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Activists launch effort to reclaim Edgewood

Harford residents work to turn around community marred by crime, decay

By Madison Park

Sun Reporter

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Mildred Samy marched during the day through the troubled Edgewood neighborhood, using a bullhorn to get out her message -- "To the thugs: You are moving out. Turn in your guns. Stop selling drugs."

Flanked by two other activists, she walked past two deflated red balloons dangling from a pole -- a memorial to a 23-year-old who was shot and killed. Across the street was a wooden cross adorned with flowers marking the spot where her 25-year-old son also was shot to death.

"It was basically a middle-class area," Samy said, looking at the decaying neighborhood where she had lived for 20 years. "Now I'm ashamed to say it looks like a slum."

Frustrated by the violence and creeping deterioration, a chorus of community activists, religious leaders and public officials are uniting to reclaim Edgewood.

One neighborhood, known as Edgewater Village or "the Ville" that encircles man-made Serene Lake, has been the site of Harford County's most violent crimes.

The violence has been brazen, including the daylight shooting of Samy's son, Samuel David Horne, that occurred less than a half-mile from the Southern Precinct of the Harford County Sheriff's Office.

Sean Nelson Smith, 28, of Edgewood, was sentenced to 50 years in prison Thursday after being found guilty by a Harford County jury in January of second-degree murder and use of a handgun in a violent crime in the shooting death of Horne.

Samy, who lives in Joppa, frequently uses the bullhorn to advertise community meetings and to condemn the violence in her old neighborhood. She often says her son "was killed on the front lines of Edgewood."

Pausing in front of the brick townhouse on Grempler Way where she once lived -- now empty with a deadbolt on the door -- Samy looked at the street littered with garbage, shattered glass and abandoned furniture. Many of the two-story townhouses are flagged with For Sale signs or boarded up.

It wasn't always like this.

In 1985, the single mother of six came from New York City to escape what she called the gritty urban life.

For decades, Edgewood, a working-class community of single-family residences and townhouses, was home to military and civilian employees, including pilots, chemists and officers who worked at nearby Edgewood Arsenal.

"It was an affordable place, and most of the people didn't come from Baltimore," said Georgia Hodsdon, a former director of administration for Harford County, who lived in Edgewood for more than 40 years but moved to Abingdon. "There were people from Pennsylvania, New York who all came together."

But in recent years, the crime rate and gang activity have proliferated, police said.

Most of the violent crimes have been concentrated in 15 Edgewood "hot spots," including Edgewater Village, police said. Three of the 11 Harford County homicides reported in 2007 occurred here.

"The areas drawing attention are just a handful where the criminal element is trying to take over," Harford County Sheriff L. Jesse Bane said. "Because the nature of the crimes [is] so violent, it draws attention, and people tend to generalize and think it's characteristic of the whole community."

A week after Horne's death in August, a 30-year-old man was stabbed in the same neighborhood. Another man was paralyzed after a mob attacked him and two others with baseball bats and knives in November, a few blocks from the sheriff's station.

"They don't have any fear of the police," Bane said.

The pockets of crime in this once-rural county are forcing law enforcement to adopt urban police strategies, such as surveillance cameras and CompStat, a crime-mapping system that analyzes statistics. Deputies will begin using "HarfordStat" this month.

Many residents attribute crimes in Edgewood to subsidized housing.

State Sen. [Nancy Jacobs](#), who represents Harford, lived in one of Edgewood's hot spots for 10 years before moving out. She said the area "has received an unfair amount of Section 8" public housing.

According to the Harford County Housing Agency, 23 percent of the people receiving housing assistance are in Edgewood.

But County Executive David R. Craig countered that most of the subsidized housing tenants are older or disabled, and are not the ones causing trouble.

"The problem I perceive in Edgewood is the high number of rental units," Craig said.

In Harford County, 21.3 percent of the homes are renter-occupied, while Edgewood has 31.7 percent, according to a 2006 estimate.

Beginning in the 1980s, the closure of urban housing projects in Baltimore and other cities created a ripple effect, bringing people to affordable neighborhoods such as Edgewater Village, officials said.

"One of the big problems is that they didn't tell the people who bought the houses that they own the streets, the street lights, the water and sewer under the street," said County Councilman Dion F. Guthrie, who represents Edgewood. "They're poor people already, and they're required to pave the street" in some areas of the community.

As a result, the streets became blighted and attracted crime, Bane said. He blamed the violence on "drug and gang elements" that come to vulnerable communities and "rule by intimidation and fear."

In an effort to drum up community involvement, more than 20 church leaders met in January to coordinate ways their congregations could help clean graffiti and remove litter in Edgewood.

"If we don't link up, we don't stand a chance," said Allan Gorman, pastor at the Harford Community Church in Bel Air. "Everything happening in Baltimore is spreading out to the suburbs."

The Baltimore chapter of the Guardian Angels will soon be patrolling a 233-unit subsidized housing complex in Edgewater Village -- the group's first venture into the suburbs.

The Guardian Angels, a volunteer foot-patrol organization, will initially have its Baltimore-Washington members help with the efforts but will require local involvement to maintain a presence. The group's founder, Curtis Sliwa, is expected to meet with Edgewood residents March 17.

Edgewood community leaders are talking about incorporating in order to gain local control. Jansen Robinson, chairman of the Edgewood Community Council, said the community needs to step up, because "we can't continue the way we have for the last 10 years."

Edgewood residents such as Lynne Jackson acknowledge that police and government can't solve all of their problems.

"Once the community walks out the front door, then you will see a difference," she said. "People have taken back worse places, like parts of Baltimore."

Samy said she returned to Harford County from Florida with a mission and her bullhorn, after her son was killed.

She said she hopes to move back to Edgewater Village and establish a program to get jobs for ex-offenders, such as her slain son.

"My son was my driving force in my activism," she said. "He made mistakes, but he was learning from them. ... I want his death to mean something."

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