

Milch Award 2013 Nomination Statement  
Sandtown Habitat for Humanity

**Sandtown Habitat for Humanity** is a nonprofit Christian housing organization in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood of West Baltimore that seeks to rebuild the vacant housing in Sandtown, increasing homeownership and improving the health of the community. Sandtown welcomes and unites volunteers from all backgrounds, religions and ethnicities, building human communities at the same time that they building new homes. Sandtown-Winchester is a vibrant Baltimore neighborhood with a rich history, deep cultural traditions, and architecturally unique housing. Sadly however the housing stock is badly deteriorated due to poverty, absentee landlords and hundreds of units of abandoned homes. Aware of Sandtown's housing crisis, in 1989 members of New Song Community Church joined together to initiate an affiliate of Habitat for Humanity in an effort to respond to the challenge of rebuilding homes and hope.

Homes are rebuilt in partnership with the prospective homeowners using mostly volunteer labor and private funding. Completed homes are then sold at cost to families with limited resources, with 20 and 30 year mortgages and with no interest charged. Payments go into a revolving fund which in turn helps to finance the renovation of other homes in the community. Using this model, Sandtown Habitat has completed 300 homes for families with limited resources who are first-time homebuyers in Sandtown-Winchester. The average cost of a Sandtown Habitat house is around \$100,000, about one-half of the cost of traditional development. A family who is selected to purchase a Habitat home is required to invest at least 330 hours of "sweat equity" into the renovation of their home. Volunteers come from inside and outside Sandtown and include individuals as well as numerous congregations, corporations, colleges and universities.

As indicated by their name, the Sandtown Habitat chapter is a community-based operation, committed to the restoration of this particular neighborhood and its residents. Their organizational structure and operational procedures firmly reinforce a commitment to the empowerment of local residents. Local residents hold positions on both the fulltime staff and on the Board of Directors, and employment and training opportunities for residents are an essential part of the Habitat mission. Their goal is to eliminate all vacant housing in a 15 block focus area, a total of 350 houses within the next several years. Together, a full time staff of more than 15, plus homeowners and thousands of volunteers are joyfully rebuilding homes and hope together in Sandtown.

Loyola College first became involved with Sandtown Habitat for Humanity in 1996 when Stephen Fowl, Professor of Theology, set up a service-learning opportunity for his classes with Sandtown Habitat. A formal partnership between Sandtown Habitat and Loyola began in 2004. Each academic year since then Loyola has provided funding to support the restoration of a home and student volunteers to assist with the rebuild of the Loyola house. Students work every Saturday under the supervision of Sandtown Habitat staff. Over the past seven years between 45 and 100 student volunteers have volunteered each year with Sandtown Habitat, both as part of co-curricular service opportunities and as part of service-learning classes.

Though the physical improvements in the neighborhood are impressive, in the minds of the Sandtown Habitat staff, the building of relationships is more integral to their mission than the physical reconstruction projects. Ever since Loyola joined in their work, it has been apparent that partnership at Sandtown Habitat means more than just showing up and using a hammer—it means working alongside people who believe that through a common vision we can come to understand our shared humanity — no matter how different our social, political or economic backgrounds may seem. Regarding the Sandtown Habitat/Loyola partnership, LaVerne Stokes, Sandtown Habitat Co-Director, said "We deeply appreciate the funding, but for us, it's all about the relationships."

Working with Sandtown Habitat has provided countless Loyola undergraduates the opportunity to participate in a deeply-inspiring faith-based community of people who have dedicated their lives to restoration in West Baltimore. The Habitat staff work closely with CCSJ student Service Coordinators and Loyola faculty members to prepare the volunteers to work safely and effectively on the construction site, but also preparing them to befriend and connect with people in the Sandtown community. Habitat staff members believe in the mission of education, serving as co-educators with Loyola staff and faculty to educate student volunteers about the history of Sandtown-Winchester, the mission of New Song Ministry and the challenge of affordable housing in Baltimore City. Our students learn to enjoy and appreciate the community members in West Baltimore through their volunteer experience, connecting their experiences to the theoretical models they are learning in their classes. Many significant relationships still continue with our students and Sandtown homeowners after graduation.

*I love working with Sandtown Habitat because the staff we serve with have a tremendous loyalty to the mission that guides all of the work done by the organization. They remain positive no matter what situation they find themselves in, and understand the importance of partnership. This understanding is demonstrated by the fact that almost all of the Habitat staff live in Sandtown and have been there for several decades. As an organization that is organic to the community they serve, Sandtown Habitat has an unequalled partnership with the people of the neighborhood. While being engaged in the community as a student I am able to draw on experiences I have had in Sandtown, whether it be in learning about the micro-businesses they have started or learning how their mission guides their operations, to formulate arguments and differing analyses during class discussions in my political philosophy courses.*

Kyle Jones, Class of 2013, Service Coordinator, Center for Community Service and Justice  
Loyola University Maryland

*For over twenty years, Sandtown Habitat for Humanity has engaged in community development that goes well beyond providing housing. They understand that housing is simply one part of a larger task of bringing new life to a troubled neighborhood; they are truly engaged in the care of the whole person as they seek the peace of the city in this part of west Baltimore.*

Stephen Fowl, Professor of Theology, Loyola University Maryland

*"Habitat has been a wonderful partner. I have nearly 20 students volunteering there this semester [as part of their service-learning theology course], by far the most at my placement sites. Mike Barb, the Co-Director, went out of his way to open several Friday slots to accommodate students who could not serve on Saturdays. Sandtown Habitat is an especially valuable partner to Loyola not only because of our longstanding service relationship, but also because Sandtown has been a vital center of engaged scholarship. One of the key texts in my Christian ethics course, *To Live in Peace*, was written by one of the founding members of Sandtown Habitat, Mark Gornik. My colleague, Steve Fowl, has frequently done seminars in community building for the staff. And speaking personally, an early research project on Sandtown Habitat as an undergraduate at UVA inspired me to pursue the field of Christian ethics. In short, Sandtown Habitat represents an exemplary synthesis of theory and practice, and is the kind of place where one's imagination can be transformed."*

John Kiess, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Theology, Loyola University Maryland

Sandtown Habitat's mission resonates with Loyola University Maryland's own philosophy and mission. Their history and daily living out of their faith in action is a continual inspiration to students, faculty and administrators, and their active commitment to positive social change provides a learning laboratory for Loyola students. Our relationship is a transformative partnership in which we mutually grow and work for justice in our city. We are proud to honor Sandtown Habitat for their great work and effort as co-educators for and with our Loyola community. It is our pleasure to nominate them for the Milch Community Partner Award.