

Building a kingdom

Faith-based group hopes to revitalize neighborhood in northeast York

By MELISSA NANN BURKE
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Jul 5, 2007 — The neighborhood reminded Michael Friend of blight he'd seen in Baltimore, his hometown.

Guys hung on the corner. The row houses were crumbling and depressed.

Few residents sat on their front stoops, and even fewer children played outside.

Then three years ago, Friend noticed something new:

A tall wooden cross mounted in a vacant lot at the corner of North Pine and Chestnut streets.

Not long after, Barbara Beattie, who lives next door, began holding outdoor worship services in the yard, praying for those living nearby and for the safety of their streets.

Beattie and Friend met, and that's how it started.

Today, the pair are leaders in a volunteer-driven, faith-based effort to revitalize their neighborhood in northeast York - spiritually and economically.

Their focus is a cluster of roughly 180 residential properties bordered by North Queen, Broad and East Philadelphia streets and the railroad tracks to the north.

With a dozen devoted helpers, their initial goal is to purchase, renovate and resell 40 residential properties, hoping to eventually attract businesses such as barbershops and eateries to the area.

They aim to raise \$3 million from local churches, investors and through grants to support the project for the next three years, Friend said.

They'll christen their community Chestnut Village and will share their vision with others at a Christian conference Saturday at the York Expo Center.

"We can't do nothing without God," said Friend, pastor of Believers Tabernacle of Faith on nearby Ridge Avenue.

"You can't rebuild the house without rebuilding the people."

As motivation, the volunteers point to the success Baltimore had in ridding the now booming Canton, Fells Point and Federal Hill neighborhoods of decay.

They expect interest in their neighborhood will grow with the new minor-league baseball stadium next door and the planned redevelopment of the former Graybill factory site to the east.

In addition to community groups like the Northeast Neighborhood Association of York, the vehicle behind the planned revitalization is the Kingdom Builders of York, a for-profit company Friend founded in 2005.

Kingdom Builders' business plan involves buying row homes at low cost (less than \$25,000), putting roughly \$16,000 of work into each and reselling to socially responsible, mid-level-income buyers.

Friend directs Men on Fire, a ministry for local men who will assist with the necessary labor, learning job skills such as construction and electrical work and helping to keep costs down.

So far, Kingdom Builders has borrowed and invested \$250,000 into six properties on North Pine and East Chestnut streets, Friend said. The first renovation is nearly complete.

At a meeting last year, city planning commission consultants discussed 300 blighted properties in the larger northeast neighborhood that includes the would-be Chestnut Village. The debate was whether it's more economical to rehabilitate or demolish them.

One consultant estimated the cost to rehabilitate a single home in the area is more than \$100,000 - much higher than the estimated \$25,000 resale value on the open market.

City figures estimate about 72 homes are vacant and 17 lots empty in the nearly 60-acre area including Broad, North Pine, Philadelphia and State streets.

Matt Jackson, the city's redevelopment authority coordinator and economic development director, believes the market exists for what the Kingdom Builders have planned - rehabbed single-family, owner-occupied properties.

He said the city encourages any effort to improve housing stock whether by private investment, neighborhood initiatives or faith-based projects.

James DeBord, director of YorkCounts, said part of the reason for the concentration of poverty in York is because of a concentration of substandard housing in the city.

"The more people working on that fact the better," DeBord said of Kingdom Builders.

In addition to the other redevelopment happening in the northeast neighborhood, "you also need families there living in good homes, being a part of the community," said DeBord, who's organization aims to improve the quality of life in York County.

"I think it's a win-win when you have that going on there."

It's a big project, but Friend said the workers are committed.

Beattie's already noticed a change since starting her makeshift "church on a corner."

Three years ago, she wouldn't have sat outside in the middle of the day because of the level of crime on surrounding blocks.

On a recent afternoon, she rested in a lawn recliner next to rows of folding chairs set up for church that night.

Children rode by on bicycles, and neighbors chatted on their porches. The cross, wrapped in strings of Christmas lights, stood near the road.

"No one can tell me prayer doesn't work," Beattie said.

"I got opposition from the young people, but soon they understood that I wasn't going anywhere, that cross wasn't going anywhere and God wasn't going anywhere.

"There's not been a person in this neighborhood that's not been affected by what we do. What we're going to do."

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KINGDOM BUILDERS

Company: Kingdom Builders of York LLC

President and founder: Michael Friend

Incorporated: 2005

Location: York

Businesses: Real estate, redevelopment

Mission: Provide clean and safe housing in a northeast neighborhood of York, attracting businesses to a village-style community called Chestnut Village

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IF YOU GO

What: The I'm Sold Out (for Christ) Conference

When: 11:45 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday

Where: Toyota Arena at the York Expo Center, 334 Carlisle Ave. in West Manchester Township

Cost: \$20

For details: (410) 665-7980, (877) 320-2427 or <http://www.soldoutconference.eventbrite.com>

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SEE 'CHESTNUT VILLAGE'

Visit <http://w2.ydr.com/photos/> to see an audio-visual slideshow of an outdoor worship service at North Pine and Chestnut streets.

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