

Signaling change on Clay St.

Community: In one troubled neighborhood, a tiny radio station is taking a stand against drugs and crime.

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In a small cubicle in a computer lab on the top floor of the Stanton Community Center in Annapolis, Vern Wallace sits at a desk with a microphone, a set of headphones and two five-disc CD players to broadcast a live radio show three times a week.

The community station on which he broadcasts - Radio Clay Street 1600 AM - has only a quarter-mile range and uses 0.1 watts. But the station's operators see it as an opportunity to deliver a motivational message to the troubled Clay Street neighborhood of Annapolis and encourage residents to stay away from drugs and gangs.

"It is a great example of residents pitching in and addressing [the problems] they themselves identified and they themselves want to overcome," said Annapolis Mayor Ellen O. Moyer. "This is, I think, what we're all about."

Radio Clay Street, on the air since March, broadcasts 24 hours a day, seven days a week and is operated entirely by the community.

Disc jockeys produce live shows a few times each week; other shows are prerecorded. When no one is in the small studio - which is most of the time - a single computer feeds the airwaves with the sounds of gospel, jazz, oldies and rhythm and blues. There is never any music that has a negative message.

The station is noncommercial and has almost no operating costs. Show hosts encourage listeners to communicate with one another, work with police, register to vote, participate in community events and learn about health care and housing opportunities in their area.

Wallace said the radio station has "put some power back in the neighborhood," a place that had fallen victim to a "new generation of gang lords."

The neighborhood has had its challenges.

"It's been thought of and called a high-crime area," said Officer Hal Dalton, a spokesman for the Annapolis Police Department, "one where a lot of drug activity goes on."

But with Radio Clay Street and other community initiatives, residents have taken a stand against crime and have let drug dealers know they aren't welcome in the neighborhood.

Radio Clay Street was conceived more than two years ago. Representatives from the city, the Police Department, local businesses and the Clay Street neighborhood began meeting in February 2002 to identify problems in the community and what each group could do to solve them.

Neighborhood residents had the hardest time formulating solutions, Moyer said, because some found it difficult to "break through the barrier of distrust."

They did not give up, however, and the Clay Street Public Safety Team formed in October 2002 with the three-part mission of supporting anti-drug laws, providing drug-prevention activities and supporting drug-treatment programs. The team created a neighborhood watch program and used video cameras and cell phones to monitor drug activity.

"Since the safety team's been in action, we've seen a definitive improvement," Dalton said. "We get a lot more cooperation from the public. People are actually calling and reporting things."

Hoping that radio would increase crime reporting and community involvement even more, the Clay Street Public Safety Team launched the station in March.

"The radio station makes [residents] feel proud," said Dennis Conti, the team's coordinator and the person who oversees the station's operations.

The community members who work at the station wear their pride on their sleeves. Conti speaks of the fact that the people the station is trying to stop - drug dealers - are the ones who provided it nearly \$2,000 in startup costs through the Annapolis Police Department's drug forfeiture pool.

Wallace, who grew up in the Clay Street area and now lives with his family in Glen Burnie, is at the station about 15 hours a week and uses his personal CD collection to mix songs to play there.

The station's technology, most of which was purchased at Goodwill, does not enable DJs to hear what is on the air; Wallace borrows his granddaughter's stereo to make sure he is not broadcasting dead air.

Larry Griffin, host of the show *Who's Next Door?*, was a drug addict for 28 years. The radio station affords him an opportunity to share his story with others and to encourage them to connect with the rest of their community, he said.

The station is trying to reach out to the community even more. It is sponsoring a contest to design a station logo, and Conti said he hopes it can work with area schools to reward

students who perform well. The city will use the station to notify residents of emergencies and terrorism-related issues, and Dalton said police are considering broadcasting crime reports through it.

Wallace also hopes the station's small broadcast area will expand soon.

"I came here with every intention of growing," he said. "We're going to get bigger and better."

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