



LOCAL SOCIAL INJUSTICE MOTIVATES OPEN HAND MINISTRIES



He does not have all the right tools. He is not a trade school graduate, a real estate

agent, or a business finance guru. Yet, Michael Stanton '06 is organizing the efforts of Open Hand Ministries, a community-based agency working to “right a wrong” by rehabbing dilapidated houses in Pittsburgh’s Garfield and East Liberty neighborhoods.

Through three partner churches—East Liberty Presbyterian, The Open Door Church, and Valley View Presbyterian—Open Hand Ministries is providing low or moderate income, disadvantaged families the opportunity for affordable homeownership.

Four years ago Stanton and his wife Holly moved into the Garfield community. “Buying that house was definitely us responding to a sense of call. It wasn’t because it was a real estate investment. It was because we wanted to live in and be a part of the community in which we serve.”

Community is the driving force behind Open Hand Ministries. “I went to Garfield with a bit of the ‘red cape syndrome,’” Stanton said. “But I quickly learned that there was no place for the cape. We needed to overcome our collective challenges.” Without the cape and without the tools, Stanton believes even more now in the power of community. Dependent on others he explains, “This is not a ministry that will rise and fall on my capabilities. It’s not meant to be. It’s meant to be a community, people and organizations pooling their resources.”

The financing for Open Hand Ministries is two fold: funding renovations and keeping costs low. Covering the renovation costs are the home owners, church and foundation grants, Pittsburgh Presbytery, and individual donors. Keeping the labor costs low are trades people working for much less than market value and the hundreds of volunteers that donate their time each year. Additionally, partner groups also supply less expensive building materials. “Funding and doing these projects involves the whole community,” Stanton said.

As director, Stanton organizes the agency’s efforts. The vision though, he says, is not his own. Local churches are served by pastors sharing Stanton’s passion. Ted Melnyk '07, who works with youth at Eastminster Presbyterian Church, developed a mentor group in which he supports at-risk teens. He teaches them basic construction and life skills and they work with Open Hand on renovations. The Rev. Chad Collins '05, pastor of Valley View Presbyterian Church is likewise committed to the vision. His church has sponsored a homeowner helping the family experience the love of Christ. The Rev. BJ Woodworth '07 and the Rev. John Creasy '06 likewise are connected. Pastors at The Open Door Church, they too head a sponsor church. Additionally, Creasy has secured vacant lots, turned them into community gardens, involved the community in their upkeep, and made the produce available to the community at affordable prices. During Open Hand volunteer work days, time is spent weeding and maintaining these gardens.

Since the beginning of the ministry, Open Hand has been involved in the rehab of eight vacant houses and has assisted eight neighborhood families in becoming first time homeowners. Committed to an on-going relationship with these families, Stanton does not see leaving Garfield any time soon. “It’s my community.”

Pictured: Michael Stanton '06 with young Samuele Novelli. Photo credit: Emily Rosenthal



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