

HELP AND HOPE

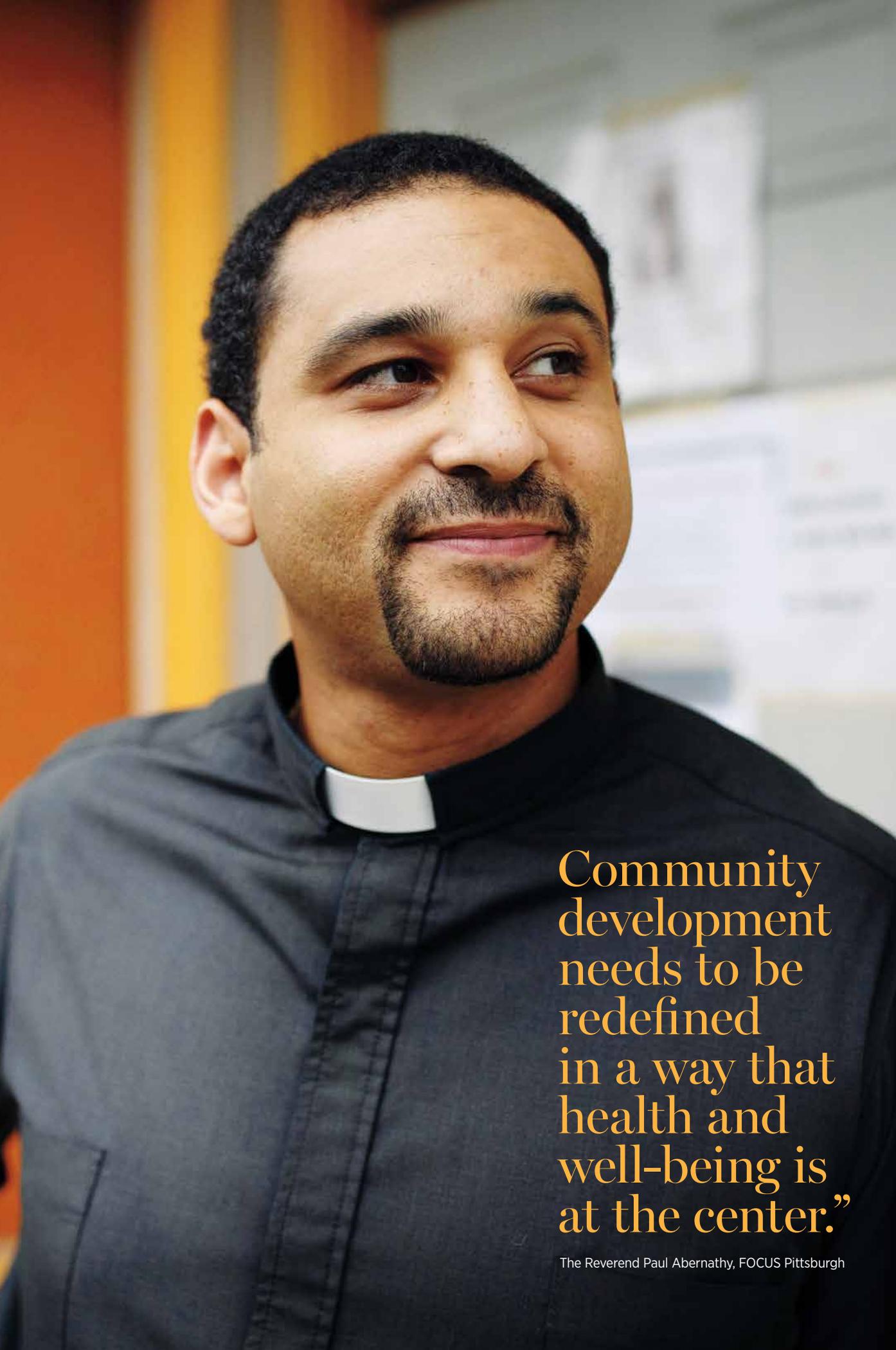
HILL DISTRICT NONPROFITS FOCUSING ON HUMAN SERVICES, INCLUDING SEVERAL FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS, ARE DOING MORE THAN MEETING NEEDS. THEY ARE HELPING RESIDENTS PREPARE FOR NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEMSELVES AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD.
BY BEN WECHT

Inside an unassuming Centre Avenue storefront in the heart of Pittsburgh’s Hill District, a transformation is in process. It’s a late-summer weekday morning, and a mostly male, predominantly African American, gathering of seven or eight residents sits in rapt attention to a charismatic, hyper-verbal younger man in the white robe and gold-hued Byzantine stole of the Orthodox Church. He is preaching to them about suffering and redemption, about Jacob dislocating his hip in an all-night wrestling match in order to behold God at last.

But the transformation underway is not solely a spiritual one—at least not as intended by the young preacher. The Rev. Paul Abernathy is the founder of FOCUS Pittsburgh, a “trauma-informed community development” center bustling with activity in a cluster of rooms on the floor above the storefront. Its mission is to prepare a workforce and revitalize a neighborhood by first addressing the health and well-being of the individuals who comprise it.

FOCUS Pittsburgh’s services include education, food, transportation and assistance with living expenses. The organization is one of nine chapters of FOCUS—Food, Occupation, Clothing, Understanding and Shelter—North America, an Orthodox Christian initiative to address poverty in America. The Pittsburgh affiliate also is part of a constellation of human services agencies in the Hill District, mostly faith-based, that are seeking to help a community with its historic share of struggles become in Rev. Abernathy’s words, “a beacon of light to the nation.”

With support from local philanthropies such as The Heinz Endowments and the McAuley Ministries Foundation, FOCUS Pittsburgh and other organizations in the Hill District are both building upon the community’s legacy of taking care of its own and addressing the root causes of long-standing economic disadvantage in an ambitious effort to restore and revitalize the neighborhood to its once and future glory.



The Rev. Paul Abernathy heads FOCUS Pittsburgh, a community organization based in the Hill District that is committed to addressing poverty and empowering residents.

Community development needs to be redefined in a way that health and well-being is at the center.”

The Reverend Paul Abernathy, FOCUS Pittsburgh

Joshua Franzos



Elan Mizrahi



“It’s not a community that’s always looked to outsiders for help,” said Carmen Anderson, the Endowments’ director of Equity and Social Justice. “A lot of its strength and support comes from within. There has been for a number of years some core work in the area of human services to shore up what the neighborhood can provide in and of itself.”

Today’s human services organizations in the Hill follow the path carved out after the turn of the last century, when, as part of a national movement to manage the wave of newcomers to America’s urban centers, German Jewish immigrant Henry Kaufmann and his wife, Theresa, established the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House in the Hill District, a place where residents of all races and creeds could access everything from prenatal and infant care to music, art and drama classes. In doing so, the organization set the standard for settlement houses nationwide.

When Jewish and other immigrant populations began moving out of the Hill in the 1950s, government agencies took over much of the work of organizations like the Kaufmann settlement house. A small group of civic leaders, including the late attorney and activist Wendell Freeland and the late philanthropist Elsie Hillman, began to discuss the idea of transferring the settlement house’s operations to a then up-and-coming organization seeking to meet the neighborhood’s growing needs.

In 1964, at a time when the Hill District was just beginning to rebound from the displacement of businesses and residents caused by the construction of the Civic Arena—an entertainment venue and later home to Pittsburgh’s hockey team, the Penguins—the settlement house building reopened its doors as the Hill House Association. Eight years later, the organization moved next door to a newly constructed headquarters facility, and the original building became the Kaufmann Center, which houses the Elsie Hillman Auditorium, a gathering space for a range of arts performances, cultural events and other presentations.

“It started as a one-stop shop and in many ways continues to be that,” said Terri Baltimore, who began working for the Hill House 26 years ago and now serves as its director of neighborhood engagement. “The needs in the neighborhood have changed, but in many ways, meeting changing needs has always been at the heart of the settlement model.”

Although the Hill House has struggled at different periods and now finds itself once more at a perilous moment (see sidebar on page 33), its legacy extends across the community, particularly through the work of faith-based organizations.

On one of the neighborhood’s many steep slopes, tucked away on a side street that has a sweeping view of the Downtown skyline, sits another community hub of activity where a different charismatic clergyman is busy



Marnajah Coleman, far left, takes a peek at the art she created as she did yoga on top of plastic-covered paper and paint during Yoga Paint, a class offered as part of Center that Cares programming at the Jeron X. Grayson Center in the Hill District. David Williams, left, looks forward to the weekly community meal provided by FOCUS Pittsburgh helpers like Victoria Ely and her daughter Ava.

taking care

trying to transform lives. As soft-spoken as Rev. Abernathy is loquacious, the Rev. Glenn G. Grayson heads the Center that CARES, a thriving youth development and enrichment organization serving more than 400 children and youth from pre-K through 12th grade. Rev. Grayson created the program almost 20 years ago, shortly after he arrived in Pittsburgh as the new pastor of Wesley Center A.M.E. Zion Church in the Hill District and began to notice a group of boys hanging around the church after school. Today, The Center that CARES offers programming at four locations. Its flagship site overlooking the city's Downtown, the Jeron X. Grayson Center, is named for Rev. Grayson's son, a Schenley High School graduate and star football player who was the unintended victim in a senseless act of gun violence in 2010, dying at the age of 18.

"After I lost my son, I wanted to do what I could," said Rev. Grayson, sitting amid the center's multiple depictions of Jeron and a museum-worthy collection of paintings with African American themes. "I was already doing this work, but I wanted to do more . . . I really firmly believed that if the young man who used that gun had been surrounded by a support base, he would have made a better choice. That's my drive and my mantra."

Twice honored by President Barack Obama for his work on gun violence, Rev. Grayson, with a staff of 30 and vital partnerships with University Preparatory School and McAuley Ministries, has provided the youth who flock to the

center four afternoons a week with a wealth of opportunities, from a safe place to gather to outdoor recreation excursions to overseas trips to locales such as Ghana and Northern Ireland.

"Kids who go to after-school programs do better and stay out of trouble more," he said, adding that "those kids who historically stay with us the longest have more opportunities come their way." Rev. Grayson is similarly optimistic about the Hill, which he describes as being "in an upswing. It's too slow, but it's taking root."

Another established provider of critical social services in the Hill is the Macedonia Family and Community Enrichment Center (FACE), an outreach initiative of Macedonia Church of Pittsburgh. Its mission is to help develop healthy families by providing key services in partnership with the Allegheny County Department of Human Services.

Macedonia FACE, which receives support from the national Annie E. Casey Foundation as well as from local philanthropies such as the Endowments and McAuley Ministries, focuses on three programs: Girls Circle, a strength-based, gender-responsive program for girls ages 9 through 18; the Community Truancy Prevention Program, a family-centered model to address root causes of truancy and absenteeism; and Teen Connect, an evidence-based program to help parents and caregivers improve relationships with the teens and preteens in their families.

According to Executive Director Trisha M. Gadson, a former children and youth caseworker who moved to Pittsburgh three decades ago, “over the years, we have recognized that a healthy community promotes a healthy family and vice versa.” FACE, she said, also strives to move beyond what she calls “deficit-based thinking” by highlighting strengths instead.

“So when we demonstrate that through our actions, it is more likely that we can engage in a partnership manner with families,” she said.

Michele Rone Cooper, executive director of McAuley Ministries, which also provides support to organizations in Uptown and West Oakland, said she is hopeful about the FACE approach “because residents who are engaged support each other. And that’s really what communities are about.”

Back at FOCUS Pittsburgh, Rev. Abernathy is busy balancing a steady flow of visitors with managing a staff that is striving to meet basic individual and family needs, providing assistance with primary medical and dental care,

and helping residents become agents of change in their own community. In one room, three young workers peer into laptops as phones ring incessantly with calls from residents in need of some type of support.

One such resident, single-mother-to-be Charmel Pollard, sits in an adjoining room outfitted with desktop computers and prices furniture on Amazon to furnish a new residence. Having discovered FOCUS Pittsburgh in 2009 when she needed help with an electric bill, she now comes regularly to access email, obtain household items and “listen to the word of God.”

As a U.S. Army veteran and graduate of both Wheeling Jesuit University and the University of Pittsburgh’s Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, Rev. Abernathy is well-versed in the formidable work that lies ahead in the Hill. Citing a late-1990s study by the California-based Kaiser Permanente Foundation about the effects of adverse childhood experiences on everything from mental health to employability, he explained why FOCUS Pittsburgh’s approach to community development centers on health and well-being.

“In the realm of community development in the U.S., people usually mean jobs,” he said. “We contend that jobs are meaningless if people are not healthy enough to sustain the opportunities. If we’re able to build buildings faster than we’re helping people, we’re just going to end up with different people living in our community.” **h**

Macedonia Family and Community Enrichment Center’s Girls Circle gives young women in the Hill District the chance to discuss issues that are important to them. Participating in this session are, from left clockwise, instructors Christina Hughey and Ashley Corum, with some students who include Shaunese Murrell, Anyia Washington and Erykah Dawkins.

