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Misery and Change in the Shadow of the Capitol

by Markus Franz and Knut Panknin

— We lock the doors of our car from the inside as we cross the Anacostia River going eastward. We are now in a supposedly no-go area for whites. A district with 77,000 inhabitants (over 90% black) of which even a black policeman tells us he would not enter unarmed at night. This is a district where more than 3.000 people have been murdered since 1960. Where in one summer evening in 2007, four different shootings led to eight victims within two hours. This is a district of which a former criminal says, “When we see teenagers, we cross the street. That is how scared we are of our kids.”

Only every second resident has a job. Every third lives below the poverty line. Two out of three children grow up without their father. Nowhere else in the city are there as many high school dropouts (34%) and as many overweight people (71%, 33% of them obese). We are in the capital of the richest country in the world: Washington, DC. However, this is a place where tourists and even most Congressmen never venture. Even some of the city’s street maps do not clearly detail this district. We find ourselves in the infamous Ward 8 district in Southeast DC, one and a half miles from the Capitol. The 8th Ward leads nearly in every negative statistic of Washington’s eight districts. Ward 7, which neighbors the 8th Ward, follows a close second.

Originally, we had planned to write a report on the forgotten people and the misery that exists in the shadow of the Capitol. Three months and countless rides across the Anacostia River later, during which nothing bad ever happened to us, we are coming to the conclusion: We are a few years too late

to write the report we had envisioned. It is still dangerous here, and the high levels of poverty and desperation are striking, but: the Ward 8 is changing. Only its reputation has remained the same. We have since decided to write a report about change and how such change can materialize. What roles do civil engagement, careful city planning, and free market forces play? For one man this answer is simple: Washington DC's former two-time Mayor Marion Barry (1979–1991 and 1995–1999), who has been the Councilmember of Ward 8 since 2004: "My leadership".

Change

(Where the poorest live today, soon the richest may reside)

Prior to our first visit to Ward 8, we expected to see rundown buildings, boarded up windows, piles of trash, graffiti, unkempt lawns, loiterers, and drug addicts. In one word: misery. But when we finally get there we ask ourselves: Where is this misery? Are we in the right place? It looks more frightening in some parts of Paris and London than here. The 8th Ward is located in one of the most scenic areas of Washington, DC. It is located along the Anacostia River and is very green and hilly. From areas that lie on high ground, like the former home of the 19th century black civil rights leader Frederick Douglass, there are beautiful views of the entire city.



View from Frederick Douglass House

One wonders why the richest of the rich do not live here, and perhaps exactly that will be the case not too long from now. James Bunn, the chairman of the Ward 8 Business Council says, "This area will resemble Georgetown in ten years". Georgetown is the trendy and touristy area in Washington, DC, which is predominantly inhabited by well-to-do whites. Bunn is referring to the prosperity of Georgetown and not the area's demographics. However, he has to admit that soon the 8th Ward could house a population that will be more than 50% white.

"We do not rent to blacks"

The demographics of the 8th Ward have changed before. In the 1960s, mostly white middle-class families lived in the area. African-Americans were discriminated against. One could hear, "We do not rent to blacks." Then the housing costs rose significantly in the city center, and the less affluent of the city's population (predominantly African Americans) moved to less expensive districts east of the Anacostia river. Additionally, the many public housing apartments located in the 8th Ward attracted the poorest of the city's poor. Many whites feared that the property values of their homes would deteriorate, felt increasingly uncomfortable about the changing racial demographics of the 8th Ward and moved away, often outside the city. The construction of the city's beltway in 1964, the highway that circles it and makes it possible to live outside the city and commute to work, facilitated this trend. By the 1980s, the 8th Ward was predominantly African American.

You won't even find a McDonald's here

Of course the area looks a bit shabby. What else would you expect when its population is so poor? We see abandoned houses with their doors and windows boarded up, an abandoned school, a few ruins, and – uncharacteristic for a U.S. city – a large number of people that are standing around with seemingly nothing to do. But we also see many single family homes. They are not really spruced up, but they are also not run-down. There are many newly built homes, some of which sell at the price of at

least \$400,000; well-kept lawns with clean playgrounds; a cultural center with a movie theater; and a pleasant supermarket that opened in December 2007.

There are a few things that we do not see simply because they do not exist: Another supermarket, a hotel, a theater, a department store of one of the large U.S. chains, a pharmacy, a book store, and a nice restaurant. Not even a Starbucks or a McDonald's exists here – the last McDonald's closed in the 1980s and the building is still abandoned today. 82 cents of every dollar are spent outside of Ward 8.

Criminal Activity

(The number of homicides is going down)

Until a few years back, Washington, DC was known as the “murder capital”. It owed its nickname mainly to the 8th Ward, where more than one quarter of all homicides occurred in the capital (representing only one eighth of DC's population of 580,000). In 1991 alone, 479 people in DC were killed. Since then, the number of homicides has declined continuously. In 2007, 181 people were killed, 63 of them in Ward 8. According to Metropolitan Police statistics, the 8th Ward still leads all city districts in the number of homicides, as well as in the number of assaults with deadly weapons (ADW) and sex abuse cases. However, the difference in terms of violent behavior between the 8th Ward and the other districts has been reduced over the past few years.

A ride with the police – the first arrest occurs after just 3 minutes

A number of certificates are hanging on the walls of the 7th Police District, which is responsible for Ward 8. They document the successful reduction in crime. In 1994 alone, crime was reduced by 27%. In the lobby of the police station you can find five gum ball machines and an ATM. The ATM is frequently being used by people who come here only to safely withdraw money. There are not many other ATMs located in the area.



The last McDonald's closed in the 1980s.

We are taking a tour of duty in Ward 8 as part of the police's ride-along program with African American police officer Dennis Stewart. We witness the first arrest after only three minutes. Dennis stops an 18-year old African American man who is well known to the police. Another officer enters the scene, they handcuff the young man and find a small sachet of hash.

Dennis Stewart thinks that the 8th Ward continues to be extremely dangerous. He advises us never to roam these streets at night. Even he would never dare to do so without being armed. But he admits that the situation has improved over the years. Shootings “do not occur on daily but only on a monthly basis.” According to him, one reason for this is that the most dangerous individuals are either dead or in jail. Another reason is the decline of public housing. Dennis says that public housing is a breeding ground for violence.

This is an argument that we hear again and again. The 8th Ward has by far the most public housing. 2,400 of the 9,900 public housing apartments that exist in Washington, DC are located here. Since 2000, the number of public housing apartments in the 8th Ward has been reduced by 1,100 units. In all other Wards combined the numbers have gone down by only 900 units. However, new public housing facilities are supposed to be built, says chairman of the Ward 8 Business Council,



Frederick Douglass House

James Bunn. Public housing in general does not have to be bad. It simply has to be kept in good condition and should not be concentrated in one area.

The Police is taking tougher measures

Councilmember Marion Barry attributes the sinking number of homicides to tougher police measures regarding drug trafficking, which is something he supported. In addition, more weapons have been confiscated in the recent past. Indeed, a police statistic shows that drug related homicides between 2002 and 2005 dropped from 34% to 10%. The 72-year old Barry is a highly controversial figure because he was sentenced to a six-month jail term in October 1990 for illegal drug use. Whites who live on the other side of the river typically roll their eyes when his name is mentioned, but we only hear good things about him from the residents of the 8th Ward. He champions their causes.

Can Volunteer Workers be more Effective than the Police?

One reason for the reduced violence in Ward 8 may be the work that is being done by non-profit organizations such as the “Alliance of Concerned Men” (ACM) and the

“Peaceoholics”. They negotiate truces between gangs, look after teenagers (especially those whose parents are in jail), procure jobs, and offer psychological help and guidance. The biggest strength of these two organizations is the credibility of their leaders, who both grew up in the 8th Ward. Tyrone Parker of ACM spent 18 months in jail for drug trafficking and will be on probation until 2011. The police shot him, his son was murdered, and his wife left him. Nonetheless, he decided to “become part of the solution instead of being part of the problem” and founded the Alliance of Concerned Men in 1991. Ronald Moten, head of the Peaceoholics, has a similar background. He also spent time in jail and his brother and several friends were shot.

Parker’s ACM, as well as Moten’s Peaceoholics, have successfully negotiated several truces between gangs, which has been favorably reported by national media. Numerous awards and certifications adorn the walls of their respective offices. ACM is located in Northeast Washington, DC and the Peaceoholics set up their offices in the 8th Ward. Parker’s and Moten’s analyses of the current conditions are very similar: violent criminals are becoming ever younger. The reasons for this are that fathers are in jail, mothers are helpless by themselves, schools are run-down, and there are too many weapons on the streets. Even 14-year old kids have machine guns.

There are more Murder Victims than 9/11 Victims

Parker agrees with Councilmember Barry that the police are successful in their battle against drug-related crimes. However, he asserts that this has merely shifted violent behavior elsewhere. There are now more armed robberies than before (481 in 2005, compared to 405 in 2002). Parker says that “many are so hungry that they always find a reason to act out violently. Crime helps to survive.”

The Peaceoholics (65 employees) are financed through public funds (70%) and private donations (30%). The ACM (46 employees) works rent-free in a building pro-

vided by the city and is funded by city contracts as well as donations. We ask Parker and Moten whether they think that politicians are doing enough to support their organizations? Parker answers, “The politicians do not care about us”, and Moten says, “We risk our lives on the streets every day. And what do the politicians demand of us? Paperwork.” Both draw parallels to the attack on the World Trade Center. The number of murdered individuals in the 8th Ward since 1960 is higher than the number of victims of 9/11. They say the current situation is a “state of emergency”, but the politicians are not doing enough. But both dismiss our question about what exactly they expect the state to do. Parker says, “This is simply how it is. It is the system that we live in. Our society is the most successful in the world, so we must help ourselves.” Moten says, „The government is not able to do what grassroots organizations are able to do.“ We encounter this attitude again and again. Despite all the criticism that is directed at the conditions of the district, hardly any of the individuals we interview is asking for more state-based help. The reasoning tends to be that individuals should not become dependent on outside help. Instead of being given fish, they should learn how to fish. This is why better education is one of the primary concerns.

Education

(minimum standards are not met)

There is hardly a negative adjective that is not used in connection with the quality of schools in the 8th Ward. Pitiful, depressing, disgraceful... The accusations are: lack of concepts, bad teachers, too much violence and run-down buildings, the air conditioning units do not work during the very hot summer months, there is no toilet paper, and it takes six months to repair broken toilets. The academic results of students in Ward 8 reflect these conditions: they are falling behind. Only one in five students is proficient in reading and just one in eight is proficient in math (DC government 2006–2007). Just 8% of the residents in Ward 8 are College graduates.

A nerve-wrecking situation

Tonya Kinlow has been the Ombudsman for public education for DC since October 2007. Together with three staff members, she receives citizen complaints brought against the public schools and tries to solve them.

Kinlow says that academic achievements are “lamentable” in Washington, DC, and in the 8th Ward in particular, but that “the entire city is focused on improving the situation”. The reasons for this are many. Teachers complain that children are not ready to receive academic instruction when they come to school. They say they spend too much time trying to get students to sit and quiet down. The kids have to deal with violence, drugs, poverty, and broken homes. Kinlow says “many of our children face a lot of intense social problems in the community, so we have to make our schools a sanctuary – a place where they look forward going to”. However, there is still violence in the schools, high staff turnover, and teachers and principals are overworked. New teachers typically leave the District’s schools within three years. They simply cannot stand it any longer than that. Kinlow says, “It’s a nerve wrecking situation, but we are hopeful for an incredible turn around.”

For Mayor Adrian Fenty (in office since August 2007) the improvement of DC’s public schools is a top priority and the creation of the position of Ombudsman is a clear indicator for that. Among other things, Fenty plans to close 23 schools by 2011 to focus the city’s resources, keep teachers in their jobs for longer time periods, increase the time children spend in school, including after school programs, and create a violence free school zone. The improvement of schools is also very important to make the city more attractive to families. The worse the schools are, the more likely well-to-do families are to move away. These families also tend to contribute larger amounts to the city’s tax revenue.

Based on the lower property values relative to the rest of DC, its proximity to the city center, and its scenic location, the 8th Ward could be an excellent neighborhood for families. But the bad condition of schools prevents

many from moving to the area. This in turn hurts the schools. In the other more well-to-do areas of the city, parents collect funds to pay for additional instructors and after school programs. This is not the case in Ward 8 where Tonya Kinlow is a resident. For years she took her children to public schools in other parts of the city. Now, she hopes for increased parent participation in Ward 8 schools bolstered by an infusion of new residents who will engage in the improvement of neighborhood schools. Kinlow said she believes that all parents want the same thing she had for her kids – high quality and free public education.

Horton's Kids: A Tutoring Program in the Department of Education

As long as schools do not improve, volunteer projects, such as Horton's Kids, are necessary. Founder Karin Walser used to work for a Congressman. One evening in 1989, she filled her tank on a busy street when a group of six-year olds offered to help her. Karin Walser found out that these kids were living in a homeless shelter. She decided to invite the children to the zoo. The kids were very excited and their mothers did not care. Walser recounts that the children's mothers were high, lying on the floor of a stuffy and dirty room. This was the day she decided to found Horton's Kids, an afterschool tutoring program for children that live in Southeast Washington.

134 children are picked up by buses from their homes in Ward 8 two to three times per week and are taken across the river to tutoring programs in government buildings. On Wednesdays for example, the program takes place in the Department of Education. On Sundays, the program organizes excursions. Before the lessons begin (usually before the buses take them from their homes), the children are given something substantial to eat. "In the dirt next to the bus", Walser says. All the children suffer from bad nutrition. They either do not get enough to eat or their diet is unbalanced. By eating well, Walser says, they are better able to focus on their lessons. The most important aspect of the program, however, is the human contact, because most of these children are neglected at home. Karin Walser recounts a story where a mother

brought a plate of shrimps home. When her five-year old daughter asked to have a shrimp, the mother said, "No, get your own."

The Secretary of Education helps out

Each kid has one tutor who is responsible for him or her at Horton's Kids. Many of the tutors come from government agencies and do this voluntary work after hours. Margaret Spellings, U.S. Secretary of Education, is one of them. She tutors every couple of months personally and usually sends a staff person on her behalf. We visited Horton's Kids at the Department of Education one Wednesday afternoon. About 40 kids sit in a bright, large room at single tables with their tutors. The kids wear simple but clean clothes. A T-shirt of a 12-year old girl reads: "Silent but deadly". A typical expression among them is: "I glass you", and means: I hit you in the eye.

Being fat means being safe

Twelve-year old Tom (his name has been changed) is a student at a typical school in the 8th Ward. Every week he is supposed to learn three to five new words. This time, two of these words are "beautiful" and "exercise". Tom is supposed to pronounce these words and explain their meaning. Furthermore, he is writing a continuing story, in which he is a superhero. His hero's name is Lightning Bolt who is 20 years old and weighs 365 pounds. When we ask Tom why he wants to be so fat, he answers, "So that nobody can beat me up."

The project is financed by private donations. The city does not fund any part of it. Karin Walser says this is very frustrating but that she does not complain. That would do no good. However, she does admit that it is very sad that so many people are left to their own devices. According to Walser, this has a lot to do with the attitudes of many Americans: It is your own fault if you are poor. "Americans do a good job of sending poor people to places where they are no longer visible."

Revival

(At the Beginning there was the Baseball Stadium)

The biggest driver of development in the 8th Ward is the new Baseball Stadium “Nationals Park” that opened on March 30, 2008 on the other side of the Anacostia River. Patron and owner of the stadium that cost \$611 Million to build is the City of Washington, DC. For 33 years, Washington, DC did not have its own baseball team. The new stadium made it possible to import a Canadian baseball team (the Montreal Expos) to the city, which is now known as the “Washington Nationals”. The decision to build the new stadium was not exclusively based on athletics. Former Mayor Anthony A. Williams advertised the project as an economic catalyst for the city (especially the poor Southeastern Wards). Three other locations in Washington, DC were available to build the stadium but Williams insisted that the stadium be built along the Anacostia River.

The construction of the stadium was a point of contention from the very beginning. During the planning stages in 2004, three quarters of the city’s population were against building the stadium. And even the current Mayor, Adrian M. Fenty, remains skeptical. Critics wonder why a chronically poor city should spend so much money to give a Canadian baseball team, which is privately owned, a new home. The more so as baseball is a sport that is primarily dominated by white athletes (only 9% of Major League Baseball players are African American) and Washington DC is a city where most residents are African American (56%).

Supporters argue that the neighborhoods adjacent to the stadium have shown positive change. There are now a trendy hotel, modern apartment buildings, office buildings, and a Starbucks, where in the past used to be sex clubs, second-hand goods stores, a methadone clinic, and unkempt public spaces. Capital expenditures range around \$6.1 Billion. Among the plans are 1.1 million square meters of office space, 75,000 square meters of shops, restaurants, and entertainment, 9,000 apartment units, and 1,200 hotel rooms (WP, April 28, 2008). These investments will result in substantially higher tax revenues.



The new baseball stadium Nationals Park

Skeptics argue that, because of the scenic beauty of the area, this improvement would have taken place even without the construction of the new stadium, and that improvements had already taken hold before the decision was made to build the stadium. They furthermore argue that the enormous sum of \$611 Million could instead have been aimed at improving schools, the city’s infrastructure, and public housing. To this, proponents reply that the stadium has substantially increased the speed of local development.

The Downside of Progress

(as evidenced with the example of “Positive Nature”)

Development also has downsides: rising real estate prices, higher rent rates, and tax increases. This results in population displacement. One example is the non-profit agency „Positive Nature“, which is an organization that takes care of neglected children and children who display behavioral problems. 70% of their budget comes from public funds while 30 % comes from private donations. In 2004, when “Positive Nature” moved into the area where Nationals Park stands today, their two-story building was the highest in the neighborhood. Today, as di-

rector and co-founder Brian Bailey points out, the building looks “like a pea” in comparison. The construction boom in the area had the following effects on the small agency: In 2005, they had to pay \$9,000 in property taxes. In 2007 it was \$83,000, and in 2008 they expect to pay more than \$100,000 in property taxes. But the city is considering a tax exemption for the small agency and has introduced a „Positive Nature Property Tax Exemption and Forgiveness Act of 2008“. However, until this act enters into law „Positive Nature“ is broke. In addition, the proposed exemption is limited to one year.

“A Selfish Society”

Because of these circumstances, Bailey and co-founder Jennifer Murphy say that the agency will leave the neighborhood mid-August. But where should they move? Property rates, rent rates, and taxes are now also rising in the neighboring 8th Ward. At this point it is not yet clear in which capacity Positive Nature will be able to continue to operate.

Brian Bailey and Jennifer Murphy are an unusual leadership team in Washington, DC. She is white and he is black. Bailey says, that “Race is a big deal in Washington, DC, but not as much as business.” This is supposed to mean that racism is not the reason why Southeast DC had been neglected for so long, but that the area was simply not profitable enough to merit investments. Jennifer Murphy laments that it says a lot about a city how it treats its most vulnerable residents, and that the city of Washington, DC is not doing enough.

There is only one other organization like Positive Nature that provides services for behaviorally challenged children in Washington, DC. We ask ourselves why the city is allowing these conditions to persist? Murphy answers, “Our society is selfish by nature”. According to her, such an attitude is short sighted and dangerous. Shortly before our visit, four individuals were murdered (three in Southeast Washington, DC) on a single weekend (April 26/27, 2008). One of them was a Horton’s Kid. Murphy says that

this shows how important prevention is, but that politicians like to talk about increased police presence. “Instead they should do something for us. We’re already here.” The 16-year old Nichelle Payne, who is one of the children in care at Positive Nature, affirms this belief. “They say they want to keep people off the streets, from killing each other. This is going to put more kids out on the streets. This is going to produce more killing” (WP, March 26, 2008).

Displacement by Slumlords

There is also displacement taking place in the neighboring Ward 8. Ever more house and property owners sense business opportunities. Their profits rise if they convert their residences into condominiums. Oftentimes, however, the current tenants who cannot afford higher rent stand in the way. Legally, landlords are rarely able to solve this problem because the protection of tenants’ rights is exceptionally strong in Washington, DC, especially compared to other U.S. cities. Tenants can prohibit that their rented apartments be turned into condominiums. This law, however, does not apply to vacant apartments and buildings.

This is why many property owners let their houses fall into disrepair. In its article “Forced Out” (March 9, 2008), the Washington Post wrote “At 3872 St NE, three floors of misery in the heart of Southeast Washington, tenants lived for years with leaking pipes, crumbling ceilings and kitchens that reeked of cat urine. When Sherita Evans returned home from work with her son, she’d shield his eyes and step over addicts who broke into the vacant, unsecured apartments to get high or get warm.” According to the Post, more than 200 apartment houses were “cleared” this way since 2004; a large percentage of these were located in Southeast Washington, DC. A few days after the article was printed, the city decided to enact tougher laws to take action against this abuse. Moreover, in March 2008, the city sued 23 landlords (the Post calls them “slumlords”) for the dilapidated conditions of their apartment buildings.

According to Councilmember Marion Barry, the change in demographics will be limited. Those who want to stay should be able to do so. The city is trying to accomplish this goal by requiring property owners of publicly subsidized housing to rent at least 35% of their apartments to low-income families and individuals. Additionally, the city subsidizes low-income persons with \$31 Million annually. Councilmember Barry wants to nearly double the current amount. He is asking for an additional \$30 Million.

The ultimate kick – Is now also a soccer stadium on the horizon?

Another giant step for the 8th Ward could be the construction of a new stadium for the Washington, DC soccer team „DC United“. The plan calls for the 27,000-seat stadium to be located on nearly 110 acres located in Ward 8, directly adjacent to the river. However, it will be at least ten years until the completion of the proposed project. Victor B. MacFarlane, the team’s owner, wanted to invest billions to develop the area. However, another developer was granted the development rights. All potential private investors demand considerable financial support from the city. \$150 Million in public money are being discussed. David Brewer, who is the Director of Constituent Services in Marion Barry’s office, leaves little doubt that the city will agree to the deal. The alternative would be to lose the team to another city. And according to Brewer, no one wants to risk that outcome. The name of the neighborhood where the stadium, a hotel, businesses and entertainment centers are supposed to be built is called “Poplar Point”. In Marion Barry’s office, everyone already speaks of the “New Ward 8”; and about “the fall of the last remaining frontier in Washington, DC.”

Brewer dates the beginning of the progress in Ward 8 to the era of former Mayor Anthony Williams. Brewer says, “Williams started paying his bills”. That means that the city started paying off its debt and balanced the budget. This enhanced the city’s credit, which reengaged banks and investors.



The location of the possible soccer stadium: Poplar Point

Health

(A distressed hospital)

There are approximately 35 general practitioners for every 100,000 residents in Ward 8 – 60 to 70 more would be needed in the area. The average in Washington, DC is around 54. The situation is even bleaker when looking at the number of dentists. There are only 24 dentists per 100,000 residents compared to 67 in the city overall. Not to mention the difference in the quality of healthcare. A particular low point is the access to care in hospitals. There is only one single general hospital that is located in the area, the Greater Southeast Community Hospital (GSCH). Its name has just been changed to United Medical Center. It was in a very bad shape. The Council of the District of Columbia wrote in an emergency declaration resolution on July 10, 2007: “...service delivery at the hospital has steadily deteriorated, placing the health and safety of District residents at serious risk.” and expressed “...serious concerns about the ability of GSCH to provide basic patient care.”

But that may change now. The hospital chain “Specialty Hospitals of America, Inc” has bought the GSCH in Octo-



New family homes in Ward 8

ber 2007. The private company owns four hospitals in Washington, DC, including GSCH. President Eric Rieseberg admits serious problems but tells us that this might change within half a year. The hospital, he continues, is the toughest task of his career. He did not take over the GSCH to get rich, but “because no one else would do it.” Rieseberg says, he is a nationally known, successful business executive, and does not need to work anymore, but would like to give back to the community. In the public media there is a different view, because Specialty Hospitals received \$79.5 Million of city subsidies for taking over GSCH, \$20 Million of which was in form of loans. One newspaper spoke of “highway robbery”.

It can only get better

In any case, things can only get better. Rieseberg’s most pressing concern at the moment is to make the hospital safe, for patients and employees alike. Rieseberg says that GSCH was a magnet for crime over the past few years. People were shot in the immediate vicinity of the hospital and a car was stolen at gunpoint in the hospital’s parking lot. Under these circumstances, it comes at no surprise that neither patients nor employees want to be in the

hospital, especially profit-bringing patients and high quality doctors that wish to be paid for their services.

Therefore, Specialty Hospitals has invested almost \$750,000 to increase hospital security, including surveillance cameras. Additionally, the hospital is working closely with the police to conduct more patrols in the hospital’s neighborhoods. The safer and more well-to-do the area is, the easier it will be to make the hospital financially stable again. This is why Rieseberg needs the hospital to be surrounded by a different kind of population. And he needs more patients from the neighboring states of Virginia and Maryland. These two states pay higher reimbursements to hospitals than Washington DC does for low-income individuals who are covered by state-run Medicaid. Today, about 80 percent of the patients come from Wards 7 and 8.

Big Plans

Insofar it is also no coincidence that Specialty Hospitals has made their investment right now. The new baseball stadium, the expected development of the waterfront, the rejuvenation of the housing market, the reduction in crime, and the influx of well-to-do families and individuals all offer new prospects and possibilities that did not exist before. In return, the GSCH could stimulate the local economy. Concerning this, Rieseberg has big plans. He wants to expand the hospital to be a health center with a skilled nursing facility, a long-term critical care provider and a psychiatric clinic. He also wants to lease the roof to telecommunications companies that can set up their antennas there.

Despite the plans, the 7th floor of the hospital will remain reserved for convicts who get their treatment at GSCH. It does not exactly enhance the hospital’s image having them enter and leave the place in handcuffs but it brings revenue. When we left the hospital, we still had the sound of the handcuffs in our ears that a young man in an orange colored prisoner jumpsuit was wearing. Councilmember Marion Barry is optimistic that the in-

vestment into the hospital will pay dividends and that the city will be returned its loan. He says he will pay particular attention to this matter. “I want my money back”, he said.

Food

(all of a sudden there is a supermarket)

For ten long years there has not been a single supermarket in Ward 8, until Giant opened a branch in December 2007 because of generous contributions by the city and the federal government. The property was sold to a developer for only \$500,000. In 1983, when the city purchased the land, it paid about \$1.8 Million. With 63,000 square feet, the supermarket is the largest of its kind in Washington, DC. There is a lot of room between the shelves, which is an indicator of how cheap the land was acquired. However, this Giant needs twice as many customers as its branches in other areas, Manager Oscar Grant tell us. His customers have less money and many purchase their groceries with food stamps. But business is booming. Monthly earnings average \$400,000.

Not unlike the Greater South East Hospital, the Giant supermarket is one of the many indicators that point to the area’s economic progress. For many years it was simply not profitable enough to open a supermarket in the 8th Ward. But with the purchasing power of residents on the rise and sinking crime rates, this has changed. Giant makes a profit and Ward 8 profits from Giant’s presence. 200 of its 210 employees live in the 8th Ward. The city demanded that this be the case for Giant to receive city subsidies. Marion Barry takes credit for this part of the negotiations. When he was Mayor, he had already tried to bring a Giant supermarket into Ward 8. As Councilmember he supported the initiative again and was successful this time around.



Location of the Farmers Market

Farmers Market – many do not know how to cook vegetables

Virginia Major, founder of the “Farmers Market” in Ward 8, says that a supermarket for 70,000 residents is not enough. The small corner stores are more expensive and have less fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats. Making the trip into downtown Washington, DC is too time-consuming and expensive for many residents who cannot afford a car. Furthermore, Major claims that Giant is not the cheapest grocery store and additional competition could help reduce prices further.

At the very least there is still the Farmers Market during the summer months that Virginia Mayor organizes along with five other Ward 8 residents. They founded the market in 1999, one year after the then only supermarket (Safeway) in Ward 8 closed shop. Major says, “We simply had to do something.” The Farmers Market is also a good advertisement for healthy eating. There are even cooking classes that are being offered. Major says, “Many people here do not know how to properly cook vegetables.” Last summer approximately one hundred customers came to the market every Saturday and there will be more this year. As of this June, a wireless reader will be available to



scan food stamps. To many residents of the 8th Ward who have little cash, this is a real incentive. The machine costs \$1,000 and was financed by a grant of the Department of Agriculture.

Faith and Hope

Our first trip to Southeast Washington, DC led us to one of 80 churches in Ward 8. This was three months before we finished writing this report. We took part in the Sunday church service at Covenant Baptist Church. Minister Darren Phelps of New York held the sermon that day. He spoke of “graveyard experiences” while referring to the biblical verse “The healing of the Gerasene Demoniac” (Mark 5: 1–20). A man, who lives amongst the graves, bashes himself with stones, hurts himself, and no one can calm him down until Jesus finally heals him. Minister Phelps pointed out that people hurt themselves so that they do not have to feel other pain and suffering. We thought later that this was just like many people in Ward 8, who are taking drugs and committing crimes just to be able to face the hardships of daily life.

The so-called “can do kids” were at the center of the prayer service. These are children who are five to eleven years old and are supported by the church in their spiritual,

cultural and social development with a special ministry. They danced in the pews and were applauded, cheered and encouraged. Their voices were not great and they did not try to hide this fact. It was often those kids with the worst, not the best, vocal abilities who sang the solos. We thought to ourselves that this is exactly what many of the neglected children of Ward 8 really need: attention, encouragement and the belief that they are someone special. Many of the children of Ward 8 grow up in single parent households, starve and are abused. Can they really make it? Can we all make a difference if we act together? Barack Obama would say: Yes we can.

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