



business brief

Founders Patrice Sheppard (left) and Pastor Eugene Sheppard (right) enter "The Zone" building

Living in the Zone Divine Inspiration Propels Ward 8 into Transformation

BY KAMILLAH PHILLIPS

Best friends who are up to something big may best describe Pastor Eugene Sheppard and his wife, Patrice Sheppard. The "big" part refers to a 20,000-square-foot commercial development to be constructed in the middle of one of Ward 8's busiest thoroughfares. The husband-wife team is the driving force behind building Trinity Plaza - a retail and residential package slated to bring 42 affordable homeownership opportunities and new business. The project is conceived out of a partnership between two faith-based, nonprofit organizations founded by the Sheppards - Lydia's House and the Far Southwest-Southeast Community Development Corporation (CDC). The nonprofits call "The Zone" on 3939 South Capitol St., SW, home.

"When we first got here it was like the OK corral!" says Mrs. Sheppard. Today it's obvious that the Sheppards' efforts are transforming the appearance of the once infamous lot. The Zone is a highly visible building that adds a fresh, clean look against a strip of rundown store fronts and liquor marts.

Over the years the Sheppards have

devoted long hours and some of their own money into making their mission a reality. Now funding and support for their new project is mainly due to partnerships, loans and grants. The CDC is in partnership with MissionFirst Development to provide affordable housing. Trinity Plaza will consist of underground parking, a ground floor allocated for nonprofit and commercial use, and three floors of affordable and market-rate condos. The Sheppards envision working with large, local retailers who can assist with the closing costs of their employees who decide to purchase affordable condos.

The Zone does more than house the administrative offices of Lydia's House and the CDC. It is designed to facilitate the programs of both organizations and the needs of the community. The building is equipped with state-of-the-art computer labs for children and adults. The Sheppards proudly boast that the Zone offered the first "free to the public" computer lab in the Bellevue community.

The couple's commitment to community goes as far back as 1989, when the two commuted daily from Olney, Maryland, to Ward 8 to help women and children at the local

transitional shelter - formerly known as Urban Shelter - Atlantic Street.

The Sheppards' work compelled them to relocate to the Bellevue community. In 1990, the Sheppards founded Lydia's House to cater effectively to the social service needs of the Bellevue, Congress Heights and Washington Highlands communities. The HUD-approved nonprofit focuses on after-school programming, summer camp, rental assistance, homeownership counseling, Home Purchase Assistance Program intake (HPAP), financial education, free tax preparation and technology.

The couple eventually formed the CDC in 1998 as a means to promote economic development in Ward 8. Mrs. Sheppard, who serves as the CDC executive director, says Trinity Plaza is just the beginning.

"The purpose of doing this is so that people who have been here can benefit from the good times because they have been here for the bad," says Mrs. Sheppard

In addition to the CDC and Lydia's House, the Sheppards have a third component to their vision.

"To be consistent with the vision what we had in mind was to have church as the spiritual foundation,

Lydia's House to serve as a social service, and the CDC to pave economic stability," explains Pastor Sheppard.

The Living Word Church was founded in 1991. Mrs. Sheppard calls it a small church with a big heart.

In the beginning, Mrs. Sheppard didn't expect to see her and her husband's efforts produce such fruitful rewards. "You really have to have a heart and compassion." She explains, "It didn't matter what people weren't willing to do, it just mattered that they did."

What gives this couple motivation? Children. They have 13 grandchildren, and they have watched some of them benefit directly from Lydia's House.

"We have seen kids grow up, get married, succeed." Pastor Eugene reflects, "We have seen the success of the programs in the community."

The Trinity Plaza development project is located in Ward 8's Bellevue neighborhood at the intersection of Atlantic and South Capitol Streets in Southwest, DC.

For more information about Lydia's House HUD-approved housing counseling services or HPAP intake, call Robert Childs at 202-373-1050. More information about the Sheppards' mission can be found at www.lydiashousedc.org. ■



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