THE OLIVER CENTER is the perfect alternative to street corners and idle hours for many East Baltimoreans. Arts and crafts, sports, exercise classes, movies and even a canteen make the center a magnet for those of all ages.

OUR NEIGHBORHOODS

OLIVER STREET CENTER

By Arthur Johnson
AFRO Staff Writer

At a time when many recreation programs throughout the city are experiencing cuts, the Oliver Center, 1400 E. Federal St., is flourishing.

"We have made do with nothing, and by us being black, some people can't understand how we can have what we have," says Anthony Dease, director of the four-year-old center.

What the center has is five basketball teams, (The Oliver Bucks), two football teams (the Demons and the Spoilers), dance/exercise classes call Dease-ercise,

AFRO Photo by Paul A. Greene
ANTHONY DEASE, director of the Oliver Street Center, tries to expose the poverty stricken youth of East Baltimore to experiences and activities that will enrich their lives.

AFRO Photo by Paul A. Greene
THE OLIVER CENTER has reached out to East Baltimore youngsters.

craftmaking classes, a swimming program in its outdoor pool, and its own concession stand.

For the Christmas holidays, the center's pool table and ping pong game room has been turned into a Christmas shop stocked with handicrafts made in the community, including handmade jewelry, ceramics, macrame, crochet, dolls, stuffed animals and pillows. There are also books on sale.

Projects such as these help keep the Oliver Center head and shoulder above the problems faced by many other Baltimore recreation centers.

"Ten percent of the profits is put back into our crafts program and the rest goes to the craft makers," explains Deborah Morris,

AFRO Photo by Paul A. Greene
STUFFED ANIMALS and books on display in the Oliver Center Christmas Shop are just a part of the fundraising efforts of the center.

senior recreation leader at the center.

"The exercise program is the catalyst of the center. I get enough money from that to run the entire program," Dease says of his super-successful dance and exercise program.

"On file we have about 1,000 ladies. On an average day we have 150 to 200 women," he says.

Dease, a dancer by profession, attended classes with the National Dance Association and was certified and taught by the "mother

AFRO Photo by Karl Ferron
DEASE-ERCISE, LEAD by Oliver Center Director Anthony Dease draws figure conscious women from all over Baltimore City.

of aerobics," Jackie Sorenson. Because so many black women mistakenly thought that aerobics was helpful for weight loss, Dease, incorporated dance with exercise so that the Oliver Center could provide the slimming down exercises that the women sought.

The classes meet Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and attract women from all over the city.

Our smallest enrollment is kids. Most of the people enrolled here are over 18," says Ms. Morris.

Because of the large volume of people who regularly use the center, the federal government chose Oliver Center to be the site of the first recreation center concession stand.

"The government did a survey of centers and found out that this center had the most traffic and the most participation," Dease says.

The experimental federally-subsidized concession stand is run by Oliver Center Supervisor and Basketball Coach Bucky Lee. Offering hot dogs, pizza, soft drinks, sandwiches, popcorn, candy bars, potato chips and ice cream, the stand is manned by two teenagers, Rodney Lynch and Paul Lee from noon to 10 p.m.

Open since last April, the concession's equipment will be turned over to the Oliver Center next April and become self-supporting.

The Oliver Center was funded by an Open Space Grant four years ago.

"It had been proposed for years, but nothing had been done. Councilman DuBurns was instrumental in getting the center completed," says Dease.

Dease, who was born in the East Baltimore neighborhood but no longer lives there, formerly worked in the mayor's office and earned a degree in business.

"I was born in this area. There are so many drugs I figured we should be giving them something wholesome so that they are not exposed to drugs," he says, adding that kids often remain at the center until 11 at night.

Discipline, self-control and order are strictly enforced at the center also.

"In four years we've had one fight and two arguments. I close the gym if they can't resolve arguments." Because the youngsters know this, they become self-governing, he says,

Dease also does not allow youngsters who are not passing their courses in school to participate on the football and basketball teams.

"I ask to see report cards. How can you justify sending kids to a recreation center when they are failing?

"If you fail classes you can't play. Sometimes the kids bring in notes from their parents saying that they can play even if they've failed classes, but I say they can't play. Some parents don't care. I care," he says.

The majority of the parents lend a great deal of support to the center.

"They realize they don't want the kids on the corners and they cook and donate food for the banquets."

AFRO Photo by Karl Ferron
THE OLIVER CENTER FAMILY includes (l to r) Paul Lee, Rodney Lynch, Pat Price, Deborah Morris, Andre Smith and Andre Barnhardt.

Dease points out that most recreation centers have to lock their bathrooms to prevent kids from smoking marijuana. At Oliver Center Dease says they know that "if they went in the bathroom to smoke I would lock the door and call the cops."

Although he is a former resident of the area, Dease says he moved away long ago and had never been exposed to the "complete poverty" he now sees in the area.

"At Oliver Center I'm exposing these kids to things they have not had. We have a Betamax (home video movie machine) and Super T.V. for the kids since there are no movies in this area."

"We also take shopping trips to show them

AFRO Photo by Paul A. Greene
RODNEY LYNCH waits on customers in the Oliver Center's concession stand.

how to shop. Many of them have never been past Old Town Mall. We take them to Reading, PA and the shopping outlets," he says.

The center also sponsors skating and skiing trips.

This past August, the Oliver Center produced a stage version of the musical "The Wiz" for three days at Lake Clifton High School.

In previous years the center held mini Olympic games as its closing activity for its summer sports camp. "We gave certificates and trophies, but it hurt me to see the kids who didn't win trophies, Last year I decided to do something as a closing activity that everyone could participate in."

The center's production of "The Wiz" starred 144 children plus the teenagers who performed the starring roles.

"The first time we practiced together was the first day of the show," says Dease, because the main characters who played, Dorothy, The Lion, The Tin Man and The Scarecrow had to work during the day and could only rehearse at night.

The free performances were so well received that Dease is planning a stage production of "Staying Alive" to be performed by Oliver Center youngsters during the Christmas school break.

"The cast will be equally as large and we will try to perform at different high schools. The first show will be free for daycare centers and underprivileged kids. The rest of the show will as a fundraiser for the center's activities."

This year, why not try a live tree for a change?

It's the kind of a Christmas tree a partridge really might want to sit in, provided there aren't any pear trees nearby.

The live Christmas tree — nursery owners throughout the state report that more Maryland families are opting for this alternative to artificial trees bound for the attic and cut trees bound for the trash.

Available in the same varieties as cut trees, live trees are sold bagged and burlapped, with their roots firmly intact.

They don't come cheap. Live trees are three to four times as, expensive as their cut counterparts, says Frank Gouin, a University of Maryland professor of horticulture and Extension specialist.

But because they can be used inside for Christmas and replanted outside for the new year, shoppers who can't resist the smell of pine are overlooking their high price tags.

Says Gouin: "Consumers are investing in two trees for the price of one — one to unwrap presents under and the other to sit under when summer arrives."

That investment may backfire, however, without special care.

The survival of a living Christmas tree hinges on what nursery owners call "winter hardiness" — a plant's ability to withstand cold.

Explains Gouin: "Live Christmas trees that become too accustomed to warm indoor temperatures will not survive transplanting outdoors."

To guarantee your tree's survival, Gouin suggests keeping it indoors for no more than five days.

If you must store the tree, keep it outdoors in a shaded area that is protected from the wind and sun.

Check the plant's root ball frequently to make sure that the soil is moist.

Gouin also recommends the following steps:

—Before the ground freezes, dig a hole in your yard for your tree. The hole should be 18-24 inches in diameter and 15 inches deep.

—Prepare soil by mixing equal parts of peat moss or compost with garden loam soil. meal to each bushel of soil mix.

—When ready to plant, place your tree in the prepared hole and fill half the space around the root ball with soil mix.

Next, loosen the burlap from the root ball and finish filling the space.

—Pack the soil firmly and build a small trench 3-4 inches deep around the filled hole. Pour 3-5 gallons of water into the trench.

—Anchor the tree to the ground with clothesline tied to stakes outside the trench.

—Mulch the ground under the tree with leaves, straw, or wood chips. A 4-inch covering will keep the soil from freezing.

—Wrap the tree with burlap or cheesecloth for complete protection.

Do not use plastic and do not remove the covering until mid-March.

For more information on live Christmas trees, call your county Extension agent.

CHUCK BARRY carried Christmas tree home after making his selection at Memorial Stadium this week.

Christmas safety precautions

The Christmas and New Year holidays are fast approaching and many people are getting into the spirit of giving and sharing. While Christmas is a family time, it's also a time to take some common sense precaution to ensure your family's well-being, according to the Greater Baltimore Board of Realtors.

Look for U.L. (Underwriter Laboratories) labels on all lighting sets and appliances. Safety is particularly important when it comes to gifts for small children.

Be sure there are no sharp edges or small parts a toddler could swallow. Children's clothing and blankets should be fire-resistant

If you decide on a natural Christmas tree this year, give it the "bounce" test before you buy.

Just bounce the tree off the ground—if a lot of needles fall off, it's too dry and would be a fire hazard.

Once you find that perfect tree, saw an inch or two off the bottom of the trunk before you place it in a stand of water.

Christmas trees can be pretty thirsty, so check the water level often. Be sure your tree is positioned away from any heat source such as a radiator or fireplace.

Artificial trees should have fire-resistant labels. You should avoid stringing lights on metallic trees to eliminate the possibility of a shock hazard.

Check Christmas light-strings for loose or broken sockets and cords with bare wires.

In addition to safety labels, any lights you plan to use outdoors should be rated for outdoor use. Remember, it's safer to buy a new string of lights than to try to make it through one more holiday with lights that may be defective. Lights should be turned off when unattended.

Real mistletoe and poinsettias are pretty and romantic at Christmas, but the real thing also is poisonous. Keep them away from small children and pets.

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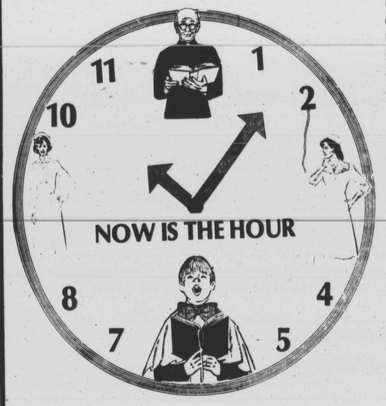

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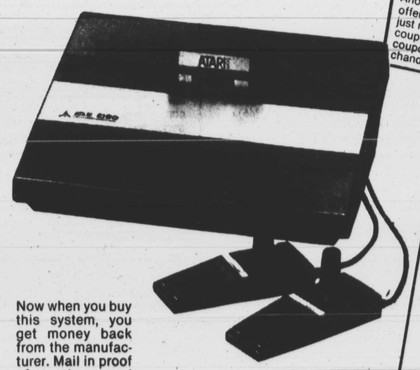

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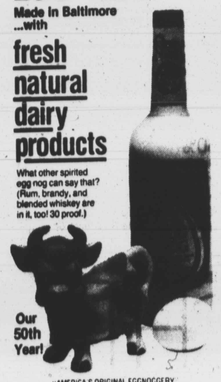

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