Putting a neighborhood back on the map

by: Elizabeth McGowan

For years, Audrey Ray has screamed at the top of her lungs about the plight of hardscrabble Ivy City. But only recently, she says, have DC officials unplugged their ears to listen. She's enlisted nonprofit Empower DC to guide the newly formed Ivy City Coalition in gaining three longtime wishes. One, restore crumbling Crummell School as a community center; two, make sure the Home Again Initiative offers affordable housing on the 30 properties it has claimed thus far; and three, provide basic police, street maintenance and trash pickup services.

"We love this place," Ray said about this neglected wedge of Northeast DC bounded by Mount Olivet, New York and West Virginia Avenues where the median income is $27,900. "We have memories, so we know what it can be."

Ray, now a 52-year-old administrative assistant, laughs like the young teen she once while recalling her days as a cheerleader for the neighborhood basketball team when she and her friends sewed green and yellow uniforms, and christened themselves the Ivy City Canaries. They shopped for up-to-date fashions at nearby H Street, NE and, for groceries at institutions such as the Okie Street Market.

She also remembers her father guarding their brick, two-story Providence Street rowhouse — the one she moved back into in 2001— with a shotgun during the 1968 riots.

Developed as a brick-making center in 1872, Ivy City was home to the National Fair Grounds and a thoroughbred racetrack visited by President Rutherford B. Hayes. The railroad maintained a roundhouse nearby. In the 1930s, it was rural enough that residents kept goats, chickens and horses. But with World War II came a hodgepodge of industrial buildings and warehouses followed by junkyards and vehicle storage lots.

When the government seemed inches away from paving a freeway through Ivy City in the mid-1960s, many residents of this black, working class neighborhood fled. Those who stayed behind saw their streets turn bloody during the 1980s crack cocaine epidemic.

The year 1980 dealt an almost deadly blow. Workers with the nonprofit Institute for Cultural Affairs were on the verge of turning the community center at Crummell they'd spent four years nurturing over to the neighbors. But Crummell burned. Gone were the training classes, the sports, the recreation, the daycare and the nursing station.

Now, besides a rinky-dink playground that's usually locked behind a fence, recreation consists of kickball in the street and a portable basketball hoop that kids drag from one block to another.

"Crummell School is our heartbeat," Ray says about the red brick, Renaissance-style building that opened as a school in 1912 and had a long history as a community center. Snowden Ashford, DC's first municipal architect, designed it. It is named for Alexander Crummell, a

prominent clergyman, missionary, orator and scholar who founded St. Luke's Episcopal Church, the city's first independent black Episcopal church.

The vehicles of Dream Nightclub patrons fill the school parking lot at night. Residents lament the increase in prostitution, drinking, drugs and parking problems they say Dream has brought. Trinity Baptist Church erected a fence to keep illegally parked cars out — but churchgoers still find condoms and other trash littering their property.

Despite its litany of problems, outside investors are starting to pour serious money into Ivy City real estate. That has longtime residents — the ones who have battled for zoning changes and rat eradication — worried they'll be left behind.

It turns out their concerns had validity. Knowing that Ivy City's housing stock was mostly raggedy and that one-third of the families had left in the 1990s, DC officials had recently planned to relocate the 425 remaining households.

"We were all feeling as if we were being taken over by Goliath," Ray says about the news that prompted the birth of the coalition. "I was appalled and offended that they wanted to knock this area down."

City officials scrapped that plan last winter. Instead of reinventing the area as a 100 percent commercial and industrial headquarters, the city is enlisting initiatives such as Home Again. Residents also are receptive to the idea of turning Crummell into a culinary or technical institute, proposals generated during an Office of Planning study.

Home Again wants to have acquired a total of 37 properties in Ivy City by the time it puts out a request for proposals this fall, said project manager Howard Ways III. In the meantime, he and other city officials are part of a task force meeting regularly with residents to discuss design, ownership, affordability and retention. With ownership, they're exploring options such as cooperatives, land trusts and condo associations.

Since its creation in 2002, Home Again has spurred rehabilitation of 350 single-family homes across DC, Ways said. The goal is to take over blighted, abandoned properties and sell them to one of the 38 developers hand-picked by Home Again.

"Given the energy of the people I've met in Ivy City," Ways said, "I'm convinced it will be a project we can all be proud of."

Ray, who said her coalition work is the equivalent of a second, full-time job, is hopeful about the city's response but taking a wait-and-see attitude.

"I'm excited, not fairy tale excited, but still excited," she says. "I feel like they're finally listening to us."