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When
it's not
a lovely
day in the
neighborhood

By Suzanne Elsesser
NC News Service

"Instead of staying behind locked doors, I'm interested in coming out and getting something done," said Bridget Healy.

"Four years ago," she continued, "I was living in a building with no heat and no hot water. People were coming in at night and stealing the pipes from one whole side of the building! We got the tenants together, had meetings in the lobby and began to hope that we could change things."

With 10 neighbors and parishioners in New York's South Bronx, Ms. Healy formed a group at St. Athanasius Parish. Together they planned ways of working to improve living conditions in an area known by many for its acres of abandoned buildings and vicious crime.

"We want to be able to say 'this is what is happening in our neighborhood. This is what needs to be done and this is what we're willing to fight for,'" added Angel Garcia.

He heads the 5-year-old People for Change organization that is working with South Bronx parishes to give people a voice in what happens to them and their neighborhoods.

Vocations

In a South Bronx neighborhood, writes Suzanne Elsesser, parishioners are joining together to fight for the kind of community they want. And fighting fear is the first battle.

Waiting for a meeting to start, I chatted briefly with Georgia Hudson who pointed to her sister-in-law, Anna Hudson, sitting across from her bundled in a heavy winter coat and wool cap. "Anna's the one who got me to come. She's the one who knows what's going on," she said.

"Yes," the sister-in-law responded with a laugh. "I'm out at meetings so much I'm just never at home. It's fun though. You come over here and people say 'Hi, how are you doing?' and it makes you feel at home."

She added that the parish group and People for Change have targeted five neighborhood buildings in which to organize and train the tenants to speak for themselves. They'll talk to the groups about such things as heat, plumbing that works, front door locks, pest control and adequate lighting in hallways.

The group discussed particular neighborhood buildings that might need work. Then Olga Rosario raised an additional topic.

"Our problem," she said, "is that we're afraid. Before we give training in how to renovate a building, we need to train people to overcome their fear."

She added: "We're equals, but we don't always see ourselves that way. We can be scared of anyone we think is higher than us, like a landlord or a lawyer or a judge."

As they rose to leave with plans to meet again in two weeks, the group paused in prayer. They had opened their meeting with a prayer for the ability to change what can be changed, the courage to accept what cannot and the wisdom to know the difference.

Now they praised God, thanking him for the opportunities that are theirs and the people he has brought to help them.

Stepping out into the cold, dark night from the warmth of the rectory, a woman paused to say: "You know, this is my neighborhood. I moved away for a while, but I'm back now. I'm a fighter and I'm going to fight for our rights here."

As she spoke, another woman came down the high stone steps struggling with two heavy plastic shopping bags filled with canned goods. She smiled as she passed on her way to the bus stop.

Garcia followed and waited with her for awhile. "She had her money stolen today after she cashed her check. So she came to the rectory for some food," he told me later. "I stayed with her because I didn't want anyone to rip her off again while she was waiting for the bus."

It was never mentioned outright, but this group was the start of a self-help program like those mentioned by the U.S. Catholic bishops in the first draft of their pastoral letter on the U.S. economy.

"Fostering self-help programs...is an effective way to attack poverty," the draft of the bishops' letter said.

(Ms. Elsesser is on the staff of the South Bronx Pastoral Center in New York City.)