

LISC

Twin Cities

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COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATIONS



Foreclosure recovery leads to job training

By Jay Walljasper

When a tornado ripped through the north side of Minneapolis in May 2011, one of the first groups to respond alongside police, firefighters and city crews was Urban Homeworks—a nonprofit group based in the neighborhood that buys and rehabilitates low-income houses as part of its mission to reknit the social fabric of Twin Cities communities.

“I will never forget it,” recalls David Morris, an Urban Homeworks crew leader at the time. “As soon as we heard about the tornado, we all texted each other to see if we were all OK. Then we knew we had to help. We started cutting trees that were blocking streets and helping people any way we could.”

Urban Homeworks wound up coordinating all volunteers for the clean up, deploying more than 3000 people in the first week to get the neighborhood back on its feet.

Jon Lundberg, the group’s construction program manager, notes, “The tornado made a lot of people realize there was another disaster going on in North Minneapolis at the same time—foreclosures.”

He points out that 50 percent of the foreclosures in the entire Twin Cities metropolitan area were concentrated in this corner of Minneapolis. People living outside North Minneapolis owned most of the foreclosed properties, but the effects were devastating within the neighborhood as families were forced out of their homes when landlords defaulted on mortgages, often with only 24 hours notice.

The “community building” business

So as soon as soon as the clean-up was over, Urban Homeworks was back at work renovating abandoned or rundown houses with crews made up of volunteers from churches and businesses as well as trainees from low-income neighborhoods wanting to learn the construction trade. The organization takes possession of dilapidated properties and fixes them up, then sells the single-family homes and



Construction materials in front of a North Minneapolis house damaged by the tornado

rents the apartments. In the wake of the tornado, they now have 20 projects underway in North Minneapolis along with others in South Minneapolis and St. Paul's Frogtown neighborhood.

"We're not just in the construction business, we're in the community building business," Lundberg explains.

That's why the faith-based group measures its success not just by the more than 200 people now living in "dignified housing," but also by the new confidence that at-risk youth and unemployed adults discover by participating in Urban Homeworks' crews. "We want to give them whatever skills are necessary to help them find jobs and make a better life," Lundberg explains. "That means construction skills but also workplace skills, communications skills, job interview skills."



Urban Homeworks crew in North Minneapolis

David Morris, for example, was hired by Urban Homeworks last year to supervise crews doing roofing, siding, landscaping, energy conservation, and interior remodeling. For Morris, 25, it was a big break he never expected to get after going to prison at age 17 on drug charges. But he proved himself to be a conscientious worker at Tree Trust, one of the groups Urban Homeworks partners with, and so they entrusted him with the responsibility of supervising both volunteers and trainees.

Another big break for Morris came last summer when he led volunteers on a reconstruction project. "This one guy and I really hit off," he remembers. "We were both cracking jokes as we worked together. He turned out to be Pat Ryan, the owner of Ryan Construction, the big construction company, and he offered me a good job."

Morris is quick to add this would not have happened without, "all the professional and personal advice and training I got from the Urban Homeworks staff. It's like a family."

Connecting opportunity and transformation

"Our idea is to empower people to meet their own needs," Lundberg stresses. "And LISC Twin Cities empowers us to do that." Twin Cities LISC partnered with Urban Homeworks to hire additional staff in order to expand their training efforts.

Chris Wiger, assistant program officer at LISC Twin Cities, notes that this project exemplifies his group's philosophy of COACTION (Connecting Opportunity And Community Transformation In Our Neighborhoods). COACTION means making necessary physical improvements in low-income communities while strengthening the capacity of local organizations and morale of residents.

LISC also partners with the Dayton's Bluff Neighborhood Housing Service (DBNHS) on a similar project for St. Paul's East Side, another community hard hit by foreclosures. Almost 20 percent of all housing units in the area have been foreclosed, according to the organization's director Jim Erchul. That increases homelessness and the threat of properties falling into disrepair. This crisis has propelled his organization to redouble its efforts to buy and fix up abandoned homes.

DBNHS works with City Academy, the nation's first charter school, to offer at-risk youth construction experience. "Some of our students have gone on to jobs in construction, while many others learned how to fix up their own houses," notes school director Milo Cutter. "Just as importantly, it teaches work skills they will use in any job: promptness, responsibility, respect, time management, initiative taking, problem solving."

In fact, the licensed contractor who now supervises City Academy's work crews, Chia Yang, was himself a student at the school in the 1990s.

LISC has invested \$61 million and leveraged additional investments of \$239 million in the North Side of Minneapolis, and invested \$29 million and leveraged additional investments of \$76.7 million in the East Side of St. Paul.

Jay Walljasper specializes in writing about cities, travel and social issues. He is author of The Great Neighborhood Book and All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons, and is editor of www.OnTheCommons.org. His website: www.JayWalljasper.com.

Photos courtesy of Urban Homeworks