Asylum Hill's Loss

By. H. PAUL SANTMIRE

Our young friend Myra Cruz has been laid to rest. She was the friend of all of us because she walked the streets we walk. She brightened the lives of her family and friends, and so the lives of all of us, with her smile. She shared with all of us the aspirations for a good and safe life in Asylum Hill, for herself, for her friends and family, and for her neighbors.

Her death, and her family's experience of the tragedy, was therefore an experience of profound loss for all of us. Part of us died, too. Our neighborhood was wracked with grief, more than perhaps we ever thought it could have been. As the expressions of consolation for the family poured in, and as the donations of funds kept arriving to assist the family, in some small way, in their grief, we discovered something about ourselves or rediscovered it. We need each other, and we have indeed found each other.

A great Rabbi once observed that when one part of the body suffers the whole body suffers. The life of a living neighborhood is something like that.

But we have not always known that. We have not always felt so connected. There was a time when people just moved in and out of Asylum Hill, as if it were some kind of army bootcamp. You had to live there for some reason, but you tried to move on to someplace else as soon as possible.

In the last several years, however, a kind of miracle has happened. People began to discover themselves as neighbors. Tenants came together to support each other. Seniors joined together to demand safety in the streets and protection from constantly higher prices for prescription drugs. Young people worked together during the summers, cleaning up our streets and inspiring the rest of us by their commitment. Even a support group for unemployed men, drawing on the ranks of those who hitherto had just hung out at Sigourney Park, got underway, with an impressive sense of solidarity.

Throughout it all, the churches pitched in resources, too, not only funds, which always help, but all the more so, human hearts and human hands, which signled that the churches were on their way to becoming residents, not just visitors, in this neighborhood.

The result of this community solidarity you can see with your eyes. Low income people are living, and living well, in Niles Park and on South Marshall Street. The UConn Family Medicine Center, which was once to be moved to Farmington, is not only here, serving well, its services have been expanded. There's a Human Needs Center and the Loaves and Fishes Soup Kitchen in Trinity Church, and a Family Development Center just about to open up in Grace Church.

Asylum Hill is now a place on the map, more perhaps than it ever has been in recent memory, because it has become a neighborhood where people can and do care about it each other and stand with each other and cry with each other.

That was perhaps the only positive thing to be discovered in the experience of Myra Cruz's loss, as we cried together. But that is something for which to be thankful, during this season of thanksgiving, which was begun for us with such a terrible tragedy.

Mr. Santmire is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church.