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Premier Issue
May/June 2009

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Motor City Blight Busters

An all-out blitz approach to fighting urban blight

By Jennifer McGuiggan

John George is on the phone, raving about the work of Motor City Blight Busters, the community-based nonprofit housing corporation he co-founded in 1988. While we talk, his passion and excitement punctuate every sentence. Every so often, he shouts directions to volunteers at today's worksite. They're cleaning out a building as we speak, with plans to transform a shed into a daycare center. "We try to help people that have dreams and talents by providing resources," he says, making it all sound so simple and matter of fact. And for George, who's been doing this for more than 20 years, it is.

"Our mission," he says, "is to save the world, and we're starting with Detroit." George explains that Blight Busters works aggressively to stabilize, revitalize, and rejuvenate the Motor City by tearing down dangerous and abandoned property and renovating and constructing new homes. "When I say aggressive, that doesn't fully explain it!" he says.

George tries to convey just how serious Blight Busters is about ridding Detroit of urban blight and building strong, healthy neighborhoods full of homeowners. He rattles off a long list of programs, initiatives, and accomplishments, from small cleanup projects with a handful of volunteers to large-scale, citywide efforts with thousands of volunteers and multiple partner organizations.

More than two decades after its start, Blight Busters has enabled thousands of volunteers to clean up hundreds of neighborhood sites and provide houses for more than 1,000 people. "If we can find a way to put our petty differences aside, we can really make a difference," George says.

That type of thinking is what led to the start of Blight Busters in the first place. In the late 1980s, George was newly married, had a young child, and was fed up with a crack house in his Detroit neighborhood. George says that after multiple calls to the authorities brought no change, he took matters into his own hands for what he calls selfish reasons: "I didn't want to move." So with the help of some neighbors, George boarded up the building, which drove away the drug dealers. This first crusade was a far cry from George's day job in his family's insurance business, but it was a pivotal moment. "I knew immediately when we were successful that this is what I'm supposed to be doing with my life," he says.

Although its primary goal is to create safe housing for Detroit families, Blight Busters doesn't stop there. In the 1990s, the organization renovated a 21,000

square foot historic building and turned it into a resource center. The center houses a coalition of partner tenants who provide services that support and complement the work of Blight Busters. These include credit counseling and financial services and a building trades training facility.

In addition to the resource center, Blight Busters is also the force behind the Artist Village, a space to nurture artists and educate the community. The Artist Village hosts weekly jazz and hip-hop concerts, as well as open mike poetry events. Charles “Chazz” Miller, Blight Busters’ resident artist, has his studio in the Village and uses it as a base to teach mural painting to local kids.

The newest addition to the Village is Motor City Java House, which will open this summer. Alicia Marion is the manager and owner, and “barista and whatever else is needed,” she says. Marion originally got involved with Blight Busters after several serendipitous chance meetings with George in the late 1990s. When he told her about the organization’s work, she signed up as a volunteer. Within a year she was working as George’s executive assistant, a role she’ll finally relinquish when the Java House opens.

George calls Marion “a big part of the heart” of Blight Busters. It’s fitting then, that she’ll be running the coffee house, which, like any kitchen, will function as the heart of the Village. “It’s important for people to feel like they belong somewhere,” Marion says. “When you feel like that, you want to care and come together.”

Blight Busters keeps bringing people together, day after day. “We get up early, we work late, and we try to help as many folks as we can,” George says. He encourages everyone to spot the needs in their own communities and work together to fill them. “It’s so simple,” he says. “I’m giving everyone permission to care about their neighborhoods.”

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