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Nine years later, a school project that many thought was only a dream becomes a reality

The Youth Dreamers defy the odds to open their own after-school center near Waverly



Deja Joseph, 13, a more recent member of the Youth Dreamers looks at one of the many wall decorations in the new youth center near Waverly. Nine years after middle school students in teacher Kristina Berdan's class first conceptualized it, they're getting their "Dream House," where they can go for after-school programs. (Lloyd Fox, Baltimore Sun / April 29, 2010)

By Jill Rosen, The Baltimore Sun

8:32 p.m. EDT, May 6, 2010

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On a back wall of the brightest house on Carswell Street hangs a piece of paper, protected in plastic to keep it from crumbling. It's a promise, impetuously made nearly a decade ago by sixth graders who lived nearby. They were going to open an after-school center. They each scribbled their name in marker, to seal the deal.

No one thought they'd ever really do it. Not even their teacher, who helped them draft the pledge.

Yet the kids and their teacher from a rough part of town incorporated, raised more than a half-million dollars, fought government bureaucracy, changed a neighborhood's mind about inner city kids and turned a derelict eyesore into something

beautiful.

Their center — they call it The Dream House — opens on Saturday.

"It definitely took patience and willingness to fail," says Chekana Reid, a college girl now who's about to turn 21 and can barely recognize her girlish signature on the pledge she signed when she was 12. "We never gave up."

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Kristina Berdan had only been teaching a few years when, in 2001, she created a community action elective at Waverly's Stadium School. The former ballerina was fresh off a social action workshop and eager to try some things out on the only nine kids in school who chose her class over basketball, art or African drums.

She challenged them to think of a project that could change their world. When they started talking about a youth center, she tried to gently rein them in — she wanted them to pick a project they could actually complete. Clearly, this wasn't it.

But the kids wouldn't budge. And signed the pledge to prove it, vowing patience, courage and perseverance in their endeavor, as if, alive for barely a decade, they had any idea what those words even

meant.

"I never really thought it would happen," Berdan says. "But they were so determined."

Guided by Berdan, who wears a shirt that says, "Ask me how to dream," the kids researched how much money they'd need to buy property and fix it up. They wrote a budget and sent 40 letters to politicians and public figures, brightly asking for help. They heard back from just three.

Disappointed but undaunted, they wrote more, all the while arranging bake sales, T-shirt sales and car washes, dropping small bills and handfuls of change into their bank account. Talent shows. Street campaigns with buckets. Artwork auctions and candy-grams.

Their big break came over the summer when **Sen. Barbara Mikulski** snared them \$70,000 of federal money. Suddenly, with real cash, paper work and taxes to contend with, Berdan knew they needed legal help. They scored what ended up to be nearly \$200,000 of legal advice over the years, pro bono, from the University of Maryland's Law Clinic.

With the attorneys' help, the classmates turned themselves into a nonprofit. They called themselves The Youth Dreamers.

When the new school year started — and each year after that — the dreamers added to their ranks as more students signed on to Berdan's suddenly popular community action class. One dreamer's mother, a trustee at Homestead United Methodist Church, helped them get a deal to buy the old parsonage house, just a short walk from their school. For \$12,500, it seemed like a great deal — until they factored in the hundreds of thousands of dollars in renovations it desperately needed. The house, unlivable for at least 20 years, was literally falling apart.

Another dreamer's father approached architect Laura Thul Penza at a Govanstowne Business Association meeting to assess the property, see if it had a prayer. When she agreed, the kids immediately put together a thank-you letter, slathering it with stickers. Smitten, Penza not only looked over the property, she stayed to redesign the house for free — at least \$70,000 worth of donated services.

With every last step of the process, Berdan didn't have the specialists just do the work themselves — though that certainly would have been quicker and more efficient. Instead, she had the pros show the kids how to do it all themselves — how to write grant letters, how to file a zoning appeal, how to work with blueprints and pick construction materials, how to get bids from sub-contractors and choose the best. She asked for the kids' opinions and actually listened when they answered.

"It's not like a bunch of adults are telling what them what to do," says Andy Powell, the project's pro bono contractor who volunteered his time while working at first for Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse and then stuck with the project when he left to work for **Towson University**. "It's their dream we're helping to sustain."

Dominique Davis and Miriam Harris were sitting on the front steps of the Dream House recently, thinking about what it means to them. They're juniors in high school who've spent the last six years working to see it open.

It's a grand Victorian, the only one in sight, with bold colors that almost shimmer in the late afternoon sunshine. The Dreamers like to tell the story of the rainbow paint job — some had wanted a bright blue house, others lemon yellow, but they compromised on a creamy white one with crayon-box details in blue, yellow, orange, lime and lilac. Inside, it's brighter still, with a warren of rooms for meeting or studying and still more for learning to cook and using computers.

Like those who signed the original pledge, Dominique and Miriam have outgrown the need for an after-school refuge. But they know that was never really the point. "I feel like I built a home not just for me but for others," Dominique says, adding that what she got for herself in the deal was some gumption. She felt important here, like what she had to say mattered. "They gave me a voice," the girl says. "Now I speak up loud and proud."

Berdan and the dreamers certainly ran into their share of hurdles over the years — the neighbors who lived on Carswell Street being a flat-out roadblock. The home owners, many of who had lived on the cul-de-sac for decades, clung to what they considered to be a serene nook amid a pretty rough community. A youth center sounded to them like a magnet for unruly teenagers, trash and traffic — they wanted nothing to do with it and

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united to oppose the dreamers zoning petition.

Though the students eventually won, they devoted themselves to changing those neighbor's minds. They knocked on every door to introduce themselves and nearly drown the block in handmade presents — Christmas wreaths for their doors, mosaic planters, spider plants in sweetly-painted pots. Miriam remembers once picking up "every piece of trash from here to Gorsuch Avenue."

John Thomas, who lives right across the street from the Dream House, was among those who fought the Dream House. Now his grandkids can't wait to go there in the evenings. "It takes a lot of dedication and devotion to do what they did," he says.

And tenacity. That's what Miriam thinks allowed the dreamers to win folks over. "It's all about relationships," she says, sounding quite sage for a 17-year-old. "That's how you really change things. You get inside someone's head."

With the center on the verge of opening, Berdan, who's felt wed to the project for the last nine years, is finally allowing herself a life. She's engaged, to "a very patient man," she says, and expects it won't be long before she leaves town to be with him, something she's put off time and again because of the project.

"You sort of get caught up in it," she says. "And as a teacher, the power of this was amazing. They learned skills they are going to use the rest of their lives."

A few years ago Chekana Reid, while working on the house, dipped her hands into blue paint and pressed them onto the front steps of 1430 Carswell. Other kids did the same thing and now the steps are covered with dozens of hand prints. Inside there are similar touches everywhere, kind of a happy graffiti.

As if they hadn't just left an impression on the whole city, the kids wanted to leave a mark. Like Deja Joseph, one of the younger dreamers, who used a turquoise marker to write on a table: "Live your life to the fullest."

"Everyone," she says, "is going to be able to see that you did something."

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TanikaDavis at 12:25 PM May 07, 2010

This is a great article, beautifully written by Jill Rosen. It shows that the city's young people aren't necessarily to be feared, but nurtured, and when they are, look at the awesome results!

Kristina Berdan is the kind of teacher more Baltimore City schools need, and our society needs to do more to encourage her brand of youth development. OSI-Baltimore recognized her audacity, and made her one of its Community Fellows, helping this project along. Sen. Mikulski found funding; dozens of volunteers donated time, money and sweat equity.

Bravo to all involved in this amazing project! Reading about it makes me proud to live in Baltimore!

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This day in history



On May 8, 1962 The musical comedy "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" opened on Broadway



On May 7, 1975 President Gerald Ford formally declared an end to the "Vietnam era"



On May 6, 1937 The Hindenburg burned and crashed in Lakehurst, N.J., killing 35 of the 97 people on board and a Navy crewman on the ground.



On May 4, 1970 Four students were shot and killed on the campus of Kent State University



On May 3, 1802, Washington, D.C. was incorporated as a city



On May 2, 1970 jockey Diane Crump became the first woman to ride in the Kentucky Derby



On May 1, 1786, Mozart's opera "The Marriage of Figaro" premiered in Vienna



On April 30, 1970, President Richard M. Nixon announced the U.S. was sending troops into Cambodia



On April 29th, 1992 rioting erupted after a jury acquitted four LAPD officers of beating of Rodney King



On April 28th, 1945 Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was executed by Italian partisans



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