

# Marching for a peaceful buffer zone

Just a few weeks ago, a disturbing open-air drug market was forming right in front of St. Frances Academy and Community Center on Chase Street. Drug dealers were passing out free samples right next to the St. Frances Convent, and dealers were stashing drugs on the high school's campus right beneath the statue of the Blessed Mother. Things were bad.

There existed for many years a buffer zone around the academy and the convent. The Oblate Sisters of Providence were highly respected by their neighbors and visitors to the Johnston Square community where SFA is located. After all, the Oblates moved into the neighborhood as a community in 1870. Only the State Penitentiary preceded their presence in the area with its 1840 construction.

In addition to the school they ran, offering free tuition to many of the students, the sisters provided care to the neighbors surrounding them. They sent soup to the elderly when they became ill and tutored the area's children. They took the kids to baseball games and invited them into the convent for Christmas gifts. The Oblates were respected also for hiring lay outreach workers to help community members find jobs or better housing.

But six months ago things began to change. The fragile peace, represented by the buffer zone, one block in every direction surrounding the school and convent, was broken. Drug dealers were standing out in front of the school and community center peddling their wares. Cars were pulling up to make quick purchases, dealers were languishing on the playground across the street from the school because drugs were being hidden under sliding boards. Men were walking up and down Greenmount Avenue counting wads of cash. You could feel the tension in the air and see lines literally form at the drug market. What happened to the peace? Where was the

customary respect for the Oblate Sisters? Would students, staff and visitors to the campus ever experience safe passages again?

Sister Marcia Hall, O.S.P., then principal of St. Frances Academy, and I put our heads together. After consultation with Sister John Francis Schilling, O.S.P., SFA's president, we decided to convert a welcoming reception for Dr. Curtis Turner, the school's new principal, into a community planning meeting regarding the unwieldy drug problem in the neighborhood. Elected officials, the police, parents, local business reps, Monsignor Damien Nalepa for Bishop Madden and SFA staff, among others, were in attendance. We kicked around a number of ideas and made plans, including to follow Major David Chevront's advice to hold a march in the neighborhood highlighting our concern about the drug problem.

With two weeks left before the school year ended, we had to pull the march together quickly. We needed to develop a theme and an approach. We settled on a "Peace March" and decided to walk around the Brentwood Village section of the neighborhood. We agreed we would stop and pray at notorious drug corners along the way and mark with signs the buffer zone we wanted restored. We labeled the zone a "Peace Zone." Some of the signs are still up a month after the march.

On the day of the demonstration, between 300 to 400 persons took the walk around the area, including much of the SFA student body, members of the staff and board and some alumnae. Also, members of the peacemaking community, such as from the American Friends, Community Mediation, St. Ignatius Church and others, walked, prayed and sang with us while African drums sounded in the background.

Mother Lange's intercession gave us great weather. Our march of outrage against renegade drugs became a march for peace against drugs, war and poverty. We offered up each step from each walker as a prayer.

Today, 30 days after the March there is peace and quiet around the school once again. Our prayers were answered.

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