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Homeownership partnership offers new hope to residents of Lower Price Hill

'We're not coming to fix you'

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CINCINNATI -- Steve Stanley knows what a difference a home can make.

Not long ago, he and his family were paying \$600 a month to rent a dump of a place in Lower Price Hill where they could smell sewer gas from the basement. They were barely getting by when Stanley learned of a chance to own a home with a mortgage he could afford.

"I was on food stamps and Social Security," Stanley said. "I didn't want to live that life no more, and I didn't want my kids seeing me live that life no more, living month-to-month."

Stanley spent about four months working with [Habitat for Humanity of Greater Cincinnati](#) building his new home. Doing all that digging and building and painting, he decided he didn't need to be on disability after all.

Steve Stanley

Stanley went back to school and now works as a security guard at nearby [Oyler School](#), where he also coaches the seventh and eighth grade boys' basketball team. His monthly mortgage payment is only \$352. And his three sons have the kind of childhood he always wanted for them.

"Every time they smile, I'm just happy," Stanley said. "Like, 'Wow. This was worth it all along.'"

Now a group of Lower Price Hill residents and community organizers are working to bring that same kind of stability and security to other families in the neighborhood.

The [Oyler Community Learning Center](#) on Thursday will announce a partnership with Habitat for Humanity to transform seven of the neighborhood's historic houses into affordable homes.

Long-time residents hope the project could be the next big step in transforming [Lower Price Hill](#) -- a community better known for poverty and blight than the qualities its residents cherish.

"The place looks like the wrath of God," said Eileen Gallagher, a 33-year resident and the secretary of the Lower Price Hill Community Council. "But there is hope. There are good people. There is a uniqueness in the way that people look after each other."

Community activists are counting on all those assets -- and an increase in homeownership -- to take Lower Price Hill's families in the direction they want to go.

'We're not coming to fix you'

If it sounds unusual for a school's community learning center to be involved in a plan to increase homeownership, that's because it is.

Developers and government agencies typically lead initiatives like the one in Lower Price Hill.

But the [Community Learning Center Institute](#)'s work on this project is a natural extension of its 17-year history in Lower Price Hill, said Darlene Kamine, the institute's executive director.

The work started when Kamine helped the community lobby Cincinnati Public Schools to keep Oyler School and add a high school at the building, a change that has boosted high school graduation rates significantly.

Darlene Kamine

Over time, the institute has helped bring resources for the community to the school -- health clinics, computer labs and even a prom. And with each successful addition, Kamine would work with the school's leaders to ask, "What's next?"

The last time Kamine asked that question, Oyler Principal Amy Randolph answered: "Housing."

"Every time a house gets boarded up," Randolph told her, "I lose a family."

So the Oyler Community Learning Center got to work by talking to the Lower Price Hill

Community Council and residents to find out what they wanted as far as housing was concerned.

The answer, as it turned out, came back to Steve Stanley.

Stanley is from Lower Price Hill. He had a rough childhood, and his mom moved him out of the neighborhood before he graduated from high school. But long-time residents know and like Stanley.

They all were proud of Stanley and happy about what he had accomplished for his family. But they were sad because his new home is in East Price Hill -- up the hill from the neighborhood where he was a kid.

"Everyone was so sorry that he had to leave the neighborhood to have that opportunity," Gallagher said. "Because he is rooted here. He's a good person."

This home in the center will be renovated as part of the partnership.

The residents of Lower Price Hill wanted the opportunity Stanley had, but they wanted it in their own neighborhood.

So that's exactly what they're getting.

"Our approach about everything that we do is that we're not coming to fix you. Our work is not to do a program for you," Kamine said. "We're just facilitating the genuine engagement, the genuine ownership and the genuine empowerment of people."

'You can do it'

The Oyler Community Learning Center's involvement in the project has been a huge help to Habitat for Humanity of Greater Cincinnati, said CEO Ed Lee.

"Our focus is really how can we be part of neighborhood revitalization as opposed to being a single family homebuilder," Lee said. "This partnership is perfect because they've done a tremendous amount of work -- and good work -- on the engagement side. So we can do what we do best, and that is work on houses."

The Lower Price Hill advocacy group [Community Matters](#) is donating five of the seven houses to Habitat for Humanity for the project. The Port of Greater Cincinnati Development Authority is donating a sixth, and a local resident is donating the seventh, said Adelyn Hall, director of housing development for the Community Learning Center Institute.

Adelyn Hall

Community Matters Executive Director Mary Delaney said the homeownership program is a perfect complement to her organization's work.

"Our whole focus is to create a thriving Lower Price Hill community," Delaney said. "As a low-income community, we have really limited options in terms of dignified and vibrant places to live."

The neighborhood also has very low home ownership rates.

"I can probably count on both hands how many homeowners we have," Delaney said.

The partnership with Habitat is designed to create opportunities for current residents to buy homes they can afford and stay in the neighborhood they love, she said.

Stanley knows from experience that it won't be easy.

Steve Stanley working on his Habitat home.

But Hall, who worked side-by-side with Stanley as he built his Habitat house, plans to work closely with the families who are selected for this new project, too.

"Housing is the foundation for everything," Hall said. "The neighborhood that you live in matters, and crime matters."

It matters to adults, and it matters to the kids who attend Oyler School, said Randolph, Oyler's principal.

Randolph started out at Oyler working in the school's dropout recovery program. She saw first-hand how older students were impacted by the instability caused by constantly moving around.

After she became Oyler's assistant principal, and then principal, she started to see how much that impacted the younger students, too.

"We had a student in fourth grade last week who didn't know his home address. A lot of them don't even stay at places long enough to know," Randolph said. "Everyone should have a place that they feel like is their home."

A third of the students who attend Oyler are from Lower Price Hill, she said. The rest of the students come from South Fairmount and Sedamsville.

Homelessness is a big problem, especially among high school students, Randolph said. And about

a quarter of the school's 675 students already have turned over this school year -- meaning either students who started the school year there have left or new students have started.

Steve Stanley's sons shoot hoops outside their home.

It's a neighborhood with plenty of challenges. But it's a place that its residents love.

Randolph hopes this new initiative gives more kids who graduate from Oyler the chance to put down roots in Lower Price Hill and send their own kids to the neighborhood school.

"It's important that people feel like they can stay in their community, still feel safe, and be around the corner from their mom and dad," she said.

Stanley, for one, is confident this approach can work for his neighbors in Lower Price Hill.

"I've been telling people, 'It's not easy. It's hard,'" Stanley said. "But I think you can do it."

Oyler School is the heart of Lower Price Hill.

More information about the [Community Learning Center Institute](#), [Habitat for Humanity of Greater Cincinnati](#) and [Community Matters](#) is all available online.

Lucy May writes about the people, places and issues that define our region – to celebrate what makes the Tri-State great and also shine a spotlight on issues we need to address. Childhood poverty is an important focus for her and for WCPO. To read more stories about childhood poverty, go to www.wcpo.com/poverty.

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