

*Penttila* Living tributes NOV 05 2005

**T**HERE ARE MANY POCKET PARKS IN Baltimore, little stretches of green that complement the brick, cement and steel of the city. Most of them are intended to offer a rest for the eyes, the psyche, during the rush of the day. Two share a deeper purpose.

The newer is at the corner of East University and St. Paul streets, to the side of the great brick Cathedral of the Incarnation. The older is at East Preston and Eden streets, to the side of a boarded-up rowhouse. Both mark untimely deaths; both offer solace and a chance for a moment's contemplation.

The Dawson Family Memorial Garden, across Eden Street from that family's East Preston rowhouse, dwells on the specifics. Five children and their parents died after their home was firebombed, retaliation for the parents' continued 911 calls to report drug dealers tearing up their neighborhood. Middle-schoolers came up with the idea of a memorial garden and did some of the work.

There are seven tiles embedded in the garden, each with a name: Angela, Carnell Sr., LaWanda, Juan, Carnell Jr., Keith, Kevin. There are seven small, strong boulders, the right size for sitting, paired with the tiles. Some of the rock benches afford a garden view, and some look out onto the streets and the neighborhood beyond.

Sitting on Carnell Sr.'s boulder at the eastern end of the garden, one looks left to follow the curving path of grass past each tile and boulder. A turn to the right, and one can watch workers rebuilding the house he lived in, reconstituting it into a shelter and haven for children in distress.

The Children's Peace Memorial on St. Paul Street makes a wider statement. Its grassy way also curves, a green river, and there are also tiles, decorated and labeled with first names. But these 36 little tiles are meant to evoke all the children in the city who have died because of neglect or violence. The names are of some of those slain in recent years, culled from newspaper stories, placed in a hat and drawn by the children who decorated the tiles. Each also marks the age of death, from Juan who died at 18 to Emunnea,

who reached only 1 month old.

A specific killing motivated the people behind this park, too — that of 3-year-old James, felled by crossfire as he sat in a barbershop chair getting a haircut. Praying and lighting candles, as the parishioners at the cathedral had done for earlier killings, didn't feel like enough for this one. He, and all the children, deserved something more permanent. Something fixed yet changing, with more vegetation than concrete.

The first designs for the park were too hard, says the peace center's director, Sarah B. Wolfenden. A softer, greener space won out. One just feels differently on grass; it can help heal. City dwellers don't have as much access to green spaces for sitting and playing; now they have a little more.

From the wooden bench at the north end of the park, one can see the green grass river widen toward the sidewalk and the street. Little boulders and tall grasses dot the banks, and a low wooden bridge crosses from the church walk to the park path. The little tiles stutter down the left side of the path, broken up by a low, wide sculpture of the lion lying down with the lamb.

The gardens are symbolic, but the people behind them toil in the real world, too. The Children's Peace Center works with children from the neighborhood and the friends they bring with them. When finished, the Dawson home will shelter families in immediate need, and caretakers there will help keep an eye on all the children on the block. The churches, schools and neighbors involved with the Dawson memorial see it as just one part of the family's legacy that also includes playgrounds, after-school activities and neighborhood revitalization.

At the Dawson memorial, people's thoughts stay private, but attached to the bench at the peace memorial is a waterproof notebook for visitors who wish to testify. Many notes are inner-directed, but one offers this advice: "Let the past be memories and the future be presents. But if you are reading this, stop. Go play." That is every child's right, and a fitting memorial too.

— Nicky Penttila