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Paul Hall Tries To Build A Center, Rebuild His Life

February 10, 1997 | By Gary Marx, Tribune Staff Writer.



In a cavernous half-constructed building on the South Side, Rev. Paul Hall and a dozen of his followers--mostly women and their children--are holding hands and shouting prayers above the roar of kerosene heaters that cut into the icy air.

The gigantic brick structure, which covers nearly half a city block, is illuminated only by a string of bare light bulbs hanging overhead. Hall and his followers huddle in a makeshift office that has plywood walls and sheet plastic draped over the top. They sleep at night on bare mattresses.

FOR THE RECORD - Additional material published Feb. 27, 1997:

Corrections and clarifications.

A story Feb. 10 about Rev. Paul Hall's efforts to build a community center reported that court records showed contractors had placed \$63,000 in liens on his organization's property. In fact, because some of the liens were duplicated, the organization actually owed \$32,700 to the contractors. The liens have not been lifted, but the organization has paid off all but about \$4,000 of the debt. The Tribune regrets the error.

They have been camped out in the building for more than two months, praying for cash to turn this partially completed shell at 10140 S. Halsted St. into a community center--a facility that Hall began more than a decade ago.

Back then, he was a beloved and energetic community activist known for his in-your-face stand against gangs, guns and drugs, founder of a South Side club for boys at 9038 S. Ashland Ave. that bears his

name and pastor of Christ Universal Church next door to the club.

Today, Hall is just as widely known as a convicted child molester.

He was sentenced in 1989 for repeatedly sexually assaulting his 13-year-old foster son. At the trial, a second former foster child also testified that Hall forced him to have sex more than 100 times.

For Hall, 51, completing the facility--slated to be named the Paul J. Hall Family Center--has become a vehicle for his return to respectability and his attempt at redemption. It is Hall's chance to move from the shadows back into the spotlight.

But Hall's story is more than just a personal tale. He has mounted a high-profile campaign, seeking support from residents, ministers, business owners, politicians and others in the Washington Heights-Roseland area.

His proposition presents the community with a problem: Should they trust his stated intentions to address a community need and give him a second chance? Or should they dismiss him as a threat and a con artist?

So far, Hall has been met mostly with indifference. Few are lining up to write checks, though most are aware of his re-emergence.

"The dark clouds have put doubts in people's minds," said Willie Lomax, executive director of the Chicago Roseland Coalition for Community Control, referring to Hall's conviction. "If I were in his shoes, I don't think that I would have the nerve to continue to try to raise funds for a project for youths, especially when your name has been so tarnished."

When Bishop Larry Trotter, pastor of Sweet Holy Spirit Full Gospel Baptist Church, called a dozen ministers on Hall's behalf, "the response was not good," Trotter said. "When I left messages saying it was regarding Rev. Hall, I only got one return call.

"I've heard from some clergy who say they could embrace the project, but they don't want his name attached to it."

At the same time, few are lining up to protest Hall's efforts. One prominent minister, Rev. James Meeks of the Salem Baptist Church, is helping Hall secure a loan. Some detractors, especially prominent black leaders, refuse to criticize Hall publicly, concerned about breaking ranks with one of their own. There are residents who said they are willing to forgive him, and even some skeptics said the dire need for the center outweighs their concern about whether Hall represents a danger to the community.

There aren't nearly enough youth programs in the community to counter the gangs, residents said, and few people are able or willing to step forth and make as fervent and time-consuming a commitment as Hall.

"We must get this center built," Hall said. "This center will save lives."

Hall's vision is grandiose. His center would include several basketball courts, an ice hockey rink, a roller

rink, an indoor track, a vocational trade school and a computer room where youths can learn the latest technology.

He used to portray it as a future oasis for kids, but now--stung by criticism that, given his past, he shouldn't be supervising youths--he said he wants the center to focus more on young adults.

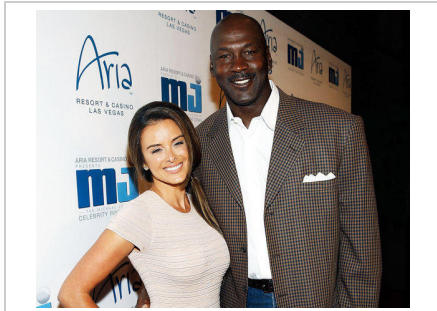
Despite having sold his home in South Holland and a large chunk of the South Halsted property, he remains bogged down in debt.

Three contractors have slapped liens on the property totaling more than \$63,000 because, they charge, Hall failed to pay them for their work. Hall also owes about \$30,000 to another contractor, according to court and property records. In recent weeks, Hall has met with a group of minority contractors in the hope that they will donate their expertise to finish the center.

Hall, who has been out of prison for about two years, said he's willing to drop his name from the facility if it means getting the project completed. He has always maintained his innocence, claiming he was set up by unnamed white politicians out to destroy a tough-minded and independent black leader.

"What am I supposed to do, hide my head in the sand?" Hall asked. "To those who feel I am guilty, forgive me. To those who think I am innocent, stay with me."

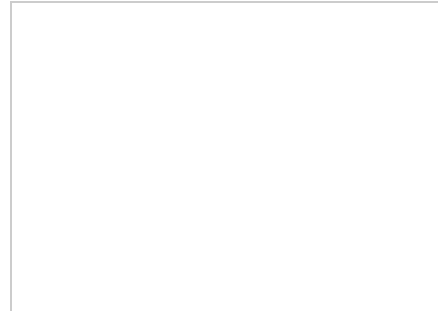
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