

ANDERTON'S IS BACK! (well, almost) ~ P. 24

# Memphis

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PLUS

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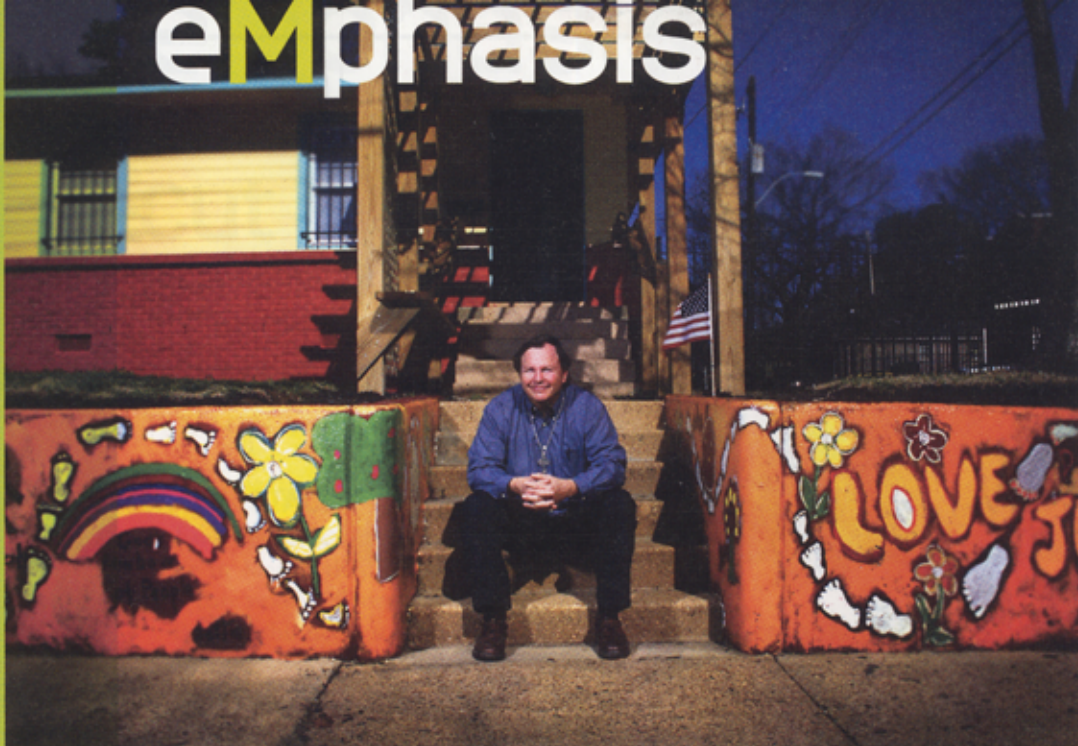
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WAYS  
TO PACK  
IT UP

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## Bill Marler

by MARILYN SADLER

**A METHODIST MINISTER** since 1988, Bill Marler helped found Jacob's Ladder, a community development corporation committed to improving the Beltline neighborhood, which lies in the shadow of Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium. Since it was founded in 2004, Jacob's Ladder has rehabbed houses, held festivals, and built partnerships aimed at reducing the ills that plague this area. We met with Marler at the Enrichment Center — scheduled to open March 1st — and found out more about him, his organization, and how its plans will mesh with the city's goals of overhauling the Fairgrounds area. >>>

### What appeals to you about community development?

It combines two things: a love to build and an aversion to decay.

### When did you first see what decay can do to a neighborhood?

Around 1964, when I visited my aunt, who was a sociologist in Chicago. She worked at the university, and standing right on the edge of that trillion-dollar alabaster facility were hovels with no electricity, no indoor plumbing.

### How does the name Jacob's Ladder represent the organization's mission?

The name comes from the Old Testament dream of Jacob running as a fugitive from his brother. For him that dream is a connection between heaven and earth. He senses that he needs to go back to his community and rebuild fences and restore relationships. Faith-based community work is our way of connecting heaven and earth.

### How was Beltline chosen as your focus for revitalization?

It has built-in resources: a Fortune 500 company [Coca-Cola], the city's investment in the Fairgrounds, and the Southern railroad tracks, amounting to several billion dollars in industry. It's only one square mile, but it has significant problems, including high crime and poverty.

### What are its boundaries?

Central on the north, Goodwyn on the east, Southern on the south, and Hollywood on the west. Beltline proper is closer to Hollywood and Southern, a much more compressed area that encompasses Buntyn and Midland.

### Its history?

This was a 100-percent investor-owned neighborhood — which is never a good plan — composed of shotgun houses of inferior material built in the 1920s. It was intended as a containment area for African Americans,

the maids, butlers, and yard workers for the people who lived in Chickasaw Gardens and other wealthy neighborhoods. It was inherently designed to fail. It never had a school, a park, or any other amenities.

### How does your mission fit with the city's mission of improving the Fairgrounds area?

I think we convinced [officials] that it didn't make sense to redo the Fairgrounds or the Liberty Bowl without addressing some of the adjacent areas. When you bring people to [games or events], you don't want them coming through this dilapidated area. [The city] bought into that and asked us to partner with them as the CDC rep.

### Who owns the houses?

We've got a knotty web of ownership. Some houses are heirlooms; some have been taken by the city for tax delinquency. We're trying to buy some of them.

### How are residents involved in your strategic planning?

When we began, we asked for their support. [In February] the University of Memphis helped us with a neighborhood survey. We know what the problems are, but the people need to articulate them and agree on long-term solutions.

### What companies and organizations are helping you?

Shelby Millwork, Coca-Cola, churches, and neighborhood associations. And the Hyde Family Foundation is a great supporter, as well as a supporter of charter schools. Our strategic plan says we need a school of excellence.

### Tell us about the Enrichment Center.

We bought the house in foreclosure with an interest-free loan from St. John's Episcopal Church. Kids will learn to publish a newsletter in the computer room, to cook in the kitchen, to perform in the theatre room. And they'll learn conflict resolution outside of simple violence. We also have a playground out back and a garden across the street.

### Response from neighborhood kids?

They poured concrete for the pergola posts. They collaborated with local artists to paint the mural outside. They know this is their place, and they're ready to own it. **M**