

Urbanite #6 November 04
By: Anne Haddad

*Check it out, I've always been a survivor,
From the moment that He blew breath in me,
He resurrected me with a purpose and with a Destiny
To forever remain a warrior of integrity
Nobody can stop me cause I'm in this for longevity...
I'm focused, even when my enemies try to pressure me
I'm so determined to leave a legacy
I'm ready for any and everything that lies ahead of me.*

— Excerpt from Sandtown's song "Destiny."

The story of Sandtown always unfolds in the language of contrast and duality. Here is a neighborhood where the glass is no more than half full—or no less than half empty. It all depends on which of the 72 square blocks you're talking about.

If you're standing on the 1500 block of Stricker Street, Sandtown is downright pretty. A block of painted brick row houses blooms in tasteful pastels and neutrals, or re-pointed brick.

A few blocks in each direction takes you past either more rehabbed older homes, or square blocks of new construction where anything beyond repair was torn down to make way for new. Like the gleaming New Song Community Center on Presstman Street, a building that opens early in the morning and closes late in the evening, which houses a public school, after-school programs, sporting events, and meetings.

To get to these pearls, you have to pass no small number of empty shells. Vacant homes have been the bane of Sandtown since the late 1960s, despite dedicated residents who stuck it out because Sandtown was and always will be home. Sandtown continues to struggle, but the hard work and doubt are tempered by lightness and color.

Throughout the neighborhood, residents have reclaimed dozens of blocks and more than 600 homes with help from nonprofit groups using private, city, state, and federal programs. These are not public housing developments or subsidized rentals—the people who live inside are proud to own them. "I was the first homeowner in my family," says Linda Williams, 42, sitting on the front steps of her home on the 1500 block of Leslie Street. "I wanted to have something to leave to my daughter."

Williams's home was among 27 built after the existing decaying row houses were demolished. She finished the construction with her own two hands, paneling the basement and installing ceramic tile in the foyer. She learned as she went, with free advice from the staff at the Home Depot on Route 40 in Catonsville. There's no Home Depot in Sandtown. No major stores at all, in fact. The residential transformation has begun, but the shopping, jobs, and businesses have yet to follow. The check-cashing storefronts along North Avenue, the northern boundary of Sandtown, don't count. The east and west boundaries of Pennsylvania Avenue and North Fulton Avenue also lack the kinds of businesses that neighbors want.

"I hope and pray the community will one day be sound economically," says LaVerne Stokes, 51, a lifelong Sandtown resident and now co-executive director of Sandtown Habitat for Humanity. "Right now, all our dollars leave our community."

There's no shortage of corner stores, but their wares are overpriced. The Avenue Market, on the southeastern edge of Sandtown, at Laurens Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, is meant to be a city market à la Lexington, but offers little more than a few food stalls selling either fried chicken or Asian fast-food, and includes a convenience store.

Arabers start their runs through the city from a stable on the edge of the neighborhood, but for any real shopping, residents now go as far as the Giant on Edmondson Avenue, almost Catonsville.

Lucky Crosby Sr., 37, who lives a few doors down from Linda Williams, ticks off a list of what Sandtown ought to have: barber shop, beauty salon, mini-market, shoe repair shop.

And more involved fathers. It's a neighborhood of mostly single-mother-led households, like the one he grew up in—on the same block where his new home sits. Crosby works as a men's services counselor at the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development at 1622 N. Carey St.

"The strength of the community lies in its children," Crosby says.

This strength is evident in Sandtown, a children's choir named for their neighborhood. The 40-voice choir captures the spirit and heart of the community through highly original music. Their sound is so strong and so vibrant, it has earned them a record deal, visits before the mayor, and performances around the country (www.sandtown.com). Their success is a reminder of the musical heritage of the neighborhood, of Billie Holiday finding her voice at The Royal Theater on Pennsylvania Avenue, of Cab Calloway going to school around the corner.

Black Flight

In the early 1900s, Sandtown began to develop into a thriving neighborhood of working-class African-American families and businesses. They bought or rented the modest row homes left behind by European immigrants who moved to outlying neighborhoods.

In the 1960s, when some neighborhoods in the city were just beginning to experience white flight, Sandtown suffered black flight. And no one came in to fill the void for more than 20 years.

Linda Williams missed the heyday, but she has lived in Sandtown since she was 3 years old. In the last 20 years, she raised a daughter alone and earned a degree at Coppin State University. She works as a customer service coordinator in financial aid at Baltimore City Community College.

Although she wanted the stability and financial security of owning a home, Williams never wanted to leave the neighborhood.

"I always felt safe," she says. "People knew me."

The familial and neighborhood ties are strong. Some Sandtown families go back for generations, Stokes says. When someone has a death in the family, the neighbors bring food and money to help with burial expenses. When someone loses a job, people send cards, and might tuck in some money to help. Or they might bring some groceries by on their way home from the store.

"Not that anyone asks, but we just do it," Stokes says. "I've seen people take food out of their own freezers to give to someone else."

"And I notice the people who do leave come back all the time on weekends," Stokes says.

A Convergence of Forces

Since the late 1980s, Sandtown started attracting a succession of organizations and individual people with a vision for the neighborhood —and funding to make it happen. In 1986, visionaries Allan and Susan Tibbels and Mark Gornick moved into the neighborhood to start New Song Community Church, which would lead to New Song Urban Ministries and New Song Academy, which opened in 1995 with just 12 middle school students. The public school, now under the city's New Schools Initiative, has grown to 136 students in grades K-8.

Through New Song, Sandtown Habitat for Humanity emerged to rehab more than 200 homes so far, and build 27 brand-new units on Leslie Street, where Williams and Crosby own homes. And more than 10,000 volunteers a year—the Baltimore Ravens among them—lend their muscle to clear out the debris to make room for fresh lumber, drywall and paint (1300 N. Fulton Ave., 410-669-3309, www.sandtownhabitat.org).

The Ravens got involved through Imara Lewis, wife of former Raven Jermaine Lewis. Imara is from Sandtown. The Lewis's started sponsoring the local youth tackle football team, the Sandtown Wolverines, and before long, Jermaine's teammates were volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. It even made national television during an NFL half-time spot on Thanksgiving Day in 2000.

The effort brings in people who might never come to Sandtown otherwise. "I think most of the volunteers think they're coming into a kind of war zone, and they're surprised to find it's a community —everyone knows each other," says Allan Tibbels, who is co-executive director of Sandtown Habitat for Humanity.

Federal programs such as Nehemiah helped build affordable homes. This federal home-ownership assistance and development program for urban areas took its name from a Biblical reference to a city in ruins that is rebuilt with hope and determination.

The Enterprise Foundation, created by the late developer Jim Rouse, chose Sandtown as a place to nurture a philosophy called "Neighborhood Transformation," in which all the needs of a community at risk are addressed with the goal of turning it around.

Several strong church communities, like New Song, have provided much of the glue for the community, and include Catholic churches St. Peter Claver at 1546 N. Fremont Ave. and St. Gregory the Great at 1542 N. Gilmore St., as well as Simmons Memorial Baptist Church at 601 Cumberland St., Sharon Baptist Church at 1373 N. Stricker St., and Ames Memorial United Methodist Church at 615 Baker St.

Yesterday and Today

The hope and determination of lifelong residents who knew this neighborhood back in the day are why Sandtown has a chance of returning to glory.

The key, Stokes says, lies in building relationships with contiguous communities such as Druid Heights to the east, and moving even further east to affluent Bolton Hill.

Marlene E. Brown, 61, of Whatcoat Street, sees hope, too, for the prospect of a major grocery store like Giant or Safeway in the neighborhood where she's lived all her life. Brown was one of the first residents to move into a neighborhood of new homes built through the Enterprise Foundation.

"With what we have now, and what's being built, that's a critical mass that would go along with the renters that already live here, to support a major store," says Brown, who works for a state licensing board.

Sandtown might never be what it was. Stokes remembers a neighborhood pet store where her parents went to buy chicks every Easter, and remembers African American doctor and lawyer offices. Stokes once saw the Supremes walking down Pennsylvania Avenue, where Cab Calloway, Billie Holliday, Ella Fitzgerald and other legends performed in clubs. Pennsylvania Avenue comes alive again one day a year when the Cadillac Parade floats down the street, with flashy cars and marching bands, celebrating the corridor where jazz legends once played.

Having seen Sandtown at its best and worst, she has perspective.

"I can see hope being restored, when it was lost," she says. "One thing we've never lost—we never lost a sense of community. The people here really support one another. They really love one another."