



Connecting and convening leaders to work together for the improvement of their neighborhoods, communities, and cities.

Spring Newsletter

2021

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- Get to know your neighbors.
- Like and follow Great Lakes Urban on Facebook!
- Watch and share the Lunch & Learn recording with your networks.
- Encourage your church to get involved with the local neighborhood.
- You can find more ideas on our website: GreatLakesUrban.org. Have other ways to get connect? Share them with us!

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Planting Care, Harvesting Abundance

Springtime is one of my favorite seasons as the gloom of long nights gives way to warm, sunny days and as the quiet cold and snow of winter is overtaken by the bursting forth of birdsong and green living things. More than any other time of year, spring inspires in me a deep sense of gratitude for life.

During this time of year, my mind turns to our little kitchen garden as well. My family and I enjoy planting in the spring after the last frost. It's a bonding experience that produces great anticipation in our hearts for the wholesome, tasty, and fresh tomatoes and beans we'll enjoy together in the summer.

It strikes me that our work at Great Lakes Urban, or GLU, is not so different. We plant seeds of hope and care by supporting the people who connect neighbors and reweave the fabric of our society. And in time that hope and care becomes a harvest of strong, abundant neighborhoods.

I hope you'll find the stories of abundance in this newsletter – as we tour three West Michigan communities – as life-affirming as I have.

We will start our tour with a review of our recent lunch and learn with three changemakers from Holland, MI, followed by an interview with Jake Norris about taking the connecting work there to scale. Next, we will explore how connectors are growing stronger, more abundant, neighborhoods in Grand Rapids and, finally, in Wyoming.

Many of you reading this newsletter give of your time, talent and treasure to nurture these stories of abundance. For that we are grateful.



Eric Smith, Director

Talking Abundance - a GLU lunch and learn with three changemakers

How does getting to know your neighbors play such a big role in building a strong community? We explored this question in our first online Lunch + Learn on March 3rd. The discussion included Amy Mares from Westcore Neighbors in Holland, MI, Sergeant John Weatherwax from the City of Holland's community policing team, and GLU Board Member and Westcore resident Jay Van Groningen.

During this conversation, Jay shared his personal reflection on why neighborhood connecting is so important to our lives: "As a nation, we've never been as isolated as we are today. If you think of a neighborhood as a tic-tac-toe board and ask the typical North American if they know the first and last names of the neighbors living in the eight squares around them, often, they won't know one."



Lunch & Learn Panel

The idea that it takes a village to raise a child used to be central to the way we did society, today it's not. By being connected to each other and working together, we have all the capacities we need to achieve what we dream about. We can build a beautiful future together."

For stories of neighborhood connecting and information on how you can get involved in this powerful work, watch the full webinar on our website at greatlakesurban.org under the updates tab.

Scaling Abundance - an interview with Jake

Jake Norris graduated from DePaul University with a degree in sociology, where he learned about Asset Based Community Development while working for both the university's center for service learning and campus ministry. After college, he first worked in Chicago. He and his family moved to Holland in 2018 and live on 18th street in the Eastcore neighborhood.



Jake Norris

Today, Jake directs 3sixty, which is strengthening the Eastcore neighborhood. In 2021 Jake is partnering with Great Lakes Urban on a new initiative to launch a Holland-Zeeland Regional Team. The team is dedicated to replicating the Neighborhood Connector program in new neighborhoods across the region. Recently, we caught up with Jake to learn more about his vision to grow change in the Holland-Zeeland region.

What drew you to neighborhood work in the first place?

It all started for me as a student at DePaul University. I was trained in Asset-Based Community Development as a part of my job as a service learning coordinator. I remember walking around the Humboldt Park neighborhood with my colleagues, speaking with faith leaders and community non-profits about the value they saw in their community, and it all clicked for me: if you want to see a neighborhood thriving, you have to have strong resident leaders who share a pride in their place.

What's a favorite story from the work?

I have many favorites, but I will share one from our Neighborhood Advocacy Team member Lori Appeldoorn. 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, beautifying the neighborhood. What's more is that 3sixty was able to secure a grant for building raised garden beds, enhancing the space even more. At our best, 3sixty is the support system to help bring neighbors' dreams to life.

What inspired you to step into a larger Regional Coach role to strengthen neighborhoods?

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.

Thanks so much, Jake! You can learn more about 3sixty and Jake by visiting www.3-sixty.org. Below are some pictures from their annual spring cleanup in the Eastcore Neighborhood and the innovative tool lending library for neighbors.



Eastcore Neighborhood Spring Cleanup



3-sixty Tool Library

Growing Friends & Food for Abundant Living - partnering with Bates Place Neighbors

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 GLU leaders who have helped us take next steps in neighbor-centered strategies of community flourishing."

Given the theme of this newsletter, we wanted to introduce you to Josh Holwerda, 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."



Josh Holwerda

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!"

Will you consider contributing toward our vision of reaching 100 neighborhoods--in partnership with groups like BPN--in the next three years?

Give the Gift of Strong Neighborhoods and Cities



Will you consider contributing toward our vision of reaching 100 neighborhoods with our connector program in the next three years?

You can make a tax deductible donation by sending a check to:

Great Lakes Urban
100 Pine St Suite NW-4
Zeeland, MI 49464

Or via our secure online system by *visiting www.greatlakesurban.com and clicking the "Donate" tab.*

Abundance Taking Root - celebrating the progress of Godfrey Lee

The Godfrey Lee neighborhood of Wyoming, Michigan is stronger today because of the Godfrey Lee Listeners (GLL). GLL is the formal name of a resident-led neighborhood team that has formed to own and support the listening and connecting work in the neighborhood. Today, we are celebrating with GLL that they just received their 501(C)3 nonprofit status from the IRS.

This news is just one more achievement for GLL in a long series of successes. GLL has initiated school, community and backyard gardens, increased the tree canopy of the neighborhood through a tree planting initiative, engaged their residents and small business community to support them through the COVID-19 pandemic, engaged students from Lee Public High School to volunteer on Chicago Drive projects, and more.

Leading the charge is Doris Perez, GLU's Godfrey Lee connector. It doesn't take long to discover that Doris is a very relational person with a servant's heart. Doris draws out the value and dignity of everyone she meets, weaving them into the social fabric of the community, and strengthening the Godfrey Lee neighborhood in the process. People's lives are improved as a result, as Rosemary, an active resident, can attest.

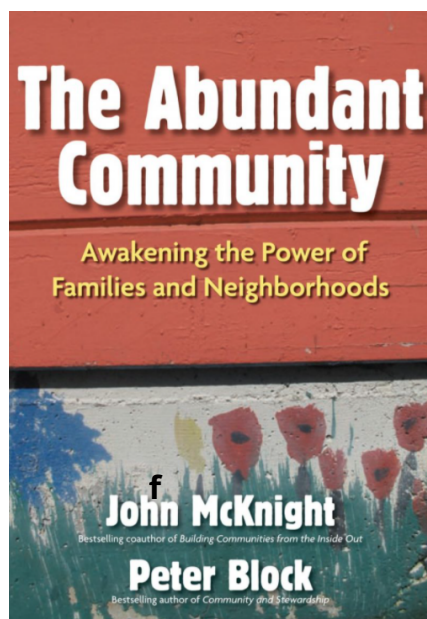


Doris Perez

"I am grateful and proud of the GLL," Rosemary pointed out in a recently, "first and mainly for the community involvement and connections I have made. These connections have improved my life in many unexpected ways. For example, a crew from the Church of the Open Door donated, delivered and installed a water heater for my husband and I during the holidays. And Lee St. CRC delivered and installed a washer and dryer. A better gift could not have been given! I found them delightful! I want to know them more, to teach them some of the things I know and to learn from them."

Rosemary also points out that, "Besides what the GLL has 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."

Way to go, Doris, Rosemary, and the GLL neighborhood team!



The Abundant Community - a resource

In *The Abundant Community* John McKnight and Peter Block take a thoughtful look at community life, pointing out that right in our own neighborhoods we have the capacity to address our human needs. We all have gifts to offer, and this book suggests how to nurture voluntary, self-organizing structures that will reveal these gifts and allow them to be shared to the greatest mutual benefit.

Block and McKnight recommend roles we can assume and actions we can take to reweave the social fabric that has been unraveled by consumerism and its teaching that we are not enough. Each neighborhood has people with the gifts and talents needed to provide for our prosperity and peace of mind. This reminds us of our power to create a hope-filled life. It assures us that we can be the architects of the future where we want to live.

For additional inspiration, visit www.abundantcommunity.com for free stories, inspiration, and resources on ABCD.

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