

Park Support Groups of Baltimore City: **Eastside Productions Youth Outreach**

Wallace “Butch” McGinnis has had many occupations – he’s been a cook, a handyman, a mechanic and a barber, among other things. Today, he can often be found doing small fix-it jobs for his neighbors in the northeastern Baltimore City neighborhood of Coldstream-Homestead-Montebello (CHM). His main occupation, however, is corralling a bunch of rowdy boys and girls between the ages of 9 and 13. They call him Mr. Butch, Uncle Butch, or just Grand-daddy. He’s the president and founder of an organization called Eastside Productions Youth Outreach (EPYO), an all-volunteer group for the kids of CHM.

According to Butch, CHM was a nice place to live when he and his family moved there in the early 1990s. But as the years passed, the drug culture exploded, and gang violence became more and more common. Butch saw the young boys in his community growing up too fast, and decided to take action. He formed EPYO in 1997 as a way to keep kids out of trouble – particularly to steer them away from gang activity – by giving them fun, productive things to do. EPYO’s first event was a three-day trip to Camp Smallwood with about 17 kids. The following year, Butch and his wife took 39 boys and girls on another trip, and a yearly tradition was born.

In addition to camping, the EPYO kids have gone on fishing and crabbing trips, trips to amusement parks, and excursions to the beach. For some kids, these trips have been the first time they’ve ever been out of the city, and Butch considers it one of his organization’s most important goals to give them as many

new experiences as possible. From the beginning, the young people in EPYO have been in charge of raising their own money. Over the years, they’ve gone out with buckets to solicit donations, held raffles, and sold pizza, candy, and bottles of water to pay for the group’s trips. These fundraisers are another way to keep the kids constructively engaged without placing a monetary burden on already-overextended families.

For most of its existence, EPYO has been centered on camping, fundraising, and the other pursuits described above. In recent years, however, the kids in the group have also been involved in cleaning up CHM’s open spaces. These activities really came into focus in 2005, when Kidada Fields, an organizer from the Parks & People Foundation, attended a CHM community meeting to talk about the Partnerships for Parks Program. Funded by the city’s Department of Recreation & Parks and administered by Parks & People, the program funds projects and events that improve Baltimore’s parks. Butch was present at the meeting, and invited Kidada to visit Briscoe Park, a small neighborhood space that had long been a hangout for a local gang.

Together, Kidada and Butch discussed options for Briscoe and developed an improvement strategy. EPYO applied for and received a Partnerships for Parks grant in the fall of 2005 to give the park a much-needed facelift. With some advertising and hard work, the group managed to turn the project day into a major community event. Volunteers, including the kids, removed trash, pulled

up invasive plants, and painted playground equipment, walls, and the park's entrance sign. Barbecue was served to the participants and Butch claims that the high turnout rate, as well as the improvements made on that day, helped push gang violence out of the park for good. Leftover grant funds were used to purchase a lawnmower so that EPYO could continue to maintain the space.

The EPYO kids have worked on a number of green areas in their neighborhood in addition to Briscoe. They've planted trees in Clifton Park and helped clean and beautify Coldstream Park. Vacant lots are where the kids have done the most work, removing trash, cutting grass and weeds, and reclaiming these once-dangerous territories for the community's use. Butch explained that the young people undertake these projects without any particular incentive beyond the satisfaction of volunteering. EPYO is

run by two structures – a youth board which is responsible for deciding upon most of the group's plans, and an adult board which functions as a backbone for the kids and helps them carry out their goals.

EPYO's activities, combined with other factors such as an increased police presence the area, have almost certainly contributed to the decrease in violence in the immediate neighborhood. Where once, Butch says, folks were reluctant even to leave their houses, the atmosphere on the street has become much friendlier. Briscoe Park was recently the site of a well-attended National Night Out party, and is now a much safer place for recreation than it has been for a number of years. At the present, the group's main challenge is the relatively small number of participating adults. More volunteers, especially parents, are needed to help coordinate future events.



Volunteers gather after a successful cleanup in Briscoe Park

WHAT: Eastside Productions Youth Outreach

WHERE: Briscoe Park, Coldstream Park, Clifton Park, and vacant lots in northeast Baltimore City

WHEN: Since 1997

WHY: To combat gang violence by providing the youth of the community with constructive activities and new experiences, while improving neighborhood green spaces.

Based on an interview with Wallace "Butch" McGinnis and on information compiled during the summer of 2006.