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After four years at Duquesne, most students are capable of identifying almost every square inch of the South Side or the Strip District. They can recall nearly every shop at the Waterfront and take you on a tour of Oakland without a map. But if asked to identify merely one or two businesses in Uptown, most students are struck with silence as if trying to describe a neighborhood they've never been to, let alone lived in.

Few students realize that every year spent living on Duquesne's campus is a year spent living in Pittsburgh's Uptown. They don't know that the Fifth and Forbes Avenue corridor is more than just a means to travel in and out of the city. It's home to Duquesne's neighbors.

This spring 2007 issue of Off the Bluff is intended to teach Duquesne University about the people and places of Uptown. Enclosed are the best stories about Uptown from Dr. Dillon's Feature Writing class. Special thanks to this magazine's editors from Maggie Patterson's Editing for Print class and to those students whose photographs grace the pages of this publication. For the magazine's aesthetic appearance, we also cannot forget to acknowledge the talented members of MODUS. Ashley McNally, Dena Galie, Tim Weber, Clark Price, Sara Zelonis, Joe Strangis, Dan Bates, Greg Pruitt, Maggie Fung and group advisor James Vota designed the attractive layout for this issue.

The Society of Professional Journalists' mission is to progress and protect journalism. This progression surely cannot be achieved without young, fresh minds pushing journalism forward through creative and honest writing and reporting. The students showcased in this edition uphold the highest standards of journalism. Their efforts should surely clear the path to future journalistic excellence.

Please enjoy.

- Chris Young, President, Society of Professional Journalists
Behind the Numbers: The Strong Bonds of Community in Uptown
Behind the Numbers: The Strong Bonds of Community in Uptown

BY THE OFF THE BLUFF STAFF

U.S. Census Bureau stats are grim. Just over one-third of Uptown's families live below the poverty level. Uptown's median income is a mere $16,964, $33,000 below the national median. More bad news: 26.6% of Uptown families earn less than $10,000 yearly and 56.5% of its residents are unemployed.

Crime statistics echo the economic picture formed by the census data. More than 150 thefts occurred in the area in 2003. Aggravated assaults, auto thefts and burglaries are the most common crimes. The numbers tell the easy story about Uptown, one of Pittsburgh's so-called "bad" neighborhoods.

The numbers also hide more stories than they tell.

Stories about people.

People like sculptor James Simon, a Gist Street resident whose studio doubles as a performance space for local writers and musicians. The Gist Street readings have put the street, and the neighborhood, on Pittsburgh's cultural map. People like brothers Mike and Mark Bianco, contractors who do a great deal of restoration work in Uptown. They were last seen working at 61 Van Braam St., restoring a house to "its original 1910 glory" so that the owner's daughter has a place to stay when she attends Duquesne University.

Stories about places.

Places like the Sun King Interactive Group, a digital marketing agency that handles accounts for corporations like Coca-Cola, American Eagle and General Electric. All of the work is handled in-house, and one of the partners, Jon Kasunic, is invested in his neighborhood. He attends neighbor James Simon's art openings and is a volunteer at Jubilee Soup Kitchen on Wyandotte Street. "We're here; we're happy," Kasunic says. "Even if the neighborhood doesn't change, we're staying."

Or places like The Center for Victims of Violent Crimes, one of the largest in the state. It offers some of the most comprehensive services for victims of violent crimes: accompanying them to court hearings, providing therapy for their children and even connecting victims with follow-up services from other agencies.

Stories about faith.

There's Shepherd's Heart Fellowship, run by Rev. Mick Warschmidt, an Episcopalian church that offers free dinners for the homeless and the poor everyday. And there's also the Corinthian Baptist Church, which has been in Uptown since 1969. With a current congregation of about 25 people, Pastor Christopher Glover and his flock stay involved with service projects such as a Mime and Puppet Ministry, regular Fellowships with other churches, and by providing extra food and clothing for the homeless who come in for help.

And the Beth Hamedrash Hagadol-Beth Jacob Synagogue, an unlikely fixture on the parking haven that is Colwell Street. Originally established in 1873, the Yiddish community boasted over 60,000 people of the Jewish faith in the Pittsburgh area. Synagogue membership was thriving and life was good on the hill. But, by 1970, people began moving to Oakland, Squirrel Hill and the East End and congregations began to thin out. Today, the total congregation consists of 50 to 60 people.

The numbers hide stories like these, and the others put forth here, because numbers are easy. "Numbers don't lie," as the saying goes, but numbers are also blind. They lead Uptown to be labeled as 'bad,' when all it takes is an honest look to see that every neighborhood has good people. People who, although their numbers go uncounted, have stories that should not go untold.
“My schooling began the day I got out of school,” the gray haired, thin-framed artist said.

A modern day Renaissance man, James Simon has traveled the world, bringing his knowledge back to Gist Street in Uptown where he lives and works creating art for Pittsburgh to enjoy.

The day after his high school graduation in 1972, James and a friend set off on a highway to find their own way in life. After hitch-hiking to California, James separated from his friend and stayed only temporarily. He eventually made his way back East to live on the beautiful islands off the coast of British Columbia.

“We didn't have any money, but we didn't even care,” James said. “We met all kinds of interesting people and learned about culture.”

His spontaneous journeys led him to decades full of fun and enriching cultural experiences, from living in an orange orchard in Australia to making violins in Oxford, England.

“Life was full of non-stop adventures which are still going,” James said. This one-man traveling machine came to a halt when his father suffered a stroke and James returned to Pittsburgh to help him recover. Finding a building on Gist Street, he established a studio and began accepting commissions. For fun, he even sculpted a larger than life-size King Kong peering over the fence surrounding his building.

“This building brought a lot of positive attention to Uptown,” James said. “This is a pretty nice area with a lot of potential.”

The building is a perfect fit for an artist. The first floor is nothing more than fragments of artwork, dust, and paint cans leading to his interesting backyard.

A junkyard before James bought it, the house's backyard now displays various sculptures which are pecked at by James' pet chickens.

“They’ve got it made here,” James said. “They are the Paris Hiltons of the chicken world.”

A simple man, James lives on the third floor of his building in a large studio apartment with his gray cat, Fifi, whose favorite lounging spot is on the mattress in the middle of the floor. Fifi doesn’t seem to mind the clutter from James' workbench or endless collection of books, nor is she frightened by the Brazilian bow and arrows and tribal masks decorating the dark paneled walls.

James lived in Brazil for several years after leaving England. He raves about how nice the Brazilian people were; eventually, he set up his own studio there.

“I missed the whole sculpture, clay thing,” James said. “Enough violin making, and I started making sculpture.”

His décor is tribal because he finds the Brazilian and Mayan cultures so interesting and those cultures became the catalyst for his sculpture.

“Any sculptor is in awe of Michelangelo and Greek sculptures, but it's not sculpture that inspires my sculpture, it's the culture,” James says.
When James isn’t practicing Tai Chi or listening to his favorite tunes—anything African, Jimmy Hendrix and Miles Davis—he is busy working on his current projects including a large public sculpture in Braddock which will pay homage to the working people of Braddock Steel. This sculpture is comparable to his 20-foot tall concrete musicians which stand on Liberty Avenue.

James’ art career took off with large sculpture like the Liberty Avenue Musicians. He learned the craft in Eugene, Oregon. As usual, he had friends there and moved to pursue sculpting. He took a ceramics class at a local university and began selling art for private collections, which he did for four years in the late ‘80s.

Large public sculpture isn’t his only work in Pittsburgh. He is also working on putting up art along Gist Street—not murals, but paintings with frames to make the street resemble a gallery.

“Art can be a really effective and positive thing,” James said. “My work is to help turn around neighborhoods that are impoverished.”

In addition to owning his studio, James owns a neighboring building that holds monthly poetry readings.

“It’s really important for the arts to mix,” James said. “They are all similar in many ways and compliment each other.”

On the Job
with James Simon
By: Adrienne Swonder

After spending some time with James Simon at his studio, he asked me if I would like to join him in collecting bits of things for a mosaic he was doing as part of the Steel Workers sculpture in Braddock. I eagerly accepted. We made our way Downtown to an abandoned building previously inhabited by traveling artists.

Slowly ascending to the third floor in an ancient and creaking dumbwaiter, slipping in and out of complete darkness between floors, we reached our destination. I opened the iron gates of the dumbwaiter and we stepped out into a huge open space. With a bucket and hammer in hand, I asked what we were looking for.

“Mirrors,” was all James said.

We turned the corner and there was one in all its reflective glory nailed to a wall. Disappointed that he forgot his tools, James managed to pry the mirror off the wall. He laid it on the floor saying, “step back.”

With one mighty blow, he swung the hammer at the mirror, his image shattering into a million pieces. In shock, I stared at him, saying nothing, until he broke the silence grinning mischievously.

“How’s that for bad luck?”
Ivy conceals a courtyard full of roosters, cats and bamboo trees. Ivy conceals the building's facade which shadows Gist Street. Ivy conceals its upper room, where wine is consumed and bread broken.

But Ivy can't hide the call girl across the street. Ivy can't hide the darker elements of Uptown.

In point of fact, though, 305 Gist Street isn't trying to hide anything.

When crowds assemble in its upper room, the city seeps in through the window. The skyline lights frame whoever stands at the podium and the surrounding room reminds the audience that this is the city. This is Uptown.

Or rather, this is what Uptown can be.

This once-time scrap yard has become host to a now renowned monthly reading for literature and poetry. Authors and poets from as far as California and Louisiana have frequented the third-floor room at some time in the reading series' 5-year run. And listeners from all across the Greater Pittsburgh Area travel here to listen, learn, and even eat some homemade ice cream.

A monthly reading wasn't what owner and sculptor James Simon had in mind when he bought the place, but he isn't complaining.

"It's a place where creative things happen. We attract a lot of people to the neighborhood—people that come not just for the prostitutes and the drugs," Simon said.

He relishes the opportunity to use his building as something more than shelter.

"I always wanted to use this building in a way that would benefit the community," he said. "This building has probably been a pretty big force in the neighborhood. The readings have attracted thousands of people that would have otherwise never heard of this town."

Tonight is no different.

The poet begins a dance with words. "I want to be a holy roller!" she says loudly. The crowd, still munching on homemade bread and sipping wine, holds silent attention.

And it's easy to forget that this isn't a theatre, it's Simon's home. Turn around and people are sitting their backs against his refrigerator, his sink, his stove in the corner, children sit in the kitchen above his file cabinets. It's easy to forget he sleeps up there.

In fact, at 305 Gist Street, it's hard to imagine that a decade ago this room was packed with junk. Literally. Simon said when he bought it in 2000, there was a bit of an accumulation by its former owner, Antoine Leyn who is now more famous for his homemade ice cream and bread that he provides for the readings.
“He bought it in the 60’s. Being a bit of junk collector himself, he continued the tradition,” Simon said.

Simon’s improvements have even caused Leyn to reconsider what he could have done with the place. “I had a lot of junk when I was here. I should have moved in myself,” said Leyn, who still lives in the house next door to the building.

Massive beams grow from this floor into six columns, equidistant and equally impressive as they help hold up the roof.

And below the upper room, lay more still: Simon’s workspace for his sculptures, more remnants of the building’s past, the courtyard and King Kong.

Yes, King Kong.

On a normal day, people often stop to take pictures or ponder what the giant ape is up to. Whatever it is, it grants this building a character all its own.

“The King Kong attracted a huge amount of attention,” Simon said. “It amazed me at how big a draw that was as a neighborhood public artwork.”

In fact, the building hosts several animals, both alive and sculpted in the courtyard right behind King Kong. A massive concrete frog sits near the middle of the space, and a small kitten sometimes purrs next to it. A pair of roosters pecks in and out of corners of the dual-deck woodshed that has more in common with an Appalachian shanty than the brick and mortar industrial dig next to it.

And for a moment, the trees, the animals, the woodshed all combine to fool the senses. How could this be the city?

305 Gist Street is asking Uptown, why not? OTRB

305 Gist Street, where the “Gist Street Readings” take place.
If you tell someone you’re heading to Uptown to see Monongahela Sal about a good time, they just might get the wrong idea. If they decide to follow, they might be surprised to end up in a sculptor’s studio, waiting to hear Gilbert and Sullivan songs.

Sal herself was surprised to end up here, although Sally Denmead was not always known as Monongahela Sal. It’s from a song called ‘Monongahela Sal,’ Denmead says. “A friend in New York said since I’m moving to Pittsburgh I’d have to call myself Monongahela Sal. It’s kind of like Benihana. Here it’s Benihana of Tokyo, in Tokyo its Benihana of New York. I just took to the name like a fish to water.”

The song is by Robert Schmertz, a local folk artist of some acclaim from the 40s. The song itself is about a woman who gets shoved overboard a boat on the Mon, swims ashore, and exacts lethal revenge on the man who slighted her. “I like that about her,” Denmead says, adding, “although it’s not part of my repertoire.”

Denmead moved to Pittsburgh with her husband, writer and musician Jonah Winter, in 2004. He specializes in picturebook biographies, and Denmead swells with pride as she explains the depth of her husband’s critical success with his book about Dizzy Gillespie. “Four publishing awards, five starred reviews,” she says, beaming. “Sean Quales did the illustrations; he does work for the New Yorker. I think he did their latest cover.”

Denmead and her husband came to Pittsburgh for a variety of reasons. They both knew people. They both had exposure to the Pittsburgh performing arts scene. They both wanted a bigger place to live.

“We were two pack rats both trying to work from home,” she says, without going into the unnecessary details of why a husband and wife working out of a crowded home together could create some stress. They lived in a row house, with neighbors on both sides and their landlady in the basement. It often made for an inconvenient work environment.

“Now, if I want to practice at midnight I can practice. If I want to practice at 6 a.m., I can practice,” she says. The practice pays off, as Denmead has had no trouble finding work since she settled into her new, bigger home in Squirrel Hill.

“It was like we had an instant community here,” she says. “It was neat to have a place, a regular place, to go. Gist Street is not a scene. Just people interested in art and going to see new things. People here really go to things. If they know about it, they’re there.”

For Denmead, this is part of the draw that brought her to Pittsburgh. There is less saturation here, unlike New York, which hosts an overwhelming amount of activities and made her feel like she was “treading water.”

“In New York you open the paper and there are 50 million things to do. By the time you sort them out you end up staying home,” she says. “Here, it’s more discreet. You can sit back and think ‘What am I in the mood for?’ Jazz, rock, whatever. And chances are you’ll know someone. It makes it more personal, less random.”

She is living proof of the kind of potential she sees in Pittsburgh, and in neighborhoods like Uptown. Plenty of opportunities for those who care enough to seek them.

“When I travel through Uptown on the bus, I always see Gist Street. There’s really no other locations to go to,” she says. The presence of Gist Street is, to Denmead, indicative of the kind of development strategy that needs to be employed in Uptown.

“Neighborhoods need to be won back one block at a time. I see that on the bus on the way in. It’s very heartening. The neighborhood has a lot of potential,” she says. “Housing prices are competitive. You could get a building and turn it into whatever you want. There’s a lot of room for imagination.”

And room for those who seek it, and seek it they do, according to Denmead. She was “overwhelmed” by the audience response her first time at Gist street. “It was like people lining up for a rock concert, they were turning people away at the door. It was chaos, they couldn’t fit everybody in,” she says.

Denmead hasn’t performed at Gist Street in a while, ever since her band, The Allegheny Playboys, went on hiatus. Recently, she’s been involved with the Pittsburgh Savoyards, a non-profit theatre company dedicated to Gilbert and Sullivan. She also sells ticket packages for the Pittsburgh Symphony and helps fit women for customized brassieres at The Pussy-cat, a women’s clothing boutique in Squirrel Hill. She feels the best part of her job is “feeling like I can help someone get what they want. Be it schedules of concerts to a favorite brassiere.”

She recently played her all-time favorite character, Despina, in the Mozart opera ‘Cosi fan tutte.’ “It was like 300 years ago, he wrote this opera for me. It fits me like a glove.” And no wisecracks about Despina being a chambermaid, either. Remember, an old folk song once cautioned, ‘Don’t mess around with Monongahela Sal!’
Hidden downstairs in the Uptown Fire Station is a workout room, an area for archery practice and a workout room that would make Rocky Balboa envious. The kitchen, with its spices and pans, would make Emeril jealous. The bathroom and sleeping quarters are like remnants of summer camp. The small backyard, with grill and a growing garden, would make any picnic complete.

And that's not all. The main garage, called the bay, is home to a ladder truck and fire engine. There is space for lockers, a basketball hoop and a pool table. The common area is full of mismatched furniture, a big screen television, and a computer with internet access. A small supply area houses extra condiments, an ice cream freezer, and a ping pong table.

Firemen work 24 hours on and 72 hours off. When they are on duty, the firehouse is their home. And between fires, amenities provide entertainment throughout the long hours. “We are like inmates, we can’t leave the compound,” jokes Dale Malleki, a fireman for 18 years. “But when a call comes in we’ve got to be there. Simple as that.”

Located on the corner of Forbes and Stevenson Street, the firehouse sits between Duquesne University’s Public safety building and the AJ Palumbo Center. It is a weathered orange brick rectangle with red handrails. A faded sign is inscribed: City of Pittsburgh, Department of Public Safety, Engine Co. 4, Truck Co. 4, Deputy Chief, Battalion Chief. The firehouse is more than 100 years old.

Head of the firehouse is Captain James O’Conner. He has been captain for six years, although he has been a firefighter for 28.

He sits with his feet propped up on the desk, wearing a T-shirt with a firehouse logo, work pants and work boots. His facial features are as rugged as his job. On this particular day, his crew has just returned from a run and he has reports to fill out.

The best part of O’Connor’s job is “seeing what guys are made of.” He also enjoys the natural rush of fighting fires. However, the downtime “turns into long days” and it can be hard to “deal with different personalities,” he says.

Station four runs on four eight-man shifts; 32 firefighters call it home. Typical days start at 8 a.m. “We go over all the equipment and the trucks get checked,” says O’Conner. “Then we break for lunch.” Afternoons are full of workouts, playing cards, more reports and dinner. When it is finally time for sleep, someone must stay up from midnight to 8 a.m. to screen fire calls.

Lieutenant Jim Overfield is next in command to O’Conner. When he is not out on a call he is usually in the kitchen. Tonight’s menu is pasta with chicken and meatballs in a marinara sauce. His chef skills were “self taught,” says Overfield. “But I don’t do dishes.” Each man contributes $15 of “house money,” which goes for everything from food to cable. If you hear him use terms like “in the field” and “screw shaker” he is referring to the mysterious food that goes missing.

Dale Malleki is also on O’Conner’s shift. His job is to drive the ladder truck. When he is not on duty he helps out fellow firemen with any construction projects, especially laying foundations. “We all use our other skills to help each other out,” says Malleki.

O’Conner, Overfield, Malleki and the rest of their eight-man crew see a lot of action. Servicing Downtown, South Side, Uptown, Oakland and Strip District, Station Four is one of the busiest in the Pittsburgh Fire Bureau.

Typical calls are for first responders, who administer medical care such as CPR, vitals checks and oxygen. Most others are for automobile accidents.

In the Hill District and Uptown, most of the residents are low income, and Station Four makes a lot of first-responder calls. Complaints range from a cold to a hard time breathing, but mostly, O’Conner says, “they just want a ride for free.” After being evaluated, the hospital even gives them a coupon for a cab ride home.

The 2005 incident report for Pittsburgh Fire Bureau supports O’Conner’s claim. In all, 43.3 percent of incidents are for rescue & emergency medical services. The next biggest category is good intent calls, at 15 percent. Good intent calls include steam, vapor, fog or dust mistaken for smoke. Surprisingly, fires account for only 6.5 percent of all calls.

Fires aren’t the only things the men of Station Four battle. In the political arena “we vote together, plus our families,” says O’Conner. “Murphy won by the amount of firefighters.” O’Conner even stands outside the polls handing out literature.

Whether fighting fires or rallying for political candidates, the men of Station Four stand united. From the outside their fire house looks old and worn, but a closer looks reveals so much more.
Mail carrier Walt Tambellini walks past boarded-up houses and barred windows in Soho, the area of Pittsburgh that runs from 1806 Forbes Ave. to the Birmingham Bridge. He dodges junkies and avoids prostitutes. He deals with suspicious business owners and old Pittsburghers.

About a half-mile down, Walt’s co-worker Dominic Fratangelo delivers mail to law firms and office buildings. Dominic banters with well-dressed professionals, shop owners and office aides.

Walt mostly delivers police summonses and government checks.

Dominic mostly delivers mail orders and bank statements.

Two different men, walking two different routes, doing the same job in the same city.

The size of the Uptown delivery area requires three mail carriers, but Dominic and Walt work on opposite ends.


He trudges up three steps, sets the mail in the box, and trots back down. Walt repeats the process for as few as four houses, or as many as 10 that line the blocks of his route. Stoops of three or four steps separate him from the black, and often rusted, mailboxes, but he manages to put off his worst stop of 83 steps until its mail backs up a few days.

“At the end of the day if I sit somewhere for like a half hour and then I get up, my legs are like, blah,” Walt says, pointing to his knees. “Sometimes they hurt me, sometimes they don’t.” His walk indicates he favors one leg over another.

They are blocks apart, but Walt and Dominic walk with pretty much the same labored gait. Both men have been carrying mail since the 1970s, each working the Uptown route for the last 14 or so years and each closing in on retirement.

“I remember when I was a kid coming down here and buying my suit for my first holy communion,” he says. “It was the only store open on Sunday.” He points to faded signs overlooking an alley that reads “Oscar Robbins.”

Dominic parks his car in the Hill district and walks down to the station on Grant Street to pick up his deliveries. A native of Pittsburgh, he knows the rich history of the city as well as the dangers of working in one of its more depressed areas.

“I had one car stolen, a few broken windows,” he recalls. “I hate to say it, but that’s the cost of doing business here.”

“People see mailmen all day,” he says. “Up on the Hill they call you ‘zip code.’”
Walt experiences a similar variety of challenges farther down Fifth Avenue. As he cuts down an alley, a tall man in black-and-white camouflage staggers about 100 feet in front of him. The man notices a visitor with Walt, and ducks into a parking lot.

“He threatened me awhile ago. He said, ‘Don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you,’” Walt says. “He’s a weirdo. It’s his birthday all the time and he wants money.”

He encounters more than weirdoes; pit bulls and Rottweilers pose an equal threat -- they seem to be the breed of choice among Soho residents. A few of those dogs have bitten chunks out of Walt’s bag, but physically he remains intact.

Walt rings the buzzer at a shop and announces himself into the speaker. The door clicks open and he slides the mail inside its designated slot, a security practice common among businesses along the Boulevard of the Allies.

“The people around here, they just walk in on you,” Walt says. “[The businesses] have to be secure.”

The businesses Dominic delivers to are less fortified. When trains transported mail to the city, the business route along Fifth and Forbes Avenues required two to three stops a day. He saunters in and out of private offices in National City Bank and law firms. When he arrives in front of National Fabrics Company, a man on the inside pushes against the door, preventing Dominic from entering. Dominic forces his way in and yells, “Hey Leonard, get down here.”

A man in his 80s walks down from a rickety loft and stands amid cubicles of linens. Leonard Frank, partner at the store, is an unofficial local historian. His son Ira is an unofficial comedian.

“Back in the day, there used to be deliveries at 8 a.m. and 1 p.m. Business was good, and so was the service,” Ira says as he points at his mailman. “When they built the arena, it all went down hill,” and he points to Dominic again. “He’s one of our worthless mailmen.” Dominic chuckles and throws the mail at him. He still has several stops to deliver mail -- and a few jabs -- to his friends.

Whether business owners, residents or “weirdos,” the people of Uptown rely on Walt and Dominic for more than just letters in envelopes: they guarantee human interaction in a dwindling community.

As Walt finishes up his route, an elderly man driving a van pulls up beside him.

“Don’t spy on my mailman,” he warns.

The man drives off. Walt pauses, shrugs and then says, “I never saw that man before in my life.”

A Tale of Two Postmen: Walt Tambellini and Domenic Fratangelo Deliver
Off Colwell Street, in the shadow of the giant monolith known as the Mellon Arena, sits the last of 23 orthodox temples in Pittsburgh. The Beth Hamedrash Hagodol-Beth Jacob synagogue has been a familiar Uptown landmark since it was built in 1963.

At one time, Beth Jacob was a thriving community of faith. Originally established in 1873, Pittsburgh's Yiddish community boasted over 60,000 people and Jewish stores with names like Kaufmann's, Baer's and Frank and Seder's lined the streets with their wares. Synagogue membership was thriving and life was good on the hill. But, by 1970, people began moving to Oakland, Squirrel Hill and the East End, and congregations began to thin out.

Today, Beth Jacob's congregation consists of 50 to 60 people. On average, 10 members visit the synagogue daily.

Keeper of the flock is Rabbi Stanley J. Savage, who came to Pittsburgh in January of 1985. Savage, the leader of three Western Pennsylvania congregations before Beth Jacob, was born to parents who survived the holocaust. He arrived from Poland over 50 years ago. Pauline Cubakovic, secretary at the synagogue since 1997, said that working with Savage is a give-and-take type of relationship. "We help each other. When you need something, the other is there for you."

Inside the white-block building with bright green-colored eaves lie the gems of Beth Jacob. The lower floor houses the Rabbi, which features his life size cardboard mannequin of Larry from The Three Stooges in the doorway, along with an office and a large dining hall. Hallways are lined with pictures and nooks full of bronze name plates featuring small golden memorial lights honoring those who have passed on. A small synagogue with wooden pews, bookshelves lined with aging prayer books and more dedication plaques occupy the sanctuary, which is used for the three prayer services held each day.

The true heart and soul of the house of worship are located on the second floor. Artifacts, photographs and the high synagogue, reserved for holy holidays Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, are located here. A display case features a silver crown, a pair of candelabras, and pictures of the three rabbis that preceded Savage.

The main vestibule also houses the chappah, or bridal canopy, displaying a concrete ceiling so the ceremony may be held indoors in case of inclement weather. Mezuza's, small cases containing tiny parchments with scriptures, are nailed on an angle to the right side of each doorpost as a constant reminder of God's presence.

On a wooden bench sits a stack of yarmulke. These...
skullcaps worn by both men and women are a sign of respect and a reminder that God is above them. In Western cultures, a sign of respect is to remove their hats, the opposite of Jewish faith.

Opposite the glass showcase, is the main sanctuary with its high ceilings and face-to-face stained glass windows depicting symbols of the Jewish religion. Light plays an important role in these windows as it stands for creation, revelation and redemption. On this particular day, rays of warm sunshine beam through the colorful shards of tangerine orange, ocean blue and wine colored glass. All picture stories of faith are held together by a thread of lead. A crown, Star of David, a lion, deer, Chai, menorah and a pillar fire are among the few that radiate with life.

The wooden ark cabinet that encases the sacred scrolls lies directly below. An incense burner with an eternal flame hangs above the altar as does a pair of wooden hands with thumbs touching and fingers separated into three parts giving a special sign of priestly blessing upon the congregation.

Back in the smaller synagogue downstairs a gathering of men cover their heads and recite blessings as Rabbi Savage repeats a series of Amen’s. “We need more people to return to Beth Jacob” says Savage. Perhaps all these prayers will lead to the place of worship no longer being on the endangered list in this Pittsburgh community. The stakes are high, but the impact of losing this sacred ground is much greater.
The people who flock to the Jubilee Soup Kitchen don’t have much to celebrate. The volunteers tending to the flock don’t have much to work with, but they rejoice at making something out of nothing.

Moldy cantaloupes, brown lettuce and canned goods are transformed into fruit and vegetable salads to revive body and soul for the hungry. The volunteers waste nothing, and their resourcefulness feeds approximately 125-150 people a day.

“If I wouldn’t eat it, I wouldn’t serve it to someone,” says Nancy Smith, a Monday volunteer. She cuts around the mold of a cantaloupe, donated from a local vendor and overlooked by the weekend volunteers, in hopes of salvaging some part of the fruit before it rots completely. She eats a piece, and determines it’s still good. She returns to her station to pick the fresh parts off lettuce to make a salad. There’s not much else in the salad this morning: no tomatoes, no cucumbers.

“Usually we have squash or something,” she says. “Today, there’s nothing but lettuce and some onion. It will have to do.”

*It will have to do* — the standing mantra of the Jubilee Kitchen. “I always say if you wanted to kill yourself here you couldn’t. There’s not a decent knife in the place,” Smith says.

Two seminarians assist Smith every Monday. Usually there are two extra pairs of hands, but today they are short-staffed. Michael Peck and Frederick Gruber of St. Paul’s Seminary in Crafton have to pick up the slack.

Smith commands the back kitchen with her six years of experience. She is a retired member of the Pittsburgh Board of Education and teacher to the mentally impaired. Since her retirement, she’s taken up golf and community service.

“There’s not as much interaction as I’d like,” she says. “But sometimes it gets so wild out there, I’m glad I’m in the back.”

Peck and Gruber patiently skin apples, cutting them in bite-sized pieces.

“A lot of people don’t have teeth to chew,” says Gruber. “The skin gets stuck easily, too.”

Gruber relates his experience in the backroom at Jubilee to the writings of Pope Benedict XVI. Benedict wrote about a sense of community and fraternity, a sense that is vividly present in every corner of the kitchen. The hallway holds a sign, “Love one another.” It doesn’t stand out. Not much at Jubilee does.

The volunteers struggle to make a decent meal available. The hungry struggle to Wyandotte Street to make it to the kitchen.

Jubilee is one of the only soup kitchens in Pittsburgh to serve a full hot meal. The patrons wait outside until the doors open at 9 a.m. They sit quietly, heads down at long tables while coffee brews. Once the caffeine starts flowing, the faces liven up, but not by much.

A light breakfast of bagels and muffins is served, but most people are happy to have somewhere to sit with the opportunity of a hot meal in the future. Lunch, opened with prayer and scripture reading, is served at 11:30.

Three hundred sixty-five days a year, the kitchen serves hot meals and compassion to its hungry patrons. Each weekday welcomes a different batch of volunteers, and a regular clientele.

But Jubilee offers more than soup. It offers child care, a food bank, counseling and an array of services to the public.

“All the people out there, if you want their picture, just go to the post office,” a man says. Most don’t willingly give names, or looks, to unfamiliar faces. They are unsure of who they can trust. Kitchen supervisors explain their apprehension because of their “shady pasts.”

Bill Colleran has been volunteering at Jubilee for 14 years. He works in the prep room, going through boxes of donated bread and baked goods and filtering out what’s stale. He checks the date and hardness of food, and separates it accordingly.
"People really like white sliced bread," he says and motions to a loaf of Italian bread. "This will fly fast."

As he mentions the word fast, a man in his 80s saunters in the prep room rambling something. The man answers to the name 'Ed', and he tips his Marine Corps ball cap to the ladies in the room.

The volunteers in the prep room explain, "He's a lady killer." "I'm fine and dandy," Ed says. He speaks so quickly, the words inaudible.

"He speaks in tongues," Bill jokes.

"I certainly don't mind talking to the women," Ed asserts, and then strolls back out to see what's cooking.

He moans when women walk out of the kitchen.

"Can you believe I was with the same woman for 30 years? I had another, but she left. I got bills to pay, and I need a lady," he laments.

Everyone at the Jubilee Soup Kitchen needs something. Ed seems to need a woman more than he needs today's macaroni and cheese, but he's a minority among those hungry for today's meal. The volunteers need more resources and hands. But everyone's existence at Jubilee is exigent on one thing; each other. A small, typed sign in the kitchen reads, "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you come because your liberation is bound with mine, then let us struggle together."
Activist Tonya Payne Knows Uptown

By: Jeff Cech

I was there in the beginning, when it started,” Payne says referring to the Uptown Community Action Group (UCAG). “We were trying to address Uptown’s problems with open drug use, drug sales and prostitution.” The organization cleaned up the neighborhood and sought to provide sustainable housing for Uptown’s less fortunate. “It was just a couple of us humble residents who believed there was power in numbers,” she says.

Though Payne grew up in Garfield, she says her political roots are in Uptown. She’s lived there for 18 years now, and currently resides on Locust Street in the heart of the neighborhood. Her career in politics started with volunteering to help democrats campaign. Then came the Uptown Community Action Group (UCAG).

After being a member of UCAG for about four years Payne was elected to be its president. Her goals included getting local businesses involved to add to the power created when individual citizens rally together.

Under Payne, UCAG worked to positively influence Uptown’s image. Black and gold banners line Fifth and Forbes Avenues between the Cross-Town Exchange and the Birmingham Bridge. UCAG put them there. Payne says they created a physical identity for Uptown, which was commonly called “the area where Duquesne University and Mercy Hospital are.”

Its geographic identity has solidified, but Uptown still has many problems with its identity as a dangerous neighborhood. Payne says there needs to be a greater police presence on the streets between downtown and Oakland. “We need to enforce some of the laws that are on the books,” she explains.

Payne decided to run for City Council to gain the power to create more change, and when she won the election she unseated an incumbent who previously held the office for a full decade.

Councilwoman Payne believes a lot of the crime in Uptown comes out of one raunchy bar. She simply says that the watering hole, “needs to go away...I don’t think they are a legal establishment.” She says that many of the robberies and violent crimes in Uptown are committed by the patrons of this notorious hangout. The bar is also known for being an avenue for heavy drinking and drug use. Payne feels that getting rid of it would solve a lot of Uptown’s problems.

Another solution for Uptown’s problems, according to Payne, would be a casino in the Hill District. She sees it as a jackpot for the area that can provide jobs and economic growth. “Business brings business and people bring business...there will be a need for a grocery store, a convenience store and a Starbucks, whatever,” says Payne. “We have a laundry list of different developments that need to happen and without the casino it just doesn’t happen.”

Prospects of a casino, crime, residential and economic developments across district six keep the councilwoman busy. “I don’t do too much with [UCAG] now because I have too much on my plate,” but Payne believes that she truly speaks for the people of Uptown. “I do have my finger.
on the pulse of Uptown and I know it better than anyone does," she declares.

However, there are those in Uptown who would disagree.

After Payne took her seat on the Pittsburgh City Council, UCAG ceased to be. The organization's website was taken down, and its phones were turned off. Many active members of the organization felt betrayed and were deeply upset at losing UCAG. However, the residents and businesses of Uptown rallied together to create a new group called Uptown Partners (UP).

The proliferation of surface parking lots and possibility of bringing gambling into the area are two issues UP and Payne now find themselves clashing over. Members of UP worry about the effects a casino in the Hill District would have on Uptown.

UP has been working with the city's top development centers including Pittsburgh's Urban Redevelopment Authority and Carnegie Mellon's John Heinz School of Public Policy and Management to develop an action plan. A leader within UP, Jeanne McNutt says, "The community has spent a year developing an action plan that has very concrete goals."

Councilwoman Payne says that disagreements notwithstanding, she has Uptown's best interests at heart. "I will always go an extra mile for uptown because it's where I live," she says. "It's always going to be on the top of my list."
Mercy Hospital:
A Refuge of Caring

“A Lasting Refuge Called Mercy…”

In 1847, the Sisters of Mercy opened the doors of a downtown convent to their first patient, a non-catholic marine boatman passing through on the rivers. It was not until the following year that 1400 Locust St. became its permanent location with a lasting purpose:

“... We carry out our mission through our core values and with a commitment to being a transforming, healing presence within the communities we serve. We promote a healthier community through a continuum of health care services, professional and community education, and research.”

“Commitment to those who are poor: We give priority to those whom society ignores”.

Providing unwavering support and opportunity to the community, Mercy Hospital is an integral member of Uptown and the neighboring Hill District. The Sisters went from running a small institution geared toward those injured in the steel mills, to fixing up victims of the now crime-ridden area.

Mercy Hospital Archivist Kathleen Washy has a dynamic view of the hospital. She knows the Sisters, understands their mission, and has a vast knowledge of the history that has taken place between the building’s thick, brick walls.

“It’s all about our mission,” she said.

By 1851, the average hospital stay was two and a half weeks with 1,072 patients treated and only 82 deaths, according to information found in the Mercy Hospital publication “Pillar of Pittsburgh.” In just eight years, the average cost per patient had increased from $2.04 to $3.35. Of the 232 patients admitted, seventy-five percent were charity cases and only 40 patients paid everything they owed.

Mercy has always been open to all, no matter gender, race, etc., Washy explains. “It’s a long-standing tradition,” she said. “Our doors are always open.”

Community: We demonstrate our connectedness to each other through inclusive and compassionate relationships.

Mercy acts as a haven to members of the Hill District and Uptown communities, and the haven stretches far past basic medical care.
“In times of riots, strikes, wars, epidemics, floods, fires, accidents, unemployment, and personal tragedy, we were here with a positive spirit and a helping hand, President and CEO, Sister Joanne Marie Andriorio wrote in “Pillar of Pittsburgh.”

As a testimony to that statement, when the poor need something as small as cab fare, Mercy is there willing to make a call and supply the money. Washy referred to a beggar she sees on the same corner day after day on her way to work asking for money for a cab or bus. You can go to Mercy any time, but the Sister will make you prove your case, she said jokingly.

As a much larger project, Mercy renovated five row houses in Uptown near to the hospital and sold them at a low rate to poor, single families. “You can’t miss them,” Washy said. “They’re the nicest ones in the area.”

**Stewardship: We care for and strengthen the ministry and all resources entrusted to us.**

It is no secret that Mercy and UPMC are in the process of merging, but perhaps it is a lesser known secret that Mercy also faced a similar challenge in 1960’s.

“They wanted Mercy to move to the suburbs,” Washy said.

Mercy’s renovation plans were denied by the Hospital Planning Association, and when their less than friendly response hinted toward relocation, the hospital took a step back to examine their situation, according to Pillar of Pittsburgh.

With the suggestion from the Association, the Sisters hired a professional hospital planning consultant. By June of 1964, with many changes made, the forward movement of hospital despite strong critics was successful. Mercy reported a net income of over $250,000, according to “Pillar of Pittsburgh.”

“Proper discharge of our stewardship calls for the revolution of Mercy, as promptly as possible, from what has long been primarily an acute-care institution into a medical complex capable of assuring responsibility for the total health needs of our neighbors,” Sister Ferdinand Clark remarked in 1968.

**Integrity: We keep our word and are faithful to who we say we are.**

Washy described the current UPMC merger as “refocusing the mission.”

“We need to take a step back,” she said. “What’s the best way we can fulfill the mission?”

The whole idea behind the merger is so the original mission of the Sisters to care for the poor and sick is carried out, Washy said. “We’re bogged down trying to keep the mission, but we’re only trying to keep the place up and running [now],” she said.

It is partly because of the Sisters’ mission that such financial strain has been placed on the hospital, Washy said. Last year, Mercy gave $25 million to the poor and sick of the community, she said.

According to Washy, Mercy will remain a Catholic hospital. UPMC would run the facility and be in charge of it, and the Bishop and the Diocese of Pittsburgh would have input in the decision making, she said.

“It’s the first Mercy hospital in the world,” Washy said. “And the first permanent hospital here in Pittsburgh, too.”

The Sister of Mercy have beaten the odds and kept alive a hospital strictly based off their mission. The struggling communities the hospital serves...
Five years ago, Cindy Snodgrass and students from Miller African Centered Academy in the lower Hill District started to work on a public art project near the Jubilee Soup Kitchen at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Wyandotte Street in Uptown. The students’ drawings and paintings of flowers created a 100-foot sculptural mural, and with the addition of a garden, they produced “Cultivating Community: Urban Gardens.”

“We definitely wanted something that people would like, and we agreed to put an emphasis on growth,” Snodgrass, an environmental artist, said. “There’s a metaphor between growing a community and growing a garden, and how the action of growing a garden helps to grow a community.”

While she lives in both Leetsdale, Pa. and Cambridge, Mass., not in Uptown, Snodgrass became invested in the community, particularly in the students at Miller, with whom she had worked with on three prior projects. She said “Urban Gardens” was inspired by the children at Miller, but also by the late August Wilson’s play “King Headley II.” Wilson, a Hill District native, wrote a ten-play cycle (one for each decade of the 20th century) that chronicles the African-American experience in Pittsburgh; “King Headley II” is set during the 1980s.

Snodgrass said having a garden in the Hill District was something the main character in the play struggled with, so she drew her inspiration from that theme and decided to create a garden close to where Uptown meets the Hill District.

The Miller students drew flowers, which were then painted on plywood and attached to the mural. On her Web site, Snodgrass wrote that she encourages and sometimes requires students to “collaborate within their larger community” so they have experience in “proposing and realizing installations outside of the studio setting.”

She added: “These kids have a limited understanding of the natural world, and I thought it would be great if the project could bring people’s awareness to gardening and art.”

Although the City of Pittsburgh commissioned “Urban Gardens,” Snodgrass said her early meetings with the city were difficult, as city officials were worried about the permanence of the project and the possibility for vandalism. She didn’t think the project would be vandalized because the students and the community were so devoted to creating it and helping with its production in any way they could.

 “[The city said], ‘No one’s going to let that thing stay for two days; it’ll be ruined.’ And I said, ‘We don’t know that,’” Snodgrass said. “I’ve put pieces out before in areas where you think that’s going to happen, and it hasn’t because people are invested in it. They appreciate it because they know whose cousin or whose brother helped make it. It’s not something strange coming in from the outside.”

In addition to the students at Miller, Snodgrass also worked with the Jubilee Soup Kitchen, people doing community service at St. Benedict the Moor Church in the Hill District.
and students from Quaker Valley High School, where her eldest daughter was a student at the time. Thirty students from Quaker Valley helped to mix cement to support the garden’s wall, and Snodgrass’s daughter brought plants in from the suburbs and got a company to give three truckloads of dirt so the garden could be planted. Snodgrass said everyone, but especially the students at Miller, got a sense of accomplishment and pride out of doing the project.

“People don’t understand how important it is to involve the kids in the growth of their neighborhood, [and how] committed they were to bringing something to life in the area where they live,” she said.

Snodgrass also said that she would enjoy doing another public art piece in Uptown, and wants to work with the students at Miller again. She said that she envisions a place where people could garden, picnic, and maybe even get married. She has the perfect place in mind for such a setting. When she originally looked at possible locations for “Urban Gardens,” she liked the area near the end of the Birmingham Bridge. Snodgrass said if she had had more money, she would have tried to obtain that piece of land for “Urban Gardens” because it’s visible from the Boulevard of the Allies and would have brought more attention to Uptown.

“[People] stay up on the Boulevard of the Allies... they stay up high and they don’t ever come through and they don’t know [about Uptown],” she said. “So what I was hoping to do was put something unique there to give the sense that there’s something to be discovered.”

But with “Urban Gardens,” Snodgrass created just one of the many things in Uptown that’s worthy of being discovered. Even five years later, she gets approached by people who walk by it or ride past it on the bus down Fifth Avenue.

“People tell me about it still. They say, ‘It makes me smile.’”

The Constant Gardener: Cindy Snodgrass Cultivates Community
On a quiet corner at Forbes Avenue and Seneca Street sits the house of God. Although small and simple, this red brick building hosts a weekly celebration that stands in contrast to the otherwise uneventful and desolate Sunday mornings in Uptown.

The 25 members of the Corinthian Baptist Church gather here, tambourines in hand, crisp suits, and starched skirts — eagerly anticipating Sister Parthenia Davis laying her hands on the piano keys to begin a thankful praise to God.

"Gonna stick my sword in the golden sand, down by the riverside! Gonna study war no more!" they joyfully sing, each note reverberating off the stained glass windows lining each wall. Although dark and rundown physically, the church is brought to life and illuminated by the chorus of worshippers lining the pews, clapping and hugging their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Corinthian Baptist Church began as a small congregation at the home of Reverend William Lee on Brady Street in 1921. The first service was held on Easter Sunday, an appropriate day for the birth of a new church community. Gradually, the church began to take shape as they moved to the "Old German Hall" and finally to their current location in 1969. By the grace of God, they were able to raise enough funds and pay for their building, new pews, an altar, a furnace and even remodeling within five years of moving into their new homes.

Sister Mary Broddie, known for always sporting a snazzy hat, is one of the oldest members of the Church, with 40 years of dedication. In addition to being the Superintendent of the church Sunday school, she is a foster grandparent at Mercy Hospital.

"I just want to keep kids involved, and all of us in this area just want to become a community again," Sister Broddie said.

Most of the congregants have moved away from Uptown but they still have fond childhood memories and they continue to make the pilgrimage to Corinthian, driving in from places such as Penn Hills and Stanton Heights.

What brings them week after week are the lively psalms, sermons, and singing. Early in the service, Sister Delores Hicks delivers the weekly children's sermon with the youngsters gathered around her, reminiscent of Jesus preaching to his young followers. "You are special, and God loves you," she says.

"AMEN, LORD!" Sister Ruby Scott proclaims, her voice rising over soft-spoken Sister Hicks.

The service concludes with a call to the altar where everyone holds hands for a final blessing. The service lasts two hours, but time is not an obstacle for those who are devoted to praising God.

Pastor Christopher Glover, an active member of Corinthian all his life and pastor for 28 years, has complete faith in his small but excited church family.

"Even though we don't have the numbers, by virtue of the church's mission we can still give consistency," he says.

Pastor Glover stresses the importance of service to his people and living out the Corinthian's motto: "The church with a vision, and a friendly spirit."

Although this humble congregation doesn't have all the money in the world to give, they offer the best thing they can - the Word of God and their hearts.

One of their most unique projects is the Mime and Puppet Ministry. It is an outreach program for children with Gospel-themed skits and songs, and even special programs with anti-
drug and smoking themes. The congregation consists entirely of African Americans, but serves anyone who may need help.

Parishioners also participate in Fellowship with other churches to worship and to have dinners.

"It's hard to have a celebration without food," Glover jokes. "When you have fellowship and eat, it authenticates the worship."

Unfortunately, though, the area the church occupies has seen better times. Drugs and prostitution have infested the area, much of it coming from the area by Crawford Square, and many of the neighboring buildings are dilapidated. This does not discourage the Corinthians, for their love of God has granted them optimism.

"The community has great potential because of its location," Glover says. "It's just great."

Pastor Glover often incorporates the importance of the community in many of his sermons and favors the plan of salvation from the Book of Romans:

"What will separate us from the love of Christ?" he preaches. "Will anguish, ('NO LORD!' chime in voices from the pews) or distress, or persecution, or famine, ('NO THEY WON'T!') or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. ('THANK YOU JESUS!')"

"Not today, not tomorrow," Pastor Glover concludes, "Nothing can change our commitment."

And they all said, "AMEN!"
Portraits of famous women, from Marilyn Monroe to Mona Lisa, line the common area of Bethlehem Haven. Less famous women pose in front, but there is no artist in line to paint their picture. These women are homeless.

Fifty-two-year-old Kathleen, a current resident of Bethlehem Haven, sits down exhausted and depressed in the conference room. She is wearing a sweat suit and her hair is pulled up in a messy ponytail. Even though she has no teeth, she constantly sips water because of dry mouth, a side effect of her medicine.

Before she explains her current life at Bethlehem Haven, she begins with her story of how she got there.

At thirteen, she started drinking Iron City beer and smoking Winston cigarettes. It was a way to ignore her childhood. “My father had just passed away from diabetes. My mom went back to work. My grandparents moved away and my aunts who lived next door died. The only relative left home was a schizophrenic uncle,” Kathleen said.

Kathleen quit going to school and started drinking - and paying too much attention to boys.

“By age 15 I had abused marijuana, pills, and LSD,” she said after a heavy sigh. Though she managed to get through college at Point Park University with a B.S. in Computer Science, she was in and out of jobs for 20 years.

From ages 13 to 51 she was usually on some type of illegal drug. In those thirty-seven years Kathleen’s life was full of horrors, including abortions, rape and arrests.

“I was clinically depressed most of my adult life,” she said.

The day her third husband died from a cocaine and heroin overdose, Kathleen hit bottom. “After a night of partying, I found him sprawled out dead on the couch,” she quietly notes. She didn’t want to call the paramedics, fearing he would go back to jail.

“I still blame myself for his death,” she said.

Kathleen’s drug use spiraled out of control, and she was in and out of methadone clinics and outpatient treatments. “I finally checked myself into Western Psych,” she said. After a few other clinics, she was referred to Bethlehem Haven on December 9, 2005.

But Kathleen’s story is typical.

Kristin Brown, Development and PR Assistant at Bethlehem Haven said, “some of our ladies have been dealt circumstances most people can’t image. Homelessness can happen to anyone, anywhere.”

Since 1981, Bethlehem Haven has been offered a variety of services, including an emergency homeless shelter. Eventually, it moved from a downtown church to its present location at Fifth Avenue Commons on Watson Street in Uptown.
Once she found a haven

As of September 12, Kathleen has been clean for a year. She attributes her success to several programs offered at Bethlehem Haven.

"The people who work with you have been through similar situations. They really do care," she said.

For example, the Step-Up program, which is dedicated to building independence, provides her with housing for up to two years. Kathleen cooks her own meals, attends drug and alcohol meetings and life skills classes.

"The programs are helpful, but you have to do your own footwork. You have to want it and work for it," she said about recovery.

She wishes she could work, go to school, or volunteer, but some of her medicines are getting in the way.

Kathleen is on Interferon, a drug to fight off Hepatitis C. She thinks she got it from one of her husbands or intravenous drug use, but she's not sure. By visiting the 902 Clinic and the Heath and Wellness Center she was able to be evaluated, counseled and treated medically.

Before she was on the medicine she had a chance to work with animals.

Following in the footsteps of her father, Kathleen choose to intern at the Humane Society through Project Employ. The program is designed to help acquire a higher quality of life by obtaining and maintaining employment. "I'm even thinking about going back to school to become a veterinarian assistant," Kathleen said. She is unsure of what the futures holds, but looks forward to being on her own. She's currently on the waiting list for city/county housing.

Kathleen is not like the paintings on the wall, but she does not care, "as long as I have my peace of mind," she concludes.
In an office suite designed to suggest the familiarity of a grandmother's living room, nine women gather for their weekly meeting. The regulars collapse into the comfort of the L-shaped plaid couch. Others, perhaps unfamiliar with the setup, choose a folding chair.

Almost everyone prepares a cup of fresh-brewed coffee as they walk out of the cold October air and into "Fun Night" at Lydia's Place, a non-profit organization on Fifth Avenue in Uptown that helps female offenders and the children of incarcerated parents rebuild their lives.

These nine women are all participants in the program for female offenders in the upper Hill District. The women are between ages of 20 and 40. Each one is a Caucasian female recovering from substance abuse.

The directors strive to incorporate a valuable lesson into each week's fun. Tonight's lesson: Protecting oneself from sexually transmitted diseases and proper condom use.

"Men should shop for condoms like they shop for shoes," said case manager Jackie Sheplar. "You want it to fit right and you want it to be comfortable."

Her comment made the women giggle like teens at a sleepover. But her lesson, which also included a video from the Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention, was valuable, especially for the women who admitted to never using condoms.

"I don't think I've ever used one before," Kathleen confessed early in the evening. But later she admitted, "Oh yeah, my husband and I bought one in a Primanti's bathroom before."

Lydia's Place opened in 1993 to reach out to women who often find themselves in jail. On a national level, female jail admissions increased by 79 percent between 1991 and 2002.

Participation in "Fun Night," or any of the other programs offered through Lydia's Place, is completely voluntary. The women must want to save themselves from a life of destruction and drug abuse.

That's how Sheplar, a former drug addict, became involved with Lydia's Place - she wanted to reach out to women in the same dangerous situation she was in nearly a decade ago.

"It's about doing something different," she told the women as they sat around a kitchen table, enjoying mushroom pizza, popcorn and fudge brownies. "Mind, body and spirit - that's what's really important."

And, according to director Vicki Sirockman, what's also really important is that Lydia's Place offers a variety of programs that reach out to children and to mothers.

"If you pick one over the other you'll fail and you'll fail bad," Sirockman said.

Lydia's Place claims that on any given day, in any given zip code, there are 7,000 children in Allegheny County with at least one parent in jail. In the past 13 years, they have helped nearly 10,000 women and their children cope with the trauma of incarceration.

In 2005, the non-profit organization managed 70 women with a total of 84 children. Of these women, Lydia's Place was able to assist a majority in finding stable housing, a regular source of income and treatment for drug and alcohol addiction and mental health problems.

In addition to "Fun Night," the six or so employees at Lydia's Place do a lot of work with women still locked inside the Allegheny County Jail. They offer parenting, prenatal and life skills classes, aimed at helping women improve their parenting skills and establish healthy habits.

And their work continues once the women are released because they strive to help them find housing and jobs while living a life free from crime and drugs.

Sirockman, who believes that working primarily with the women is necessary for saving children, was not shy about sharing her personal story with the group of nine who spent 90 minutes at Lydia's Place.

It wasn't easy, the professionally dressed Sirockman explained. She had to convince herself that not seeing her alcoholic ex-boyfriend was the right decision. She had to repeatedly remind herself that she could make it without the drugs. Without the sex. Without stealing from convenience stores.

And now, after nearly a decade of being clean, she was finally able to purchase her dream car and is saving up for an exotic vacation.

Dreams are attainable, Sirockman said. But being able to purchase nice things is not what's most important. It's living more responsibly, knowing you can care for yourself and your child and being able to say no to the drugs, alcohol and people that took away so many years of your life.

"The things that make me happy don't cost a penny," Sheplar told the women.
With its 40-acre campus, population of nearly 10,000 students and 11 schools of study, Duquesne University is without a doubt one of the most prominent institutions of Uptown.

The University's employees, staff and students live, work, play and study in Uptown. Their actions and decisions affect the surrounding community—a community that continually struggles to keep its head above water and depends on successful institutions, such as Duquesne, to help it do so.

That is why people like Evan Stoddard, associate dean for the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts, find it important to get involved in Uptown community organizations. He inspires other university officials and students to do so, too.

"People who live in the neighborhood have a stake in the neighborhood," Stoddard said, adding that Duquesne is an integral part of the community that stretches from the Crosstown Boulevard to the Birmingham Bridge and lies between the Boulevard of the Allies and Fifth Avenue.

Stoddard's involvement in Uptown began nearly 10 years ago when he was asked to serve as a facilitator for the Uptown Community Action Group, where he led discussions that helped leaders focus their energies on specific priorities and problems.

From there, Stoddard challenged a group of graduate students in the Center for Social and Public Policy to become Peace Corp fellows for the Uptown Community Action Group, which, because of a small budget, could not afford to hire permanent staff members.

The fellowship program lasted until 1999. In 2000, Stoddard began teaching an honors seminar focused on service learning projects.

"The classes were a natural outgrowth from my involvement with the community," Stoddard said. "It was convenient for students too because Uptown is so close."

Most Duquesne students, if given the option, would probably not choose to enroll in a service-learning class, where the description on the syllabus reads: "I expect perfect attendance, unless an exceptional circumstance arises."

But close to 80 honor students in five semesters since 2000 have opted to enroll in Dr. Stoddard's honors seminar, where the goal is to find a need in Uptown, design a project that meets those needs and implement that project in the community.

That first semester, students took on a variety of small group projects throughout the Hill District and Uptown. Now, however, students work together on one larger project.

At the beginning of the semester, Stoddard says students are skeptical about working in Uptown, especially when he gives them their first assignment—a walking tour of the neighborhood.

By the time the project is complete, students are significantly more comfortable with the neighborhood.

"In the end, we're all people," Stoddard said.

And those who completed the class couldn't agree more.

"As afraid as I was at first, by the time it came to passing out flyers in the community, I was happy to be able to get a chance to talk to the residents," said Amy Dudash, a junior English major who took the class last spring.

Dudash and 20 other students planned the event "Celebrate Uptown Pittsburgh!" to help support the community's efforts to create a clean, safe and green environment with healthy neighbors and a healthy economy.

The event, held in conjunction with Duquesne's annual Spring Clean-Up Day, also offered opportunities for Uptown residents to learn about energy conservation, drug and alcohol abuse, as well as sexually transmitted diseases.

"The day of the project itself was definitely the best experience of the whole class," said sophomore journalism major Kelly Horein. "Seeing all the work we had done over the past semester in action was such a great and satisfying feeling."

Those enrolled in Dr. Stoddard's seminar aren't the only Duquesne students who have the opportunity to participate in Uptown service projects. The Duquesne University Volunteers also place students in a number of Uptown's volunteer programs.

Stoddard loves the people who are committed to improving the community and dislikes those who only want to make a dollar off the neighborhood. He remains still involved in Uptown and continuously offers advice and suggestions on how Uptown and other institutions, such as Duquesne, can better the community.

Throughout his research and involvement, Stoddard has learned the most important steps toward success in Uptown are to create a sustainable organization, strengthen efforts to clean and beautify the community and encourage commercial and residential developments.

And Duquesne, with its location, resources and intelligent students and faculty, can play a large role in making those things happen.

"Wherever we are, we have a responsibility to make the world a better place," Stoddard said.
There’s no twirling barber pole, not even a colorful neon sign. There is, however, an inviting slogan for shaggy-haired pedestrians strolling through Uptown: “To look your best, come to Archie’s Place.”

Archie Creighton is by no means a flashy guy. But he’s confident. Confident in his ability to trim your top better than any other barber. However, if first-time customers are wary about the competence of Archie and the quality of his barber shop, all they need to do is ask the old man.

“Ain’t nobody better than me,” Archie says, slouching in his barber’s chair during a Saturday morning lull in business. “I let my work speak for itself.”

The reason Archie considers his barber shop superior is simple: He’s been cutting hair for more than 64 years. And up until the recent deaths of his co-workers Louis Robinson and Tommy Hays, his whole staff had been barbers almost all their lives.

Previously run by a crew of elderly gentlemen, Archie says the barber shop became known as “The Old Man’s Barber Shop.” Old is the most accurate description of Archie’s Place. In a way, Archie’s Place is a microcosm of the neighborhood it resides in. It’s small. It’s aging. And unfortunately, it’s dying.

Today, Archie works alone, except for the few hours a week his nephew assists him in the shop. Throughout his career as a barber in the Hill District and Uptown, Archie says there “ain’t
too much I haven’t seen,” but although he’s seen neighborhoods, hairstyles and his clientele change, Archie and his shop have pretty much remained the same.

Carefully shaving the lathered head of first-time customer Jeffrey Grant, 20, Archie explains how important experience is in the barber shop business.

“You can cut yourself awful easy if you don’t know what you’re doing,” he says.

The manner with which Archie cuts can only be described as delicate. He prides himself on his steady hand and his ability to finish a customer quickly at his age.

“I’m 85 years old, and I ain’t nervous or nothin’,” Archie says, holding out his arms to display his unwavering hands. “I can still cut hair in 20 minutes and cut it right.”

Archie’s Place hasn’t always been located on the main drag headed downtown, however. His barber shop on Fifth Avenue started in 1980, but Archie and his buddies got started in the business blocks away in the Hill District. Archie and Hays learned their craft at the Crystal Barber Shop on Wylie Avenue in the 1940s when “cuts were 85 cents,” Archie says.

Although times have changed, Archie’s mindset toward pricing hasn’t. A haircut at Archie’s Place is only $10. Archie’s Place caters to Uptown’s low-income residents.

Eddie Morris, Archie’s brother-in-law, opened Morris’ Barber Shop on Centre Avenue in the Hill District in 1952. Archie perfected his skills there and later took over the barber shop when it moved to Fifth Avenue in 1980.

Archie says all but one of the guys he used to cut hair with have passed away. The deaths of his coworkers, however, aren’t the only changes he’s witnessed.

“The neighborhood’s changing altogether,” Archie says. “I’ve seen all kinds of changes.”

Archie attributes his knowledge of Uptown’s evolution to his barber shop’s prime location.

“When you’re in this barber shop, you always know what’s going on in the streets,” he says. “There’s always somebody coming in talking about something.”

Although Archie says he enjoys what he does and he would like to do it until he’s 100, he hasn’t always been enthused by some of the changes he’s witnessed, both in his customers and in the neighborhood. Archie says he and his coworkers used to battle with the fads and trends in hairstyles.

“They used to wear those big ol’ afros,” he says. “I don’t do that no more.” Today, Archie forgoes the fancy cuts. He likes the straightforward trims and shaves, instead.

When Grant’s time in the chair is done, Archie points with pride to his work. “You look good,” he says. After Grant strolls out of the barber shop, Archie expects the man to return for his next cut.

“That boy’s as happy as he can be,” he says. “He’ll come back.”

As the only man left in Archie’s Place, it’s Archie’s job to uphold the standards of “The Old Man’s Barber Shop.” Although Archie’s Place is strikingly similar to the neighborhood surrounding it, Archie likes to think one aspect of his shop is nothing like the streets of Uptown.
The building on the corner of Jumonville Street and Fifth Avenue in Uptown has a long history. It's been a chiropractic college, an office, a repository for a chemical company, the home of Italian immigrants who ran a funeral home across the street, an Elks Hall and a photography studio. Now it's home to Soho Invention, a design firm.

Soho Invention works on print communication, exhibit design, Web development and multimedia services. The company, which has been around since 1983, has its roots Downtown. But in 1993, founder and president Dale McNutt bought the company from his partner, renamed it, and moved it to Uptown.

The company reinvented itself, and now Dale McNutt and his wife, the vice-president of the company, Jeanne McNutt, are determined to help reinvent Uptown. In 2002, after renting for 12 years and continuing to expand their office space, the McNutts bought the building. Through their renovation, an eyesore has become something beautiful.

"We feel really great about giving this building back to the community," Jeanne said. "It completes the corner, and gives the corner an anchor."

Photographs from 2003 show a dilapidated building with dirty windows and peeling paint. Now, the red brick is set off by bright green shutters, new windows and a wrought-iron fence and gate. Starting in 2004, Dale and Jeanne began to make improvements to the building, starting with necessities such as plumbing and lighting. Architect Paul Rosenblatt led the work on the exterior of the building, which involved painting, replacing windows, repairing the roof, and having the bricks cleaned and pointed. Dale and Jeanne are still making improvements - by next year, they hope to install an elevator and put an addition on the roof, which will become their apartment.

Dale echoed Jeanne's thoughts about giving the building back to Uptown.

"By renovating a building in a community like this, it helps the self-esteem of the whole community develop," he said.

Part of the building's renovation also involved building a courtyard entrance to the studio. At this entrance, the McNutts' dog, a chocolate standard poodle named Jersey, greets visitors. Inside, there's a small, attractive kitchen with a concrete floor (this part of the building used to be a garage) which opens into a large studio space. Soho Inventions' design projects are everywhere, including exhibit signs for the new Louis Comfort Tiffany exhibit at the Carnegie Museum of Art, and a brochure blown up to poster-board size in bright pinks, blues and greens, that reads, "Uptown: On its way up!" It highlights the many assets of the neighborhood, including the easy access to Downtown, the South Side and Oakland; the variety of businesses; and the potential for housing and retail development.

"Uptown is a great place to be."
Dale said, "There's access to the East End and downtown, and it's a central location for businesses. You can walk to the Cultural District in 15 minutes. There's also the Duquesne University campus, and most people don't know what's up there or how nice it is."

In addition to her work at Soho Invention, Jeanne is involved in revitalizing Uptown as the chair of the housing and economic development committee of the Uptown Task Force. Its goals include involving the businesses on Forbes and Fifth Avenues to form an active group that combines the community and businesses in Uptown. It grew out of the need for an organization other than the Uptown Community Action Group to work on improving the neighborhood.

"We don't need more parking lots in Uptown," Jeanne said. "We need a supermarket, pharmacy, a decent coffee shop - things that will allow people to meet their neighbors in a safe environment. Parking lots are not conducive to this. An excess of parking lots devalues the community and its potential for positive growth."

She added, "We hope our public servants and elected officials will listen to the community and our plan."

Jeanne acknowledges that there's still a long way to go before Uptown becomes the vibrant place she thinks it could - and should - become. She said that it's more than just a place that people drive through on their way from Oakland to Downtown. And people are starting to realize that.

"People are waking up to the fact that we're more than just a connecting link," she said. "We're a community."

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Workstation at Soho Invention where employees work on graphic design and advertising.
A customer gets "last-chance" gas at Barber's Gulf Station on Fifth Avenue.

HARRY BARBER'S GULF STATION:
AN ISLAND OF STABILITY IN UPTOWN

By: Brian Mozuch
The office, like most of Uptown, hasn't changed in a while. It has all the trappings of a full-service Gulf station. Faded auto parts magazines stacked and yellowing near a sunny window, vending machines with a slight hum and a wise old man resting his leg on a steel desk, leaning back in his usual chair with its usual view.

"Supposed to bother me when it rains," says the man, Harry Barber, 69, of his hip. "The older I get the better it feels. They say I need a new hip, eventually." Barber has owned what is now the only gas station in Uptown since 1968. That's seven presidents ago, when gas was a little more than 25 cents a gallon.

Every now and then, a black rotary phone rings, or Barber shuffles out to service a customer. He braves the weather to pump the gas, check the oil and wipe the windows. It's service, he says, that a lot of downtown professionals enjoy on morning commutes.

"Attorneys dressed to see a judge, or hospital workers in their blues, don't want to spill gas," he explains. He's seen a lot of customers in his time here, but in the past several years he's been seeing fewer and fewer. In 1999, he stopped 24-hour service.

"There wasn't anything left. No bars or stores. Traffic died down to a bare trickle. The neighborhood is very quiet," says Barber.

He remembers when the neighborhood was different when his station was a Sunoco, then a Citgo, before becoming a Gulf. He remembers when there used to be "schools and apartment buildings. There were five furniture stores, two or three real estate places, markets.

"Everything that has moved to the suburbs used to be here. Now it's predominantly parking," says Barber.

Like a lot of Pittsburgh neighborhoods, Uptown saw a decline in people after the mills closed. Buildings that needed upkeep didn't get it. He cites the race riots in the 60s and the gas shortages of the 70s as landmarks in his memory when the neighborhood lost people. Although, in his time managing the station (which still carries the original name, Bruno's), Barber has kept one person around, Ernie Mahaffey.

When first asked how long he's worked at the Gulf, Mahaffey chuckles slightly. "Long time, long time," he says. "Pick a year." Mahaffey and Barber both used to live in Uptown. Mahaffey lived on Dinwiddie Street before moving to Beltzhoover, and Barber lived on Collin Street before he moved to the South Side slopes with his wife in 1962.

Mahaffey has seen a lot since then, but says little about it. He's soft-spoken, but looks every bit the helpful station attendant in a worn-in pair of jeans and thin blue shirt, complete with the nametag bearing his name, "Ernie," in red cursive letters. Every now and then a passing motorist honks hello, or shouts a 'Hey Ernie!' his way. He remembers an Uptown that was "more like a neighborhood. Schools, apartment buildings, it generated business. In the old days, laundromats and supermarkets and stores used to be all around."

Now, all that's around are more parking lots, according to Mahaffey. He doesn't spend much time thinking about neighborhood revitalization, and his thoughts on the issue echo Barber's. "I wonder why they tear stuff down instead of refurbishing," he says. "Old buildings are in better shape. They tear stuff down, nobody puts anything up to replace it."

Harry Barber doesn't see much change coming for his station or the community it serves. He doesn't know much about switching over to a self-service convenience store, and even if he wanted to, he couldn't afford it. Like Uptown, the money for change got spent elsewhere. In Barber's case, it was a large loan to upgrade his pumps to meet state regulations. As for Uptown, he feels money it deserved was spent on the Hill District instead.

"All the money's up on top," he says, pointing. "New houses, new buildings, new yards. That's where they put the reconstruction money." He's in favor of a new casino, a new arena, a new anything that "provides employment for a large amount of people. That'd be good."

Mahaffey shares that view, although he feels the casino is only a good idea "for those who can afford it." And those who can't? "I don't have a clue," he says. Mahaffey mulls for a moment, and then comments briefly that the money might be better used for more diverse developments. "What about the people that need jobs?"

In this old office, Barber and Mahaffey know their jobs are secure. This Gulf station has weathered the economic downturns these two have seen erode the neighborhood from a vibrant urban community to a veritable ghost town, a go-between stretch of road from Oakland to Downtown. Of all the faded, dusty and damaged things that seem to have a place in this office, there is something slightly odd. Underneath the desk where Barber rests his leg, a cardboard box houses two sleeping cats.

"They like it here," says Barber. The cats could leave, but choose not to. "The door's open," he adds. The cats, like their caretakers, seem to quietly enjoy their time in a familiar gas station office in the standstill neighborhood of Uptown.
A man in a white sweat suit tosses a cigarette to the ground, stubs it out with his foot, exhales and opens the door to Grifols PlasmaCare. He says hello to the staff and to Eddie, a regular.

PlasmaCare welcomes roughly 1,000 donors like Eddie every week. Some are familiar, some aren't. "Seventy percent of our customers are regulars. Some are college students, it just depends," Reyne Palfreyman said.

Palfreyman, the manager, has worked in three different PlasmaCare locations more than 17 years: Downtown, McKeesport and Uptown. The downtown location moved to Uptown in 1985.

The Uptown facility was a welcome retreat from the seedy, downtown location. "I've worked both places, and to tell you the truth, there were problems when I worked there," Palfreyman said. "There were times I didn't feel safe at all being there after dark."

Assistant Manager Michael Dixon, a suburbanite, left work after dark on his first day at the Uptown location. "I was frightened to death walking down the street, and I was a grown man. But then you realize everyone around here knows each other ... there's a strong sense of community."

Palfreyman tries to help an area otherwise known for depressed economic conditions. "There are a lot of underemployed people. They use this money so they can get something to eat, or to ride a bus."

Uptown's geography is also linked to the crime-plagued Hill District. "People drive past and see them [residents] sitting outside and assume they're causing trouble ... what it really is, is people sitting on stoops outside their houses. In the suburbs you can go out in your backyard or sit on a deck. Here, our neighbors don't have any of that, so they sit on their stairs and talk - that is their yard," Palfreyman said.

Taking a walk through Uptown is like exploring the attic of your grandmother's house. "There's a soup kitchen down the road, great restaurants and bars all over the place, there is a lot of activity going on in this area and it's a tragedy for people to miss out on it," Dixon said.

Duquesne student Shannon McCarthy has donated plasma many times. "It's a quick and easy way to make some cash, but it keeps me thinking about my nutrition and health, which is easy to forget about in college," she said.

McCarthy's experience started as a joke posed by a friend who mentioned she could sell plasma. "I thought it sounded like a good idea, so I looked up how to do it and what the risks were and then got the nerve to do it."

Despite thoroughly researching the process, McCarthy didn't want to wind up light-headed like she did after donating blood in high school. "I was really nervous ... I didn't know how weak it would make me feel or how sanitary the place would be."

McCarthy left her first donation like a kid trying broccoli for the first time - she realized it wasn't too bad. "It was worth it. I was only on the machine for 30 minutes - they told me it was a record - it didn't disrupt my day and I didn't get sick."

College students like McCarthy can benefit from donating plasma. Your first
"I didn’t know how weak I would feel or how sanitary the place would be."

donation earns $15 and the second $25. "$40 a week for sitting back and watching movies seems like a pretty good deal to me," McCarthy said.

PlasmaCare provides television, beds and a free parking lot for donors. "We want our donors to come here and feel comfortable with their surroundings and what they are about to do," Dixon said.

"You do get money, that’s true, but at the same time you are helping save someone’s life, and that’s our main goal," Dixon said. 

Vincent Hill, Kriss McConnell, and Eddie Poindexter wait to take information from a new donor at the Plasma Care center in Uptown Pittsburgh.
Every streaking bike and trike on the deck comes to a halt with a new discovery.

"Preschool, if you want to see a bug, come on over," Ms. Jaimie yells over the children. Everyone huddles around the bug crawling sluggishly across the deck.

"It’s brown, it has six legs. These things” -she points- “are called antennas.”

Enamored, some of the children start poking at the bug, talking to it, and giving it leaves to eat in their enthusiasm. Afraid for the bug, Ms. Jaimie takes control.

She scoops it onto a leaf.

"Maybe he’ll go in the tree so he doesn’t get stepped on. We don’t want him to get stepped on, do we?” asks Ms. Jaimie. The children all watch anxiously as their teacher places this bug, this insignificant, personality-less thing, into the refuge of the tree.

AN OASIS IN THE PROJECTS

The children who attend the John Heinz Child Development Center in Uptown, blocks from one of the most dangerous sections of Pittsburgh, wouldn’t dream of hurting an antenna on that bug’s head. Children from weeks to five years old are watched here, a Meiji Stewart poem inside the front door makes the laws in this mic community. The 26-line poem begins:

Children are …
Amazing, acknowledge them
Believable, trust them
Children are … Childlike, allow them
Ms. Joyce just finished serving the children a homemade lunch of ribs, mashed potatoes, peach and pineapple squares, and a little something special.

“They’ll get a surprise from Ms. Joyce,” she says to the other staffers. “They’ve been pretty good. I think they deserve chocolate milk.”

“Thank you Ms. Joyce,” says four-year-old James after she filled his cup.

The staff cares for seven infants, six one-year-olds, six two-year-olds and 11 preschoolers up to five years old. Most of these children spend Monday through Friday, up to 11 hours a day, at the center. But unlike the surrounding crime-ridden streets, these children know no enemies, only friends.

“We sing a song every day – ‘Make new friends, keep the old. One is silver and the other is gold,’” says Ms. Joyce Gloster, preschool’s teacher’s aide.

Though friends may be the only riches many of the children here have, their parents are all working to change that.

Parents must work at least 20 hours a week or be in school to bring their children here. The cost is whatever the parent or family can afford for child care, maybe only $25 a week. The rest is covered by the Department of Welfare and Child Care Partnerships (CCP).

Consequently, the center is not the wealthiest -- but it is certainly no slouch.

“This is not a cookie-cutter kind of center,” Ms. Jennifer says, meaning they don’t have all the necessities a university-supported center might. “We work with what we have and it isn’t necessarily perfect, but it’s what we’re dealt.”

Still, there are always enough resources for fun, like when the zoo visits next week.

“We usually go to the zoo,” Ms. Joyce says. “This is the first time the zoo is coming here. I don’t know what they’re going to bring,” she says with childlike curiosity.

Children are …

Innocent, delight with them

After lunch comes, of course, afternoon nap time.

Though Ms. Jaimie – Jaimie Szafranski, head preschool teacher – has cut the lights, some are still finishing their meals. Three little boys – two black; Tre’von, 3, and Amaru, 3, one white, James – sit laughing together and gargling their milk, not as boys of two races, but as three equal friends.

Ms. Joyce has just put on classical music for the children to fall asleep to, but their musical exposure does not end with soothing sounds of sleep.

Every Thursday, Ms. Clark comes in and teaches the four and five-year-olds music, and every Friday, the same group takes violin lessons from Ms. Lucy.

Many of these children go home at night to depleted neighborhoods and welfare homes, some of which can’t afford to feed their children dinner. But here, in the confines of the center, these children get every opportunity life could offer.

Children are … precious, value them

Kids are Seen – and Heard

This daycare is not just a daycare, it is a preschool learning facility. It is a child’s fantasy land in the midst of the projects. Every child gets work every day on their cognitive, motor and language that they might not otherwise get at home.

All of their activities, Ms. Jennifer says, are guided by feedback from the children.

“Our children are very verbal, and we want them to be. They need to learn how to communicate. Here, they are heard and seen,” says Ms. Jennifer with her eyes aimlessly scanning the ever-active room.

“It’s a great thing to have a place like this in a low-income neighborhood [where the kids are] being watched by the best. I say we’re the best,” Miss Joyce says. The kids are the proof.

“A lot of them don’t want to leave. [At the end of the day] some kids start crying.”
Khoury’s Market sets on the corner of Forbes and Miltenberger. It’s a small convenience store where Orange Crush is sold in large glass bottles. They have three cereals to choose from: Corn Flakes, Rice Krispies and Raisin Bran. One of the two boxes of Corn Flakes on the shelf has a badly crinkled corner. Right next to the cereal is the toilet paper, and right by that are boxes of Reynolds Wrap and garbage bags. At Khoury’s, customers can grab a hot sandwich for take-out. The aroma of home cooking wafts from behind the deli counter. There’s a freezer case filled with TV dinners and boxes of frozen chicken by the register.

Khoury’s Customers are a mix of neighborhood residents and people who work in Uptown. They are all regulars. One elderly woman comes in to buy a pack of Newports and lottery tickets each day. Another customer, a young man named Dave Collins who works at a film business around the corner, says he comes into Khoury’s every day for a sandwich. Dave Mahoney works at the Pioneer building a few doors down from Khoury’s and says he comes to the market because the “food’s fresh; if you want something cold, it’s cold, and they’re very friendly people.”
One truck driver stops mid-route, pulls his Mack truck up onto the sidewalk by the store, and runs in to grab a quick meal and a pack of smokes.

Khoury's Market is owned by George Khoury. The gray-haired man sports a mustache and a half-apron while he manages his shop. He opened up Khoury's Market at 1800 Forbes Ave. in 1958. At that point, it was a full-scale grocery store, but according to Mr. Khoury, "times change, and you've got to change with the times." He fondly recalls when "he used to cut meat by hand with a saw, but those days are gone." Mr. Khoury can best be described as a careful shop-keeper. He runs the register and the lotto machine while his wife, Suzie, and Vicky S., one of Khoury's employees, makes food behind the deli case filled with meats, cheeses and a pan of pickles.

The deli is in the back of the store. The ceiling is higher in the front, and wooden shingles cover a sort of awning that hangs over the deli case. It is reminiscent of a beach bungalow. Another sign hangs on the back wall, "Suzie Q Deli, Home of the $3.99 Reuben." Mrs. Khoury is quiet, but smiles delightfully while she hums around the store. She lights up, pleased to explain that the Suzie Q Deli was named for her.

The Khourys lived above the market for over 30 years, but, Mr. Khoury says, he "had to move out of the neighborhood, it got too bad." An iron trellis gate fences in the corner store, and a sign in front of the market explains that cameras are keeping an eye out. Khoury's market has been robbed seven times. Mr. Khoury leans across the counter, and speaks in a soft voice: "Once guys came in with guns, wearing ski masks, and made Vicky lay down behind the register," while they robbed the store. "She was scared," he explains, "It's a tough neighborhood."

Vicky keeps the mood in the market bright even though the neighborhood isn't the best it's been. She has a way of making bad news sound good. "Today's special is hot sausage, we ran out, but I just made some meatballs."

The meatball hoagie is loaded with hot tomato sauce and delicious meatballs. The Reuben is done in the classic style. Both come wrapped in aluminum foil. The two ladies cook on a regular kitchen stove in the deli section of the store that adds a homey feeling to the place.

Behind the counter a collage of cartoons and helpful expressions cover a few feet of wood paneling. One cartoon depicts a crane standing in a pond trying to eat a frog. The amphibian defiantly reaches out of the bird's beak and wraps its hands around the crane's throat. The caption reads, "don't ever give up." It's a perfect depiction for the little store.

Mr. Khoury claims "hard work" has been his secret in keeping the business open over the past 48 years. "I think it was Thomas Jefferson who said genius is 98 percent hard work and 2 percent genius," says Khoury. He may not be a corner store market genius, but on the corner of Forbes and Miltenberger, Khoury's has certainly cornered the corner store market. OIB
Old, run-down houses are commonplace in Uptown. Many streets are lined with them. But, on one street, across from a row of boarded up houses, sits a bright green, brick building with two large, open windows, funky light fixtures, and a big, fancy wooden door. The building, owned and operated by SunKing Interactive Group, looks more like a building found on the streets of New York City, not on Gist Street.

Although the building itself may not seem to fit on the street, SunKing Interactive Group partner and executive producer Jon Kasunic does. Kasunic, who joined with SunKing in 2001, knows everyone in the neighborhood. He attends his neighbor James Simon’s art openings and is a volunteer at Jubilee Soup Kitchen on Wyandotte Street.

“There’s a lot of stability in the neighborhood; there’s a lot of full-time residents,” Kasunic said. “We have some real characters here.”

SunKing bought the 8,000 square-foot building in 2004 after it outgrew its space on the South Side.

“Let’s be honest, the South Side was getting expensive and we didn’t want to move Downtown because of parking,” Kasunic said. “Our location [on Gist Street] is accessible to all areas because we’re right on the Boulevard.”

But, moving their business to Uptown wasn’t an easy task for Kasunic and his partners. Kasunic, who went to the University of Pittsburgh with the owner of the grip-and-lighting company next-door to SunKing’s current location, began looking in Uptown after he saw how much his friend liked the neighborhood.

Like many of the buildings in Uptown, this building needed a lot of work.

“We gutted the entire building. The only thing still from the original building is the steel beams,” Kasunic said as he pointed to the ceiling.

The space, a former type-setting house that had 20 to 30 individual rooms at one time, is today one big, open space with about ten desks and top-of-the line computer equipment along both walls.

SunKing is a digital marketing agency that uses offline and online marketing, viral marketing, digital advertising campaigns, Web sites and billboards to reach a client’s audience. The company produces all of its work in-house. Writers, designers, planners, filmmakers, researchers, artists and developers are all on staff to develop digital solutions for clients such as Coca-Cola, American Eagle, Education Management Corporation, General Electric and Transitions Optical.

Currently employing 15 people, the space on Gist Street provides the perfect amount of room for growing into a “40 person company,” Kasunic said.

“It made a lot of sense for us to create our own little neighborhood,” he added.

And although most of the work is done on the Web, clients that do visit from out of town are impressed by the area.

“They think it is a pretty nice, artistic-looking space. They don’t think ‘Whoa, you’re in Uptown,’” Kasunic said. “They just love it.”

Since its move, SunKing’s business has really taken off. Even its clients have diversified.

“The move gave us space not just to spread our wings, not just as a practical matter, but creatively,” he said.

Although the location on Gist Street has been ideal for SunKing’s business, other businesses are more hesitant to make the move.

“It’s a blighted area,” Kasunic said. “Pittsburgh has never had the rapid growth. We’re not going to get an anchor tenant like Barnes & Noble up here.”

But Uptown does need more local businesses, like SunKing, to invest in the neighborhood, he said.
"[The neighborhood] is never going to be what it was 100 years ago with children on the streets and synagogues and churches, but having more business move to the area is a start," he added.

According to Kasunic and his partners, the biggest obstacle keeping businesses from moving into the Uptown neighborhood is crime.

"It's tiring for the neighbors to have to put up with the crime," Kasunic, who has to call 911 all the time, said. "Until the police push out the crack dealers and prostitutes, businesses are not going to come here."

According to the Pittsburgh Police Department, from January 2006 to June 2006, nine counts of robbery, 25 counts of burglary, 50 counts of theft and seven counts of motor vehicle theft occurred in Uptown.

But for Kasunic, a solution is not out of reach.

"Pittsburgh needs to pull together a plan to make the neighborhood greener and safer," he said. "We really need more of a presence here from public safety; we need the police to be more vigilant."

However, Kasunic and his partners don't see SunKing moving from Uptown anytime soon. Even if it outgrows its space on Gist Street, Kasunic can't imagine SunKing being anywhere else.

"We have a flat roof, we can always build up," he jokes. "We're here, we're happy; even if the neighborhood doesn't change we're staying."
With the tremendous amount of demolition and gentrification occurring on the Bluff, one might wonder: "Is there any part of Uptown still left?"

Well, yes, actually. And one of the main institutions doing some of that demolition—Duquesne University—has made sure that at least one of Uptown's most historic businesses will remain right next door. In fact, inside the University's doors.

Joe Madia's Barbershop, about one block off-campus on Magee Street, has been doing business in Uptown for more than 80 years, and Duquesne has made sure that the shop will have a home for many more years to come by reserving space for it in its forthcoming multipurpose recreational center on Forbes Avenue.

"About 2,000 square feet," says shop owner Kevin Kappel, a barrel-chested, dark-haired man with so much Italian about him that you don't even need to ask.

Officially though, Kappel is the grandson of former shop owner and Italian Joe Madia (pronounced MAY-dee-uh).

But Madia was not the shop's first owner, which may surprise some.

"His uncle owned the shop originally, and his name was also Joe Madia," explains Kappel. "My grandfather was actually Joe Madia III, but he was still just 'Joe Madia,' know what I mean?"

Kappel's grandfather became owner of the shop around the mid-1960s, and Kevin began working at Madia's when he was only 12 years old, filling-up cream bowls for the post-cut shaves.

That was way back when the shop was still at its first location on Forbes Avenue. Madia followed the store to its second location on the corner of Magee and Forbes and remained involved there all the way until about a year before his death in 2001. He was 87.

Kappel, 35, who took over official ownership of the shop from Madia around 1998, shares it with his wife Angel, whom he has been with since high school. Along with the shop, they also share two children—boys Kevin Jr., 15, and Dakota, 10.

Kappel opens Madia's every weekday at 6 a.m., when it looks no different outside than it does at 10 p.m.

"Back in the day when the steel mills dominated Pittsburgh, they worked shifts," says Kappel. "If you were on that late shift, you would sleep all day, so my grandfather opened up early to accommodate them. We just never changed it."

Sure enough, on a recent Monday morning, a customer was waiting outside the shop before Kappel even showed at 6 a.m. Only this man was no steel mill worker; he was an accountant.

"Yeah, we get all sorts of guys in here," says Kappel. "Lawyers, judges and, like this guy, an accountant. I hear all sorts of stuff."

But what kind of stuff? Certainly, Kappel is in a unique position to hear some of
the city's most lurid secrets. After all, a barbershop's a comfortable place, and Pittsburgh's most important people may let their guard down for a bit.

"I already know who's getting the slots license," says Kappel. "Don't ask me how, but I know."

"The new arena's still coming though," he continues. "All of the land has been bought. But you watch; that arena and Duquesne's new project is going to completely change this place, eventually.

"I don't think the slots are a good idea here though. I've already had my window broken a few times," he says, hinting at the notion that gambling in Uptown may bring more crime.

"There's a camera inside and outside of this place," he says. "You can never be too careful, but for the most part, we're alright."

The cameras come in handy even for things not directly related to Joe Madia's.

"When the shootings happened at Duquesne, the police asked to see my tapes," says Kappel. "There was nothing on them, though."

The shop's ties to Duquesne by no way end there.

"Duquesne students are like our Christmas bonus," he says. "They're good to us."

And understandably so. Duquesne is literally right across the street from the barbershop, and Kappel is looking forward to actually being on campus in about one year.

So how much longer will Joe Madia's Barbershop be Joe Madia's Barbershop? "Until I hit the Powerball," says Kappel.

And since the odds of winning the Powerball are one in several million, it appears that the old shop will be with us for quite awhile. Not that that's a bad thing.
If you walk across Fifth Ave, at the corner of Fifth and Logan, and your nose catches the smell of fresh ribs cooking on an open flame, you're probably standing in front of Mr. Ribbs restaurant in Uptown. Walking up to the restaurant, you first pass a huge metal grill that can cook up to 10 racks of ribs. Upon entering the restaurant, you are greeted at the counter with a smile and a "what can I get for you today" by owner James Posey.

Posey, 53, Brookline, has seen many things change in his business and in the surrounding Uptown neighborhood. “This neighborhood is like night and day. It’s like a line separating the two parts, the good and the bad. Up past Citizens Bank is the bad and down here is the good,” Posey said. According to Posey, his business is not affected by the “bad element” in Uptown because, “they never seem to go beyond that line.”

“There is a lot of change going on here in Uptown, we’re all aware of it, and we’re all open to it. It’s about time,” Posey said.

Starting out as a manager for Kentucky Fried Chicken for more than 20 years, Posey knows the fine points of the restaurant business. “I had an idea for a place of my own and it took me a while to get it together, but I’ll never look back,” he said. It took Posey close to a year to perfect his signature spicy rib sauce. “I worked on it every time I had some spare time to get it just right. I fed a lot of friends some of my recipes, and when their eyes opened real big and nodded their head when they took that first bite, I knew I had the winner,” he said.

Mr. Ribbs is a full-service restaurant offering eat-in and take-out services, but it also has a catering service that is in demand for weddings and fund raisers. A huge smile crosses Posey’s face as he talks proudly about the catering end of the business. “We just catered for WQED not too long ago, and we get regular calls for parties and weddings,” Posey said.

Posey has just three other employees to manage the time between regular business hours and getting food ready for catering jobs. “It gets hard to manage some time, but we seem to get by,” Posey said.

Mr. Ribbs is doing more than just getting by. Businesses have come and gone in Uptown, leaving behind only vague memories and empty store fronts. Mr. Ribbs is one of the few to withstand the test of time in Uptown. Joe Madia’s barbershop, Shale’s Pub and Mr. Ribbs are connected not only by the close proximity to each other, but also because they have all been in Uptown more than 10 years.

Bob Traupman, 35, Springhill, works at Joe Madia’s and knows what it takes to have a successful business in Uptown. “This is the heart of the city, the Hill, Uptown. Up here it’s like sink or swim. You either make it or you don’t,” Traupman said.

Traupman picked up fried chicken at Mr. Ribbs last week. “That’s my favorite over there, the ribs are great and so is the chicken.” Traupman only knows a little about Mr. Posey himself. “I know well enough to say ‘hi’ and give him the respect for being a hardworking man, like a common respect for one another in Uptown,” Traupman said.
“Living the Dream on Van Braam”: 
DU Students Find a Home in Uptown

by: Laura Steff

When it was finally time to move off campus, junior Amelia Chapman went on the lookout for a house within walking distance from Duquesne’s campus. She looked everywhere—Washington Plaza, Midtown Towers, South Side, Chatham Square, even Brottier.

But it wasn’t until she picked up a copy of the Duquesne Duke that she found just what she was looking for.

“I saw an ad for King Real Estate Group,” Amelia says. “I didn’t originally consider Uptown because I heard all the horror stories.”

After getting a tour of the red brick house with white trim located at 40 Van Braam St., Amelia was sold on the idea to her future roommates.

“Most people hear ‘Uptown’ and say ‘Absolutely not,’” Amelia explains.

That’s just what happened when she told the friends she was set to live with about the house in Uptown. Luckily, she knew two girls who were also looking for a place to live who were not afraid of the neighborhood.

Amelia moved into the house in May. Juniors Mary Beth Coulin and Dawn Candlish followed in August. As students in the Mary Pappert School of Music and close friends the girls were excited to become roommates.

The three-bedroom loft house with one bathroom, kitchen, living room and basement is the perfect living space for the three girls. In fact, since they only pay roughly $1,000 a month plus utilities, they can’t imagine living anywhere else.

According to the Uptown Web site developed by Duquesne’s honors seminar, due to the large number of students living in Uptown, 70.7 percent of the household types are considered non-family.

“I signed the lease before telling my parents where it was,” Amelia says. “I told them it was near a hospital but warned them it wasn’t the best, but they weren’t too concerned because they lived in some sketchy areas themselves.”

Mary Beth agrees. “My parents came to see me and I told them about the house,” she says. “They are easygoing and thought it looked nice.”

But to the girls, the neighborhood was still “crappy.” If it weren’t for the people of Uptown, and their sense of community, the girls wouldn’t “stick it out.”

“A lot of people don’t talk to their neighbors anymore,” Amelia says. “We have these common threads. Living in the conditions we live in creates that sense of community.”

And the girls first noticed that sense of community when their pet, a cream-colored cat named Albert, got lost.

“It’s nice to know that good people are around looking out for you,” Amelia says. “There’s still a lot of culture and community here, even though there’s been a downside.”

Mary Beth agrees. “The neighbors wanted to know what they could do,” she says. “It was nice to know it wasn’t just us who were looking for him.”

And for Amelia and Mary Beth, getting to know their neighbors, especially the other students living on the street, played a big part in their moving off campus.

Every Sunday, the girls invite the seven boys living next door to what they call “Sunday dinners.”

 “[The boys] sit nicely at the table and we eat, talk and laugh,” Mary Beth says.

“It’s like having a family.”

But their involvement with the neighbors doesn’t stop there. The roommates are also very involved with the older people who live on the street.

“Here’s a couple of older ladies and gentlemen that sit out in lawn chairs or on their stoops and keep tabs on the neighborhood,” Amelia explains. “I’ve stopped to talk to them a few times and even offered to get them groceries.”

And the girls look forward to the growth of the Uptown neighborhood after Duquesne is finished with all its construction plans. They welcome the possibility of more students and permanent residents in the area and encourage Pittsburghers to see Uptown “for what it has, rather than what it does not have.” To them, a little more community involvement can go a long way.

“More community activities that people can go to for a hot meal or a place for kids to play,” Amelia says.

“There are so many vacant houses,” Mary Beth adds. “The city could put in a playground for the kids.”

Although Uptown is lacking in a lot of areas and has its problems, these roommates never once felt out of place.

“There’s really no reason to go anywhere,” Amelia says. “[Uptown] is a good place to be.”

And even though the girls do not plan on staying in the neighborhood after they graduate, they have become attached to both the house and area.

“When I was home [for Thanksgiving] all I talked about was Van Braam,” Mary Beth jokes. “We’re living the dream here on Van Braam.”

DIU Students Find a Home In Uptown

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When Antoine Leyn bought his Uptown house, a prostitute lived there. “It was pretty dilapidated,” he chuckles. Now, he says, “Gist Street is one of the best streets around.

Mention Uptown, and many people think of shootings, drugs and prostitution. Say you live in Uptown, and you might be corrected: “Oh, you mean the Hill District” — arguably an even less desirable area. People generally don’t think of Uptown as a nice place to live, much less the home of one of the “best streets around.”

According to a report by the National Association of Realtors, the national median price for single family homes is $277,500, and $120,300 in Pittsburgh. The median price of a house in Uptown is $15,000.

Leyn has seen a lot of changes on Gist, and he doesn’t deny that he’s been an integral part of them. Once he decided to get into the rental business, he said, “I just scooped up properties. In some ways I saved properties.” An abandoned building can only survive so long without care before it has to be torn down. If he hadn’t bought them, they would have disappeared, he said.

When buyers look at Uptown, it is generally for one of three things: institutional use, parking lots and student housing. For years, students didn’t live on Gist, simply because Leyn wouldn’t rent to them. “They have those keggers and raise a fuss and piss on the streets and make the neighbors angry,” he explained. Eventually, Leyn sold some of his houses to Bob Eckenrode, who rents to students.

It doesn’t take long to find evidence of Gist Street’s emergent art scene. Sculptor James Simon lives and works on Gist, and his studio is most memorable for the huge King Kong figure peeking over the garage door into the street. Gist is also home to one of Pittsburgh’s best-regarded literary events, the Gist Street Readings, which happen once a month and feature award-winning writers from all over the country.
In many cases, when an area becomes nicer or better looking or generally more desirable, it attracts property buyers with higher incomes. Eventually, this causes prices to go up, and the people who originally lived there can't afford it anymore. This gentrification is happening in neighborhoods like Garfield and East Liberty. Garfield has an abundance of new galleries and art venues, as well as a new children's hospital being built nearby. East Liberty is experiencing a kind of spill-over from Shadyside, and is attracting higher-income shoppers to stores like Whole Foods and Trader Joe's.

Gentrification is a "catch-22." While certain neighborhoods enjoy better reputations, it's bad news for people who have to find new places to live. However, gentrification is less of a problem in Pittsburgh than in some other cities. Dr. Evan Stoddard pointed out that, because of Pittsburgh's slowing economy and decreasing population, "you just don't have the pressures on the economy that result in rapid gentrification." As for Uptown, he doesn't think it is any more gentrified than South Side or Lawrenceville, where it is more common for a house to be sold because the owner dies, rather than because it became unaffordable. "There is no area in Pittsburgh where the housing market is so hot that people are being priced out of their houses." When it comes to Gist Street, though, he said, "I guess it is the one part of Uptown that is most gentrified." But, he added, that's not exactly saying much.

Gist Street's residents don't seem to think that gentrification will be the fate of their neighborhood. "It's a little early for that," said John Fleenor, who moved to Pittsburgh about three years ago to work with Simon. "It might be becoming 'parking-lot-ized.' It seems like there are a lot of big institutions that need to expand and this is where they go."

Leyn points out that Uptown isn't a very densely populated area, which suggests that changes in neighborhood dynamics might not be as significant. While some say the possibility of a new hockey arena and casinos will make more people want to live in Uptown, Fleenor doubts it. "If you go to another city and you want to see the most blighted neighborhoods, go to the arenas and you'll find them."
Yes, you too can own a historic part of Pittsburgh! Check out this two-story beauty: A brick-and-shingled roughhouse, with central heat, a full basement, three bedrooms, one full bath, 1,580 square feet of living space, low taxes and all in historic Uptown. John Hancock — yep, that’s his real name — recently made this purchase for $3,000 in July of 2006.

This bargain is located at 61 Van Braam Street, at the corner of Locust. Never mind that it’s been abandoned for years with its crumbling brick, broken windows, padlock doorknob and yellow caution tape draped over the gray painted and rotting wooden door. The new owner has dreams of restoring the building to its original 1910 glory.

On a sunny October day, Mike and Mark Bianco, two contractors hired by Mr. Hancock, are perched facing the brick façade of the building, their legs dangling off the scaffolding as they scrape out old mortar between the century-old brick. Mike climbs down from the contraption to explain that he and his brother were hired to start the refurbishing process.

“Hey Mike,” Mark yells down from the second floor. “Did you tell her that his daughter goes to Duquesne?”

This vine-covered house is one of the many homes being renovated in Uptown

Photos by Marissa Vogel

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Dirt Cheap
Mike quickly explains that the owner has “lots of money” and bought the property so that his daughter, who attends Duquesne University, has a place to live while she’s in school.

**Return from the dead**

Time, a lot of elbow grease and finances beyond the actual cost of the property are going to be needed to re-create the grandeur that was once 61 Van Braam. Today, a couple of blue plastic trash cans, smashed beer bottles, broken pieces of brick, dirt and trash are strewn in front of the three-stepped stoop. Mike continues to show the outside of the home. He starts walking around the corner.

“We’re bringing her back to life” says Mike. “She ought to be a real beauty when we’re done. Come around here to the back.”

Attached to the back of the building is a red cinder block addition that is now the kitchen. “Look at that roof,” Mike adds. “You don’t see a roof like that any more. It’s either tin or maybe even copper. Those kinds of roofs are welded together and are made with two pieces of metal.”

**A Walk on the Wild Side**

Mike invites a visitor to take a walk inside. “Go ahead” he says jokingly. “Although I don’t know what you’ll find in there.” The house looks exceptionally deserted and forgotten on the outside, a scene straight out of “Nightmare on Elm Street.”

The other row homes that sit above 61 Van Braam also appear to be vacant. Most have moldy, boarded-up windows and rotting exteriors after years of extreme neglect and disrepair.

“Sixty-three Van Braam might actually have someone living in it,” Mike says. One of the two windows of the home facing Mercy Hospital is broken and jagged; the window screen has been torn so one can easily see inside. Facing a fireplace, there is a couch in the middle of the room with clothes draped over it, an old television set, a lamp setting on an end-table and finally, tacked up on one wall with yellowed aging cellophane tape, a Steelers poster. From each of the four corners of the room, the faded, striped wallpaper is peeling and a musty smell wafts past the ripped screen.

Peering beyond what appears to be the living room, Mike says, “Look at that busted window in the kitchen. I bet someone probably climbs in and out of there all the time.” He adds: “Just because there is a padlock on the front door doesn’t stop someone if they want to get in somewhere.”

Returning to the front of 61 Van Braam, he explains that he and his brother are fixing up other properties in Uptown. “You ought to check out the ones we’re working on besides here. There’s one up on Ophelia just on the other side of Uptown and the other on Forbes. They’re worth a look.” Mark chimes in. “We love what we do and it shows.”

The inside of this abandoned duplex still boasts Pittsburgh Pride, even though it was gutted by fire years ago.
Chris Roach enjoys the view from the roof of the house he is renovating in uptown.
The row house at 2020 Forbes Ave. looks like any other in uptown. On one of the last blocks before the Birmingham Bridge, it sits on the brink of no-man’s-land between Oakland and Downtown.

Stepping inside, it looks like no man should live there. Gutted to a skeletal state in one of the least flattering neighborhoods in Pittsburgh, one wouldn’t expect it to be a student’s dream home.

But to Chris Roach, the house that he bought in March of 2006 is a dream and then some, an opportunity to change the world, or at least a small part of it. Purchasing a four-bedroom house might not seem like a practical move for a single 22-year-old college student. Spending time, money, and physical effort completely refurbishing the house while still studying for an Education degree might seem like an even crazier idea.

Roach didn’t buy the house for himself, though. He didn’t buy it as a real estate investment. He bought it because a friend of his had to leave Duquesne University after not being able to afford rent or dorm room fees. “It wasn’t right that she had to leave.” Roach did not want to see that happen to more friends, so he set out on a mission to build an oasis of relief in the harsh world of college housing.

Using construction work skills he honed growing up in Cleveland, Roach has taken on a vast do-it-yourself fixer-upper project so he can rent out the extra bedrooms at a charitable rate of about $150 a month to students who need it. And if $150 is too much, Roach will take manual labor around the house as a payment.

“My whole idea is to help people out. People have been so generous to me and I intend to reciprocate.”

Roach has so much confidence in the help of his friends and his own construction talent that he predicts the bulk of the work will be done within a year. The way electrical wires dangle from the ceilings, the insulation protrudes from the barren walls, carpeting and tiling are ripped from most of the floors, it looks like a job that will occupy him for much longer. Drills, hammers, buckets of nails, and paint cans clutter every corner, evidence that Roach is keeping busy and striving to turn the unfinished house into a cozy home.

The only thing that came with the house that was worth keeping was its relatively new roof. At the moment, with every room in some transitory stage of construction, the steep shingles are one of Roach’s favorite spots on the whole property. After an awkward climb out of the back bedroom window, Roach goes up to the roof’s highest peak and crouches down to appreciate his very own scenic overlook. He takes in a 360-degree view of the downtown skyline, the Hill District, the Monongahela River and the South Side. Pointing to a fire-ravaged house a block or two behind him on the bluff, he counts his blessings and empathizes with the family that lost its home just a few weeks ago. He used to see their children in the playground behind his backyard.

In the few months since he moved in, Roach has made a point of getting to know his neighbors well. So well, in fact, that when he sits on his front porch chatting with a man next door who has lived in Uptown for a decade, Roach impresses with his extensive knowledge of the community. “A lot of stuff goes on in this neighborhood that is good, but a lot of stuff goes on that is bad.”

Roach hopes that his involvement in the community will be one of the good things.
Between a Hospital and a Hard Place: The Man in the Little White House

By: Robert Healey III

No, at first impression, Roberto seems as calm as the color of his house, especially in his friendly all-white sweat suit and accompanied by his pet Chihuahua.

“Poochie #1 died, but I believe in reincarnation. This is Poochie #2, just a pound heavier.

She ate good up in heaven.” But after about two hours of convo, the tone changes, right along with the content.

Roberto served for over eight years in the U.S. Navy, earning 13 battle stars for his time aboard the U.S.S. Minneapolis in World War II.

“Ain’t too many islands in the Pacific that I wasn’t at,” says Roberto.

And with those battle stars come battle scars.

In 1944, he was injured badly when a Japanese kamikaze pilot barely missed the bow of the Minneapolis. The ship was splattered with shrapnel though, knocking Roberto from the top deck to the bottom and tearing all of the ligaments below the knee of one leg.

But that didn’t stop him.

“They operated on me and tied all of my ligaments together, but I only had 10 percent movement,” he says. “When they sent me to therapy, the corpsman told me, ‘Might as well quit comin’ down here, boy. You’re crippled; you’re goin’ home.’

“But I was too skilled. They considered me a prize recruit because I specialized in electronics. So next thing you know, I’m sent back out to sea. I rendezvoused with my ship, and we hit the Philippines.”

Roberto’s learned the skills so highly prized by the military at Pittsburgh’s own Connelly Trade School, where he specialized in telephone and radio. His skills led not only to his hitch in the Navy, but in getting hitched to his wife.

Roberto used to pass her almost everyday. “Even if a wee little ant comes in here, I can spot ’em easily, White reveals impurity.”

Roberto insists he won’t leave his white house without a fight — if at all. Like a good sailor, he won’t give up the ship.

The Navy couldn’t let him go, and Roberto doesn’t seem ready to let Uptown go either. But having a man as handy as Roberto around is certainly not a bad thing.
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