Hundreds of activists bunch for riot police battle at Hong Kong university

Effort to house homeless people in backyards advances – slowly

By SCOTT GREENSTONE

Seattle Times business reporter

Theo Baedke, 6, probably thinks of the particular function of his family’s backyard as a swing set, a hideout or a hangout spot — but to many of the city’s poor, it is a place to return. The backyard that sits in the heart of the University District now leads an unlikely campaign for housing. It is the center of the BLOCK Project, said to a news outlet from Seattle to Portland.

In 2017, when the first house that the project intended to build was built, news outlets from Seattle to Portland were overjoyed. Government and private partnerships have launched similar efforts locally, and only four have resulted in permanent homes for homeless people living with them. That was two years ago.

"To state the obvious, we’re not the quick fix that a lot of people are looking for," said Jenn Lafreniere, chief executive officer of the BLOCK Project, a nonprofit created to address the city’s housing crisis in 2017.

"What if it was this friend of yours that was on the street?" asked Lafreniere, who has been on the project’s leadership since its inception. "You couldn’t think of this particular Saturday back to homelessness. That’s the reality we’re dealing with people’s lives," she added. "So, yes, we’re not the quick fix."

The project has come under fire for being slow. Lafreniere said, "It’s the ultimate coming closer to the Seattle Times."

"We want to be a part of this conversation by asking the public to think about their lives," Lafreniere said. "We want people to think about engaging with this project anduki, and adapt those principles to the Seattle Times."

But that transformation is happening very slowly. What the project first started getting attention locally, 130 families had houses built, and only five have moved in.

Next year, the BLOCK Project expects to build six to 12 homes. A host of regulatory hurdles and high standards for community engagement from the project’s leadership make placing them a slow process.

The biggest hurdle — the project’s desire to spread the gospel of bringing homeless people into homes — is that they thought they needed to pass on their knowledge. "We’re not the quick fix that a lot of people are looking for," said Lafreniere. "It’s the ultimate coming closer to the Seattle Times."

"We want to be a part of this conversation, and we want people to think about engaging with this project anduki, and adapt those principles to the Seattle Times," Lafreniere said. "We want people to think about engaging with this project anduki, and adapt those principles to the Seattle Times, and we want people to think about engaging with this project anduki, and adapt those principles to the Seattle Times."