



the building block

IT STARTED SMALL—WITH ALLEY CLEAN-UPS AND KIDS' ACTIVITIES.
THEN WE DISCOVERED THAT OUR WORK TO CHANGE THE 2800 BLOCK
OF PELHAM AVENUE WAS WORKING SOME CHANGES INSIDE OF US.

by jim duffy



When the phone rings at my desk at work, Jill's voice has that nervous, giggly tone, the one that tells me she's done something crazy and she's hoping I'll let it pass without a lot of griping. She tells the story in one rushed sentence, how she got home and parked the car and saw two kids and noticed a cardboard box and heard a squeak and asked what was that and the answer came back: "A cat. You want it?"

So it begins, our life as neighborhood do-gooders. I don't realize this at the time. In the moment, it seems we're adopting a kitten, nothing more. This kitten is adorable, by the way, her orange fur dotted with gray splotches that make it look like she's been scrambling up a chimney. We call her Smudge, and I don't gripe about her at all.

But I do gripe when Jill promptly leaves town for a few days, stranding me alone with two cats, one middle-aged and set in his ways, the other brand-new and full of restless energy. Both are soon about the mysterious feline business of deciding whether to bond as siblings or just claw each other to death.

So it's a tense, sleep-deprived household that gets rocked two days

later at 6:30 a.m. by a furious pounding at the door. I rush downstairs, half expecting to land in the middle of urgent police business. Instead, I open the door and an 8-year-old stranger storms in, all bluster and bravado, like he's gonna flat out kick my ass if I don't tell him what he needs to know.

"WHERE IS MY CAT?!?"

I take him up to see Smudge. Apparently, Tony's been knocking at the door a lot, but always in the after-school hours when I'm at the office. He's convinced himself that one of two things is happening. Either I've left town and abandoned "his" cat to death by starvation, or I've been so busy torturing the kitten that I can't be bothered with answering the door.

As he heads off to school, Tony gives me a suspicious look and vows to return and check up on Smudge again. Next time he brings that other boy Jill met on the street, Jerald. They're a study in contrasts, these cousins. Tony comes on all tough and street-smart, but he never tries to hide his undying love for every last creature in the animal kingdom. Jerald is quieter, more thoughtful, but once he settles in, he unveils a sense of humor that's surprisingly sharp and insightfully wicked.

Ironically, Smudge flees under the bed in terror whenever these two

visit. But Jerald and Tony always make Jill and I laugh. Soon enough, the boys catch on to the fact that they're welcome at our house pretty much anytime, even if we don't have any idea at this point who their mothers are.

Smudge arrived on September 26, 2000. In the years since, I've often joked about writing a children's book called *The Cat Who Saved the Neighborhood*. It'd tell a wildly exaggerated version of the chapter in our lives sparked by Jill's encounter with those two boys and their box full of kitten.

The 2800 block of Pelham Avenue is a pretty typical slice of working-class Baltimore. Located along Belair Road in the northeast part of the city, it's got two long stretches of rowhouses, forty-five apiece, facing each other across a narrow one-way street. Our former house stands smack dab in the middle. It's a good-looking block, if you can look past the half-dozen or so abandoned houses, and the dozen or so others in need of a little TLC. Belair-Edison may not rank as the safest neighborhood in the city, or the cleanest, but it's not the most dangerous or the dirtiest either.

Look again, you'll see: Most houses are pretty nice. They sell for sweet prices. And one of the city's best-kept secrets, Herring Run Park, is right around the corner.

The people living here are mostly black, with a good number of whites and a few Hispanics and Asians sprinkled in. The block is chock-full of children—three, four, sometimes more to a house. My first Halloween on

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Pelham, I think I dropped \$40 on emergency runs to Rite Aid while trying to keep pace with the parade of vampires, princesses, and sullen teenagers.

Many of these kids are growing up old-school style, not so different from the way I grew up in the late 1960s and early '70s: Within the confines of their block, they're allowed to fly solo for hours at a stretch before returning home to tackle schoolwork and chores. There's not much of the hyper-vigilant oversight and every-second-counts scheduling that seem to be the way of the parenting world these days.

Before Smudge came along, I'd been on Pelham for five years, Jill for two. Our life there at the outset was as normal as could be. We'd wave to folks and trade small talk. We knew a few names. It was all quite neighborly, never more dramatically so than the night Mark Saunders sprinted out of his house across the street from ours in the wee hours to tackle a fleeing-on-foot drunk driver who'd just trashed several parked cars, including ours.

After Smudge, everything changed. Looking back, it's as if we climbed aboard a runaway train full of neighbor kids and block projects. The sequence went like this: Jerald and Tony started bringing friends over. Those friends brought their friends over. Other kids started lurking outside, worried they might be missing out on some fun or, better yet, free junk food.

Then some adult neighbors from a nearby block decided to do something nice for the kids of the larger community by putting on a free basketball tournament. They roped us in and rounded up some grant money. That's how we got to know the folks at Belair-Edison Neighborhoods, Inc. (BENI), the community revitalization nonprofit that



TOP: Among Smudge's many charms: she's a burrower.

BOTTOM: Dancing on Tony's 9th birthday: Gumper, Tony, Cecil, and Jerald.

runs the Healthy Neighborhoods Initiative in Belair-Edison.

This initiative seeks to stem the tide of neighborhood decline by intervening early in a downward cycle, trying to stabilize things before they turn irreversibly bad. It encourages homeowners to invest in properties and organize blocks, offering everything from cheap home-improvement loans to technical assistance and small grants. BENI also strives to bring new homeowners into the neighborhood.

It's a worthwhile program, and we worked with our neighbors to take advantage of it. The folks at BENI helped us make that basketball tournament an annual affair. They got us supplies for a monthly series of alley cleanups and assisted with the occasional "Dumpster Day" so folks could clear out basements and garages. They even got us a grant to buy more than fifty new porch lights; almost all of these were installed over one exhausting weekend by volunteer teams of block residents, each a mix of kids and adults.

The list of projects we tackled in partnership with our neighbors goes on and on: new planters, plugging rat holes, block newsletters, speed-bump petitions, mediation sessions with nightmarish neighbors, craft projects for kids. Our block even won its fifteen minutes of fame, landing on the front page of the *Hartford Courant*, which sent a reporter down from Connecticut to see what was happening on Pelham when that city was getting ready to launch a version of Healthy Neighborhoods.

Friends and family outside Belair-Edison were amused by the sudden transformation in our lives; my sarcastic sister in Chicago took to dubbing our abode "The House of Hope." But what's important to me about our time on Pelham is not so much what we did but how we got started doing it. Neither Jill nor I was born with an extra dose of do-gooder genes. Neither of us acted out of a burning desire to advance one cause of social justice or another.

We did what we did because a gaggle of funny, sweet, upstanding kids barged into our house and took a liking to us. We liked them, too, and in that exchange these kids managed to pry open a new space in our lives, one we'd never before imagined we might have the time, energy, or inclination to occupy. After that, well, one thing led to another.

Two questions lie at the bottom line here. First, did we make a difference for our neighborhood? Second, did our do-goodering do any good for us, personally? That second question is the easy one, leading as it does to myriad anecdotes that never fail to make me smile.

Start with Tony's ninth birthday party, a spur-of-the-moment affair conceived by Jill, who has a gift for devising simple ways to engage kids. This bash offered slices of ice cream sandwich topped with candles, nothing more.

Our guests—Tony, Jerald, Cecil, and Gumper—responded to this gesture like they'd died and gone to heaven. They put on a hip-hop dance show in the backyard that left all six of us rolling on the lawn in laughter. A couple of days later, we were on the front porch when a woman walked by and thanked us for giving her son some ice cream. We misunderstood this exchange at first, thinking that Yolanda Frazier was Tony's mother when she was actually Jerald's mother, but it marked the start of a special friendship nonetheless.

The next time Tony came over, he brought his older brother, Aki, who sauntered in looking even more streetwise than Tony. I've always wondered whether Tony's mother sent the older boy over to check up on the couple who was giving her son the run of their house.

We played on the computer that day, visiting Pokémon websites and such. Then Tony wrote a letter to his father, who was in jail at the time. He described in detail the various cats, frogs, and crickets under his care at that moment. He promised to grow up strong so he could buy his father a car. "I hope you come home one special day. Love, your son Tony."

Aki wrote this poem: "Thank you Ma for a roof over my head. Thank you Ma for a comfortable bed. Thank you Ma for loving me. Thank you Ma



TOP: Alley cleanup: Jerald, T.J., and Davon pitch in as a DPW crew rolls through.



BOTTOM: Ashley (right) and twin sisters Sandra and Stasia spread the cleanliness gospel.

for hugging me. Thank you Ma for all your kisses. Thank you Ma for all the things you do. Don't never forget I love you."

Over the years aboard that runaway train, Jerald probably came over more often than any other kid on the block. Jill and I were both working full-time at home for most of this stretch, and he'd roll in mid-afternoon seeking help with homework and trying to scam us out of junk food. Together, he and I learned about tsunamis, Harriet Tubman, Eratosthenes, and other stuff.

After one of these homework sessions, Jerald turned to me with a very serious expression on his face. Then he said, "Mr. Jim, I just want you to know that when I'm over here with you and Miss Jill, it feels like I'm with family."

I blinked back tears. Then I told Jerald that the feeling was mutual. I also told him what a kind and brave thing he'd done, sharing his feelings with me out of the blue like that.

That's the way things went on the old block sometimes. Kids found their way to something true, then grabbed us by the hand and led us right up to it. I hope it worked the other way around once or twice, and it makes me proud to say that I'm pretty sure it did.

Another day comes to mind, this one dawning with the block buried

under a foot of snow. In the work-at-home world, there are no snow days, so I was already at my computer when a joyous chanting noise erupted from the porch outside our front door, courtesy of a trio of middle-school girls.

"MISTER JEEIM! MISS JEEILL! AIN'T YOU GONNA COME OUT AND PLAY?"

Jill beckoned Ashley and her twin sisters, Sandra and Stasia, inside. After she fed them breakfast, the five of us blew almost all that long day sledding and snowball fighting and tromping through the park and drinking hot chocolate.

From the get-go, there seemed to be a special bond between Jill and Ashley. Partly, this was because Ashley's smile is such an infectious display of deep-felt joy. Partly, this was because no one on the block—kid or adult—was more devoted to our clean-up-the-trash efforts than Ashley. She and her sisters even won prestigious "Golden Pushbroom" awards at a neighborhood festival once.

I asked Jill recently if she had any theories as to why she and Ashley hit it off like that. She talked about how touched she was by the way Ashley would alternate between shy, uncertain girl and young woman going places, full of fire and smarts and leadership skills.

Thinking about this now, I wonder if maybe there wasn't a reflection of ourselves in Ashley. As far removed as we were from middle school, weren't we striving to make a comparable transition, from low-key neighbors to leaders on our block? Weren't we fighting doubts about our abilities and striving to gain confidence, too?

The best day of the year in our old house always landed on the Saturday before Halloween. That's when we'd throw Jill's annual pumpkin-carving party. We usually bought at least twenty-five

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pumpkins in preparation for this affair, which the kids loved almost as much as we did.

In my mind's eye, these pumpkin parties all run together as one, serving up a parade of characters I wish I had the space to write about here: T.J. and Nicholas; Lakeira and Shantera; Mitch; Davon; Devon and Jimmy; China; Kendra; Tyree and Tyrell; Donita and Waynette; Chantae and Chatell; Shamora; and the unforgettable Lamont, aka Boo Man. On those Saturdays before Halloween, you should have seen our porch come dusk, lined up end to end with shimmering pumpkins and laughing children.

In late 2004, Jill and I moved out of Belair-Edison, chasing an impulse to try small-town life and landing in Cambridge, on the Eastern Shore. Our new house isn't the kid-magnet our old one was, but we try to contribute to our new community in other ways.

So, yes, our do-goodering continues, despite the fact that we've learned over the years what an aggravation such work can be. It's a pain to look at your calendar and see too many meetings and obligations on the horizon. It's inevitable that in striving to work together with neighbors, you'll encounter a few obstinate characters, and it's always a bitter disappointment when too few volunteers show up, or too few donations come in.

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TOP: The author (far left) looks on as Ashley (center) and sisters frolic atop a snowpile.

BOTTOM: Pelham neighbor Henry Thompson at work on the porchlight project.

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We had our share of this back on Pelham Avenue, but they fill only a small space in our memories. The old block is still a part of our lives. Jerald's mother, Yolanda, started renting our old house after we moved out. Earlier this year, she finished cobbling together a down payment and bought the place from us. Jerald's bedroom is my old office, the room where we used to do homework together.

Last summer, Yolanda brought Tony and Jerald down to the Shore for a weekend of kayaking, barbecuing, and laughing. Smudge spent most of that weekend hiding under the bed. Tony went home with a captured frog to add to his menagerie, which is as big as ever. It was a great feeling, hearing the sound of their laughter fill our new house.

Shortly thereafter, I got the chance to write this essay, and so I've been thinking a lot about Belair-Edison. In doing so, I've found myself struggling with that other question, the one about whether our do-goodering did any lasting good for our block. The truth is, there were still a handful of abandoned houses on Pelham when we left. There was still too much trash and too many rats.

Sometimes I read in the paper about do-gooders in other communities who accomplish unfathomable things with their young neighbors. They teach skills like photography and filmmaking and get kids' work displayed in galleries and theaters. They start academic support programs that push kids through high school and toward college.

By those standards, our efforts on Pelham don't really rate. If the city had tracked the progress of our block according to some strict CitiStat statistical evaluation of crime, grime, and delinquency, would we have passed? I don't know, actually.

I do know we made our share of blunders. The first time we convened a block-wide meeting, we were armed with pastries for thirty. Three people showed up. (Jerald's eyes got real big at the sight of all those leftovers.) That mediation session with a problem neighbor? A pointless affair, serving only to fuel the fires of resentment right up until the last minute, when our neighbor Robert Jones saved the day by stepping up, asking everyone to join hands, and closing it out with a heartfelt prayer that sent all parties home feeling like their petitions were respected.

One Sunday a few weeks ago, I returned to Pelham Avenue to pick up Jerald and take him to a Ravens game. He's in his first year of high school today, so he's much less a boy and much more a young man in the making. On the ride downtown, I tried to explain to Jerald how I'd been struggling with the notion of measuring what, if anything, we accomplished together in the good old days.

He's always been a guy who thinks things through carefully, so I expected Jerald to pause and ponder before tackling such a serious question. Instead, he spun on me quickly with a look that might even have betrayed a touch of anger: "C'mon, Mr. Jim! You know better than that!"

Deep down, I suppose I do. Here, too, it helps to seek refuge in anecdotes. For instance, that reporter from Hartford interviewed Robert Jones and his wife, Annie. On Pelham, it's tough keeping up with the Joneses. Their yard is always a little bit tidier than yours, their flowers a little bit prettier. These are proud people and ideal neighbors, so it felt good to hear that reporter say that, when she asked the Joneses to identify the secret of our block's success in the Healthy Neighborhoods program, Mr. Jones pointed at our house and said, "They are."

Then there was that exhausting weekend of the porch-light project. I have no idea whether replacing all those broken-down fixtures deterred crime, like it was supposed to. But I do know that the night we finished, the most dedicated of our adult partners in that job, Henry Thompson,



Jerald now: August 2007

broke down and cried while pulling his car into the block. He banged on our door shortly thereafter, telling Jill he just had to talk with somebody about how overwhelming it was to see our block lit up like that in a display of togetherness and shared commitment to safety.

Such moments have a way of lodging in your heart for keeps. And such moments have a way of informing the decisions you make moving forward in life. So shortly after we arrived in Cambridge, Jill started volunteering with our local chapter of Habitat for Humanity. We both signed up with a group that helps promote the revitalization of downtown. And I'm working with folks who are trying to preserve and celebrate Cambridge's incredible African American history.

Don't misunderstand: We don't rank as the most active or the most generous members of our new community. But it feels like we're doing our part. And one of the main reasons we're doing it is because of that surprising space those kids on Pelham Avenue opened up in our lives. It didn't close back up when we left the block. All these years later, one thing is still leading to another. ■ ?

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