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Killer Trash

Why Reservoir Hill Can't Take Out the Garbage



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

Efforts to clean up Reservoir Hill's trash, like this pile on the 2300 block of Jordan Alley, have "never been enough," says activist/resident Willie M' Davis. "If we give them trash cans, someone comes along and steals them. We've never been able to put our trash together and get rid of it!"



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

Russ Moss, Reservoir Hill homeowner, landlord, and activist, pitches in during a neighborhood clean-up day.



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

Some days Reservoir Hill looks overrun with garbage, but on other days it looks clean and bright as it did earlier this month when homeowner Stephanie Garney (above) showed off her lush backyard during a neighborhood garden tour.



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

Resident Frances Ferguson battles the trash war by taking a broom to her neighborhood's streets and gutters. "It's never-ending," she says of the effort.

By Eileen Murphy

Priscilla Blackwell-Kelly moved into her Reservoir Street home nearly 50 years ago. When she and her husband left a public-housing project to become homeowners, they also became the first African-American family to buy into Reservoir Hill.

Part two of a series. Read other stories.

A lot has changed since Blackwell-Kelly moved here nearly a half-century ago. The schools where she sent her five sons are no longer segregated.

The North Avenue movie theaters that once barred her presence no longer exist. And the neighborhood itself is different.

"You saw a growth in apartment buildings. More people crowded in," she recalls. Then she started noticing vacant buildings during the 1960s, and their number gradually increased. "They went from homeowners to apartments to nothing."

Now Blackwell-Kelly's well-kept three-story home is flanked by abandoned houses, one vacant for 20 years, the other for 10. "It's a hazard," she says, ticking off the risks of being sandwiched between empty buildings: "water damage . . . animals, fire, drug users." The situation has forced her to adapt her own home, installing an alarm system and acquiring a dog to deal with potential problems from squatters who might take up residence next-door.

Then there's the trash. Illegally dumped garbage is an issue throughout historic Reservoir Hill, but it's a particular problem for residents living next to abandoned houses, where no one is mowing the lawn or removing debris. Even though she maintains her property, Blackwell-Kelly doesn't use her backyard anymore; she had a deck built so that she can go outside without coming face to face with rats. She and her son put up shower curtains so they can sit outside without seeing the garbage in the alley.

They also have to keep an eye on the neighboring properties. A couple of summers ago, Blackwell-Kelly smelled something bad in the alley; thanks to the



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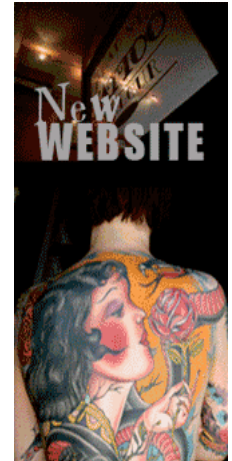
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JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

in one of the adjacent yards. She investigated and found a dead dog in one of the adjacent yards. She called the city's Bureau of Solid Waste but was told it couldn't enter private property to retrieve the corpse without the owner's permission. Animal Control wouldn't handle a dead dog. Finally, Blackwell-Kelly paid a neighborhood man to bag the carcass and drag it into the alley, where sanitation workers picked it up with the rest of the trash.

Everyone in Reservoir Hill talks about the trash. It's the great leveler: Regardless of your economic status, level of education, social situation, or location within the neighborhood, if you live in Reservoir Hill, you deal with garbage.

You deal with the bags and bottles and cans that float piecemeal though the streets, thanks to careless litterbugs and a steady southbound wind. You deal with overcrowded apartment buildings whose absentee landlords fail to provide the standard one trash can per unit. You deal with dumping by small haulers who find that the neighborhood's easy access to Interstate 83 makes for a quick getaway. You deal with garbage strategically placed by drug dealers to aid their business and hinder the cops.

It makes for a startling visual. Perfectly appointed Victorian rowhouses face mounds of torn and overflowing plastic bags. Stately brick houses, sometimes boasting two or three wooden decks, might overlook alleys littered with discarded mattresses, rusting cars, and scattered refuse. Shared courtyards may feature new benches and picnic tables, but many days they also teem with broken glass and fast-food wrappers. On some days the neighborhood looks clean and bright; on others, it is overrun with garbage.

The situation is longstanding, and seemingly intractable. Joe Kolodziejski, head of the Department of Public Works' (DPW) Bureau of Solid Waste, considers Reservoir Hill a "hot zone," one of 16 city neighborhoods with particular sanitation problems that warrant extra attention and resources from his agency. It has held that designation for the entire 30 years Kolodziejski has been with the department.

Horror stories about: The dead cat on a Mount Royal Terrace roof that residents couldn't get anyone to come collect. (The cat was part of a tour residents arranged for then-Mayor William Donald Schaefer to demonstrate the trash problem; according to neighborhood lore, Schaefer was so appalled by what he saw in Reservoir Hill that he cut the tour short, before reaching the feline "exhibit.") The junked car residents had to take apart and bag to get the city to take it away. The apartment buildings that lack rear exits, so tenants have no access to the alleys where trash is collected and thus dump their garbage out front, or launch it from windows into unused backyards.

Residents deal with the garbage that surrounds them in different ways. Some act alone: Jay Fisher, a curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art who lives in the 1900 block of Park Avenue, takes broom and dustpan to both sides of his street--every single morning. "I'm really affected by the trash," he says. "It makes such a big difference when you take care of it."

Some act collectively: Tyrone Gaines, head of the Reservoir Hill Coalition after-school program at John Eager Howard Elementary, treats the trash problem as an opportunity to get the neighborhood kids involved in their community. Every summer he runs a "Trashbusters" program in which local kids clean up the Reservoir Hill streets and are rewarded with a bus trip to an amusement park.

And some try to blot the problem out: Jacqueline Jones, a Washington College English professor newly moved to Reservoir Street, maintains a high fence that keeps an unsightly alley from view. (When she did play squeaky wheel recently and contacted the Bureau of Solid Waste about the trash problem outside her house, she ended up being fined \$50 for building materials stored in her backyard.)

Such efforts may help residents feel empowered, but many people in Reservoir Hill fear that the situation will never improve. It isn't for lack of effort, but even intense cleanups seem merely to keep things from getting worse. Longtime residents confirm the longevity of the problem, while energetic newcomers are quickly worn down by its ubiquity. Without better policing and enforcement of existing dumping laws by the city, residents can only maintain the neighborhood. It seems a pipe dream to imagine a Reservoir Hill free of trash.

Willie Mae Davis used to be passionate when it came to the neighborhood's trash problem, but 40 years of activism in Reservoir Hill has left her tired. "There seemed not to be a solution to trash," she says. "People seem not to care where they live. You can see them on the street corners. What they're saying is, 'This is not real to me.'"

Davis is 83 years old, and she still works full time at the YWCA on Mulberry Street. She's a doer, not a talker, and anyway, she's tired of talking about trash. When a reporter asks for

a formal interview, Davis initially declines; folks are free to stop by her apartment on Reservoir Street, she says, and if it's a nice day and she's feeling so inclined, she'll take a walk around the neighborhood and point out everything that's beautiful. But her eyesight is fading, she's got a bad back, and she doesn't want to dwell on the negative. She'd prefer to focus on what's right with her community.

"It's a beautiful neighborhood, the architecture is beautiful," she says. "Everything [I've done] has been around trying to beautify the neighborhood."

Davis was the driving force behind the hiring of a neighborhood trash truck. In the late '90s, she applied for and received a city-administered federal grant to fund extra rounds by a DPW trash truck, in addition to the usual city-funded, twice-a-week pickup. The Reservoir Hill Improvement Council's (RHIC) Sanitation Committee hired two residents to work part time on the truck, and for two years it made three rounds a week, dealing with illegally dumped garbage and bags that missed the regular pickup.

But last year the city took the truck away, returning Reservoir Hill to the regular twice-a-week trash collection. Residents blame the change on the arrival of a new mayor. But Reggie Scriber, the ombudsman at the Department of Housing and Community Development, which oversaw the grant that funded the truck, says the extra pickup was never meant to be permanent. Yet residents came to depend on it, he says, putting trash out on off days because they knew the extra truck was coming--and the neighborhood association didn't work hard enough to educate people about improving the situation without it.

To Davis, the problem runs much deeper than whether there's trash pickup two or three times a week. It goes back to changes in attitude and attention among both the leaders in City Hall and neighbors she says don't want to put time into the community. "Once upon a time, we had Mayor Schaefer. He was somebody you could talk to," she says. "We came a long way; we did quite a few things in here."

In the '70s, she says, there was public money to pay kids to work in the neighborhood as part of the Summer Corps program. The neighborhood was more unified, and people enjoyed working together on projects. And she had more energy to get things done. Like Tyrone Gaines, she used the trash situation as an opportunity to get neighborhood kids involved in something positive, organizing a program that included neighborhood cleanups and after-school rap sessions. "The kids 20 years ago, I could name them one by one," she says. "They all got good jobs, went to college. We tried to point the kids in the right direction. It worked.

"My idea was, I was an outdoor person, and beautification came in there," Davis says. "My commitment made it very easy to get things done . . . and I committed myself to sanitation and beautification."

She still cares deeply about beautification and takes part in plantings around the neighborhood. But the trash problem remains, and Davis is the first to admit it. "It's never been enough," she says of the neighborhood's efforts. "If we give them trash cans, someone comes along and steals them. We've never been able to put our trash together and get rid of it!"

As a songwriter and musician, Russ Moss spends his evenings in jazz clubs and recording studios. As a cameraperson, he spends his days roaming the city for WJZ (channel 13) news. As a Reservoir Hill homeowner and landlord, he spends his weekends and far too much of his free time dealing with trash.

A native Georgian, Moss came to Reservoir Hill by way of Buffalo, N.Y., Columbia, S.C., and Annapolis. He bought the three-story Park Avenue rowhouse where he lives in 1984. Moss occupies the first floor and rents out the rest of the building as apartments; he also owns another rental property in the neighborhood. Moss says he chose to buy in Reservoir Hill after passing over Federal Hill (small houses), Fells Point (too noisy), and Charles Village (not enough parking). Besides, he wanted to be able to walk his cocker spaniel in Druid Hill Park and jog across North Avenue to attend ArtScape without any of the parking hassles.

What Moss didn't expect to deal with was other people's trash. He has filled his home with photographs and plants and well-thumbed books, but when he steps out his door he sees garbage. In his mind's eye, Moss envisions all of the things Baltimore could be. "We have all of our architecture intact," he says. "This could be a world-class city." But that's not what he sees most days.

And he set out to do something about it. Moss helped found the Bolton-Park Neighbors block club, served as president of the Reservoir Hill Advisory Board, a predecessor to the Reservoir Hill Improvement Council, and is the current chairperson of the RHIC's Sanitation Committee.

The committee meets on the fourth Tuesday of every month. Besides Moss, a few core members always attend--Helen and Harold Walker, 30-year residents of Brookfield Avenue; Paul Hartzell, a resident of Mount Royal Terrace; and Frances Ferguson and assistant chairperson Frances Meekins, both of whom live on Reservoir Street. Although his

personality is jovial and laid-back, Moss focuses on getting things done; he insists on keeping the meeting to an hour and sticks to the printed agenda, gently reminding members to follow the rules of order and to keep complaints to a minimum. Much of the hour he spends enthusiastically discussing upcoming events--neighborhood cleanups, Reservoir Hill's annual June garden tour, the schedule for the weekly roll-off truck, which the Bureau of Solid Waste positions on a different neighborhood corner every Friday.

Most of the money the Sanitation Committee generates through fund-raising and a state grant goes toward buying trash cans to give residents as incentives to participate in various projects, from garden plantings to weekend cleanups. Moss has recently initiated another funding effort, a raffle to raise money to reward residents who turn in those who dump illegally.

He could probably qualify to collect a couple of those dollars himself. In his home, Moss keeps a box of plastic gloves near his door for those times when his finely trained ear detects "the unmistakable sound of a plastic bag of refuse hitting the ground."

"I'm a lot more aggressive than a lot of people," he acknowledges. When someone dumps trash on or near his property, Moss pulls on a pair of gloves, holds his nose, and starts sorting. "I can usually find a BGE bill, a [phone] bill. I take the dumped trash back to the people with a note: 'You don't want your trash? I don't want it either!' I attach a pickup schedule, and [they] can call me with questions."

He doesn't accept excuses either. Moss goes out of his way to make sure his neighbors know what to do with their garbage. As a landlord, he writes the trash-pickup schedule into his tenants' leases and provides trash cans, so there's no doubt as to when and how to put out their garbage. As head of RHIC's Sanitation Committee, he publishes an occasional newsletter, *Trash Talk*, and, with Meekins, arranges and publicizes the dates for the roll-off truck.

"You can change attitudes," Moss says. He runs through ideas: advertising campaigns using buses, newspapers, and church bulletins; song and poster contests to get schoolkids involved. And he's seen it work. He recalls a time when residents couldn't have heating oil delivered because trash in the alleys blocked the trucks. No longer. He shows a visitor a 1986 photo of a trash-strewn alley and proudly explains that the alley is now part of the garden tour, hosted by the block groups Bolton-Park Neighbors and Historic Mount Royal Terrace, in which 26 residents open their backyards to paying visitors.

When the tour was held earlier this month, there wasn't a piece of trash in sight; the alleys in this part of Reservoir Hill were swept clean. The gardens on display varied dramatically, from sculptor Jack Scott's fountain- and tower-filled Bolton Street yard to Elizabeth and Larry Schaeff's rain-forest-like refuge on Reservoir Street. Joined by RHIC President Trudy Robinson, a wine-sipping, hat-wearing Moss hosted guests in his own shady, plant-filled backyard and, for one glorious day, focused solely on the beauty of his neighborhood rather than being distracted by its periodic ugliness.

"You do what you need to make your community livable," he says. "I'd much rather be teaching a class, but you can't do that while trash is swirling around."

According to city solid-waste chief Joe Kolodziejski, Reservoir Hill gets the same sanitation services as the rest of the city's neighborhoods: twice-a-week trash collection, weekly recycling, monthly pickups. The neighborhood sometimes loses its Monday pickups because of federal holidays, but other communities, such as nearby Bolton Hill, are on the same schedule and do not suffer the same trash problems.

What's the difference? The bottom line, Kolodziejski and DPW spokesperson Kurt Kocher say, is resident behavior.

"Nobody wants to sit here and say it, but some people in some neighborhoods just don't get it," Kocher says. In other words, neighborhoods where residents don't follow the law--using regulation trash cans, putting trash out the morning of pickup, signing up for the city's monthly bulk pickup--should expect to have sanitation problems. The city can offer some solutions--materials to educate residents and fines for those who continue to flout the law--but ultimately officials put the responsibility for a clean neighborhood back on the residents.

There are complicating factors in Reservoir Hill. The city can't enter private property to dispose of a dead animal or other garbage without the owner's permission, and if a property is vacant--as so many are here--that permission can be difficult to obtain.

The drug trade fuels the stasis as well. Kolodziejski says the greatest improvement in Reservoir Hill's trash situation came from the 1994 demolition of the 900 block of Whitelock Street, once the neighborhood's commercial district and an area considered by police to be a busy drug market. But there still may be a drug-related aspect to Reservoir Hill's trash problem, he says--dealers sometimes use trash to block alleys to prevent police cars from driving through. According to a source familiar with the neighborhood's drug problems, dealers sometimes use garbage as a place to hide drugs, or use specific, recognizable pieces

of garbage to signal to customers that they're open for business.

But for that trash to start collecting in and around vacant properties and providing shelter for dealers' stashes, someone has to leave it out in the first place. And usually, both city officials and residents say, the dumpers are the people who then have to live with the consequences. When Russ Moss, sorting through trash, discovers the identity of an illegal dumper, he doesn't have to get in his car to confront the scofflaw; the offender is usually right down the street. While he finds fault with the city's handling of sanitation problems--poor enforcement of dumping laws, underfunding of rat-eradication efforts, fines so low it's cheaper for small haulers to pay the penalty than to pay to have their garbage collected legally--he holds his neighbors largely responsible.

"Eighty-five percent [of the residents] are doing the right thing. It's that 15 percent," Moss says. "If 15 percent of drivers were running red lights, you'd have carnage on the highways.

"Baltimore has as many sanitation resources as other cities," he goes on, his annoyance apparent. "I say this from digging in other people's trash for 15 years. In South Carolina, people get trash picked up every two weeks," and there isn't the sort of sanitation crisis he sees in Baltimore.

"I see people step over the trash. We need a citywide campaign to clean up the attitudes, to change the approach to the trash. . . . [We] need to create an environment where trash is unacceptable."

That's where many people are when first confronted with the problem, Kolodziejski says, but too often they become frustrated by its intractability and ultimately accustomed to the ubiquitous trash. He's seen the cycle play out many times: New residents make frequent calls to complain about trash but see few results. They take the initiative and join in efforts to clean up the neighborhood. But change is slow, and over time they lower their standards. Sometimes they're even fined for their own habits, which have become slack in reflection of their surroundings. Sometimes they need to be shocked back into awareness of the problem.

That may be true of public officials as well. In late January, City Council member Catherine Pugh, whose 4th District includes Reservoir Hill, accompanied a reporter on a drive through the neighborhood. Pugh acknowledges that Reservoir Hill has a problem with trash, but she believes the neighborhood isn't suffering alone--it's a citywide problem. She recalls jogging near Druid Hill Park and witnessing a Druid Heights resident dumping a pot full of kitchen trash into the park. Pugh says that when she confronted the dumper the woman told her to mind her own business.

Pugh blames the sanitation problem in Reservoir Hill--and throughout the city--on entrenched behaviors. "Some people you have to teach," she says. "You have to reach out to figure out why" residents litter and disobey sanitation laws. "The big issue is, what do you want your neighborhood to look like?"

On this January day, though, Pugh--despite her knowledge of the garbage problem in Reservoir Hill and throughout Baltimore--wasn't prepared for the sights that greeted her. It was early on a Thursday afternoon, just hours after the garbage trucks made their rounds, yet trash was piled up--mattresses dumped in alleys, plastic bags filled with garbage sitting on corners, a collapsing garage nearly half-filled with moldering junk. The usually refined Pugh called her office on a cell phone and barked out orders, insisting that her staff call DPW, the housing department, *somebody* who could get out here and clean this mess up. It might have helped that there was a reporter in the car to witness all this righteous indignation, but Pugh's outrage seemed genuine.

"This is bad," she said, almost to herself, as she put away her cell phone. "This is really bad."

Next in this series: educating Reservoir Hill's children.

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