

HARWOOD

Background

Nestled in the heart of north-central Baltimore, Harwood encompasses about 14 city blocks. In the 1890s, the B&O Railroad constructed the Baltimore Belt Line through the neighborhood. Once the main passenger rail line into Baltimore from Philadelphia and New York, it evolved into a major freight route, with several trains passing through each day. Harwood was also home to Baltimore's early professional baseball teams, with the original Oriole Park once located in the north end of the neighborhood.

Most homes in Harwood are brick rowhouses built between 1900 and 1920. Harwood's population declined steadily in the latter half of the 20th century and early 21st century due to middle-class flight, petty crime, drug dealing, drug abuse, and other social ills. Harwood was still a majority white neighborhood into the 1970s but at the close of the 2010s was overwhelmingly African-American (with signs of increasingly diversification in recent years).

In the late 1960s, Johns Hopkins University became involved in supporting the local Barclay Elementary/Middle School with members of the Hopkins Women's

Club and university faculty volunteering regularly. (Confusingly, the Barclay School is located in the Harwood neighborhood on Barclay Street – not in the nearby Barclay neighborhood.)

Esther Bonnet, who later became President of Strong City’s Board of Directors, ran the Barclay School library. Strong City Baltimore inherited these ties when it was formed in 1969, and by the early 1970s Strong City AmeriCorps VISTA members were deployed at the school. Gertrude Williams, a visionary education leader who began as assistant principal in 1969, was promoted to principal in 1973. Under her leadership, community engagement grew exponentially.

Despite the strength of the Barclay School, the ensuing decades saw a period of steady neighborhood decline and disinvestment, and increasing crime. In winter 2005, things came to a head. Open-air drug markets had long thrived in the neighborhood, where local drug dealers controlled blocks filled with vacant and blighted homes.

Edna McAbier, who purchased her home in 1983, was an active resident and member of the Harwood Community Association. In 2002, Strong City’s then-Executive Director Bill Miller encouraged Ms. McAbier to serve as the community association president. She ran and was elected. In this role, Ms. McAbier quickly became one of Harwood’s greatest champions, known for telling drug dealers, “I don’t want you on this corner.” Many of Edna McAbier’s neighbors trusted that she would get their complaints and concerns into the right hands, as she had formed a strong alliance with local

police. But one early morning in January 2005, Ms. McAbier's home was firebombed with Molotov cocktails in retaliation. Eight people, including a prominent gang leader, were eventually arrested and sentenced to decades in prison. But Ms. McAbier, who had relocated into police protection, would never return to the neighborhood. Losing her was a hard hit for Harwood. The community association floundered as many residents simply stopped getting involved for fear of retaliation.

Approaching the Work

Improving public schools is a keystone of Strong City's community revitalization and neighborhood stabilization efforts because successful schools attract and retain families. For many years, Strong City VISTAs had been providing a great range of services to the Harwood neighborhood's Barclay School, where they worked to connect the school to program providers, funding sources, and volunteers, while also offering technical assistance and leadership development opportunities for parents and school staff.

Strong City worked in partnership with the Barclay School to establish an education committee of teachers, staff, parents, and residents. This committee evolved into its own independent group called the Barclay Brent Education Corporation (BBEC), which was dedicated to strengthening two local public schools – Barclay and Margaret Brent Elementary/Middle in Charles Village. Strong City and the Barclay School made extraordinary strides in curriculum development during Gertrude Williams' tenure, which lasted until 1998. In the years

that followed, Strong City maintained a presence in Harwood through its work at the school.

In 2005, Strong City applied for and received funding to implement a Community Schools model at the Barclay School, which would broaden the organization's reach in the school and neighborhood. By definition, a Community School is a network of partnerships between the school and other community resources that promote student achievement and family and community well-being. Its integrated focus on academics, enrichment, health and social supports, youth and community development, and family engagement leads to student success, strong families, and healthy communities. Partnerships allow schools to become resources to the community and offer programs and opportunities that are open to all.

In tandem with its work at the Barclay School, Strong City focused on attracting investment, providing resources to current residents, and building civic capacity. Harwood's high vacancy rate continued to cause challenges with regard to drug dealing and other crime, which put a strain on residents and deterred potential homebuyers and investors.

Baltimore's housing market typology had long classified Harwood as "Middle Market Stressed," meaning that it had considerable assets but also many "Distressed" blocks. Strong City had been providing grants for block projects through its Healthy Neighborhoods program for several years but would need to increase efforts around strategic code enforcement and marketing.

As in all of the neighborhoods where Strong City played a supportive role in building and promoting quality of life, attracting and retaining investment in Harwood was key to ensuring a successful turnaround. Issues with aging housing stock, vacancies, and crime presented challenges that required ongoing strategic efforts to improve the local public school, facilitate public and private investment, and encourage strong civic involvement by developing neighborhood leadership.

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From Vision to Action

In 2005, the year drug dealers firebombed Edna McAbier's home, Baltimore had begun to formally implement the national Community Schools model across the city, including at Barclay. With this model, schools became neighborhood hubs that brought educators, families, and community partners together to offer a range of opportunities, supports, and services to children, their families, and the community.

With funding from the Family League of Baltimore City, Strong City hired a full-time Community School