

Construction trainees Stacy Ward, Andre Washington and Donita Walker drywall an upstairs bedroom in a former drug house in the 1500 block of W. Center St.
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It seems the antithesis of hope, this dilapidated, boarded-up, burned-out, crime-poisoned neighborhood on Milwaukee's near north side.

But hope is sometimes just a tiny light amid darkness, like the single bulb that illuminated a half-dozen construction trainees. Some of these workers are as poor as this neighborhood, where they toiled one blustery afternoon on this gutted-to-the-studs cottage in the 1500 block of W. Center St.

"It's like a wasteland," acknowledged Chris Litzau, executive director of Milwaukee Community Service Corps.

"The face of a block with missing teeth," he mused, surveying a dismal expanse of vacant, litter-strewn lots, sagging, scarred houses and no midday signs of life besides his work crew.

'We start here'

"This is our foothold. We start here," Litzau said. "Our idea was to save what we could, then build some new. This is one of the poorest census tracts in the city, and it may have hit bottom."

The neighborhood has been the scene of some high-profile crimes recently. Less than two blocks away, a woman was abducted this month by two men who raped her and then cut her so badly that she needed 200 stitches. She was allegedly their second victim in three weeks. In September, a mob of boys and young men severely beat neighbor Charlie Young Jr., who later died of his injuries.

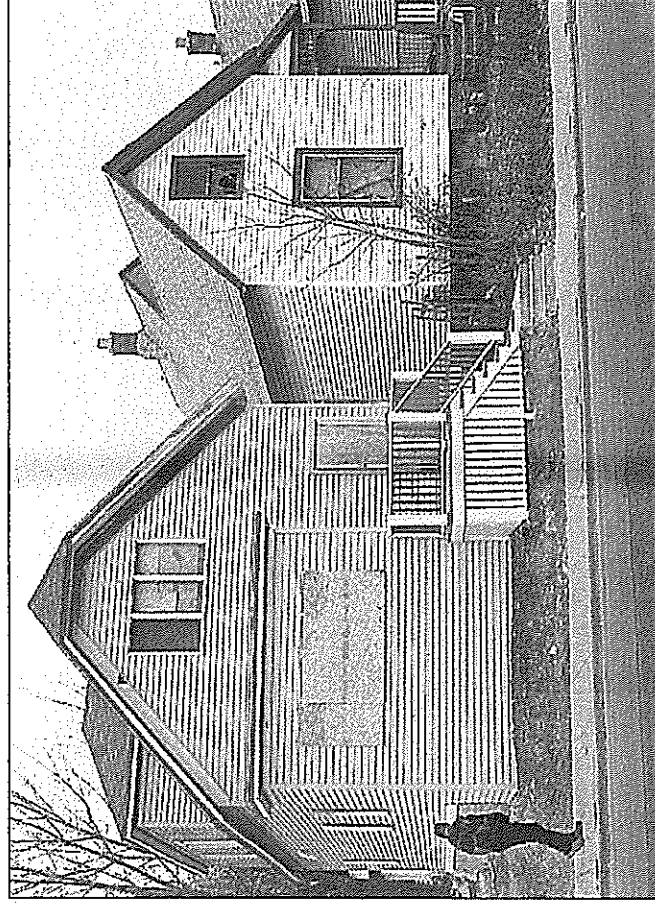
It seems like a tough sell, marketing houses in such a neighborhood. Yet Litzau's group wants to rehab or build six to eight a year.

"Our job is to look at the bigger picture," he said. "We believe we can help bring this neighborhood back."

"We" are a trio of youth education and training groups — La Casa de Esperanza Inc. of Waukesha, Madison-based Wisconsin Conservation Corps and Litzau's group — that target the economically disad-

Team hopes to give house and neighborhood **NEW LIFE**

Construction trainees envision brighter future



taged.

Two anchors

Litzau and his colleagues have staked out a two-block area for renewal, pinning their hopes on two anchors — Hopkins Street Elementary School, 1503 W. Hopkins St., and LaVarney Boys & Girls Club, 2739 N. 15th St. Other revitalization interests operate in tough city neighborhoods, including Mil-

waukee's Neighborhood Improvement Development Corp., the YMCA, Habitat for Humanity and Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority.

"But there aren't many housing producers around here anymore," Litzau said.

Sponsors hope that their two dozen workers will tie their futures to that of the neighborhood, brightening the pros-

This former drug house on Center St. is getting a makeover, and construction trainees hope to do the same with the vacant home next door.

pects for both. "They're fired up and motivated," Litzau said of the trainees, who are in their late teens and 20s.

"There's a wonderful chemistry there. Participants often

live within the neighborhoods we serve. What we've found is that they take ownership of their projects. If they know somebody's (planning) graffiti or vandalism, they're more apt to dissuade them. They might even become home buyers. They're familiar with the area and they have realistic expectations."

A total rehab

This two-story duplex is the sponsors' case in point. They bought it for \$200, lot and all, a place so maltreated that demolition seemed a merciful end.

But, as crew leader Oscar Aguirre observed, "Anything can be saved. This is a total rehab — all new plumbing, heating, electrical, drywall, windows, doors. This will be a three-bedroom, 1.5-bathroom house when we're finished."

On paper, the restored home will be worth \$108,000 — the cost of labor and materials.

When it goes on sale next spring, "we expect to sell it at a loss," Litzau said. "That's what we do — come in where there's a void, where few others choose to tread, and serve as catalyst."

Stacy Ward, a 20-year-old Milwaukee Community Service Corps worker, dreams of being a catalyst as she "muds" the seams of new drywall. She knows this neighborhood, and shows no trepidation.

"I went to school on 11th and Center, and I'm looking for a small single-family home like this — if it were fixed up," she said. "A hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money, but with my mother and my sister, I think the three of us can do it."

Meanwhile, she's learning a trade with a good employment outlook — construction. Her colleague, Christopher Johnson, 20, can attest to that. His life's prospects seem to be improving even faster than this house.

"I've been a trainee for eight months, and in that eight months I learned a lot. I did gages, siding, landscaping," Johnson said. "I'm already helping my mom out — her house is 56 years old. And on drywall, I've already gotten side jobs. I have a 4-month-old child, so that benefits a lot."