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THE SUN

A Tribune Publishing Company

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Penttila Waiting in East Oliver

THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF EAST OLIVER looks much as it did when the Dawson family lived there. The house where Angela Dawson made all those phone calls to report drug dealers working the neighborhood still stands empty. Plain plywood covers windows charred by the fire that claimed this family of seven. Across the street and beside another empty house, the hard-pressed sliver of turf called the Dawson Family Memorial Garden struggles on.

Is this doing right by the Dawsons?

Three years have passed since the deaths of five children and two adults drew out a rallying call to take back the city, starting with East Oliver. If one judges by speed and action, Baltimore and its people have faltered. If one judges by citywide attention paid, this neighborhood is forgotten again. From the outside, it looks as if this family's sacrifice was in vain.

If one judges by the hearts of the people who live there, though, this neighborhood is still strong. Local church coalitions are marching steadily if slowly toward rehabbing blocks of boarded-up buildings. The private house next door is being renovated; so is the funeral home across the street.

At Dr. Bernard Harris Elementary School, children are growing familiar and friendly with local beat cops, some of whom even hang out at the school on off-hours. They play on well-maintained playground equipment that their families and neighbors went to Annapolis to lobby for.

But for all the elaborate promises, outside help has slowed to a trickle. Federal money was quickly found in 2002 to put up bright streetlights on some blocks, along with secu-

rity cameras that have forced more drug-dealing inside or onto other streets. But a bill that would have provided ongoing funding stalled in Congress; it was reintroduced this year and is tied up behind new, more-pressing business. Meanwhile, some neighbors who signed up to call in tips to a promised "anonymous" tip line are still waiting for their codes and instructions. And watching the dealing continue.

East Oliver is still a dumping ground for other neighborhoods' mattresses and appliances, though the city Public Works Department is much quicker now about picking them up. Drug traffic has moved, but it has not disappeared — or lessened, neighbors say. People in the city are buying "stop snitching" videos and T-shirts. The lesson has not been learned.

The neighborhood still awaits the bulldozers to raze blocks and blocks of filthy and lead-laced buildings. It awaits promised job training and tutoring help, along with the extra drug-treatment slots. The children living here are all three years older now, and deserve better.

Plans have been approved and the money nearly collected — \$550,000 — to start rehabbing the Dawson family's rowhouse into a temporary shelter for families in danger, a church-led project with the city's assistance. The city, these three years later, says it is about ready, sometime soon, to start razing the first three blocks of dead houses in East Oliver.

There is a lot in the air about East Oliver this week, the third anniversary of the fire-bombing. A lot of words, as before. But it's in action that the city and its people will do right by the Dawsons.