

Sandtown-Winchester Article

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“Unfortunately, too many people in this country believe that the type of poverty that exists in Sandtown-Winchester is a permanent part of the American fabric... We’ve come to accept the litany of poverty as part of America, that there is nothing we can do about it because it’s too big, too costly.”¹

-James W. Rouse, founder of “Community Building in Partnership”

West Baltimore’s largest urban neighborhood, formed within the 1816 annex, is the community of Sandtown-Winchester.² With a recorded population in 2000 of 9, 254,³ it is a neighborhood rich in history and heritage, situated on a gradual topographic ascent, south to north, forming the highest elevation of Baltimore until 1888.⁴ This 72 square foot block area bordered by North Ave (north), Pennsylvania Ave (northeast), Fremont Ave (southeast), Lafayette Ave (south), and Fulton Ave (west), has its historical roots originating back to the early 1800’s. The name of the community combines two different meanings: *Sandtown*, which in oral tradition is a sand quarry where people left trails of sand when they cut through the neighborhood; and *Winchester*, which was named after General George Winchester who was the President of the Baltimore and Susquehanna railroads.⁵

Sandtown-Winchester has a wonderful rich tradition as an African American community located in the western section of Baltimore City.⁶ Not only does it have over 40 churches within its 72 blocks, many with very strong social missions, Sandtown also has a rich social and cultural heritage. It was the birthplace or early home of Judge Thurgood Marshall, jazz musicians Billie Holiday and Cab Calloway, and actor Harold Rollins.⁷ The Royal Theatre on legendary Pennsylvania Avenue was one of the major

¹ Hopkins, Tracy. “In 5 Years an Urban Columbia.” *AFRO* March 2, 1993.

² Ryon, Roderick. West Baltimore Neighborhoods: Sketches of their History 1840-1960. Institution of Publications Region at the University of Baltimore, 1993. pg. 109.

³ Census 2000 Summary File 1, U.S. Census Bureau, July 3, 2001.

⁴ Ryon, Roderick. West Baltimore Neighborhoods: Sketches of their History 1840-1960. Institution of Publications Region at the University of Baltimore, 1993. pg. 109.

⁵ Rolandson Associates. “72 Block Community of Contrasts.” *A history of Sandtown 1800's to present*.

⁶ “Sandtown-Winchester Community Building in Partnership” Kurt Schmoke (Mayor), April 28, 1992.

⁷ *Ibis*.

stops for artists heading to Philadelphia and Harlem. Musical pioneers, such as Stevie Wonder, Dionne Warwick, Diana Ross and James Brown, performed at the theater.⁸

During the 19th Century, the railroad industry based in Baltimore, increased urban development, that allowed a boom in jobs for the residents of Sandtown-Winchester. Fulton (on Fulton Avenue) was a station and freight depot for both the western Maryland and Baltimore and Potomac Railroads, carrying heavy volumes of coal, livestock, and grain. A large number of impoverished people came from Virginia, Rural Maryland and Pennsylvania in search of a better life and job opportunities, including railroad workers, professionals, retailers, bakers, and slaughter house workers.⁹ The Sandtown-Winchester community thrived in the 1800s with trades such as coal, wool and stone yards, as well as “arabbing,” which was a popular African American tradition. Considered the oldest consistent trade, “arabbing” started in stables and was the selling of veggies and fish to people passing through the streets.¹⁰ A heterogeneous mix of residences in the area during the era of development attracted a mix of public and private institutions, including the churches of Cumberland and Bethany German Reformed, as well as the city’s first athletic park for professional baseball teams (league and non-league teams played until it was demolished in the late 1880s for new housing development).¹¹

Unfortunately, the beginning of the 20th Century brought segregation to Sandtown-Winchester. Between 1913 and 1917, segregation played a key role in the community and African Americans were unable to build homes or own property.¹² The poorest people lived in between the alleys and streets in the community. With complaints that said police behaved like “dog-catchers,” not patrolmen, an NAACP neighborhood watch-dog club formed in the 1950s and city wide they began to compile records of “unjust

⁸ www.sandtown.com

⁹ Rolandson Associates. "72 Block Community of Contrasts." *A history of Sandtown 1800's to present.*

¹⁰ *Ibis.*

¹¹ Ryon, Roderick. *West Baltimore Neighborhoods: Sketches of their History 1840-1960.* Institution of Publications Region at the University of Baltimore, 1993. pg. 109.

¹² Rolandson Associates. "72 Block Community of Contrasts." *A history of Sandtown 1800's to present.*

arrests” of African Americans who lived at edges of white neighborhoods.¹³ In Sandtown-Winchester African Americans faced discrimination within the employment and housing sector and due to this scarcity with jobs, unemployment and poverty levels continued to increase drastically. Living conditions in Sandtown from the 17th century to the 21st had been deemed the worst possible. One of the most significant elements which still exists today is Sandtown’s row housing. These narrow connected buildings faced destruction in the 1990’s when the poverty and crime level was at its highest. In order to combat this poverty and crime stricken neighborhood, strong community and government changes were enacted in the 20th century.

With nearly half the residents unemployed and 45% receiving some type of public assistance, Sandtown was regarded as one of the most depressed neighborhoods in Baltimore in the early 1990’s.¹⁴ It was a community plagued by widespread substance abuse and drug related crime, an alarming rate of teen pregnancy and school drop-outs, unemployment reaching epidemic proportions, substandard housing and homelessness, overwhelming poverty, and an overall feeling of hopelessness and fear.¹⁵ Sandtown was clearly suffering within, as well as creating an urban poverty amidst the city of Baltimore. Economic segregation, racism, dislocation, poor education, and lack of effective federal urban policy sickened the community and began to separate it from the rest of the city.¹⁶

The community was in desperate need of revitalization and help from both inside and outside of Sandtown. Positive changes began in 1991 when developer James W. Rouse of Rouse Company teamed up with the city of Baltimore and various civic and church organizations to build up the community. In a 1993 article in *AFRO*, Rouse stated “Unfortunately, too many people in this country believe that the type of poverty that exists in Sandtown-Winchester is a permanent part of the American fabric... We’ve come to accept the litany of poverty as part of America, that there is nothing we can do about it because it’s too

¹³ Ryon, Roderick. West Baltimore Neighborhoods: Sketches of their History 1840-1960. Institution of Publications Region at the University of Baltimore, 1993. pg. 109.

¹⁴ Jernigan, Ivy. “Former Sandtown-Winchester Resident gives back to Community.” *AFRO*. Jan. 8, 1995 (A12).

¹⁵ “Sandtown-Winchester Community Building in Partnership” Kurt Schmoke (Mayor), April 28, 1992.

¹⁶ *Ibis*.

big, too costly.”¹⁷ Rouse completely rejected this theory and founded a nonprofit enterprise with a determination to improve Sandtown through the creation of new homes, neighborhood centers and daycare facilities.¹⁸ With Barbara Bostic as executive director of the partnership, the collaborative team called “Community Building in Partnership” intended to increase affordable housing through the creation of townhouses, therefore hoping to improve social and financial hardships for Sandtown residents. Their main goals were to improve the infant mortality rate which at its worst was 32 deaths for 1000 babies, as well as the drop-out rate of students and the epidemic problem of unemployment.¹⁹

But Rouse was not the only one making strides to improve Sandtown-Winchester. Members of the Davis family who were residents of Sandtown on North Mount Street, founded a committee in 1978 called “Community United to Save Sandtown Inc.” which funded money to feed the needy and purchase clothing for the school children of the community.²⁰ Also, “Sandtown Village Co-op” was established in the late 20th century bringing the neighborhood subsidized housing. Through this initiative residents became collective owners of their housing complex, becoming stockholders of a company that owns and manages the complex, in “effect becoming their own landlords.”²¹

More recently, another organization which greatly improved the community was New Song. New Song was established in 1988 as a Christian Community consisting of 80 faculty members.²² The members are predominately residents of the neighborhood Sandtown-Winchester. This church-based program aims to develop the neighborhood located in West Baltimore. Some steps by New Song that are being taken to improve Sandtown are decreasing the number of vacant houses, setting up programs and making new opportunities available to the residents, specifically the youth.²³ New Song functions with the help of several extra hands from residents, volunteers, corporations, civic groups, and government aid

¹⁷ Hopkins, Tracy. “In 5 Years an Urban Columbia.” *AFRO* March 2, 1993.

¹⁸ Jernigan, Ivy. “Former Sandtown-Winchester Resident gives back to Community.” *AFRO*. Jan. 8, 1995 (A12).

¹⁹ *Ibis*.

²⁰ Canzian, Eileen. “Co-op to bring More Housing to Sandtown.” *The Baltimore Sun*. Jan. 27, 1982.

²¹ *Ibis*.

²² <http://www.nsum.org/>

²³ *Ibis*.

from The City of Baltimore as well as the state of Maryland.

One branch of New Song is New Song Arts, which focuses largely around religion. As well as strengthening the relationship between New Song members and God, the program seeks to break barriers of racial and economic origin. This entails confronting injustice and giving power to the Sandtown residents as well as promoting health both physically and spiritually.²⁴ Specific programs that are in the works in Sandtown are housing renovations, health care, and educational and outreach programs for the youth. New Song lives by God's commandments especially "love God" and "love thy neighbors."²⁵ The establishment of New Song Urban Ministries serves as an umbrella of other organizations: Sandtown Habitat for Humanity, New Song Community Learning Center, New Song Community Learning Center Pre-School, EDEN Jobs, New Song Arts, New Song Health CO-OP, Martha's Place (Newborn Ministries).

One of New Song Urban Ministries that has made a particular impact on the community is Eden Jobs. Over the past 20 years Sandtown has drastically changed in many ways, for example the rate of unemployment has decreased. Much of this can be attributed to the inception of The Economic Development Employment Network (Eden Jobs). The program is designed to facilitate job placement and employment networking for the residents of Sandtown. It also serves as a means for changing career tracks or finding temporary employment while in between jobs. Eden Jobs is designed not to simply place its participants but rather to lend a guiding hand. Participants are encouraged to seek employment on their own time; however Eden Jobs helps to facilitate many opportunities. According to Antoine Bennett, the director at Eden Jobs, the programs purpose is to, "act as a hand holding process for them to become more employable. We do feel like everyone is employable, but they just need to be fine tuned and acquire the necessary knowledge to compete and become competent job seekers in today's job market."²⁶

²⁴ *Ibis.*

²⁵ *Ibis.*

²⁶ Antoine Bennett Interview. February 23, 2007, 3:00pm

Services at Eden Jobs include mock interviews, how to properly fill out an application, and the importance of and how to produce a cover letter and resume. “You would be amazed at how many adults are walking around right now that don’t know the significance of an application. Don’t know how to fill out an application,”²⁷ notes Bennett. Although the majority of clients come from Sandtown, approximately 10-15% are from neighboring or adjacent communities.²⁸ Bennett finds that Eden Jobs is different than other job placement facilities in that they have a distinct way of interacting with their participants. “What makes Eden different to similar programs that are out there is that we have a very unique way of connecting with our residents. One unique thing is that we live amongst the same folks that we serve. I run into folks not just in the office but also in the Laundromat, the local grocery store, and corner stores. So there’s always a connection there.”²⁹ On a more personal note Bennett, now the programs director is also a successful example of what the program can achieve. After serving a brief stint in jail, Bennett had two options upon returning to Sandtown: he could either return to the streets or he could try and make something of his life. Luckily for Eden Jobs he chose the latter. “Where would I have been if I hadn’t found Eden Jobs today?” questions Bennett, “Most certainly I believe, honestly, that I would probably be back in the penitentiary or I would probably be dead. I grew up with twenty close friends in my neighborhood. I think I’m one of five that are either free or alive. Had it not been for me taking full advantage of Eden Jobs I would probably be of the fifteen instead of the five. I have no doubt about that.”³⁰ The services provided at Eden Jobs are irreplaceable and the program has helped the Sandtown-Winchester community immensely.

Another aspect of New Song Urban Ministries is a program that teaches life skills to neighborhood youth by providing music training and performance opportunities. This Sandtown Children's Choir is a development of New Song Arts, a music program reaching children and youth in the

²⁷ *Ibis.*

²⁸ <http://www.edenjobs.org/>

²⁹ Antoine Bennett Interview. February 23, 2007, 3:00pm

³⁰ *Ibis.*

community. The children of the choir call the New Song Community Church their second home.³¹ What used to be a run-down Boys Club was renovated into beautiful offices as well as a studio and performance space for the choir.³² As the choir expands they are doing bigger and better things such as touring as far as Nashville, Tennessee. Singing their hearts out in America's music capital was an awesome adventure for the 30 choir members back in 2002.³³

Through much hard work, the Sandtown Children's choir has created and released an album entitled "Based on a True Story." Their label was Gotee and it was the choir's first national album. It can be purchased under the Gospel or Christian contemporary section in music stores or found on I-tunes.³⁴

Like New Song, Habitat for Humanity plays a crucial role in the revitalization and improvement of Sandtown. Habitat for Humanity was started by a millionaire turned missionary, Millard Fuller, in 1976. Today there are a variety of habitat programs across the nation. One particular program, Sandtown Habitat for Humanity, is making a huge impact on its community. Sandtown Habitat for Humanity is a nonprofit Christian housing organization with the intent of rebuilding the vacant housing in Sandtown and increasing homeownership and improving the health of the community.

Houses are rehabilitated and built in partnership with the homeowners using mainly volunteer labor and private funding. In Sandtown the completed homes are sold at cost to low-income families on a 20-year mortgage with no interest charged. Payments go into a revolving fund which helps to finance other homes. "I can't imagine any other agency that would take on a risk like me. I had no job, back bills, a history of moving often. My credit was bad. I always had a pretty good self-image, but now I feel a little bit better about myself because I can provide a stable environment for my children. It has really affected my life,"³⁵ say Sandtown Habitat recipient Natilie Towles.³⁶ Antoine Bennett, a Habitat homeowner, says

³¹ Michael Parker Interview February 21, 2007, 3:30pm

³² *Ibis*.

³³ www.sandtown.com

³⁴ *Ibis*.

³⁵ Bock, James, "Habitat for Humanity joins blight battle in Sandtown-Winchester" *Evening Sun*, March 27th, 1992.

³⁶ *Ibis*.

that “being a homeowner through the Habitat program inspired me to be more involved in my community. The feeling of being part-owner of my community serves as motivation to stay active in the community, in terms of making sure that it’s clean and safe for our children to grow up in.”³⁷

Although Sandtown-Winchester continues to face problems with crime, poverty and unemployment, this diverse community of Baltimore city in general has improved considerably from the horrible times of the early 1990’s. Programs such as Habitat for Humanity and New Song are changing the face of Sandtown and improving the lives of its inhabitants. Sandtown’s history, architecture and cultural neighborhood all reflect its racial diversity and strong heritage within Baltimore. Although Sandtown has faced serious struggles throughout the past hundred years, the community continues to come together and bring positive changes to their homes, community, and most importantly their families.

³⁷ Antoine Bennett Interview. February 23, 2007, 3:00pm