

## **Urban Center Agency History**



### **History**

The Urban Center began in 1996 with a vision of hospitality. The founders, Seth and Steve, envisioned a place where people from the community could go to experience hospitality. The year before, Steve, a longtime D.C. resident, happened upon a house that was for sale in Southeast D.C. There were snags along the way, but, according to the founders, “divine intervention” prevailed, and the vision became reality. The owners of the house were moving out of the city, and while there were initially other buyers, the owners were intrigued by Seth and Steve’s intentions to turn the house into a place of hospitality for the surrounding community.

The vision for the house was to be a “presence for Jesus in the community”, as well as be “in fellowship with the people in the community”. They sought to establish a relationship with the residents in the surrounding neighborhoods, and through those relationships, begin to meet the needs that arose. This proved to be a challenge; they described the area they were in as rather mobile at times.

The Urban Center consists of three separate entities: a clearinghouse of services that meet the practical needs of the community, a partnership that reaches out to the youth in the community, and the actual house in which interns and volunteer groups are housed. Although each of these entities has a unique role, there is often overlap in the programs that are offered and the staff and volunteers that are involved.

One of the first programs of the Urban Center emerged through a service project. When a group of college students came to volunteer with them doing cleanup at a local elementary school, they began to get to know the kids that came along to help out. They noticed that many of the kids seemed to have nothing to do. It was then that the idea came to begin a mentoring program. They began to work with the schools in the area to identify the kids most “at risk” and pair them with a mentor.

As more people found out about the house, its reputation began to spread-so much so that in the spring of 1997, a local “crew” leader (similar to a gang) from the neighborhood informed them of his intention to protect the property by putting word out to his peers not to target the house for theft or vandalism.

Many of these relationships spanned outside the city, and, occasionally, outside the country. Among those that the Urban Center developed relationships with were outside church groups that traveled to the city, typically for “urban plunge” trips. It was through the volunteer work of these groups that much of the remodeling of the house was completed; work that was often costly and extensive had they attempted to complete it through regular means. The success of the Urban Center was tied with the relationships they sought to form.

Through these relationships, the interior of the house also began to change. Furniture in the bedrooms that housed interns was donated by the parents who had seen a change in their son after he had worked with the Urban Center. Paintings of the house staff and volunteers adorn the dining room and meeting spaces. They were donated by an artist that rented out part of the space as a loft to work on her art. A church group from Pennsylvania helped to build the spacious kitchen that now feeds guests and program participants. Often a program emerged simply from a volunteer recognizing a need, discussing it with Seth, Steve, and the staff members of the house, and then taking steps toward the program becoming reality.

In 2001, the Urban Center purchased a building on the same block that would eventually serve as a place to provide additional programming for youth. They are continuing to work on remodeling the former apartment building in order to accommodate their increasing number of programs and participants.

In 2003, they began to see a need to reach out to the mothers in the community, recognizing the prominent role that many of them played in the lives of the kids as the sole breadwinners. Out of this idea came “Moms Night Out”, an evening during which mothers could come to the Urban Center for a night off. It began with a night of pampering and arts and crafts, but as time progressed, the participants showed more interest in classes on money management and home improvement, as well as a Bible study and support group.

Later that year saw the emergence of a program that met the practical needs of the neighborhood through a clearinghouse of services that ranged from rent to food assistance. This program received the Community Action Award in 2006 from the city of D.C. for the services it provided to the community. 2006 also saw the groundbreaking of the additional building purchased earlier in order to expand Urban Center programs.

As the Urban Center continues to expand, it will not be without challenges. The current economy, as well as increasing development in the Southeast region of the D.C. will likely force out many of the residents who have come to rely on the Urban Center. However, the founders and staff continue to be hopeful in their mission to be a positive presence in a stigmatized and often overlooked area of the city.

## **Timeline**

- 1996 Purchase of house, the Urban Center begins.
- 1997 Volunteer Mentoring Program begins. Local “crew” leader assures protection of the Urban Center from theft or vandalism.
- 2001 Three-story apartment building on Q St. is purchased.
- 2003 Mom’s Night Out is started as an outreach to single mothers in the community.
- 2006- Clearinghouse program receives the DC Office of Neighborhood Services’ Community Action Award.  
Groundbreaking for Q Street Building

## **Finances**

The Urban Center engages in fundraising primarily through telling a series of what they term as “miracle stories”. These are accounts of ways the center has obtained items for the house, donations of labor, staff and volunteers; as well as individual stories of lives that were affected through the programs that the center offered. Their goal in recounting these stories is to inspire further community giving.



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