

ROCHELLE RILEY: Dave Bing's vision for Detroit

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For the record, Dave Bing doesn't care that you call him names.

He expects the epithets as Detroit reacts to his decision to support a second public school system, paid for mostly by a white Plymouth businessman the city has rejected once.

But Bing doesn't have his heart in the politics of it all. His heart is in changing the way Detroit children are educated and getting them prepared for work. He supports 15 charter high schools, but he's focused mostly on one -- a technical high school near his steel company -- that is part of his larger plan to transform a dying community into the working and middle-class haven it once was.

To help save the North End from the ghosts, Bing is independently building 40 middle-income, brick homes from \$170,000 to \$200,000. He has sold seven, earning more pride than profit. Along with more than 300 units of affordable housing being built by the Rev. Edgar Vann's Second Ebenezer Church -- and units built or planned by at least two other churches -- the Bing homes are reestablishing the area.

Bing, the eight-time All-Star Detroit Piston whose auto supply company employs 1,400 and expects to have \$550 million in annual sales this year, has a plan to fix Detroit: one neighborhood at a time.

If he is successful, his plan could be a blueprint for corporate and community leaders to rebuild their own little pieces of Detroit. Dick Dauch, cofounder, chairman and chief executive officer of American Axle & Manufacturing, is behind him.

"Dave is one of Detroit's jewels," he said. "He's a great human being and also an extraordinary industrial businessman who has made a whole professional commitment to Detroit having jobs."

The Bing Group sits at the top of the North End, which stretches from the Hamtramck and Highland Park borders south to East Grand Boulevard and from I-75 west to

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Woodward. Bing has adopted the elementary and middle schools. And he's working with area leaders and clergy to bring shopping back to Oakland Avenue.

Bing, 61, of Franklin couldn't help at a better time. Detroit is more than \$300 million in debt. Its public schools are falling apart, with students fleeing to the suburbs, teachers threatening to strike and former administrators accumulating more than \$200 million in debt.

Had enough?

So has Bing, who joined the Thompson Foundation and the Skillman Foundation on Monday to seek to charter 15 high schools for a second school district, New Schools of Detroit.

Yes, it is that Bob Thompson. Detroit residents rejected his offer to build \$200-million worth of high schools before. But the critics won't stop Bing.

"You've got to start somewhere," Bing said. "Two years ago, when I decided to do this, I looked at the community, and I saw the deplorable conditions of the housing stock, and I said, 'People don't have to live like this. People need to dream.'"

"I had a couple of people who said why don't you do a low-income housing project. I said, no. That's part of the problem with us as a people. That's what we aspire to do, and that's all we do. So every 20 or 30 years there's a housing project that gets turned over, and it's just constantly going down the tubes. I don't want that."

Bing's strategy might be the only approach for Detroit.

"Let's face it," said Vann, pastor of the 5,500-member Second Ebenezer. "The large entities that are developing downtown have been doing wonderful work there ... God bless them, and we need that. But if Detroit is to be saved, the neighborhoods have to be saved, and the communities where people live and work and play every day have to be saved -- and those will be saved by people like Dave Bing."

Vann's Vanguard Community Development Corp. is building 311 housing units in the North End -- a 10-unit brownstone next to a single-family home on the I-75 service drive and two 150-unit buildings north of the church. Vann plans to turn his old church into a community-youth recreation center and banquet hall with a beauty and barber shop. His church will break ground next month on a new church at 6 Mile and I-75.

The new North End might resemble the strong black neighborhoods displaced by highways and factories, ones with houses like Lucy Maddox's two-story brick, which is six blocks from one she lived in for 37 years. At her recent home dedication, her friends marveled at a house that looks more Farmington Hills than northeast Detroit.

"I think it is wonderful!" Maddox, 66, said. "I just think we need more."

Dave Bing may be best remembered as the player who wore the first number ever retired by the Pistons. But he wants to be remembered for being the man who helped show a city how to come back -- and taught others to do the same.

Fifteen years ago, Bing was searching for digs for his 10-year-old steel company, his family business. He found 30 acres near the Chrysler Freeway. Problem was, the land was in Highland Park.

"I talked to the mayor about this project and that I wanted this land, and needless to say, he said, 'You can't be in Highland Park. You've got to be in Detroit.' So he and Bob Blackwell, who was the mayor of Highland Park at that point in time, cut a little deal and everything now is in Detroit proper."

Those acres now house six of the Bing Group's 10 companies, which is a family enterprise in more ways than one. For Dave Bing, every employee is family. On a recent drive around the plants, he not only spoke to each, but knew each by name and asked about their families.

"You look like you're cold, Rose! It's not that bad out there," he said to a woman wearing a jacket in a dusk breeze. "Her sister just passed. She was an employee of ours. A boy, 17 and one 10 -- 39 years old and had a brain tumor, so we're setting up a foundation."

That loyalty has made Bing's employees loyal to him as well. It's been that way since the beginning, when he opened his first plant with a \$5-million investment in 1980. Ten companies later, he is still expanding, hoping to reach \$1 billion in annual sales within five years.

He also plans to continue as a role model for future leaders who need him, and others like him, more than ever.

"Our generation -- we had some advantages that these young kids don't have today," Bing said. "People who cared about you whether they were your parents or not. Now you've got a generation of people who don't care anymore. Nobody reminds them that these children need love and mentoring."

One who knows firsthand is Bing's chief financial officer, Kirk Lewis, who at 12 was a ball boy for the Pistons when Bing played. He said his boss doesn't mind walking alone.

"Once he determines that a path is the correct path, he really doesn't need a lot of people to pat him on the back to say that's the right thing," said Lewis, 45.

Besides treating employees as family, Bing relies heavily on his family.

Cassandra Bing, 41, the eldest of his three daughters, says her dad asked her to join the company after she graduated from Michigan State University. She started at the bottom; no favors.

She is now vice president of Bing Metals Group Steel Processing. Her sister, Aleisha, works in human resources. Their sister, Bridgett, lives in Mississippi with her husband and kids, Kenneth and Denzel.

"Any credibility I have, I earned on my own," Cassandra Bing said. "It's not because I am his daughter."

She first heard about the plan to rebuild the North End during a family barbecue, after her dad had just had a chat with his grandkids. It was there that she learned about his plans for her sister's children and her own daughter, Caris.

"She's 8, and she came over and said, 'You know Mommy, one day, me, Kenneth and Denzel are going to run the Bing Group.'

"I said, 'Who told you that?' She said 'Granddad.' She said, 'I'm probably going to be last because I'm the youngest. But we're going to do it, and we need to understand what you do.' "

Just like the Fords, just like the Firestones. Dave Bing is reminding his children that their name is attached to something special. And like every family that has chosen Detroit instead of being stuck in Detroit, he wants to make sure their city is special, too.

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