

From Milwaukee Renaissance

PeaceOfMind: EzekielHOPERebuildsLivesHomesAndPropertyTaxBase

Ezekiel HOPE Rebuilds Lives, Homes and Property Tax Base

By Patricia Oblatz, Editor

www.MilwaukeeRenaissance.com/PeaceOfMind/

“Update 7/10/16: City of Milwaukee Offers New Grant to Ezekiel HOPE at this July 9, 2016 ceremony:
http://www.photoshow.com/watch/GV6Md3QV?source=em_ps_show_recipient

The end game of racism is prison, the imperfect yet still profitable post-Civil War enslavement system contrived by white America pushing inadequate schools, healthcare and housing, and fear-based hate. That’s why a few dedicated Milwaukee volunteers with wisdom and spiritual fortitude are working to undo the damage: **Most prisoners** are black boys and men arrested and convicted for the same non-violent crimes that white boys and men commit at the same rate and yet, far fewer of them get arrested, much less convicted.

Most prisoners serve their sentences and return home.

Too many prisoners are unprepared to succeed back in society – so many were so young when first convicted, which multiplies their chance of returning to prison. That’s why **Ezekiel HOPE** (Home Ownership Partnership Employment) provides construction work apprenticeship opportunities to help former prisoners and prisoners in work release programs become self-sufficient.

Board of Directors members **Reverend Willie E. Brisco**, President of WISDOM and President of AALC (African American Leadership Council) of **Gamaliel Foundation**, **Jim Gaillard**, vice-president of finance, and **Donald Utech**, chairman, met with PeaceOfMind to discuss this frontline civil rights priority.

Jim Gaillard said, “We’re using foreclosed properties in Milwaukee to give people training, create jobs, and create hope. Our legal name is Ezekiel Community Development Corporation.”

Rev. Brisco said that Gaillard is a Master Electrician who came from Pyramid Electric and WHIRE Electric; he said that Ezekiel HOPE is Gaillard’s vision.

Putting the pieces together

Gaillard said that Brisco invited him to a **MICAH** (Milwaukee Inner City Congregations Allied for Hope) meeting in 2012 after the city said there were no qualified minorities to work on the Century City project. At the meeting, Gaillard said that his company was working on the Century City site, but was being excluded from a new project there that involved millions of dollars and was given to a majority contractor; nor could he get bonding throughout his 30-something years in the construction trade. In essence, he said, the city did its best to dissuade black people from applying for larger construction jobs.



Rev. Willie Brisco Don Utech Jim Gaillard
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Gaillard said that, when he was a surveyor for the City of Milwaukee, he was warned not to take a promotional exam for Electrical Services, because “‘they’re racists over there.’ I did (take it and found) all kinds of problems there, but – “

Don Utech said “tenacity” got Gaillard through the apprenticeship.

“True,” Gaillard admitted, adding that he’d been in a Better Chance program that took him from tenth grade at North Division High School to Oshkosh, Wisconsin: population 60,000 with 300 black college students. Of 3,000 high school students, five were black.

Gaillard learned “how to deal with latent, blatant or whatever type of racism” and knew that he “had to be better to overcome.” Telling him he can’t do something energizes him, he said. “And that’s part of what Ezekiel wants to teach people: Don’t give up hope because the struggle is hard — you can make it.”

Gaillard’s first company was W.H.I.R.E (We Hire Intelligent Responsible Employees) in 1994. Desire to help people help themselves compelled him to hire people from his neighborhood to fix up buildings and sell them to employees by using payroll deductions, and turning buildings into neighborhood daycare centers, restaurants and other enrichments.

When Gaillard met Utech at that 2012 MICA meeting of the Job and Economics Committee, Utech introduced his idea for a “virtual corporation” of different skilled trades minority contractors in order to get larger job contracts. “He’s got the business acumen to help them,” Gaillard said.

Utech knew Gaillard was the key to building the “virtual corporation” of minority contractors, who, Utech said, were “a little bit shy on the business end.” Combining individual companies of electricians, carpenters, plumbers, and other skilled tradesmen into one corporation gives them “the clout to go after the larger contracts and not be denied.”

To receive public and private grant funding, they realized they needed to partner with a 501©3 non-profit agency — and MICA was about to dissolve a 501©3 corporation named Ezekiel. Gaillard had worked for that company in the late 1990s, helping to build ten new houses. He said, “Things like that just let me know that God was putting the pieces together that couldn’t be denied.”

Earning Freedom

Utech said that, although he is president and Gaillard is vice-president, neither one receives payment, nor do board of director members. Their goal is to provide on-the-job training and paid work for others to create opportunity for people. Rehabbing a house is the byproduct, he said. The city sees these houses as a burden, but Ezekiel sees them as “a classroom... a chance for us to teach people how to do electrical work or painting or plumbing or whatever, and at the same time, we’re building capacity in the minority contractors.”

As of May 2016, Ezekiel has rehabilitated five houses and deconstructed one. Ten men on work release from the House of Correction learned how to build a house by dismantling it one brick at a time – without any machinery. Once her parents’ house was demolished, the woman next door bought the vacant lot.

Utech said that the city is weighing the options of demolition versus deconstruction: demolition requires “one guy on a bulldozer and probably a guy with a water hose keeping the dust down... Or you can have five to 12 men taking it down and learning how it goes together.”

He said that the first day, the men were just glad to be outside and free, “but by the second or third day, they were talking like contractors and proud of what they were doing... They were being worthwhile to society.”

Crew members from the House of Correction earn their freedom one workday at a time; the rest of the crew receives paychecks.

Brisco said they were forming a partnership with the Milwaukee County House of Correction, which would entail Gaillard working on a six-month training and certifying program with ten work release people a year.

“More than the work,” Brisco said, “is the trust and the belief in what we’re doing. There is no desire to make a profit — Jim and Don volunteer their time.”

Brisco attended the closing of the house on 78th Street that a young single mother bought. She said that her children already had claimed ownership of their rooms, then expressed her gratitude to Ezekiel HOPE: the low interest mortgage rate dropped her monthly housing bill from \$1,000 to \$560.

Gaillard said they want to keep pricing houses in the \$50-to-\$65,000 range. They won a small Home Funds grant from the city to fix up houses for first time home owners in low to moderate income brackets. They “probably put \$30-to-\$45,000 into a house in labor and materials,” which can include a new furnace, new hot water heater, new kitchen cabinets – the inside of the houses “look brand new when finished.”

Rebuilding Lives and the City

Brisco believes that private sector corporations understand that Ezekiel HOPE’s grass roots initiative is run by honest men volunteering their expertise to provide on the job training on abandoned houses, turning them into affordable, equity-building houses, rebuilding lives and the city.

Brisco said that Gaillard and Utech are not only honest, they “take risks that only people who have a heart for this ministry would take. There are a lot of people who wouldn’t put themselves out and who wouldn’t be walking in the inner city looking at houses in neighborhoods that most people wouldn’t dare go, or who would put their businesses on the line... We are doing things for the right reason and for the right people at the right time... Every house that we’ve sold has been a house that I would move into.”

Gaillard said that the mayor supported them with a \$100,000 grant last year. Unfamiliar with grant writing, they “worked with Jeff Thomas and Mario Higgins in Steve Mahan’s Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) office. One board member, John Kaye, Milwaukee Christian Centers, also has been helpful; another board member, Audrey Morrow, who works at US Bank, was instrumental in helping them gain a line of credit; they’re waiting to hear about Bader Foundation and Milwaukee Foundation grants and have a **GoFundMe** page, to “create a circle of prosperity, as opposed to funding the normal pipeline from the hood to prison.

“It’s a no-brainer,” Gaillard said. “On one side, we’ve got a huge pile of unemployed people and formerly incarcerated and currently incarcerated people. And on the other side, you’ve got a huge skilled trades gap: a pile over here, and a hole over there,” he said. “We’re fixing two problems with a third problem, and solving all three.”

Common Ground and ACTS also rehab foreclosed housing, but they don’t provide on-the-job training, Utech said, adding, “Our employees are certified in their field by professional contractors. Having that feeling of accomplishment is number one when you get done.

“Some people say other training programs don’t want us to be involved, the unions don’t want us to be involved, but the problems in Milwaukee are big enough that *everybody* ought to be involved. There should be 10 ACTS, there should be 10 Ezekiels, there should be 10 Common Grounds, all with training programs leading to jobs.”

Seeding Hope, Building Wealth

Gaillard and Utech are behind Ezekiel HOPE because, the latter said, “A lot of people out here don’t have hope, they don’t think they can do better. But I know that you can make a lot of money being an electrician, being a carpenter, being a plumber. You don’t have to sell dope, you don’t have to rob anybody. These houses are the perfect vehicle” to produce a legal, sustainable taxpayer future.

Utech explained that a lot of inner city families don't have parents like his, who owned their own home, gave him room and board while he worked his way through college, and helped him whenever they could. "So besides creating skilled trades jobs and training people to work construction, we want people to own their own home, not rent," he said. "Now they've got a stake in the ground, and every year their equity is going to build and they're building wealth in their neighborhood. Now they can get a loan from the bank, because they have equity built up; they can finance their grandkids to go to school or whatever. (Rent money never builds wealth) and we need to build wealth within the inner city and form businesses and more."

Brisco said, "Milwaukee is a sinking boat and you want as many people bailing water as you can... If you're all bailing water, eventually you're doing the same thing, and that's hard to get through to people who realize they have to scratch and scramble for everything."

He paused before saying that one rehabbed house among a block of dilapidated houses makes it difficult to sell. That's why Ezekiel wants "to restore entire blocks and neighborhoods in order to bring them back to life. This won't happen," Brisco said, "if people don't understand how important renewal is to rebuilding neighborhoods. The more that we can make a neighborhood safe and viable for families, the better it's going to be for all of us," Brisco said.

Lifting People Out of Hopelessness, Addiction and Crime

Gaillard reiterated the goal of creating jobs and filling the serious skilled trades gap, adding that those working on the houses attract future business and can then hire more people. "They also get a guy like Don, who has been all over the world doing business; I've got 33 years of business experience to lend to these contractors..."

"There's millions of dollars-worth of work going on downtown in Milwaukee that **(minorities are) still being excluded from**" despite their certified contractor experience... The only thing that you're left with is, okay, because you're a different color," Gaillard said.

Utech said, "Racism runs really deep in Milwaukee. And, somehow we're going to have to climb above it and show them what we can do." He mentioned a recent article about the jobs, skilled trades gap, how Milwaukee has failed in what's called the **RPP**, Residential Preference Program.

Brisco said that, in the central city, most people have nothing to do, nothing to get involved in. "(W)hen you run into an area of depressed oppression, the individuals that are oppressed begin to turn on each other, and they begin to compete with each other. That is why it seems like crime is at an all-time high. That's why it seems like hope is at an all-time low. You've got to give people something meaningful to do to show them their worth. That's what Ezekiel HOPE is — we know that jobs are the key to lifting people out of hopelessness, addiction and crime."

Gaillard said the plan is to have two crews working on two houses a month. That kind of volume, he said, feeds a lot more people and brings up capacity.

Trainees get a goal sheet to fill out, asking what they think of the program, what they get out of it, have they ever worked construction? "And the things that they say in the beginning and the things they say at the end are what make me feel good about it... They want to learn more so they can take care of their own house one day. They have a goal." Gaillard smiled.

Without a goal, Gaillard said, "You'll be one of those people wandering around looking for something, or letting something bad happen to you," such as using drugs to numb the pain of existence, becoming addicted, turning to crime to support that addiction.

Women Contractors More Meticulous, Detailed and Reliable

When asked if they hired women, Gaillard said that five women on work release from the House of Correction worked on the last house. "They're more meticulous and detailed than men are. I think women (working) in construction are going to be the new thing."

Gaillard said, “We’ve got a lot of baby boys out here. Young black men who have been raised by a woman really don’t understand how to be a man.”

Gaillard said that women have been taught to be strong, to be the bread winner of the house, and “when I saw those women come out there and work, I was like, why haven’t I thought of this? I’m tired of these guys telling me, ‘I can’t come to work because my girl has got to use the car to go to the daycare.’ So I’m thinking about going with the women and seeing how it works, if they’re really willing to do this.”

Utech said the women were at first “a little timid, then after a few days, they started talking back and forth, ‘Wait ‘til I get out, I’m gonna show Jimmy how to put in an outlet here, his lazy ass. I can do this now.’ I enjoyed that.”

Brisco said that women prisoners are “a climbing statistic” and now make up 10–15% of the prison population.

Diabolical Designs and Ivory Towers

Brisco said that those in government offices that control the money “always talk to themselves and other people, they never ask the poor, the disenfranchised, ‘what is it that you need and how can we help you?’ Right now you’ve got to work for Welfare, you’ve got to do community service for food stamps.

“Even the people who are receiving this aid realize that, ‘if you can do this, why can’t you just give me a job?’ But they can’t figure that out up high.” Brisco said. “Welfare was a problem in the past because people said, ‘we’ll pay you for each additional child.’” Brisco added that Welfare “incentivized (mothers) to have more children by different men by cutting off the check if a man stayed in the house. So this became a culture created by the higher ups...

“Welfare was designed to keep people at a certain rate and to keep them there permanently. Not to give them an education or get them a higher paying job or move them into a corporate office. This is the mindset of leaders not asking the people, what do you need?” Brisco said most mothers would say that the only way their children can be made accountable is if they were able to stay home. “Those are just some examples of what happens when you make decisions in ivory towers.”

Utech said there are a lot of unemployed people in the inner city and that most jobs are in the suburbs. “And so, what we have is by diabolical design, I think, just like the ghettos of WWII; you put all the Jews together so you can control them, and we’ve done that with the African Americans in Milwaukee. There are very few buses that go out to the suburbs where the jobs are... they can’t afford a car, so what options do they have?” He said that WISDOM and MICAHA are working on bus programs, “but that’s just a start. You know we need better transportation out to where the jobs are.”

Utech said his northern relatives talk about the millions upon millions of dollars “being poured into the City of Milwaukee for training. But yet — we’re in the same shape we were 20 years ago.” He said those millions were going to training programs for construction on the Couture building, Northwestern Mutual, and Manpower’s construction by the lake. “And **Barry Mandel** is building a new luxury apartment complex.”

The men agreed that the training programs were not being run as dictated by HUD’s Section 3 fair hiring practices: first, workers must be residents in the area, as well as be in a low income bracket.

Utech described how St Ann Center for Intergenerational Care, now on North Avenue, but then on the south side, wanted the new building to be constructed by low-income minority workers in the neighborhood. He said their goal was to have 75% minority participation. CG Schmidt got the contract, and when Gaillard and Utech talked to them, they agreed that St Ann Center was demanding minority participation.

All the unions got the projects, but none were meeting the 75% goal. The building would cost about \$20 million, but St. Ann Center raised only \$18 — The contractors insisted that “they had to raise their price to cover training minorities, unlike the people

they hire from Madison or Waukesha, or wherever.” Utech then said he’d believed that minority contractors would hold the majority of jobs on this project and “felt so frustrated” when that possibility became impossible for unjust reasons.

Milwaukee Doesn’t Have to Sink

Gaillard said that large millionaire, possibly billionaire, contractors, such as **Hunzingers**, who worked on Westlawn, and **Gilbane**, who is working on Northwestern Mutual “are not going to hire us. We’re going to hire us. Minorities hire minorities.” He said his apprenticeship to become an electrician was a 4-year program that, “When I came in, nobody had gotten through it in 12 years. They do this because they’re not ready to let anybody in the club...

“(Y)ou can say ... yes to hiring minorities,” Gaillard continued, “but when you sign that contract, then that’s when they (say) ‘we would love to do it that way, but we can’t find them,’ or like when Rev. Brisco asked if there were any people qualified to be on it. They’ve been using this shell game since the ‘60s, and if the powers that be don’t force them to put it in the contract — in the case of the (Bucks) arena, the state, the county and the city gave them \$500 million without stipulating that they have to use minorities.”

Shaking his head, Gaillard said, “If we recognize that minority unemployment is a problem, adding to the problem of minority incarceration, why are you still afraid to say ‘we’ve got to address that?’ We’re in desperate times. Like you say,” he said, nodding at Brisco: “‘The boat is sinking.’

“So what do we do, sink and everybody dies? Say, ‘I’m not going to say I’m going to hire minorities, because that would be discriminatory -- And that’s where a lot of the problem comes in,” Gaillard emphasized, then said, “We’ve got to do something outside of the box to change things or, as I said before, they’ll keep getting worse... If you keep using the same rules -- these are the rules that got us where we are.”

Brisco said, “Milwaukee forgets really quick that the entire manufacturing base and production base in this city was bolstered by the black migration from the south, men who had worked on farms and with machinery, and had integrity, and were vouched for by other men... (And) worked next to (Milwaukee) men on the assembly line, taking about a month to become proficient in the job.

“They feel that there’s an inexhaustible workforce out there,” Brisco said. “Now they want everybody trained before they walk in the door of the factory...

“To put **Westlawn** in a nutshell, our protest and our marches proved to be right. *Hunzingers was found in violation on nine counts — the penalty was: ‘we caught you, don’t do it anymore or else.’” Brisco said HUD invited MICAH to attend meetings and report to them if anyone failed to carry through their promise. “But no one was fired, no one was penalized financially, no one was disciplined. They just said ‘don’t do it again.’”

Of the housing authority meetings Gaillard attended, he said “they would sit there and (say) ‘we’re gonna do this or there are not enough people to take these jobs (mostly housing projects); we don’t know when we’re gonna do Westlawn Part II.’

“When they finally came up with the money to do Westlawn Part II, they kept it hushed. By that time, I had stopped going to these farces of meetings, but they told the person who did go, ‘we couldn’t say anything to you, we were hushed — gag ordered.’ You’re invited into the meetings to show transparency, but when something comes down, ‘I can’t talk to you.’ That’s not being transparent to me.” Disgust delivered Gaillard’s tone.

Disparity Gap Punitive

Brisco referred to laws and regulations that can change behavior, and emphasized that actions and connections can train emotions. “Everybody now thinks that you can legislate your way out of situations... There has to be a way to reach the heart... it’s unlawful to discriminate, but behind closed doors, ‘I’ll do whatever I want to do...’

“There is no intentionality within this city to bridge these gaps, there’s only legislation and talk,” Brisco said. That’s why he wanted to personally hand over the keys to the young mother first-time home buyer.

“Most people don’t know how easy it is to own a home with mortgages at such low interest rates. They think that ‘I’m not in that situation yet,’ even though you’re paying twice the mortgage for rent. Those are esteem problems: people don’t feel that they are deserving. That’s why so many of our children don’t go to the lakefront. That’s why so many of our children don’t go to the State Fair. That’s why so many of our children don’t think they belong out in Brookfield or in Waukesha. It’s ingrained that (owning a home) is not something you should aspire to. ‘So that’s why I can shoot you and destroy my life at the same time, because there’s nothing better for me.’”

Oppression Drives Poverty

Brisco said that poverty is one of the vehicles driving people into hopelessness, that better off dead state of mind that is suicidal depression and sometimes PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). “I came out of poverty and I never conceived of robbing somebody else. We had to make things better for ourselves, and it wasn’t that we liked being in poverty, we were there and there were other people there, so we shared. Now, people have begun to think that poverty is their fault.”

Because Brisco had three meals a day, he never thought they were poor. But he knew racism – his early years were in Mississippi. He said, “Racism today is still right in your face given the way heroin addiction is being handled. ‘We’re going to stop charging these people with crimes because this is an illness, it’s an addiction.’ The (mostly black) people sitting in there doing 30 years for crack addiction say, ‘What was mine?’ So this is right in your face: it’s okay to neglect the crack epidemic, but not the heroin epidemic.

“The people already in prison due to addiction are not even considered for amnesty, yet they’re going to give someone a shot of Narcon, send him home and put him in treatment. The disparity is huge.”

Brisco continued: “They’ve allowed this disparity gap to grow to the point where now it’s punitive.” When his family moved to Milwaukee in the 1960s, “it was natural to move in with another family and get a job within a month, then a home. But as time went by, racism, redlining (housing discrimination) and (closing factories) eliminated those means of owning homes and other means of moving up.

“After a while, people started adopting the ways of the oppressor, oppressing each other, calling each other out by name...”

When Brisco took the training for a promotion at the House of Correction, a lot of people said, “‘You’re trying to be white, you’re trying to be better than the rest of us.’” He said a lot of people said that walking around “in a white shirt” wasn’t for them. “And these are educated people who have this self-hatred and this self-deprivation that’s pervasive.

“So think of children, who didn’t get much of an education and who are not getting out of a ten-block radius of their area. Poverty has something to do with it, but poverty is not the main determining factor: It’s the mindset that creates generational poverty that has to change.”

More Evidence:

“Giant corporations are incentivizing, and **profiting** from the expansion of the prisons industry.”

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