

Urban pioneers

Bringing the Enos Park neighborhood back

By Tara McClellan McAndrew



Men from the Urban League's Male Involvement Program are getting construction training while rehabbing this home on North Fifth Street in the Enos Park neighborhood. Back row, from left to right, are Joseph Yeley, Montrell Isom, Troy Sullivan and S
PHOTO BY DAVID HINE

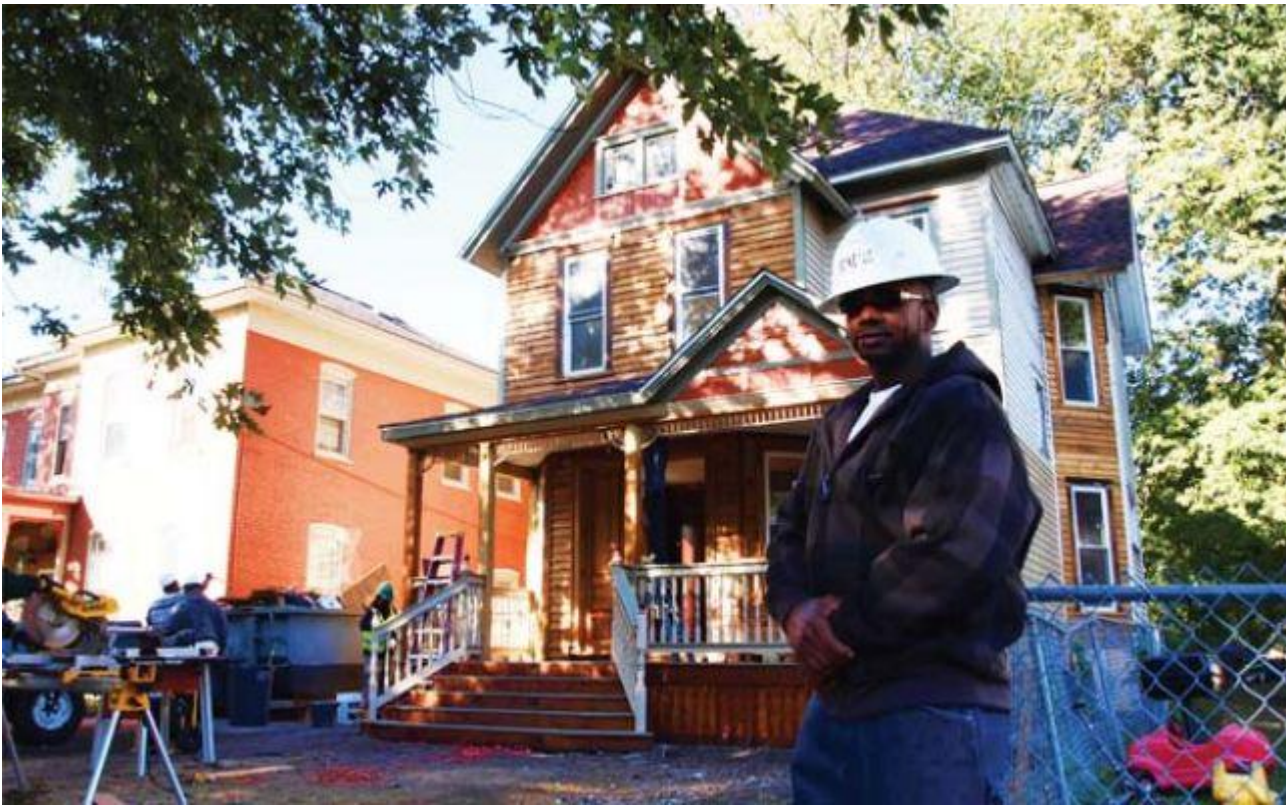
In the 1000 block of North Fifth Street, a tall, former beauty is a beehive of activity.

Construction trucks surround her and a swarm of burly men work inside and out to restore this two-story Victorian home in the north-end Enos Park neighborhood. The crew is helping themselves as much as the house. Many are unemployed or underemployed men from the Urban League's Male Involvement Program who are getting construction experience as job training.

Last February, this Victorian grande dame was a mess from years of neglect. "You wouldn't believe it," says current owner Calvin Pitts. A potential renter found a dead bat in the upstairs tub.

Today, her century-old, honey-colored wooden exterior shines. "It's Douglas fir," says Pitts, who owns a construction training company. Douglas fir is a top grade wood for construction. "One hundred years ago, that was the wood they used. You can hardly get it now."

Last March, Pitts and his wife purchased this low-cost, dilapidated property to rehab and live in. They're among what the neighborhood calls its "urban pioneers," people or companies willing to buy properties in Enos Park and restore them. They're the neighborhood's latest, and perhaps best, attempt at revitalization.



Calvin Pitts, a professional electrician and construction manager, purchased this home on North Fifth Street from Enos Park Development. He and his wife will live there once restoration is completed.

PHOTO BY DAVID HINE

This historic neighborhood, which surrounds the Springfield Art Association at 700 North Fourth Street, is north of St. John’s Hospital and centered along Fifth and Sixth Streets. “Its heyday was the 1870s through 1890s, when a lot of its homes were being built,” says city historian Curtis Mann. “It was a very popular area during that time because it was close to the Illinois Watch Company and other big employers on the north end.”

In those days its large and beautifully detailed Victorian, Queen Anne and Italianate homes adorned brick streets. A horse-drawn trolley on Fifth Street took residents to their jobs at the nearby watch factory, coal mines, brewery or businesses downtown. The residents were a mix of low-income, working-class people and affluent business owners, according to a 1997 study by the local historical archaeology firm, Fever River Research.

Some of Springfield’s elite were big landowners there, like the families of Pascal Enos, one of Springfield’s founders, and Benjamin Edwards, a lawyer and Mary Lincoln’s brother-in-law. The Edwards’ home, which is the “oldest Springfield house on its own grounds” according to the Springfield Historic Sites Commission, is now owned by the Springfield Art Association. It was the center of many social and political gatherings that attracted the Lincolns, his political opponent Stephen Douglas and others of the upper crust. The neighborhood has ties to Springfield’s worst days, too. The two alleged incidents that sparked Springfield’s infamous 1908 race riots occurred there.

The city’s retreat from its center and decades of neglect sent the neighborhood spiraling until it hit bottom in the 1980s. Crime, slumlords and dilapidated houses were rampant. Steve Combs, the enthusiastic 70-something president of the Enos Park Neighborhood Improvement Association (EPNIA), says it was “Dodge City” back then. Longtime resident and landlord Owen (“Andy”) Anderson, who’s a member of EPNIA and has rehabilitated properties there, remembers finding spent bullets on rooftops in those days. But not now, he says.

Today, about 450 of the original homes still stand in the 36-square-block neighborhood, which is a patchwork quilt of bad and good properties. There are dilapidated houses that look overdue for the wrecking ball, boarding houses with too many people, sloppy lots and small, average homes that beg for upkeep. They may be next

to well-maintained homes with detailed trim and welcoming porches. Sprinkled around are gorgeously restored, turn of the century homes with modern amenities. Several such homes were finished by Old Neighborhood Rehab, Inc., a nonprofit created to restore and sell Enos Park homes by Fletcher Farrar, longtime Enos Park resident and editor of Illinois Times. Here and there are homes that have been or are being rehabbed by the “urban pioneers.”



Before Jermaine Ward bought this house on North Fifth from Enos Park Development it had been considered a candidate for demolition. But over the past two years Ward, a building contractor, has lovingly restored it as his residence.

PHOTO BY JOE COPLEY

Twenty-four years ago, some Enos Park residents tired of the area’s decline and formed the neighborhood association. Its efforts got a boost in 1997 when the city designated Enos Park as a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District, one of eight currently in the city, according to Mike Farmer, head of the city’s Office of Planning and Economic Development. The city uses TIF money to help revitalize blighted areas. That money comes from the increased property taxes an improved area generates.

Through TIF funds, Enos Park got new sidewalks, trees and historic-looking, black streetlights. Among other things, TIF funds also bought a former restaurant and bar at 726 North Grand Avenue which EPNIA is turning into a storage facility and store. Here, home rehabbers will be able to buy usable items taken from restored or demolished Enos Park homes.

In 2009, the city used TIF funds to develop a master plan for the neighborhood’s renewal. That’s when things kicked into high gear. Enos Park received input from two consulting firms (The Lakota Group in Chicago and Mansur Real Estate in Indianapolis) which have experience in revitalizing depressed urban areas. “The master plan is for Enos Park to become the jewel of the city again,” Combs says.

Developing the plan was “a really exciting time,” says Michelle Higginbotham, an Enos Park resident and EPNIA vice president. The consultants recommended the neighborhood begin buying problem lots and properties. “If you don’t own the property, you can’t control what happens to it,” she explains.

So, in 2010, EPNIA created a nonprofit spinoff – Enos Park Development LLC – which enabled it, with the city’s approval of TIF funds, to acquire property in the neighborhood. Higginbotham, a commercial real estate

broker, and Combs are two of the development group's managers. "We started land banking property and we've been doing that fast and furiously for about three years," says Higginbotham.



Jermaine Ward's music room includes custom furniture he made in his workshop in a converted carriage house behind the residence.
PHOTO BY JOE COPLEY

"We've been buying the worst of the worst houses and lots, tearing down some houses and finding new owners to renovate the houses that can be saved," Combs says. According to him, Enos Park Development has acquired 80 properties and sold 22 houses so far.

They sell them cheap, really cheap – typically between \$2,000 and \$5,000, and for good reason. They need far more than new paint and carpeting. "They need an overhaul," Higginbotham says. And, like most good deals, they come with strings attached. Owners have a contractual commitment: rehab the house within three years or lose it. The development group will repossess it if the owners don't rehab it, but so far it hasn't repossessed any, according to Combs.

The homes are for single families, owners can't divide them into apartments to sell or rent to others, and they must live there or sell to single-family owner-occupiers. "The contract is restrictive," Combs says, "but we have too much of an emotional commitment that we don't want to pass these properties to people who become the bad property owner or landlord that we're trying to get out of here. We make sure we get the right people. We're looking for good neighbors."

In order to buy one of these properties, potential owners have to be approved by Enos Park Development. "They fill out an application and identify what resources they have," Combs says. Owners need money to pay someone to rehab their property, or have the ability, time and energy to do it themselves, or a combination of both. Applicants are also asked about their willingness to volunteer with the neighborhood's many activities (a community garden, block parties, National Night Out, an annual Fall Home Tour, and more).

Buyers have to be prepared for the neighborhood's drawbacks. "We look at where they have lived in the past,"

Combs says. “Some come with no experience in older neighborhoods, so we’re somewhat concerned about if they can overcome the urban blight and shock they may get here.”



Amber Rigor with her children, Skylar, Kent and Elizabeth, in front of the home she bought from the neighborhood and is restoring on North Sixth Street.
PHOTO BY JOE COPLEY

There is less crime, but it’s still an issue, according to Combs. Earlier this year, the area had a rash of arsons before police arrested suspects. One homeowner (who wants to remain anonymous) from the neighborhood’s western edge near Memorial Hospital, found a hypodermic needle in their yard, possibly discarded by illegal drug users, and is afraid to install an outdoor air conditioning unit because they’re sometimes stolen.

Some of the crime stems from overcrowding in group homes or rental properties. EPNIA hopes to get the area rezoned to decrease the density. “A lot of the folks we have trouble with come and go. It’s a very transient neighborhood,” Combs says. While the neighborhood’s number of rental properties has decreased, they still total more than 60 percent.

“Crime is one of the most frequent questions we get,” Higginbotham says. “Most of the crime we have, and I suspect this is true in many parts of the city, is what we refer to as ‘bad guy on bad guy’ crime.... Most are domestic disputes, drug deals gone bad, people who know each other. Fourth and Eighth Streets are our worst areas.”

The nearby social services, such as St. John’s Breadline and Washington Street Mission, help draw frequent foot traffic. “That’s not necessarily crime,” Higginbotham says, but it’s a lot of people walking around the neighborhood a lot of the time.”

“I’m not afraid to be here, it doesn’t feel that dangerous to me,” says Betsy Dollar, executive director of the Springfield Art Association, who chose to live on Fifth Street in Enos Park near her office. Over the last three years the Association’s Edwards Place historic home has been broken into and a sculpture on the grounds destroyed; however, Dollar says, “for the most part, the Art Association is respected in the neighborhood and generally left alone.”



Ryan and Dawn Mobley with their five children – Hannah, left, Rachel, Ellie, top, Aiden and Lydia, front. The Mobleys bought their Sixth Street home from Enos Park Development a year ago and have been restoring it since, using some contractors and
PHOTO BY JOE COPLEY

She has an idea to make the area better – bring in artists to live and work. Dollar is going to talk to EPNIA about marketing to artists and offering them an affordable way to buy property here. “There are all kinds of statistics out there that say if you bring artists into a depressed area, they turn it around because they have skills, are creative, and know how to use materials.” She’s seen this happen in two older communities in Minnesota. Enos Park is already working on a local art project. Sculptor Michael Dunbar purchased a building there for his studio and is helping the neighborhood develop a sculpture park next to it.

“Enos Park is great,” Dollar says. “I love that it’s easy walking distance to downtown, and it’s wonderful we now have an accessible grocery store (the County Market at Second and Carpenter Streets).”

Those factors help, says Anthony Rubano, who works at the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency helping commercial historic districts to revitalize. “Walkability, bikeability and shopping local are becoming more important to how we live in this country. They make a neighborhood desirable,” he says.

Enos Park’s proximity to downtown and its affordability were a couple reasons Dawn Mobley’s large family moved there from a rental on the west side. “The other reason is we’re Christians,” says Mobley. “We believe the Lord has given us a mission to spread the Gospel with those who are lost and broken, and there is definitely a lot of brokenness here.”

She and her husband, Ryan, bought a two-story, rundown, Victorian home on North Sixth Street from Enos Park Development about a year ago. They secured a construction loan to fix the house, which needed tons of work. The electrical system, plumbing and ductwork had to be redone and the kitchen redesigned. Next year they’re adding siding. While the Mobleys hired contractors, they had some experience with construction and worked with their contractors to learn and do more. This kept their rehab costs down “significantly,” Mobley says. “When it’s done we’ll have spent \$70,000.” Their bank estimated the property’s value would be \$103,000 when they finish.



This fully restored home at 901 N. Fifth St., now on the market for sale, is one of the “after” houses featured on Enos Park’s Oct. 5 “Before and After House Tour.”
PHOTO BY JOE COPLEY

The couple has five kids which Mobley home schools, so “we weren’t concerned about the school district.” Students at the neighborhood school, McClernand, are mostly from low-income families. Though McClernand has an energetic faculty, many volunteer tutors and innovative programs, the school is still a reason some families stay away.

“I know crime is an issue, but the main issue for us is foot traffic,” Mobley says. “I’ve had to teach my kids that just because there’s someone out there and they smile doesn’t mean they have the best intentions.”

EPNIA continues to fight crime and the perceptions that are sometimes worse. “We have an amazing neighborhood police watch,” Mobley says. The association is rehabbing a home on Eighth Street so a police officer can live there. Last year it started hiring off-duty officers to patrol the area. The extra patrols are funded through annual Thanksgiving sales of pies handmade by residents.

People like Mobley, Combs and Higginbotham are passionate about improving their neighborhood and building partnerships to help. In the last few years they’ve partnered with Habitat for Humanity, Allied Waste, Calvin Pitts’ construction training center and others to create the Eighth Street home for a future neighborhood cop. Habitat has offered to improve the exteriors of current Enos Park residents and is building its clients homes on lots EPNIA donated, according to Ryan Mobley, Dawn’s husband and Habitat’s director of community engagement.

“Enos Park is a great neighborhood for us to work in because of their focus on revitalization and home ownership. The vision of EPNIA and Habitat are very complementary,” Mobley says.

Partnerships can be an important tool in revitalizing blighted neighborhoods, according to Rubano, who’s also a board member of the Springfield Art Association. What helps is “that partnership where you have committed residents, a city that understands the value of the neighborhood or the concept of how inner-ring neighborhoods are critical to the health of the entire community, so the donut isn’t continually hollowed out from the inside.”

Since Enos Park's TIF District was established in 1997, the area's baseline property tax values have risen \$4.4 million. "That means the property values there are going up," says Farmer, "which is what TIF Districts are meant to do – remediate blight and enhance property values."

"We still need about 20 families to jump in here, be a part of the neighborhood and help prove to Springfield that it is a good place and has benefits," says Dollar.

Tara McClellan McAndrew of Springfield is a journalist, playwright and author.

Enos Park Before and After Home Tour

On Saturday, Oct. 5, from noon to 4 p.m., Enos Park is holding its annual Home Tour where the public can see both rehabbed homes and homes that are available for low cost to owners who will fix them. Advance tickets are \$5; tickets purchased that day are \$10. Buy tickets at: Qik n EZ stores, Suzie Q's Restaurant, the Bicycle Doctor, or the Springfield Art Association.