

Program makes effort to fit in East Liberty

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By Diana Nelson Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



John Heller/Post-Gazette

As the adults dedicate the new Sojourner MOMS playground on Black Street in East Liberty, Raheim Jefferson, 5, tests out the new play space.

A car pulled up to the curb at 5525 Black St. the other day and a large man walked to the fence.

"I've seen people working out here," he said, draping his arms over the metal railing. "I ride through here all the time wondering what this is. It's beautiful."

On the surface and deeper, Greg Johnston, who lives on nearby Schenley Street, had hit on something. The play yard, transformed from blighted vacant lots by 5,000 volunteer hours over 18 months, is just the latest milestone in the relationship between a neighborhood in East Liberty and 16 troubled households that joined it two years ago.

On Hays and Black streets, Sojourner House, a facility that helps clients with addictions, established Sojourner MOMS, a long-term, supported residency program for 16 women and their children in four apartment buildings starting in 2008.

Aside from occasional disparagement and grumbling, 75 neighbors turned out for a cookout MOMS held for National Night Out last month. (MOMS stands for Motivation, Opportunities, Mentoring & Spirituality.) With the 16 women are 45 children.

Gary Cirrincione, vice president of the Negley Place Neighborhood Alliance, has fixed bikes, mentored children in the community garden and held competitive anti-litter clean-up games for them. He bristles when someone makes a barbed reference to MOMS, saying, "They're our neighbors."

Thursday, at a ribbon-cutting ceremony to dedicate the new play yard, Alicia Williams watched her 8- and 9-year-old daughters at the top of a sliding board. "It's nice they have a place where other kids can't come and torment them. I really feel blessed to have something like this."

She has been a MOMS resident for three months and said she already feels like a part of the neighborhood. "The neighbors are really nice. I'm like, wow, they actually say hi. And if something's going on with your kid, they let you know."

MOMS resident Sharon Taylor lived on the streets with a cocaine habit and without her four children for a while; they stayed with her brother and sister-in-law. Now, she is more than one year clean, has her children with her and says she has felt more welcomed in the neighborhood than she could have imagined.

A full-time student in social work at the Community College of Allegheny County, she moved into a MOMS apartment in December and wants to meet more neighbors. She said she is looking forward to making more acquaintances as a MOMS representative at neighborhood meetings. "It's important that we are part of the neighborhood and not just that rehab place," she said.

"What was awesome was to learn that the community was instrumental in making all this happen. That they would believe in people rehabilitating themselves and having their kids with them as part of the community."

The neighborhood alliance saw Sojourner House as a good replacement for the drug dealing and prostitution that was going on in two apartment buildings on Hays in the 1990s. The group enlisted the help of East Liberty Development Inc., which bought the first building in 2004.

Since then, special-needs state and federal funding and grants and loans from Pittsburgh Partnership for Neighborhood Development, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, the Pittsburgh Housing Authority, the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and an anonymous foundation have totaled about \$4 million.

"We started moving families in late in 2008, and the kids played in the streets," said Joann Cyganovich, executive director of Sojourner House. Two vacant lots on Black Street looked like the solution to that. The city-owned lots were vacant and full of debris, she said. Again with East Liberty Development Inc.'s help, the transformation began last year.

Volunteers came in from Carnegie Mellon University, the Student Conservation Association, Shadyside Presbyterian Church, Deloitte, G-TECH, East Liberty Development Inc. and the neighborhood. They moved soil, dug up debris from old foundations and used the brick and stone they found to build walkways. They built a little boardwalk, a sand box and a hop-scotch pad and dug out a hillside to anchor climbing tires with rebar and gravel.

Everything in the play space is recycled except a bench that rings a tree and shadowbox wooden fencing. The metal fence portion was donated by Mosites Corp. Tires were both donated and found. A fallen tree is a balance beam. Burt Hill Architects designed the yard.

The total cost of the project was \$35,000.

Mr. Cirrincione, a semiretired architect, said the neighborhood has improved since Sojourner MOMS was established, in part because of the vice they replaced on Hays Street.

"We're still able to sell houses," he said. "Hays is now 60 percent owner-occupied, and we have the first new construction on Hays and Black streets in 30 years."

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