



BLIGHT BU



What started off as one man's mission to take back his neighborhood has grown into a crusade. Fed up with one too many nights filled with gunfire in his Old Redford neighborhood, John George found himself faced with a decision.

"I had a young son and a daughter on the way and my first thought was to pack up and move," George said. "It felt like a form of child abuse to let my children grow up around that."



STERS

SENDING OUT A DETROIT RIPPLE

By Rene Rosencrantz Wheaton

Instead of reaching for moving boxes, George decided to reach for a hammer, nails, and some plywood, to board up an abandoned home that was attracting drug dealers and the like to his neighborhood.

"When the drug dealers came back and couldn't get in, they left," he said.

Shortly after that John George founded Motor City Blight Busters and it has grown into quite a phenomenon in the 22 years since. Motor City Blight Busters, along with its community partners, lay claim to more than 100,000 volunteers who have logged enough hours to paint 684 homes, secure 379 abandoned buildings, rehab 176 houses, and build 114 new homes.

And while rehabbing and blight abatement has remained an important tenet of the organization, their efforts have been broadened, but the goal has stayed the same—to revitalize Detroit.

Angel's Night

Blight Busters volunteers have been very active in Angel's Night patrols, helping to turn the tide of arson and mayhem that was associated with what was formerly known as "Devil's Night."

"Words are powerful things and the children are listening, and that's why we call it Angel's Night," George said. "It's about patrolling, protecting, and celebrating all the positive things that are going on in the city."

Blight Busters has been behind a lot of positive efforts in the Motor City, including the renovation of the Masonic Temple into a resource and community center. Now known as the Redford Resource Center, the facility has given the organization the chance to help students learn skills in the building trades and culinary arts.

George said Blight Busters also helps bridge gaps between groups. Each year the organization hosts suburban teens to the city to volunteer on projects in the inner city.

"Our goal is to save the world, starting with Detroit," George said. "These projects help give people a sense of ownership, opportunity, and hope."





In December, MTV came in to chronicle Blight Busters as the crew and a contingent of adult and high school volunteers boarded and cleaned up two abandoned houses across from a high school. John George gathered the volunteers, gave an inspiring speech identifying the effort as “sending out a Detroit ripple of love,” and had the group lining up for tools and cleaning within 10 minutes.

The Artist Village

The area around the Redford Community Center, known as the Artist Village, has also begun to bridge gaps. It draws people from all walks of life. “There is jazz and poetry drawing a young urban crowd, and the Redford Theater continues to draw an older, suburban crowd,” he said. “The Java House, the coffee house in the Village, is where the work meets. It’s really quite a phenomenon. Sometimes I pinch myself when I see how things are working out.”

Once destined to become lost to drugs and crime, George said the Old Redford Neighborhood is really coming into its own with a weekly chess club, garden program, and growing art community.

Motor City Blight Busters is always

looking for collaborators and is currently partnering with Fertile Ground Collective and Replanting Roots in launching Farm City Detroit, an urban farm and community resource that will span two city blocks.

“I may have started Blight Busters, but there is a deep bench of talent that has contributed to the success that is happening here,” he said.

Neighborhood Economic Growth

New businesses are moving into the area like a new Meijer store, along with dozens of smaller businesses like Sweet Potato Sensations, a bakery that specializes in baked goods and even ice cream that has sweet potato as a base.

Among the many businesses is Ray-Ann’s Wardrobe, a women’s clothing boutique owned, in part by Ann-Marie George, John George’s daughter.

“It’s interesting because I started this because of my children and now they are grown and very much involved. My son, John Williams George, who was two when this all started, is now a senior Blight Busters crew leader, leading demolitions and cleanup work,” George said.



Facing his 55th birthday in June, George said his role in Motor City Blight Busters will likely slow a little and it is a powerful thing to see his family and numerous volunteers ensuring his work will continue.

"It has definitely been a life changing experience," George said. "I always knew I was supposed to do something different and unique with my life. I just want to save this city. I invite everyone to give and allow everyone to get. The more you give the more you get."

Volunteerism Is Contagious


The work and attitude of Blight Busters is contagious and it continues to grow. "Twelve years ago, we had six students from the University of Michigan come to volunteer here. The next year it was 30, the next 50, and that led to a yearly project that brings 1,500 volunteers to Detroit to work on sites simultaneously throughout the city," George said.



"We like to invite people down to take a look and usually they are very touched about the spirit of cooperation they find here."

While George admits there are still many challenges facing the city he has called home for almost 55 years, he is hopeful about the road ahead.

"People like to pile on to Detroit, but we're not as bad as people think," he said. "We like to invite people down to take a look and usually they are very touched about the spirit of cooperation they find here."

People are touched and often come back as volunteers. "We have volunteers from inside the city and from outside the city," he said. "We welcome all people of good will, because people of good will can always find common ground. It's our responsibility to create those bridges." 

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