



## Bringing Community Together in Graham Heights

by Liz Bertrand

When the Bailey Concert Band, a drum corps of nine from the United House of Prayer, made their dramatic entrance at the Graham Heights Spring Festival Block Party, they struck the right beat for the day: perfect synchronization. The group captivated the 150 or so neighbors lining Ennis Avenue, just north of Charlotte's center city, and illustrated the residents' own coordinated efforts to create a successful community event.

The gathering, which was partially funded by a Crossroads Charlotte “Achieving Community Today” (A.C.T.) grant, was made possible by the efforts of dozens of volunteers. They recruited sponsors like Food Lion and other area grocery chains to defray food expenses, set up the borrowed tables and chairs, prepared and served the food, and organized a raffle for gift cards worth up to \$725 apiece from Lowe's South End to be used toward purchasing Energy Star Appliances. Even a Charlotte-Mecklenburg policeman stopped by to drop off a box full of coloring books, crayons, bookmarks and Junior Officer stickers for kids. Most important, volunteers spread the word and got the neighborhood to come together.

“It's a close-knit community,” said 54 year-old Ruby Williams, who has lived in Graham Heights since she was 16. She attended the event with her daughter, three granddaughters, and extended family. As the kids decorated the street with colorful chalk drawings and munched on burgers, Williams nodded with approval: “Since they started the neighborhood association, it's improved a whole lot.”

Getting families like Williams' out of their homes to spend time with neighbors of all ages was one of the primary goals of the block party, according to Joe Howarth, a graduate student at UNC-Charlotte, who has been working with the neighborhood since last August. While the Graham Heights Community Association's monthly meetings are well-attended,

they generally draw older residents. He hoped the day's gathering would help the association "connect with younger generations."

Howarth serves as a community liaison from the university's Charlotte Action Research Project (C.H.A.R.P.). The program's aim is to connect professors and students with challenged communities and engage both groups in mutually beneficial projects. In this role, Howarth has helped secure funding for several Graham Heights neighborhood improvement projects including the A.C.T. grant and a Power 2 Live Green grant that funded the day's raffle prizes as well as a larger initiative to provide free energy use audits for 30 homes in the neighborhood.

Although the community association has been active for about 10 years, according to long-time resident Bob Jordan, this was the first large-scale block party they have organized. Jordan was among the approximately 35 volunteers for the day's event. A professional caterer, he surveyed the food line from his post behind a massive, sizzling grill.

Jeff Pharr, Vice President of the neighborhood association, believes that getting people involved in events like the block party helps develop a sense of cohesiveness in Graham Heights and deter crime. "You don't normally see people out," said Pharr. "We don't have a park in the neighborhood." But, he added, he hopes a park may be possible one day with the help of neighborhood matching grants.

Without missing a beat, several young girls nearby eagerly volunteered to be on the playground planning committee.