

AFACT

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SUMMER 2009



Congregation and community members wait to testify in St. Anthony Catholic Church. Photo by James Murphy.

Shining a Light on Neighborhood Blight

"You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace."

~Nehemiah. 4:17

For years, St. Anthony parishioners and neighbors have been disturbed by the poor condition of San Roberto Avenue and the gradual deterioration of the neighborhood. St. Anthony Organizing Ministry leader Pat Petrivelli, describing how concern about the road grew into a public meeting at St. Anthony's on neighborhood blight, credited hundreds of one-to-one visits. "We learned that besides the bad roads, people were concerned about the... chronically overflowing dumpsters, that ravens take garbage out of the dumpsters and spread it around and then kids have to walk to school through that...Graffiti was appearing all along the road and it wasn't getting cleaned up."



A raven picks through the garbage in one chronically overflowing dumpster on San Roberto Avenue.

As St. Anthony Organizing Ministry leaders researched the problems of the road, graffiti and dumpsters on San Roberto, hope began to grow that by addressing the blight in the neighborhood, other community issues, such as crime, could also be tackled. The frustration of residents was clearly evident in neighbor Roxanna Jeshe's lament that "Our neighborhood was so nice at one time, it's just sad to see."

During the June 11 meeting, neighbors and parishioners shared stories of the area. Alexandra Berkeley, a resident, stated she would not allow her grandson walk to school along San Roberto because "it looks so trashy." Parishioner Annette Alleva challenged code enforcement to act on the overflowing

Shining a Light, continued next page



Evidence of blight in St. Anthony neighborhood: Water-filled potholes on San Roberto Avenue, a graffiti-covered fence on Klevin St., and an overfilled dumpster on San Roberto Avenue.



The Conex, bordering St. Anthony's property (top), covered in graffiti in early June and (bottom) repainted by Graffiti Busters in late June.

When “everyone is doing it and no one is taking any action to stop [graffiti] or address the damage” the message to children is that it is “ok to do.”

~Sr. Kathleen Powers

dumpsters and graffiti, stating “I don’t know why you tolerate it.”

Sr. Kathleen Powers urged the immediate clean up of the graffiti not only because of its impact on the neighborhood but also its effect on the children who walked by. When “everyone is doing it and no one is taking any action to stop [graffiti] or address the damage” the message to children is that it is “ok to do.” A member of the parish for 29 years, Tam Agosti-Gisler shared, “I have noticed increased deterioration [in the neighborhood]... There have always been potholes [on San Roberto] to be repaired, but it seems to have gotten worse and worse within the last few years.” Another parishoner, Gemma Gaudio, stated “I come from a village with only two miles of road and I think that road is better than San Roberto.”

During the public meeting, those gathered raised \$500 in a collection for the Municipality’s Anti Graffiti Trust Fund as evidence of their deep commitment to the identified neighborhood problems. St. Anthony’s Organizing Ministry leaders then invited Assembly members Shelia Selkregg and Mike Gutierrez, as well as Daune Wyatt from Code Enforcement and Jim Lamson from Project Management and Engineering, to do their part in rebuilding the neighborhood. In a clarifying question, Jody Komis asked Mark Madden, Director of Solid Waste Services, to register the dumpster complaints immediately and asked people to stand if they were tired of the chronically overflowing dumpsters in the neighborhood. As the entire church stood, Fr. Fred Bugarin noted that “this is the neighbors’ complaint.”

By the end of the meeting, each invited guest had made commitments. With the full support of Jim Lamson, both Assembly members agreed to request

state funding to address the flooding and surface problems of San Roberto. Assembly members also pledged to introduce an ordinance to change city code to limit graffiti to 5 days or less once a complaint had been filed. Code Enforcement Officer Daune Wyatt committed to immediately begin the complaint process for all the identified areas of graffiti and several chronically




Fr. Ben Torreto invites public testimony as Fr. Fred Bugarin and Organizing Ministry leaders, Pat Petrivelli, Sharon Stockard, and Jody Komis, look on. Photo by Ron Nicholl.

overflowing dumpsters on San Roberto.

The impact of the meeting extended beyond the commitments requested by St. Anthony leaders:

- Jim Gurke, of the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, announced that he would apply “for up to \$10 million to redevelop the properties along San Roberto.” Days later, supported by the research of the Organizing Ministry, Mr. Gurke’s application was filed.
- In a Channel 2 news story on the meeting at St. Anthony, Jim Lamson identified San Roberto Avenue as “one of the worst [roads] in this area” and committed \$75,000 of Municipality maintenance funds to do basic repairs on the road surface and sidewalks.
- Senator Wielechowski, who attended the meeting at St. Anthony, stated he would seek funding in the 2010 state budget for San Roberto road repairs.

The change in the neighborhood was immediate, with the repainting of one graffiti problem spot, a Conex located behind St. Anthony’s property. By shining a light on neighborhood blight for just one evening, the neighborhood restoration began. 

Parent Outreach Proposal Wins School District Support

Four years ago, after visiting more than 100 Alaska Native families, it was apparent to the leaders in AFACT's Alaska Native Organizing Ministry that the gulf between the classroom and many Alaska Native families was wide and difficult to bridge. Ministry leaders voiced their concern to School Superintendent Carol Comeau in two public meetings attended by hundreds of families in 2005 and 2008. In subsequent talks with the school district, the lack of funding for any ambitious outreach to bridge the gulf was a recurring theme.

All that changed on Monday, June 22, when the School Board approved the Anchorage School District's application for American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds, which included \$400,000 for parent outreach. The Alaska Native Organizing Ministry put forth a proposal for use of a portion of the outreach monies, with leaders Renee Nicholson and Pastor Karen Sonray providing supportive testimony at the School Board meeting.

While the total ARRA application was for more than \$50 million, the \$178,000 proposal put forth by the Organizing Ministry dominated the School Board discussion. Leaders proposed training K-3 teachers in four Title I schools to conduct outreach, visiting parents in their homes or wherever the parents would be most comfortable. The proposal recommended training conducted by the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project (PTHVP), a nonprofit located in Sacramento, CA, that trains teachers throughout the country on parent visitation.

In a lively School Board discussion, School Board Member Pat Higgins expressed his support for the Alaska Native Organizing Ministry proposal, saying "AFACT has come forward with a great proposal.... What I've heard from teachers and what I've heard from the School District is the biggest obstacle we have sometimes is that parents aren't connected with the schools. They aren't supporting the education. What AFACT is saying is 'get them involved in the education. Get them engaged.'"

The Organizing Ministry's proposal also received the vocal support of School Board President John Steiner, who stressed



Above, Pastor Karen Sonray and Renee Nicholson testify to the School Board on the Alaska Native outreach proposal. Left, Alaska Native parents and elders listen to the School Board discussion. Photos by Jose Pablo Ramirez

"There are more than 4,200 Native students among the Anchorage School District's 48,000 kids. Despite millions spent in recent years on special tutoring and culture training for teachers, Native students as a whole are still performing poorly on math, reading and writing. They are more likely to drop out than any other ethnic group."


~Anchorage Daily News, May 12, 2009

the importance of listening to the voices of the community. Mr. Steiner said he was glad the funds were available for something along the lines AFACT was presenting and hoped that the project would be done "with fidelity to what [AFACT leaders] have discerned in their community is really needed."

Providing professional development training to

teachers to reach outside of the school and build relationships with families is a new approach to an ongoing crisis. According to a May 2009 *Anchorage Daily News* report, "There are more than 4,200 Native students among the Anchorage School District's 48,000 kids. Despite millions spent in recent years on special tutoring and culture training for teachers, Native students as a whole are still performing poorly on math, reading and writing. They are more likely to drop out than any other ethnic group."

The ARRA funds will provide a two-year window of opportunity to reach out to families, build bridges and relationships between the school and the home, and eventually stem the tide of Alaska Native students dropping out in high school.

AFACT leaders celebrated the Superintendent's continued commitment when she said she is "absolutely committed to doing the training" and considered the PTHVP a good program to use for teacher training. In conclusion, she added that with \$400,000 in the ARRA application, "I think we can accommodate the things in [AFACT's] request and do a lot more..." 



Native Identity Explored

Leader Gemma Gaudio introduces respected scholar, Dr. Martin Brokenleg, at a community potluck and presentation hosted by the Alaska Native Organizing Ministry on May 28, 2009. The Organizing Ministry partnered with several other organizations in the Anchorage Community

Diversity Project to bring Dr. Brokenleg to Alaska for a number of events. During his presentation, Dr. Brokenleg shared stories of his experiences as a Lakota man and spoke powerfully on the issue of Native Identity. Photo by Ron Nicholl



Immigration From a Faith Perspective

Leader Daniel Esparza (center) invites questions in response to "Immigration from a Faith Perspective," a presentation by Mr. Kevin Appleby (right), Director of Migration and Refugee Policy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Our Lady of Guadalupe Organizing Ministry hosted the May 21 event, which reflected on Catholic teaching and the immigrant experience in America. Photo by Ron Nicholl



Calendar of Events

AFACT Annual Leaders' Retreat

August 28 and 29, 2009
Friday 7:00 pm – Saturday 5:00 pm
Holy Spirit Center, Anchorage, AK

AFACT Statewide Leadership Training

October 21–25, 2009
Wednesday 7:00 pm – Sunday 9:00 am
Holy Spirit Center, Anchorage, AK

**For more information contact:
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