

In Repairs, a Lesson in Perseverance

By Erika Fitzpatrick

The hurricane got my attention, but the shooting was the shocker. That's when I decided to find out why the Prospect Learning Center across the street from my Capitol Hill rowhouse was seemingly abandoned during what was supposed to be a yearlong project to replace its exterior panel walls.

When I began inquiring about the delay, first in 2002, but in earnest in 2003, I never would have predicted that the story would have a happy ending. I was wrong.

[enlarge photo](#) 



To help get the Prospect Learning Center in Capitol Hill repaired and running, the author, Erika Fitzpatrick, left, worked with Principal Eve Byford-Peterson and D.C. public school staff members. (James M. Thresher -- The Washington Post)

— D.C. Crime —

- [Local Officials' Salaries Vault Past \\$200,000](#) (The Washington Post, Dec 16, 2004)
- [Senators Question Tuition Program](#) (The Washington Post, Dec 16, 2004)
- [Inaugural Events to Salute Armed Forces](#) (The Washington Post, Dec 16, 2004)
- [More Stories](#)

— D.C. Government —

- [Va. Baseball Boosters Show Restraint](#) (The Washington Post, Dec 16, 2004)
- [Sherman Howard: Church of God in Christ Bishop](#) (The Washington Post, Dec 16, 2004)
- [Local Officials' Salaries Vault Past \\$200,000](#) (The Washington Post, Dec 16, 2004)
- [D.C. Crime Watch](#) (The Washington Post, Dec 16, 2004)
- [More Stories](#)

—Free E-mail Newsletters—

- Today's Headlines & Columnists
[See a Sample](#) | [Sign Up Now](#)
- Breaking News Alerts
[See a Sample](#) | [Sign Up Now](#)

By 2003, the old walls of the school, which serves children with learning disabilities, were missing. The only things separating the interior classrooms from the elements were a few pieces of plastic, now dangling in the wind after Hurricane Isabel.

About two months later, as I sat watching crime-show reruns, the pop of real bullets rang out. The victim lay bleeding steps from my front door on the school's side yard. The yard, like the entire site, had been left unsecured by the missing contractors, who neglected to install a temporary construction fence. The police discovered that drug users had been sneaking through a flimsy plywood door to shoot up in the facility's basement. The school's rear playground, in the shadow of the newly completed Sherwood Family Recreation Center, had been virtually destroyed by neglect and vandalism.

Here we had a D.C. public school that resembled a listing old warship, ready to keel over and sink, sitting next to a new, multi-million-dollar recreation center. The juxtaposition was too disturbing to ignore.

Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner Joseph Fengler, a neighbor and I met with Tommy Wells, the local school board representative, and several Army Corps of Engineers and D.C. Public School (DCPS) workers in the lobby of the school. With the help of Francine Edmonds, our Ward 6 neighborhood services administrative assistant, that meeting led to the installation of a temporary fence. It also launched a yearlong battle to cajole the Corps, which works with DCPS on school renovations, to do right by the Prospect Goding community. (The school is usually called Prospect Goding because it is located in the old Goding Elementary School.) The folks at that late-2003 meeting agreed to convene every month to update the community on progress (or lack thereof) at the site. A series of mishaps, we were told, contributed to the delay and further deterioration of the building. The Corps took some responsibility for the state of affairs (never enough, in my book) but also blamed DCPS for neglecting the facility's roof, which leaked and caused damage. The blame game probably continues today as the Corps and DCPS hash out who owes what to whom.

What's more important is that eventually several DCPS officials -- including Ray Bryant, chief of special education reform; Gary Cooper and Renee Brown of DCPS's facilities; Prospect's deeply committed principal, Eve Byford-Peterson; and teacher Alva Abdussalaam -- stepped into the breach. A few others and I met with this core group regularly over the next year, not only to push the Corps to replace the school's walls and the roof, but to come up with a plan to fully modernize the building.

Bryant wrested additional funds for the project, often, in the words of Peterson, from "thin air," while the burly and jovial Cooper, whose rapid pace in getting repairs accomplished no doubt bewildered the Corps's project managers, took over day-to-day site management. Brown worked miracles handling the procurement morass, met regularly with contractors, and fought day and night to meet the self-imposed deadline of bringing the kids back from their temporary location at Douglass Junior High School by the start of the 2004-2005 school year.

Perhaps to the surprise of the Corps and to the eternal delight of us all, the students returned from their temporary location in mid-October, welcomed by teachers who can now throw up the shades and let in a flood of sunshine, not water. It took more than two years to get the renovations completed. But the positive ending to this public school story is a testament not to privatization or school choice or military precision, but to the work of DCPS personnel whose pride and unflagging dedication to the kids in their care always trumped blame and finger-pointing. Bryant's dedication to his students and Cooper and Brown's take-no-prisoners attitude left Prospect with modern windows and new roofing, painting, furniture and technology, as well as a playground, iron fence and state-of-the-art teaching tools. The work is not done. Peterson, in addition to the huge task of managing an urban school in an often turbulent system now acclimating under a new superintendent, has to handle a long list of tasks remaining from the construction phase. But she's thrilled that Prospect's students are now learning in a bright and cheerful place that is centrally located for District residents. The landscape is now ringed with new trees donated by the Casey Trees Endowment Fund, and spring bulbs will be planted. The community is pleased, too, as evidenced by the "Welcome Back" sign in a resident's window greeting teachers and students. Our monthly construction meetings are no longer necessary, but Peterson invited me to sit on the school's restructuring council so I can continue to participate in a small way to Prospect's continuing improvement. But even when that phase is over, a great respect for the daily hard work of these public school professionals -- against daunting odds -- will endure. This project should never have gotten so far off track, but to see it turned completely around shows that perseverance is rewarded, even in a public school environment often described as beleaguered, chaotic or even broken. That's a pretty good lesson and, for a change, a happy ending.

Erika Fitzpatrick was born in the district, grew up in Massachusetts and has lived on Capitol Hill for nearly 10 years. She reports on government programs for Congressional Digest Corp., a locally based publishing company, and, in her spare time, enjoys gardening, visual art and tennis.

[Print This Article](#)
[E-Mail This Article](#)

© 2004 The Washington Post Company

Advertising Links

[What's this?](#)

[Colleges in Prospect Park, PA](#)

Search our listings for schools in Prospect Park, and request a free Infopak from the Pennsylvania colleges of your choice.

college.us.com

[Attend College in Prospect Park, PA](#)

Enhance your earning power with a degree from American Intercontinental University Online. Request complimentary info here.

aiu-schools.org

[Prospect Park Schools](#)

Advance your career. Get all the information you need to make the right choice: we researched all Pennsylvania Online Schools: associates, bachelors, masters, doctorate. Request info here.

Request info here.

www.onlinecollegereview.com