

Blackland Transitional Housing Helping to "Bring in Neighbors"

By Ashley Gatewood

We don't bring in tenants, we bring in neighbors, says Bo McCarver while proudly surveying the area that comprises Blackland Transitional Housing. McCarver is the chairman of the Blackland Community Development Corporation (CDC) and has been active within the neighborhood for twenty-two years.

One mission of Blackland is to give homeless people an opportunity to get back on their feet by providing them with comfortable, temporary housing. There are nine units allocated for the homeless and rent varies from \$0 to \$300 per month, with the average around \$234 per month. Rent is kept low, and as a result Blackland loses approximately \$100 per month on each house. McCarver explains that the renters work to support themselves. Typical positions include nursing aids, waiters, and clerks. While some of the people at Blackland have college degrees, one thing all have in common is that they are in a time of crisis.

People often come to Blackland from the Salvation Army or Safeplace. Many hear about the community by word-of-mouth. An application to live in the development is reviewed by a committee, and those accepted are permitted to live in Blackland for one year. Should a resident not be ready to move after that period, they are permitted to extend their stay up to an additional six months.



ABOVE: One of the houses allocated for the elderly.

McCarver says that about 60% of the residents get stabilized during their time at Blackland and are ready to find their own housing. He cites addiction problems as a major reason the remaining 40% are not able to take care of themselves. This is despite the fact that persons with addiction issues are allowed to reside at Blackland if they are in a treatment program.

Aside from the nine homes for the homeless, there are six others set aside for the elderly and two for adults recovering from physical and/or mental disabilities. Blackland receives some income from renting several units as Section 8 properties. The non-profit uses profits from the Section 8 rents to subsidize the losses on the transitional houses. Altogether there are about 35 houses in the development and McCarver feels that number will max out at 45 units or so. The major hindrance to Blackland's expansion is that property values in the area have swelled. Lots that cost \$8,000 several years ago are now selling for \$80,000 to \$100,000, which the organization cannot afford to buy.

McCarver says that the greatest challenges of running a transitional housing program are legal and technical. Much of the legal work is done pro-bono and McCarver credits CBAR and Texas Rural Legal Aid with much of the organization's success.

Indeed, Blackland has encountered many obstacles over the last two decades. For years the University of Texas at Austin had been annexing areas east of I-35, most of which were lower-income, African-American neighborhoods. The residents didn't put up a fight, and their communities were slowly fractioned. In 1980, UT attempted what would have been its 6th annexation. McCarver and a like-minded group decided to take on the university and challenge their encroachment upon economically disadvantaged people's homes and neighborhoods. Realizing that the most efficient way to stymie UT was by using the land for a non-profit organization, the Blackland CDC was born. With little money for the ensuing struggle, Blackland used the press to fight UT. The organization made it known that it intended to utilize the land for rental housing. While a few in the area protested the project, the Blackland CDC garnered the support of the majority of the neighborhood and managed to have its dream realized.

With the aid of a \$500,000 Community Development Block Grant from the City of Austin, Blackland was able to break ground on the project. After receiving help from non-profit developers John Henneberger and Karen Paup, and architect, Tom Hatch, the first set of 11 houses was finished in 1986. In 1992, under the pressure of increasing negative press, the University of Texas abandoned its annexation and divested 16 houses it had purchased in the neighborhood to the non-profit. Near the end of the 12-year struggle, homeless advocates had joined Blackland, and the Blackland CDC acknowledged that support by dedicating nine of the 16 houses to homeless families. Texas' only neighborhood-sponsored transitional housing program was born.



ABOVE: McCarver beside a plaque dedicated to 8 residents who passed away during the twelve-year battle with UT.

I asked McCarver how he became involved with Blackland and its mission. He told me that his own family had been homeless for a period in the 70s and stayed with friends until they could get themselves properly settled. By working with this organization, he feels that he is simply repaying the good deed that was done for him. His initial interest in low-income housing began during the years when UT was purchasing rental houses and evicting tenants without any regard for the residents. This angered McCarver and he joined the battle to keep the Blackland Neighborhood intact.

While it may appear that most of Blackland's troubles are behind it, the organization faces the challenge of helping all those in need. For every family we accept, there are twenty we have to turn away, McCarver says, his voice heavy with dissonance. Although the organization's ability to help does have limitations, there are many in Austin who owe their second chance to Blackland.