Opening Statement

My name is Sylvia Robinson, and I am the treasurer of the Emergence Community Arts Collective. I am here today requesting a special exception to allow a community service center at 733 Euclid St. NW.

733 Euclid St. is an abandoned building in the middle of the block on Euclid between Georgia and Sherman Aves. It is a three story building with approximately 6550 square feet of interior space on an 11,400 square foot lot. The first two floors are each approximately 2550 square feet, and the third floor is considerably smaller, about 1440 square feet. There is a small basement that will be used for storage. The property is detached from the remaining row houses on Euclid St., with about 20 feet between the properties on either side. There is approximately a 40 ft elevation from the street level to the first floor from the front of the building, however the first floor is handicapped accessible from the alleyway in the rear. The rear and sides of the property are paved and provides a parking area for ten cars. The property is owned by Emergence Inc. who will lease the first two floors to the Emergence Community Arts Collective, and rent the third floor apartment. The renovations are expected to be completed by January 2004.

I would like to briefly describe the history of this property, as it is relevant to this request. This property had been owned and operated since at least 1915 by the National Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Women and Children. This organization was formed on February 14, 1863 by an act of Congress - one of many relief organizations formed to deal with the aftermath of the Civil War and Emancipation. Its charter was to, "support such aged or indigent colored women and children as may properly come under the charge of such association; to provide suitable home, board, clothing, and instruction, and to bring them under Christian influence..."

Based on annual reports and other historical records, the Association functioned successfully in this capacity for many years. In the 1950s, the center functioned as the Meriwether Home for Women and Children. One of the former directors of the Meriwether Home, Mrs. Marie Key evolved the organization into the Key Day Care Center in 1975. Key Day Care attempted to address a nation-wide shortage of day care facilities which prevented many single parent families from getting jobs or job training. The Key Day Care Center functioned successfully until 1999. Although the property served in different capacities over the years, the owner of record was always the National Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Women and Children. Dr. Joseph McKinney, the Chairman of the Board of the Association was committed to keeping this property in service to the community. Around 1997, a number of setbacks befell the Center, including a stroke suffered by Dr. McKinney. In 1999, the Key Day Care abandoned the building. Since then the property has been boarded up and deteriorating, creating a haven for drug addicts and squatters.

For many years now I and others have had a vision of opening a community center and since 2001, we had been searching this area of the city for a suitable space to house the project I am about to describe. The center would be a place for community gatherings

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Case No. 17027
Exhibit No. 25

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO. 17027
EXHIBIT NO. 25

such as pot luck dinners, games, meetings, book clubs, discussions, and social gatherings where people in the neighborhood could network and get to know each other. It would be a place to learn traditional arts – dance, martial arts, and crafts, not just as exercise, but as a way of learning about other cultures, histories and philosophies. It would be a place to find support for crisis or difficult life issues, to find out where to go or what to do or just have someone to talk to. It would be a place to learn from each other, to help each other, to share our resources and our vision as a community. It would be open to everyone, regardless of age, race, religion, economic situations or handicaps, yet everyone would be expected to make a contribution, no matter how small, of money, time, or ideas to the community.

The Emergence Community Arts Collective is a non-profit organization that was formed by myself and two other women to realize this vision. My experience over many years has made me uniquely qualified to serve as the general manager and treasurer of this organization. I left a full time career as a systems analyst in 1993 to become a drug and alcohol counselor. During this time I worked in both a youth outpatient and adult inpatient facility. When my father became ill and wheelchair bound, I chose to care for him in my home becoming a full time nurse's aid. Early in 1993 I began studying martial arts, focusing on learning Tai Chi and Chi Kung as ways to reduce stress and promote health. I eventually took over many administrative duties of the school and served as a primary staff member for six years. After my father's death in 1996, I began studying Capoeira Angola, an African Brazilian martial art. Serving as a full time administrator, I helped this organization grow from a small group of practitioners to an international non-profit organization. This organization has been successful in reaching African American youth, exposing them to elements of African culture, a history of triumph over oppression, healthy physical exercise, an appreciation of music and rhythm, and a sense of community. Through a variety of experiences working with people in many settings, I have come to firmly believe in the power of a community to help itself and heal itself and am fully prepared to face the challenge of this venture.

I have two partners who are equally capable and committed to making it a success. Pamela Moore, president, has many years of experience as a health educator and supervisor in the areas of HIV/AIDS and substance abuse counseling. She has managed HIV prevention programs at the Women's Collective and also at the Washington Free Clinic. She has spearheaded health education and outreach efforts for women and youth in all wards of the district. She has also served as a liaison between health programs and government organizations, raising their awareness of the services provided. In addition, Ms. Moore is a writer and poet who has shared her work at many community venues. Ms. Moore sees a clear connection between her work as a health educator and her work as a literary artist. She believes both can be used to inspire positive change in the hearts and minds of community residents. At ECAC, Ms. Moore will use her expertise to provide extensive outreach to the local community, and coordinate educational programs.

Ms. Charisse Williams, Secretary, has a law degree, is a member of the Maryland Bar and has experience working with human rights organizations, youth in detention and on criminal justice reform issues. Her expertise is in the areas of Criminal Justice and

Disadvantaged Youth and she has traveled around the country learning about the work of various organizations. In the process she has provided advice and technical assistance to groups on issues ranging from board development, fundraising, program design, implementation and evaluation. In addition, Ms. Williams is a dancer who studies and performs Afro-Cuban dance with Ashe Moyubba Folkloric Ensemble.

The ECAC Board of Directors bring a variety of skills to this project as well. Stephen Shaff is the director of Community Visions, an organization focused on community real estate development and arts based community centers. Cinezio Pecanha, master of Capoeira Angola is world reknown for his work with African American youth, especially street children in Brazil. Paul Ramos, director of the Wu Shen Tao Health and Martial Arts Center in Takoma Park, has over 30 years of martial arts training and is an army trained intensive care nurse who has studied herbology, Taoist meditation and health practices, Eastern and Western massage, and Acupressure. Meghan Walsh is an architect whose work includes several projects for the Latin American Youth Center as well as a public art installation at the Columbia Heights Metro station involving young graffiti artists.

I am confident that the backgrounds, expertise and commitment of the staff and the Board of Directors will create a successful organization.

I would like now to discuss in detail the activities that are planned for the center. There are four categories of activities that will be taking place. There will be community activities which will include pot luck gatherings, games night, field trips, gardening, neighborhood clean-up and other similar activities that are recreational but will also encourage networking and learning. These types of activities will be held at least once per month, and more often depending on the popularity of the activity. With the exception of field trips and neighborhood clean-up, the activities will take place inside of the center. These activities will usually be held either on a Friday evening between 6 and 9pm, or Saturday or Sunday afternoon between 12 and 8pm. These activities will require at least one staff person be present to coordinate the activity, but will not require professional supervision. These activities will be open to anyone, but will be advertised most heavily in the Pleasant Plains community.

The next category of activity are arts classes, which will be primarily movement, dance, martial arts, stretching, energy balancing and meditation. The classes that are currently planned are:

Capoeira Angola, an African Brazilian martial art form which is a combined dance/fight incorporating music, singing and acrobatic movement. This art form was handed down through oral tradition from Angola through slavery in Brazil and is revived today in its original form. It is a great testament to the survival of African culture through enslavement and oppression.

Tai Chi, a slow meditative martial art form practiced today to promote good health, increase energy and reduce stress. A companion to Tai Chi is Chi Kung, focused breathing and meditation practices that can be easily practiced at home.

Yoga, a series of slow stretching and relaxation exercises that will help keep the body limber and flexible.

These classes will be held on a regular basis, about three times per week. A typical daily schedule would include early Chi Kung and meditation classes held before 8am, classes in Tai Chi and Yoga between 12 and 2pm for retirees and seniors, Capoeira Angola classes between 4 and 6pm geared towards children and young adults, and a combination of all classes between 6 and 9pm.

Instructors for Capoeira Angola would be provided by the International Capoeira Angola Foundation based in Washington DC. The Tai Chi and Chi Kung classes will be taught by myself, a practitioner and qualified instructor in these arts. A yoga instructor has been tentatively selected but has not yet committed.

The third category of activity are seminars and workshops on a variety of topics. We believe there is much expertise and information to be shared within the community if the opportunity is provided to do so. The frequency of these workshops will depend on the availability of presenters but we would like to hold it at least once per month. The types of presentations we are seeking will be artistic, such as instruction in quilting, instrument making, poetry or other crafts, educational seminars on citizens rights, tax laws, financial planning, local history, or environmental issues, or experiential workshops that facilitate communication and interaction among participants. These workshops will typically be held on weekends between 12 and 8pm, although workshops geared towards youth may be held on weekdays during the after school hours.

The last category of activity will be support groups and counseling services. Addictions, stress, anger and conflict affect a significant percentage of the community and getting help has become less affordable and available. ECAC plans to address these needs in the following manner. We will designate an area of the center as a resource center set aside for flyers and information about the counseling and support services available in the DC Metropolitan area. We will provide regular discussion meetings specifically for certain groups such as men, women, teens, and new mothers or for those dealing with difficult life issues such as anger management, conflict resolution, or grieving. We will provide regular support group meetings following the 12 Step or similar models for emotional recovery from addictions, codependency and other issues. We will provide Rite of Passage programs for adolescents designed to assist them through the difficult transition into adulthood. These programs emphasize self awareness, cultural awareness and societal awareness, as well as fostering a sense of belonging to a larger community. Individual counseling will be provided depending on the availability of qualified staff.

It is expected that these type of activities will be held once a week or more. The type of staffing needed will depend on the activity. Support groups and discussion groups

meetings will be led by volunteer facilitators. Rite of Passage programs will be supervised by experienced facilitators, but utilizes many community volunteers as mentors and assistants. Counseling services will be provided by appropriately licensed therapists.

In addition to the activities outlined above, the center will have a darkroom facility which will be rented on an hourly basis and used for photography classes.

These activities that have been outlined describe the offerings envisioned at this time. Activities will, however be added and changed based on community interest and input. ECAC may also work in partnership with other organizations to help meet these goals and have lease arrangements with them to offer services at the center. Fees will be charged for classes, seminars and workshops, however there will be an option to do volunteer work at the center or in the community in exchange for services. Community activities, support groups and discussion groups will be free. Besides the fees, the center will be financed through grants, fundraising activities and donations.

I would now like to address the burden of proof requirements and show that this proposal is within the intent of the zoning regulations. Section 334.1 states, "A community service center to accommodate organizations created for the purpose of improving the social or economic well-being of the residents in the neighborhood in which the center is proposed to be located that may include but not be limited to centers for job training, family counseling, consumer cooperatives, and such other facilities as are similar in nature and purpose, shall be permitted as a special exception in a R-4 District if approved by the Board of Zoning Adjustment under 3104 subject to the provisions of this section."

We believe that the services to be provided in this facility by the Emergence Community Arts Collective will improve the social well being of the residents of the neighborhood. We believe that the presence of this center will provide opportunity for networking, social interaction, education on practical matters in life, and an outlet for exercise and fun. The target market for these activities are the residents of Pleasant Plains and the scheduling and variety of activities were chosen to accommodate residents of all ages, interests and backgrounds.

Section 334.2 states, "A community service center shall be located so that it is not likely to become objectionable to neighboring properties because of noise or other objectionable conditions." There are several points I would like to address here.

First, the issue of noise. The loudest noise that would come from the center would be music used in the classes or played at a social gatherings. As noted in the photographs and on the plat, this is a detached property with a distance of 20 feet to the nearest house on the left, 30 feet to the nearest house on the right, 60 feet to the nearest house in the rear, and no residences or structures in front, as it faces Banneker field and High School. We believe the distance and the vegetation on either side will buffer the immediate neighbors from music used in any of the classes. Furthermore, there are plans to insulate all exterior walls and close off several windows in the rear of the building which will

further diminish the impact of noise on neighbors. Classes using music will be completed by 9pm, and as the resident manager of the center, I personally will be available to immediately act on any complaints from a neighbor.

The second issue is parking. As noted in the plat, the center has a parking lot in the rear that can accommodate 10 cars. Although this does meet the zoning requirement of one space for each 600 square feet of gross floor area and cellar floor area, I am aware that parking is an area of concern for residents. In this particular area, however, parking is more of a problem during the day, as the overflow from Howard University students and Banneker staff crowd the parking on Euclid St. and in the alley between Euclid and Farimont. We do not expect the daytime activities at the center to add to this problem as the offerings are targeted towards retirees, seniors and youth from the neighborhood. Parking is not as much of an issue in the evening hours as many spaces are freed up when Banneker students and staff leave. Since all of the activities at the center are targeted for the immediate neighborhood – those who can walk or easily take public transportation, we do not believe parking will be an issue.

The third issue is security. As a resident of the property, I have a great incentive to keep the center secure. The exterior of the center will be well lit during evening operating hours, particularly the parking lot area. The lights will be directed down on the lot only, so that it won't affect neighboring houses. At night when the center is closed, there will be motion lights around the perimeter of the building that will come on if anyone is detected on the property. A security alarm system will be installed in the center to detect break-ins. The fence around the perimeter of the parking lot will be repaired and the gate closed and locked after operating hours, preventing people from congregating on the property at night. No loitering will be allowed in the front or rear of the center at any time. Anyone not engaged in an activity at the center will be asked to leave. There will be no alcohol served at any of the center's functions, nor will anyone be allowed to enter the center who is under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

The fourth issue is the general appearance of the property. Since the property was abandoned it has fallen in a terrible state of disrepair and had become an eyesore in the neighborhood. Plans are underway to restore the property to one in which neighbors can take pride. The front retaining wall which is falling over will be replaced. The rear parking lot will be repaved and the fence surrounding it replaced. The windows, which were all broken or missing will be replaced. A dead tree has already been removed from the yard, and the yard will be neatly landscaped.

In light of this, we do not feel that the Center will be objectionable to the neighborhood.

Section 334.3 states, "No structural changes shall be made except those required by other municipal laws or regulations." The current floor plan for the building's use as a day care center requires few changes for use as a community service center. Most of the rehabilitation needed will be to repair damage from years of disuse, accommodate handicapped patrons, or meet building code requirements. No exterior structural changes or additions are planned.

Section 334.4 states, "The use shall be reasonably necessary or convenient to the neighborhood in which it is proposed to be located." It is the priority of ECAC to serve the residents of the neighborhood. It is for this reason that classes are offered in the early morning before many people go to work, in the early afternoon for retirees, in the late afternoon for after school activities and the early evening for children and adults. It is also for this reason that a wheelchair lift will be installed for handicapped access to the second floor. It should be noted that both Banneker High School and Howard University are in the immediate vicinity of the center. Although there will be an attempt to integrate students from these institutions into the center's activities, no activity will be exclusively for these students. All activities will be open to all residents. It should also be noted that the Center is located near major bus lines on Georgia, and Sherman Aves and 11th St., and is in the proximity of three Metro stations – Georgia Ave. Petworth, Shaw/Howard University and Columbia Heights. We believe the center is convenient to the neighborhood.

Section 334.5 states, "A community service center shall not be organized for profit, and no part of its net income shall inure to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual." The Emergence Community Arts Collective is a non-profit organization with no part of its net income benefiting any private shareholder. I would like to explain the relationship between the ECAC and the company that owns the property, Emergence Inc. This property was purchased under somewhat unusual circumstances. The National Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Women and Children who owned the building abandoned it in 1999. Property taxes began to accumulate and the building was auctioned at a tax sale. The tax lien had been purchased by a company in Baltimore who had begun the foreclosure proceedings and scheduled a court date to foreclose. After finding the property's owner, Dr. McKinney, the chairman of the board of the Association, I had a limited amount of time to evaluate the property, arrange financing, and purchase the property. Since I knew that the entire building would not be used as a community center, I did not want the goals of ownership and maintenance of property to interfere with the community center activities. I made the decision to purchase the property as a for profit entity, Emergence Inc. whose mission is simply to renovate and lease the building.

The Emergence Community Arts Collective is a separate, non-profit organization who will have a lease agreement with Emergence Inc. It will be funded through grants, donations, fundraising activities, and revenue generated from classes in the manner stated previously. ECAC has resolved that by December 31, 2003 a full board of 12 directors will be elected, the majority of which will in no way be associated with Emergence Inc.

Turning now to the requirements in section 3104.1, we believe that this special exception will be in harmony with the general purpose and intent of the Zoning Regulations and Zoning Map. From the National Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Women and Children, to the Meriwether Home, to the Key Day Care Center, there has always been the purpose and intent for its use in community service since it was built in the early 1900s. This fact has been recognized and documented by local historians, and accepted

by the community. Its continued use as a community service center would be consistent with its previous use.

We also believe that this use will not adversely affect the use of neighboring property, as there will be no change in the way the property has been used for the past 100 years. The landscaping and structure of the property will not change, and will, in fact be improved from the decay of the last five years.

I will conclude by saying that we believe the Emergence Community Arts Collective has fully met the burden of proof and intent of the zoning regulations for a special exception, and we believe the center will be a great advantage to this neighborhood. Thank you.