

Fatal stabbing worries Seton Hill, Orchard Mews

By Peter Hermann, *Baltimore Sun*, January 22, 2010

They were angry over the dim lighting and they were angry over the crowded corners and they were angry over the heroin vials.

Then a Baltimore police detective was shot trying to make an undercover drug deal - one bullet grazed his chin, a second bullet shattered his jaw.

It was January 2009, and the spike in violence led to a showdown between the people of historic Seton Hill, living in some of the city's oldest rowhouses, and the people across Orchard Street in Orchard Mews, a subsidized apartment block built in the 1970s near Pennsylvania Avenue and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

Some in Seton Hill blamed Orchard Mews for the crime, and some in Orchard Mews said they didn't feel welcome in Seton Hill. The mayor refereed a meeting and discovered that even neighbors distrustful of each other shared a common frustration over crime and being scared.

City leaders promised action - to send more police, to add brighter street lights, to bulldoze a cul-de-sac and open a street to end the neighborhood's isolation. The residents promised to cross the street and meet, to attend each other's meetings, to call the police and cooperate when they showed up.

For a year, there were few complaints.

Then, Wednesday night on Franklin Street, at the southern tip of Seton Hill, someone plunged a knife into the chest of James P. Jackson, killing the 27-year-old and renewing fears in a neighborhood that had been on the brink. Police call the slaying an aberration, that violence primed by the swift drug trade along Pennsylvania Avenue has dropped, that promises made back when the mayor visited have not been forgotten and are still being implemented.

New managers of Orchard Mews are stepping up efforts to evict convicted criminals and are paying for two off-duty police officers to patrol at night. The city has added two additional officers to walk the beat in Seton Hill. And representatives from Orchard Mews attend the Seton Hill community meetings. The city is in its final planning stages to open Orchard Street to Pennsylvania Avenue.

Mico Milanovic, president of the Seton Hill Association, said there are plans to team with Orchard Mews for a joint recycling project and to join in spring planting at a community garden.

City Councilman William H. Cole IV agreed that change seems incremental. But, he said: "Everything we talked about at that meeting is being worked on. We haven't had much violence lately, but there's still a tremendous amount of drugs along the corridor."

Baltimore Police Maj. Dennis Smith, who commands the Central District, said he has poured resources into the neighborhood and has a task force concentrating on drugs on Pennsylvania Avenue. "We're making a lot of progress up there," he said.

But starting the year with a killing is not a good omen.

Jackson's rap sheet is typical of too many of Baltimore's fallen victims. A string of arrests and convictions for drug-related crimes in 2001, 2002 and 2009. He had attended Southwestern High School, but he earned his degree behind prison walls.

Police described him as having "no known address," but court records list an apartment in Bolton Hill. Jackson's older sister, Chanita Moore, said he had lived on Bolton Street with his mother. She said he was unemployed, fighting his addiction to drugs and sketching designs to come up with his own clothing line.

"He was trying to get himself on the right track," said Moore.

His most recent arrest was in October outside the Food 7 Mart on North Eutaw Street, just a few blocks from Seton Hill, when an officer stopped him and he admitted to having a quarter-gram of marijuana in his pants pocket. He pleaded guilty in November and was sentenced to one day in jail.

Jackson was not the first in the family to fall to violence. Moore said two of her cousins were shot and killed in Baltimore in recent years.

She said police told her that Jackson had been hanging out with three other men and two women, and might have been stabbed during an argument over a girl. Police have not made any arrests and the police major would not discuss possible motives.

For the residents of Baltimore, Jackson's death was No. 8 on the year's homicide list, which ended 2009 with 238 names, near a 20-year low set the year before. For the people of Seton Hill and Orchard Mews, Jackson's death is another cause for concern as they work to overcome years of discord to make their neighborhood safe.

For the victim's family, it's another day to mourn a loved one whose violent end barely got noticed amid the din of city violence.

"We're trying to hold up," Moore said. "Through prayer."