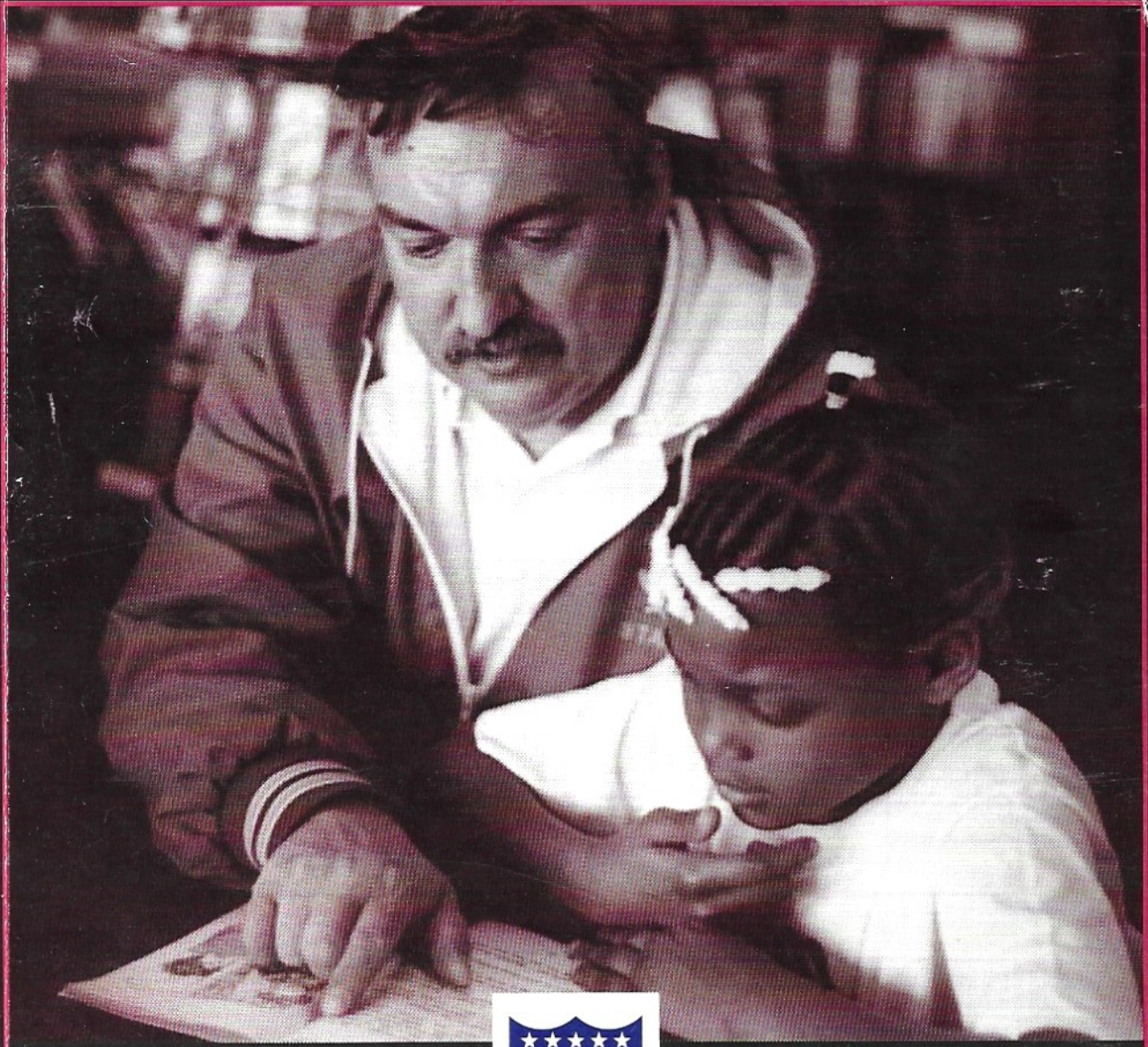


*The 1997
All-America City Yearbook*

A program of the National Civic League, sponsored by
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Hillside Neighborhood (Colorado Springs), Colorado

Founded in 1987, the Hillside Neighborhood Association has made remarkable inroads against urban decline in the past ten years. The neighborhood group was so successful in accomplishing its goals that it is now waging a "sustainability and replication" project to consolidate its gains and help neighborhoods in other communities.

A sign of the neighborhood's strength and entrepreneurial spirit was its ability to compete successfully in the 1997 All-America City Awards against cities, counties and regions with much larger populations and far greater resources. The motto of the neighborhood group is telling: "We alone can do it, but we cannot do it alone."

Hillside boasts of their award on signs at neighborhood entrances.

Hillside is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Colorado Springs. It is also one of the most diverse, with a population that is 39 percent white, 22 percent black, and 24 percent Hispanic. During the late 1970s and 1980s, the residents of the neighborhood felt neglected as the city poured funds into the growing subdivisions to the north, and all but ignored the needs of Hillside.

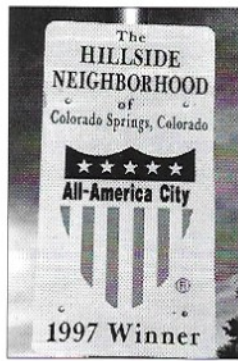
Promise Lee, a minister/community organizer, grew up in the Hillside Neighborhood. After

being away from Colorado Springs for 11 years, he returned to the community to take care of his ailing father. He was appalled by the conditions he found. Slum lords had taken over the neighborhood. There was open drug dealing, street protestation, gang graffiti. The city was neglecting basic services such as street lighting.

Lee attributes much of the decline of the neighborhood to a decision by the local school district to close down South Junior High School in 1983. The school had served as a de facto community center in a neighborhood that lacked other facilities. "It had served as a place for people to socialize," says Lee. "The gym was open every night. It was an old fashioned community school." Members of the community asked Lee if he would "help put things in order."

On the first meeting of what would become the Hillside Neighborhood Association, there were only four people. By the third meeting there were 200-300 people. The first step was taking back the streets and enforcing a "no tolerance" policy toward open drug dealing. Block captains were appointed. Police were called at the first sign of trouble. Drug dealers were approached by Lee and other association members and told, simply, "This is a new day and we're not going to tolerate it anymore."

The next step was to go to the city and demand more and better services. The neighbors did a little homework and discovered that in 12 years the city had spent a total of \$4,800 in the



neighborhood—on picnic tables and barbecues. “The city had been neglecting our neighborhood. People became upset when they realized that, and anger motivates to action.”

The organizers took these and other facts to the media and began applying public pressure on city government. The pressure paid off. At Prospect Lake, for example, the city has spent a total of \$500,000 to renovate a beach house, improve landscaping, provide new equipment and pave and expand the walkways.

Hillside activists convinced the city to appoint a community liaison to listen to neighborhood concerns on traffic safety, truck routes, affordable housing, capital improvements, code enforcement and recreational programs. Public visioning sessions identified priorities and initiated awareness campaigns to change Hillside from a blighted, crime infested area to a family oriented friendly place to live. These changes are reflected in the improving ability of residents to obtain bank loans.

Colorado’s Department of Local Affairs has taken an interest in the neighborhood’s successes. In recent months, the association has begun to provide information about organizing techniques to state supported Neighborhood Resource Centers in Denver and Fort Collins, Colorado. The University of Colorado has become a partner with the association by providing evaluation from its Center for Community Development and Design.

The “No Tolerance” Campaign

Since the association began organizing in 1987, the neighborhood has experienced a substantial reduction in crime. Burglaries have decreased by 52 percent, and aggravated assault and robbery have fallen by 45 percent. The focus of the association has been both on improving police services and on emphasizing individual and community responsibility.

In 1995, neighborhood residents decided to solidify their gains with a new “No Tolerance



Yellow ribbons and yellow porch light bulbs are the daily reminders of the “No Tolerance” anti-crime campaign.

Campaign.” It consisted of issuing yellow ribbons and yellow porch light bulbs to provide a message of solidarity among neighbors and to serve as a symbolic warning to criminals. More than 500 residents have signed the following pledge. “I vow to actively exercise an attitude of non-tolerance toward individual and institutional crime, violence, gang activity and other negative elements that promote the destruction of family and my community. Therefore I vow:

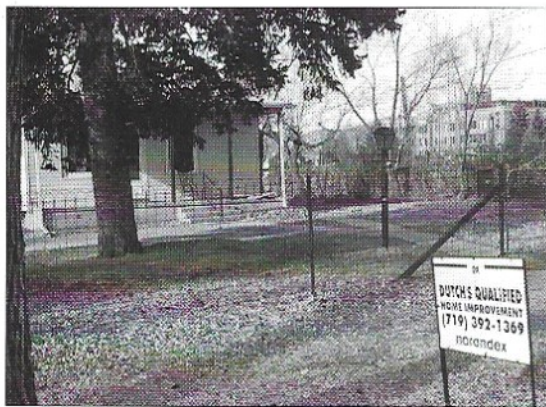
- 1) Actively to work to change those elements that lead to crime;
- 2) To do this by becoming involved in my community and the lives of young people;
- 3) To encourage those around me to also become involved in efforts to combat those social ills;
- 4) Finally, I vow to never personally do anything to harm my community

The campaign began with a massive phone calling effort, informing people about the pledge and asking for their verbal support. Other institutions within the community helped. The school district asked all employees to spread the word of the campaign and to participate in distributing ribbons and light bulbs. Local clergy have helped spread the word and the campaign has attracted substantial media coverage, reversing a trend of negative reporting on the Hillside area.

Police statistics showed an immediate drop in the crime rate after the campaign began. And that reduction—about five percent—has continued. The pledge campaign got neighbors out of their houses and talking to each other, fostering more good will and community involvement.

Hillside Heights

One of the goals that came out of a 1990 “visioning” process was to promote home ownership within the Hillside neighborhood. Far too many residents have been renting for decades without the possibility of buying their own homes. When the neighborhood went into decline during the



An example of many home improvement projects.

mid 1980s, many homeowners moved out and were replaced by absentee landlords. It is widely believed among community development groups that promoting affordable home ownership improves a community in two ways, by providing housing for low income families, and by giving

those new homeowners a greater stake in the future of the community.

When the state of Colorado announced the plan to remove nine homes in order to widen a nearby highway corridor, the Hillside Neighborhood Association saw an opportunity. Under a state program, the homes were to be made available to the City of Colorado Springs after being removed from the highway right of way. The city would partner with lending institutions and community groups to move the homes, renovate them and make them available to first time home buyers.

A rundown section of the Hillside neighborhood was selected for the homes. The Hillside Heights project now consists of a block of nine nicely renovated homes. Over half of the new homeowners were from the neighborhood. Beautifully renovated and landscaped, the project has received several awards for low income housing, community design and the use of the principles of “Xeriscaping” (water saving plantings) in community development.

Sustainability and Replication

The headquarters of the Hillside Neighborhood Association is in a seven-unit strip mall near a neighborhood park. Last year, when the mall came up for sale, association members worried that they might lose their lease because of the change of ownership. So the association decided to buy the mall itself. In six weeks the organization had raised \$50,000 for a down payment on the property. The primary source of donations came from Hillside residents. Teenagers, homeowners, local business people and seniors on fixed incomes all contributed to the fund.

Aside from the immediate concern over the lease, the association members had another reason for buying the mall—an urge to be economically self sufficient. The organization has a strong entrepreneurial bent, and members don’t want to become reliant on government funding or grants. Payments from the other mall tenants pay for the

association's mortgage and then some. One of the units of the mall now houses Graffi-T's screen printing, an association project that employs



The Hillside Associations Graffi-T shop employs teens who learn business and printing skills on the job. Hillside's AAC Award and neighborhood booster poster (designed by Graffi-T) are prominently displayed on the wall at left.

apprentices who learn the skills of printing, computer graphics and small business operation. Purchasing the mall is part of the association's "Sustainability and Replication" program, which has three goals: to establish a permanent site for ongoing activities, to develop sources of earned income for the association, and to replicate its

successes in other neighborhoods so the culture of self empowerment will be irreversible in other neighborhoods. Since 1995, the association has worked actively with other Colorado Springs area neighborhoods to help them organize. The group's Neighborhood Resource Center, which is also housed at the mall, provides literature, leadership training and technical assistance to seven other neighborhood groups.

Hillside has already had an impact on other neighborhoods. One neighborhood is now sponsoring City Council Candidate forums. A mobile home park group successfully organized to make management changes at the park. More importantly, the City of Colorado Springs has developed a Community Action Plan to deal with the community wide concerns. Under this new initiative, neighborhood organizing is being encouraged rather than discouraged by city officials.

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Hillside Plaza, a seven unit strip mall, was purchased by the Hillside Neighborhood Association. The plaza now serves as income generator, training ground for neighborhood residents, and headquarters for the Association.



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(Colorado Springs), CO
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Bismarck, ND
Aiken, SC
Texas City, TX

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Longmont, CO
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Lowell, MA
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