

Park Support Groups of Baltimore City: **The Reservoir Hill Improvement Council**

Like so many urban communities, Reservoir Hill is an area of contrasts. In this central Baltimore neighborhood, stunning 19th century architecture stands side by side with alleys heaped with trash and rows of vacant houses. Yet unlike some neighborhoods in Charm City, this community has a unifying voice fighting to make it a better place to live – the Reservoir Hill Improvement Council (RHIC).

Formed in 1994 as an umbrella organization, the Improvement Council counts over twenty groups on its roster, including neighborhood associations, youth and family programs, religious groups, and educational institutions. RHIC organizes these member associations to address local community needs and to advocate for changes in city and state-wide policies. RHIC's primary programs include housing counseling and development, greening, tenant organizing, leadership training, and improving the educational system and services for residents.

In 2001, The Baltimore Neighborhood Collaborative (BNC) provided funding for RHIC to hire an interim executive director who helped to lay the foundation for the organization. In 2002, an executive director and community organizer were hired to implement the 5-year master plan for Reservoir Hill. Over the next several years, another 2 full-time staff have been added to the team, thanks to the funding provided by the Baltimore Community Foundation, Goldseker Foundation, Healthy Neighborhoods Initiative and several other local funders.

One of RHIC's most successful greening efforts was the Lennox Street Community Garden. Using funds from HNI and other contributors, volunteers turned a vacant lot into a beautiful vegetable garden that is utilized and maintained by residents. Two years after its completion, the garden still provides nourishment and connection to the Reservoir Hill community.

Frank Patinella has been RHIC's community organizer for the past five years. He considers working on greening activities to be the "fun stuff" of his job, because it lets him see all the different people in his neighborhood contribute their various talents – from young people digging in the dirt to little old ladies serving lemonade. One of the biggest obstacles that he faces is getting groups with different backgrounds and agendas to work together.

"Willie Mae Davis Park", an informal name given by stewards of the park, is a small open space that sits between two very different Reservoir Hill neighborhoods. On one side it is bordered by the Reservoir Hill Mutual Homes, a housing cooperative that maintains properties in the area and speaks for many of the lower-income residents in the neighborhood. On the other side of the park, residents of Bolton-Park Neighbors, work towards preserving and increasing home ownership and property values. For RHIC, Willie Mae presented multiple opportunities. The umbrella organization was able to foster community cohesion by getting both

groups involved in the planning process for the park, and has already had success in improving the park itself. In the fall of 2005, RHIC received a grant from the Partnerships for Parks program, which is funded by the city's Department of Recreation & Parks and administered by the Parks & People Foundation, to pay for plantings and stipends for local youths to maintain the park.

RHIC's greening successes started small, with plantings and beautification projects in vacant lots and on median strips. From there the organization moved on to bigger, more ambitious targets, like Willie Mae. Each project has been undertaken in a series of carefully planned steps, starting with building consensus and commitment in the community, and moving on to organizing funds and manpower. Significantly, the group has always included the need for follow-up in its

plans, with neighborhood volunteers in place to maintain projects after their completion.

According to Frank, one of the most important keys to success has been drawing on as many connections as possible. Over the years, he has built a network of relationships with groups that share RHIC's goals, from Recreation & Parks and Parks & People to non-profits like Civic Works and the Master Gardeners of Baltimore. He even calls upon local developers frequently who gladly donate their services and resources by removing heavy debris and tilling hard vacant lot surfaces with machinery. "There are always people out there who are willing to help," he says, "and being effective means finding and tapping into those resources."

WHAT: The Reservoir Hill Improvement Council

WHERE: Multiple parks and green spaces across Reservoir Hill in central Baltimore City

WHEN: Since 1994

WHY: To revitalize the Reservoir Hill community while bringing power and a sense of sustainability to all residents, regardless of their economic status

Based on an interview with Frank Patinella and on information compiled during the summer of 2006.