

The Gift of Connected Communities

Recently, I represented Great Lakes Urban at a first-of-its-kind conference held in Boston called Building Connected Communities. One conference speaker was Dr. Robert Putnam, author of such acclaimed works as, “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community”. What does Dr. Putnam conclude from his extensive research spanning decades?

“Community connectedness is not just about warm fuzzy tales of civic triumph. In measurable and well-documented ways, social capital makes an enormous difference in our lives...Social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy.”

Seemingly small acts that grow connectedness add up to significant impacts in our communities, our country, and our world. Does that seem so surprising against the backdrop of the season we are in? Christmastime offers intimate spaces, reasons to be together, and opportunities to give out of our abundance, all of which adds up to hope and light.

For many at the conference, this was a new focus; however, Great Lakes Urban has been innovating in this space since 2008. You, our Great Lakes Urban community, are the gift that makes our work possible. You have contributed time, talent, and treasure, and we are grateful.

Core to our strategy for building community connectedness is equipping and supporting Neighborhood Connectors. I think you’ll enjoy hearing on the following pages about Makya and some of the other connectors we support. And, I think you’ll enjoy hearing from Ken Genzink who is investing in greater connectedness. May their stories warm your heart and add to the season’s spirit of hope and light.



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Help us grow the movement

- **Donate** to Great Lakes Urban to support our neighborhood strengthening activities.
- **Get to know** your neighbors.
- **Like and follow** Great Lakes Urban on Facebook!
- **Watch and share** our Lunch+Learn recordings and blogs with your networks.
- **Encourage** your church, business, etc. to get involved with a local neighborhood.
- **Visit our website** at: GreatLakesUrban.org to learn more.
- **Share** your ideas with us by emailing: info@greatlakesurban.org

To change how you receive this newsletter, or to talk with someone at Great Lakes Urban, send an email to: info@greatlakesurban.org or call 937-935-4844



Bright Spots in ABCD: The Holland Story

Our last Bright Spots in ABCD webinar of 2023 celebrated the transformative power of social connection across **Holland, MI**. From the block level to City Hall, local leaders are creating lasting change. Visit greatlakesurban.org/events for a link to the video.

This year, we hosted **6** Bright Spots in ABCD with over **200** participants! Each year, we are able to reach more people and provide access to innovative ways to connect neighbors for lasting transformation.

Keep an eye out next year as we build on this momentum and create new opportunities to learn and receive coaching to implement ideas in your neighborhood.

The Changemakers We Need

The holiday season is a time of hope, remembrance, and celebration. But sometimes, this season of joy is interrupted with reminders of our long to-do lists, news cycles of violence, and the pain of hope unfulfilled. When this happens, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and believe that the small things, like meeting a new neighbor or joining a neighborhood group, aren't what makes a difference.

At Great Lakes Urban we see everyday that this isn't true. It is the work of connecting, caring, and collaborating together that makes a brighter future for all. When neighbors come together, it has the power to create resilient communities, one neighborhood at a time. Over the past year, we've captured the stories of how Neighborhood Connectors champion hope, dignity, and belonging. We've seen relationships that took years to cultivate begin to move forward, showing that in our era of immediate results, slow movement is what produces lasting change.

See a glimpse of these stories below and watch their digital stories at www.GreatLakesUrban.org/Post/Changemakers. With thanks to Amy Mares and Westcore Neighbors, Lori Appeldoorn and 3Sixty, and Jerry Baker and Bates Place Neighbors for allowing us into your neighborhoods and lives as Connectors!



Westcore Creates Nuestra Casa

"We don't just want this to be a neighborhood you live in, but a **family** you're a part of."



Tulip City Walls Mural Festival

"The whole goal was for people to come here and feel together. **Everyone is welcome** here right in Eastcore."



Bates Place Community Gardens

"We got involved in the garden program and it really feels like **everyone truly cares** about each other."

Celebrating Connection

Over the summer, seven participants completed a 12-week Community Connector course. During the course, they spent six weeks learning Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) skills, such as listening for joys, passions, patterns, and connections of neighbors. The following six weeks explored in-depth community-based actions where participants completed both in-class and community-based activities. Some of the outcomes included:

- Participants organized two family events at Meadow Lanes Townhomes, including a game night with a variety of board games and corn hole and an Octoberfest gathering featuring a costume contest. Both were great fun and heartwarming.
- Participants from Pioneer Village hosted several events as well, including crafting events, movie nights, and Christmas Caroling.
- Participants are also planning events for the families living at Harbor Village Apartments. These three complexes, taken together, make up a large share of the population of the Jefferson Elementary attendance zone. This energized set of connectors is already showing what's possible in an environment that can feel disconnected.



Community Connector Course, Summer 2023

Meet Makya Murray: Builder of Connected Communities



Makya Murphy
Community Connector

Meet our newest Community Connector, Makya Murphy. Makya was one of the participants in the Community Connector course. She works in the area south of 32nd St. in Holland, MI. Makya's efforts bring people together, cultivate community, and create the conditions for positive change. We recently caught up with Makya for an interview.

Makya, tell us about yourself.

Eleven years ago, my family moved to Holland, and what at first seemed new and scary has become what I call home. I moved here from Benton Harbor, where there wasn't a communal feeling, but Holland was completely different. That led me to this position so I can encourage more people to join their community. When I'm not doing Connector work, I'm busy as a full-time college student and a mother to my one-year-old son. I am currently getting my Bachelor's in Education, and I plan to be an Elementary School teacher after I graduate.

Recently, you participated in a Community Connector class. Can you tell us about that?

Yes! Attending the Community Connector class was extremely beneficial for me. I learned key techniques in bringing my community together, and it also aided in learning the skills necessary for accurately recognizing the different qualities and assets in other individuals. I was also able to gain community from my classmates and learn new things from them. We had a variety of great women in our group. In addition to this, I was able to get this job as a Community Connector and apply everything I was taught! I'd recommend this class to anybody wanting to improve themselves and their community, even if that might not be their career path. There is a lot of knowledge coming from that six-week course.

And what drew you to participate in the class in the first place?

Initially, I was interested in this class because I wanted to get to know my community more and needed strategies on how to do so. Like I said, with me not being from here, there are still a lot of people I do not know and connections I have not made. However, after hearing different stories about Southwest Holland and other areas of the city, I knew there needed to be more put into that area specifically.

I understand the class has already made an impact in the neighborhood. Can you share?

Yes! Myself and my classmates were able to host two different gatherings at Meadowlanes Townhomes. Our goal was to bring the people of the complex together, and hopefully find some people that would want to continue having gatherings even after our class ended. We started off with a game night hosted for the children and their parents. That had a great turnout, and the kids had fun. It was a great way to introduce ourselves to the community and start building relationships. The second and largest event we put together was our Octoberfest, where we had the kids and parents come out dressed up for Halloween and play some games, eat some good food, and spend time with their community. This event was very special to me because I have a huge passion for bringing people together and also creating safe and fun spaces for the children of the community. It felt good to hear that the parents of Meadowlanes appreciated our initiative in hosting an event so that the kids could have a good time, and the parents found themselves mingling as well. You truly know your efforts matter when you get a first-hand experience of its effects.

How do you see your work as a Community Connector nudging the neighborhood toward a better future story?

I believe that with time, my work as a community connector will not only bring people together but also encourage more members of the community to crave change and take the steps to promote change as well. I see the community having their own group of people--all putting in different assets to create events, fundraisers, and even just social gatherings for all to attend. This, in turn, will automatically better the neighborhood, because where there is community, there is positivity and a successful future.

Thanks for all you're doing, Makya! Also, thank you to all our supporters, as well as the Community Foundation of the Holland-Zeeland Area general fund. You made the Community Connector course, and Makya's work, possible.

Fueling Community Connection

Neighborhood Connectors across Michigan are showing that we can champion hope, dignity, and belonging. Their work would not be possible without the generosity of our donors. We could not be more grateful for all the ways you're supporting the future you want to see this holiday season.

On **Giving Tuesday**, we were given the challenge of a matching \$1,000 donation. Because you showed up, **we raised a total of \$2,070** to fuel Neighborhood Connectors! In one day, you helped us reach 10% of our End-of-Year goal. But, the challenge isn't over yet.



Help us reach our End-of-Year fundraising goal of \$20,000! Help fuel connected communities across the country!

To ignite a chain reaction of positive change, we need your help. Our End-of-Year campaign will run through **December 31st**, and every dollar creates resilience and hope. To see more stories of transformation, multiply the work of Connectors like Makya, and create resilient communities neighborhood by neighborhood, partner with us by making a secure donation at bit.ly/glu-fuelthemovement. Thank you!

Investing in Community Connection: Meet Ken Genzink



Ken Genzink

We regularly interview leaders, volunteers, donors, and others in our generous Great Lakes Urban community. Below, check out a snippet of our conversation with Ken Genzink, CEO at Code Blue and Chairman of our Great Lakes Urban Board of Directors.

Ken, what is it about Great Lakes Urban's mission that attracts you?

It's the methodology. In my opinion, the best way to help people in the long term is to help them help themselves. Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is about helping people discover their own gifts and utilize them to become leaders in and contributors to their own neighborhood's success. Neighbors who are engaged, connected, and work together on things they care about are "the one thing that positively affects 20 things" in their neighborhood and the community in which they work and live.

Can you share what motivates you to give to the organization in terms of your time, talent, and treasure?

It's the return on investment. ABCD is a powerful concept with a tremendous ROI, or return on investment. Unfortunately, it is not well known, well understood, or well supported. Great Lakes Urban is working to change that. Having said that, the City of Holland understands and supports it very well and has made it part of their strategy for Flourishing Neighborhoods. Being part of a small organization that provides structure and support for other cities that want to adopt these methodologies is very rewarding.

What is your hope, your vision, for the future of the work?

Great Lakes Urban is a small organization with a big vision. Our goal is not to build an organization, but to support the ABCD Movement across North America, sharing what we have learned from the successes here in Holland, MI. Our experience, confirmed by extensive research, is that neighborhoods with ABCD Coaches and Neighborhood Connectors are better able to get their neighbors to work together to improve their own quality of life for themselves and each other. Every dollar that you invest in Great Lakes Urban helps to equip and support ABCD Coaches and Neighborhood Connectors locally or in some other city in North America. My hope is that, with Great Lakes Urban's help, this ABCD Movement is embraced by neighborhood and city leaders across North America as a strategy for their own flourishing communities.

Thank you, Ken, for sharing, and for contributing to our ambitious vision!