McDougald Terrace “Reborn”

DURHAM -- In the T.A. Grady Neighborhood Center, 40 children sit clustered around tables, doing arts and crafts. Their hands are splashed with paint, and they talk excitedly as they create.

In the McDougald Terrace Family Resource Center, Wisdom Pharaoh leans forward and says that she’s re-enrolled at N.C. Central University, 10 years after she left. Pharaoh, 29, was able to get all three of her children into the camp at T.A. Grady. She plans to start looking for a job soon.

But three years ago, the camp didn't exist. The building that is now T.A. Grady sat dormant and unused. There was no Family Resource Center.

McDougald Terrace is the largest complex in the Durham Housing Authority system, with a reputation for being a hotbed of crime. But in the last three years, a plethora of new -- and mostly free -- services for the residents have sprung up.

T.A. Grady opened in November after members of the community’s resident council -- which started three years ago -- petitioned the City Council to fund the center.

It did, and approved a $295,000 project to upgrade the center and the nearby park for the community.

"That place has been reborn," said Councilman Howard Clement. "It was dormant for years, and the changeover in the last year and a half or so has been remarkable."

The center now hosts classes for the community in parenting, yoga and arts and crafts. It has a senior citizens’ program that includes bingo. Every Friday night, there’s a movie and a show.

And, perhaps most important of all, residents say, a food bank was started for when their cupboards are low.

All of this, they say, began with the arrival of one woman: Annie Jones.

Jones is a community facilitator for the Durham Family Initiative, a program that received a grant from Duke University to fight child abuse and neglect in certain parts of Durham.

One part was McDougald Terrace, she said. She was assigned to the neighborhood.

"I certainly see the community on the upswing," she said.

Pharaoh said Jones opened doors for the residents.

"She is a blessing to McDougald Terrace," she said.

And Jones started the resident council; Pharaoh is now the secretary.

China Townsend, the president, said Jones helped her find herself.

"She's letting us know that there's life out here for us, when people don't even know it," Townsend said.
Lt. Derek O'Mary, the commander of the Sheriff's Anti-Crime and Narcotics Unit, said he spends a lot of time in McDougald.

He'd personally rank the area as one of the top five hotspots for street-level drug crime in Durham, he said, and if he had to guess where in Durham he's made the most weapons-related arrests, "McDougald would be one of the first ones to come to mind."

McDougald is a "fragile community," Clement said.

Townsend and the other residents say that -- at least, when it comes to shootings -- the perpetrators are almost always people who live outside the neighborhood.

"It'd be people that don't even live over here that comes over here doing the shooting and everything else," Townsend said. "Because nobody over here killed one another."

That may be true, O'Mary said, but the violence often stems from crime that comes from within McDougald Terrace.

"Yeah, the shots are probably being fired by another group from outside of McDougald Terrace," he said, but they're probably a result of what's going on inside McDougald Terrace.

"You get those people keeping drugs in their house and coming onto the street to sell drugs," he said.

Regardless, several residents said they feel safe in their community.

"If they shoot down the street, I know to walk the other way. Or I know not to go out there at all," Townsend said.

The McDougald Terrace Branch Library is one room, about 40 feet long and 20 feet wide. Shelves of books line the walls. There are about 4,200 books, the county library Web site says. Seventy percent are for children, the site says.

But the room's only open two days a week, and that's the residents' next target.

They have a petition with about 170 signatures asking for it to be open more days, and they're trying to get on the County Commissioners agenda in August.

They're also trying to develop a wellness center, and a pre-kindergarten readiness program, among others.

But Jones may not be there to see all these dreams come to fruition.

Her job calls for her to work with the residents a limited amount of time, and that's up in December, she said.

When she goes, "the neighborhood team will be able to work with other community agencies in the community to sustain what they have built so far," she said.

"I had really enjoyed working in McDougald the last three years that I've been there," she said. "It's been inspirational, and I've absolutely fallen in love with the people and the families."