

South End *News*

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Guest Op-Ed

Programs and People Preserve Harriet Tubman's Legacy, Not a Building

BY ARTHUR J. GAJARSA,
RETIRED U.S. CIRCUIT JUDGE,
USES ALUMNUS AND BOARD MEMBER

I have been following the concerns expressed by a number of citizens attending the last meeting of the Boston Planning and Development Agency, opposing the proposed changes that will come about because of the pending sale of the building located at 566 Columbus Avenue in the South End of Boston.

The building is known as the Harriet Tubman House and is owned by United South End Settlements (USES). USES operates various programs for the residents of the South End and has been instrumental in

servicing the underrepresented members of the South End community for the past 127 years.

It has focused, during its existence, in providing educational opportunities to its constituents and offering them the tools to break the cycle of poverty, with the ultimate objective through their programs to forge the cadre of leaders for tomorrow's diverse society.

As a young lad, I was given the opportunity to participate in its programs. In 1948, as an immigrant and living in the South End, I was fortunate to attend the youth programs at the Hale House on Davis Street where I lived in a tenement

apartment with my mother, father, and sister. Because of that participation, I was able to attend Camp Hale, another USES program, in New Hampshire during the summers.

The program offered by USES allowed the young lads, like myself, to be infused with the "can do spirit" taught by Gigi Pieri, one of the leaders at Hale House. The Hale House building was sold and demolished for urban renewal.

In time, the youth program was moved to Lincoln House on Emerald Street. My family also moved to Emerald Street and I continued in

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the city youth programs and also continued to attend Camp Hale during the summer. Eventually, the Lincoln House became the victim of urban renewal.

The spirit imbued by the social workers such as Gigi Pieri and Mel King was not dissipated by the absence of the buildings; the "can do spirit" and leadership attitude instilled in us during our formative years was maintained by all of us, who participated in the program, during the trajectory of our subsequent careers. Some of those lads won Silver Star medals in combat, became U.S. Army generals, political leaders, engineers, educators, and construction workers. Some, like me, became lawyers.

I attended Boston public schools and subsequently attended college and law school, preserving and relying on the lessons learned at Hale House, Lincoln House, and Camp Hale. Eventually, I was appointed to the U.S. Circuit Court by President Clinton. My successful career was due in part to the lessons learned in my youth growing up in the South End in a completely diverse community.

Therefore, while I appreciate the concerns expressed by some of the citizens against the sale of a building, we must understand that the bricks and mortar of the physical building do not embody the spirit and qualities emboldened by the particular individuals whom we admire, whether it is Edward Everett Hale, Abraham Lincoln, or Harriet Tubman.

That spirit is forged by the individuals who teach the essence of the leadership qualities exemplified by individuals

whose lives we honor by the programs established by USES. USES is attempting to preserve the legacy of those individuals by its ability to continue offering its services to the South End community. It is selling the 566 property, not because it wants to but because it must to maintain its fiscal viability without which it would eventually fail.

Its viability is critical to maintain the program for the community and individuals it serves. Because of this necessity, I and all of my fellow Board Members voted, after due consideration of alternatives, to sell the property in order to maintain the spirit, fortitude, and character exemplified by Harriet Tubman. It is the continuation of her legacy and its spirit that matters more than the brick and mortar of a building.