

FBNA Newsletter – August 2004

Heroes Next Door

This past month, I have become aware of some three extraordinary acts of courage that I want to share with everyone. I think it is significant that they all involve immigrant families living in our neighborhood.

Pepe was driving to his home on Harris Street when he observed a car swerving erratically heading for the park. They made the call and followed the car into the park. It came to a drunken halt and the driver tried to flee. Pepe was not going to let him get away with whatever damage this person had caused. He pursued and at great personal risk "restrained" this criminal until police were on the scene. Who knows what would have happened if Pepe hadn't taken action to make sure no one got hurt.

This kind of valor starts young. Local youngsters, Walter and Michelle, noticed a strange boy riding a neighbor's bike. They watched, waited, and then took action. The boy abandoned the bike and they took it back and returned it to the little girl it belonged to. Turns out they had observed some older men trying to get into the garage it was taken from earlier in the day and now the drive patrol and neighborhood watch are armed with that information.

What do you do when a hooker moves into your small apartment building and strange men are pounding on your door at all hours? Norman and Cristina fought back. They led the rest of their neighbors in an offensive to give the landlord what he needed to get these people out and away from their family. The threats they received only made them more determined. After weeks of calls and confrontations, an eviction was finally served and one corner of Poppleton and Park Avenue has been quieter since. And what was their reward? This week immigration was waiting for Norman in front of his apartment, his wife, and his children, to arrest and deport him for improper documentation. A few years ago, I couldn't get immigration to come to a place of business I worked at with seven undocumented workers because it did not merit their involvement. But they made time for Norman. Kenny and Coffee have been working our blocks for years and the authorities are impotent to do anything about it. But thank God they got Norman. I can breathe easier knowing that there is one less hard working, rent paying, dedicated family man in the neighborhood.

There have been real casualties in our fight against crime this month. One family gone here, one home business suffering there, property vacancies and poor home sales everywhere. And for the criminals it is still business as usual and no one seems able to do anything about it. But these people I've mentioned did something about it. They prove that when things seem bleak and authority fails, individual character can shine through. There are still people, young and old, who are not giving up. Each crisis is an opportunity for heroism. I think it is unrealistic to think that politicians and authorities who won't dare live in our neighborhood are going to do much on our behalf. WE call our neighborhood home, and it is up to us to make sure that the heroic actions of Pepe, Walter and Michelle, and Norman and Cristina, are not wasted on a neighborhood that doesn't care. To borrow a line from Jack Nicholson, these guys make me want to be a better neighbor.

- John Cleveland

July Meeting

By vote of the membership at the general meeting in July, the Ford Birthsite Neighborhood Association joined the newly founded Midtown Neighborhood Alliance. The association will be represented on the board of directors by Jennifer Cleveland. David Franslau from the Planning Department was guest speaker. His message is that Ford Birthsite is over zoned - that is it's zoned for a higher level of density than its current or desirable use. The City Planning Office would like for us to voluntarily request that individual properties that we own be rezoned to a lower level consistent with current usage. You may check the existing use and zoning for properties in this area at the Park Avenue Cafe, 1107 Park Avenue. Voluntary rezoning is an important first step in reducing the population density in our area without infringing on the rights of current owners.

Contact Destination Midtown at 1301 Harney Street, Omaha, NE 68102
www.omahachamber.org/DestinationMidtown

Give Us Your Tired, Your Poor

As part of the Omaha Housing Authority's (OHA) effort to complete its court-supervised housing replacement plan, the agency proposed buying the apartment complex at 1036 S. 31st St. with plans to convert it into 16 three bedroom apartments. Both Ford Birthsite and Leavenworth NA opposed the project.

A public hearing was held on Friday July 30th. The meeting was attended by Jan Quinley as the Ford Birthsite political liaison, Michelle Roy representing the Neighborhood Watch and Tracy Willits from the Drive Patrol. They were prepared to present a coherent case against OHA's purchase and management of this property by arguing that the property already provides for low and moderate income tenants, the neighborhood has more than it's share of affordable housing and we have long-standing concerns about the quality of management of the existing OHA properties in our neighborhood.

The following is an email from Jan following the meeting:

Just to let you know that OHA had made the decision to drop the attempt to purchase the property on S 31st Street. Due to a lot of hard work by association members, OHA staff and Jim Vokal on our behalf they agreed that the density and parking and the fact that it was already a "low income" building meant that they could make more progress towards more affordable units looking elsewhere.

I want to thank the 10 FBNA residents and Marge from MNA who attended the meeting. We did not even have to present our arguments! It is very refreshing when we see large government respect the efforts we and Destination Midtown are making.

We had very good conversations with the OHA staff and I look forward to major improvements in regards to OHA properties in our area in the near future. -- Jan Quinley
So Omaha, give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses but thanks for showing a

little mercy and common sense.

Its For You

Ford Birthsite Neighborhood Association Election of Officers and Chairpersons, Tuesday September 28th.

During his annual spiritual retreat in 610 CE Muhammad ibn Abdallah prayed, "Lord you sent Elija to the Jews and Jesus to the Greeks why have you not sent a prophet to the Arabs?" The Angel of the Lord replied, "I have sent a prophet to the Arabs. Its you." And Muhammad said, "No it isn't. I've never done anything like this." And the Lord said, "Just do it."

So here in CE 2004 you're saying to yourself, "Why can't someone in that Ford Birthsite Neighborhood Association get something right for a change." And the neighborhood association says, "There is someone who can get it right. It's you." The Ford Birthsite Neighborhood Association's annual election of officers will be held at the general meeting in September. Nominations for board members and committee chairpersons may be made at Perk Avenue Cafe or at the meeting before the election.

Fair Warning

The billboards are up at last! FBNA received a grant of \$2,500 from the Omaha Community Foundation to publicize the names of men convicted of soliciting prostitution in our area. The names of sixteen men convicted between November 25th and January 21st will be displayed on four billboards until September 6th. After enduring months of Douglas County Court record review, careful consideration of every imaginable legal ramification and last minute cold feet by some of the allies the results of the hard work are on display.

When the prostitutes return to the corners on Park Avenue its astonishing how quickly the word spreads throughout Omaha and Council Bluffs that they are back in business. We expect that this extraordinary step will help to get the word out just as fast that this neighborhood will no longer be the destination of choice for men looking to buy sex. If publicity is any part of the solution, we've got it. The billboards made C Span immediately. All four television stations in Omaha ran a story and the newspapers covered it. Jan Quinly did interviews on local radio and with two radio stations in Canada, one in Colorado and the G. Gordon Liddy show out of New York. Jan says she declined interviews with "shockjocks" in Washington and San Diego. She didn't say who or how she knew they were shocking but the point is that this isn't a joke and prostitution isn't a victimless crime. As Jan said to the Newspaper reporter, "It degrades everyone associated with it."

From the Watch **"We'll be Seeing You"**

Randy and I have been having a really hard time with this quasi-electrician we've hired to

change our house from fuses to breakers. As it turned out, the licensed electrician we hired is not a licensed electrician. He's a journeyman, who does not have legal right to work unsupervised, nor can he pull permits. Which is what started all this in the first place. After months of problems, failed inspections, and messes, the head electrical inspector for the city, Terry Scholl, is going before the licensing board on Friday to file charges against him.

During my conversation with Terry, I asked if the "electricians" felony conviction and jail sentence for bad check writing had kept him from taking the qualifying test. Terry told me that his criminal background has nothing whatsoever to do with him not taking the test, and in fact, wouldn't bar him from getting any license. He said the application for the test doesn't even have a section on it regarding criminal convictions. It's not considered relevant.

Well, guess what? I consider it relevant. Imagine being alone in the house with a violent criminal, and not knowing it. Worse, having your kids present. There is NO check run at ALL. This needs to be changed, in my not-so-humble opinion. Terry agreed and mentioned my concern to his licensing board, but that's just for electricians. I don't think this goes far enough. I'm not worried about bad checks writers but with no background check being run at all, they could have convictions of any kind.

I discussed this with Tracy Willits who pointed out that probably the only reason it occurred to us to check his background at all is because as the neighborhood watch we do that kind of thing all the time. Most people would be doing well to remember to check the BBB for a rating, and then call it good. He also suggested, and I agree with him, that if we decide to run with this, it should mandate that only violent offenders have to disclose that information.

I AM going to run with this.

- Michelle Roy

Ford Birthsite Neighborhood Association officers are elected annually at the General Association Meeting in September. Write in candidates are acceptable. Any person nominated shall have been a member in good standing of the Association for no less than one year prior to nomination.

FBNA 2004/2005
Candidates for Board of Directors

President

Jennifer Campbell

Tracy Willits

Vice President

Don Greer

Jan Quinley

Secretary

Kelli Bowen Dorothy Fangenburg

Treasurer

Mary Brown

Drive Patrol

Tracy Willits

Membership

Michelle Roy

Omaha Police Chief Thomas Warren and Southeast Precinct Captain John Friend will review problems with crime in our neighborhood and share solutions with the association membership at the September meeting.

Discussion will begin immediately following the election of officers.

Representatives of the City Prosecutor's office will also attend if possible.