

Maximum impact

Frankie Blackburn is inspired by personal connections

We sat down with Frankie Blackburn, executive director of Impact Silver Spring, to discuss how the interaction of issues of affordable housing, economic diversity and immigration affect the quality of life in local communities.

Where do you see our community in 20 years? What's your vision?

I believe that in 20 years we're going to be able to write a story about a successful mixed-income, mixed-race, mixed-cultures community that is a role model for other communities. But to get there is a painful process, and to pretend that it isn't painful is dishonest.

But we're ahead of the curve in Silver Spring and Takoma Park in figuring out how to do schools together, how to shop together, and how to grow spiritually together.

That's why I've been willing to devote huge chunks of my life to this.

Can elaborate on what is painful about the process?

One is to adjust our image of the perfect setting. You may be living next a house with five cars in front because the family is of a different culture, and it might bother you. But in 20 years your son might say, "Wow, that was such a fun family that we were living next to. They were warm, embracing."

Or in school where we all are so bent on having the best for our children, but that insistence may shoot down a different part of the education system where others can achieve. It's painful to face yourself in the mirror and realize your ambitions for your child conflict with your ideal of democracy.

What are the hopeful, exciting factors?

I have not yet found an apartment community or a group of immigrant parents where I couldn't find multiple people ready and willing to offer up their ideas, their original thinking.

Were you surprised by their level of engagement?

Yes, and it debunks so many theories that people are walking around with. That renters don't care about this community, or that Latino immigrants are in this county just to send money home.

What about established homeowners? Do you see the same thing?

I do. I've watched PTAs come a long way in how they operate to become more inclusive. I've watched developers become more honest about the sensitivities required to manage different populations, which is a first step, even though there are problems



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they need solve.

What do you see happening locally to help us cope with the challenge of climate change?

I have seen in every walk in my life a bigger conversation around how to change our behavior. In my church, we're talking about how to run the building better. My own 10-year-old child is walking around noticing everything I do that's not environmentally supportive. That's amazing. That's got to be good.

Does this carry over to other challenges?

I think it does. I look at how we've begun to shift on the environment and think, "How can we do that for other things?" The pain will help produce the gain.

I hate that phrase in some ways, but I've never been through anything where it didn't take some hard work and sacrifice to get to the good.

What is hopeful and inspiring in terms of housing?

I see the beginning of change. For the first time in the 25 years that I've been doing this there is a breadth of interest and a heatedness in the conversation.

For example, the other day someone brought up the question of building in the Agricultural Reserve in Montgomery County, and the person that was leading the discussion immediately shut down the other person. I don't think we can shut

anything off at this point. There needs to be the full set of options on the table. We need to stop with the short-term solutions and be more communicative.

How would you define the housing situation right now in Silver Spring?

Out of balance, in a very quiet, pricey way. There are a lot of people hanging by a thread, not sure where they are going to lay their head every night. That creates a level of anxiety and instability that hurts employers, hurts schools, and hurts attitudes on the streets. Unfortunately, we have such a divided community that it is hard for those with security to understand those who lack security. There are a heck of a lot of adults sleeping on couches or kids four to a bed, and it's hard to have healthy families with that much ad hoc living.

Is it market pricing or an income disparity?

It's a failure of 40 years ago to think in the long term about how to create a continuum of housing options.

Even 10 years ago we created a redevelopment plan without a single word about housing. That's what I mean by short term, which is we just closed our eyes to one of the most fundamental issues that defines the community.

What do you see as the challenge and hope for immigration?

My hope is that this really awful public extremist debate is actually creating a space for people to struggle and decide we really

are a country built on immigration.

Looking at our own behavior is going to underscore why it's worth preserving democracy and treating people with compassion and inclusivity. That's what we've been try to do at Impact. This is going to be a moment of reckoning.

We're sitting in Highland Coffee, one of the new Silver Spring hangouts created by an Ethiopian entrepreneur. Isn't this an example of the transformed and transforming culture of Silver Spring?

Absolutely. Our community is completely benefiting from the decisions of people to come here from other countries.

I also want to acknowledge there's an underlying pain that's being exposed which is the unresolved relationship between the African American community and the mainstream white community. The immigrant debate has just highlighted the lack of resolution.

What do you see as our challenges in terms of the local economy?

A lot of times community activists think that anyone who is part of the capitalist system is out to do bad things. It's not true. We are in a capitalist society.

I'm asking business leaders and community activists to communicate with each other. We have to find common ground in this private market system.

What are local actions that inspire you?

One of the things that inspired me the most last year was this group of immigrant parents who put a little ad in the Voice and other papers to find volunteers to organize a homework club for their kids. They made sure each kid was fully supported each week. That was cool.

Another was this woman, Delilah, who saw the flood at Charter House and took it upon herself to organize an evacuation plan for her building. She met with other residents, and they met with the police department and fire department and got it together.

Or this other woman who moved here and was lonely and gathered other residents who never talked to exchange clothes, and they started having a great time.

For me it's all about that Gandhi quote, "Be the change you want to see

Founded in 1999, Impact Silver Spring's mission is "to create the capacity needed to build and sustain Silver Spring as a thriving, multicultural community [by] aising awareness, developing leadership, building relationships, fostering dialogue [and] facilitating collaborative action."

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