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Non-Profit transforms the once blighted Oliver neighborhood one house at a time

By Shernay Williams

Eight years ago, Angela Dawson, her husband and their five children were murdered in their Oliver neighborhood home in East Baltimore. Their killer was a suspected drug dealer, who firebombed their house in retaliation to the family's crusade to end crime. The Dawsons' demise stunned Baltimore City, but their community remained a haven for drug trafficking and abandoned homes.

Until now.

For the last year-and-a half, a non-profit group has been rehabilitating the Oliver community. Their efforts are attracting new families and instilling pride in longtime residents of the neighborhood.

Lloyd Williams, a professional builder with deep roots in the area, joined forces with the Baltimore Police Department to weed out crime and enlisted support from the private lending group, Bridge Private, to renovate vacant homes.

Bridge Private, headed by lawyer and environmentalist David Borinsky, did more than loan money; they launched the "One Green Home at a Time" initiative with the mission to transform low-income neighborhoods physically and socially with a "green" theme.

The group has restored 20 abandoned complexes in the Oliver neighborhood to date, investing over two million dollars in the area. What's more, nearly all of the new homes have been sold to non-subsidized homebuyers from economically diverse backgrounds.

"That's the beauty of it," said Borinsky. "The project is attracting buyers that actually have a choice, and they are choosing to live here."

The non-profit team consisting of four managers and countless advocates is targeting the 1400-1500 blocks of Bond and Oliver Streets with a plan to expand.

While One Green Home's goal is to drive new faces into this row house community, its leaders have not forgotten the existing residents, or the "mamas and papas" as foundation director Yvette Chambers-El calls them.

She holds community meetings for residents to voice concerns, engages youth through cultural outings and promotes green living by launching neighborhood cleanups and recycling and community gardening events.

"The idea is to change the social infrastructure of the community...and we do it using a holistic approach," said Chambers-El. "The builders say 'one green home at a time' and I actually see one family at a time, one person at a time to bring change to the community."

Chambers-El enlists support from groups like HABC, the Coalition to End Childhood Lead Poisoning and the Health Department to allocate weatherization funding for residents.

"It is really important that this isn't just about the sticks and bricks, but it's about community," Borinsky said. "This is down with gentrification."

The team also employs Oliver residents. About 90 percent of their home rehabbers come from the neighborhood.

Chris Hager, a Baltimore native who has lived on Bond Street for two years, is a plumber for One Green Home.

"There were a lot of drugs but we got that out the neighborhood," he said.

"When you start to get more people involved, what you are doing is changing people's ideas, their thoughts, even their feelings about the neighborhood by bringing more diverse people to the area," said Hager. "That's the key."

One Green Home attracted 28-year-old Dina Freeman and her husband earlier this year.

"We found out about the project and we thought it was great," said Freeman. The young couple moved from Prince George's County with their two elementary aged children.

"I'm happy when I see other families moving into this neighborhood because I think there is so much potential around here and I'm really grateful to [the team] for wanting to make Baltimore a great city."

The renovated homes, which average about \$175,000, feature luxury amenities including exposed brick, fireplaces, stone countertops and Jacuzzi styled tubs. Nearly all are LEED certified.

"We decided early on that we wanted to



In addition to renovating houses, One Green Home at a Time provides programs and services to residents throughout the Oliver community including programs for children and teens in the neighborhood.



People who purchase a home in the Oliver neighborhood through One Green Home at a Time have the opportunity to choose design features for their house, including a unique design like this in the bathroom.

panding," said Borinsky when asked how many homes he plans to build.

"I think a lot of communities that have problems [with drugs and crime] is a result of hopelessness," said Williams. "So, if we can...bring some hope back, then that should bring a vibrant new sense of community"

The neighborhood once plundered by crime has emerged as an epicenter of growth and inspiration for other Baltimore neighborhoods. The Dawson family would be proud.

build counter intuitively," said Martin Richardson, the head realtor. "Most builders, especially as the market slowed down, started to build with less and less amenities. We made a conscious decision to build more."

The organization also offers tax credits. "As much money as I can raise is how much money I'm going to spend on houses and ex-