

Home rehab a lesson for Camden planners

Standing inside the newly rehabbed "Labor of Love" house on Camden's Ferry Avenue Tuesday, I actually wished some bureaucrats had shown up for the party.

If only someone from Trenton or City Hall could hear how a church, a nonprofit and a bunch of suburban union workers came together to transform one house as a way of nudging a neighborhood. If only some of the people in charge of Camden's fate realized that maybe the reason the city's \$175 million revitalization has been such a big disappointment is because they're thinking too big.

Promoting the eviction of 1,200 working-class families from Cramer Hill to make way for a posh golf course development may have been a bold idea, but it led to court dates, not tee times. Prescribing a radical face lift for a scarred city gave chief operating officer Randy Primas such a frown, he's resigning and skipping town.

Surely, there's got to be a happier medium between doing what should be done — using Camden's priceless waterfront to boost tax revenue and bring back the middle class — and what must be done — making life more livable for the poor folks who aren't going anywhere.

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Commentary By *Monica Yant Kinney*

Small success offers a big lesson for Camden planners

CAMDEN from B1

For the latter, the answer may be in the prayer that sold one man on the power of one stone's ripple-effect.

Come, Holy Creator, and rebuild the City of Camden.

So that we do not labor in vain without you.

Come, Holy Savior, and heal all that is broken.

In our lives and in our streets.

Building up the hope

The first time I visited 1725 Ferry Ave., I was wearing a hard hat. The place had been gutted, and all around me, journeymen plumbers and carpenters were using the renovation as teaching tool for students — many of them Camden residents — who viewed a union card as a ticket to a brighter life.

The project grew out of a chance encounter between John Connors, the executive director of the South Jersey Mechanical Contractors Association, and Msgr. Michael Doyle at Sacred Heart parish in Camden's Waterfront South neighborhood.

At a breakfast meeting a few years ago, Doyle recited his "Prayer for Camden" and Connors took it personally.

Next thing he knew, Connors was plotting with the Heart of Camden (www.heartofcamden.org) in getting organized labor to help the nonprofit turn working-class people into homeowners, abandoned houses into inspiration.

Pretty soon, Connors had dozens of \$60-an-hour union workers spending nights and weekends for free on Ferry Avenue. Contractors donated most of the materials — from a \$10,000 oak floor to the state-of-the-art plumbing that will allow new resident

Dillyn Harle to flush the toilet when her dad, Don, is in the shower without scalding him.

"Our dream is to make Camden worthy of the children," Doyle said at the unveiling. "How can we have places so harsh? Damaged cities like this shouldn't exist in a country of such wealth."

Restoration's ripple effect

Don Harle's grandmother attended Sacred Heart school. His great-grandmother did the linens for the church. Harle was born in the city, but grew up in Cherry Hill, returning to the ruins more 12 years ago to do maintenance work and art restoration at Sacred Heart.

"When I first moved here, the garbage was waist-deep," he tells me of the home he and Dillyn rented down the block. Once they cleaned and greened, the neighbors started planting flowers, too.

There's that small stone rippling for you.

From the porch of their new home, the Harles can see fireworks over the Delaware River if they look beyond the scrap metal yard inexplicably occupying prime waterfront real estate, as a state prison does farther north.

"Someday, people with money are going to say, 'I'm buying that place and giving people the view of Philly they can't get in Philly,'" Harle says.

For now, he'll settle with owning a new house on an old block, using his good fortune to help others make the most of what they've got.

The project came from a contractor's chance encounter.

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