

Walking the Walk

BY GERAUD BLANKS

In a city full of problems and promise, I'm taking the first steps toward learning up close what community organizing can accomplish.

MILWAUKEE—A SMALL metropolis with the issues of a big city. One of the most segregated places in the country, with more bars per capita than New York or Los Angeles. Daily reports in the evening news tell of homicides and violence from sections of the city where hardworking, tax-paying adults, and their families live. According to the *Wisconsin State Journal*, it is the largest city in a state with more black men in prison than anywhere else in America—a community organizer's dream, or nightmare, depending on your perspective.

Here, Safe & Sound's Community Partners walk the streets in packs of as many as 10 and teams as small as two. Knocking on doors in some of the roughest gang-infested neighborhoods in Milwaukee's inner city, they talk to residents about crime, form block-watch groups, and work with residents to report nuisance properties—buildings or homes where the residents or landlord have introduced a criminal element to the community. Some residents greet them with salutations usually reserved for close friends and relatives; others whisper, even shout, to warn of their appearance on "the block."

We had just crossed Center Street and were approaching the next block when a young African-American woman announced our arrival to a group of young men refurbishing the

inside of a house. "It's gonna be one of those days," I thought to myself. A colleague standing directly in front of me turned and laughed, calming the situation with a touch of humor. "She must be talking about us." As one of the two black men walking alongside three white women in a predominantly black neighborhood, while several other black comrades slowly caught up with the group, I was struck again by the courage that the men and women of Milwaukee's Community Partners organization demonstrate on a daily basis.

As the newest member of Community Partners, I have been on the receiving end of both kinds of receptions as I walk down these blocks, clipboard in hand. Streets like 2nd and Center, where Raheim Patrick was jumped and killed by a group of young men while waiting at the bus stop, or 17th and Brown, where Charles White was brutally beaten to death by children wielding snow shovels.

If you've never heard of these streets or the incidents that made them infamous, then you may not fully comprehend the value of the Community Partners. They are on the frontlines. They know these neighborhoods well. If a young boy dies, a crew of young hustlers is causing a ruckus on a nearby corner, or there is a delinquent landlord on your block, they address it. If there was a shooting last week, they go to that block and talk to the people who had to

hide on their living-room floor.

Community Partners is a part of the Safe and Sound organization, an initiative established in 1998 to reduce crime, especially violent crime, in high-crime, generally low-income neighborhoods through public-private partnerships. Safe and Sound uses a three-pronged approach of community organizing, law enforcement, and anti-crime youth development. As the community-organizing component of Safe & Sound, Community Partners is integral in all of the approaches and focuses on lowering the rate of youth crime and violence in the Milwaukee area. "It is a unique approach to fighting crime, violence, illegal alcohol, drug selling, and other neighborhood problems." At least that is the way the organization's brochure describes it. For me, it has been nothing short of an awakening, both as a young black man with a limited understanding of city politics and as an urban resident of nearly 30 years who thought he knew a little about the city in which he was raised.

I recently started working for Community Partners through Public Allies, an AmeriCorps-funded organization. Public Allies acts as a nonprofit apprenticeship program, placing young community advocates with nonprofits in various cities around the country. I am one of two Public Allies placed at Community Partners; the other is a bright-eyed 23-year-old woman named Julie Knorowski. It was through the Public Allies placement process that I got an interview with Joe Kubiask, the program manager of Community Partners. I remember immediately being struck by the mild-mannered, yet extremely passionate nature of

the man who would decide whether to employ me for the next 10 months (the term of service for the Public Allies/AmeriCorps program).

Joe had been a Peace Corps volunteer from 1997-2000. It had taken him places I had only seen on the National Geographic Channel. During the interview, I thought, "I don't know if I am cut out for this job." My apprehension was rooted primarily in the feeling that I had been out of the game too long; I hadn't really been working in the community since my college years. For seven years, I have managed my own entertainment booking and management agency. After endless nights in bars, nightclubs, and on the road with bands, I felt disconnected from my community, and I wanted to feel connected again. So I shook Joe's hand and accepted the position. I figured I could work a "nine to five" while managing my small business at night and on the weekends.

I wasn't sure how long it would take me to get acclimated to the life of a community organizer. I was a little uneasy about going to residents' homes to talk to them about crime, health, and poverty issues. But like anything else, the comfort comes in the practice.

Through weeks of training and shadowing my partners as they canvassed neighborhoods, I got the hang of walking to someone's door while surveying the environment for any potential concerns. Shaking the fence to announce your presence to dogs before you enter someone's yard was one of the first lessons learned at a two-hour training on how to move safely through the neighborhood. After a while you memorize your talking points and you figure out how to hold the clipboard and 30 pamphlets filled with resource information, all the while taking down comments from residents, sometimes in freezing or scorching-hot temperatures.

The resource materials given to

residents cover a wide range of topics, from after-school programs for kids to a police sketch of a serial rapist. I respond to residents' concerns and provide information about city services, job fairs, community resources, and phone numbers to call in times of trouble—whatever residents express a need for.

Every house you visit must be noted so that a tally can be kept to insure partners are reaching their goals of a specific amount of contacts per week. Each partner is responsible for a sector of the city and must keep accurate weekly reports on how many people he has helped and how. In order to retain funding, each fiscal year the organization is held accountable for achieving quality outcomes.

Because I am a member of the Public Allies program, I share a sector with another community partner. While all community partners are responsible for weekly reports for Safe & Sound, I have my own reporting system called PISD (Personal Impact Service Document) through AmeriCorps.

While knocking on doors is an important part of community outreach, it is only a fraction of the daily responsibility. Some of the duties a partner must perform include establishing block clubs, organizing neighborhood clean-ups, providing community-service opportunities for youth offenders, and facilitating events with residents. A Community Partners event can range from a neighborhood walk to a conflict-resolution meeting, known as a "peace circle." Often partners are assigned special projects to assist with quality-of-life issues. For example, Julie and I conducted housing-code surveys in October 2007. We organized an initiative in which partners were required to collectively document a minimum of 300 housing-code violations throughout the city, a task that



brought its share of agitated phone calls and voice-mail messages from residents.

Perhaps my largest and most ambitious task to date is a lead-abatement initiative, encompassing five community-outreach events for which Julie and I were responsible. Each outreach event consists of local kids walking their neighborhoods and talking to residents about the dangers of lead poisoning. The first outreach involved high-school age students from the Boys & Girls Club in Milwaukee's Sherman Park community. The youth group received a brief training on the health risks of lead as well as on community organizing before going door to door. Four more events are being scheduled for the spring in areas of the city identified as at high risk for lead poisoning.

I was just a few weeks into the job when I went to my first Community Prosecutors Unit (CPUT) meeting and realized that this is exactly where I was meant to be. At CPUT meetings, members of Community Partners meet with law-enforcement officers and representatives of the District Attorney's office to discuss issues pertaining to crime and violence. After several of these gatherings and my first crime-analysis meeting at police headquarters, I had what an alcoholic might call a "moment of clarity." There is an entire world out here that I know nothing about. What were merely streets

Geraud Blanks (back row, far right) and others from the Safe & Sound Community Partners team meet up before heading out into the neighborhood.

See **ORGANIZE!** on page 46

TODD SWANSTROM is professor of public policy at Saint Louis University and co-author of *Place Matters: Metropolitcs for the Twenty-first Century* (University Press of Kansas, 2005). He is presently doing research on responses to the foreclosure crisis in six metropolitan areas.

the mortgage crisis was caused by speculative fever of the kind that has plagued markets throughout history. This is Alan Greenspan's explanation in a December 7, 2007 article in *The Wall Street Journal*, in which he traces the mortgage meltdown to a global excess of savings that drove down interest rates and fueled a housing bubble. Greenspan is quoted as saying that "after a period of protracted adjustment, the U.S. economy, and the world economy more generally, will be able to get back to business."

Greenspan's view is self-serving. It gets federal regulators off the hook: there is very little we can do about global savings rates and the irratio-

nal exuberance that ensues. There is some truth to the claim that the run-up in housing prices stimulated subprime lending. Consumers and speculators in hot markets took out risky loans figuring they would take a ride on rapid housing inflation.

In fact, however, speculative fever is not the fundamental cause of the mortgage mess. Areas of the country that did not experience large price increases are, nevertheless, suffering from high foreclosure rates. The current rash of foreclosures was fundamentally caused by policy choices that freed up powerful market actors to exploit consumers and investors.

Gramlich outlined a basic set of

regulatory reforms that would insure the end of exploitative predatory loans. I wish that politicians would read Gramlich's book and be convinced by his careful empirical analysis of what needs to be done. In truth, however, the reason the federal government failed to act was not because decision makers lacked the empirical evidence so clearly laid out by Gramlich. Instead, Washington policymakers succumbed to a powerful mortgage industry supported by the prevailing free-market ideology. Until the American people take back that power, they will be forced to pick up the tab for the so-called "free" market. ♦

ORGANIZE! continued from p. 41

with names and blocks with numbers became human beings.

In addition to strong relations with residents and law enforcement, partners are assigned "Safe Places" where they act as community liaisons. Safe Places are community resource centers geared toward the development of youth through recreation, education, and mentorship. Safe Places include schools, teen centers, the YMCA, YWCA and the City Park, Recreation and Forestry Department. Safe & Sound supplies \$1.3 million to 30 Safe Places in Milwaukee's high-crime neighborhoods. Partners must establish ongoing relationships with Safe Places to ensure positive working relationships between the Safe Place, Safe & Sound, law enforcement, and the broader community.

Every Wednesday evening, I work with a Safe Place called the Running Rebels Center in its youth music program. Running Rebels is a unique learning experience, housing a recording studio and a copy center in addition to community-center staples like pool tables and computers. Through the music program, youths

15 to 18 teach their younger peers how to write and record songs and use studio equipment. The older kids who complete the program are allowed to record songs, design their own flyers and CD artwork, and duplicate and print the product for distribution in the community.

After three and a half months on the job, I've realized two things. The first is that the word "community" is a verb, not a noun. Community is only a reality when there are those willing to give of their time to bring people together. The second thing I've learned is that service is not always a mutually agreeable action. Community organizers get called all kinds of names (often good, sometimes bad); they are cheered on from passing cars and told to keep up the great work. There are some residents who see cooperation of any kind with the police as taboo, while many residents welcome the opportunity to have their concerns heard by law enforcement.

It is only over time that the good deeds of those in service can be judged accurately by the public. Residents may never completely agree on the effectiveness of any community-service initiative or organization. It is a delicate balance of maintaining daily

one-on-one contact with residents, canvassing neighborhoods, and cooperating with other community and local government organizations that allows Community Partners to have a personal impact on the lives of the citizens they serve.

Ultimately, all people—black, Latino, Asian, and white, poor and affluent alike—want the same for their families and their communities. Inner-city residents, however, often feel abandoned by a system that only seems to pay attention when a shocking incident like the Charles White killing occurs—an event that put Milwaukee in the national headlines in a way it hasn't been since they pulled the skeletons out of Jeffrey Dahmer's freezer.

Building trust between these citizens and those appointed to represent them is where a Community Partner can be most effective. In doing so, we often act as a conduit between alienated residents and their larger community. Many residents are reluctant to call upon officials they feel have ignored their pleas in the past, so they just stop calling. Community Partners have been answering their calls for nearly 10 years, no bat signal necessary. ♦

GERAUD BLANKS is a project coordinator for Safe & Sound Community Partners in Milwaukee.