



Project Neighbors

Respect & Encourage Community

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Neighbors Place A Residence for Women

The history of Project Neighbors follows a long list of opportunities taken. A need presents itself and this small group of citizens responds. With no rigid mission (feed the poor, buy eye-glasses for children, support the library), this allows for a diversity of action: housing, daycare, healthcare, education, human relations, economic development. All of these have been areas of effort for Project Neighbors.

The phenomenal success of HealthLinc (the largest community health center in Indiana) presented a different kind of opportunity. With urgent need for a much larger facility, HealthLinc had to leave the building on the corner of Union and College Streets and build a new facility on Sturdy Road. As of August 2013, the old HealthLinc building was empty. Project Neighbors and the larger community had been an integral part in the creation of this building.

Opportunity!

“But an empty building is not a community need”, you say. Right, but the need for affordable housing is a constant in this community. Anticipating HealthLinc’s departure, Project Neighbors wrestled with what do with this great building; 11,000 sq. ft. – built by the community. After several months of conversation amongst the PN board and with allies Housing Opportunities, the city of Valpo, United Way, Porter County Community

Foundation, and Hilltop Neighborhood House the vision of “Neighbors Place - A Residence for Women” was created. The need for affordable housing in Valparaiso is well documented. Most efforts are directed at families with children leaving single individuals with limited income at the mercy of the marketplace. Housing Opportunities has a waiting list of 30 individuals in need right now.

The plan is to remodel the second and third floor; remove medical rooms and build eighteen efficiency apartments each with a private bathroom and kitchenette. These new, comfortable spaces will then be available to single women without children at very affordable rates. The target population is women on Social Security, disability income or who qualify for other income reasons.

At this time, the ground floor will be unchanged. The space known as the Reiner Center may be used by next-door neighbor Hilltop Neighborhood House to expand the child care mission.

Management of the eighteen rental units will be in the capable and experienced hands of Housing Opportunities. Rental candidates’ applications will be screened, leases prepared and additional services offered by H.O.

Project Neighbors is very thankful for this partnership.

Partnerships

The Neighbors Place project will not be an accomplishment of Project Neighbors alone. From the very beginning it has been conceived as a collaboration of many groups. Take a look:

- **Project Neighbors:** Will own the building and manage the renovation.
- **Housing Opportunities:** In on the planning from the start and will manage rentals.
- **Porter County Community Foundation:** Spearheading the effort to raise funds for purchase and renovation.
- **HealthLinc:** Committed to leaving the building as a community asset and generously discounting the purchase price.
- **Centier Bank:** Providing financing for purchase and renovation beyond funds raised from the community.
- **Valparaiso University:** Former owner of the property is supportive of this new use of the property.
- **Design Organization:** Providing necessary architectural services.
- **City of Valparaiso:** Has expressed support of the vision and helped negotiate planning.
- **United Way of Porter County:** Present at planning sessions.
- **Volunteers from several churches:** Will do demolition, painting, trim and floor covering to help reduce costs.

*Great outcomes are possible
when people work together!*

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Neighbors builds a family a New Home

Project Neighbors' ancient house at 505 Brown St. (reportedly a Sears package house) couldn't be saved. Both the former owner and Walt, who negotiated a long-ago agreement-to-sell with him, have passed on. The cardboard on which they inked the agreement is dust. So is the front stoop on which those two old fellows made the deal. With constant fixing-up, PN was able to keep the roof solid over a family of six for many years. Barely. When the family moved on, we tackled the inevitable. Raze and build new.

The two-story, four-bedroom, many-windowed beauty taking over the 505 Brown Street address since June, is home to another family, Mary Mwaura and daughters Maggy and Abie, who tell us "We thank God for the opportunity he has blessed us with to have such caring people willing to take time to build and provide us with a house." So many



"caring people," we add....Paul Schreiner, Mike Willard, Jeff Lewis, Ron and Linda Kuker, Ed Senne, and a small army of loyal volunteers from Trinity and Immanuel, members of the Lutheran Deaconess Association, etc.

Maggy is finishing college; Abie looks forward to the same after high school; Mary, a Deaconess, hopes for all her children to be together again in this lovely space. She adds: "May God continue to bless the work of your hands, Project Neighbors!"

From the desk of Michele

In this newsletter, you can read about the highlights of some of the "children" of Project Neighbors. Just like Hilltop Neighborhood House, Healthline, WVLP, etc, Project Neighbors maintains its own level of responsibilities.

Three years ago, when I became an employee of Neighbors Corporation, I took on the administrative duties. One of the duties involves maintaining the financial records so that accurate financial reports can be created. Whether they are prepared for the board, the bank, or the government, the purpose of the financial reports is to record the financial activities of an organization. They provide important information, however, these reports only show numbers. Our most important activity cannot be summarized numerically.

One of the most important things I have learned is not to underestimate the power of a listening ear. It has proven to be a very effective tool in dealing with some of the issues Project Neighbors faces. Once I learned to truly listen, I began to better understand those we partner with and see how our activities can help guide them to achievement of their goals. What I heard were tears of joy at the sight of a safe new home. What I heard was excitement listening to a family discuss plans for a Christmas tree in their home for the first time. I heard pride in the voices of mothers speaking of the success of their children, and I heard hope when the mother of four children told me that moving into one of our homes provided her family with a new start and wiped away their fears of homelessness.

The generosity of many individuals and organizations make it possible for our work to continue. I wish I could provide a report showing the success of Project Neighbors, but I've also learned that some of the greatest accomplishments cannot be summarized by numbers.

The Sale of 454 (Maria Elenas & Gabriellas)

After 11 years, this experiment of neighborhood economic development has ended. To say the effort failed would be a mistake; it was an amazing success...for a few years. Here's the story: Project Neighbors purchased the small building on Greenwich Street almost 12 years ago to interject economic activity into the Hilltop neighborhood. The former Greek's Pizza building contained a restaurant space on the first floor and two apartments above. Through his contact in the Hispanic community, Walt Reiner located a chef working in Michigan City who was willing to take the risk of partnering on a

new venture which would become familiar to most folks in Valpo as Maria Elenas.

For the first five or six years, Maria Elenas was the best place to eat out in Valpo. Then health problems prompted chef Felix Cardines to retreat from his management and eventually to sell his interest in the restaurant. Gabriellas restaurant, under new ownership, entered the very competitive market two years ago and struggled. Finally, after Gabriellas closed, it was decided to sell the building. In October the building and restaurant equipment were sold. We expect to see a new restaurant opening soon.

In Memoriam

The University and the Valparaiso community recently lost two of its most creative and tireless servants and Project Neighbors lost two loyal friends. Too suddenly, too soon. Grateful for the precious witness to justice and compassion each demonstrated so tenaciously – publicly, professionally, privately - we offer here our gratitude, as well as our heartfelt condolences, to the families of Arvid "Gus" Sponberg and Alan Bloom.

Neighbors Educational Opportunities (NEO)

Embarking on its third year of operation, Neighbors' Educational Opportunities (NEO) has firmly established itself as a community resource for adult education and high school classes. A year ago, NEO officially opened Neighbors' New Vistas High School, a public charter high school serving students from all over northwest Indiana.

New Vistas is unique in its mission of providing any eligible high school student, of any age, the opportunity to earn a high school diploma. Here are a few highlights from the 2012-2013 school year:

NEO received the Quality of Life award from the Portage Chamber of Commerce;

New Vistas students were awarded "Volunteers of the Year" from the Portage Community Historical Society;

335 students enrolled in adult education classes;

255 students testers at NEO's GED testing site passed the test;

136 high school students enrolled with New Vistas High School on the September 2012 "count day"; by the end of the year, an additional 74 students turned to New Vistas to earn high school credits;

NEO was awarded grants from the Porter County Community Foundation, the Porter County United Way, Dollar General in addition to numerous state and federal grants; and

62 students participated in NEO's 2013 graduation ceremony.

With the 2013-2014 school year underway, NEO's educational programs continue to grow. New Vistas has grown; 171 returning and new high school students are enrolled this year with an additional 17 on the waiting list for the new term. New Vistas has also expanded its programs and services to now include a school-wide breakfast and lunch program, full-time art program and part-time PE program, broader course



selections, increased classroom technology including I Pads and smart boards, a part-time guidance counselor, and an after-school online and distance learning opportunities. The biggest change, however, is New Vistas new principal, Mrs. Shaunna Finley. Mrs. Finley is a Portage resident who brings a wealth of experience, passion, commitment, and knowledge to this position.

NEO's adult education program is growing as well. Thanks to a partnership with the Lake County Public Library System and a grant from the Department of Workforce Development, NEO has expanded English Language and Civic instruction to include evening and Saturday classes at the Lake Station Public Library.

NEO's adult education program is also preparing students for the change coming to Indiana with regards to the high school equivalency test. The well-known GED test is being replaced in Indiana with the TASC (Test Assessing Secondary Credit). This test will be awarded the same status as the GED with post-secondary institutions, the work place and military.



Dayspring

October 15, 2012, Dayspring Women's Center opened its doors. Prior to that date, there was no place like Dayspring to assist women struggling with homelessness in our community.

Dayspring was projected to serve 25 women in 2012-2013 by providing a safe, stable, daytime environment where homeless women could begin to take steps to reestablish themselves. Services include financial and life skills counseling, food and personal items, job search opportunities, housing, and medical assistance, plus a much needed address and phone number. Far exceeding that initial projection, Dayspring served 63 women in its first year of operation; in its second year the number of women served could easily exceed 100.

In its first year, as a provisional project of Project Neighbors, Dayspring was able to utilize Neighbor's 501(c)3 status to retain grants and donations. Neighbors volunteers also assisted with the completion of the kitchen and with planning and fund-raising. Dayspring has now attained its own 501(c)3 status and is an independent non-profit organization that will continue to provide much needed assistance and support to struggling women.

The Tech Project

One of Project Neighbors' newest ventures is to convert the former Valparaiso Technical Institute building, 1150 W. Lincolnway, into a multi-purpose community arts center. The plan is to utilize all three stories of the 15,000 sq. ft. building for a combination of studio, workshop, co-working spaces, art classes, an artists' co-op, and a café. The third floor large open ballroom will be available for a wide variety of private and public events including performances, exhibits, classes and meetings, theater and film. Since they first began this project, the organizers, Rebecca Reiner (PN board member), Hilda Lutze and Elias Crim have raised \$10,000 in donations to pay for an engineering study of the building and have begun preliminary renovation of the top floor. They are operating under the business name of HubWorks and hope to have a firm plan for the future of the building by January 2014. For more information:

Facebook Group: **TheTechProject (VTI)**
Email: valpotechproject@gmail.com

CATIS Mexico

Project Neighbors was instrumental in launching and continues to support CATIS Mexico (Center for Appropriate Technology and Indigenous Sustainability). In September a CATIS Mexico volunteer attorney helped a coalition of 14 community groups present a case before the Permanent Peoples Tribunal alleging that over exploitation of the aquifer by large agribusiness and government corruption deprived people of safe drinking water and is a violation of their human rights.

In October, CATIS Mx began distribution of Its Ceramic Water Filters in communities which lack access to safe water. Water born disease cause 1.8 million deaths per year in the world, 90% are children under 5. CATIS Filters eliminate

the bacteria and coliforms which are the primary cause of death from water born disease. While water going into the filters greatly exceed national and international standards, water coming out has consistently tested at the "No Detect" level.

In November, a dozen students from the US, Mexico, Guatemala, Ireland and with interest in building in those countries and Africa, took part in a workshop on building with compressed earth blocks and Mexican vault ceilings. And at least two field schools on sustainable development are planned so far for 2014, one with Engineers Without Borders, UK, and another with Northern Illinois University. For more information see: www.catis-mexico.org

Valparaiso Human Relations Council

Unfortunately, "drive-by" harassment of racial minorities continues. One such incident took place on the VU campus on August 31, 2013, when an Asian graduate student was the target while riding his bicycle. President Heckler responded with a letter to students, faculty and staff calling for a "higher standard of conduct." He stated, "[o]ur University's diversity serves as a vitally important resource. I call upon each and every member of the Valparaiso University community to hold one another to a higher standard of conduct in our interactions with one another."

The HRC-initiated statement related to such drive-by incidents is available at

<https://www.change.org/petitions/valparaiso-community-members-sign-a-statement-of-support-for-diversity-in-our-community>.

The HRC continues to look at police-community relations and has suggested gathering, and making available to the public, information about the race, national origin, and gender of individuals involved in encounters with the local police. It is also looking at the feasibility of offering mediation as a way of resolving complaints directed at the police. At its November meeting, HRC members will consider a recommendation related to the City's celebration of MLK day in January 2014.

WVLP 98.3 LPFM

On April 7th, 2013, WVLP held the first annual "Stars Over Valpo" concert at the Valparaiso University Duesenberg Hall in the Center for the Performing Arts. The goal was two-fold: to show the community the amazing array of local musical talent and to raise money for the operation of WVLP. As a culture, Americans are bombarded by the virtues of the top pop performers – the Michael Jacksons and the Taylor Swifts – to the neglect of local talent that fails to achieve that national spotlight.

The packed audience at the concert was offered evidence of deep resources of amazing talent right here in Valparaiso. Performing that night were Buddy Pearson, Mami Matsuda, Into the Light, Mickey Camp, Flight 1050, Samantha Lawson, Melissa Welch, Mayor Jon Costas, Chad Clifford, John Derado, Ronn Barany, Ron Buffington, Captain Ambivalent, Walter Lisek (WAZ), Patti Shafner, Lou Saminago, and The Shades of Gray. All performers donated their talent.

Project Neighbors Documentary

The Project Neighbors Documentary began as a way to document the nearly 45-year history of the efforts by a group of citizens to enhance the lives of all the town's residents, driven by the needs of those that are the most vulnerable.

Pat Wisniewski, of For Goodness Sake Productions, and Ben Schreiner, of Puma Productions, submitted a proposal to complete a one-hour documentary to the Project Neighbors Board of Directors. It was approved under the stipulation of the ability to raise the funding.

The documentary will trace themes that guided the development of what was once the Valparaiso Builders Association that ultimately became Project Neighbors.

To date, we have conducted research at the Calumet Archives, shot footage of the tearing down of the historic Cotton Family Home, the building up of several new or reconstructed homes and the Martin Luther King Day event with Mayor Costas.

In addition, we have conducted major interviews with some of the early participants in the community such as Lois Reiner, Ivan Bodensteiner, Betty Ballard, Karl Lutze and Paul Schreiner as well as brief interviews with the construction crew on various building sites.

We hope to have a brief trailer of this documentary put together by the end of this year and use that to help raise the needed funds to complete the project.

Newsletter Production

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