

Heart of neighborhood beats in her

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By Diana Nelson Jones, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Minutes before the neighborhood council met the other night, I sat without sampling the holiday cookies or drawing a cup of coffee. I'm too new on the scene to deserve goodies yet.

If I make it to age 90, as Ethel Hagler has today, I will be proud to have accomplished one-tenth of what she has done for Pittsburgh since she arrived in 1931. She's the type of person goodies should rain down on. You want a role model for your kids? Put down the remote.

The Central Northside Neighborhood Council was about to begin its meeting when an elderly woman came into the basement room of the Unitarian Church on West North Avenue. She was hunched over and moved inch by inch behind a cane. Two young men practically leapt from folding metal chairs to position a big wooden one with arm rests and a red leather seat cushion for her to ease into.

Joan Kimmel, the group's president, told us Pittsburgh City Council would be honoring Ethel Hagler the next day. The elderly woman smiled as the room broke into applause.

The next day, I read council's resolution and realized the neighborhood I choose to live in became that neighborhood in part because of Ethel Hagler's driving force over seven decades.

From Dante, Va., near Roanoke, she came to Pittsburgh with her husband, whose relatives lived here. They moved to Loraine Street. He worked in construction, as a truck driver and pipe layer. She went to work for the neighborhood.

"I began to get acquainted with people at Brown Chapel AME Church," she said. "You get to know people when you go to church, you know."

She joined with garden-club ladies to clean up the streets and plant gardens. She started a community club to raise money for neighbors who hit snags or got sick or struck by tragedy. She and a group of neighborhood women filled Christmas baskets for shut-ins and the needy. She took over the neighborhood pot-luck Thanksgiving dinner 15 years ago and organized committees for each food group.

One of her regular donors is a doctor she met by serving on committees: "He always donates a ham and he don't even eat ham," she said. "He said, 'Ethel, I can't say no to you.' "

Her gift for fund raising and trustworthiness earned her the treasurer's job at her church. She was invited to be a trustee on the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation.

The most far-reaching of Hagler's projects is Neighborhood Housing Services, an agency that started in a trailer on Jacksonia Street in 1967. With her neighbor Dorothy Richardson, she lobbied bankers to set up a program to get poor people housing loans. The group met in the trailer and manned it for people who would drop in.

"One man had plaster fall in his house, and some people called to tell me. I told him to go to the trailer and tell them the situation and to apply for a loan. He got the loan."

Word of mouth spread to other cities. Hagler and Richardson visited bankers in, for starters, Florida, Texas, California. Neighborhood Housing Services is now in 170 cities.

Howard B. Slaughter Jr., chairman of the board of Neighborhood Housing Services here, calls Hagler "a remarkable person." Her current pastor, the Rev. Alexander Thompson, says, "We're looking forward to all the days the Lord is going to give her."

At 90, disabled by a fall in her home two years ago, she inches along North Side streets that are better than they were before she came. On Tuesday, she was cheered by neighbors and church friends at the City-County Building.

Now, I look forward to future neighborhood meetings, wondering how many of us it will take to carry Hagler's baton. But lots of people have been beside her, doing good things with her. Out there right now, younger versions of Ethel Hagler are getting started. People like Hagler are like perfectly formed rose buds. As often as you encounter one, you never fail to stop and marvel.

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