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Recalling Farfel's research

East Baltimore resident recollects public health study

By Jonathan Bor

Sun reporter

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Lucille Gorham remembers a quiet, "nerdy" scientist who became a regular presence in her East Baltimore neighborhood, walking down dangerous streets and alleys as if he didn't know better.

"He was very easy to talk to, didn't mind being in the neighborhood," said Gorham, former president of the Middle East Community Organization. "He talked like I talk, didn't talk with a lot of professional language I didn't understand."

The scientist was Mark Farfel, the public health researcher who spearheaded a study eight years ago to see if composted sludge spread on inner-city yards could reduce the lead hazard in soil.

In contrast to leaders with the NAACP and other black organizations who said they were never consulted before the experiment, Gorham said Farfel met several times with her group and others to explain the study and recruit participants.

Some of the meetings took place at a community center at 1000 Rutland Ave., others in people's houses, she said.

Gorham said she became acquainted with him years earlier, when he was researching ways to reduce the hazard inside lead-painted houses near the sprawling Johns Hopkins medical campus.

For the soil experiment, Gorham said she helped him by taking down the names and addresses of people who wanted their yards treated.

Gorham, who moved to Belair Edison last year when developers acquired her property on East Chase Street to make room for the east-side biopark, said she has long forgotten who participated. Citing standard confidentiality agreements with volunteers in the study, Hopkins has declined to release the names or addresses of the participants, and none have publicly emerged.

She said the recent flap hasn't made her question the study's ethics.

"I still feel pretty good about it," she said. "We had a problem, and he tried to help us resolve it."

Farfel said he also consulted Bea Gaddy, one of the city's best-known advocates for the poor, and Leon Purnell,

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director of the Men's Center just blocks from Hopkins. Gaddy died in 2001.

Purnell, who said he got to know Farfel after the study, said he doesn't remember being consulted beforehand. Later, Purnell was recruited to the Environmental Justice Partnership, formed in 2003 to promote healthy lifestyles and involve the community in reviewing research affecting its residents.

Purnell said he allowed Farfel to place floor mats inside the men's center to collect demolition dust tracked in by people entering the center. Farfel had been studying lead dust raised by the razing of older buildings, and had created a booklet advising community members on ways to protect themselves.

As for the soil study, Purnell said he understands concerns raised by critics of the study but believes Farfel was a "competent" researcher who cared about the community.

jonathan.bor@baltsun.com

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