

Founder Series — Sarah “Sally” Metzger

by Samantha Long



HOME is excited to introduce our new “Founder Series.” Many individuals over the years have helped HOME grow into the organization it is today and played an integral role in the history of fair housing in Western New York – most notably, those who were here in the beginning and who continue the fight for fair housing to this day. HOME would like to recognize its founding generation with this series and share their stories.

Sarah “Sally” Metzger has been a member of HOME since it was first founded in 1963 by members of the Buffalo Area Council of Churches. That’s over 50 years! She joined the Board around 1966 and was Secretary of the Board for many years.

Sally was born in New York City and raised in Ithaca, NY. She attended Swarthmore College just outside Philadelphia, PA where she majored in Zoology. This was also where she first became interested and involved in solving urban problems. While at Swarthmore, Sally began attending a weekend camp run by the Religious Society of Friends and aimed at exposing students to urban issues. The group would go into the city to volunteer, doing things like helping to repair homes and observing Sunday morning city court. One of Sally’s classmates was Amy Hecht, wife of Dr. James Hecht, who would later play a leading role in HOME and who chronicled the early years of the fair housing movement in America, including HOME in particular, in his 1970 book, *Because It Is Right: Integration in Housing*.

One incident that affected Sally deeply and contributed to her becoming

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After Home is Burned Down, Refugee Waits for Justice

by DeAnna Eason

Born and raised in Rwanda, Fidele* and his family fled to Zaire in 1994 during a time of political unrest and mass genocide. His moment of peace and security in Zaire was short-lived before the First Congo War began in 1996. After witnessing the slaughter of many innocents and other horrendous acts of violence, Fidele fled to Tanzania and lived in a refugee camp for two years. It was at this camp where he was first introduced to the notion of “The American Dream.” United States refugee workers spoke to him of education, employment, and the opportunity to purchase his own home. He was enticed with the idea of starting a brand new life — a peaceful and better life.



Client’s house after first arson.

In 1998, Fidele’s dream became a reality. He moved to the United States and lived in New Hampshire before he was invited to Lackawanna, New York by a close friend. Fidele was told that although finding work might be difficult, the Buffalo area was a great place to buy a nice home. It wasn’t long before he was able to find a stable job, and Fidele began to faithfully save his money to purchase a home.

By 2010, Fidele was shown a HUD house that he immediately fell in love with. It was a duplex located in the Old First Ward on Mackinaw Street. Fidele was able to pay cash for it out of his five years of savings, and he closed on his home in January 2011. It was perfect; he would live in the lower flat with his son and rent out the upper unit to good tenants. Though it would be a while before he could move in, it was an affordable fixer-upper that he would take

pride in once he was finished. Fidele was finally the rightful owner of a piece of the “American Dream,” but then, it was all taken away from him.

After work on Saturday, March 12, 2011, Fidele headed to the house, which he had been fixing up for the past two months. When he arrived, he immediately noticed smoke streaming from the rear of the house and could smell gasoline. Fidele immediately called 911. He was later informed by a fire investigator that in addition to setting



The vacant lot where client’s house once stood.

fire to his home, someone had entered through the back of the house, broke out several windows, and smashed the door to the upper unit. Fidele was angry and in shock but assumed it was the work of vandals.

Fidele was not thwarted by the damage to his home. He worked hard

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From the Director:

Positive Movement on County Fair Housing Law

by Scott W. Gehl

The Erie County Fair Housing Partnership is an organization of two dozen government agencies, banks, realtors and non-profits dedicated to promoting fair housing. In 2014, the Partnership proposed legislation to outlaw source of income discrimination across all of Erie County. Additionally, the proposed legislation will require larger housing providers to use affirmative fair housing marketing to attract diverse applicants, and it will encourage cities and towns to adopt inclusionary zoning so that a percentage of new multi-family housing would be affordable to families of limited means.

The Fair Housing Partnership's proposed Erie County Fair Housing Law continues to move forward. At the invitation of sponsor Betty Jean Grant, Roseann Scibilia (past president of the Partnership) and I met with five members of the legislative minority and staff. We have also had a series of engaging discussions with members of the majority.

Meanwhile, community leaders have begun to line up in support: Francisco Vasquez, CEO of Child & Family Services, was the first to endorse the Partnership's legislation.

In the weeks since Dr. Vasquez's letter, support has come from Mary Shine, executive director of the Rental Assistance Corporation; Ronald Silverio, CEO of the Evergreen Association; Matthew Crehan Higgins, senior director of the Pride Center of WNY; Elizabeth Huckabone, president of Belmont Housing Resources for WNY; Rhonda Frederick, president of People Inc.; Dennis Walczyk, CEO of Catholic Charities; Karen Diemunsch, executive director of Southtowns Rural Preservation Company; Megan Burns-Moran, executive director of West Side Neighborhood Housing Services; and Brenda McDuffie, president of the Buffalo Urban League.

In the first days of November, we were honored to receive a letter of support from the Most Reverent Richard J. Malone, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Buffalo. Bishop Malone is a Friend of HOME and, like previous bishops of the eight county Diocese, has been an ardent supporter of fair housing. Other significant endorsements are expected in coming weeks.

Roseann Scibilia, the first woman to serve as Clerk of the Legislature, is optimistic that this measure will come to a vote in the first quarter of 2016. In the nation's sixth most racially segregated metropolitan area, the arc of history is especially long, but it does still "bend toward justice."

Remembering Bette Blosat

During HOME's first years as a professionally staffed organization, we were fortunate that our meager finances were overseen by a vigilant Board of Directors and incredibly diligent Treasurers. In 1982, engineer Ray Griffenhagen handed over HOME's books to an accounting professional, Bette Blosat.

Bette kept our books and literally wrote our checks. Watching her work, I became the first Executive to gain her trust. Eventually I set down her way of doing things onto paper and then HOME, in the pre-computer age, brought the financial functions within the staff. Still, every second Wednesday morning, I would drive to Bette's office where she would examine our work and counter-sign the checks. At a time when HOME's budget barely exceeded \$60,000, Bette generously donated thousands of dollars of in-kind services each year.

Far from the archetypal staid accountant, Bette was also a character of the first order whose memory I shall always cherish. I was saddened to learn of her passing. When paying respects, I told her son, Greg, that the lessons Bette taught so long ago remain an important factor in HOME's survival. Her legacy lives on as we continue our important work.

An Intro to Our New Education Specialist

Katherine Sponaugle joined HOME as our new Education Specialist in September 2015. She is a graduate of SUNY Geneseo.

What led you to apply to work at HOME?

I am committed to civil rights issues and was impressed with HOME's mission and impact. It is important to examine the condition of Buffalo objectively and find positive solutions to its problems. HOME is one of those "positive solutions."

How does your background lend itself to your new position at HOME?

I worked with United Way for two years as Special Projects Coordinator, where I was tasked with a variety of projects from archiving United Way's 100-year history to raising money for local Veterans' agencies by selling "Operation United" shirts. Through these projects, I was able to learn more about our community's challenges, collaborate with myriad WNY organizations during United Way's annual "Spring It On" fundraiser, and examine the long history of our community's charity and generosity.

I also worked as a freelance writer for several years, which mostly involved creating press releases and copy, writing proposals, and editing — skills that certainly come in handy in my new position. I have a passion for direct service work and have volunteered extensively with literacy programs and prisoner reentry organizations.

What are some of your tasks as Education Specialist?

It's my job to spread community education on fair housing law, tenant and landlord rights, and HOME's services. This involves mailings, outreach to the press, and landlord-tenant fair housing trainings. So far, I have conducted educational presentations at the University Heights Collaborative, Niagara Branch Library, Friends of Night People, University at Buffalo, and more. If you are interested in offering a fair housing training to your staff or clients, please contact me at (716) 854-1400 ext. 22 or ksponaugle@homeny.org.

What are some interesting facts about you?

I am a double lung transplant survivor of 3½ years, which is my constant motivation to push hard and approach life with determination. I'm an author and a lifelong cellist, and I'm currently pursuing my masters in criminal justice from Boston University online. I'm happily married, and we have two rescue dogs named Bonnie and Clyde (no coincidence for someone interested in criminology!).



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ing so dedicated to the Civil Rights Movement happened when she was still living in Philadelphia. She was traveling to Washington, D.C. with a young doctor from India, someone with whom she worked. Sally was going to sightsee and the doctor was going on business, so they had decided to make the trip together. They stopped at a restaurant off the highway for lunch, and the restaurant refused to serve Sally and her travel companion because of his color. In our interview, Sally said she had never encountered blatant discrimination like that before in her life.

“It was a shock and so demeaning,” she recalled.

After graduating from Swarthmore, Sally lived and worked in Philadelphia for some time before moving to Buffalo for a Research Assistant position at Roswell Park Cancer Institute. Buffalo is where she eventually met her late hus-

band Ernie Metzger at a dance on North Street. They raised three children together.

Sally says she “always kept her eyes open as to how she could remain involved” with the urban issues she first learned about in Philadelphia.

The group of HOME’s founding members held open meetings every month. At times, there were upwards of 500 people in attendance.

The restaurant refused to serve Sally and her travel companion because of his color.

Sally assisted the early organization in bulk mailings and increasing membership. She occasionally acted as a tester (someone who plays the role of a home seeker and tests for discrimination by housing providers). For years, she participated in

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a suburban committee under the leadership of Paul Rosenthal. The committee visited affordable housing for seniors in Amherst and prepared a slideshow presentation for inner-city senior groups.

“It was an exciting time and a big part of my life for years,” says Sally.

I asked Sally what she saw as still being a major obstacle to fair housing in Buffalo, and she said, “There are groups that need much more affordable housing...and we need to stand up for our recent immigrants to make sure they are accepted. I hope HOME will write in Insight that the organization is not afraid of assisting Syrians and other refugees from the Middle East.”

In 1989, Sally was awarded the James Crawford Award for outstanding service. She remains a dedicated HOME member to this day, and the staff and Board are so thankful for her and all she has helped to accomplish for fair housing over the years.

After Home is Burned Down, Refugee Waits for Justice

every day to repair and renovate it into a safe and comfortable haven. By the month of May, Fidele had spent several thousands of dollars and countless hours repairing and furnishing the house and had decided that May 24th would be the day he would move in. On May 23rd, he arrived on Mackinaw to find only a burnt shell of his house. It had been set on fire the day before, but none of his neighbors had his contact information to provide to the police and fire department. Fidele walked through the rubbish numb and in complete and utter shock. His hopes, dreams, and hard work were ash and debris under his feet. He was not able to find one salvageable item that would serve as tangible proof of any financial or emotional investment.

Authorities questioned Fidele. The fact that there were two fires at the same address caught the attention of the FBI, Buffalo Fire Marshall, and the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives. This time, they knew that this was not just an act of ignorance at the hands of vandals but an act of hatred toward Fidele’s color and national origin. According to a *Buffalo News* article, the investigators suspected the

house was set afire by a small group of residents of the predominately White Old First Ward who did not want the Black man living there.

After the fires, Fidele became a different person. Although a man of strong faith in God, he became depressed and suffered from insomnia. Whenever he wasn’t focused on work or family, his mind would shift to the blackened shell of his house. He could still smell the burnt wood and feel the debris underfoot. He would tell himself that he had nothing left and therefore nothing to live for. The “American Dream” had turned into an American Nightmare, and the refugee who escaped genocide and other political horrors was felled by racial discrimination.

In November of 2011, Fidele had to testify before the grand jury. While watching the news in January of 2012, he learned that Michael Fijal, a lifelong Old First Ward resident and board member of the Old First Ward Community Association, had been indicted by the U.S. Attorney’s office on two arson-related charges. These charges carried a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison, a \$250,000

fine, or both. A day or two later, Fidele received a letter from the U.S. Department of Justice informing him that Fijal was charged with conspiracy and damaging/destroying a building by fire. Prosecutors suspected that the then-58-year-old conspired with one or more individuals to torch the property, even withdrawing money from his personal HSBC account on at least two occasions to fund the arson. The indictment was the result of the joint investigation of the FBI, The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, and Buffalo Fire Department. The FBI offered a \$10,000 reward to anyone who provided information that led to an arrest and conviction of responsible parties Fijal may have conspired with, and billboards were erected throughout the city advertising the reward.

In September of 2014, Fijal pled guilty to arson conspiracy; he now faces up to 33 months in prison and will have to pay up to \$150,000 in restitution. The plea deal also included Fijal acknowledging being part of a conspiracy to destroy Fidele’s home. Although years have passed since the fires, Fidele is still awaiting justice. Since January of 2015,

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White Collar Crimes in Housing

by Katherine Sponaugle

What images come to mind when you hear the word “crime”? When we see crimes in the media, they are usually conventional or “street” offenses: violent felonies, robbery, drug dealing, and so on. Politicians pontificate their intentions to “tackle crime” and “make our streets safe,” yet white collar (occupational) crime is often excluded from the discussion completely.

What if we changed these optics? If political figures and media spoke more punitively about white collar crime, would it cause the general public to view it more seriously? Even more, could it perhaps result in a decline in conventional crimes?

To define: white collar crimes are violations of law committed within an occupation. While this terminology might conjure images of Enron and Bernie Madoff, it actually covers a spectrum of illegal activity. In the housing market, one might associate white collar crimes with mortgage fraud or any of the reckless lending practices that led to the 2008 market crash – but they can also appear in the forms of housing code violations, security deposit fraud, and discrimination.

HOME’s work is primarily focused on white collar crimes associated with the latter scenarios. This category

of crime is not reported as often as conventional crimes and does not receive the same publicity, nor are white collar perpetrators punished in the same way. However, they are far more prevalent and continually impact neighborhood prosperity on a profound level.

Power Abuse and Violations of Trust

White collar crimes often occur in environments where an individual or group is in a position of power. For instance, low-income tenants might not have the capital to move to a safer apartment or file a small claims case against a negligent landlord. This puts them in a vulnerable position when it comes to demanding the proper conditions they deserve, especially if they believe the landlord will retaliate. Other times, absentee landlords will list their home address in an entirely different state to make it more difficult for tenants to sue in Small Claims Court.

In more extreme cases, housing providers or real estate agents might perpetuate segregation through discriminatory practices. By professional status, real estate agents are in a position of power; clients trust that agents will provide accurate information and conduct their job to the best of their abilities regardless of the buyer’s background. A violation of that pact is a serious matter.

The National Fair Housing Alliance (NFHA) recently conducted a study in several US cities to see if real estate agents are steering individuals to certain neighborhoods based on their race. To investigate, NFHA sent out “testers,” each bearing proof of a mortgage pre-approval that allowed enough, if not more, to afford a house of their choice.

The only difference between the testers was race.

The inquiries revealed a disturbing trend: white buyers who requested to see houses in predominantly black neighborhoods were only shown homes in predominantly white neighborhoods. When the buyers questioned why they were not being shown housing in the neighborhoods they requested, the agent explained that the schools were undesirable. The same was true for black buyers: after requesting to see houses in predominantly white neighborhoods, they were steered to neighborhoods with a 75% or higher black population. The real estate agents explained to the black buyers that they would “get a better value” in such neighborhoods.

Throughout this study, both white and black buyers were discriminated against. These findings also support conclusions by other studies that segregation is perpetuated by discriminatory practices, not necessarily by income disparity or personal choice.

Do we consider these prejudicial real estate agents “criminals”? Though steering is a hidden form of discrimination, it is still a violation of the law with detrimental consequences. It is possible the perpetrators did not view their acts as immoral or particularly damaging, and perhaps maintaining segregated neighborhoods was not their immediate intention. Intent aside, getting caught red-handed aside, punishment (or lack thereof) aside – would they have continued to break fair housing laws if they felt greater stigma in doing so?

While no studies have been conducted on the amount of steering

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White Collar Crimes In Housing

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specifically in Buffalo, NY, HOME witnesses it on a case-by-case basis, and our reported incidents of housing discrimination have increased by 30% in the past year, with over half relating to race/color and Source of Income discrimination.

The Ripple Effect

To fully understand the effects of white collar crimes, we must also acknowledge their victimization. Victims of housing discrimination may come to feel a deep sense of powerlessness and even worthlessness and humiliation, but the effects extend beyond that. After all, where we live determines our access to transportation, good education, jobs, safety, health services, and more.

Beyond individual victims, we see entire communities in jeopardy because of white collar crimes in housing.

Buffalo remains one of the most racially segregated metropolitan areas in the nation. Our city has also been named one of the top 10 most dangerous in the US by Forbes, which rated cities with populations over 200,000 according to violent crime rates per capita – and that correlation is no accident. In blunt juxtaposition, several of Buffalo's

primarily white suburbs have been named in the top 50 safest cities in New York by SafeWise, including Orchard Park, Amherst, Tonawanda, Lancaster, Depew, Kenmore, West Seneca, and North Tonawanda.

Why does this pattern exist?

Acclaimed criminologist John Braithwaite would argue that the relationship between segregation and crime is causal; in other words, racial inequity leads to conventional and white collar crime. He explains in a 1992 essay, "Inequality of wealth and power is structurally humiliating... [It] undermines respect for the dominion of others. And a society where respect for dominion is lost will be a society riddled with crime" (from *White Collar Crime Reconsidered*).

Americans hold tight to the adage, "If you try hard enough, you will succeed." This may be true for many, especially those who already possess wealth and opportunity. However, for those who experience the most detrimental effects of discrimination, segregation, and disadvantageous housing, the difficulty in attaining upward mobility can engender feelings of inferiority, desperation,

and a loss of personal power, which — according to Braithwaite's theory of structural humiliation — can often result in criminal behavior. As mentioned earlier, inegalitarian structures also enable people in positions of power to take advantage of people who lack it. This might all sound far-fetched; however, while Braithwaite's theory is not an all-encompassing explanation of crime, it is a widely accepted contribution to causation theory.

Reframing the Language

Moving forward, what would happen if we described fair housing law violations as criminal rather than immoral? A discussion on morality invites people to blur lines around a clear-cut issue, but by definition, discrimination is a criminal act — and one with many victims. If a society reframes the way it thinks, it can encourage better actions by its citizens, even those with a crooked moral code. From there, we could shift to a more positive ripple effect: stricter adherence to fair housing, more diverse communities, better economic opportunities, less inequity, lower crime rates, and a more stable society.

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After Home is Burned Down, Refugee Waits for Justice

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at least five sentencing/status hearings have been scheduled and adjourned, most often at defense counsel's request. Each time, Fidele has taken off work, ready to look into the face of the man who admitted responsibility for burning down his home. Although Fidele has been told several times that his appearance isn't necessary, he insists on being present. When asked why he desires so strongly to attend the hearings, his answer is always the same, "I would like to see the man who paid someone to burn down my house. As far as I know, we have never seen each other face to face . . .

never spoken to each other; I didn't even know his name until I heard it on the news. Yet his hatred is so strong for me, because of who God made me, that he would burn down what I worked so hard for and take everything from me. I would like to ask him why."

The lot still stands empty at 179 Mackinaw. The land is still owned by Fidele who is renting a modest apartment in Lackawanna and works two jobs to pay the taxes on his lot. He says he will sell it after this nightmare is resolved. Maybe then he will be able to sleep.

Note: In early 2012, HOME assisted Fidele in filing a discrimination case with the US Department of Housing and Urban Development against Fijal asserting that Fidele's home was torched as the result of his race/color and national origin, but the case cannot move forward until this criminal matter has concluded. HOME remains an advocate and support for Fidele through this challenging situation.

*Client's name has been changed at his request.



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