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Articles

Greening the lot around the corner

VOICE writes, "By Joshua Gray

Some newcomers to our ever-transient neighborhood, knowing their time is brief, avoid putting down roots. Others, like Hill East resident Eric Schwalb, take the seed of an idea and nurture it into a scion of neighborhood good will.

Schwalb's inner-city Walden is a small parcel at 13th and C streets SE. Adjacent to the Kentucky Courts complex, the mostly empty lot is currently host to a Dumpster, and little else. It's not exactly a black pit of urban blight, but it doesn't contribute anything to the up-and-coming intersection. Though the corner once had a reputation for illicit activities, crime is largely limited to illegal dumping by unlicensed contractors working in the area, an ironic footnote in the evolving gentrification story on the Hill.

Still, it's an eyesore and a waste of that rarest urban commodity: open space. In its place, Schwalb and his wife, Christy, envisioned a green oasis, a neighborhood hub that would go beyond the usual small park. Rather than a collection of benches and shrubs, it would be a fusion of park and active community garden, a space where neighbors could congregate.

The Schwalbs arrived in the Hill East neighborhood about three years ago. The Midwest transplants had lived in D.C. for years, but it was their first time as Hill residents -- in their first house. Soon their tidy house became a home, and along with their beagle Molly, they became part of the neighborhood.

At this point, Christy was pregnant, but the couple didn't retreat into a nest building.

"We sent fliers around [about their vision of a community space] and put them on people's gates and put it on the Hill East listserv," Eric said. "We had our first meeting of maybe 12 folks from around the Hill here on a Saturday. He was born two days later," he said recently, as he watched their now 9-month-old baby, Jack, crawl across the living-room floor.

In spite of the demands of his growing family, Schwalb wanted to take the idea to the next level. Here, the project benefited from the power of neighborhood networking.

"We had some great fortune that one of our neighbors who has been very key in this process is Rich Lukas," Schwalb said. Lukas was on a community walkthrough with Ward 6 Council member Tommy Wells, "and they got talking about this lot and this idea that folks had," said Schwalb.

With the support of a growing coalition of neighbors and city officials, plans for the 13th Street Community Park and Garden quickly began to take shape. More than 100 Hill residents joined Mayor Adrian Fenty at a kickoff event in September.

Signs went up heralding the new arrival. Volunteers, including architect Colleen Garibaldi and landscape designer Liz Guthrie, hashed out ideas for the design. The project gained momentum when Washington Post columnist Marc Fischer picked up the story.

A few dozen neighbors gathered Jan. 12 for a design workshop to discuss ideas for the garden's final appearance. Schwalb hopes to deliver the final proposal to the D.C. Housing Authority, which controls the lot, by early February. If all goes according to plan, ground will be broken in the spring.

And sometime during the summer, the transformation should be complete. A windblown lot will be a green and growing oasis for neighborhood stalwarts and newcomers. It's a community project that started with the Schwalbs.

"Everyone wants the same thing," Schwalb said. "Everyone wants a nice space. Everyone wants a nice place nice to live. And everyone is in favor of making this corner at 13th and C into something a lot nicer."

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