

AS ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT
ADVANCES IN
HOMEWOOD,
MORE BUSINESS
AND TRAINING
OPPORTUNITIES
ARE EMERGING
FOR LOCAL
RESIDENTS.
BY ELWIN GREEN

A popular hashtag for online discussions about Pittsburgh's Homewood neighborhood is #HomewoodIsHappening. • To put it another way, Homewood has many things happening: entrepreneurship, real estate development, urban agriculture, arts and culture. Government, philanthropy, academia and opportunity-minded individuals have all turned their eyes toward Homewood and are finding fertile ground for growth in all of those economic and quality-of-life arenas. • At the same time, neighborhood residents are laying claim to their piece of the community development pie to start or expand their own businesses and to participate in the revitalization planning process. • “We want what happens in our community to be the decision of residents, not the investors, not the banks,” said the Rev. Samuel Ware, executive director of the nonprofit lender Building United of Southwestern Pennsylvania and chairman of the Homewood Community Development Collaborative. “We need to control our own destiny, not watch as others make decisions for us.”

ENTREPRENEURIAL ENERGY

7800 SUSQUEHANNA



For Nisha Blackwell, the 7800 Susquehanna converted warehouse has been a good fit for her small business, Knotzland, where she creates bowties from donated fabrics.



EVERYDAY CAFÉ

An enterprise designed to do more than produce revenue is Everyday Café, a coffee shop that opened in November 2016. The original concept goes back to 2010, when John M. Wallace Jr., a University of Pittsburgh sociology professor and pastor of Bible Center Church, assembled a team to pursue the possibility of creating a café in a former post office, providing Homewood residents and others with a “third place,” somewhere other than home and work in which to meet for business or social reasons.

After Oxford Development and S&A Homes acquired the building to make way for Homewood Station, a senior housing complex with first-floor retail spaces, Dr. Wallace’s church partnered with Operation Better Block to place a café in one of those spaces.

Since it opened, Everyday Café has received five-star reviews on Facebook and proven to be a popular gathering spot. Dr. Wallace himself, pictured in the blue-patterned shirt talking with Jason Jones, community development divisional manager for Woodforest National Bank, also enjoys having meetings there. Besides serving breakfast and lunch, the café hosts special events, such as networking programs, business presentations, or study sessions for young people, usually held on Monday evenings. Support from The Heinz Endowments has helped it to stay afloat as it approaches the break-even point.

A significant amount of what is “happening” in Homewood occurs inside the walls of 7800 Susquehanna, a former Westinghouse warehouse that nonprofit lender Bridgeway Capital purchased in 2013. The intent was to make the building a hub for enterprise, and it has become that.

Within the five-story, 150,000-square-foot structure are two training programs. The Trade Institute of Pittsburgh occupies 11,000 square feet of the building and offers instruction in construction trades, such as brick and block masonry, carpentry and stone work, and provides apprenticeship opportunities in welding and carpentry. Most of the students were formerly incarcerated, and the program touts its impact on recidivism: Only 3.6 percent of program participants return to prison after one year compared to 22.5 percent of inmates statewide.

Last year, the University of Pittsburgh’s Manufacturing Assistance Center, established in 1994, moved from Pitt’s Applied Research Center, about 17 miles northeast of the city, to the Homewood warehouse. The center’s 9,000-square-foot space includes classrooms where students learn precision manufacturing, programming for machine tools, and computer-aided design and manufacturing technologies. The program boasts a 95 percent job placement rate for graduates, and the jobs pay livable wages, starting at \$18 to \$20 an hour.

“The baby boom generation, they’re retiring,” explained marketing and outreach specialist Claire Guth. As a result, local manufacturers will need to hire 22,000 people in the next five years and 80,000 in the next decade. “It’s the easiest part of the day, getting people jobs,” she said.

The center also offers small-business development services, educational programming for schools, summer camps, and a “maker space” with 3D printers and other equipment that community members can use after being trained by staff. “We just want to help nurture the next generation of Pennsylvania manufacturers,” Ms. Guth said.

And artists and entrepreneurs who got their start outside the walls of 7800 Susquehanna have found the location to be a welcoming one.

Homewood native Nisha Blackwell was working her way through nursing school when she got downsized from her job at a coffee shop. A friend was holding a birthday party for her daughter soon after, and Ms. Blackwell couldn’t afford a gift. So she opened a sewing machine that she had never used, taught herself to stitch, and created hair bows. They turned out to be a hit with the other moms. “I came home from that party with six customers,” she recalled.

In August 2014, Knotzland was born, creating custom bow ties.

For Ms. Blackwell, Knotzland is not just a revenue stream, it is a mission-driven enterprise, dedicated to sustainability. She makes her bowties from donated fabrics that would otherwise be discarded and added to the landfills that make the fashion industry the second largest source of pollution. She also employs local residents as part-time seamstresses, strengthening the neighborhood economy.

Knotzland moved to 7800 Susquehanna in May 2016, and Ms. Blackwell has put nursing school on the back burner. She has taken advantage of business opportunities as they arise, from forming a partnership with an artisans’ collective in Kenya to being chosen in January to join Facebook’s Small Business Council.



Members of the Homewood Community Development Collaborative gather for a group photo on the steps of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh-Homewood to mark the launch of the organization, which is dedicated to promoting the neighborhood's economic growth.

HCDC AND HBBA

COMING ATTRACTIONS

The University of Pittsburgh's first Community Engagement Center is expected to open in Homewood in September. Center director Daren A. Ellerbee describes it as a "front door" to Pitt in the neighborhood—a point of entry where residents can gain access to university resources—and "a place where community and university people come together to work on projects and programs."

The brainchild of Kathy Humphrey, Pitt's vice chancellor of engagement, the Community Engagement Center will provide space for the Institute for Entrepreneurial Excellence, part of the Katz School of Business, to offer neighborhood entrepreneurs assistance with business development. It also will house a Neighborhood Legal Services office, which will work with Pitt's Law School to provide free legal services, and a Pitt-assisted Communities and Schools program, which will work to mobilize university resources to address community needs.

The center will connect different departments at Pitt that do work in Homewood, such as the School for Social Work and the School of Engineering, and help them all to link with Homewood residents to discover how the university can better serve the community.

The Homewood Community Development Collaborative (HCDC) and the Homewood-Brushton Business Association (HBBA), both formed in 2014, have helped to give neighborhood residents a voice in the wave of development that is building in Homewood. HBBA assists neighborhood entrepreneurs in growing their businesses, and advocates on behalf of Homewood's business community. With some two dozen members, the organization meets monthly and has established the Homewood Small Business Expo, which provides vending opportunities along with training sessions each November.

During the past two years, HBBA also has sponsored a holiday market that gave members and other vendors the opportunity to set up shop in temporary facilities during the Christmas season. This year, it plans to bring back an event first held in October 2016: a progressive dinner that will allow both residents and visitors to sample the cuisine from a series of restaurants or caterers. Association President Vernard Alexander's big dream for the group is to obtain a grant that would fund the hiring of a part-time executive director.

The Homewood Community Development Collaborative is a group of nine nonprofit organizations that is working to provide overall strategy for promoting economic growth in the neighborhood. It has partnered with the Urban Redevelopment Authority and the Department of City Planning to invite residents and businesses to help create the Homewood Comprehensive Community Plan to guide future development. Collaborative members include Building United of Southwestern Pennsylvania, Community Empowerment Association, the Homewood Children's Village, Homewood-Brushton Business Association, Homewood-Brushton Community Ministries, Homewood-Brushton YMCA, Homewood-Brushton YWCA, Operation Better Block, and Race Street 2050.

A land use proposal previously crafted by Operation Better Block with resident input is being incorporated into the plan, which will set outcomes in the areas of education, culture and recreation, mobility, public health and public safety, workforce development, housing, business and innovation, urban design and development, and sustainability. Action teams for each area have begun meeting, and will continue to do so to implement the plan after it is completed.

"We want [the plan] to house the desires, wishes and aspirations of the community," said Rev. Samuel Ware, HCDC chairman.

Jullian Henry, of Lawrenceville, seated, examines the work of Lashay Manus, right, at The Natural Choice Barber Shop & Salon Homewood, one of the anchor tenants in The Shop. The barber shop and salon is the second location and apprenticeship training site for master barber Nate Mitchell's natural hair grooming and styling business, which has been popular in Oakland, Pittsburgh's university hub, for more than 20 years.

While 7800 Susquehanna is an entrepreneurial center, it is not Homewood's only hotspot for regenerative economic activity.

The Shop takes its name from the fact that it used to be an auto body shop. Otherwise, there's no connection between its past and its present, which owner Adam Paulisick describes as "a brand new view of co-working."

Typically, co-working spaces allow budding entrepreneurs to set up shop by paying to share office space and facilities, rather than having to rent space and buy office equipment entirely on their own. The arrangement can save them significant money, but Mr. Paulisick envisioned going further.

"I wanted to make sure that the definition of entrepreneur was about people that use their hands [to create] as much as about people who use their hands to code on a keyboard," he said, adding that he also did not want money to be an issue for users of the space.

The Shop opened in January 2017, and after more than a year of experimenting to see how the space might be most useful, the concept emerged that members of The Shop could use the space and its facilities in exchange for donating 10 hours or more of their time to serve Homewood. The Homewood Children's Village directs the use of the volunteer hours.

There is no set monetary price for membership; so far, the Shop's primary source of income is rental fees for events. But because the fees do not cover expenses, Mr. Paulisick is using his own funds to keep things going for now. "The model will find its legs at some point," he said.

The Shop began offering formal memberships in May, and Mr. Paulisick's goal is to attract 100 committed members over the next year.

THE SHOP

