

Operation West Laurel: Community Action Grounded in Faith

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If you want an inspirational community story, look no further than Operation West Laurel (OWL). OWL is an interfaith community organization based in Laurel, Delaware. The challenges facing OWL are daunting: the town's crime rate is the highest in the state. Laurel is also the poorest municipality in Delaware, with almost 40 percent of residents below the poverty line.

Operation West Laurel was founded in 2023 by Amy Puckham Handy and several other local residents, following an epidemic of gun violence in Laurel that took the lives of several young people that year. One of the deceased teens was a basketball star at Laurel High School who was gunned down in his home neighborhood of Wexford Village. Although gun violence was the initial focus of OWL's mission, the scope of that mission has broadened over time to include a wide range of programs for local youth and other residents.

OWL was recently incorporated as a 501(c)(3) charitable foundation to facilitate fundraising. The principal area served by OWL comprises racially mixed, underprivileged neighborhoods on the western side of the town of Laurel. The area is anchored by two adjacent low-income housing projects: Little Creek and Wexford Village. OWL was initially governed by an "executive board" consisting of Amy Handy, who recently retired as a teacher at Laurel High School, Crystal Stevens, Cheryl Barber, and Ryan Horsey.

Prayer as the Focal Point

OWL is an interfaith community group whose members come from several Christian denominations. OWL's Episcopal church partner is St. Philip's Episcopal Church, Laurel. Several St. Philip's parishioners, including the authors of this article, are active participants in OWL programs, and the church itself provides financial support through its annual Strawberry Festival.

OWL convenes bimonthly information meetings at New Zion United Methodist Church, of which Amy is a lay leader. These regular meetings always begin with a prayer, followed by "ice breaker" activities prepared by Cheryl and substantive updates by Amy and others on local events and OWL programs.

OWL “Prayer Warriors” on the March and Online

OWL’s prayer ministry is carried vigorously into the neighborhoods that it serves. In fact, prayer walks were the first organized activity in which OWL engaged. Every Thursday evening during Daylight Savings Time, several OWL members meet in the parking lot of New Zion church for a quick moment of prayer and a group photo before venturing forth to carry the Word of the Lord into West Laurel. In good weather, these weekly prayer walks are conducted on foot. During the hot summer, the OWL “prayer warriors” set out in a small caravan of cars, led by Crystal.

At several places on the route, the caravan stops, and the prayer warriors take turns offering a prayer for the neighborhood: for a holy “hedge of protection” from the gun violence and drug problems that have plagued West Laurel; for the people to come to know Christ and to embrace the unconditional love and guidance that the Lord offers; for good health and the elimination of hunger; and for young people to do well in school and at work. If any local people are nearby, particularly children or teens, they are invited to pray with the OWLs, and many do. At each stop, photos are taken, and candy and snacks are offered to the children.

It is particularly gratifying for the OWLs to minister to the children. Many are “repeat customers” who welcome prayer and trust the OWLs to offer them support and encouragement. Examples include a young boy from Little Creek, who first visited us while carrying a dog almost half his size, and once called out “wait, wait” for fear that we might leave without praying with him; a girl from Greene Avenue, who is proud of making the honor roll at Laurel Elementary School; teen mothers with infants; and a 12-year-old boy who bashfully asked to lead our group in prayer and did so after turning around to compose himself.

The OWL prayer walks are an enriching, but sobering, experience for the participants. We pray regularly with a faithful older gentleman who has survived several strokes. He looks forward to our visits, and the Lord has given him better health recently. On 7th Street near his home, there is a “hot spot” with several young people, who sometimes disappear when they see our yellow OWL t-shirts. That troubled area is emblematic of the risks that confront West Laurel residents every day.

The prayer walks are not the only spiritual activity conducted by OWL. Practically every Monday evening, OWL convenes a Zoom prayer session that lasts 45 minutes to an hour. These Zoom sessions have four to eight regular participants, including St. Philip’s vocational deacon. At the outset, the facilitators ask the others for short scripture

readings. After the readings, the attendees are invited to offer prayers on any matter of importance to them. Most participants provide powerful testimonies that bespeak a deep knowledge of Scripture and a familiarity with the healing power of corporate prayer. The authors' own prayer lives have been greatly enhanced by these Zoom sessions.

OWL Programs and Projects for the Community

Operation West Laurel sponsors several programs in its advocacy for the community, particularly for children and youth. Several such programs are summarized below. We refer you to the OWL website (operationwestlaurel.org) for a more complete description of those activities and the community partnerships in which OWL participates.

The SOAR Program (Students Overcoming Adversity and Rising) is an initiative for children in elementary grades who have been exposed to gun violence. SOAR activities include homework help and tutoring, creative arts, recreational opportunities, and exercises in conflict resolution and violence prevention. One SOAR activity that the children especially enjoy is the cooking class led by a St. Philip's parishioner and assisted by St. Philip's volunteers.

Project R.I.S.E. (Resilience, Integrity, Strength, Empowerment) is aimed at a high-risk cohort of West Laurel residents: young males in high school. This cohort's exposure to community violence raises the risk of dropping out of school and turning to crime and substance abuse. Project R.I.S.E. focuses, among other things, on academic tutoring, workforce skills, mentorship, structured recreation, and conflict resolution skills. A related activity, Empowering Young Men for Success, provides career exploration advice and assistance through partnering with local businesses and professionals.

Other OWL-sponsored programs are just plain fun. For example, Friday with Friends is a summer enrichment camp for elementary and middle-school aged children that teaches the importance of friendship and kindness through team-building games and activities. Camp for Christ is a one-week basketball camp that combines basketball skills with fellowship and spiritual development.

Finally, pride in the community is demonstrated by OWL efforts to improve the appearance of West Laurel. In June, about 50 people (including about ten Laurel High School football players, two coaches, the chief of police, and a state representative) gathered for a community cleanup, followed by pizza and other refreshments. OWL members, in partnership with End Community Violence Now and Healthy Communities Delaware, have created three attractive community gardens featuring flowers and

vegetables. The “peace garden” planned for Laurel High School, in memory of the young gun violence victims, will furnish an atmosphere conducive to prayerful reflection.

Operation West Laurel has energized an entire community in its short life. Members of OWL are easy to spot in their yellow t-shirts as they traverse the neighborhoods on their weekly prayer walks. The group’s emphasis on peace through prayer has given the town a sense of accomplishment and optimism for the future. OWL has received several significant financial grants from private and public sources that will further strengthen its programs. Most notably, there have been no gun deaths in Laurel since 2024. Truly, the Holy Spirit is at work here.