A black and white sketch of a two-story brick building with a porch and a cross in a window. The building has a prominent front porch with columns and a set of stairs leading up to it. A cross is visible in one of the windows on the second floor. The sketch is rendered in a detailed, cross-hatched style.

The Pope of Whitelock Street

by Karen Armacost

The Story of Father Tom Composto
and St. Francis Neighborhood Center

This book is dedicated to the
people of Reservoir Hill
past, present, and future.

The Pope of Whitelock Street
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Layout and design by Jordan Bernier

Most of the photos in the St. Francis Neighborhood Center archives did not identify the photographer, the date, or the people pictured. The author is sincerely sorry that so many people in the photos are unidentified. If there is a second printing of this book and new information is available, the author will add it.

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The Pope of Whitelock Street is a self-published book. It is being distributed at no cost to Reservoir Hill residents while supplies last and private funding allows.

Cover: This drawing of St. Francis Neighborhood Center on Whitelock Street was created by Don Nayden. It appeared on the cover of the center newsletters from 1974 to 1995.

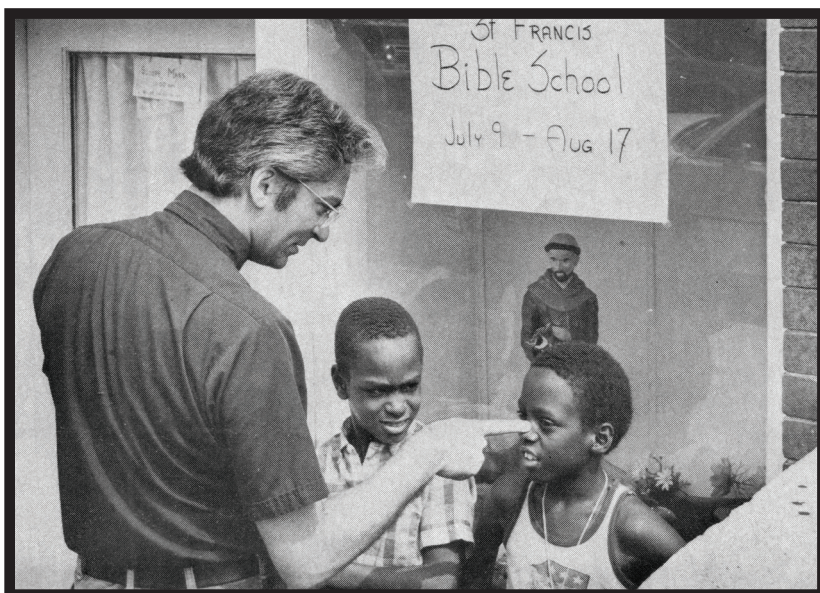
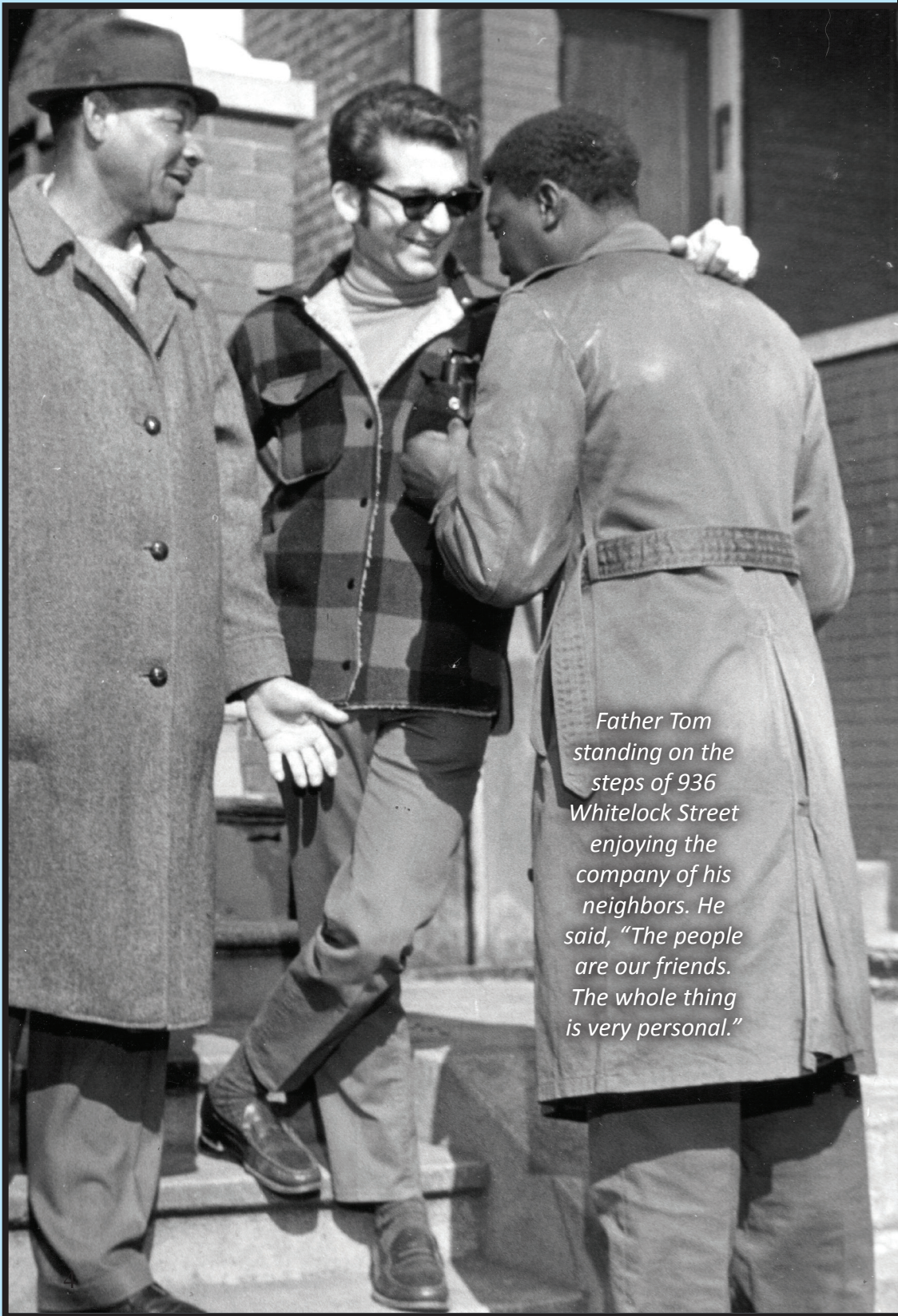


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*Father Tom
standing on the
steps of 936
Whitelock Street
enjoying the
company of his
neighbors. He
said, "The people
are our friends.
The whole thing
is very personal."*

Introduction

To tell the story of Father Tom Composto, you must tell the story of St. Francis Neighborhood Center. The two are not just a pair, like salt and pepper. You can have salt without pepper. That is not true of Father Tom and St. Francis Neighborhood Center. You cannot talk about one without the other. They are inseparable, like mother and baby.

It is important to tell this story for two reasons. First, those who knew Father Tom want others to know how he lived his life. They want him to be remembered. Not many people choose to live a life of poverty in service to the poor and needy. Many have heard about the good works of Mother Teresa. People should know about Father Tom Composto.

Secondly, 2020 is a big year for St. Francis Neighborhood Center. Father Tom's dream of a new building and expanded programs that better serve his people will become a reality. The story should be told as this new chapter begins.

Let's not forget how the center came to be. Let's not forget how Father Tom put his heart and soul into it.

Chapter 1

From Brooklyn to Baltimore



*Photo of Father Tom as a child.
Family members called him "Tommy"
throughout his life.*

Thomas Frank Composto was born in Brooklyn, New York on June 20th, 1938. His Brooklyn roots were apparent throughout his life, especially in his brash way of talking.

His family was Catholic. Father Tom wrote that his mother and father, Concetta and Frank Composto, were very spiritual and always praying. It was part of what they did every day. Prayer was not just for Sundays.

Tom played the piano from the age of six. He loved playing at parties – a love that lasted throughout his life. In fact, family and friends say that Tom was always the life of the party. His good humor and winning smile never failed to light up a room.

Tom and his younger brother Frank attended Brooklyn Prep High School. It was a highly selective Jesuit preparatory school. At that time, Tom was influenced by one of the Jesuit teachers, Father Daniel Berrigan. Father Berrigan challenged the students to a life of action. He challenged the students to stop complaining about community problems and do something about them. Inspired by Father Berrigan and other Jesuit teachers, Tom started working with the poor in high school.

In 1955 when Tom was 17 years old, he left the

streets of Brooklyn and entered the Jesuit Novitiate. Preparing to be a Jesuit is a long process. At that time, it took thirteen to fifteen years – longer than any other Catholic order. One of Tom’s high school teachers said that he would not last six months. Tom said, “Fortunately, God disagreed.”

To become a Jesuit priest, a man spends a lot of time in prayer, getting advanced college degrees, and living in a community of other men studying for the priesthood. This was true for Tom.

In 1963, Tom was still very deep in his studies at the seminary in New York. At that time, St. Peter Claver Church in West Baltimore set up the Callow Avenue Bible School in a rented apartment. The center moved several times and ended up at 936 Whitelock Street. The Church reached out for assistance from the nearby seminary in Woodstock, Maryland. Three Jesuits, Leo Gafney, Bill Sherman, and Dick Lawrence, moved into the rented apartment. Father John J. Hartman named it St. Francis Neighborhood Center.

The idea was to create a community church and a sense of community in the neighborhood.

In 1966, Tom Composto, still a seminarian, came to Whitelock Street as part of his Jesuit studies.

A story is often told that one of the first things a neighbor said to Tom was, “How long will it be until you leave, like everyone else?” This made a deep impression on Tom. It was likely the moment he decided to stay and not leave like everyone else.

In Father Tom’s own words...

*My gift to you is not a thing; it’s me!
Here I am for you. God wants me to
tell you I love you.*

As Tom spent more time at the center, he began to understand Jesus in a new way. He saw Jesus in the people he met on Whitelock Street.

On June 13, 1968, Tom Composto was ordained a Jesuit priest. To his surprise, some of his Whitelock Street neighbors made the trip to New York for the ordination.

Father Tom Composto, S.J. moved into 936 Whitelock Street and became the director of the St. Francis Neighborhood Center. He did not leave Whitelock Street until he was forced to many years later.

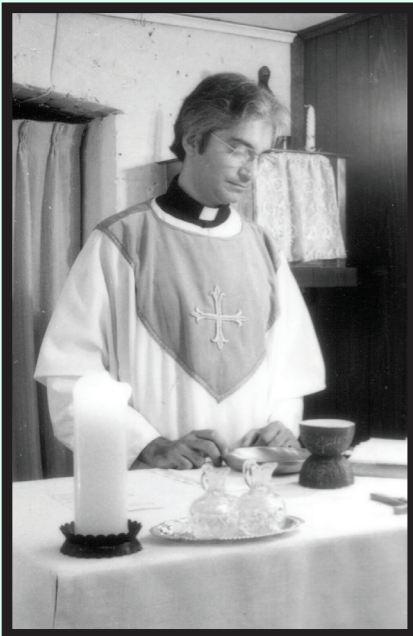
The Jesuit Order

The Jesuits are one of many orders, or religious groups, in the Catholic Church. Religious groups within the Catholic Church may have their own leaders, institutions, and teachings. Nevertheless, they are all part of the Catholic Church led by the Pope in Vatican City, Italy.

In 1539, the Jesuit group was founded in Rome, by a man named Ignatius of Loyola. He thought that Jesus was the way to God. This is why the Jesuit order is called the “Society of Jesus.” When a man becomes

a Jesuit priest, S.J. follows his name.

One of the main Ignatian teachings is an emphasis on Jesus’ life of poverty. Jesus identified with all human beings, especially the neediest and most rejected. Service is at the heart of the Jesuit life.



In Father Tom's own words...

About Ignatius. It has always been my conviction that, to be a proper Jesuit, one has to become Ignatius. Hard work. One of his main orientations was 'seeing God in all things.' This was the basis for being a 'contemplative in action.' This spirituality is also my inheritance. In this life, I could be nothing but a Jesuit.

Father Daniel Berrigan, S.J.

Father Daniel Berrigan was another Jesuit priest who lived and worked in Baltimore and New York. He was a peace activist, author, and poet. His brother, Father Philip Berrigan, was also a priest. In the 1960s, the two priests protested the Vietnam War because people were being killed and injured by powerful weapons. They went to jail several times for their belief that killing was against God's will.

The 1960s

The 1960s were a time of great change and struggle across the United States, including in Baltimore.

The Civil Rights movement educated citizens about the enormous differences between opportunities for white and black Americans. Black Americans suffered in the areas of income, jobs, housing, and education. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led peaceful protests and urged Congress to change the laws. When Dr. King was assassinated, there were riots in big cities, including Baltimore.

After a long struggle, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968, making it a federal crime to discriminate against someone because of their race, color, religion, or national origin.

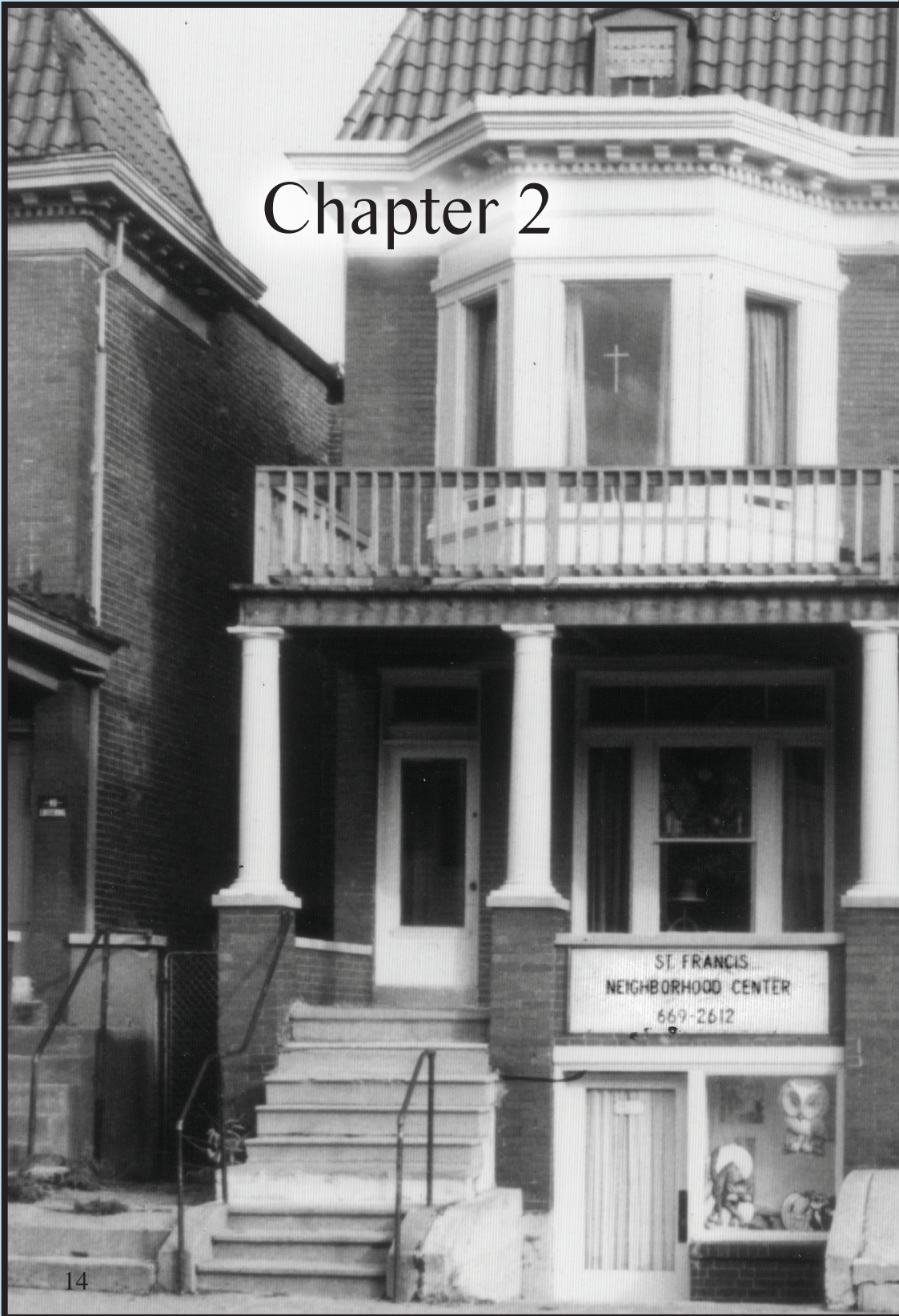
Following a trend of rising drug use in the United States, heroin use exploded in Baltimore in the 1960s. A generation of drug dealers took over many neighborhoods. There was a drastic increase in crime. Many people moved away from inner cities. At the same time, there were changes in the

Catholic Church. New rules were adopted by the Second Vatican Council. The new rules described the importance of laypeople (not just the priests) in the Church. This supported the Jesuit belief that we meet God in our everyday life, especially when we are serving the poor.

One result of the turmoil of the 1960s was that more citizens were paying attention to the causes and effects of poverty in our cities.



Chapter 2



A black and white photograph of a two-story brick building. The building features a prominent balcony on the second floor with a white railing. Below the balcony, there is a set of concrete steps leading to a ground-level entrance. A sign is mounted on the wall to the left of the steps. The building has a tiled roof and a decorative cornice. The text 'Whitelock Street' is overlaid on the upper part of the image.

Whitelock Street

Father Tom lived by himself upstairs at 936 Whitelock Street, the house on the left. Notice the cross in the second floor window.

The Dental Health Center was next door on the first floor at 934. When completed, the chapel spanned the lower level of both buildings.

FR. THOMAS F. COMPOSTO, S.J.
DENTAL HEALTH SERVICE
ST. FRANCIS NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER
720-3500

In the 1960s and 1970s, Baltimore was similar to other urban areas across the country. African Americans resided in large segregated areas where poverty levels were high, especially for children. White people and local businesses began to move out of cities to suburban areas. This resulted in more segregation and poverty. Job opportunities and quality education declined. Many African Americans living in cities felt left out, hopeless, and even angry.

Two months before Father Tom's ordination, there were four nights of riots in Baltimore. Peaceful civil rights protests turned violent. People were afraid. This is what was happening when Father Tom chose to live on Whitelock Street. He wanted to walk with the African American residents in their struggle to make things better.

Over the next 25 years, things were very busy at St. Francis Neighborhood Center.

In 1968, John Taylor, a student at Loyola High School, class of 1970, started volunteering. In spite of his young age, he became the center's co-director. Soon after, Father Tom began referring to John Taylor as the "backbone" of the center because of his organizational skills. Amazingly, John continued in this volunteer role for over 40 years! Father Tom,

In Father Tom's own words...

Do you know how often we sit on the steps of our center, watching the street that never sleeps, and wondering what it means to bring Christ into the world of Whitelock Street?

John, and John's wife and children remained lifelong friends.

Like other Jesuit priests, Father Tom offered the sacraments to people in the community. This included Baptisms, Confirmations, Communion, Reconciliation (confession), Blessing of the Sick, and Matrimony (weddings). Catholics believe that a sacrament is God's gift of Grace. Hundreds, maybe thousands of people received God's Grace through Father Tom.

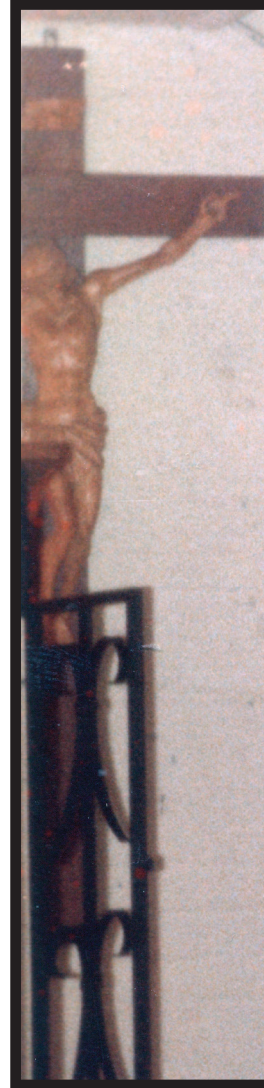
In addition to regular Sunday services, the center offered Bible school for adults and children. The doors were opened for Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous meetings. There was a community

library that included books and services for the visually impaired. Father Tom made home visits.

In 1972, the center was incorporated as a non-profit organization independent of any church affiliation. That same year, after a two-year renovation of the first floor of the Whitelock Street building, the St. Francis Neighborhood Center Dental Health Services opened. The purpose was to serve the poor and the elderly, whose needs were traditionally ignored. Volunteer dentists served hundreds of patients at the Center.

Things continued to be very busy. The Center was mostly supported by private donations of cash or services. Father Tom helped financially, too. He taught courses in psychology, religion, and sociology at local colleges. Jesuits study for many years and have advanced college degrees. Father Tom was very qualified to teach.

It was 1984. One crowning achievement was the completion of the chapel in the basement of Whitelock Street. Finally, the community would have its own sacred place to meet and to worship.





Father Tom in the basement chapel of Whitelock Street preparing to say Mass.

Under Father Tom and John's leadership, St. Francis Neighborhood Center thrived in the 1970s and 1980s. There was growth and joy. There were also difficult days ahead.

John K. Taylor III, DDS

If Father Tom was the heart and soul of St. Francis Neighborhood Center, John Taylor was the backbone. He was co-director of the center with Father Tom from 1968 until the year of Tom's death, 2011.

It was John's idea to provide dental services. He built the dental suite with donations. He recruited dozens of volunteer dentists. The Dental Health Center opened in 1972. In 1977, John became a dentist himself.



Under John's leadership, the dental service was run as a private office where each patient had his or her own dentist. Patients were charged modest fees to maintain their dignity and to cover some expenses. In later years, Dr. Taylor took mobile dental services to the homebound and people in nursing homes. What a blessing for so many people! People like Gloria who had twin daughters with Down Syndrome. The girls were obese and traveling was difficult. Gloria's husband had died. Gloria was exhausted from caring for her daughters. She was stunned to find a dentist who would come to her house. In 2020, Dr. Taylor is still making home dental appointments.

Father Tom saying Mass in the early days of his ordination, joined by high school student John Taylor and other Jesuits.

The Women of St. Francis Neighborhood Center



The women volunteers came from the neighborhood and various religious communities. Sister Maryann Hartnett (dressed in white) stands next to then-Representative Barbara Mikulski and Father Tom during a visit to the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. in 1978. Senator Mikulski and Baltimore City Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke were long-time supporters of St. Francis Neighborhood Center. Mary Pat Clarke was instrumental in acquiring the Linden Avenue site from Baltimore City.



Elizabeth Johnson (Liz Evans)

Liz was at the center every day doing anything and everything until she had to leave for school crossing guard duty. During the Whitelock years, Liz was a personal force behind the dental office. It is said that when Father Tom was too soft on some misbehavior, Liz stepped in with a firm hand.

WHITELOCK SUITE



WORDS AND MUSIC
BY
CECILIA SQUIGGINS

ARRANGED BY
STEVEN HASSINGER
AND
KELLOGG JOHNSON

A cardboard and paper folder dated Christmas 1978 appears to have been created by Cecilia Squiggins. A handwritten inscription reads, "Dedicated to and inspired by Father Tom Composto and the People of Whitelock Stree." In addition to the cover drawing pictured above, the folder contains several pieces of original sheet music with lyrics. Titles include "Whitelock Street Blues" and "Loneliness is Just Another Name for a Big City Street" pictured on the facing page.

Cecilia Squiggins

Many kids in the neighborhood recall going to the center on Saturdays and getting free piano lessons from Cecilia. In addition to being a piano teacher, she was also a composer who wrote original songs about the community.

Loneliness Is Just Another Name for a Busy City Street

Composed by: Cecilia Squiggins
Arranged by: Steven D. Harrison
Piano - Vocal - Guitar

freely - with expression
mf

very freely: E^m9
Loneliness is just another word for a

Db9 *Fm7* *Bb7* *Fm9* *Bb7*
busy city street, people talking, people laughing, children playing, but are they say - ing

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the song "Loneliness Is Just Another Name for a Busy City Street" by Cecilia Squiggins. The score is written on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and includes piano accompaniment and vocal lines. The title is written in cursive at the top. Below the title, it says "Composed by: Cecilia Squiggins" and "Arranged by: Steven D. Harrison". The instrumentation is listed as "Piano - Vocal - Guitar". The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (mf), performance instructions (freely - with expression, very freely), and chord symbols (E^m9, Db9, Fm7, Bb7, Fm9, Bb7). The lyrics are written below the vocal line: "Loneliness is just another word for a busy city street, people talking, people laughing, children playing, but are they say - ing".

Mary Staiten

Mary lived next door on Whitelock Street. She noticed that her neighbors (including the young priests) were not eating very well, and she decided to feed them. Father Tom described her: “She’s receptionist, dietician, housemother (grandmother), and feminine influence in our center.”

Sarah Taylor

John Taylor’s daughter practically grew up at the center. She became assistant director in 2006 and helped Father Tom purchase the city lot next to the Linden Avenue building – the site of the center’s new addition.

Denise Bailey

Father Tom liked to joke that he and Denise were both born into the neighborhood the same year, 1968. It is true that Denise was an enduring presence at the center for decades, from birth to adulthood. In addition to Bible school and Saturday arts and crafts with the kids, Denise was hard-working and did just about anything that needed doing.

Melody Healy

Melody Healy was another local resident who spent a lot of time at the center in the early days. She cooked meals for anyone and everyone with Liz Evans. Melody married Joe Healy, a former Jesuit priest. The two of them continued the spirit of Father Tom's work in other communities.

In Father Tom's own words

A guiding principle among all of the people who work together at St. Francis Neighborhood Center is that we are personal. We try to enter people's lives, share our own with them, and support them in their own attempts and striving to realize their potentials.

No Greater Love Spirit Award

*There is no greater love than when a
man lay down his life for others.*

John 15:13



By 1978, Father Tom and John Taylor had been co-directing St. Francis Neighborhood Center for ten years. They had built the center with their own hands. All money was donated. There were no state or federal funds.

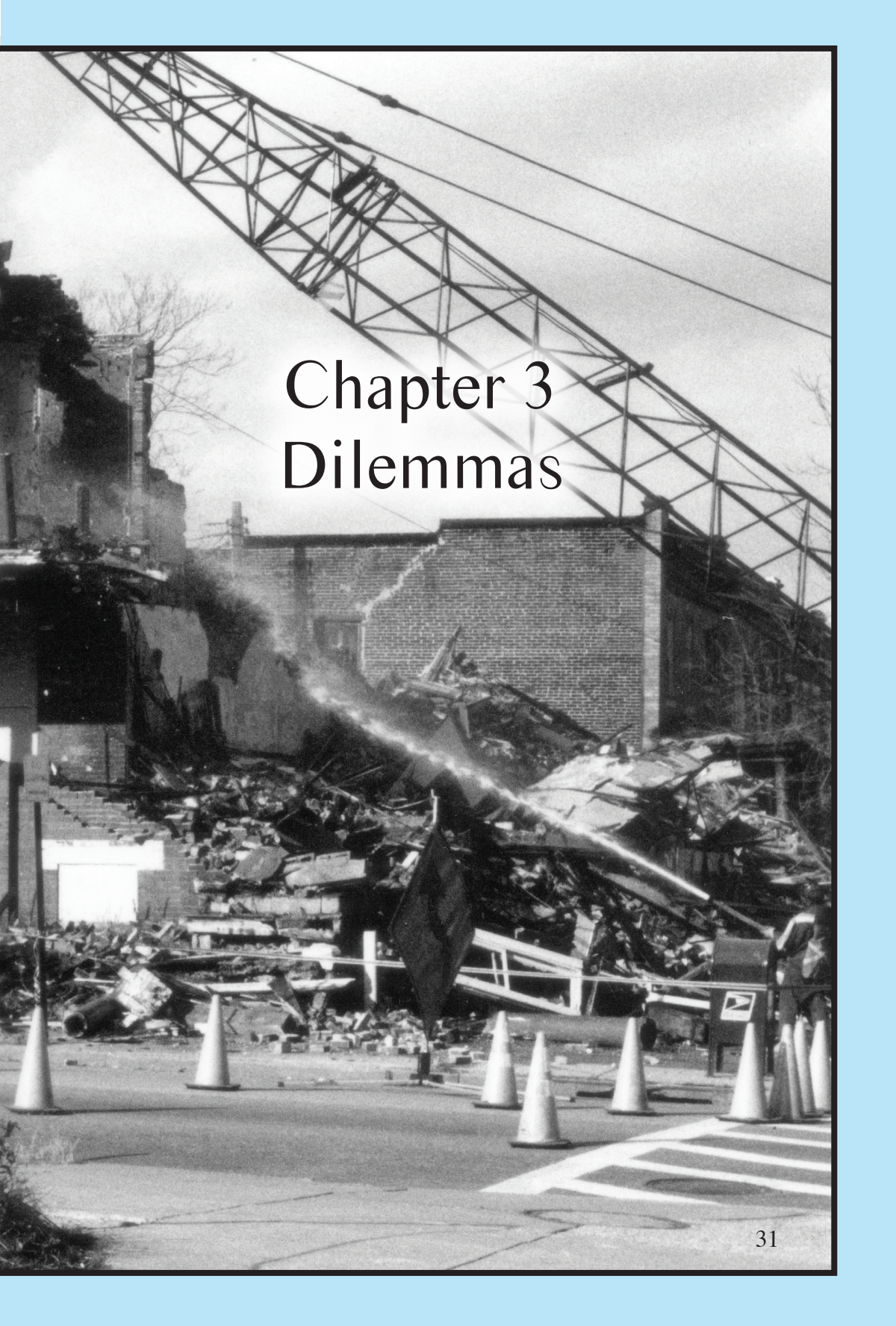
A local newspaper wrote that “The directors begged, borrowed, and otherwise improvised to get a job done that nobody else wanted to do.”

For this, Father Tom and John were awarded the first annual No Greater Love Spirit Award in appreciation of their outstanding work in helping to revitalize the spirit of an inner city neighborhood.

Celebrity athletes and a local TV newsman attended the award ceremony along with Father Tom’s parents, Frank and Concetta Composto. It was a great honor!

Celebrating the No Greater Love Spirit Award outside 934 and 936 Whitelock Street. The porch, sidewalks, and streets were filled with well-wishers on that day. Surrounding Father Tom, (clockwise from the left) Lenny Moore and Sanders Shiver of the Baltimore Colts, Elrod Hendricks of the Baltimore Orioles, WJZ-TV newsman Jerry Turner and Dr. John Taylor.





Chapter 3 Dilemmas

In 1990, there were two dilemmas for Father Tom and Whitelock Street. A dilemma happens when a decision has to be made and there are two undesirable choices. Dilemmas are difficult situations. One of the dilemmas concerned the Catholic Church. The other concerned the City of Baltimore.

Father Tom continued to bring the sacraments to anyone who asked. He often said “Yes” to people



The neighborhood people were so happy to have their own priest and their own chapel. Father Tom pours water over this young man's head as part of the sacrament of Baptism.

in situations where the local Catholic Churches said “No.”

One day, when Father Tom was at a local restaurant, the waitress told him that the parish priest refused to baptize her baby grandson because the mother was not married. The waitress was very upset.

Father Tom arranged for the young mother and the grandmother to attend baptismal classes at St. Francis Neighborhood Center. After the classes, Father Tom baptized the baby in the St. Francis Chapel. It was a joyful occasion. There are many stories like this.

The Catholic Church has rules about the sacraments. The rules tell how people should prepare for the sacraments, where the sacraments are to be performed, and how they will be recorded. The Catholic Church advised Father Tom to follow the rules.

It is common in the Catholic Church for leaders to give priests new assignments. Often, the priest must move to another city.

In 1990, the Jesuits ordered Father Tom to leave St. Francis Neighborhood Center and return to New York for another assignment. If he refused, he

would be dismissed from the Jesuit order. It is unclear exactly why the Jesuits recalled Father Tom to New York. It may have been his time for a new assignment.

One thing was very clear. The Church said that Father Tom would not be replaced by another Jesuit. St. Francis Neighborhood Center would lose its priest.

This was a dilemma for Father Tom. His whole life was about being a Jesuit priest. He had spent many years in training and many more in service. He did not want to be separated from the Jesuits or the Catholic Church. At the same time, his entire life was

In Father Tom's own words...

I could not find it in myself to abandon this mission and its people to whom I had promised my commitment almost twenty-five years ago. I delayed. I discussed.

I telephoned. I negotiated. I prayed. I struggled. I wrote letters. I slept a disturbed sleep. All this eventuated in my decision to remain here at St. Francis. The alternative was the demise of this mission.

about living with and serving the poor and the needy.

Father Tom decided to remain on Whitelock Street. This meant that he was no longer a Jesuit. However, he was still a priest in the community. He continued to be the spiritual leader of St. Francis Neighborhood Center.

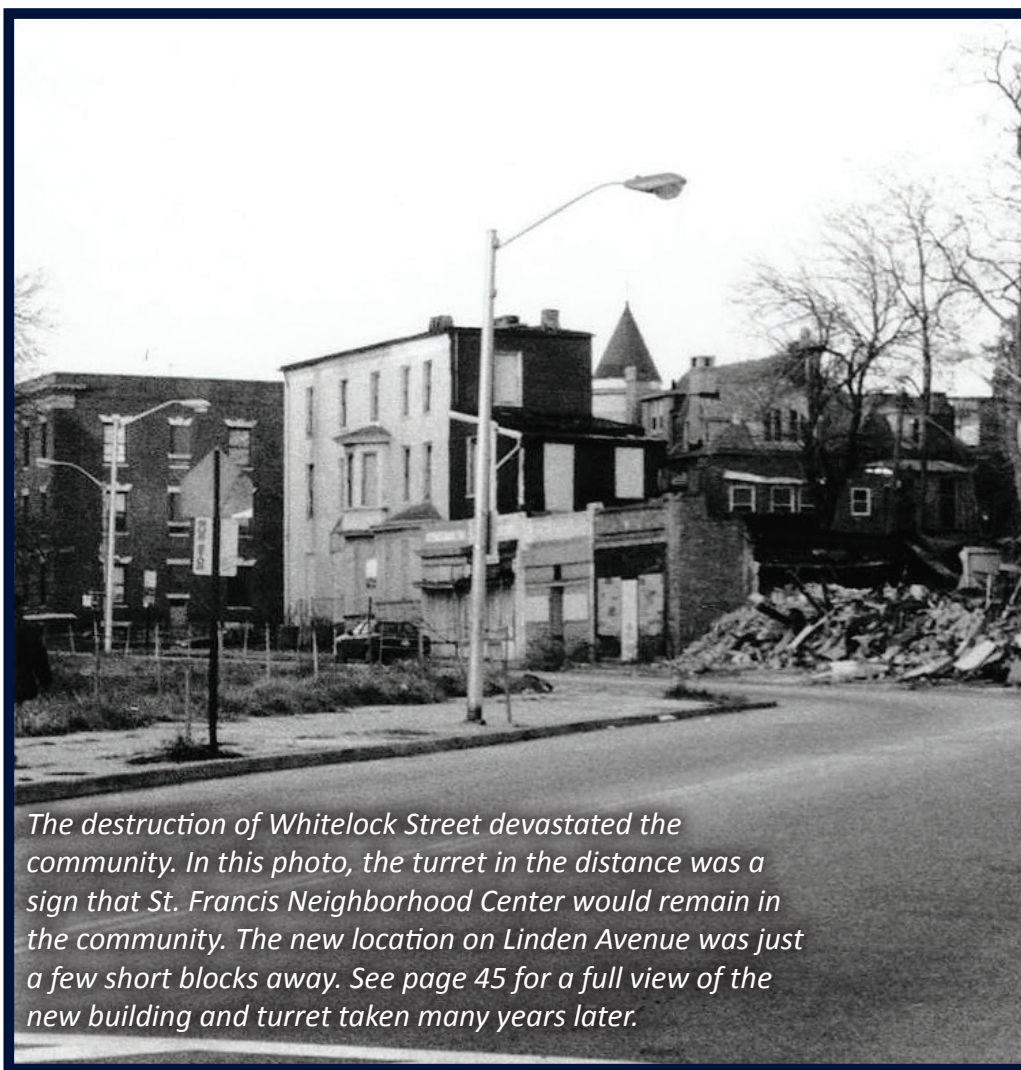
There was another dilemma on Whitelock Street. This time, Baltimore City had to make a difficult decision.

The drug situation in the neighborhood was getting worse. Whitelock Street seemed to be a magnet for drug dealers and buyers. Father Tom pleaded for help from city politicians and police officials. He wrote, "In the end, our only weapon is continued and unified pressure in the form of calls to 911."

The city had another weapon in mind. It planned to tear down businesses and buildings in the 900 block of Whitelock Street. Getting rid of the buildings would also get rid of the drug dealing, or so they thought.

There was a rental office on Whitelock Street. Father Tom worked with the rental office owners when someone needed a place to live. Miriam Winder's parents owned the business. She has fond

memories of Father Tom and the other businesses on the block. There was also a popular hardware store owned by Bill Harris. There was a grocery store, a laundromat, a dry cleaner, a pool room, and a pharmacy.



The destruction of Whitelock Street devastated the community. In this photo, the turret in the distance was a sign that St. Francis Neighborhood Center would remain in the community. The new location on Linden Avenue was just a few short blocks away. See page 45 for a full view of the new building and turret taken many years later.

Miriam remembered her parents and other business owners on the street saying that it was a stupid idea to tear down the buildings. The drug dealers would just move elsewhere. Bill Harris and others worried that tearing down the



block would take away the conveniences that the businesses provided. Once again, the people in the neighborhood felt ignored and abandoned.

Of course, tearing down Whitelock Street

In Father Tom's own words...

Sometimes I'm the cop (silent), when the kids start throwing bottles or rocks. Sometimes I'm the Pope of Whitelock Street (no competition).

All the time I am pastor of our congregation, and they are my family.

Lots of times, I am the taxi service when the elder-van services blow it. Which happens a lot. For the Center, I am the general maintenance man, fund-raiser, organizer, and general fac-totum. In between, I work part-time jobs like teaching, sing-a-long gigs, parties, counseling, and computer work to earn my keep.

would also mean the loss of the home of St. Francis Neighborhood Center and the Dental Health Center.

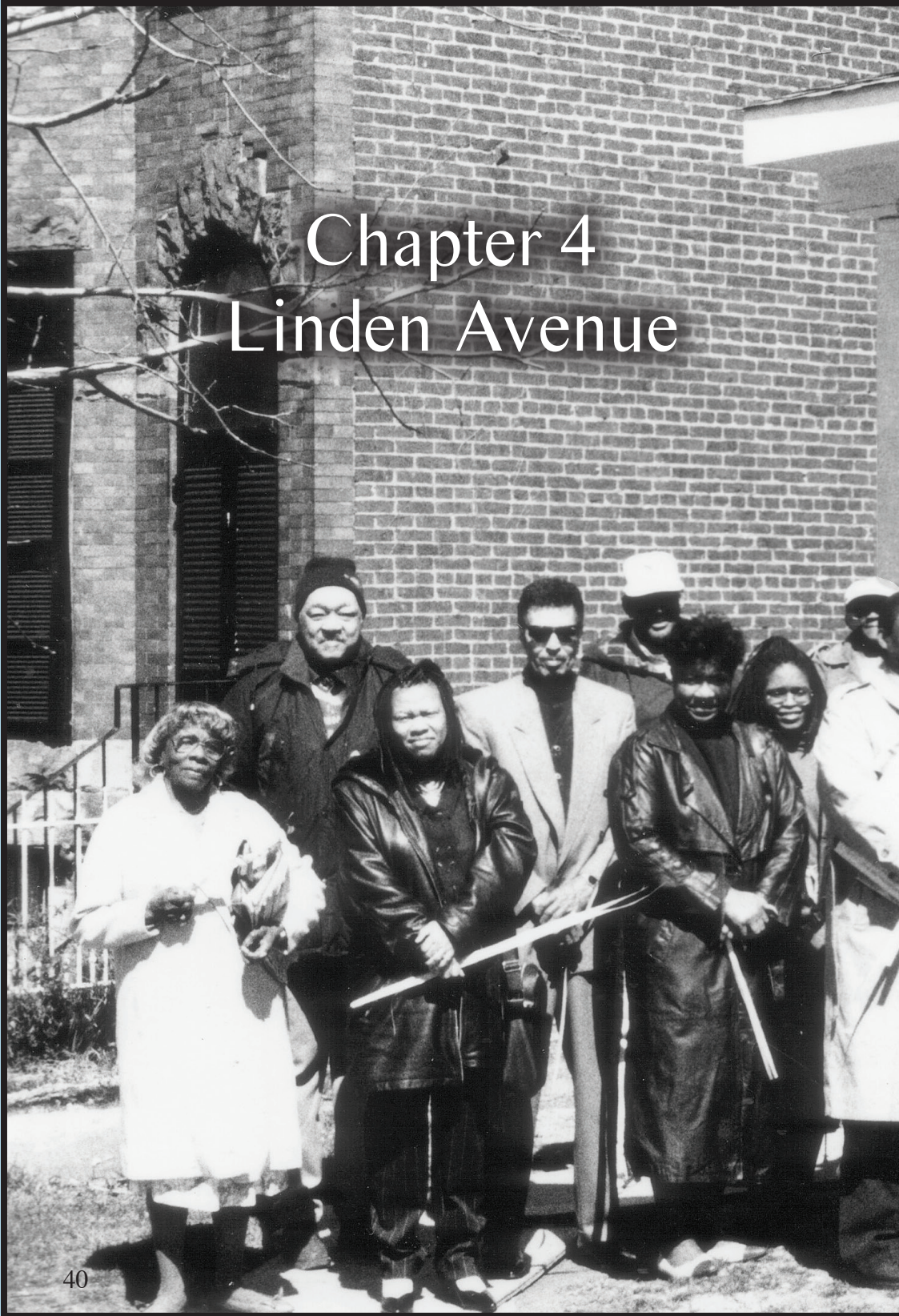
In his usual Brooklyn style – not the least bit timid or shy – Father Tom attended meetings, made calls, wrote letters, begged, and pleaded for the interests of the people in the community.

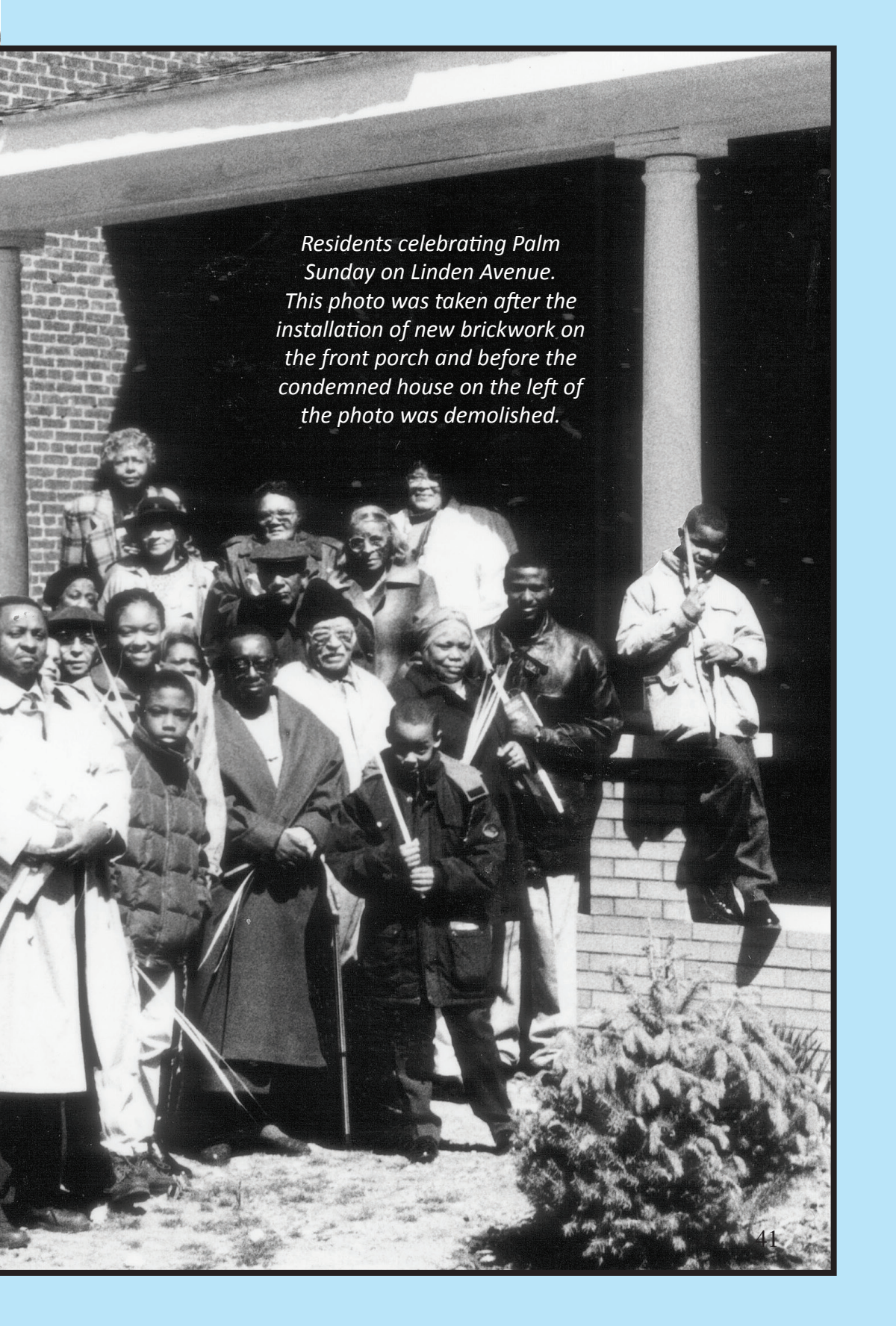
By this time, Father Tom was well-known in the community. Many years of patience and hard work had earned him the people's trust. Bill Harris explained to this author that black culture has a way of giving people titles. The community named Father Tom "The Pope of Whitelock Street." The name stuck. It was used on the streets in Reservoir Hill. It even appeared in a local newspaper headline in December 1994 – "Pope still fighting for Reservoir Hill."

In the end, the city made the decision to tear down twenty buildings and stores in the 900 block of Whitelock Street.

It was 1995. It was sad to leave Whitelock Street. Father Tom called it sacred ground. He said that it was the site of God's presence for so many people, for so many years - 32 years to be exact!

Chapter 4 Linden Avenue





Residents celebrating Palm Sunday on Linden Avenue. This photo was taken after the installation of new brickwork on the front porch and before the condemned house on the left of the photo was demolished.

The new building was just one block west. 2405 Linden Avenue. It was a “gift” from Baltimore City because the city had torn down Whitelock Street. The building was falling down inside and out. Houses on both sides were condemned and torn down. Father Tom said, “It needs everything. Pipes, sinks, toilets, radiators, furnaces, wiring are all gone; ripped out by ‘souvenir hunters.’ We have to start over.”

As always, Father Tom was tough and determined. The community would create a new sacred place. Sadness turned into excitement. Businesses donated their services to repair the building. Individual volunteers did what they could.

Father Tom continued weekly religious services in the new chapel on the first floor. John Taylor installed a stained glass image of Jesus in the front window. The glass had been rescued from the trash. Services were well-attended by the neighbors as well as many of the center’s long-time supporters.

One regular attendee, Mary, echoes a common sentiment: “Going to mass at St. Francis Neighborhood Center is a great lift for me. Everyone is so warm and concerned about each other. It is





Father Tom successfully rallied the services of community residents, businesses, and volunteers to make 2405 Linden Avenue a safe, welcoming space.

wonderful to have a chapel in this community.”

In the early 2000s, Father Tom heard that Baltimore City was preparing to sell a lot adjacent to the Linden Avenue building. He wanted the property to expand the center’s services. Once more, he was determined. He talked to everyone in city

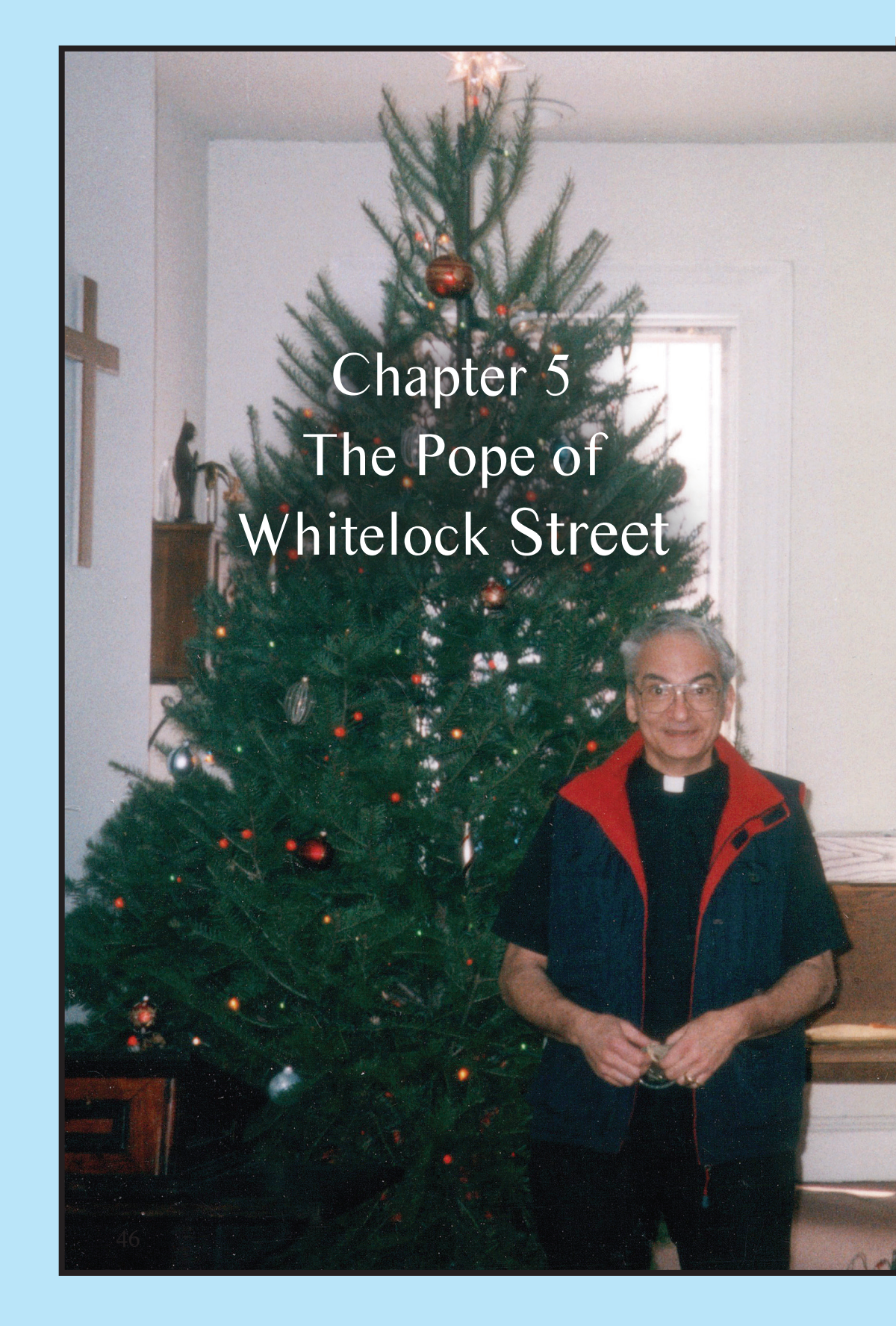
government. He talked in his usual Brooklyn style – a little bit pushy and a lot persuasive. In 2006, the purchase was complete. The property belonged to St. Francis Neighborhood Center for future development.

In 2009, St. Francis Neighborhood Center expanded its weekend and summer Bible programs, launching a free after-school program for children called the Power Project. Kids arrived from multiple schools. They got a snack, help with homework, and special tutoring if needed. They participated in fun and enriching activities like art and music. Program leaders stayed in touch with the kids' schools and parents. Everyone worked together to help the kids improve in school. The adults provided a safe environment and encouraged the kids' natural talents. There was always a waiting list.

Imagine Father Tom's delight at all of these kids on Linden Avenue. Father Tom never doubted God's purpose for him. He knew his path was to live among the poor and the ignored. He was stubborn when he had to be to get things done.

Every nook and cranny in this three-story building on Linden Avenue was utilized. Can you picture fifty kids moving in groups from floor to floor, room to room for all kinds of classes? The center was welcoming and lively. After a while, it was too small to meet the community's needs.





Chapter 5
The Pope of
Whitelock Street



In 2011, Father Tom was not feeling well. His friends suspected that something was wrong. But Father Tom did not like to talk about himself. He did not tell his family or friends that he had lung cancer. Father Tom quietly prepared himself. He made it clear that he did not want treatment.

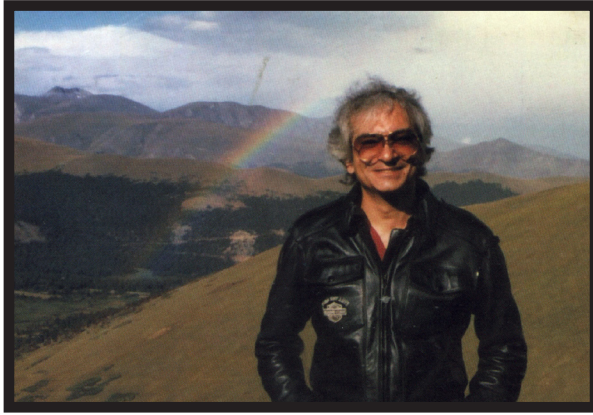
Father Tom died on March 16, 2011 at the age of 72. More than 100 people attended his funeral in the chapel of St. Francis Neighborhood Center. Crowds spilled out onto the porch, into the street, and down the entire block. Tom Hall, a resident of Reservoir Hill, voiced a touching tribute to Father Tom on WYPR's Maryland Morning: "He's not an ordinary man who did extraordinary things... He's an extraordinary man who did ordinary things."

Fortunately, and not surprisingly, Father Tom's oversized personality and powerful presence remain at St. Francis Neighborhood Center.

In 2019, St. Francis Neighborhood Center celebrated the tenth anniversary of The Power Project. Services for neighborhood kids continue year-round. The center brings the community together for greening projects, stoop nights, self-help meetings, and much more.

There is more good news. A strong board of

directors, the executive director, and staff members successfully raised enough money to renovate the Linden Avenue building AND to build an addition. The addition will be on the city property that Father Tom purchased.



The new center will be modern and cheerful. It will have computers, a library, and relaxing green space. Most importantly, there will be room to expand The Power Project.

At the ground-breaking for the new building, dozens of people who knew the Pope of Whitelock Street spoke of him. The stories were touching – mostly funny, never sad.

Father Tom's presence was definitely felt by the crowd that day. Few people doubted that Father Tom's spirit will continue at St. Francis Neighborhood Center.

The Power Project



Genesis and Candace chop vegetables during cooking class.

The Power Project began in 2009 with a grant from the Knott Foundation. The after-school youth development program provides a safe environment with nurturing adults who teach new skills and encourage natural talents.

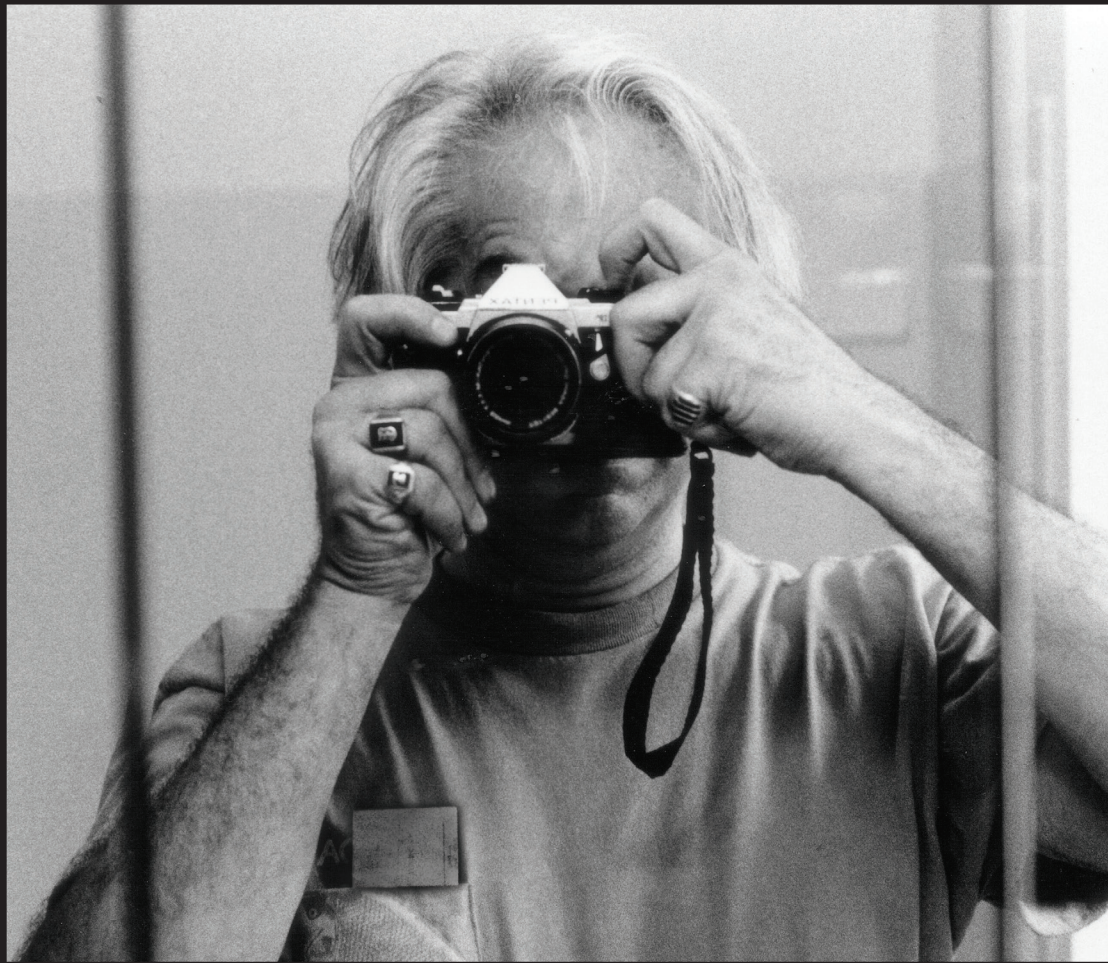
In 2019, as the Power Project entered its tenth year, St. Francis Neighborhood Center broke ground for a new building long envisioned by Father Tom.



Kayla practices a dance routine for a fundraising event.

In Father Tom's own words...
*We help plant the seeds of stability by
persistent and continued presence in
our neighborhood.*

Discussion Questions



Father Tom's talents and interests were varied. He had many names: Priest, Spiritual Leader, Community Leader, Musician, Composer, Entertainer, Poet, Writer, Scholar, Photographer, Harley-Lover, Rebel, and Educator/Professor.

1. In 1968, Reservoir Hill residents lived in poverty and there were many problems. What were the problems? How is the neighborhood the same or different in 2020 (more than 50 years later)?

2. People said that Father Tom was “highly principled.” This means that he was a strong believer and that he was willing to give things up for what he believed. What did Father Tom believe? What do you think that he gave up, or sacrificed, for his beliefs?

3. People said that Father Tom was “a powerful presence” in the community. He said hello to everyone. He worked hard to help people who were poor, sick, or hurting. Is there a person like Father Tom living in your community? Who is it? How is he or she like Father Tom?

Notes from the Author

Father Tom Composto, S.J. married my husband Jim Armacost and me in August 1969 at Corpus Christi Church in Baltimore not far from St. Francis Neighborhood Center. This book was imagined in 2019 as Jim and I thought about how to celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary. We decided to honor Father Tom and the center in some way. Telling this story seemed to be the best way.

The primary source of information for the book was the St. Francis Neighborhood Center archives. Fortunately, this included almost thirty years of newsletters written by Father Tom. The newsletters included center updates as well as Father Tom's thoughts. What a gift to have so much material "In His Own Words!"

John Taylor provided invaluable information and insight. Other important sources of information included interviews with people who knew Father Tom, including his dear brother Frank.

Many thanks to others who shared their recollections including: Tom Hall, William Harris, Sister Mary Ann Hartman, SSND, Melody Healy, Margaret Shawleyis, Sarah Taylor, and Miriam Winder Kelly.

Special thanks to those who read early drafts and whose comments contributed to a better book. This includes: Christine Armacost, Carolyn Bernier, Kaj van Broekhoven, Gina Kotowski, Anita Langford, Jane Michael, and Ruth Sadler.

Last but not least, sincere appreciation to the St. Francis Neighborhood Center board and staff members. Jessica Childress provided Power Project information. Christi Green, executive director, and Kevin Apperson, board chair, provided information and enthusiastic support. Their love for the Reservoir Hill Community and their passion for St. Francis Neighborhood Center will ensure Father Tom's legacy continues.

- Karen Armacost, 2020