HED: UMB builds a fresh model for community transformation

IMAGE:   
By Donna M. Owens  
  
Right around Christmas a few years ago, Dr. Richard Colgan saw a patient whose story has stayed with him ever since. "She was an older African-American woman," recalls Colgan, a professor of family and community medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in West Baltimore. "When we talked, she mentioned some vague aches and pains."   
  
After further examination, the doctor's diagnosis was that the woman's physical symptoms appeared to be fueled by emotional distress. "Over the years, she'd lost four of the men in her life because of urban woes," Colgan remembers, "including a son who had been shot and another who died of HIV/AIDS. She was feeling sad around the holidays."  
  
His voice registers compassion. "We're family doctors in the middle of Baltimore. We see violence, homelessness, and more," he explains. "We are very sensitive to the fact that a lot of people in the community we serve are not just physically ill, but hurting economically, emotionally, and perhaps spiritually."

That confluence of factors, coupled with the unrest that followed the police custody death of Freddie Gray last year, has led to a renewed commitment to community initiatives and outreach, according to UMB faculty—and not just at the medical school.

UMB President Jay A. Perman says the university has had a longstanding commitment to ending "acute" poverty. "But UMB—and the rest of the city’s anchor institutions, businesses, and nonprofits—have an obligation to do even more," he says.  
  
To that end, UMB has launched a multi-pronged effort aimed at giving West Baltimore residents more opportunities beginning in grade school stretching through college, and ultimately into potential careers. The effort represents a fresh approach to collaborating with and empowering inner-city communities.  
  
Last summer, UMB teamed up with nearby Franklin Square Elementary/Middle School on a summer camp for local students. For six weeks, about two dozen youngsters visited the campus every Friday for science, technology, engineering, and math-based activities. They also interacted with law school students, learned about financial literacy and healthy eating, and took part in recreational activities such as swimming.

"Our kids are so smart, and being able to see [university] students inspires them," said Kirk Crawley, a practicing attorney who teaches history and world cultures to 7th and 8th graders at Franklin Square. "Now they're talking about becoming lawyers, doctors, and professionals, too. They're dreaming big."  
  
The university's Summer Bioscience Internship Program mentors and guides West Baltimore students from middle school all the way to possible careers in health care. In recent years, leaders have struggled to secure enough mentors to support 25 students, but last year, 36 faculty members signed up, double the previous year’s participation. "They'll spend a summer acquainting Baltimore high school students with bioscience research and inspiring them to make a career of it," Perman wrote in a campus newsletter.  
  
In September, UMB launched the Community Engagement Center in the University’s Biopark in West Baltimore's Poppleton neighborhood. The center's initiatives will include providing residents with health, legal, and social services; promote learning among area children and adults; and build residents’ capacity to advocate for policies and programs, according to Ashley R. Valis, UMB’s executive director of community initiatives and engagement.   
  
“The School of Nursing will host guest lecturers so that nursing students and neighbors alike might explore urgent community and public health issues," she said. "The ‘Just Advice' Clinic in the Carey School of Law will hold sessions, while the School of Social Work will hold a course on community and economic development." And so on.

In October, UMB announced the creation of the Continuing Umbrella for Research Experiences (CURE) Scholars Program, designed to create a “pipeline” to carry Baltimore school kids into careers in cancer research and care. The program should help increase diversity in cancer care careers—and also addresses the higher cancer rates among poor communities and communities of color.

The university is also significantly increasing the business it does with community merchants, and will help nearby residents apply for jobs on the campus. "And we’re working closely with a coalition of neighborhood organizations—the Southwest Partnership—to help our neighbors achieve the community development goals they set," says Perman.

With seven graduate schools, including those devoted to pharmacy, law, social work, and medicine, UMB is situated amid an economically, ethnically diverse urban population. Its main campus intersects several neighborhoods on the city's west side that are dealing with poverty, crime, and blight, among other issues.

“We make the mistake of treating people in low-income and black or brown communities-in-need as if they are broken, when they have merely adapted to the brokenness that was created in their lives and in their communities,” said Diane Bell-McKoy, President and CEO of Associated Black Charities. “As we move forward to support communities and provide them with the tools, information, access, opportunities, and relationships to change their lives, I also hope we have the courage to address the institutional and systemic issues and policies that created the situation we currently have in Baltimore and other cities."

HED: In Freddie Gray’s honor, a hub for Baltimore youth

By Donna M. Owens

On Sunday mornings, Rev. Jamal Bryant delivers fiery sermons to a congregation of 10,000 people at Empowerment Temple Church in Northwest Baltimore.

But following the death of Freddie Gray, the new millennium minister has gained local and national attention as a social activist determined to shed light on the volatile uprising that revealed how deep the chasms are between prosperous and poor neighborhoods in Baltimore.

"The issues that face contemporary urban life are too volatile for residents to have to wait months for change. Help in these communities needs to be immediate," said Bryant. "In the competitive 21st Century, a city cannot thrive when a significant portion of its residents can't participate in its culture and economy."

With that in mind, Bryant decided in July to re-open a multi-level building owned by the church and dedicate it as the Freddie Gray Youth Empowerment Center.

The three-story building is located in Bolton Hill, about a mile from Gilmore Homes, were Freddie Gray lived.

Last summer, the center hosted youth summer camp classes with enrichment programming, as well as free breakfast and lunch served daily. Campers were exposed to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics classes, as well as fitness, creative arts, leadership, entrepreneurship, and theater.

The center will also include a young adult safe-haven camp for teens, computer, and job training classes, as well as meeting space for community associations and local businesses.

Because Freddie Gray and his twin sister, Fredericka, were exposed as youngsters to lead based paint, and were found to have excessive levels in their blood, the site will also host monthly lead paint testing sessions sponsored by the law offices of Saul Kerpleman.

At a grand opening, Gray's family and dignitaries that included Maryland Lt. Governor Boyd Rutherford all took part in the building dedication ceremony.

HED: During unrest, libraries offered a safe haven

By Donna M. Owens

The Enoch Pratt Free Library has long been a Baltimore institution. But the library took on new significance as the city erupted on the day of Freddie Gray's funeral.

"We decided to stay open—all branches—when the riots started on Monday," said Roswell Encina, a Pratt spokesman, explaining that the Pennsylvania Avenue Branch (at the intersection of North and Pennsylvania) became ground zero as looters smashed windows, torched police cars, and destroyed a CVS pharmacy.

When a large group of people descended toward the library, Branch Manager Melanie Townsend Diggs and her staff locked the doors, keeping the children and adults inside calm and away from the windows. When it was safe, they snuck the patrons out the back door, Encina says.

The following day, with city schools closed, Pratt officials, under the leadership of Dr. Carla Hayden, decided to open branches citywide, providing safe, nurturing spaces for the city’s kids.

"It was important to show that the Pratt is there for the community," said Encina.

When Silicon Valley tech entrepreneur Marc Andreessen and his wife, Laura Arrillaga-Andreessen, learned that the Pratt had remained open during the unrest and the days that followed, they donated $170,000 in Hewlett-Packard computers, laptops, and printers. More good news came in June, when Rep. Nancy Pelosi, a Baltimore native, presented Melanie Townsend Diggs, the Pennsylvania Avenue branch manger, with the American Library Association’s People's First Award.