

PUBLIC DEFENDER
Englewood resident Butler, pictured on West 61st Street, leads the fight to restore her neighborhood to the safe community she remembers from her youth.



CAN ENGLEWOOD BE SAVED?

It looks so much better!" says Asiaha Butler, 35, gazing at a red brick home on Aberdeen Street in Englewood. The house had turned into a drug den after her grandfather moved out in 2007; now, it appears inhabited and tidy. She grew up just a few blocks away, and her grandfather's house was once the site of lively family gatherings. She met her husband, Antoine, also an Englewood native, at a get-together at a friend's house across the street.

"Someone's living here now," she says. "It's cared for."

Such signs give Butler hope that Englewood—one of Chicago's most crime-ridden and impoverished areas—can return to the neighborhood of her youth, when families chatted on stoops while kids played outside.

The area designated the Seventh District by the Chicago Police Department and known as "Greater Englewood" by many residents encompasses the neighborhoods of Englewood and West Englewood, stretching from 55th Street to 75th Street and from the Dan Ryan Expressway to Hamilton Avenue, plus several blocks east of the expressway on the northern end. In its 3.1 square miles (about the size of Lakeview), it's common to find trash-strewn

vacant lots, liquor stores with peeling signs, windowless storefront churches. On a recent Saturday, young men loiter at a gas station where many of the pumps don't work, drinking from bottles in brown bags in front of a cashier encased in bulletproof glass.

Englewood frequently makes headlines for violence. On the morning of March 29, two men ran down South Vincennes Avenue firing what appeared to be machine guns, according to one witness, causing a car to crash into a CTA bus and leaving 11 people injured. In the past 12 months, the Seventh District ranked second among the city's 25 police districts for homicide, with 41, and first for violent crime, with 2,364. The median for districts citywide was 13 and 897, respectively.

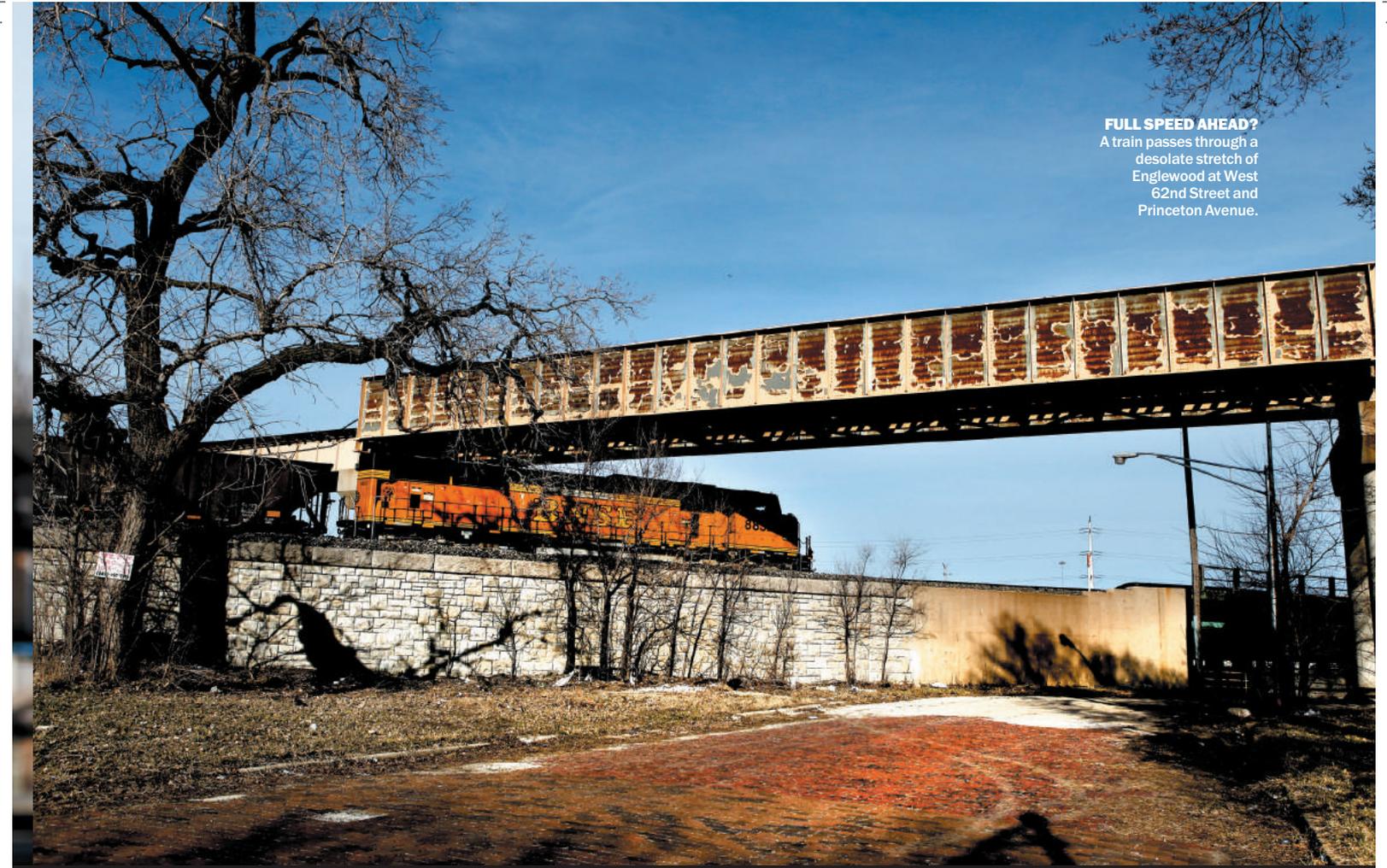
This year, the Woodstock Institute announced that Englewood and West Englewood were two of the top three neighborhoods in Chicago for number of foreclosed properties left abandoned. Together, the neighborhoods harbor more than 300 such homes. New Census figures show that Englewood lost nearly a quarter of its population over the past decade.

About three-quarters of Englewood's 38 schools are on probation for low academic

performance. There are no large grocery stores, cafés or art galleries. The neighborhood's only fine-dining restaurant, Sikia, closed to the public in February for lack of customers.

It hasn't always been this way. From the late 1800s to mid-1900s, Englewood was an upscale neighborhood. But as racial strife shook the 1950s and '60s, the majority of Irish, Swedish and German residents left Englewood while African-Americans moved in, many of them displaced from other neighborhoods by the building of the Dan Ryan. Institutional discrimination translated into banks refusing to lend money to people trying to start businesses or buy homes in African-American neighborhoods, and major grocery stores and other companies refusing to open branches. Though Englewood maintained the family-oriented culture Butler remembers, crime escalated in the mid-'80s as crack hit the streets and gangs became increasingly violent.

After all that, can Englewood be saved? Butler and other active residents think so. Their goals include securing more funding for job training and after-school programs; persuading local entrepreneurs and national companies to open grocery stores, restaurants, galleries and boutiques; lobbying for local political leadership,



FULL SPEED AHEAD?
A train passes through a desolate stretch of Englewood at West 62nd Street and Princeton Avenue.

Crime stats are bleak, and hundreds of homes lie abandoned. But some residents of this South Side neighborhood aren't giving up. By **Kari Lydersen** Photographs by **Allison Williams**

ideally obtained through redistricting that would divide Greater Englewood into two rather than six wards (see “Aldermanic shuffle,” page 21). If city officials, foundations and private investors back at least some of activists’ demands, the neighborhood may have a fighting chance.



With her wide, easy smile, Butler envisions a changed Englewood. She views areas like a decrepit stretch of 69th Street between Wentworth and Ashland Avenues as a blank canvas. The long-vacant Second Choice Lounge could be a café. The vast expanse at Wentworth could house an ice-cream shop, a tattoo parlor, a bakery.

Just north of this strip, Butler lives with her husband and 13-year-old daughter in a gray two-story house she bought in 2002. Her brother, his wife and four kids live on the second floor. The house next door is boarded up; her brother had rented an apartment there until it was foreclosed upon. Butler also owns a handsome graystone across the street, standing like a loose tooth between vacant parcels.

After getting a degree from the University of Phoenix and a job as supervisor of educational services at the Institute of Real Estate

Management downtown in 2000, Butler considered moving away from the hardscrabble South Side.

“But something just hit me,” Butler says, her signature big earrings flashing near her close-cropped dark hair. “If you move, you’re like everyone else who leaves the area when they think they’ve made it.”

In 2009, Butler began browsing volunteer opportunities in Englewood. But she soon became annoyed by do-gooders from outside the neighborhood who, in her view, zero in on the crime issue without understanding related factors, such as the need to pump funding into the organizations that keep youth off the streets in the first place.

“Outsiders do focus groups and case studies,” she says. “We will knock on doors, sit on the porches and talk to people.” She often doles out hugs along with flyers for the various community programs she has created.

In early 2010, Butler and Antoine launched a series called Docs and Dialogue, hoping to prompt conversations between youth and often fearful older adults, and spur political activism, by screening documentaries on topics including the legacy of slavery and violence in video games. The February session

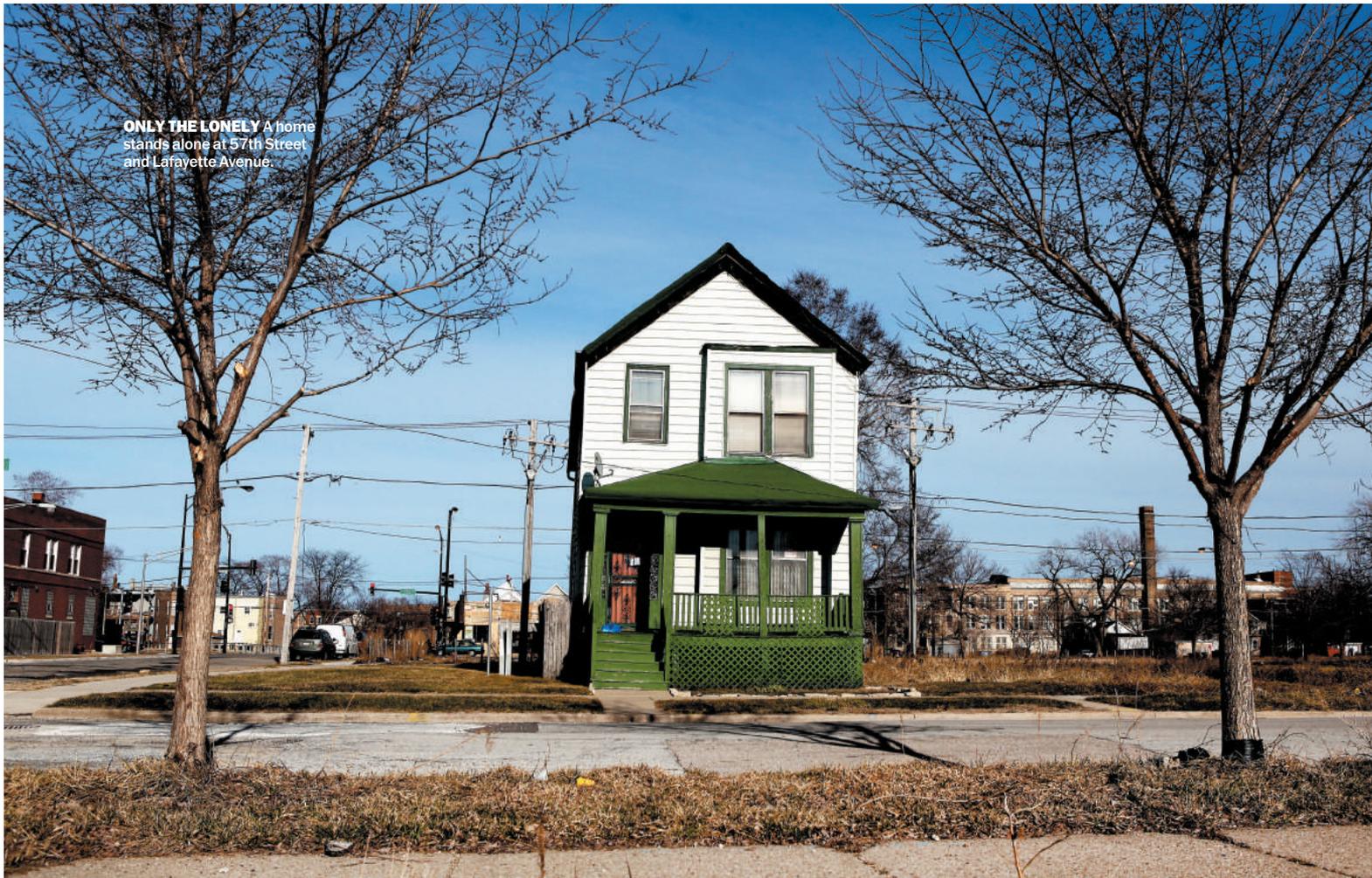
drew about 75 people to watch *Louder than a Bomb*, about four Chicago-area high-school poetry teams, and Butler is planning the next one for this month.

Last fall, Butler met Tonika Johnson, 31, and LaTasha Dickerson, 36. Like Butler, these women have college degrees and white-collar jobs...and found people were surprised they continued living and socializing in Englewood.

Johnson studied photography and journalism at Columbia College, got an M.B.A. at National Louis University, and now teaches art and writing classes for nonprofit groups. Dickerson has a master’s in education from Harvard University and works as an educational consultant. “We came together like the Transformers,” Johnson says of the trio, which launched a youth journalism program called Media-N-Motion in January. About 15 teens attended an eight-week session, producing a newsletter focused on positive happenings in Englewood. The second session began in April.

“It’s not enough to provide a ‘safe space’ and some snacks,” Dickerson says after a recent planning meeting at Dunkin’ Donuts on 63rd Street—Englewood’s only place that passes for a café. “We wanted to show our

ONLY THE LONELY A home stands alone at 57th Street and Lafayette Avenue.



STAND-UP CITIZEN Butler, right, speaks at a meeting for RAGE, a group she cofounded to encourage more youth programming and grassroots activism.

"I don't feel bad saying I don't want to live here forever," Epps says. "You always want the best for yourself, and this isn't it." Walking home from the bus around midnight, she says she never feels safe. She wishes she carried a gun.

"Guys are whistling at me [and] I'm like, 'I'm not a prostitute, hello, I'm coming home from work,'" she says. "Males have to worry about being jumped for no reason. But females have to worry about being raped."

Englewood, the birthplace of the Gangster Disciples in the late 1960s, has been a hotbed of gang activity for decades. But experts say that today, streets are dominated by cliques of young men arranged around

the blocks they live on. The majority of violence is sparked not by fights over drug-dealing turf but rather by personal beefs regarding women, parties or perceived slights, according to Tio Hardiman, director of CeaseFire Illinois.

CeaseFire, a program that works to defuse violent conflicts, charts Englewood as one of its most active sites, boasting 14 mediators. But the more decentralized nature of gangs has made violence harder to combat. CeaseFire mediator Shango Johnson, a 37-year-old Englewood native, says that while growing

up, there were respected gang leaders. A killing could be called off if they said so. Now situations are more chaotic.

Public perception plays a role, too. "There are so many men here doing positive things," Epps says. "But since they don't wear suits and ties, people think they're just thugs. I don't approve of walking around with your underwear showing, but people should be able to dress how they want without being judged. If a guy is wearing baggy pants, a cap and a white T-shirt, people look at him like [he's] a criminal. He could have a degree and a nice car and a political job."

Or maybe he's an aspiring chef. In 2000, William Reynolds resigned as vice president at the Culinary Institute of America to launch a campus of the historic Washburne Institute in a low-income neighborhood—Englewood. The spacious building opened in 2008 and enrollment quickly filled up. Of the 300 students, about a third from Englewood, most will get jobs in the food service industry after graduating, he says.

The Washburne provost, between tasting student-made polenta cookie sandwiches, says the perception of crime in Englewood can be more damaging than actual crime levels, a point evidenced by the shuttering of Sikia, Washburne's foray into fine dining. People from outside Englewood told Reynolds they didn't feel safe visiting. But Reynolds says Sikia also failed because many locals didn't have the funds for a white-tablecloth restaurant, where entrées ranged from \$14 to \$25.

"We so much need a place you can just sit down and have a nice meal," Butler says of

young people they can have a voice in how their community is described, and they have opportunities and options."



But even as Butler, Dickerson and Johnson push this message, they're faced with the reality that some young residents are pushing to get out. Englewood native Tiara Epps, 20, is balancing two jobs downtown with film classes at the Illinois Institute of Art, with the hope of one day moving to the Loop.

ALDERMANIC SHUFFLE

Does Englewood need to redistrict?



OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS Where most people see desolation, like this building at 59th and Green Streets, Butler sees future ice-cream shops and other businesses.

the restaurant, which is now open only for special events.



As Butler's blog, *mrsenglewood.blogspot.com*, proclaims, "It Takes A Village!" to improve a community, and thus, she's not always the neighborhood's leading voice. On March 26, she files in with the crowd headed to the basement of True Vine Church at 67th and Stewart Streets to hear from retired teacher Jean Carter Hill. A festive atmosphere prevails despite the grim topic: lead poisoning.

Because few of Englewood's largely low-income residents and absentee landlords rehab structures, buildings are likely to bear lead-based paint. When children inhale even tiny quantities of lead-laced dust, they can suffer serious neurological effects, including kidney damage and the onset of learning disabilities, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Englewood kids have tested positive for lead poisoning at about twice the citywide rate.

"Now we see another reason why our children can't read, why they are more suggestible to peer pressure and joining gangs," says activist Jo Anna Brown-El near the end of the meeting. "It's the lead! It's not the spirit, it's not the soul. This was an epiphany."

Butler stands to announce an upcoming forum hosted by another organization she cofounded last fall: RAGE, or Residents Association of Greater Englewood, a group pushing for more funding for youth programs, more grassroots activism and more commercial investment. Carter Hill asks whether lead will be a focus of the forum, but Butler says no. While important, there are other challenges to tackle. Carter Hill leads

parents in raising their hands to demand lead be added to the RAGE agenda. Butler shrugs off the protests. Instead, the meeting's goal is to create a list of demands for incoming mayor Rahm Emanuel on topics including education, violence, housing and redistricting.

"We're not a militant organization, but we do have a little bit of rage about how our community is treated—and mistreated," says Butler, wearing a red T-shirt asking GOT RAGE? before a packed room at the March 31 RAGE forum at the Hiram Kelly Chicago Public Library branch.

Residents discuss the Englewood Tax Increment Financing (TIF) zone, an impending tax break for developers in the area stretching west from 67th and Wentworth. Before business owners would even consider taking advantage of the zone, city officials will need to figure out how to address crime and the hundreds of abandoned buildings, attendees say.

Butler and other community leaders say solutions to these problems aren't rocket science, but they aren't easy to accomplish. The city budget crisis and struggling economy make public and private investment hard to come by. And for years, the police department has introduced initiatives to reduce crime in impoverished neighborhoods including Englewood, with few lasting results.

"There are challenges, definitely," Butler says late at night after a recent Media-N-Motion meeting. She is battling a cold, but the congestion doesn't mask the enthusiasm in her voice when she talks about Englewood's future. "We're beginning all these enterprises here—Docs and Dialogue, Media-N-Motion, RAGE. This is the start. Just watch what happens."

To Asiaha Butler and the other members of RAGE, Englewood's political pot is bubbling. The question is: Do too many aldermen spoil the broth? A combined 3.1 square miles, Englewood and West Englewood are split among six wards: the 3rd, 6th, 15th, 16th, 17th and 20th. But a bigger problem, according to Butler: There is not one aldermanic office in the neighborhood. Residents say this is a symbol that none of the aldermen wants to take the lead in tackling the neighborhood's problems. RAGE members are calling for redistricting that would reshape Greater Englewood into just two wards.

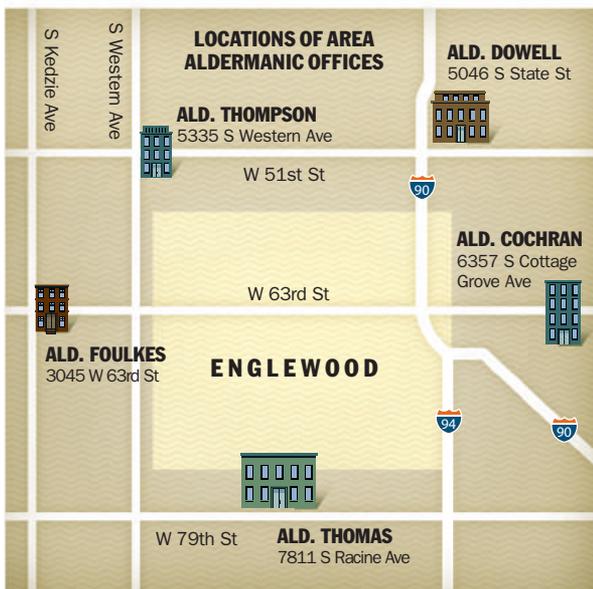
Englewood has been in political flux this spring: Of the 14 aldermanic seats contested in the April 5 runoff election, five were in wards that include parts of Englewood. RAGE held three candidate forums leading up to the February elections, with five of the incumbent aldermen and 28 out of 35 challengers attending. None of the incumbents agreed to support RAGE's redistricting proposal, Butler says. Incoming 6th Ward Ald. **Roderick Sawyer**, the only nonincumbent to win a seat, says he might discuss redistricting with the other

aldermen. At press time, he had not yet decided where to locate his office.

"I will serve the needs of the whole 6th Ward," says Sawyer, the son of former Chicago Mayor Eugene Sawyer. "I realize Englewood might have more needs than some other areas." He listed neighborhood cleanup and job training as primary focuses, with the idea that jobs are the key to crime reduction.

Ald. JoAnn Thompson (16th) and **Ald. Latasha Thomas** (17th) didn't return repeated requests for interviews. **Ald. Willie Cochran** (20th) and **Ald. Pat Dowell** (3rd) did respond, but interviews couldn't be scheduled by press time. At the March 31 RAGE meeting, **Ald. Toni Foulkes** (15th), showing off her scuffed sneakers, says she prides herself on spending time in West Englewood. "Look at my feet," she says. "I get down and dirty."

"When you start something new, you need to clean up and see what you have," Sawyer says. "There's so much debris in Englewood, people need to start picking things up. The residents of Englewood need to partner with me. I'm just one person; I can't do it alone."—KL



MAP: PETER HOEY