

# A GOOD NEIGHBOR

The Pittsburgh Project offers help and hope to a struggling community.

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**SEVERAL NEIGHBORHOODS ON PITTSBURGH'S NORTH SIDE COULD BE KNOWN PRIMARILY  
STEERS MANY YOUTH AWAY FROM THE VIOLENCE OF THE STREETS**

Neighborhood boys trot down Morrison Street on a sunny day without an apparent care in the world. It's an image of tranquility that The Pittsburgh Project labors to nurture in struggling communities on Pittsburgh's North Side.

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# COMMUNITY BUILDING

**FOR GANGS AND POVERTY. BUT THIS IS WHERE THE FAITH-BASED PITTSBURGH PROJECT  
AND INTO PROGRAMS THAT IMPROVE THEIR LIVES BY ANDREW PETERS PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM JUDKIS**

Aging homes, like these row houses on Charles Street, blanket the North Side, where The Pittsburgh Project has set down roots.



In the summertime, Pittsburgh's Charles Street is dotted with inflatable kiddie pools and clusters of girls arguing about hopscotch. But the community along the steep, two-mile stretch between Brighton Road and Perrysville Avenue also has seen more than its fair share of hardships.

This section of Perry South has more gangs than city blocks, and gunfire is an all-too-familiar sound at night. In 2003, the main intersection, North Charles Street and Perrysville Avenue, was the site of what then-Attorney General John Ashcroft proclaimed the largest drug ring in western Pennsylvania's history. The combination of poverty, antiquated infrastructure and mostly century-old housing stock means many residents struggle to find the money to keep the water turned on, heat their homes in the winter or provide their families with three meals a day.

This is the neighborhood that 20-year-old twins Justin and Josh Reid call home. The Reid family moved from the East Hills section of the city to the North Side's Perry South when the brothers were 9. The family wanted to be near relatives, all of whom live within a block of each other on Maple Street. In a community where the quality of your life depends a lot on who you know, it was the faith-based Pittsburgh Project that helped the Reid brothers stay out of trouble.



The Pittsburgh Project's campus includes the red brick building in the center foreground above, a former Catholic school that's been converted to classroom and office space. The gray building to the left is the LEED Gold-certified, 324-bed guest house, where summer staff and volunteers stay. And in the background on the right is a former church, which contains a 275-seat, multi-purpose performance space; a commercial kitchen; and a 150-seat dining hall. Next to the dining hall is the Charles Street Café, shown below, which provides employment for students and helps support the organization's youth development programs.





Elementary school youngsters, shown above, take a break from the Project's summer educational programs by playing a card game as their instructor, Bruce Pittman, center, watches. At left, La'Jaya Windbush, 9, waves her arms victoriously while next to her Shyann Glover, 10, is slightly less exuberant. On the right, Nasjeia Graham, 9, foreground, and Mikala Lindsey, 9, continue to focus on their cards. Below, a boy from the community who does not attend Project programs gives a winning grin after a dip in the Fowler Park pool, which the organization operates.





“Coming from a different neighborhood to the North Side, there was a lot of tension against us because we were not from there,” says Josh Reid. “[Fitting in] is about knowing your neighbors. Coming to The Pittsburgh Project, you see these people every day. ... [It] was a place where all the kids from Perry South came and got along. Kids got to know kids from different parts of the North Side who went to different schools. For those three hours after school, everyone put their differences aside to coexist.”

Not that there weren't constant temptations to make poor choices. Some of the Reid brothers' neighbors and family members were involved in gang activity and drawn into the drug trade. When their older brother started selling drugs, the twins decided it was an example they would not follow. With encouragement from their parents, the brothers chose what Justin calls “the hard way,” keeping up with their studies, staying clear of drugs, and often working two or three jobs at a time to help support the family.

The Project helped by offering alternatives that made it easier for the Reids to resist the lure of the streets. From seventh grade through high school, the brothers attended after-school programs where they received daily homework assistance and supplemental academic help. In the summer of 2004, Josh Reid also became a Leader-In-Training, an opportunity to

“In the same five block radius that has 1,500 kids, there are seven gangs. We have worked like crazy to ensure that [our] little campus... is kind of like Switzerland.”

**Saleem Ghubril**, former executive director, The Pittsburgh Project

work at the Project and received job training, mentoring and, ultimately, scholarships to higher education.

“The Pittsburgh Project paid for my first guitar, which I still have today,” he adds. “I've been playing for five years. Without the opportunities that [the Project] gives, a lot of people wouldn't have anything.”

Students and community leaders give much of the credit for the impact the organization has had on the Perry South community and its residents to former Executive Director Saleem Ghubril, a 47-year-old ordained Presbyterian minister who immigrated to the United States from war-torn Lebanon when he was 16. Ghubril left the Project in September to assume leadership of a new youth initiative, the Pittsburgh Promise, a scholarship program designed to motivate city public school students to get good grades and to encourage families to stay in the district. His departure comes after his two-decade commitment to the neighborhood successfully helped turn a couple of dilapidated city blocks into a neighborhood-friendly haven for hundreds of children.

“After 23 years, it's going to be hard to disentangle Saleem from the Project. Everyone loves him. People's faces light up when you mention his name,” says Wayne Jones, a Children, Youth & Families program officer for The Heinz Endowments, which has granted the organization more than \$1.1 million since 1995.

But Jones adds that Ghubril might be exactly what the fledgling Promise needs to succeed. “Saleem will bring an added sense of legitimacy to the Promise because he is real and honorable and has a track record of tenacity and creativity through his work at the Project.”

The Rev. Ron Peters, director of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's Metro-Urban Institute, believes that the change also is a well-considered and important one for Ghubril to make.

“It's an understandable move on his part, and I think it's a healthy one,” says Peters, who has known Ghubril for 16 years. “In leaving, he strengthens [the] Project. Unless organizations can stay true to their main goal, they rise and fall on the strength of a particular personality. ... He has put something together there that will be well able to transcend his departure. The Bulls didn't collapse [after] Michael Jordan.”

The Project allocates more than \$2 million every year to provide a safe environment in which young people can work, play and serve. It runs after-school programs for about 400 children every year; operates playgrounds, parks, meeting spaces and a swimming pool for Perry South's 5,276 residents; and manages its own Charles Street Café and summer





Above, high school students along with home repair volunteer Jim Olson, center, load up a truck outside The Pittsburgh Project's colorfully painted warehouse with supplies for the houses they will work on that day. Below, a summer volunteer relaxes in one of the 20 dorm rooms in the organization's Guest House. Each room has seven sets of bunk beds, and each of the two floors containing the dorm rooms has a central bathroom. Not pictured are the building's 11 suites with private bathrooms.



# building communities, building homes

The Pittsburgh Project's home repair ministry extends beyond its immediate neighborhood. The red dots on the chart to the right represent homes that the organization's teams have repaired since 1985, with the heaviest concentration on the city's North Side. But work also has been done on homes throughout the city.

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smoothie stand, which offer employment opportunities to children in the community. The organization also offers an academic-assistance and job-training program called YouthBuild that helps 18- to 24-year-olds in the community obtain their GED, learn building-trade skills and gain life experiences to become productive adults.

Its home repair ministry has provided free home repairs annually to more than 150 residents who are elderly or who qualify under federal poverty standards in Pittsburgh. This summer, the organization drew 2,500 teenagers from more than 25 states to repair the homes. They worked every day from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and lived in the Project's new "green" dormitory. Complete with recycled rain-water for irrigation and sanitary systems, solar power, radiant heating and natural ventilation, the dormitory's emphasis on sustainability is rooted in the organization's goal of being stewards of both the community and the Earth.

One-third of the group's income comes from foundations and corporations, while tuition payments from students involved in the home repair ministry or participating in after-school or summer programs account for 25 percent. Seventeen percent is from individual donations, and only 3 percent comes from churches. Eighteen percent is generated from revenue sources such as the café and the smoothie stand, with the remaining 4 percent coming from a variety of contributions.

The Project's origins can be traced to the summer of 1986 when Ghubril started bringing together groups of teenagers to help fix Perry South's dilapidated homes. Though some newspapers reported that the organization began as a program created by a coalition of Presbyterian churches, Ghubril says it started when he and two friends just wanted to help out in the community. That summer, 60 high school students from three different churches spent their time repairing homes in the neighborhood.

"There is not a shortage of people who are willing to work with kids in settings that are comfortable and safe and well-paying," says Ghubril. But his early mentor, Tony Campolo, then a sociology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, encouraged him to go where he was most needed, and to "think about not just kids in general, but kids in particular who lack the resources that all kids deserve to have in order to grow up healthy and, hopefully, with a [promising] future."

Ghubril decided to focus on Perry South because, in the mid-1980s, he worked at a church in a suburb north of Pittsburgh that had an outreach to the community. And if he was looking for a setting that was less than safe and comfortable, he found it in Perry South.

The neighborhood is deeply impoverished, with nearly 50 percent of its households earning less than \$25,000 per year and 45 percent of its children living below the poverty line. With an average of three to five homicides annually from 2002

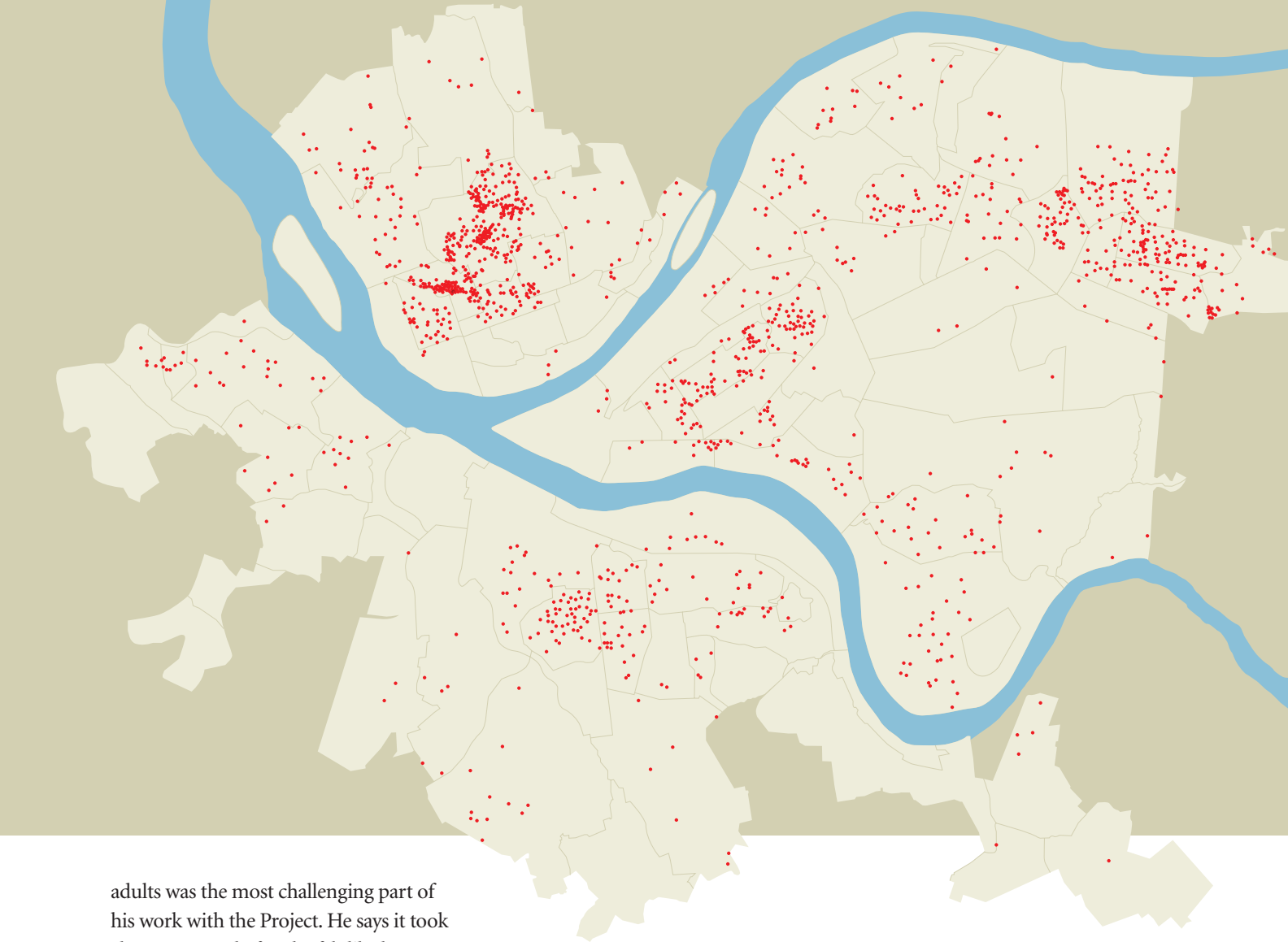
through 2005, Perry South and neighboring Northview Heights accounted for nearly 12 percent of all of Pittsburgh's homicide victims during that period. In the first six months of this year, the community had seen 96 felonies and 229 misdemeanors.

The human losses behind the statistics hit home for Project staff most recently in January when program participant and middle school student Jolesa Barber was gunned down while visiting her sister in a nearby North Side neighborhood. The 12-year-old's death sent waves of sadness and frustration throughout the community.

"In the same five-block radius that has 1,500 kids, there are seven gangs," says Ghubril. "We have worked like crazy to ensure that [our] little campus... is kind of like Switzerland. This is neutral territory."

And even with these efforts, residents are cautious. Ghubril relates a story about trying to rally attendance at a block party earlier this year. His staff went from house to house inviting neighbors to come. When responding to questions about safety, the staffers said that there would not be police protection at the party, and some people—including those who lived close to the Project—refused to come. They were unwilling to walk even two blocks through a rival gang's territory to the organization's campus.

Ghubril believes that establishing close, working relations with youth and



adults was the most challenging part of his work with the Project. He says it took about 13 years before he felt like he was not a stranger, even though his family lives three blocks from the organization's headquarters in the old Annunciation Roman Catholic Church on Charles Street and his children graduated from Perry High School.

"Why did it take so long to earn trust?" Ghubril muses. "There has been so much traffic in and out of communities like this... so many great, brilliant ideas pitched and marketed, but so few lasted. So the perception here was, 'You're going to be another one who comes in with his good idea, and you'll do your thing until you get something better and you won't last.'"

Despite initial tension between the Project and local residents, Ghubril eventually earned the neighborhood's respect, says Keith Lunsford, 27, who was involved with the organization as a youth and now is on staff.

"Saleem had to adjust to this community," says Lunsford. "He had to meet the community's needs for the people who live here."

For Lunsford, that moment came in eighth grade, when Pittsburgh was experiencing a spike in gang activity. His friend Norvel Jennings was shot and killed in a gang fight only three blocks from the Project. After Jennings died, Lunsford knew he had to decide whether or not to follow his friends into gangs. It was the organization's influence that helped him to realize he didn't have to do everything his friends were doing.

"It's definitely a place that saved my life," he says. "If it wasn't for [The Pittsburgh Project], I'd either be dead or in jail."

Peter Dobkin Hall, senior research fellow and an expert on nonprofit organizations at Harvard's Kennedy

School of Government, says the Project is "a faith-based organization that doesn't seem like a faith-based organization."

He explains that, unlike most faith-based groups, which usually are attached to congregations, the Project is separate from a specific church or denomination. Compared with its peer organizations, it also is focused much less on explicit religious or devotional rhetoric. Hall puts it in the same mold as Habitat for Humanity and the American Friends Service Committee, both faith-based groups with Christian values but an emphasis on human services rather than on proselytizing.

Peters believes Ghubril and The Pittsburgh Project have tapped into a rich American tradition of faith-based organizations serving at the forefront of most social movements, including the



The Project's YouthBuild program requires students to use the building-trade skills they're learning to provide affordable housing in the community. Above, Beverly Hardrick, 21, is helping to tear down a wall in a donated house that is being gutted and renovated by students. The work is scheduled to be completed this fall, and the house will be sold at cost to a family that lost its home in a fire. Below, Hardrick, front, and Todd Thomas, 17, remove debris from the same house.



Abolition Movement, Prohibition and the Civil Rights Movement. He has a special name for the type of work the Project performs: public ministry. If the role of the church is to call people together to pray, he explains, then the role of public ministry is to call them together to work and serve.

“It is out of this tradition that clergy like Saleem get a sense of passion and urgency,” Peters says. “The bottom line for [the Project] is really getting people to know one another, so that the elderly—rather than sitting in dilapidated houses behind closed doors with a leaky ceiling and a toilet that doesn’t work, and fearing the young people outside—can actually remember that there are young people who are not intimidating, who are willing to help.”

The organization is guided by the philosophy of John Perkins, a Mississippi-born minister recognized in many religious circles as an expert on applying Biblical principles to community development efforts in impoverished areas. Perkins’ approach is based on what he calls “the three R’s” of community development: relocation into communities of need; reconciliation between God and people and among individuals across racial, ethnic and economic lines; and redistribution of resources to benefit low-income areas.

“I think to understand [The Pittsburgh Project’s] impact, you need to imagine what that neighborhood would be like without the presence of that institution.”

**Gregg Behr**, executive director, the Grable Foundation

Ghubril and the Project’s team have embedded themselves in the Perry South and Perry Hilltop neighborhoods in a way few other community organizations have matched. In addition to Ghubril and his family, two-thirds of the staff members live within walking distance of the organization’s campus, allowing them to understand the community, its residents and its challenges on a personal level.

“They have high ideals and high visions, but then at the same time, the organization’s staff and board are well grounded,” says Hank Buekema, executive director of the McCune Foundation, one of the Project’s supporters. “They are realistic: They don’t lose track of who they are, what they are doing and who the people are that they work with. Saleem brings some unique qualities to that work. Other people put it up on the chalkboard, but they don’t execute it the way he does.”

Gregg Behr, executive director of the Grable Foundation, puts the organization on a par with successful community programs like Harlem Children’s Zone in New York. Since 1994, Grable has supported the Project with more than

\$1 million in grants. “I think to understand its impact, you need to imagine what that neighborhood would be like without the presence of that institution,” says Behr.

As Ghubril assumes a new role in the city, he leaves behind a homegrown group of young leaders to carry on his work in Perry South. They include the Reid brothers, who recently returned from a tour of duty with the U.S. Marines in Iraq and spent the summer working with middle and high school students as Project staffers.

“You’re not [doing this] because of the paycheck. You do it because this is what you want to do,” says Josh Reid. He and his brother believe that they have to give something back after benefiting from Project opportunities. But that also means that, at some point, the twins will have to part with the organization again, at least temporarily, as they make plans to attend college.

“There’s no way you can come through The Pittsburgh Project,” says Justin Reid, “and not be motivated to do something in life.” *h*