

A TRIBUTE TO “SAVE THE MILNER” STRUGGLE

OUR UNDAUNTING SPIRIT STILL LIVES

Six years ago, on May 20th, 1994 a city-ordered wrecking ball carried out its fatal blow to the Milner Hotel. 115 units of low-income housing were destroyed on Garfield Place in downtown Cincinnati to make way for “Greenwich on the Park”, a 64 unit upscale housing project by Towne Properties. A valiant effort to save the Milner was organized by the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless over a number of years prior to the Milner’s destruction. The Hotel was home for residents with little or no resources. A portion of the units was made available to area homeless shelters for quick access when shelters were overcrowded. The Milner was a unique resource; it was a private business and operated with no subsidy. It was a safety net for many poor and homeless folk of this city. The Milner made sense and it worked. It was a resource this City promised to replace and pledged to explore duplicating in the Central Business District in an ordinance passed on April 28, 1993 by City Council. This ordinance came after the late Rev. Maurice McCrackin’s 13 day fast which heightened the focus on this City’s disregard for low income residents.

Now, six years later, the Milner is gone and adequate replacement was never carried out satisfactorily. The safety net many people counted on was permanently damaged. The number of permanent, available low-income units of housing is dwindling, and greater numbers of homeless people are bedding down at our shelters. A Master Plan ruled at a time when Cincinnati was awarded “The Most Livable City”. We continue to ask the question: **most livable city for whom?** The Greenwich was heavily subsidized by the City and State to provide housing for the affluent. Cincinnati has managed to use taxpayers’ dollars to build fine homes for the Reds and the Bengals. **Where were this muscle, money and miracle when we needed it to save housing for the poor at the Milner?** We are all diminished by policies that consider only the privileged. Garfield Place could have been a street that maintained an economic mix if the Milner stood standing. City Hall’s demand for economic mix in our neighborhoods weakens when it can’t model this mix in its own backyard.

Our peoples struggle to save the Milner was marked with tenacious efforts. The decision to scale the fence and block the bulldozer with our bodies came after all other attempts failed. Citizens across this City joined us on that last day. With pots and pans clamoring in our hands, with eloquent voices bellowing out for justice standing on the back of a blue pickup truck, with black balloons bursting one by one in the wind to mourn the loss of each 115 units of housing, with several people carted off by the police for risking civil disobedience, with a chorus of songs chanting our outrage and our determination to carry on despite this painful loss to our housing efforts, the wrecking ball did not strike its fatal blow without being drowned out by **the roar of a powerful resistance** to this unjust act. It was a day and is a day to remember. The spirit of the Milner still rings in our souls.

In tribute to this heroic effort, Miami University Architecture Students collaborated with the Over-the-Rhine Peoples Movement to create and erect a visual remembrance of the

Milner struggle. Their creative works of art was exhibited in Piatt Park on the sixth anniversary of the destruction of the Milner, Saturday, May 20th, 2000. Red ribbon hung in the trees to draw attention to the exhibit, which displayed silhouettes of homeless persons and quotes from people who were affected by the loss of the Milner. One such person, Don Sawyer, who once lived and worked at the Milner was present and gave a moving testimony to the crowd who gathered for the event. Challenging questions were posed on placards laying on the ground to invite passers-by to critically think about what really happened here when the bulldozer wiped out the Milner. The exhibit resurrected the memory of the Trail of Tears when the Cherokee Nation was forcibly moved off their land. On the cover of the brochure passed out at the exhibit these words were proclaimed: **“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”** (George Santayana, 1863-1952).

It always takes our neighborhood groups mountains of labor, hours of sweat, and great lobbying efforts to muster up enough resources to put even one low-income housing unit on line. And then before our eyes in one fell swoop of a wrecking ball, 115 homes shattered with no ironclad replacement, this inequity of power was and still is astounding. It made no moral or economic sense. There is something very wrong about pushing the poor out to make way for the rich, as is currently happening in downtown and in our inner city neighborhoods of Over-the-Rhine and West End. This city's vision and values must be challenged to include housing for all. We cannot let housing for the poor be considered last and get crumbs while politicians engineer master plans with fat subsidies that push profitable agendas for the already privileged.

At our rally on the site of where the Milner once stood, we celebrated this undaunting spirit that waged this particular struggle for justice, and simmers still in the souls of our people. Everyday we persevere and work hard to plant seeds that will someday swell to guarantee and protect basic human rights for all. The **SAVE THE MILNER STRUGGLE** will go down in our people's history as a story to be told again and again to inspire those who now carry and will carry into the future the banner for housing justice.

In recognition and appreciation for the **undaunted spirit that still lives and flows** within us because many Someone's before us stood strong against the evils of injustice.

By Bonnie Neumeier
O-T-R Resident and Activist
May 23, 2000