir Hill. The program, which is funded and staffed by Echo House, aims to keep kids in school, off drugs, and on the right track. Activities revolve around similar themes and offer lessons on reading and writing, self esteem, anger management, problem solving, and more.

Like clockwork, at 3pm every school day, about 15 kids between 6 and 12 years old make their way up from John Eager Howard Elementary School. As the kids crest the long hill from North Avenue and cross Whitelock Street, a cacophony of sound precedes their arrival at the Center.

Almost in unison, the children ask: "Is Miss Martina here?"

Shortly after the kids arrive, a green compact car pulls up. Martina Woodard, the Echo House staffer who directs the Center's after school program, steps out and begins pulling an endless array of crafts, instructional materials, books, and snacks from the trunk of her car.

A small dust storm of children surround her, helping to lug the day's materials up to the second floor class room the program calls home.

Formerly an elegant bedroom in the Joseph A. Bank mansion, the large room is now decorated with examples of the kids' artistic ability. Posters that teach the value of citizenship, trustworthiness, and honesty also share wall space. One poster proudly declares that "We are all Winners." It's not hard to see why Martina feels that way about her students. Each of them bright, eager, and full of energy, the kids exude potential.

"All of them are leaders," says Martina. "They want to be in charge, they just need to be directed in how to *be* in charge."

After several years of working with youthful offenders in an alternative

sentencing program, Martina says she hopes to keep the kids at Saint Francis from making similar mistakes. The biggest challenge, she reports, is prevention.

"What it really means is getting them to address and deal with their anger," says Martina. A good deal of the anger, she explains, comes from growing up in less than ideal homes—where good examples are often lacking. What's frustrating, says Martina, is the knowledge that there's only so much she can do for the kids in the three hours she has them.

"I know I'm only one person and can only do so much," she says. "There's such little time. Sometimes I wonder if it's really working because they only get [tutoring] for one hour here. They don't get it at home."

Still, even in the face of such odds, Martina reports success. One little girl, Myra, is proof that the program is working.

"When Myra came in she didn't know her ABCs, she didn't know her numbers," laments Martina. "Now she can read and write. She's to the point where she can come in and start her homework."

Even so, Martina says that initially she doubted her ability to work with children.

"In the beginning I didn't think I would be acceptable to the children—I don't consider myself a children's person."

Nonetheless, the former assistant director of Echo House admits that she has a long history of working with young people. Prior to starting the program at Saint Francis, Martina oversaw the summer camp at Echo House and, before that, helped city high school students find volunteer jobs to fulfill their community service requirement for graduation.

"I've always worked with kids in some form or fashion," Martina says with a smile.

Fortunately, Martina's form and fashion of working with Reservoir Hill's kids is paying off. Many of the kids who have come to the program—like Myra—are doing better and some of the kids with behavior problems are starting to learn new ways of coping with their anger.

"It's been a process," says Martina. "Some of them are getting better."

For more information on how to enroll your child in the after school program or to learn how you can help, call the Center.

Time to Help?

Many of us, when contemplating whether or not to volunteer for a worthy cause, are afraid that the time commitment may be too much. Certainly, in today's busy world time is a most precious commodity.

But if you have just *one hour* a day, you can make a difference in the lives of thousands of people!

Saint Francis is currently—okay, we'll be honest, *always*—looking for volunteers to serve in a variety of capacities. We need envelope stuffers, data entry support, secretarial assistance, Internet experts, and folks of all stripes to give us just a few hours a week. If you're interested in volunteering, call David M. Baker at 410-669-2612. He's waiting by the phone!

What's Happening!

Monday through Friday:

3:00 pm - 5:00 pm: After School Program with Martina Woodard. This program is sponsored by Echo House and hosted by Saint Francis.

Every Week:

Sunday, 11:00 am: Ecumenical Prayer Services in the Chapel. Come, join us! We are an open congregation and all are welcome to pray here.

Sunday, 3:00 pm: Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in the second floor multi-purpose room.

Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, 6:00 pm: Narcotics Anonymous meeting in the second floor multi-purpose room.

By Appointment Only

Grief counseling with Rev. Composto. Please call ahead, if possible. Services are available on a sliding scale.

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