

In Penn North, a former BPD detective pushes to build a new youth and community center

By

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Debbie Ramsey, founder of Unified Efforts, stands in front of the nonprofit's Penn North property. Photo by Ethan McLeod.

Neighbors once called it “The Plantation”—not with the grim historical undertone you might expect for the largely black community of Penn North, but with a more playful reference to the property’s exterior. The three-story home at 2521 Woodbrook Ave. is uniquely set back from the otherwise row home-lined street, and sports a Southern-style second-floor balcony out back.

It was owned by Thomas H. Miller and his family, white residents who had a number of homes in the West Baltimore neighborhood.

“The big house,” says Annie Hall, president of the Penn North Community Association, who grew up nearby and went on to rent her first home from Miller. “That’s what we called it coming up.”

Miller sold it in 1972, and it was later acquired by the city, land records show. For years thereafter, the lot between Francis Street and Woodbrook Avenue earned a new nickname: “The Cut,” says former Baltimore Police Det. Debbie Ramsey. The vacant site became overgrown and littered with trash, offering a suitable place for people running from the cops to dump their contraband or hideout.

But after decades of neglect, Ramsey’s nonprofit, Unified Efforts, purchased the land from the city for \$3,500 this past September. A month later, she and a group of volunteers cleared the grounds of litter, brush and other assorted debris. Neighbors have since helped maintain it by removing dumped trash, Ramsey says; they’ve told her it’s already a huge improvement from before.

And if she can realize her vision, the lot will soon house a brand new building with classrooms, a computer lab, an indoor recreational area, a commercial kitchen, a garden out back and a retail storefront, ideally staffed by students to help teach them basic job skills. Space would be the permanent headquarters for Unified Efforts’ camps and after-school activities, which the nomadic nonprofit has offered to city youth since 2015.

The organization seeks to broaden the horizons of children ages 5 to 17, and give them a place to be after school and during the summer. They’ve taken field trips to learn about aviation at Martin State Airport, firefighting at city fire stations and black history at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum downtown. Ramsey has brought them to see the Baltimore Blast play and to hit balls at the driving range at Pine Ridge Golf Course in Lutherville.

Some activities focus on basic education and life skills: This past summer, Unified Efforts raised \$7,500 to sponsor certified swimming lessons for 30 children at Coppin State University.

Along the way, they’ve helped secure internships for high school students, offered them culinary classes and showed teens how to run their own print magazine, called *I Belong*, distributed annually by *The Daily Record*.

Ramsey’s chief goal is to get kids “out of the line of fire,” she says. She cites her experiences seeing youth become entangled in deadly neighborhood strife during her 12 years as a city police officer, including in BPD’s Criminal Investigation Division and Drug Enforcement section.

“If we can expose our children to new career paths, that will take off,” she says. “I’m not trying to make golfers or pilots or chefs out of them. I don’t know what’s gonna light them up inside. We try to give them an array of experiences.”

Simply getting kids out to other parts of town helps to expand their world, she says. An example: They took a trip this summer to Harbor East, where they visited Whole Foods and walked down to the water. One student observed young white people could walk in groups and not get stopped by police. “For him, that was a new optic. He could not believe—he said, *They can walk in groups?*”

After years of garnering trust from parents and support from neighborhood groups, Ramsey wants to cement Unified Efforts as a dedicated youth and community center with a brick-and-mortar home.

The wheels are already in motion. Ramsey says she’s working with Humanim’s [Details Deconstruction](#) service to tear the “Plantation” house down. Demolition is set to happen within the next month. For her envisioned building, the nonprofit Neighborhood Design Center is putting together conceptual design plans, which Ramsey says should be ready in January.

But to do all of this, the organization needs funding. Unified Efforts received a \$30,000 grant from a 2016 state bond bill as initial capital, though those dollars haven’t been dispersed. (Ramsey plans to use that money to pay for Details’ scheduled demolition.)

After applying [unsuccessfully](#) for \$500,000 more in bond funding this past spring, the nonprofit is trying again. For 2019, newly elected 40th District Sen. Antonio Hayes has offered to sponsor a bill requesting \$300,000, which Ramsey says would be used to begin building the new center.

She’s applied for a \$100,000 Community Catalyst Grant from the city as well and is pursuing other private funding sources.

Somewhat bullish, she says finding a property and earning the trust of families and the Penn North community has been “the hard part.” Now, she just needs to find the money. (She notes potential investors sometimes look at her incredulously when she tells them that.)

Hall, who sits on Unified Efforts’ board, says she “can’t wait” for the nonprofit to get started with its own home base, “because it’s good for the community.”

She met Ramsey in 2015 when the former cop had just begun working with kids after school. It was right before the Baltimore Uprising following Freddie Gray’s death in police custody.

“I thought, and I still do think, that it’s a great idea to have some kind of facility in this neighborhood that’s gonna cater to our children,” says Hall, who’s helmed the Penn North Community Association since 2004. “Unfortunately a lot of the kids in this neighborhood, their parents are out there and that’s unfortunate. But Debbie, she stepped in and she hasn’t stopped.”

Sen. Hayes grew up in the neighborhood (and also happens to be Hall’s great-nephew). “That is a community where I’m from,” he says. “I’ve seen a lot of activity, at least from a development

perspective, happen around Penn North, but not necessarily in Penn North.” Unified Efforts’ planned center “would definitely bring value added to a long-vacant property” in the locale, he says.

Hayes and his Annapolis colleagues will decide on Dec. 19, this Wednesday, which causes to ultimately take up for bond bills. Legislators receive many requests from numerous organizations for bond funding, and there’s only so much money to go around, he notes.

Ramsey is aware of the competition. “We just have to do our due diligence and we just have to ask like everybody else. There are a lot of wonderful programs going on in the city, and we’re just one of many.”

And either way, she’ll still need to find another financing. She’s considering launching an online crowdfunding campaign through their website and hosting events to attract private donors. Ideally, she says, the money would come from people who are invested in Penn North’s success.

“The baby boomer in me says, *No, I have to go through all these hoops and loops, banks and lenders, capital improvement.* But my hope is that it will be built by people who are just interested and want this to happen.”

The endgame, she says, is creating a home base for Unified Efforts that gives kids a permanent place to go to be productive and safe, away from crime and violence. That alone will help to lift up the neighborhood, she says.

“Job opportunities, safe and peaceable place for the children after school, career paths. We see ourselves really impacting this entire community with just our presence, starting out with the children.”

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Ethan has been editing and reporting for Baltimore Fishbowl since fall of 2016. His previous stops include Fox 45, CQ Researcher and Connection Newspapers in Northern Virginia. His freelance writing has been featured in Baltimore City Paper, Leafly, DCist and BmoreArt, among other outlets.



