

The Baltimore Mud

TOWNS

Despite inclement weather
Convoy of Hope
helps usher in new day

By Michael Nene and Kirk Noonan

Baltimore's Inner Harbor is idyllic. Sailboats bob on the water as tourists saunter in and out of museums, restaurants and storefronts. Overhead seagulls float on breezes from the Atlantic. A few blocks away Camden Yard and M&T Bank Stadium stand like sentinels watching over the city.

But venture into some of Baltimore's older neighborhoods — the ones torched and looted during the riots that followed Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968; the ones plagued by concentrated poverty, gangs, drugs and crime — and you suddenly realize why Baltimore was recently tagged with the lamentable appellation of the big city with the highest murder rate in the nation.

Yes, every city has its scourge. Baltimore's happens to be its murder rate.

Despite the grim reality, many Baltimore residents refuse to give up on their city. That's not surprising given the city's history. In years past, Baltimore has been at the center of skirmishes,

battles, riots, fires and economic downturns. Yet no matter what hardships it has faced, the city has always bounced back.

Resiliency and determination are hallmarks of Baltimore. But in the city's impoverished areas, few would argue that a little hope — even a sliver of it — can go a long way.

Baltimore got an infusion of such hope recently when more than 1,100 volunteers joined with more than 150 churches, businesses, agencies and organizations for an event simply dubbed Baltimore Convoy of Hope.

Mud Bowl

Two days before the outreach is to take place, rain inundates the city. At Clifton Park — which is in one of the city's tougher neighborhoods — volunteers, trucks and equipment sink in the saturated ground as teams set up the site in an unrelenting downpour.

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“It doesn’t matter if it stops raining or not,” says Kelly Harrison, the local coordinator for the outreach and a staff member at Trinity Assembly of God in Lutherville where George Raduano is pastor. “What matters is getting the outreach site done and making it a place where God can be glorified through His people.”

That’s exactly what happens. Gwendolyn comes to the outreach to get some free groceries but leaves with much more than that.

When followers of Christ can demonstrate Christian love and action to an entire community, great things happen.

“My heart wasn’t right, but now it is,” she says. “I came to get groceries, but I also received Christ today.”

Gwendolyn is one of more than 100 people who commit their lives to Jesus Christ during the outreach. Of the more than 3,000 guests who attend the outreach, nearly 2,600 of them say they needed prayer and were prayed for by volunteers.

Committed

About 50 times a year Convoy of Hope rolls into impoverished neighborhoods in an effort to give residents a much needed hand up. Services vary at each outreach, but in most cases medical and dental services are offered along with a free meal, groceries and a day packed full of entertainment and activities for children.

In Baltimore honored guests have the opportunity to receive medical screenings and haircuts, get help in writing resumes, speak with human resource personnel from local companies, and enjoy a family portrait. Most important, volunteers are always ready to offer prayer.

“I hit the job fair, got a haircut, and had some medical screenings done,” says Barbara, who lives in the neighborhood. “Since I want to provide for my family more, I also went to the job fair, and that was a big help.”

One local pastor says when followers of Christ can demonstrate Christian love and action to an entire community, great things happen.

“It gives people a sense of well-being that gives our churches an opportunity to reach people and bring them in,” he says.

Proving Ground

Michael Redmon, U.S. Outreach director for Convoy of Hope, stops in the autograph tent where several former and current National Football League players sign autographs for honored guests.

“This is a first for us,” he says as he surveys the action before him. “We’ve been partnering with the NFL and have done several NFL-sanctioned Super Bowl outreaches, but this is the first time we’ve partnered with them for a non-Super Bowl outreach.”

Lenny Moore, a former member of the Baltimore Colts and a Hall of Fame running back, is glad Convoy of Hope teamed up with the NFL.

“Some people are struggling and having a tough time,” he says. “But Convoy of Hope reaches out to such individuals to let them know they are not alone and they are not forgotten.”

Redmon says plans are afoot to take the concept to other cities.

“Baltimore Convoy of Hope gave the NFL another vision of what we can do together to better the nation’s communities,” says Redmon.

“Now other NFL teams have inquired about similar outreaches.”

Impressing the NFL and providing honored guests with a seamless, carefree and extraordinary experience does not happen by accident.

According to Redmon, months of planning on the part of Convoy of Hope staff and hundreds of local volunteers goes into each outreach. Volunteers, he contends, are the difference makers at any outreach.

“Each year volunteers perform a variety of functions for us,” says Hal Donaldson, co-founder and president of Convoy of Hope. “We could not do what we do without them. The many hours volunteers have given us have resulted in hundreds of thousands of people getting the help they need.”

Since Convoy of Hope was founded more than 15 years ago, more than 2 million volunteer hours have been donated. Because of that generous help, Convoy of Hope has been able to serve more than 27 million people in the United States and around the world.

Message of Hope

As the day winds down, some of the local volunteers reminisce about the hard days that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. They talk of the looting, fires and how everything seemed so out of control.

Though poverty and crime have blighted the neighborhood where the outreach is taking place, hope has had its way here.

“This area has seen nothing but murder, addiction and loss,” says one community leader a day after the outreach. “But today many people are waking up to a new reality of hope and love. This area will never be the same.”

And that’s exactly why Convoy of Hope exists. e

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E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.

