



STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION

A PUBLICATION OF

**GREAT LAKES URBAN
RESTORATION NETWORK**

POWERING FLOURISHING NEIGHBORHOODS
AND CITIES SINCE 2008

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Friend,

At Great Lakes Urban we often use the phrase, "We are more disconnected now than ever before--but we don't have to be."

One of the reasons we know that disconnection and loneliness--and the numerous social ailments that this condition exacerbates--can be turned into connection and hope is because we see it happening every single day.

Indeed, one of the greatest privileges of being involved with Great Lakes Urban is that I get to experience transformation taking place in the lives of people and neighborhoods. It is with great joy that I share with you just a few of the many, many stories taking place.

Contained in this collection are some of the people and places where connection and change are being cultivated. Each story is significant, but they are just a small glimpse into a larger narrative that is emerging and taking shape.

Slowly but surely the structures and norms are being built that will allow more and more neighbors to experience belonging, dignity, abundance, value and agency. This is what will turn the tide. This is what will bring healing and hope. This is why we wake up every day wondering what more we can do.

I hope you come away from reading these stories feeling inspired. Please know that we are profoundly grateful to you for being a part of a growing movement, an expanding community, a just cause, and a lasting solution!

Happy reading,

Eric R. Smith, Executive Director

WASHINGTON SCHOOL NEIGHBORHOOD

Washington School Neighbors: schooling us in good neighboring



The work of cultivating connection and change in the Washington School neighborhood is spearheaded by Lisa Kasten. Lisa directs the efforts of Washington School Neighbors (WSN), an independent nonprofit neighborhood development corporation. WSN runs the neighborhood garden, recruits, equips and mobilizes block connectors, supports neighborhood gatherings, like an annual street art program, and much, much more.

At 82, Mama Fran sometimes feels worn out, but like her family and her neighborhood, there's no keeping her down. Mama Fran and her multi-generation family of 14 live in a home in the Washington School neighborhood, a community of 500 households nestled in a 27-block radius near the heart of downtown.

Mama Fran's doesn't qualify for home repair assistance. That's meant living with badly chipped paint and a broken window that would let in cold air all winter. Despite these conditions, Mama Fran adds heart and soul to the neighborhood. When the Hislops moved in down the street, for example, Mama Fran's family was the first to bring around a meal to welcome them.

When the city raised concerns about the condition of the house, the neighborhood responded. Over the course of a weekend volunteers turned out to paint the exterior and replace the window. By Monday, Mama Fran was in tears, overwhelmed by the outpouring of support and care. "I can't believe it. In year's past, this wouldn't have happened."

Stories like this only happen in neighborhoods where the fabric of community is strong. For the Washington School neighborhood, the social fabric has been rebuilt through ice-cream socials, a community garden, clean-up days, a quarterly neighborhood newsletter, and safety workshops. What makes these points of interaction possible are the efforts of a network of volunteer Block Connectors who meet together, connect with neighbors, and take responsibility for the quality of life on their block.

There's always a spark that starts the flame of good neighboring, and in the Washington School neighborhood that spark is Lisa. Lisa, a resident of 24 years was recruited to be a Neighborhood Connector. Today, she provides leadership to the Washington School Neighbors, a successful, independent, and self-sustaining micro-organization. "This job was no accident," Lisa will tell you, "I've been invited into these people's lives, and that has given me life."

WEST OF WASHINGTON NEIGHBORHOOD

Discovering Gifts - an interview with our newest connector, Maddie



Maddie Roberts was born and raised in Illinois and attended Taylor University in Indiana where she majored in Public Health. After graduating from college and marrying her husband, Christian, Maddie moved to Holland, MI. Beginning July 1, 2020, Maddie joined Great Lakes Urban part-time to start her connecting work in the West of Washington neighborhood through a partnership with the City of Holland. We recently caught up with Maddie to ask her about her experience of discovering and connecting local gifts.

What is it that drew you to connecting work in the first place?

Connecting work recognizes that, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or religious beliefs, every neighbor is an integral piece of a neighborhood. I believe that neighborhoods are agents of change and sources of belonging, and it's these values that drew me towards connecting work and Great Lakes Urban!

You've been a connector now for a couple of years. What's a favorite story from that time?

While it is hard to pick just one, a recent favorite story took place when a neighborhood family approached me with a creative vision to repurpose the blank space of their garage door into a mural that would respond to racial violence and injustice. Over five weeks, in partnership with CultureWorks' Student Advisory Council and with artistic direction from professional artist Jamari Taylor, we envisioned, designed, and painted a neighborhood mural. This project is a perfect example of collaborative, neighborhood-based creativity. Our hope is that this mural will inspire neighbors to reimagine their own day-to-day spaces and to consider creative ways that they may also seek racial justice, equality, and peace.

What are you learning from starting a completely new project in the West of Washington neighborhood?

Over the last six months, I have been reminded that even though West of Washington is a "new" project, there is always an abundance of partnerships, initiatives, ideas, and dreams already taking place within every neighborhood. While I get to discover, celebrate, mobilize, and support what's taking place in West of Washington, my biggest priority is to learn the intricacies and history of the neighborhood.



BATES NEIGHBORHOOD

Growing Friends & Food for Abundant Living



Bates Place Neighbors (BPN), based in Grand Rapids, MI, is passionate about neighborhood strengthening. In 2021, Great Lakes Urban formally linked with BPN as a supporting partner. Wayne Squires, BPN director, remarked, "We so appreciate the ongoing training and coaching support of Great Lakes Urban. Our staff has benefited from the energy, wisdom, and encouragement of Great Lakes Urban leaders who have helped us take next steps in neighbor-centered strategies of community flourishing."

Josh Holwerda, pictured to the right in the photograph above, is the lead connector on the BPN staff. Josh loves to initiate community gardens. Community gardens not only improve the community's ability to eat well, they are also a metaphor for the abundance of life. In a recent interview on what personally motivates him Josh said, "Greenhouses and gardens are very therapeutic for me. The smells, the growing process, the production of fresh, nutritious foods... it all helps me settle down and feel more connected to the joyful rhythms of everyday life."

He shared memories of his dad who bought a greenhouse business, Holwerda Interior Plantscaping. At this greenhouse, customers were welcomed and made to feel like an important part of the business. It was also a place where Josh learned that if one is diligent in the tasks of cultivating, planting, and nurturing; good and beautiful things are produced.

What does all of this have to do with his work as a connector? Josh has a good deal of experience in using gardening to encourage neighbors to work together in a way that brings joy and mutual benefit. He saw some amazing things in his years as an organizer in Muskegon's McLaughlin neighborhood and in the Alger Heights neighborhood of Grand Rapids.

"There is no need for anything truly unique or special, just a group of neighbors with a shared interest, a willingness to learn and participate, and an opportunity to offer their skills and resources to each other. This is such an unintimidating way for neighbors to meaningfully connect," he said. Josh has witnessed simple community gardening projects become "launch pads" for other neighborhood activities including home-to-home childcare among parent gardeners, educational opportunities related to composting and rain barrels, progressive food-to-table dinner events, a 5K-run fundraiser, and even the creation of "pocket parks" in collaboration with local government leaders. It works!

For Josh, the integration of his connector role with sustainable local gardening continues to provide therapy for his soul. "I have the joy and privilege of building trust with neighbors in such tangible, hands-on ways and bearing witness to their personal empowerment stories. It doesn't get much better than that!"

PIONEER VILLAGE NEIGHBORHOOD

Community Pioneer: Meet Robin Klay



Community leader Robin Klay has lived in Pioneer Village for the past four years. Having worked and lived in places like West Africa, Japan, and Mexico, she has gained a diverse and global perspective that she brings into her community connecting in Holland, MI. We were able to talk with Robin about her life, work, and her recent endeavors with the residential cohort that she formed called Pioneer Neighbors.

Why do you think connecting with the community is important?

Ultimately, humans are meant for friendship. There are also a lot of extremely talented people who haven't yet found places where they are needed. A lot of people whom I have engaged with—especially while living abroad—have been waiting for years for someone to ask them to share their knowledge, experience, and values. I think that's the case with a lot of us; we are waiting to be asked to be a part of something meaningful and to share our experiences. That's what these connections allow us to do.

What was something that you learned while living and working abroad?

I have learned that people love to tell their stories. One area I lived in was a very rural part of Oaxaca, Mexico. Living in a remote village, these people often imagine that they are not important to the broader community. But if you ask them to tell you their stories, they are very willing to share. As they shared, they came to realize that their lives were interesting and important. It's inspiring to see people who don't believe they have remarkable lives come to realize that they actually do.

Tell me more about the work you are doing now.

I live in Pioneer Village. Last winter, I met Jonna Johnson with Great Lakes Urban and learned about her experiences in community development. We began talking about how I could make some connections with people in the area. To start, I literally went door to door to each of the 72 units with a flyer inviting those interested to help create opportunities for mutual sharing of our talents and meeting neighbors' needs. We quickly discovered that all of us felt like strangers in our own neighborhood.

Has there been anything surprising about this work?

I have been pleasantly surprised by the way that people have taken great interest in getting to know each other. Residents have started to recognize others in their community and strike up conversations. One woman, who lost her husband about a year ago, wanted to find something new to do. She joined our Pioneer Neighbors group and offered to write up biographies so that people could get to know something about each other. She interviews a person for about 20 minutes and then writes up something really engaging. These brief insights about a person help neighbors discover mutual interests and create opportunities for new and deeper friendships.

EASTCORE NEIGHBORHOOD

Dia De Los Muertos: When Culture & Community Meet



Great Lakes Urban is proud to support the work of 3sixty in the Eastcore neighborhood of Holland, Michigan. This past year, at the height of a global pandemic, Eastcore residents launched a new event with special meaning; an event that showed us all the value of culture in building a connected community. This is their story.

First Annual Dia De Los Muertos festival

A significant percentage of Eastcore residents find connection, meaning, and belonging through the rich traditions of the Hispanic culture. Included in this number are business owners Jaqui Navarrete and Lucy Mircoles.

When Juaqui and Lucy were approached by Lori Appledorn from 3sixty's Neighborhood Advocacy Team about piloting a Dia De Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) festival, they agreed it was a good opportunity to share this tradition with the neighborhood.

Residents of Eastcore woke up on October 31, 2021 to a sunny and somewhat chili morning. If they walked over to the field at Rosa Parks, they would see a flurry of activity as festival planners and volunteers hurriedly put up tents and tables, set out memory candles and sugar skulls, and organized the Altar.

By 2:00 O'clock everything was in place. The festival kicked off with a welcome, followed by music from a Mariachi band. Children and youth took advantage of the face painting and craft booths, while families adorned the altar with photos, sugar skulls, and candles.

Through the festival, 63 residents created together a collective experience of remembrance and deep human connection. Sandy, for example, had recently lost her fiancé to COVID-19. She placed a photo of Tim on the altar and mourned his passing with others, in community.

As Jake Norris, Director of 3sixty remarked afterward, "It was absolutely moving to see this shared appreciation for life lived together emerge." Every single one of the residents that participated in the follow-up survey said they'd come out again in 2022! With the likes of Jaqui and Lucy at the helm, you know next year's Dia De Los Muertos festival will be even more meaningful.

We wish you all the best, Eastcore!

WESTCORE NEIGHBORHOOD

Meet Paul Bowles: Westcore resident and volunteer



The work of cultivating connection and change in the Westcore neighborhood is spearheaded by Amy Mares. Amy directs the efforts of Westcore Neighbors, an independent nonprofit neighborhood development corporation. Westcore Neighbors manages Nuestro Casa (a neglected property that residents purchased and restored to use as a community center), recruits, equips and mobilizes block connectors, supports neighborhood gatherings, like summer block parties, organizes an annual visioning event, and much, much more.

After struggling to feel at home for many years, Paul Bowles decided to take a chance and relocate to Holland, MI. Since moving to his current neighborhood in Westcore, Paul's life has improved in ways that he never would have imagined. He found a community and forged connections that transformed his mental, emotional, and physical health. We were fortunate enough to chat with Paul and learn more about his story.

How did you get involved?

Through my involvement with Circles USA, I was able to form concrete relationships with people in the community which have been really impactful on my life. I'm now involved with the organization Westcore Neighbors as a block connector and my job is to be available for members of this block and help them find solutions for problems that arise. I also have the privilege to develop block parties and ultimately try to get people to come out of their shell and become neighbors.

Can you talk about the relationships you have formed in this community?

My friendship with Jay [of Great Lakes Urban] has been really important. He has helped me to prosper in life in so many ways. He's the one that pushed me to get to know others in the area by saying, "Paul, be a neighbor. Go knock on the door and introduce yourself and say hi." So, I did, and now I have a great friendship with my next-door neighbor, and they have become just like family.

How does having a stronger sense of community improve your life?

I know I'm not alone. Growing up, I came from a family that wasn't very sociable and didn't have any community or relationships with extended family. When I got to Holland, I started developing significant and loving relationships with people that I had never had before. I've planted roots and found myself at home.

GODFREY LEE NEIGHBORHOOD

Doris Perez: Weaving the Tapestry of Change



Doris Perez was born and raised in the Dominican Republic, where her parents were both heavily involved in their community. They ran a medical clinic out of a trailer that they were able to move all over the island to bring assistance to many people. Every person that they helped was treated with dignity and love – a value that was very important for their family to uphold, and one that Doris continues to practice in her work today.

In 1979, Doris came to Michigan to study psychology and social work at Spring Arbor University. These four years taught her a lot about social work in America and inspired her to continue working with people. Eventually, Doris was offered a position as a Neighborhood Connector in the Godfrey Lee neighborhood through Great Lakes Urban.

Every week, Doris and other residents participate in a walking club, in which they walk weekly and talk with one another. After walking, they meet at someone's home to cook, share stories, talk about goals and hopes for the future, and uplift each other. They also like to come together and look for ways to help others in the community that are in need. In one instance, there was a woman that was at a low point both emotionally and physically and was unable to care for her garden. Doris and the walking club came along to help with the garden and show support.

Uncovering that potential has been Doris' favorite thing to do and she calls this "treasure hunting." She goes out into the community, getting to know and appreciate what every person has to offer. She says, "Every person has a distinctive, beautiful thing to contribute to society." By practicing what she believes in, Doris has inspired others to want to connect with their neighbors and volunteer their time in the community. She has been committed to providing the training and support that the residents need to lead the growth and transformation of their communities.

As one resident that's benefited from Doris' work has said, "I am grateful and proud of Godfrey Lee, first and mainly for the community involvement and connections I have made. These connections have improved my life in many unexpected ways. For example, Lee St. CRC delivered and installed a washer and dryer. Besides what has been done for me, I also have dreamed on what I wish to see in my neighborhood, to turn the empty lots on Chicago Drive into working areas such as a farmers market, cultural crafts/flea market or food truck area with outdoor eating. Best of all, I have connected with other folks who also want to improve the place we love and live in."

HOLLAND-ZEELAND REGION

Scaling abundance: An interview with Jake Norris



Jake Norris graduated from DePaul University with a degree in sociology, where he learned about Asset Based Community Development. He and his family moved to Holland in 2018 and live in the Eastcore neighborhood. Jake directs 3sixty, which is strengthening the Eastcore neighborhood. Jake also serves as the Holland-Zeeland Regional Coach. 3sixty has been instrumental in everything from housing and mural programs, to a tool lending library and annual clean-up events. We caught up with Jake to learn more about his vision.

What's a favorite story from the work?

I have many favorites, but I will share one from our Neighborhood Advocacy Team member Lori. Lori and her husband Dave moved into the Eastcore neighborhood 30 years ago. In that time, they have built community around them by reclaiming a neglected alley behind their home for a community garden. Lori and Dave have connected their neighbors by organizing events in the alley and using the gifts of the whole block. What was formerly a littered eyesore has been transformed into a gathering place where neighbors can connect and care for their shared space.

At its best, 3sixty is the support system to help bring dreams to life. While it's nice to see how these gardens and spaces improve the appearance of the area, these projects bring so much more than that. As Lori emphasizes, "It's really about humanity and just being out with each other. Everybody gets together and has so much fun. Because of this work, we now know our neighbors and if we are ever in a jam, night or day, we know that our neighbors are going to have our back."

What inspired you to work regionally?

Simply put, I love the work and want to see more of it happening in the Holland-Zeeland area. I see how challenging it is for resident leaders to sustain the work over the long haul, and how hard it is for individual neighborhood organizations to tell their story to a broader audience; I'd like to build the support structure to free up neighbors to focus on their neighborhood! My dream is to incubate and support neighborhood connector entities in every neighborhood. Every neighborhood has intrinsic value and unique gifts; I want to see those resources leveraged for collective flourishing across our region.



SPILL-OVER EFFECT

On Building Community: Lessons from Minerva Clients



The following is reprinted with permission from the Minerva Strategies blog at <https://www.minervastrategies.com/blog/>. Sara Veltkamp, on Minerva's staff, helped Great Lakes Urban revamp our messaging platforms.

I'm not going to mince words: I've struggled during the pandemic. While I am grateful that I am healthy, haven't lost loved ones, and have a good, steady job and a safe place to live, seeing people close-up and in-person shouldn't feel like a special occasion—or a risk. We are all meant to exist within a rich tapestry of relationships, not just with a few people you see occasionally from a safe distance or over a screen. As a result of these conditions, I have felt more alone this past year than I have ever thought possible.

What I've learned during the pandemic is that community is not something I can continue to assume will “just happen.” Building a community of people you want to live with—and more importantly, rely on when things get hard—takes intention.

Fortunately for me, one of Minerva's clients helped me figure out my next steps.

Great Lakes Urban is a nonprofit organization based in Michigan with the goal of connecting people to build stronger neighborhoods. Drawing from a strengths-based framework, they look at the wealth of resources in a neighborhood and help people take advantage of the gifts and talents they have to build the communities they want to live in.

Through our partnership with Great Lakes Urban to level-up their communications platforms, we supported an online event where two neighborhood residents and a community police officer talked about the changes they've seen and been a part of in the neighborhood of Holland, Michigan. Sergeant John Weatherwax described these efforts succinctly, “the residents have turned these neighborhoods into communities.”

In preparation for this event, I spent time with the panelists to make sure they felt comfortable and confident. Toward the end of this prep call, we started talking about life in a pandemic, and I mentioned how challenging it has been to find and build community. Great Lakes Urban Board Member Jay Van Groningen asked me point-blank: “How many of your neighbors' names do you know?” I sheepishly made excuses like “I'm new to the building” and “I moved here during the pandemic.” These things are true, but they are excuses, nonetheless. Several neighbors have attempted to start conversations with me, and our building has held COVID-friendly outdoor events.

The truth is that I have not prioritized building community in this new space. Jay was simply pointing that out—and offering a simple path to start.



**LEARN MORE, CONNECT,
GIVE AND JOIN**

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