

A ministry helps people find and stay in homes in Garfield

By Diana Nelson Jones / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Linda Lighty was walking on North Fairmount Street in Garfield with her son, Princeante, one recent day when Michael Stanton hailed them from his car.

They greeted each other, and Princeante asked if Mr. Stanton had a tape measure.

"I might have one," he said, rifling through supplies in the back seat. "But what do you have to do?"

"Take care of it," Princeante said.

"That's right," said Mr. Stanton, "because it's a tool, not a toy."

In his truck minutes later, Mr. Stanton hailed J. Macharia McCoy, who was outside his home on the same street. He stopped, got out, and the two men hugged.

Days later, Mr. McCoy talked about the impact Mr. Stanton and his organization, the Open Hand Ministries, have had on him.

In 2007, Mr. McCoy moved into one of the first houses Open Hand volunteers renovated. It was the first home he had ever owned.

"At first I was skeptical," said Mr. McCoy, a Vietnam veteran and retired social worker. "They took me on a tour of three homes they had available. This one had vegetation all over it and was a mess inside. It was a major operation, with all these young people clearing and cleaning. I joined in."

Once he had moved in, he said, the attention continued. "They tilled the backyard and gave me a lawn mower and a garden hose and kept checking to make sure I was OK. I wasn't accustomed to that kind of outpouring.

"When my drain was backed up, Mike came over with a snake and cleared it. I can't think of it as anything but" the way good neighbors treat each other.

Open Hand is a collaboration of Valley View Presbyterian in Garfield; East Liberty and Eastminster Presbyterian churches in East Liberty; and the Open Door at the Union Project in Highland Park. Two other congregations -- Shadyside Presbyterian and Beulah United Presbyterian in Churchill -- have seats on the board.

Before starting it in 2007, Mr. Stanton was the development coordinator for Hosanna Industries when it held a one-day, five-house rehab event called the East End Blitz. Hosanna Industries renovates low-income housing regionwide, but Mr. Stanton branched off to do it full time and be neighborhood intensive in Garfield, where he lives.

"We bought a home here out of the sense of belonging to the neighborhood we were serving," he said.

Ted Melnyk, director of operations and mission at Eastminster, said Mr. Stanton's passion "is about staying with people. It is a long slog to take somebody from a subsidized apartment to home ownership and then keep them in that house and support them."

Each congregation has core members who practice the intensive neighborliness that helps client families build stability. In every congregation, Mr. Stanton said, there are skills that can help nurture the church's neighbors. "You have your lawyer, your plumber, your financial adviser, your behavioral specialist. If you multiply that across all churches," he said, "you can start multiplying the healing."

One family had a \$15,000 sewer repair that would have resulted in a foreclosure had Mr. Stanton not called the congregations to help pay for it, Mr. Melnyk said.

"We are four congregations with theologies across the spectrum from conservative to liberal, and we might not otherwise be in a relationship, but if there's one thing we can do it's to serve the community working side by side."

The Rev. Chad Collins of the Valley View Church said providing Open Hand with office space is "one of the ways we can contribute. We're a paycheck to paycheck kind of church. But we also have people who volunteer their labor."

The operation depends on volunteers to ensure the cost of a home will be low enough. Among its friends are contractors who work at a discount. The homes sell at 60 percent of market rate to keep the mortgages at 15 to 20 percent of the new owners' incomes.

"We think it is our church's responsibility to break down the wall so all people can have prosperity, provision and what is good for the long term," Mr. Collins said.

The organization remains in relationships with the East End Blitz families, who are still in those homes, and five other households. Most were referred by congregations and social agencies.

Open Hand also coordinates with housing developments of East Liberty Development Inc. and the Bloomfield Garfield Corp. to place its families in the umbrellas of stability that these nonprofits are creating.

"It's not just about putting a person in a home," Mr. Stanton said. "Our goal is to help them build equity in a stable situation so they have control. I have the privilege of being able to move if I want, and Open Hand wants that for all the members of its community."

On Kincaid Street in Garfield, a recent rehab allowed Lynda Johnson-Alexander to move into a house that had been a vacant wreck for years. With a lean budget, the crew installed a new deck, high-end kitchen and hardwood floors.

Ms. Johnson-Alexander, a dialysis technician who is raising a niece, was renting in East Liberty when Open Hand began working with her to help her qualify for a loan. She spent more than a year in that process. "They helped me with the ins and outs and the scary parts, and there are a lot of those," she said.

Mr. Stanton said at first he was concerned the ministry would be overwhelmed by people's need for a home, but the process is too arduous to be popular.

"We are asking people to change their credit rating, learn new habits, learn things that maybe never were modeled for them," he said. "We work with families for six months to two years sometimes. We're willing to work with them as long as they are willing to work to get to 'yes.'"

Mr. Stanton, 41, grew up a self-described "Army brat" whose family moved a lot. He came to Pittsburgh in 2002 and graduated from the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 2006.

Living in the neighborhood has been bumpy at times, he said.

"We are still overcoming false perceptions, the brokenness of race relations and our own privilege. There are drawbacks." Social dysfunction is "pervasive, but it is not defining. We have neighbors who are looking out for us and whom we look out for. The magnitude of the grace in the way we've been received here is inspiring."

Mr. McCoy, who co-founded the Black Vietnam-era Veterans of Western Pennsylvania, said he will celebrate five years this summer in his cottage with a front porch and backyard. "It has been heaven sent. My mortgage is cheaper than the rent I was paying [in Homewood]. I worked for social service agencies and remain a busy guy in community things but it isn't reflected in my bank account.

"I told them that if they can get me in this house, I can do it. I can do most repairs myself, and I can be a good neighbor back.

"The night Mike's son was born there was a full moon, so I identified an African name for him: Badru, "born under a full moon" in Swahili. I taught him the word 'hotep,' which means peace. He's almost 5 now, and one day I heard him calling 'hotep! hotep!' My heart flooded."

He said the drug and gun activity that used to plague the area has been fading with a change in energy. "A couple down the street just had a baby, and Mike and his wife have a young family. I started thinking, 'Wow, this appears to be a place that's conducive to family raising.'"

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