

# The Daily Herald.

Group works to revive community - Apr 25, 2010

Citizens repair homes, pride

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Two years ago Annie Hardison lived in fear of the violence which plagued East Columbia.

“Two years ago we couldn’t sit on our porch,” Hardison said. “I kept every door locked and the alarm system on.”

The violence got so bad it finally spurred the city government into action.

A new police chief arrived bringing with him modern techniques and experience dealing with gangs.

The city council commissioned a revitalization plan to target the area’s economic needs.

But perhaps the biggest change came not from the government, but a group of ordinary citizens who banded together to make a difference.

Calling themselves People Helping People Together, the group set about fixing up homes in the area. The group aimed to help neighbors restore pride in their community and lower crime at the same time.

In less than a year, the group has worked on eight homes and have plans for 12 more before winter.

“It is the most rewarding experience you can imagine,” PHPT President Jan Kirk Wright said.

By repairing dilapidated homes, the group wants to bring back pride and hope to a neighborhood which seemed in short supply of both.

And it seems to have worked.

Wright said the group has received an outpouring of support from all over the community.

First Farmers and Merchants Bank donated \$30,000 to the program. This money has allowed PHPT to tap grants from the Tennessee Housing Development Agency.

Others donated time and materials. Chris Clark donated 200 trees to the group. He said the efforts of PHPT and the neighborhood stood as an example of what the community could accomplish.

“If you give people the tools and set them in the right direction ... they will step up,” he said.

Ted Fellman, director of the THDA, said the efforts in East Columbia have ramifications far beyond one or two neighborhoods.

“This is how we are going to rebuild the economy,” Fellman said.

Bernice Alderson has lived in East Columbia more than 50 years. She said she worked all her life to keep her house up, but once she retired and was forced to live on a fixed income her home fell into disrepair.

She said there just was not enough money to go around.

"The light bill goes up. The water bill goes up. But the checks don't go up," she said.

PHPT installed a new central heating and air unit, fixed her roof and gave her a swing, flag and even a new bible.

"I gave to the community all my life. Now they are giving to me," Alderson said.

Hardison said the changes go beyond the homes which are refurbished. She said the improvements have inspired neighbors to fix up their homes as well.

"Since our houses are being fixed up it is making neighbors go ahead and pick up their trash," she said. "There is a sense of pride and accomplishment spreading throughout."

To Deborah Witherspoon and her son Justin, the changes are much more tangible.

"It was raining on us," Deborah Witherspoon said.

Her Bridge Street home was the most recent one completed by PHPT.

"We just feel blessed," Justin Witherspoon said.

Hardison said things still aren't perfect - as a recent shooting on Glade Street demonstrated - but she feels the neighborhood has turned a corner.

"People are working together," she said. "Pride makes a big difference."

She said the difference is noticeable in many ways. The police now make foot patrols in the area. The community has formed neighborhood watches and are not afraid to talk to authorities. But the most important change for Hardison is that she can now sit on her front porch without fear.

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