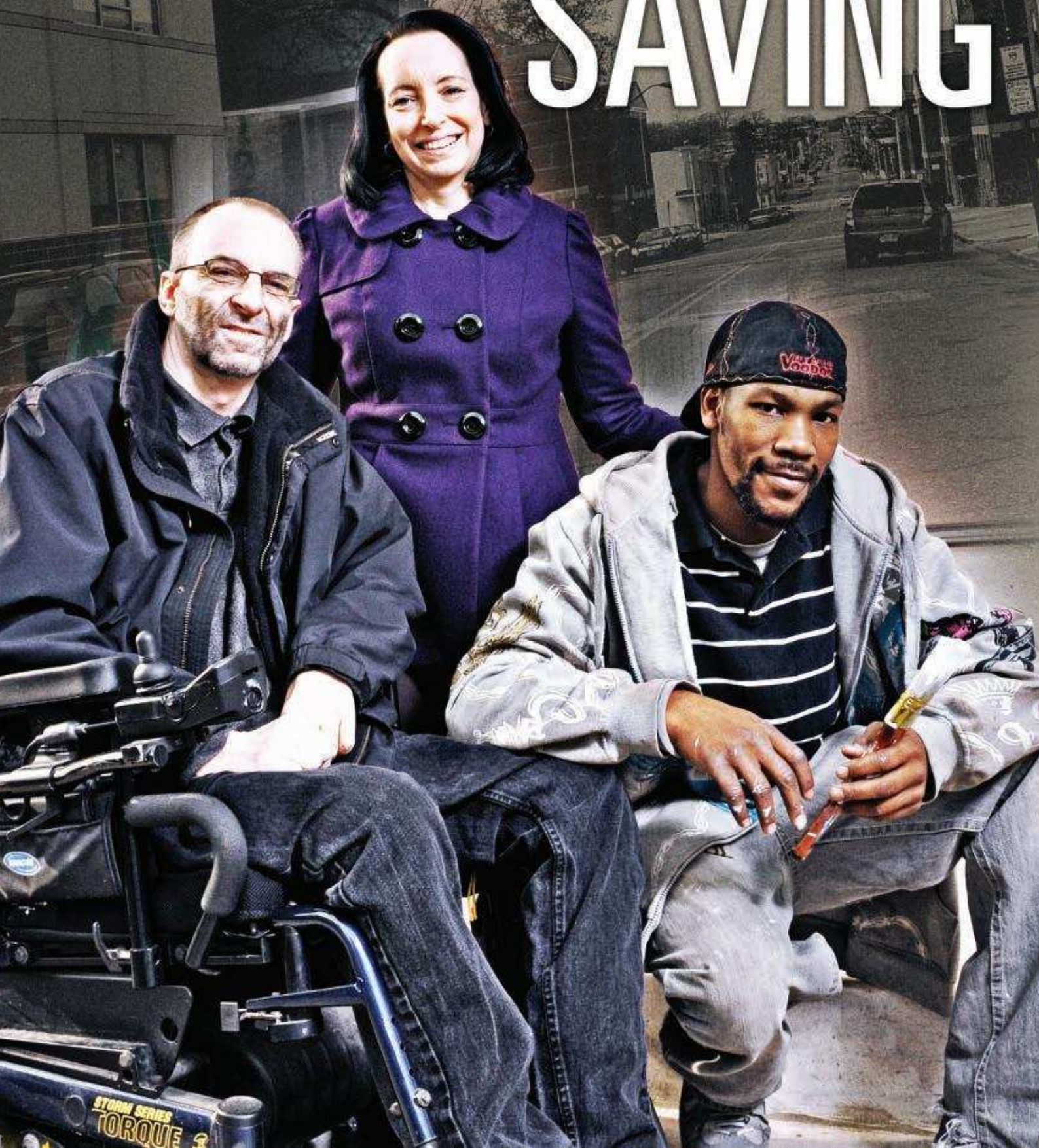


SAVING





SANDTOWN

BY JAN LUCAS ■ PHOTOS BY KANJI TAKENO AND DESIRÉE STOVER

Allan '88 and Susan '91 Tibbels have devoted 24 years to revitalizing one of Baltimore's most distressed neighborhoods.

By the 1980s Sandtown had hit bottom. The historically black enclave on Baltimore's West side had once been home to thousands of working-class families that took pride in their rowhouses and their bustling, close-knit community.

Blight had gained a foothold in the '60s as better-off residents moved out, leaving Sandtown increasingly fractured and vulnerable.

It took only a decade or so for the neighborhood to become the sort of place few wanted to drive through, much less live and work in. The exodus left 1,000 abandoned houses, and those still occupied fell into disrepair. Businesses faltered, then failed. Crime, joblessness, disease and despair afflicted the remaining residents. Once-stable Sandtown was in trouble—big trouble.

But one man detected a heartbeat in the midst of hopelessness.

Clarksville, Md., resident Allan Tibbels had long been involved with his church, where he was active in youth-outreach programs. In the early '80s, after a spinal cord injury left him paralyzed at age 26, he began to consider what he could do to address urban ills. "I felt a calling to relocate to inner-city Baltimore," he remem-

bers. In his efforts to pinpoint the "most hurting" area, Tibbels studied the city's demographics and explored distressed neighborhoods.

"The idea," he explains, "was to organize a team, move in and devote the next 30 years to the effort."

There was nothing pie-in-the-sky about Allan Tibbels' plans. He espouses a model of Christian community development created by John M. Perkins, a former Mississippi sharecropper turned civil rights activist. Perkins championed social action, economic development and justice in addition to evangelism. The model required sacrifice and commitment from its adherents, as well as full-time presence in the community of need.

For Allan and Susan Tibbels, that meant trading suburban Howard County for Sandtown.

While she supported her husband's plans, Susan Tibbels didn't initially see eye-to-eye with him on the need for relocation. "We had two young children," she says. "I really wasn't enthusiastic about moving to the city."

Susan wasn't alone. "People thought Allan had lost his mind," she recalls.

In 1986 the Tibbelses, their daughters Jennifer and Jessica, and a friend, Mark Gornik, established residence in the neighborhood. About 10,000 people lived in the 72 square-block area that comprised Sandtown, all of

them very low-income African Americans. The newcomers immediately aroused suspicion, Allan Tibbels says.

"Everyone wondered what we were doing there and what we wanted," he says. "That was understandable, given the circumstances."

Fitt Bennett, now an administrative assistant at New Song Academy, was a rambunctious 11-year-old when he first noticed the Tibbels family. "I was nosy," he recalls with a laugh. "Who were these white people? I knocked on their door every day for three days, until Allan finally came out."

Allan Tibbels and Mark Gornik initially focused on getting to know Sandtown's teens and young adults. As they earned the kids' trust, parents and other residents began to let down their guard. "We were careful not to impose an agenda," Tibbels emphasizes. "This needed to be a community effort."

Banks weren't eager to lend in Sandtown, so Allan and Susan Tibbels used the proceeds from the sale of their Clarksville rancher and 13-acre lot to purchase, gut and rehab condemned houses. "Decent housing was a priority, but so were health care, jobs and economic development," says Allan. "Every day we saw the struggle and hurt that was so deeply entrenched in the neighborhood."

During the next few years, the Tibbelses and a small army of supporters

Allan '88 and Susan '91 Tibbels with Kevin Mills, Sandtown homeowner and Habitat for Humanity employee.

undertook an astonishing array of initiatives designed to reverse Sandtown's decline. In 1988 they helped to found New Song Community Church, an interracial, economically diverse congregation based in the neighborhood. That same year Towson awarded Allan the bachelor's degree in history and sociology that he'd pursued part-time for a decade.

In 1989 he co-founded Sandtown Habitat for Humanity, which, with assistance from volunteers and sweat-equity invested by prospective homeowners, transformed 275 eyesores into handsome residences. The nonprofit organization, with Tibbels as co-executive director, hopes to restore another 100 houses during the coming years.

Towson faculty and students are no

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strangers to Habitat projects. Retired physics professor John Wessner—who taught Susan Tibbels as an undergraduate—has been recruiting volunteers and installing heating systems in rehabbed houses since 1990.

In 1991—the year she received her B.S. degree in elementary education from Towson—Susan Tibbels launched New Song Community Learning Center, which includes New Song Academy, a nonprofit public contract school begun in 1996. It now enrolls about 140 Sandtown pupils from preschool through eighth grade.

"We're essentially a zoned public school in partnership with Baltimore City," Susan explains. Half of her pupils live in Habitat-restored houses, and most walk to school. "The building we opened in 2001 also functions as a community center," she adds. "It's used for all kinds of gatherings, including after-school programs, college and career preparation, graduations—even weddings."

Workers from Habitat and the community have transformed 275 houses.

Gerry Palmer, the owner of Gerry's Goods, embodies the new entrepreneurial spirit taking hold in Sandtown.



The school is also the focus of one of Towson University's longest-running urban-outreach partnerships. Established in 1992, the program enables TU art-education majors to work with New Song students to foster understanding, enhance classroom learning and create pathways to college. (See sidebar.)

In addition to providing a sound education—New Song pupils regularly outperform other neighborhood schools on standardized tests—Susan Tibbels and her staff strive to match graduates with the Baltimore high schools best suited to their needs and

"Mothers put their babies on our waiting list before they're born—that's something I had associated only with affluent parents and private schools."

Establishing a church and a school were just the beginning of the Tibbels' work in Sandtown. Within a few years they'd also established New Song Family Health Services in partnership with Mercy Medical Center; EDEN Jobs, a job-placement, counseling and career-services center; New Song Arts and Media; and a partnership with Newborn Holistic Ministries, which includes a transitional recovery house for women.

Gerry's Goods, a newly opened coffee shop and convenience store, exemplifies the kind of small businesses the community hopes to attract. It's owned and operated by Gerry Palmer, a Sandtown resident.

For a couple who insist they "stink at fundraising," Allan and Susan Tibbels have ploughed about \$50 million into Sandtown projects from a variety of sources, including corporations, foundations and contributions from faith-based organizations and from individuals. "We've been blessed with a strong network of volunteers that allowed us to meet people with resources," Susan says.



Allan adds, “For 20 years we’ve operated on the principle that as we move forward, it will be funded. Susan broke ground for a new school building in 2000 when we had absolutely no money. We ended up with \$5.5 million to fund the construction, and now we’re planning an expansion.”

The Tibbels point to their neighbors as the key to their successes. “Sandtown is an intergenerational community—the family networks are amazing,” Allan says. “There’s a relational commitment: they love this place and one another. They want to stay here, and we want them to stay here.”

“Yes, I do get discouraged,” he says. “We’re dealing with the results of years of oppression, racism and systemic injustice. There are still abandoned houses and problems that we have to face every day. But we work in partnership and see ourselves as an extended family.”

There’s a lot of pain in living here,” he acknowledges, “but there’s a lot of joy, too.”

Susan Tibbels notes that “suffering has been a journey” for Sandtown’s residents. “They’ve exhibited tremendous faith in circumstances that would render most people incapable of functioning.”

“If we were to think about quitting, we’d have to consider the effect on all those who are on this journey with us.” ■

Jan Lucas is an associate director in University Relations.



The Towson-New Song partnership, directed by Kay Broadwater (center in red) is a model for art-education programs in other states. The Maryland Art Education Association selected Broadwater as 2010 Maryland Art Educator of the Year.

Finding the Future With Art

Towson’s art-education partnership with New Song Academy is one of the university’s oldest urban-outreach efforts. Founded in 1992 by Kay Broadwater, then a lecturer in the TU Department of Art, the program initially aimed to address the lack of art instruction in the newly opened Sandtown school.

“My husband and I have known Allan and Susan Tibbels since the ’70s,” says Broadwater, who now serves as the art department’s area coordinator for art education. “I volunteered at New Song and began to think about how to bring more art into these kids’ lives.”

From an initial 39 middle-schoolers and 50 TU elementary education majors, the program has ballooned to about 130 children and 100 Towson students.

Broadwater funds the program with the help of grants from Pepsi and the Alumni Association; New Song provides bus transportation.

Then, as now, Towson students design lesson plans that integrate art with New Song’s academic subjects. Some projects draw inspiration from Baltimore streetscapes and multicultural themes. Others are integrated with existing math and science curriculums.

The Towson-New Song partnership formed the crux of Broadwater’s doctoral dissertation and has been used as the model for art-education programs in other states.

Broadwater understood that the Towson-New Song partnership was much more than an outlet for creative expression. It also aspires to demolish stereotypes, explore human commonality and difference, integrate theory with practice and encourage children to develop a vision for continuing their education at the college level.

She points with pride to some lesser-known benefits of art education in public schools. “Students who are involved with the arts in school are much more likely to graduate than those who aren’t,” she says. “You can prove that art gets them to school and keeps them there longer. But it also requires respect, trust, commitment and high expectations from both teachers and students.”

Broadwater acknowledges that both parties have benefited from the partnership, perhaps in unexpected ways. “In my experience the people who are perceived as reaching out often receive the greatest benefit. I learned so much that it changed the way I taught.”

She clearly admires the virtues New Song children bring to Towson. “They possess enormous empathy and resiliency,” says Broadwater. “It surprised me at first—then it inspired me.”