

NE Lot Source Of Pride in Kingman Park

By Jennifer Caspar
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Late nights, when rowdy youths pull up to the vacant lot between the 2100 blocks of D and E streets NE, it would be easy for neighbors in the brick row houses nearby to turn up their televisions, pull down their shades and hope the ruckus will stop.

Not Thomas William Jones.

The 75-year-old retired federal worker refuses to put up with the noise—much less the trash and destruction the intruders leave behind.

He marches right up to them, lets them know that drug enforcement agents have been photographing people and their cars there.

They soon take off, he said.

He has an investment in the little patch of green in the Kingman Park neighborhood that nobody will claim. Last year he spent his spare time turning what had become a junkyard dump into a pretty little corner park.

He cleared off the rubble and trash, spread some grass seed, stuck a few rose bushes in the earth and planted a little pine tree. Then he made it a regular part of his schedule to tend what the neighbors now call "Mr. Jones's park."

"I live here," he said

Explanation enough.

In fact, the former Government Printing Office employee and his wife, Mary, have lived on the block for 50 years and reared a son, who now lives two doors away.

They have also seen better and worse times for the lot behind them. In the 1940s, when the neighborhood was built, the city and homeowners put up a playground there. But 20 years later, the seesaws and swings had fallen down, and the lot had turned into a dump.

Irritated when he looked out his kitchen window and saw car parts, old appliances and used diapers, Jones started to clean up the lot last year. Now the grass is green and manicured, the small pine is slightly squashed by a few rough kids, and a picnic table and a few lawn chairs have been added—by Jones.

Jones said mowing the grass and tending



Federal retiree Thomas William Jones spends much of his time cleaning and pruning in vacant lot.

the roses are a small job. The big task is picking up after the drug dealers and other outsiders who feel any vacant lot in the city is a fair target for their trash.

"I look to find a body out there," he said. "Anything you name . . . I mean everything, condoms even."

Jones was one of 50 city residents honored a few weeks ago by D.C. Council member Nadine Winter (D-Ward 6) for beautifying their neighborhoods. Some picked up trash; others patched alley potholes. And it helps, Winter said, "because the government can only do so much."

Honorees, who included garden clubs and community groups were nominated by neighbors. Kingman Park resident Lorraine Powell nominated Jones:

"Like a magician, Mr. Jones turned a vacant lot filled with weeds, abandoned automobiles and other discarded litter into . . . a well-manicured miniature park for which he

provided the materials and the labor," she wrote. "So very pleasing to the eye, it's folks like Mr. Jones who make the world a better place to live."

Jones said he sometimes wishes his neighbors would get involved, too.

"They'll call me if someone's out there making noise or something. They call me: 'Mr Jones, so-and-so is going on out here on your picnic area.' I say, 'It's not my picnic area. It's the community's picnic area.'"

The park is "for everybody who wants to use it—that's really what it's for," Jones said, pointing to his two gas barbecue grills he often lends neighbors.

Last year, in fact, he ended up inviting the whole block to his family picnic for Labor Day. Three hundred turned out for the hot dogs, hamburgers, beer and snow cones—all at Mr. Jones's Park.

"There was a gang of kids in here," he said. "It was the most beautiful thing."