

East-side Samaritans

The sudden, violent deaths of children and the elderly are particularly head-shaking, but of all the killings in Baltimore City in 2018, none was more horrific than the crime that took Jacquelyn Smith.

On the first weekend of Advent, the good Samaritan from Harford County rolled down the window on her car to help what she took to be a young mother in need. Instead a man came forward and robbed Smith, of her purse and her life.

For the fourth year in a row, Baltimore was on pace to record 300 murders. Drugs, guns and illiteracy seem to outweigh the sense of community, good schools and opportunity that provide peace and stability – notwithstanding some of the Catholic institutions within walking distance of where Smith was murdered.

All make the point, in their own way, that if a panhandler makes you feel uncomfortable, there are still ways to help address the systemic problems that lead to poverty and homelessness.

St. Frances Academy is the closest to the intersection of Chase and Valley streets. Its assets include the Williams family. Danaz Williams formerly was the assistant director of the Joubert House, the St. Frances Academy program for homeless boys that dates to 2011. Now he provides hot meals for a student body that includes his ninth-grade twins, Mekki and Da’Nae. His wife, Markette, is a math teacher at the school.

“I’m a firm believer in the vision of Mother Mary Lange,” she said, of the Oblate Sister of Providence who founded what is now St. Frances Academy. “This is what God sent us to do. We’re not here to see people suffer. We’re here to do something about it.”

To the east, across Harford Road, sits Ss. James and John Catholic School. Dr. Karmen Collins is its first-year principal, but her roots in Baltimore are six generations deep. Her mother, Karen Douglass, was a graduate of the school. Her grandmother and an aunt were principals of Catholic schools in the city.

“They deserve the best Catholic education we can provide,” said Collins of her students, who have a Robotics Club and recently participated in the archdiocesan Academic Challenge in Bel Air.

They also took part in a robust Thanksgiving outreach that helped those in need in their community, and attended an early December revival at Historic St. Francis Xavier on Oliver Street, where Collins’ family has always worshiped.

That parish’s campus includes a Head Start program, sponsored by St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore.

South of Ss. James and John School on Somerset Street, in what used to be the novitiate house for the School Sisters of Notre Dame, is the Caroline Center. Since 1996 it has prepared almost 4,000 women for careers in nursing and other healthcare fields.

Caroline Center shares the block with the Institute of Notre Dame, where the class of 2020 includes Joan Githinji and Sara Kehinde. Both are Theresian Scholars, student ambassadors and active in “Hildie’s Helpers,” the service club named for the School Sister who continues to inspire several generations.

“At IND, we’re taught that people are naturally good,” Githinji said. “If you look at people as being bad, then you have no motivation to do anything and become part of the community.”

She’s the daughter of Kenyan immigrants. Kehinde’s father came here from Nigeria.

“My father is deaf, but people saw his potential and helped him get here,” Kehinde said. “In a sense, if those people hadn’t rolled down a window, he wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t be here.”