

# Skylines

JULY 2010

THE HOPE CENTER NEWSLETTER

## A Neighborhood Abandoned



### MISSION

To honor God by developing healthy communities where the vulnerable flourish.

### VISION

We envision a safe, vibrant neighborhood where people of all types flourish. Our east-side community will transform from a violent, hopeless and declining one into a safe, pleasant place to live. Those in need will have the hope and support they need to improve their quality of life. Our community seeks to become an excellent place for families to raise great kids.

### VALUES

We believe

...In the power of God to change lives...

...That the love of Christ, as expressed through loving relationships is a powerful force for change...

...In the leadership potential of urban youth...

...In responding to the whole person...

The choice of where to live is one of the most important decisions we make in our adult lives. At its most basic, housing is shelter, one of the base levels in our hierarchy of needs. At its best, housing becomes a home, where our lives are made and memories are created.

Housing represents who we are more than any other physical facet. The mere mention of our neighborhood creates a stereotypical persona in the minds of others. Our homes also house our possessions and display what we value. For most Americans, our homes are our largest item of value, our biggest investment, and we build our professional lives around maintaining them. But more than anything, housing reflects and creates the situations that define our relationships, from our neighbors to our jobs to our schooling. Housing literally creates our communities, and we all want to live in healthy communities.

Research shows that social systems – and thus communities – collapse when home ownership rates fall below 70 percent. Social resources and tax dollars are stretched

thin when home ownership plummets and vacancies skyrocket, which creates overburdened police forces, fire departments, and schools. These social stresses allow more crime, which overwhelms the courts and jails.

Those who remain in such neighborhoods, the majority of whom are the poor and vulnerable, often are extremely transient, which makes neighborhood stability difficult. The criminal population is unfortunately less transient, taking advantage of neglected and less-policed neighborhoods. As a neighborhood deteriorates, more and more people “want out,” creating a self-reinforcing downward spiral. The neighborhood surrounding the Hope Center is in this very predicament.

Chris Jehle, CEO of the Hope Center, estimates that at least 50 percent of the houses in The Hope Center neighborhood are vacant, while home ownership of the non-vacant houses sits around 60 percent – creating a home ownership rate of about 30 percent of the existing housing stock. Many homes are owned by absentee landlords who allow the houses to deteriorate beyond

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acceptable living conditions, while often times collecting government-guaranteed rent checks.

To make matters worse, Kansas City and the neighborhoods surrounding The Hope Center have been hit particularly hard by the recent financial and foreclosure crisis. A July 2009 Forbes article dubiously named Kansas City "America's Most Abandoned City". Forbes also noted that Kansas City's rental and homeowner vacancy rates were rising faster than any other metropolitan area in the country.

A drive down Benton Boulevard, directly east of The Hope Center reveals dozens of what were once proud and stately homes. The neighborhood was built in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a segregated neighborhood, and Kansas City's middle and upper-middle classes called these streets home just 50 years ago.

Paradoxically, pre-1920s Kansas City was less segregated than it is today – even though racism was still rampant and even institutionalized (Gotham, 33). The current reality is that Kansas City has now been identified as one of America's hyper-segregated cities, due to the extremely high rates of housing and economic segregation (Gotham, 13). Probably not a shocking fact to those who reside in a city where one street, such as Troost Avenue, so starkly serves as a racial and economic dividing line.

Like most structural shifts in society, there were a series of historical events that created and enabled Kansas City's hyper-segregation. Two primary culprits were the automobile and the suburban housing boom. For the first time, the majority of middle class families were able to afford both cars and new suburban houses. The roads were built to the suburbs, and families packed up the cars and left the urban core. This phenomenon commonly known as white flight only tells part of the story.

Once the white population had fled to the suburbs, it was nearly impossible



This vacant house is one of many of its kind located in what has been named "America's Most Abandoned City."

for African-American middle-class families to move there too. In Kevin Fox Gotham's indispensable book for understanding the history of housing in Kansas City, "Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development," he explains how "...real estate elites, community builders, and homeowner associations [created] racially homogenous neighborhoods through the use and enforcement of racially restrictive covenants – private agreements among property owners that prevented Blacks and other minorities from owning property in a particular subdivision."

In other words, legal walls were built around the suburbs that made it illegal for African-Americans to purchase homes there. These racist housing covenants were legally upheld by the State Supreme Courts and structured so that they were nearly impossible to remove. Many remained on the books for years.

White flight took place quickly in The Hope Center neighborhood, which was soon repopulated by a new generation of middle-class African-Americans. In the 1970s and 80s, however, the neighborhood

was dealt another devastating blow as the remaining middle class African-Americans left in what has been called black flight. Today, the congregations of many of the neighborhood churches near The Hope Center are filled with middle class African-American families who left the neighborhood at that time.

After these destructive social changes in the neighborhood, the majority of those who remained were the poor, the oppressed, and the criminals. The few middle class families who stayed are now elderly folks who have been in the neighborhood since the first wave of African-Americans moved in during the 1950s. As a result, most people in the neighborhood are a full generation removed from a base-line understanding of what economic and societal normalcy can look like. There are few external economic or social networks, and positive examples are rare. Many of us know how important role models and good contacts are to professional success. These resources are nonexistent for the urban poor.

The Hope Center has a vision of a neighborhood that is integrated both racially and economically. Its mission is to honor God by developing healthy communities where the vulnerable flourish. It is a vision full of hope and possibility, one that mirrors the Gospel of Christ's grace being extended to all peoples. A healthy neighborhood needs a dynamic mix of people who can bring different talents, resources, and viewpoints while being a living example of Christ in the world.

Chris Jehle explains it this way, "Whoever owns the neighborhood controls the future and the quality of the neighborhood." The Hope Center envisions a new kind of ownership – an ownership that overcomes poverty, societal injustice, oppression, crime, and mostly; hopelessness.

## FOR MORE READING ON THIS TOPIC:

- **Race, Real Estate and Uneven Development** by Kevin Fox Gotham
- **King of Kings County** by Whitney Terrell
- **Compassion, Justice and the Christian Life: Rethinking Ministry to the Poor** by Robert D. Lupton

# A Letter From Chris Jehle

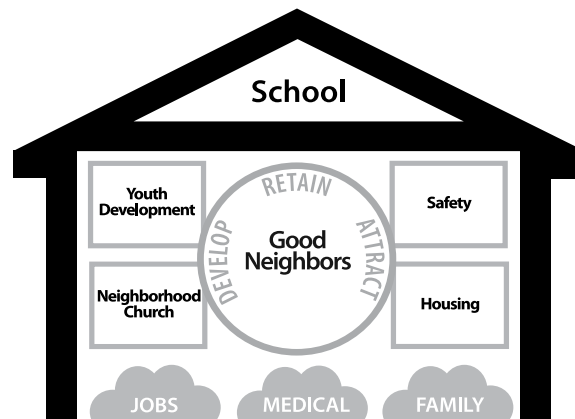
In the last several newsletters we have identified and explained what we believe to be a God-honoring strategy for neighborhood transformation. In our work with the kids and families of The Hope Center, we realized that in a neighborhood as challenged and underserved as the one where we live and serve, a comprehensive approach to ministry is a must. This comprehensive strategy for neighborhood transformation is portrayed in the house illustration on the right.

As we have been elaborating on each of the strategic initiatives in our newsletters, it has been exciting to be able to announce noteworthy development on each. For example, in addition to a youth ministry which has anchored the The Hope Center ministry since its inception, we now have a steadily growing medical center, Hope Family Care Center. Hope Leadership Academy is swiftly moving towards opening its doors in 2011; this in the midst of a challenged public school system that recently made national news by deciding to close half of its existing schools.

One may wonder how it is possible that a public school system would make such a drastic decision. While the KCMO School District has long struggled to perform at a satisfactory level, the problem does not start or end with it. As the lead article in this newsletter explains, the inner city neighborhoods of KCMO have been largely abandoned. Almost everyone with the resources to live somewhere else has left, leaving the poor and vulnerable behind.

As a result, social systems such as a school are overburdened and usually unable to effectively respond.

In light of this reality, it is a real privilege to have the opportunity to open a neighborhood K-8 school. In the aforementioned school closings, both of our area grade schools will be closed, which



would have left the neighborhood and its youth without a nearby school. Thanks to the power of God and the dedication of a handful of people, Hope Leadership Academy is poised to offer a real hope and a real future to a community in desperate need of both.

What is essential to understand though is that a school cannot alone meet the challenge. Neither can a vibrant youth ministry or even a dynamic church. However, by working together with each of the other strategic initiatives, transformation is possible and even likely.

Housing, the topic of this newsletter, is an indispensable component of our strategy. For our community to someday be a place where people desire to live, someone must invest the required resources to provide the housing infrastructure that a thriving mixed income community could inhabit.

Yet, as of this writing, this has not happened. We are hopeful though that the Lord is working within a person or persons who will respond to meet the need. The Hope Center is committed to continue praying until this occurs.

The bungalow described below is a good next step in establishing a housing initiative. We have a low income family who has long been involved in the youth ministry who strongly desires to live in it. They are a perfect example of how Christian neighborhood transformation occurs. The kids have strong relationships with Christ and are actively involved in our youth ministry. Because of the strong relationships and personal transformation the family has experienced through the youth ministry, they want to remain nearby. The existing housing stock, however, does not make such a decision easy. Without options, families that wish to make our neighborhood their home feel no choice but to move elsewhere.

My hope and prayer is that The Hope Center will be given the opportunity to honor God by offering quality, affordable housing that will work within our larger guiding strategy to transform an abandoned, decaying neighborhood into a vibrant place to live. With the power of God and with the commitment of a resourced person or group, such a prayer is possible.

## BUNGALOW REHAB PROJECT

Several years ago, The Hope Center acquired a foreclosed bungalow in its immediate vicinity. This bungalow, once renovated, can serve as a design template for future construction and/or renovation of family-friendly and energy efficient housing for a low to moderate income family.

Jacob Littrell, a local architect and Hope Center volunteer, has drawn up design plans to convert the bungalow into a comfortable three bedroom house that can become home to one of THC's families. Jacob is excited about this first step: "This home has a lot of potential and restoring it is a great way to tangibly implement The Hope Center's mission, developing healthy communities where the vulnerable flourish. By providing a family with a safe and clean home, The Hope Center is helping one family to grow and flourish. This one home is the first step in a greater plan to develop housing in the neighborhood."

Although the bungalow is structurally sound, it will require significant renovation. This renovation is expected to cost around \$50,000. With the plans in place, The Hope Center is ready to move forward and is hopeful that an individual or group will commit the resources needed to restore this house into a lovely

home for a neighborhood family. If you are able to support this project in any way, please contact Matt Nagel at (816) 931-6290 or [matttn@hopecenterkc.org](mailto:matttn@hopecenterkc.org).



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## HOPE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY UPDATE

**Charter Progress:** Progress continues towards the summer 2011 opening of our new charter school, Hope Leadership Academy (HLA). The University of Central Missouri (UCM) has committed to being the university sponsor for HLA. Currently contracts are being negotiated and should be completed within the next few months. With like vision on education UCM looks to be a great match for HLA and the HLA board is very excited to have them as the school's sponsor.

**Principal:** We are delighted to announce that Mike Coulter has been hired to be the principal of Hope Leadership Academy. Mike has over 20 years of experience as an elementary school principal. He will start September 1st and begin building the school and staff for the summer 2011 opening.

**Renovation:** Renovation began in early May on the upper level of The Hope Center building in order to make way for 5 classrooms. The HLA board is committed to securing the funding to complete the renovation of the school building in order to allow Hope Leadership Academy to be a fully functioning K-8 school.

*To see pictures of the renovation visit our website at [www.hopecenterkc.org](http://www.hopecenterkc.org).*

## PRAYER

Relying on God's Spirit to guide and empower the ministry of The Hope Center is vital. On our 2010 prayer card you will find different prayer topics for each day of the month. Below are updated topics from the prayer card related to education that we request you spend additional time praying for during this season.

- Day #10 Guidance for The Hope Center and HLA board as they continue to prepare for HLA's opening
- Day #11 Leadership: HLA board to continue providing sound leadership for Hope Leadership Academy  
Principal: Mike Coulter