EMPOWERING THROUGH EMPLOYMENT

A healthy community is dependent on a healthy economy and healthy people. Neighborhoods struggling with crime and poverty are often affected by unemployment and a lack of commercial development. Such is the case with Highland Park, where high rates of returning offenders are also impacting the health of the community. Jobs and job training are essential to the long-term well-being of both individuals and the community. The establishment of positive commercial activity in Highland Park is needed to provide jobs and to draw resources from across the metropolitan area.

At the heart of the Boaz & Ruth vision are dynamic social enterprises that provide on-the-job training and work readiness skills for individuals needing a second chance. As participants encounter new or challenging scenarios at work, they are able to discuss those situations in classes designed to strengthen the emotional competencies needed to obtain and maintain a job. Employment in the six social enterprises that we call “Life Labs” not only helps participants build skills, but also establishes a foundation of positive work history.

As trainees near completion of the program, they are assisted in identifying the next step. For some, it is continued education at a trade school or college, but for most it is obtaining a full-time job. Through our network of supporters and business owners, the Transition and Jobs Connection Teams work one-on-one to establish connections between graduates and potential employers.

72% of graduates obtained a job after graduation; of those, 80% maintained a job for at least a year

- Currently Boaz & Ruth provides approximately 60 paid positions for employees and program participants.
- Between 2002-2011 $8,000,000 flowed back into the community as trainee stipends and an additional $1,000,000 in payroll to staff, many of whom live in Highland Park.

“Tough times don’t last forever, tough people do. I have been in business 37 years. I have seen the community fluctuate between good and bad. Boaz and Ruth came in and brought a lot of positives to Highland Park... it is wonderful to see the healthy steps [program participants] have taken and how they are putting their gifts to use to build our community.”

- Michael Simpson, Owner, Simpson’s Market, pictured above with B&R Founder & CEO Martha Rollins.

Approximately 30 men and women are employed through Boaz & Ruth’s transitional staffing partnership with the City of Richmond.
EMPOWERING THROUGH SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Located along a four-block section of the Meadowbridge Road commercial corridor, Boaz & Ruth’s six social enterprises are designed to achieve both financial and social returns. By establishing a critical mass of positive enterprise in an area where just ten years ago 80% of the buildings were boarded up, Boaz & Ruth’s social enterprises are helping to prepare this corridor for the return of mainstream commerce. The positive presence of the social enterprises is helping to create a new normal—one of open and inviting stores for the community—a norm of hospitality.

At the same time, the social enterprises—what we call “Life Labs”—are providing paid positions for people needing a second chance. Here, men and women who helped destroy a community have an opportunity to rebuild it. We use the name “Life Labs” because here program participants put into practice the standards of workplace behavior that they learn in our classroom. The Life Labs also offer a meeting place for diverse shoppers and diners.

Finally, the social enterprises are a source of revenue for both the organization of Boaz & Ruth and the Highland Park community, as indicated by the figures to the left.

Significantly, Boaz & Ruth’s commercial presence has encouraged other entrepreneurs to open businesses in the area. In addition, two youth-focused nonprofits have opened space along the Meadowbridge Corridor, adding to the neighborhood’s positive presence.
Before Boaz & Ruth opened in December 2002, over half the buildings in the surrounding area were empty, creating urban blight and fostering crime. Since then, Boaz & Ruth has renovated thirteen commercial and residential buildings in the Highland Park neighborhood including the main retail and training facility, a mixed-use building, a clothing thrift store, nine neighboring houses and Fire House 15 Café. For struggling neighbors, the reclamation of neglected properties is a powerful metaphor for the restoration of broken lives and a depressed community.

Neighbor Gail Hicks says she is so happy to see Boaz & Ruth at work in Highland Park. “I see more people fixing up the neighborhood again – and Boaz & Ruth has played a part in that. There has been so much hardship, neighbors are glad to work with Boaz & Ruth here.”

**Transitional Housing & Mixed Use**

1. 1203 Giles Ave—2008* — housing for 4 people
2. 1213 Giles Ave—2007* — housing for 5 people
3. 1207 Giles Ave—2005* — housing for 5 people
4. 1211 Giles Ave—2012* — housing for 3 people
5. 1212 Highland View Ave—2004* — housing for 4 people
6. 3005 1st Ave—2010* — housing for 6 people
7. 3007 1st Ave—2009* — housing for 3 trainees & a family
8. 3019 1st Ave—2009* — housing for 6 people
9. 3096 Meadowbridge Road—2007* — (mixed use)
   3 apartments and retail space
10. Community Garden Site/Future Habitat House site
11. B&R and University of Richmond Habitat House owned by program graduates, completed 2008

**Commercial Revitalization**

9. 3030 Meadowbridge Road—2002* — Harvest Thrift Store, computer lab, & training center
10. 3011 Meadowbridge Road—2006* — Fire House 15 Café
11. 3001-3009 Meadowbridge Road—2007* — Benefield Building offices, Sunny Days Clothing Thrift Store

* year acquired
In our first two years of presence in Highland Park (2003-04), there were nine murders in Highland Park, including one in front of B&R’s Harvest Store that took the life of a 15 year old. Still, Boaz & Ruth chose to remain and fill the emptiness with a positive presence. By 2006, neighbors were beginning to see a change. One woman reported, “I have owned my house 11 years and have not felt safe enough to sit on my porch until this summer. It is because of Boaz & Ruth— the nice men who live in your house look out for me.”

By 2009 (and through 2011), overall crime in Highland Park was down 61%. That year, Boaz & Ruth, the Richmond Police Department and the Richmond City Sheriff’s Office were honored with a national MetLife Foundation Community-Police Partnership Award for extraordinary achievements in improving safety and spurring economic development in the Highland Park community.

Boaz & Ruth is humbled and proud to be a part of a community vision of Highland Park as a safe, beautiful, thriving community. We are working toward this vision through the North Richmond Revitalization Coalition (NRRC). The NRRC is a partnership of police, businesses, churches, schools, residents, and non-profit/civic organizations that work in unity for the common vision a safe, prosperous, vibrant and caring community.

A unifying force in these efforts is the Quality of Life Plan that was initiated in fall 2010 by Councilwoman Ellen Robertson through VCU’s Urban Planning Department. Assessing the assets and needs of Highland Park, the plan outlines four goals for a healthy community, three of which are closely aligned with the activities of Boaz & Ruth: Empowering People, Youth Development, Neighborhood Safety, and Workforce Development.

Additional partners in this effort include: Saving Our Youth, Seventh Street Memorial Baptist, Northside Outreach Center, Rubicon, Guardian Angels, Richmond Police Department, Fresh Anointing Cathedral, and 5th Street Baptist Church.

L to R: Tommy Cox (Saving Our Youth), Mike Simpson (Simpson’s Market), Butch Johnson (Northside Outreach Center), Larry Miles (Fresh Anointing Cathedral), Martha Rollins, Jo White (Saving Our Youth)