



# Project Neighbors

Respect & Encourage Community

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Catherine Tufariello, Editor

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## HNH Too—Walt's Place: The Dream Goes On

## South Morgan Blvd. Project

by Lois Reiner

by Paul Schreiner

When Walt Reiner surveyed what had been wrought in the Hilltop neighborhood, he declared that the roughly six-block-square area deserved to be called THE VILLAGE. Project Neighbors, its battalion of partners, and armies of volunteers had accomplished the makings of one in record time. There was something for everyone in that little village: Decent, affordable, new or renovated housing for 24 of its families; a premier, affordable child care center for working parents; its own four-star restaurant providing jobs and economical dining; a modern new clinic delivering superb health and dental care; its own community center for after-school tutoring and neighborhood events; even a grocery store/laundromat with two apartments upstairs.

Nearly every new project flourished. Most of the families were buying their homes on contract; and energetic, visionary, creative leaders with their own staffs and boards of directors had taken over the governance of Hilltop Neighborhood House, HealthLinc at Hilltop, and Maria Elena's restaurant. Only one enterprise struggled: the grocery store. Since PN had determined its store would not sell liquor, lottery tickets, or cigarettes, The Village Pantry just carried the bare necessities. And made zero profit. A year after it opened, volunteer managers Cruz and Ara-

celi Ramos emptied the inventory and helped the neighborhood women turn the space into a free food pantry/clothing distribution center. When that operation moved over to Brown St., The Porter County Family Counseling Center took up the lease temporarily. With each new use, the building underwent one more renovation. What WAS its role to be in The Village?



Enter Hilltop Neighborhood House director Deb Lambert, my personal heroine. When I mentioned to Deb that PN's building at 554 S. Locust was losing yet another tenant, she lit up. The after-school program HNH ran in collaboration with PN, next door at the Reiner Community Center, was getting squeezed. Its host, HealthLinc, needed the space more often than not as its patient load topped 10,000. Perfect, suggested Deb, envisioning HNH's own center around the corner.

That was last winter. In September,  
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Three years ago Project Neighbors purchased four city lots on the east side of S. Morgan Blvd. This heavily wooded property, riddled with garbage from years of dumping, boasted one abandoned two-story house and many raccoons. Project Neighbors sold the southernmost lot to Habitat for Humanity, which built a duplex. Six months later, the volunteers at Trinity Lutheran Church built another duplex on the property just north of the Habitat building. Both of these buildings were completed and occupied in late 2009.

A Kouts group, "New Life Builders," volunteered to build the next duplex for PN just north of the Trinity duplex. Dean Birky led construction efforts on the two-story, three-bedroom units, which were completed and occupied in early October 2010. Dean deserves all the pats on the back we can deliver: this huge volunteer project was his first, and probably turned out to be more work than he could have imagined at the outset, yet he more than fulfilled his commitment.

About the time Dean was polishing his duplex to a high sheen, PN began to excavate the final lot on the north end of the property. The "Neighbors Duplex" will be the largest, with 1200 square feet of finished living space, three bedrooms and a 1200 square foot basement per unit. Designed by architect Jeff Lewis, this pair of houses will be one-story units with bamboo and ceramic flooring, lots of windows, and a second full bathroom in the basement. These units can accommodate a family with up to four children. Completion is scheduled for early 2011.

In addition to Habitat for Humanity, the Trinity volunteers, Dean Birky, his wife Melissa and his New Life Builders, we are grateful to Mayor John Costas and the City of Valparaiso for the brand new alley off Union Street, which provides safe access to all four duplexes.

**HILLTOP TOO—  
"WALT'S PLACE"**  
554 S. Locust Street  
Sign up for the after-school program:  
Weekdays 3:30-5:30  
Homework help—Snacks—  
Recreation  
For more information,  
Call Jan Jones at 464-9997 or email  
jsjones@hilltophouse.org

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## Maria Elena's: Celebrating 10 Years

By the summer of 1999, most of Project Neighbors' building projects in the Hilltop area were complete. Newly built and rehabbed homes were occupied with families, and a health clinic and childcare center were operating at full capacity. But while Hilltop had been revitalized by new, affordable housing and access to quality childcare and health care, no commerce existed in the neighborhood. Every café, restaurant, pizza joint, and grocery store that once thrived in Hilltop had closed shop many years before. "There's not even a

place for students and faculty and folks from this neighborhood to get a cup of coffee together!" Walt Reiner would complain. "There's no LIFE!"

There was one boarded-up property—the original Greeks Pizzeria—that beckoned to Walt and Loie as they passed it on walks through the neighborhood. One day, after trying once more to peer through the grimy glass, Walt announced, "This will make a great restaurant for the neighborhood again!" Word of Walt's newest idea soon reached friends Cruz and Araceli Ramos, who introduced Walt and Loie to Felix Cardenas and his wife Maria Elena. In a matter of minutes, without anything written, faxed, or notarized, Project Neighbors and Felix had become partners on a new venture. If Project Neighbors could buy the building, Felix would have his own dream realized: to manage and cook in his own restaurant.

The risk abounded in this operation, for PN and the twenty "charter members" who dished out \$600 each to kick off this venture, but most of all for Felix. His leap of faith in this partnership was a huge one. He left his chef jobs in Michigan City and New Buffalo, moved his family of six into one of the apartments above the restaurant, and went to work with the army of vol-



unteers, gutting and renovating. In one terrifying moment, he nearly severed his thumb on a table saw.

Within the first month of the doors opening, the region's dining critics had given Maria Elena's four stars, and the restaurant's reputation for outstanding food and modest prices spread so rapidly that there were lines for a table on most weekend nights. Even international visitors discovered the charms of this place. Among them was the Russian ambassador, who came as a guest of the Foreign Languages Department and was so impressed with the food and ambiance of Maria Elena's, he returned to serenade Valentine's Day diners with his violin.

Now, Maria Elena's is celebrating its tenth year as a favored dining spot in Valparaiso. In addition to cooking for people who come to the restaurant, over the years Felix often has brought his food to the people. During the construction of the Hilltop Health Center, Felix provided lunch to the volunteers, sometimes forty or more, every Saturday. He has fed hundreds in this way at many other community ventures and fundraisers. The dedicated patrons, for whom Maria Elena's is the "In" spot even when they dine in the cozy outdoor patio, continue to fill the seats and put Felix's restaurant at the heart of the Hilltop community.

## HNH Too — Walt's Place

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I joined the HNH board for its meeting in the NEW, completely remodeled, kid-friendly 554 S. Locust. HNH is leasing it from PN and calling it Hilltop Too/Walt's Place, and it is a marvel! Thanks to Deb's persistence in applying for and receiving a generous grant from the Porter County Community Foundation Women's

## Reflections on Joining Project Neighbors

by Jeff Lewis

Back in the spring of 2008, I began to attend Trinity Lutheran Church more regularly and was introduced to Paul Schreiner. He was in the early stages of planning the most recent of Trinity's affordable housing ministries, a duplex on S. Morgan Blvd., so I volunteered my architectural services. I'm not sure quite how it happened, but I quickly became friends with Paul and we put on a weekly "Roadshow" in the church trying to drum up volunteers. By the spring of 2009, the foundations and framing were complete and ready for our volunteer crew.

Every Saturday morning we had skilled and unskilled labor show up to build a house for families they didn't know, and have a great time doing it. By the fall of 2009, the duplexes were complete and ready to be lived in. I felt that it was quite an accomplishment, but I also felt a little sadness that I wouldn't get to share the laughs that I had grown to look forward to each week.

Shortly after the duplex was finished, Paul asked me to attend a Project Neighbors Board meeting so that I could meet other members and see what the organization was all about. I quickly found that Project Neighbors had been providing and maintaining affordable housing for those in need for many years. Seeing what had been accomplished over many years, I couldn't pass up an invitation to join the Project Neighbors Board of Directors. The group welcomed me with open arms, and I feel fortunate to have gained a group of friends that share the same values my parents instilled in me growing up. Helping others is the best way of helping yourself.

Fund, the support of her staff and board, and the clever programming of HNH's Jan Jones, Walt's Place is finally becoming what it was meant to be ten years ago! Something for everyone...ESL, GED, tutoring, art classes, computers, basketball court, library space for neighborhood meetings. Perfect, indeed. Walt's not the only one grinning right now!



## Chiapas Building Project Launches New Initiative

By Dylan Terrell and George Terrell

In the spring of 2009, the Chiapas Building Project, a program of Project Neighbors, partnered with Tierra y Cal (“Earth and Lime”) to bring sustainable and affordable building technologies, including construction with compressed earthblocks, to rural, indigenous communities in Mexico’s southernmost state—Chiapas.

Building on the success of these projects, Tierra y Cal has formed a strategic alliance with Project Neighbors and



other organizations to construct a sustainable living and training institute, El Centro de Desarrollo Sustentable (Center for Sustainable Development). Engineers, students, community organizers, architects, builders and other experts in sustainable development will participate in the construction of “El Centro.” Located on a 23-acre parcel of land outside of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, “El Centro” will exponentially expand access to sustainable technologies for these marginalized com-

munities.

Once complete, El Centro will be the hub of a network of satellite organizations, universities and communities offering training and educational opportunities throughout Mexico and Latin America. Trainings at the Center will provide the necessary skills for Partner

Trainers and members of rural communities to develop their own ecosystem-based enterprises, thus stemming the exodus to urban centers. Instead of accepting the so-

called “inevitability of urbanization,” Tierra y Cal and ISF-Mexico see the transformation of rural economies and the resurgence of healthy communities as essential to achieving rural, and consequently global, sustainability.

With the support of PN, Tierra y Cal has leveraged two new partnerships to help with the development of El Centro: Birambye International—a nonprofit consulting group of engineers, architects and other experts located in Denver, Col-

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## Valparaiso Human Relations Council

By Ivan Bodensteiner

The Valparaiso Human Relations Council (HRC) was formed in the fall of 2008 as an advisory committee to the Mayor. Two members of the Project Neighbors Board met with the Mayor after an article in a local newspaper described some of what an African American woman, who worked at the law school, and her two biracial children encountered during their two-year stay in Valparaiso. The meeting’s purpose was to ask the Mayor whether he was willing to lead efforts to improve the environment in Valparaiso for racial minorities. After more discussion, the Mayor responded positively and appointed the initial members of the HRC.

After getting organized, the HRC assumed responsibility for working with



the Mayor and the Chief of Police in responding to racially-motivated incidents by contacting and offering support to victims of such incidents. A recently-established relationship with the law school gives students access to the response team. Members of this

team are working with the Porter County Sheriff and the Valparaiso police, and are responding to incidents investigated by the Sheriff.

Another group of HRC members is responsible for organizing and sponsoring events to promote human relations. This group played an important role in organizing the City’s first formal recognition of MLK day in January 2010. An education and public relations group has promoted publications and discussions related to race

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## 2nd Annual HATS Vigil Celebrates Diversity

The second annual Hands Around the Square candlelight vigil to support “unity in diversity” in Valparaiso was held on Saturday, October 2 at the Porter County Courthouse Square. Despite cool and windy weather that made it a challenge for participants to keep their candles lit and decreased the turnout slightly from last year, the hour-long vigil was a festive occasion, featuring music by Planetary and free coffee and hot chocolate provided by GracePoint Church.



Among the speakers were Mayor Jon Costas, Valparaiso Community Schools Superintendent Dr. Andrew Melin, Porter County Sheriff David Lain, PN board member and New Creation Men’s Center founder Tom Isakson, Javier Aguilar of Gloria Dei Hispanic Mission, and event founder and director Christine Hisick. Mayor Costas underscored the vigil’s emphasis on accepting and understanding rather than judging others with whom we may disagree. Dr. Melin noted that after parents, educators have the potential to make the greatest difference in the lives of children, calling education “the great equalizer” and emphasizing the school district’s responsibility to “honor and respect all citizens.” Isakson, representing the homeless and socioeconomically disadvantaged, said, “Those I serve have sometimes felt excluded in this community—though we need their labor.” He stressed the need for more affordable housing in Valpo and more acceptance and appreciation of those whose manual labor builds our restaurants, movie theaters and gas stations for little compensation. Leading the balloon launch that preceded the lighting of candles, Sheriff Lain said of the vigil, “This is something we all can do in

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## HATS

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unison to celebrate our differences.” Moments later, hundreds of white balloons floated across the front of the courthouse and into the sky. Then participants lit their candles, joined hands and circled the courthouse in an impromptu conga line.

In early November, HATS founder and director Christine Hisick was named Valparaiso’s new neighborhood liaison. In that role, she will work with residents in neighborhoods throughout the city, facilitating communication and serving as a problem solver. “I will strongly advocate and be a voice for them to the administration and the department heads,” says Hisick. “I’m really passionate about it. I believe strongly in the old-fashioned type of neighborhood. She urged residents to contact her at City Hall, 462-1161 extension 3337 or at [chisick@valpo.us](mailto:chisick@valpo.us).

## Chiapas

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orado—and Ingenieros Sin Fronteras Mexico (ISF Mexico), a national chapter of Engineers Without Borders (EWB). In October 2010, members of all the partnering organizations met in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico to develop their strategic alliance and a development plan. Working closely with ISF Mexico and EWB, El Centro will develop a network of satellite sites and “Partner Trainers” equipped to spread sustainable technologies more effectively and efficiently throughout Mexico, Latin America and the globe.

For more information about the Chiapas Building Project, contact George Terrell at [georgewterrelljr@yahoo.com](mailto:georgewterrelljr@yahoo.com).

### Project Neighbors Board

Paul Schreiner (President), Ivan Bodensteiner (Vice President), Catherine Tufariello (Secretary), Rebecca Reiner (Treasurer), Keith Chitwood, Scooter Holloway, Tom Isakson, Gregory Jones, Jeff Lewis, Bill Loeschke, Ted Ludwig, Gail Lutze, Karl Lutze, Sharon Mortenson, Alberta Petrone, Lois Reiner, Ed Senne, George Terrell, Pat Terrell, Al Trost, Ron West.

### To contact Project Neighbors:

By Mail: 554 S. Locust Street  
Valparaiso, IN 46383  
Phone: (219) 241-0782 (Michele Nix,  
Office Manager)

## Valparaiso Diversity Network Association Sponsors Rally Against Racism

The Valparaiso Diversity Network Association (VDNA) was formed in 2009 to organize the efforts of institutions, religious organizations, and Valparaiso citizens around issues of racial intolerance. The Clergy branch of the VDNA, led by Rev. Dr. Gregory Jones of Union Community Church, is a group of religious leaders who stand together against racism in the Valparaiso community. On May 23, 2010, the Feast of Pentecost, the Clergy VDNA sponsored a rally against racism at the Porter County Court-



house that was attended by Valparaiso faith leaders and hun-

dreds of community members. Participants signed a large banner stating: “We affirm that racism is sin. As Valparaiso communities of faith, we agree to stand together against it.” Since late



May the banner has been on a tour of fifteen local churches, at each of which parishioners have been invited to add their names. The banner will visit Faith Evangelical Bible Church from Nov. 28-Dec. 5 and will make its final stop at St. Iakovos Greek Orthodox Church from Dec. 12-19.

If you are interested in learning more about the VDNA, contact Rev. Gregory Jones at [gregory.jones@valpo.edu](mailto:gregory.jones@valpo.edu).

## Welcome Back, Michele!

When Tracy Traut’s role as Executive Director of the Porter County Counseling Center expanded, Tracy opted to stay on the board but leave the part-time Executive Director’s post with PN. Thus began a search for an individual to manage the day-to-day affairs of Project



Neighbors. We are pleased to announce that the position was accepted by an old friend, Michele Nix, a 2001 graduate of Purdue University and former PN office manager. Michele receives rents, does bookkeeping, processes requests from PN families, works with accountant and board member Sharon Mortensen, and manages the current Project Neighbors files. According to Board President Paul Schreiner, “Michele is accurate, pleasant, and tenacious at a task and will keep Project Neighbors’ affairs in the kind of shape that would have caused Walt to say ‘Good show!’”

## HRC

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relations, diversity and equality.

From its inception, the HRC has sought partners willing to join the City in placing human relations on the community agenda. The President of the Valparaiso Community Schools Board has been on the HRC from the beginning, and recently the Superintendent joined the HRC. Valparaiso University has been a partner through its Diversity Concerns Committee, the Valparaiso Diversity Network Association chaired by Greg Jones, and most recently the Diversity Summit announced by Mayor Costas and President Heckler. A Committee is planning the Diversity Summit, which will be a “kickoff” event in the spring of 2011 for a long-term effort. Another partner is the Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce, which has passed a resolution encouraging all businesses to make a commitment to inclusiveness.

The HRC is currently consulting with the Mayor to explore the possibility of a City ordinance establishing the HRC as a unit of City government, rather than simply an advisory committee to the Mayor. This, we believe, would make the HRC more of a fixture in City government, with a better-defined role.