

**LOCAL** SEPTEMBER 6, 2015

# Grier Heights celebrates a bygone pride with reopening of restored school

## HIGHLIGHTS

Old Rosenwald school now a community center

\$500,000 restoration overseen by church-based nonprofit

Ribbon-cutting after community's 50th annual Labor Day parade



1 of 3



BY DAVID PERLMUTT  
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Long before Grier Heights got its unshakable image as one of Charlotte's most distressed and feared neighborhoods, the community that 67-year-old Marvin Price grew up in had nothing to do with guns, drugs and gang violence.

His heroes lived in the mostly African-American community 3 miles south of uptown. They were doctors, lawyers, teachers, principals, artists and writers.

As a boy, it was impossible for him to stray – too many eyes watching.

“This was a proud neighborhood,” said Price, a semi-retired barber whose shop is in Grier Heights. “I used to know everybody in Grier Heights and could tell you where they lived. We couldn't get away with nothing without someone picking up the phone and calling our moms.

“We all looked out for each other.”

That version of the Grier Heights story will be on display Monday, when the neighborhood celebrates its 50th annual Labor Day homecoming, with former residents expected from across the country. The Labor Day parade – billed as the biggest one yet – will wind through the neighborhood and end at 3100 Leroy St. for a ribbon-cutting to reopen the sturdy 88-year-old Billingsville School that since October has undergone a \$500,000 restoration.

The restored school, now a community center and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, has become a motivating symbol for Grier Heights' latest attempt at rebirth.

Even after integration enticed Price's heroes out of the neighborhood and urban renewal ushered in low-income renters who cared little about the neighborhood, "the school" was the center of life in Grier Heights.

It's where many of the long-timers saw their first movies, where the Grier Heights Community Improvements Organization plotted its moves. It's where Grier Heights celebrates its heritage and pays tribute to its most important residents with photos lining its longest hall.

Over the years, the school – a historic Rosenwald school built with the help of philanthropic money and bricked by masons from the community – had declined with the neighborhood.

That was until a nonprofit organization called Crossroads Corp., seeded with \$1.5 million by Myers Park Presbyterian Church in 2008, began knocking on doors and asking neighbors what they could do to help.

Hundreds of volunteers from the church and neighborhood met to discuss what was needed to get Grier Heights beyond its image of a hardscrabble, troubled community. From 2011 to 2013, the rate of violent crimes stayed about the same but were roughly five times Charlotte's average, according to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Quality of Life Explorer.

Property crimes – arson, burglary and larceny – dropped 17 percent during that time, the data base shows.

But last year, crime numbers were the lowest in years, said CMPD Lt. Shawn Crooks, who oversees the response area that includes Grier Heights.

"Extraordinary things are happening in that neighborhood," Crooks said. He attributes those improvements to work by Crossroads, churches, neighborhood leaders and CMPD building relationships. Still, only 13 percent of residents live in homes they own. The dropout rate remains twice as high as the city average.

"It's an ongoing effort to work with property owners to bring in the right type of people and to remove the criminal element and keep them out," Crooks said. "You can have one or two individuals that can raise your crime statistics overnight."

## **New life in Grier Heights**

The neighbors agreed they needed a preschool so children could get a better start in school. They needed better housing and job preparation training and a high-school diploma equivalency program, so residents would have a better chance at landing decent jobs.

Crossroads, partnering with Self-Help Community Development Corp., used the seed money to buy 36 lots mostly on Heflin Street to build mixed-income housing. So far, 12 have been built and 12 sold, using federal HUD incentives. Next week, ground will be broken for another eight houses.

"It's not been a hard sell," said Don Gately, Crossroads' executive director and an elder at Myers Park Presbyterian. "The buyers have been diverse racially and economically." Along Heflin, he said, are teachers, chefs, a wine salesman and a physician in his first year of residency and his young family. The nonprofit and The Learning Collaborative are building a preschool and provide parenting classes.

Crossroads and neighbors decided to turn the old school into a community center for recreation and education programs and wellness and vocational training services. But it needed significant work. After working out a 15-year lease with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, which owns the four-room building, the restoration money was raised through local and national foundations.

They persuaded Jonathan Belton, a former Billingsville student raised in Grier Heights, to be the center's director.

"It would be real easy to bring financial resources to a neighborhood like Grier Heights and say, 'Here's your problems, we're going to fix it,'" Gately said. "But that's not sustainable change.

"Our goal is to help the neighbors improve their quality of life."

## **A school to last**

The neighborhood, which stretches on prime land from Randolph Road to Monroe near the affluent Eastover and Elizabeth communities, was organized by former slaves. It largely sprang from farms owned in the late 1800s by Arthur Grier and Sam Billings.

Grier Heights (once called The Quarter or Griertown) wasn't a planned suburb. When Belton and Marvin Price were growing up, the neighborhood was outside the city. "It was country," Belton said. "There was a sense of family here."

In the mid-1920s, community leaders, including Grier and Billings, petitioned Mecklenburg's school board for a neighborhood school. The board told them to wait until they could buy a site. The neighborhood assembled the land themselves, buying two acres from Billings, who donated a third acre.

In 1927, the school board and Rosenwald Foundation of Chicago built the four-room school and named it for Billings. The Rosenwald fund, financed by Sears Roebuck President Julius Rosenwald, spent millions helping to build 5,300 schools for Southern black children at a time when little money was spent to educate them. Twenty-six schools were built in Mecklenburg.

Like most Rosenwald schools, Billingsville School was initially a frame structure. But soon, the community held fish fries to raise \$500, and masons who lived in the neighborhood covered it in brick.

“That speaks to the lasting pride of this community,” Belton said. “This building was built to last.”

### ‘We’re moving forward’

Even as the neighborhood fell on hard times in the 1970s and ’80s, as drug dealers and crime moved in and longtime residents moved out, the old school stood as a solid reminder of a proud past.

There are other reminders. Many of its streets are named for important people in the neighborhood’s history. Framed portraits of them and others are displayed on the school’s “Wall of Fame.”

Barbara Simpson has lived in Grier Heights for 66 years, since she was 10. One day last week, she looked across Leroy Street from the school and pointed to houses built in the last seven years.

“Those houses and other new ones on Heflin Street could be anywhere in Charlotte,” she said. “They stand as a testament to what we’re trying to do here. We want people to come into Grier Heights, buy houses and build the kind of pride in this community that we had when I was a girl.

“We know gentrification is coming. But as long as it’s done with pride, and they’re working with us and we know what’s taking place – and they’re not kicking out our people – then we’ll be OK as long as we’re moving forward.”

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### WANT TO GO?

The 50th annual Grier Heights Labor Day Parade starts 10 a.m. Monday at Fannie Circle and Orange Street but will wind throughout the community and end at the Billingsville School on Leroy Street. At 11:30 a.m., there’ll be a ribbon-cutting ceremony that includes speeches to reopen the restored school that is now a community center.



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### COMMENTS

# Charlotte approves housing grants

By: Steve Harrison, The Charlotte Observer November 11, 2014

The Charlotte City Council Monday voted to spend nearly \$4.1 million in federal housing grants on six housing projects for low-income residents.

The Community Development Block Grants will mostly be used to renovate three apartment complexes: Heritage Park near Albemarle Road (\$650,000); Savannah Woods near Park Road (\$1.47 million); and Thomasboro/Hovis Apartments (\$328,000).

The Heritage Park Apartments are for people earning 80 percent or below of the area's median income, which is \$51,350. The other two apartment rehabs are for people earning 60 percent of the area median income.

---Council members also approved giving \$375,000 in block grants to Habitat for Humanity, which plans to repair 35 homes for people earning 60 percent or less of the median incomes.

---The city will spend \$500,000 to partner with the Charlotte Mecklenburg Housing Partnership to build 130 new units at the Atando Avenue Apartments north of uptown.

---The city will spend \$750,000 on infrastructure improvements for the Grier Heights neighborhood, on Orange, McVay, Dunn and Heflin streets. The street improvements will be made to support 35 single-family homes under construction by CrossRoads and Self-Help Community Development.

The grants are awarded through U.S. Housing and Urban Development. The money is not part of the city's Housing Trust Fund, which is from local dollars.

Read more here: [http://www.thestate.com/2014/11/11/3805754\\_charlotte-approves-housing-grants.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy](http://www.thestate.com/2014/11/11/3805754_charlotte-approves-housing-grants.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy)

# Self-Help helps others, not itself: Durham-based national nonprofit works quietly to revitalize Grier Heights

By: Tony Brown, Staff Writer December 16, 2013



Donnetta Collier, project manager for Self-Help's revitalization efforts in Grier Heights, sits on the front porch of a house on Orange Street that the nonprofit developer rehabbed to the studs. It is for sale, but only to someone making less than 50 percent of the Charlotte area median income. Photo by Tony Brown

The Center for Community Self-Help, a Durham-based conglomeration of half a dozen nonprofit lending and development corporations with at least \$100 million in total annual revenues and a national reach, is involved in two residential real estate ventures in Grier Heights: a new single-family owner-occupied subdivision and a for-lease multifamily complex.

In the case of the 36-lot Elizabeth Heights subdivision under construction, Self-Help has been happy to let its partners be the public faces of the project – the non-profit CrossRoads Corp. for Affordable Housing and Community Development, and the for-profit builder JCB Urban and the Helen Adams Realty sellers agency – all three of Charlotte.

Self-Help's multifamily development, the ongoing renovation of the 34-unit Grierton Court town house complex, has been so low-key that it has received little to no attention from the press.

But with last week's announcement that for-profit, Charlotte-based RuBec Properties will manage the apartments – a key role considering that Self-Help officials say that Grierton Courts fell into disrepair as a result of poor management – the nonprofit has outed its considerable Charlotte presence, which also includes an effort to buy and renovate foreclosed-on homes in the Peachtree Hills starter-home subdivision.

“Much of the credit for the success of Elizabeth Heights, an incredibly complex project with all its partnerships, goes to Self-Help, which has really held it together, and largely behind the scenes,” said Curt Seifart, the Helen Adams Realtor who has signed buyers with all eight of the first-phase homes in Elizabeth Heights.

Self-Help – described by spokesman David Beck as “a family of nonprofit organizations including two credit unions; a community development loan fund; and a policy and research organization, the Center for Responsible Lending – had humble origins some 30 years ago.

“The story goes that Martin Eakes, our founder and CEO, started the Self-Help Credit Union with \$77 earned from a bake sale,” said Kim Cameron, the nonprofit's director of real estate.

“Now we have 500 employees. The credit union is state-chartered and has expanded to become a federal credit union as well with operations in California and Chicago. A lot of organizations such as Self-Help have not survived the downturn. We have grown throughout this time, with sound business decisions and adequate reserves.”

A look at the federal tax returns and financial statements of the Self-Help entities verifies Cameron's assertions. The books are more than balanced, the assets are steady and the administrative-program cost ratio is low. Employee experience level, on the other hand, is high. Cameron has 20 years in the nonprofit housing world, in Atlanta and Milwaukee, and Self-Help project manager Donnetta Collier has 30, in Boston.

Most important, the lending and development programs – market-priced, historic commercial building rehabs; new and renovated affordable residential development; and loans to small-businesses and affordable residential developers – effect positive change.

## ‘Gentrification with justice’

The history of the Grierton Court project – in which all of the units in one of the four town house buildings have been renovated inside – illustrates two Self-Help strategies: loans to commercial and nonprofit builders and developers of affordable housing, and doing the building and developing itself.

A different nonprofit entity acquired the 1960s complex in the mid-2000s, and won a loan from Self-Help – which had won money from the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department's Neighborhood Stabilization Program – to renovate them.

But the recession hit, the nonprofit went belly-up, and Self-Help was forced to foreclose on the property, Cameron said, before deciding to continue the project and acquiring it in 2012.

One of the Self-Help philosophies that has come into play is not displacing people, what CrossRoads executive director Don Gately likes to call “gentrification with justice.”

In the case of Elizabeth Heights, all the single-family home lots acquired by CrossRoads and Self-Help were abandoned duplexes whose only residents were illegal ones. Crime fell 30 percent after the two nonprofits demolished the structures, Collier said. Current residents of Grier Heights who rent are the target market.

“We want to leave the families in place,” Collier said. “Our goal was never to displace or out-price people. Everything we have bought is vacant. And we didn't push anyone to sell.”

In Grierton Court, the units are being renovated as tenants leave, Cameron said.

When enough units are complete, work will begin on exterior renovations, which will include replacing the chain-link fence around the complex with something nicer, adding front porches and back patios, and major landscaping improvements.

The renovated apartments, which will rent for \$550, have hardwood floors in the bedrooms, laminate in the formal rooms and vinyl in the kitchens. Tenant income is capped by HUD at 120 percent of the Charlotte area's median income for a family of four, or \$77,000.

Cameron touted the signing of RuBec, a 7-year-old firm that manages 300 properties, nearly all of them single-family rentals, as the latest coup for Grierton Court.

“The neglectful management by the previous firm led to disrepair,” Cameron said. “RuBec is very excited about this project and has been attending community meetings to try to better fit the needs of the neighborhood. The previous guys did not do that.”

At RuBec, spokeswoman Hattie Wheeler said, “We try to give back.” She also noted that the renovation work to the first building has been so effective, current tenants in other buildings, as well as former complex renters, are applying to get into the rehabbed units.

## Cooperation fuels construction

On the single-family, homeowner-occupied side of Self-Help, the nonprofit began work several years before the CrossRoads partnership on Elizabeth Heights, building nine new homes and gut-renovating two as infill housing scattered throughout Grier Heights

Most of the existing housing stock is 1950s and '60s. The historically black neighborhood was originally set-up as a community after the Civil War by former slaves, and platted in 1949 as the area's first suburban subdivision for blacks in the separate-but-equal era by Arthur S. Grier, who named many of the streets for his family members; Fannie Circle, main street Grier Heights, was a tribute to his mother.

Once a proud neighborhood, it became one of Charlotte's most crime- and depravation-ridden.

But, said Collier, most of the residents remained stalwart.

“We say we have a three-legged stool: Self-Help, CrossRoads and the Grier Heights community; the residents are the backbone of the whole thing,” Collier said. “And we couldn't have done any of this without the city of Charlotte.”

Self-Help discovered that building and renovating scattered houses was not having its desired effect, which was to create what Collier called “a critical mass” of new housing to attract for-profit development and revitalize the neighborhood.

Enter CrossRoads, spun off from Myers Park Presbyterian Church, which first came to Grier Heights to sponsor a book-reading club with two local churches. The two organizations figured out that if they worked together, they could put together more than 30 contiguous lots in an effort to create a neighborhood-within-a-neighborhood and to achieve Collier's critical mass.

Self-Help usually buys lots and sells them to other affordable housing developers, including Habitat for Humanity, which is also active in Grier Heights. But the downturn made the lots worth less than they were bought for, and Self-Help and CrossRoads decided to do the work themselves. They brought in Jim Burbank of JCB Urban, a dean among Charlotte homebuilders, to construct the homes – which have hardwood floors, granite countertops, sealed basements and solid interior doors – and to act as an unofficial adviser.

“We went to the city and said we need help,” Collier said. “We got a \$427,000 grant from the city, and that was how we were able to get Elizabeth Heights started.”

The first eight Elizabeth Heights homes cost \$170,000 to build and went on the market in the upper \$130,000 s. The next eight will be about \$10,000 higher in price, Seifart said, and the hope is that eventually the neighborhood will be mixed-income.

Some observers question how affordable homebuilders and developers can hope to sell homes in those price ranges to people making 80 percent of area median income, or \$52,100 for a family of four. As Collier admits, it takes about \$25,000 in down payments and fees to get into the homes.

“What they don't understand is that there are all kinds of down-payment assistance programs out there,” Collier said.

“You can get \$15,000 from Wells Fargo's Neighborhood Lift program, and it's forgiven after five years. You can get another \$7,500 from the city's House Charlotte that is forgiven in 10 years. And you can get a loan from the N.C. Housing Finance Agency, a quasi-government organization, for 15 percent of sales prices that is forgiven after the first mortgage is paid off.”

And, she said, applicants are carefully screened, advised and guided.

“We're not going to do anything predatory or that they can't afford,” Collier said. “We don't do anybody if their payment would be \$100 over their monthly rent. I've made some enemies that way, but it's for the best.”

# Nonprofits lift Elizabeth Heights

By: Tony Brown, Staff Writer October 24, 2013



Don Gately, left, executive director of CrossRoads Corp. for Affordable Housing and Community Development, and Helen Adams Realty agent Curt Seifart sit on the front porch of a newly built home on Heflin Street in Grier Heights that is part of the Elizabeth Heights neighborhood redevelopment program. Photo by Tony Brown

GRIER HEIGHTS – Elizabeth Heights, the affordable new neighborhood within this historically black neighborhood that is trying to free itself of a bad rep, is off to a ripsaw-roaring start toward its 36-house urban revitalization goal. Four of the first eight homes in the new development, a joint venture of two nonprofits and Charlotte-based builder JCB Urban, have closed, another is under contract, and more potential buyers are in the approval-process pipeline for the final three.

And in the next few weeks, a national foundation will announce a major cash donation to the ongoing project.

“They literally built these homes on faith,” said Helen Adams Realtor Curt Seifart, who is acting as seller’s agent on faith himself, and without commission.

“But these homes would have sold on the first day if they had been on the open market. They’re doing incredibly well considering the long approval process, which we’re spending a lot of time educating buyers agents on.”

The three-bedroom, two- to 2.5-bath homes – two-stories and ranches that cost about \$170,000 to build and include high-end custom touches like fully sealed crawl-space foundations and other energy efficient features, craftsman style exteriors clad in HardiePlank, hardwood floors in formal room, and granite countertops – sell for far under market prices, in the \$130,000s.

But because they are partially underwritten by a Housing and Urban Development grant, the homes are aimed at households earning around \$52,000, or 80 percent of the Charlotte area’s median income, and come with down-payment assistance, discount mortgages and an arduous qualification process that can slow time-to-contract to up to four weeks.

The neighborhood is being developed by Charlotte-based CrossRoads Corp. for Affordable Housing and Community Development and the homes being built by the Durham-based Center for Community Self-Help.

CrossRoads is an outreach ministry program of the influential and assistance-oriented Myers Park Presbyterian Church, which happens to be the longtime church-home of Seifart, who is a deacon.

“I knew there would come a time when CrossRoads would need to market the homes,” said Seifart (pronounced SEE-furt). “So one day I picked up the phone and called Don.”

Don is Don Gately, a Myers Park congregant; retiree of Bank of America and Lat Purser & Associates commercial real estate firm; and now executive director of CrossRoads. He had high praise for Seifart’s efforts.

“He has marketed these houses like they were the mansions of Eastover,” where Seifart is a leading Realtor, Gately said earlier this week as he and Seifart showed a reporter around two of the ranch homes in Elizabeth Heights. “He has been an incredible partner.”

Although JCB Urban is not a nonprofit builder, Gately and Seifart also heaped compliments on JCB owner Jim Burbank, a dean of Charlotte homebuilders who constructs higher-end homes under his Saussy Burbank brand.

“Jim contributed some of his own custom features to the homes like upgraded (interior) doors, tile backsplashes, ceramic-tile bathroom floors,” Gately said. “His team just got so passionate throughout” the build of the first eight houses.



Heflin Street was largely lined with dilapidated duplexes before being bought and developed to become part of Elizabeth Heights. Photo courtesy of CrossRoads

Although the arduous qualification process for potential buyers – “a real education process for buyer’s agents,” Seifart said – includes a criminal background check, former felons are not necessarily excluded, depending on the nature of the crime, the length of time since it occurred, and evidence of rehabilitation, Seifart noted.

Myers Park began fundraising in 2008 and with the help of individual “angels” began acquiring lands – largely populated by boarded-up duplexes – in 2009. Development and building began last year. With help from the federal money, CrossRoads and Self-Help have invested about \$1.3 million in land and spent \$1.4 million on the construction of the first eight homes.

Although the build and marketing of the homes has been fast and successful, Seifart said, “there were some missteps at the beginning because we had to change the paperwork” to hew to shifting HUD guidelines.

Seifart and Gately expect the next phase of the project – another eight houses in roughly the same price range – to go more smoothly, thanks to both experience and what Gately called “a significant grant from one of the biggest foundations in the country.”

Elizabeth Heights might at one point include some middle-income housing to create a mix and to spur other commercial builders to come into the distressed neighborhood, which is starting to slowly gentrify in pockets. “But it’s a delicate matter of when to start market (-rate) homes,” Gately said. Habitat for Humanity Charlotte, which builds and sells more modest homes in the \$80,000s, also works in Grier Heights, largely doing renovations and curb-appeal spruce-ups.

“Habitat is another great partner here,” Gately said.

Seifart said a major part of his buyers-education process – “and it’s been that more than a marketing campaign for me,” Seifart said – includes the one-stop information portal website [elizabeth-heights.com](http://elizabeth-heights.com), which has links to all the regulations, qualifications, documents and other materials needed for buyers to apply to buy an Elizabeth Heights home.

“The real difference between Elizabeth Heights and other neighborhood revitalization programs is that we are building on contiguous lots. We’re building a real neighborhood-within-a-neighborhood that we hope will have a real impact on the larger area,” Gately said.

“That has required a real partnership by everyone involved, and we’ve been blessed, so far, by everything coming together.”