

# Project Neighbors

RESPECT & ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY

As you might recognize by its sheer size, this is a special issue of the Project Neighbors newsletter. We thought that we would take this opportunity to reflect on the last 50 years of activity—first embodied in the Valparaiso Builders Association—that has come to define the movement that we now call Project Neighbors. But this exercise is not merely meant to be a self-congratulatory pat on the back. We are using this issue for two purposes. First, we are defining the elements and forces that have propelled us to continue to grow and to define new ways to work toward a more just and equitable community. Second, we are convinced that communities everywhere need and can have their own Project Neighbors and we believe that describing our path will be useful to others as a sort of tutorial on resident-driven community change. And we look forward to continuing to work with all of you as we move to an ever more welcoming, caring and vibrant Valparaiso.

— The Project Neighbors Board



## MY HISTORY WITH PROJECT NEIGHBORS: 50 YEARS OF INNOVATIVE CITIZENSHIP

by Loie Reiner

Project Neighbors is often called “the best kept secret in town” and I understand why. From its board membership to its modus operandi, it is truly special among non-profit organizations. Even its motto, “Respect and encourage community,” doesn’t adequately describe the full range of its amazing accomplishments or the tenacious creativity of the Project Neighbors board and its partners. It has been a unique experience to have lived through this journey and share my story in the hope that others can realize what can be done when people are determined to improve their lives and those of others. The past 50 years have seen struggle and racism and fear, but I want to focus on the incredible strength and creativity and unity that have kept us going and growing.

From 1968-1982, the organization that is now known as Project Neighbors (PN) took seed when a small group of mainly Valparaiso University faculty couples banded together to respond to the request of an African-American Chicago friend of my family desperate enough to be the first to break the color barrier in then all-white Valpo. In rapid succession, five more families with the same courage joined us, and the numbers of those who helped us welcome them gradually multiplied. Volunteers built the first home on donated land and reappeared with friends to help create five more. Our ranks of “digging deeper” to “share the wealth” grew, almost in lockstep with discovering strengths and weaknesses we’d never realized before our new neighbors opened us up to the opportunity. Together, we were involved in a bona fide win-win experience, even if we didn’t know it then. Membership in that intentional community brought conflict, but, more importantly, new and rich relationships that transformed individual lives and a whole community.

By 1982, when Valparaiso Builders Association (VBA), as we called ourselves then, closed the books and turned the deeds to their homes over to the families, children and mothers alike had earned high school and/or university degrees. Then, for awhile, continuing to enjoy the relationships that had been built, we fooled ourselves, thinking we had “done our part.”

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The reality, however, was that VBA was just the start. As we learned from the families that participated in VBA and others that struggled in the community, it was clear that there was still not anywhere near the amount of decent affordable housing for the most vulnerable Valpo families, nor the services needed for their support. We decided to build on our VBA experience and work collectively towards building a more equitable community for all of us who live here. The next iteration of this journey was conceptualized and we called it Project Neighbors.

Veterans of the VBA experience brought lessons-learned and fresh recruits brought new ideas and energy. The new, expanded board table, along with donations of land, cash, and commitments of time and labor, were mobilized to address PN's first priority: families with small children in desperate situations, referred by a person, agency, or parish respected by PN. One family at a time. One beautifully renovated and furnished fixer-upper by small, tireless armies of volunteers at a time. One support group at a time, composed of seven to 10 local families eager and willing to be good neighbors.

From 1986 on, PN's board continued to grow its previous model of creating affordable housing, fielding and adopting one referral after another from its many connections – local and beyond. Today, spread all across Valpo, and concentrated in the Hilltop area, are the single family homes, duplexes, and reconstructed three-flats volunteers created for the scores of families, whose lives meshed for years with so many others', relationships that—again and again—changed hearts and minds, both ways.

Yet, something was missing, claimed Walt Reiner—my husband and the founder of both VBA and PN—and the board agreed. Daily conversations with these families had made it clear that reliable, premium, affordable childcare and healthcare for families struggling to earn their way out of poverty was missing for thousands of our neighbors in Valpo. PN took on the challenge and (miraculously, I want to say) a whole, inspired community seemed to come on board to help us fill those needs. In this issue you'll read more about the results of those efforts—Hilltop Neighborhood House and what is now known as HealthLinc—from those personally involved. These efforts, instigated by the PN board, sought others with specific interest and expertise and spun off to exist on their own, serving the whole community.

Almost simultaneously, PN's board, partners, patrons, and volunteers moved ahead with us to not only continue creating lovely and affordable housing on Locust St., but to add the Village Grocery/Laundromat and Maria Elena's Restaurant to the Hilltop community. Without seeming to stop for breath, PN

completed one endeavor after another in its commitment to building a more equitable community: Neighbors' Place and Caroline's Place for women in need of affordable housing; our community FM radio station WVLP; NEO, a new resource for alternative education; and many other projects emanating from our board and others, which you can read more about in this issue.

What I find absolutely inspiring at this 50-year mark is not just PN's record for meeting so many needs and changing so many lives in the process, but the downright contagious ingenuity and willingness to risk from the members of its free-wheeling, idea-swapping, committed-to-making-a-better-world board!

I've got to be the luckiest almost-nonagenarian around to have had 50 years of such experiences and relationships, and, now, to be included in the company of both those who envision, design and carry out one need-meeting innovation after another as well as those who benefit.

So, while PN continues to address this community's growing need for affordable housing, thanks to a treasure of committed volunteers and your vital financial support, no grass grows under its feet. One blessed thing leads to another.

How wonderful is that! Happy Anniversary!



# LOIE-PALOOZA

SAVE THE DATE  
7.13.19

URSCHEL PAVILION  
in central park  
VALPARAISO, IN

SHOW UP.  
MAKE CHANGE.  
HAVE FUN.

JOIN US IN CELEBRATING 90 YEARS OF JOYFUL LIVING!

A VERY SPECIAL EVENING FUNDRAISER  
FOR PROJECT NEIGHBORS  
Honoring Lois Reiner





Project Neighbors (PN) evolved from the Valparaiso Builders Association (VBA) and despite its name, was never intended to be a housing organization. The mission always was to strengthen the community by addressing issues of race, class and poverty, and to build healthy families and neighborhoods where diversity of all kinds is welcomed and cherished.

That being said, housing is fundamental! A safe, warm, affordable place to live, to raise children, to rest from a day's labor is a prerequisite to a productive, satisfying and healthy life. Try to imagine being homeless or living in a dangerous place. Without the stability of that place—a roof to keep out the weather, a heating system, water, a kitchen, a functioning bathroom, and adequate space for people and stuff—life is not easy.

To achieve our goals over the years, we understood the importance of starting with housing. We could divide the 50 years into two phases. The first phase, from 1968 until 1988, the process went like this: a family or an individual would express a need or desire to better their living situation, much like Barbara Cotton expressed to Walt Reiner. So, the family came first. The Cotton house was built from scratch because renting or purchasing a house was not possible due to widely practiced anti-diversity policies in Valpo. Once that color barrier had been cracked, obtaining existing housing was more possible. And this is significant: during that period, old, worn, but affordable housing was still available in Valparaiso. So for most of phase one, houses were purchased and rehabilitated by a growing army of volunteers. Once the house was made safe and fully functional (plumbing works, fresh paint, adequate heating system, etc.), the family moved in and then an array of nurturing activities commenced to insure success living in Valpo. As Valpo grew, housing and land costs began to inflate. Add to that development the demolition of old, inexpensive houses by the university, the city and developers. The situation changed and cheap, fixer-uppers are scarce, and when they are on the market they are expensive. This period begins phase two: locate cheap, undesirable land. Show up as the firetrucks are driving

away. Find the house that has been condemned as unsafe for occupancy. PN, realizing the rare opportunity to buy low and having the vision to see past the rubble, would buy the property, design a single family house or duplex and harness the energy of volunteers to create a new dwelling even before a family was chosen. With a builder added to the PN board of directors and later an architect, the process was repeated over and over.

I came on the scene in 1991, and while much had been done prior to that year, I can speak most accurately about those 28 years. In that period, PN has built, rehabilitated or purchased 34 buildings which, in total, provided 67 living units!

For most of these 50 years the focus has been on families with children. The belief was that with housing stability, the children would be able to become educated and transcend the cycle of poverty. Lots of needy people got left out of this formula, particularly single individuals who were homeless or at risk of homelessness. Then an opportunity presented itself. HealthLinc, the community health center which grew out of Hilltop Neighborhood House (another PN creation), would soon move out of the 11,000 square foot building on the corner of Union and College Streets. With a very generous purchase priced from HealthLinc, PN bought the building. The vision was small, fully equipped (with kitchenettes and bathrooms in every unit), single occupancy apartments for single women. After a year of gutting the building and constructing 18 such units, Neighbors Place was born. It has been fully occupied for five years. The concept was so simple and successful that two years after the opening of Neighbors Place, Housing Opportunities and PN collaborated to create Caroline's Place on Calumet Avenue, an additional 15 single occupancy units for women.

Beginning our next 50 years, there is still much work to do and housing—still fundamental—will continue to be a part of the PN mission.

## THE FOCUS FOR 2019

Like many creative endeavors, there are periods of struggle when you think your next project, or artistic creation will never present itself...and then there are periods when ideas and plans flow like a gushing river; 2019—and 2020—feel like the gushing river.

As soon as we get the building permit from Indianapolis, Project Neighbors (PN) will collaborate with Respite House, an organization providing a halfway house for recovering substance abusers, to build a second, 24-bed halfway house on two adjacent parcels of ground on Union Street. This half million dollar project will be owned and operated by Respite House, Inc., but built by PN and community volunteers.

Soon to be off the drawing board is a five-unit row house development located on Monroe Street, just two blocks south of the heart of downtown Valpo. While all recent close-in residential construction has been high-end projects like those on Chicago Street, these 1200 square foot, three bedroom row houses will be attractive, energy efficient and affordable to the folks who work but earn considerably less than the median household income.

Ever since the building of Neighbors Place and Caroline's Place, PN has been searching for the opportunity to create comparable housing for single men. Right now, single homeless men—most of whom are employed—spend their nights sleeping on church floors. Finding the right building to convert to housing has been a challenge. Recently, two local individuals have committed \$250,000 total as seed money to acquire land and get on with the challenge of providing this desperately needed type of housing for men. We now have a lead on suitable land. Stay tuned.

Finally, last year PN purchased a former garage which had been converted to two small apartments on Axe Avenue. The garage was situated on the south half of the property leaving the north half buildable. We envision a small, three bedroom single family house to be called our "anniversary house."

# Housing and Caring Communities

In many ways, 2018 was not a great year in terms of "Housing for All" in Valparaiso. Certainly, there were some bright spots. Foremost among them would have to be the transformation of the "ugliest" piece of property in the City over on Axe Avenue, to a nicely landscaped piece of property containing a sophisticatedly designed and impressively constructed duplex by Project Neighbors (PN). Another bright spot has been the reports from residents at both Neighbors Place and Caroline's Place that they have not only been provided with a quality, affordable place to live, but clearly a place these women can call home. One could add the emerging partnership between PN and Respite House in the pending construction of Respite House II, planned to house 25 or so men in the process of recovery from addiction. After that, most of the news on "Housing for All" has been, at best, disappointing.

In a July 2018 article in the *Northwest Indiana Times*, Valparaiso Mayor Jon Costas stated that he was not sure about the need for affordable housing in Valpo, and announced that by the end of this year he would hire a consultant to do a study and issue a report sometime next year. To date, there has been no public announcement of the hiring of a consultant and members of the City Council consulted were not aware of one either. The problem with the Mayor's request for more data is that there is sufficient data already available. The city did already hire a consultant, the Social Impact Research Center, to examine housing issues in the city. Their study—which the city rejected—concluded, among many other things, that in Valparaiso, "there are gaps of 1,490 affordable units for extremely low-income owners and renters and 507 affordable units for very low-income owners."

In addition to the existing studies, there is ample data available without hiring a consultant. For example, it is the renters in this community who have the biggest affordability problems and the US Census data paints a very adequate picture of the problems they face. For example, of all the renting households in Valparaiso, 48.2% are paying more than 30% of their income for housing which is the level at which HUD refers to as being housing burdened or in more general terms, living in housing they really can't afford without sacrificing or cutting back on other necessary expenses like their own healthcare. The picture gets much worse when we look at people making less than \$20,000 per year where 90.4% are housing burdened. If you include all renters making less than \$35,000 per year, 85.5% are housing burdened, which in more concrete terms amounts to 2,043 housing units. To carry this one step further, the median income renter making \$32,385 per year cannot, without going over the 30% figure, afford the median rent in 2017 which is \$897. And the problem has gotten much worse. Since 2010 the median rent has increased by 11.6% and the median income for renting households has increased by only 1.6%. The data is clear that we have a problem that needs attention. More data is always welcome, but there has been a good deal of data for a long time that illustrates a very real problem.

We did learn something about housing markets this past year. As reported last year, expectations on creating Housing for All were raised when the ValpoNext action agenda included calls for "affordable housing" as did the AltogetherValpo plan, although to a more limited extent. Confusion emerged when the City announced it had "decoupled" ValpoNext from the City indicating it had cut off funding, only to later announce it had "coupled" them together again. The City's true intentions were made known when the plan for the downtown transit oriented district was announced. Citing the 2018 HyettPalma Supplemental Letter that, "while it is understood that most caring communities desire to provide adequate shelter for residents of all income



*South Morgan Blvd. duplex built by volunteers in 2018. Two three-bedroom, 1200 square foot living units, built on the formally "ugliest lot in Valpo."*

levels," it is simply not feasible in Downtown Valparaiso. The obvious conclusion from this is that market forces don't provide "Housing for All," nor do market forces provide the necessary incentives to construct high end housing. As a result, "appropriate financial incentives" must be offered to construct what is referred to as "higher quality" housing. So while the need is clearly for more low income housing to serve the current residents of Valparaiso, it appears more important to serve the desires of persons who can already afford it. It also indicates a priority for attracting new persons to the City rather than taking care of those persons already here.

What is happening with housing in Valparaiso parallels—and is certainly partially responsible for—another disturbing trend in the city: growing inequality. The extensive disparity between rich and poor in this community continues to grow. According to the most recent American Community Survey (2017) data, the top 20% of the households in the city now earn more than half (50.21%) of the income and the bottom 20% earn 3.14%. More disturbing is that the top 5% of households earn almost a quarter (22.8%) of the total income. Not surprisingly, the data indicates that the rich are getting richer. For example, in 2010 the average income of the households in the top 5% was \$240,381. In 2017 that number increased to \$318,315, an increase of \$77,934. At the same time, the income of the bottom 20% rose from \$9,635 to \$11,202 in 2017, an increase of \$1,567. Also reflecting this growing inequality, the Gini Index, a measure of the extent of inequality, in Valparaiso has consistently moved upward since 2010 indicating increasing inequality.

Given this data, one can only imagine what the City of Valparaiso will look like in the future as the city continues to reject what caring communities do— incentivize the construction of housing for all— and instead continue to incentivize housing for the wealthy. To paraphrase the Kerner Commission Report on civil rights from 1968 and reframe it as a question: Is our city moving toward two societies, one rich, one poor—separate and unequal? Is this the legacy of the current administration?

## LIVING AT NEIGHBORS PLACE

I have been a resident of one of Neighbors Corporation's endeavors for four years. I needed somewhere to live. I wanted a nice, safe apartment but my income is less than desirable for many landlords in Valparaiso. The guidelines for Neighbors Place were a good fit for me. I was one of the original 18 tenants to fill the building to capacity.

During my second to third year as a resident I realized I got so much more than a roof over my head! A camaraderie developed amongst many of the tenants as well as friendships. We have met many board members (of Project Neighbors) and their families and friends. We attend community events and enjoy gatherings together. Our social network continues to grow.

Project Neighbors is now celebrating 50 years of providing opportunities to hundreds of residents of Valparaiso in the form of housing, education, food, and childcare. They continue to expand their assistance programs every year. It brings me great pleasure to participate with this organization as they continue to grow and offer more positive life-effective opportunities to more individuals and families.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all the past and present members for their efforts and inspiring thoughts and selflessness. Thank you to all individuals, businesses, and organizations who make financial as well as physical contributions for the possibility of a good or better life experience for many!

Humbly and respectfully submitted,  
A resident of Neighbors Place



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I have been a volunteer on a couple Project Neighbors projects over the last three years. I am a retired carpenter and still enjoy building things. I've run out of projects at my house, so now I spend my time helping others. I come when I can. The guy running the show, Paul S., is always grateful to see another hand come through the door, and he lets you know it. Experienced or not, doesn't matter; he will partner you up with "someone who knows what he's doing," or take the time to show you how to do the work.

There are a couple reasons why I volunteer. Project Neighbors' mission not only promotes affordable housing, but through their efforts, and with the help of volunteers, they can actually offer affordable housing to average people who cannot afford the homes on the market today, even starter homes. I support this idea.

Plus, it's always nice showing up and seeing the "regulars" there, making new friends. The atmosphere is always light-hearted and we all have a good time as the project moves along. It's rewarding to see what a group of individuals can do working as a team. So if you have never volunteered before, try it! I strongly recommend it.

- John Schopp

Clockwise from left: "Valparaiso University (VU) professor and former PN board member Hannah Langhof painting Neighbors Place; VU peer ministers led by Don Evans (gray hair in back row) landscaping Morgan Blvd. duplex; Immanuel Lutheran Church's IMPACT group taking a break at Morgan Blvd. duplex.

## THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

Training for basic carpentry began at my father's workbench when the basics of pounding in a nail or cutting a board with the proper saw, cross-cut versus a rip-saw, were learned (no power tools in those days). These experiences instilled the desire to craft things, though quite basic, with my hands.

Being a volunteer required that first leap of faith, i.e., thinking, "I can probably be of some help on a project 'like that'...even though you've never done it before in your life." Usually, however, we are less likely to volunteer unless we are asked. That was the case for me some 20+ years ago when Walt Reiner asked me to "help out" on a project.

It's been too long ago to recall the nature of the work done that day, but I found my involvement to be a satisfying experience. Readily admitting that I didn't know how to do the task assigned, I was provided guidance by an experienced volunteer and left that day with new found confidence in both my abilities and in the knowledge that I was able, in some small way, to help someone with a need.

A wide variety of projects both big and small have been undertaken during the intervening years. Each one with a group of fellow volunteers and each one a learning experience. Every once in a while someone might ask, "Hey, how do you do that?" and you have the opportunity to pass along knowledge learned from a fellow volunteer in your past.

Don't hesitate to volunteer if you enjoy working and creating things with your hands. Don't wait to be asked...you risk missing an enriching opportunity!

# PILLAR || STRIVING TO MAKE VALPARAISO AN OPEN, EQUITABLE AND JUST COMMUNITY



Attendees at the City Council meeting where council members were asked to vote on the Human Rights Ordinance. Here, citizens shake hands with Valparaíso City Councilman Robert Cotton after the council voted 5-2 in favor of the ordinance.

PHOTO CREDIT: Rob Earnshaw, *The Times*

When Project Neighbors (PN) was formed in 1969, there was racial tension in the community. Shortly after the 1967 election of Richard Hatcher, a graduate of the Valparaíso University Law School (VULS), as the first African-American mayor of the City of Gary, Valparaíso became an “escape” for a substantial number of white residents of Gary. At that time the African-American population of Valparaíso was very small (10, according to the 1960 census). Around the same time, several of the founders of PN were instrumental in assisting a few African-American residents of Chicago who decided to move to Valparaíso. To the white residents who saw Valparaíso as their “escape,” and many others living in Valparaíso, this “intrusion” was viewed as a threat.

In September 1981, a cross was burned near the Valparaíso High School football field during a game against Gary Roosevelt High School, a predominantly Black school. This act and many others like it over the next 10 years prompted a public condemnation by the Mayor, the City Council, the Chamber of Commerce, and in a statement signed by more than 350 residents of Valparaíso. In 2007, through the public accounting of several painful experiences of a courageous Black woman—who was the Executive Director of Career Planning at VULS and her children—PN representatives were able to meet with Mayor Costas about race relations in Valparaíso. The result was the creation of the Human Relations Council.

The City Council went on to pass an Ordinance codifying that executive action, and more recently the City Council passed another ordinance

prohibiting specific discriminatory actions and adding an enforcement mechanism. Unfortunately, the mere passage of laws prohibiting discrimination does not end discrimination. PN continues to devote resources and energy to its effort to improve race relations in the City.

However, there are incredible women and men who have acted in the best interest of the Valparaíso Community by pushing for a more just and equitable community. These are the stories that you typically will not hear. Stories of how a group of parents of children of color confronted the unfair treatment their children were receiving in the school. A pastor who works in the community to shepherd and counsel families that feel unwelcome and unsupported by the lack of cultural representation in the Valparaíso religious community. The group of high school and college students that gathered to bring awareness to the issue of gun violence. A musician who is shaping society by transforming the youngest voices in our community into the ‘Voices of Today’ that we need to hear. While PN has had the opportunity to partner with several members of this community to help create committees for change and ordinances that act as significant landmarks of progress and protection, it is not the ultimate way forward. The way forward to a more equitable community will be fueled in the same manner PN began; by individuals young or old, black or white, responding to the needs of our neighbors.

## AGENDA FOR A BETTER COMMUNITY



This powerful set of proposals is described as “an attempt by a small and growing group of residents of Valparaíso to put down on paper the elements that we believe are necessary in a healthy, thriving, just and sustainable community.” The initial “agenda” items are (a) a welcoming community, (b) availability of quality housing for persons at all income levels, (c) a healthy community, (d) a strong and equitable economy, (e) access to comprehensive educational opportunities, (f) a sustainable environment, and (g) a safe community for all residents.

Launched in mid-2018, the primary goal of ABC is to get people talking and thinking about the items listed above. An eight-page brochure describing the agenda items has been distributed and made available at places where people congregate. A website ([www.abcvapo.org](http://www.abcvapo.org)) contains the agenda items and some articles discussing those topics. House parties will be promoted as a way to introduce the agenda and expand community engagement related to the topics mentioned above. Small cards announcing the website and the agenda will be available soon.

Since 2019 is an election year for local offices, candidate forums will be organized in an effort to encourage candidates for public office to learn about the agenda items and participate in discussions about these important topics. However, efforts related to ABC are not driven by elections; rather, ABC promotes full-time engagement because important decisions are made in the community every day. ABC seeks to increase participation in those decisions.

# Combating Racism, White Supremacy and White Fragility

From the very beginning, Project Neighbors (PN) and its predecessor Valparaiso Builders Association (VBA), has had at its core taking concrete action to help create a more equitable community and to counteract the real-world effects of white supremacy and racism and the disproportionate effects people of color are burdened within our culture. Rehabbing and building homes with volunteers to make the dream of home ownership available to the most marginalized in our society; helping facilitate the first African American led institution in our town, Union Community Church; standing up against racial hatred when a cross was burned on the lawn of the first black family residing in Valparaiso and when swastikas were painted on a Church wall and when the Klan marched downtown. Some things have changed, but racial bias still burdens the day to day lives of African-Americans and other marginalized people in our town as it does in our country.

In the spring of 2018 in a meeting in of the diversity and inclusion sub committee of ValpoNEXT which had been working on affordable housing issues the question was asked: "Shouldn't we be doing something more about diversity inclusion in our town?" Several of us responded and we gathered a group of people from ValpoNEXT, PN and other people interested in racial justice and begin meeting every two or three weeks in an informal setting in someone's living room to see what we might do. Our multi racial group acknowledged that we live pretty segregated lives here as elsewhere in the country. Over the next few months, we gained some insight into what it is like day to day for people of color to exist in Valparaiso. And it was not good. We decided that we needed to educate ourselves. We began by reading *White Fragility: why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*, by Robin Diangelo.

We learned that most white people react defensively when criticized for offensive conduct, because they believe that racism is simply a matter of bad people doing bad things and they aren't bad people. They/we intended no harm so it is unfair to criticize, even though we have caused harm. Diangelo characterizes this reaction as white fragility and that it ends up bolstering the system of white supremacy.

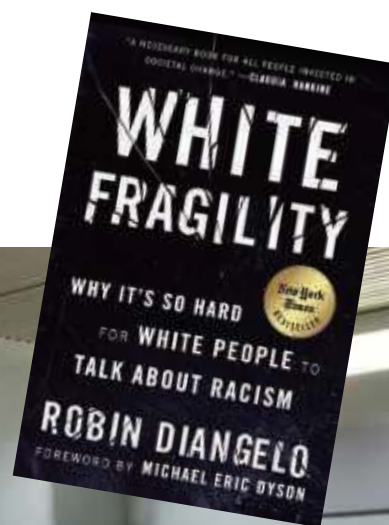
She points out that racism and white supremacy is built into our culture, and is ingrained in our history, our education system as well as our criminal justice and economic systems. And that being part of this culture means that all of us to one degree or another help participate the structure of white supremacy. If we want to create a better society we should welcome criticism so that we can change our behavior.

The reality is those of us who live in this place Valparaiso Indiana have not addressed a fundamental flaw in our social /economic and political environment. This threatens the fabric and quality of our life together. This issue cannot be ignored nor can it be relegated to some futuristic notion of justice. It must be attended to by those of us who know this is not acceptable.

So, over the last few months more than 50 neighbors have been meeting to engage in difficult and challenging conversations and to begin to build a strong cohort of people who want to combat the growing racial hatred facilitated by some of our so-called leaders. White people benefit from white privilege whether we want to or not. It is incumbent on us to recognize that truth and to try to educate ourselves and take action to undo the adverse effects white privilege and white supremacy has on people of color right her in our community and in our nation. Want to get involved?

Email: [info@peojectneighbors.org](mailto:info@peojectneighbors.org) and ask to be put in contact with the White Fragility working group.

- Dr. Gregory A Jones & George Terrell



PN board member George Terrell leading a discussion on being a good ally to the African-American community at *White Fragility* discussion session at Living Hope Community Church.

# Cultural Hub provides a bridge toward diversity

Valparaiso, Indiana is a strong city that has an important history not only in Indiana, but also in the History of the United States. The creation of a cultural hub for black people in the city of Valparaiso Indiana gives an opportunity for this city to live prophetically into its future. The Hub gives Valparaiso an opportunity to give every member of this city the chance to see the thriving black businesses, strong Black leaders and the contribution that Black residents make to the growth and progress of this community.

The need for Black people in Valparaiso to have a significant voice was long overdue. Through the collaborative work of many we are slowly seeing the representation of Black people in the public sphere. In the past two years, we have seen the election of the first Black city council member in the person of Robert Cotton. The city has started to appoint people of color to different committees and hopefully soon to high ranking city positions, to expand our city's capacity to both grow and interact, intellectually, economically, and morally.

But where does the Black community meet in Valparaiso? How can the leaders in the community hear from the voice of the collective Black community? The James L. Kingsland Cultural Hub is a cultural space where history, education, and art converge. The mission of this space is to promote Black culture and support the Black community, unhindered by external social regulations that are often unintentionally imposed through mixed company. Ultimately, the goal of all these advancements is twofold. First, is to normalize black culture and the existence of Black people in the city of Valparaiso. This two part phenomena is highly important to the advancement of people of color. This is the over-arching concept that non-white people belong here and should have a high quality of life socially, spiritually, culturally. It is not enough that Black people believe this to be true, but the knights of the status quo who protect the remnants of yesteryear must shift and buy-in as well. Secondly, the goal is to concretize the Black voice in the city of Valparaiso. This is why the grand opening of the Cultural Hub in Valparaiso is so important.

Critical to the growth process is the voice of the African-American community unencumbered by isolation and ignorance that so often prompts the instigation of relationships between cultures in this society. Communication and dialogue is critical to this process.

The James L. Kingsland cultural Hub is an attempt to create the environment for dialogue that will foster the development of a growing diverse community, which reflects the best of what all cultures have to offer. Those who support the James L. Kingsland Cultural Hub believe that its creation will continue to provide the critical models for interaction and communication between cultural communities that is vital to the ultimate progressive development of an diverse and important city in Northern Indiana.

## VALPARAISO HUMAN RELATIONS COUNCIL (HRC)

One of the strengths of Project Neighbors (PN) is its ability to respond promptly to needs, events and circumstances that come to the attention of its Board members. An example of this is PN's decision to approach the Mayor of Valparaiso, Jon Costas, about race relations in the City after the experiences of the Executive Director of Career Planning at the VU Law School became public. In short, after three years she decided to leave Valparaiso because of what she and her children were facing in community and in the public schools.

While PN's representatives had no specific proposal, the Mayor was receptive and agreed the City should address race relations. After several meetings involving the PN representatives, the Mayor and other City officials, the HRC was formed in August 2008 as an advisory committee to the Mayor. The members eventually agreed on the following statement of purpose: The most effective way to make all residents of Valparaiso feel welcome and believe they have an equal opportunity to participate fully in the community is through the strong leadership of the City and its officials, including City-sponsored opportunities for residents to engage in open, civil discussion of human relations. Barriers to equal opportunity include not only intentional discrimination, including harassment, based on characteristics such as race, color, national origin, gender, disability, religion, age, sexual orientation and socio-economic status, but also unconscious bias that results from acting on the basis of stereotypes rather than individual merit.

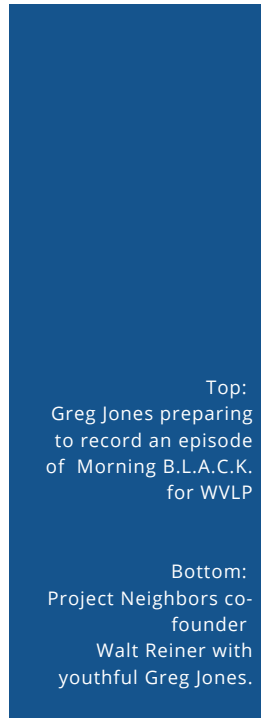
Subsequently, in 2011, the City Council adopted an Ordinance establishing the HRC, still as an advisory Committee to the Mayor. A few years later, in 2016, the City Council adopted an anti-discrimination Ordinance that prohibits certain acts of discrimination and establishes an enforcement scheme. This ordinance is available at: [bit.ly/ValpoHRO](http://bit.ly/ValpoHRO). As of this date, only a few formal complaints of discrimination have been filed.

Is Valparaiso a better place because of the HRC? That is difficult to answer because most of what is addressed in the Ordinance was already prohibited by state and federal laws. Although anti-discrimination laws are often ignored, that does not mean they have no positive effect. We can reasonably expect there is less discrimination because it is prohibited by laws. But beyond that, laws are symbolic. Government, at all levels, speaks through its laws. The City of Valparaiso should speak against discrimination, and back it up with enforcement.

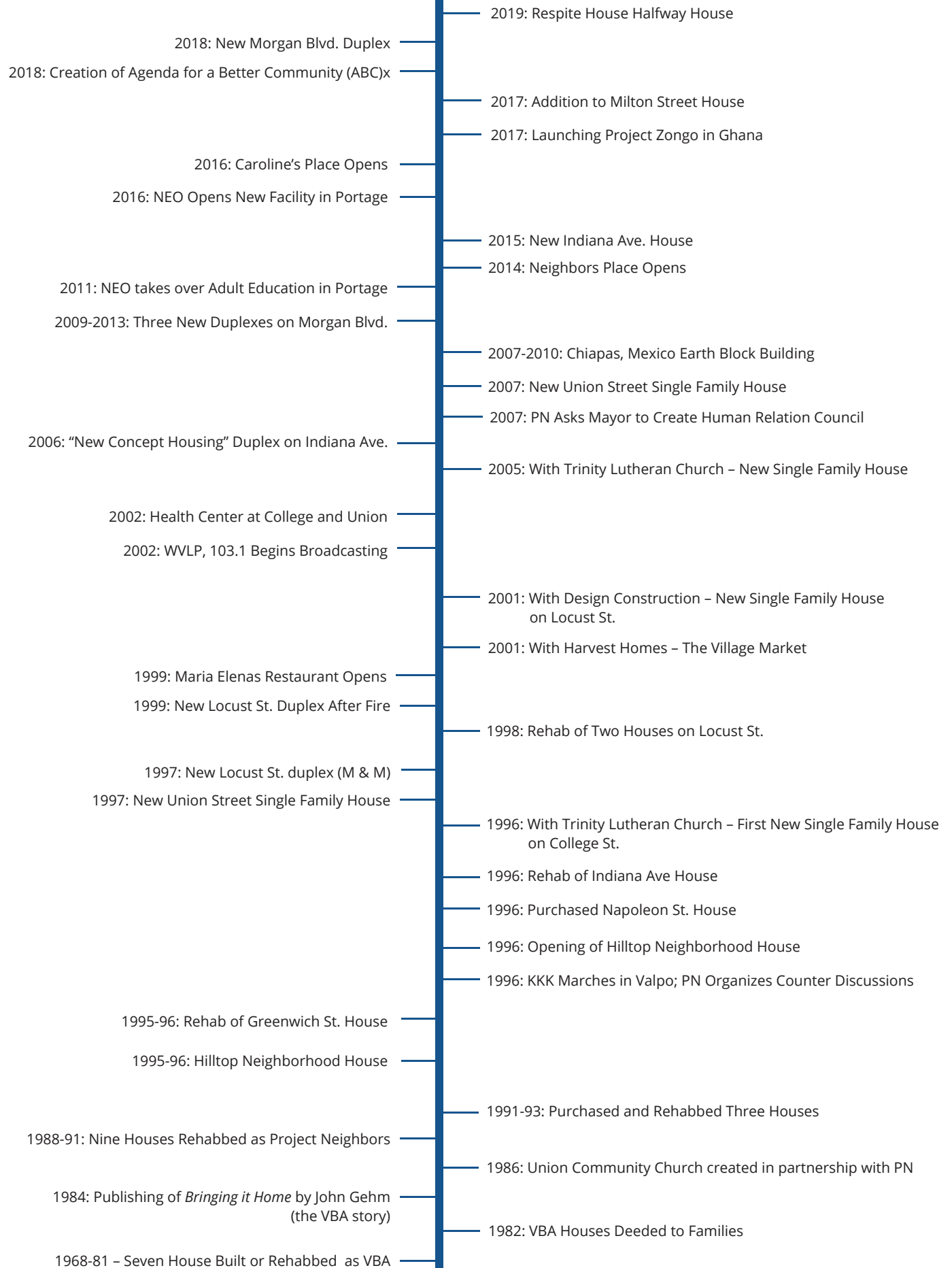
Our vision is to create an environment where all people of all cultures can thrive and continue to grow. Please join in this process of evolving toward a better and more productive future for the diverse generations to come.

We encourage your support and participation in this important work.

- Submitted by The James L Kingsland Cultural Hub Organizers



# PROJECT NEIGHBORS TIMELINE





TOP: Brothers Reaching Out (BRO), a Valparaiso University (VU) Chapel-based service organization, after a day of cutting down dead trees threatening a Project Neighbors property on the north side of town.



BELOW LEFT: View of tin roofed shacks in the Zongo section (population 800,000-1,000,000) of Accra, Ghana. Project Neighbors is partnering with Project Zongo to build modern, three-story housing units to more efficiently use available land in the Zongo. A newly built mosque stands in the background.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Project Zongo Founder and VU Law School graduate, Yusif Bandoagou— who grew up in the Zongo—explaining his vision of modern housing.





TOP: Liberty Mutual Insurance attorneys after their annual work day of spring clean-up and flower planting at Neighbors Place.



LEFT: Valparaiso University history professor and Project Neighbors board member, Heath Carter, practicing his painting skill at the recently completed Morgan Blvd. duplex.

# PILLAR || NEW SERVICES FOR THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY

*One of the most meaningful aspects of the work that Project Neighbors (PN) in building new housing has been the interaction between those doing the building and those who come to live in the houses. Relationships are formed and understanding grows. In the early 1990's, and continually since then, members of the PN Board have brought new ideas, often generated through these new relationships, about additional resources that could be created to make life better for everyone in the community. These ideas come to the Board and a discussion ensues about the willingness of a critical mass of people to take on a new project. A PN board member or members will then find others who want to develop a project, often calling on those who might have experience relevant to the effort. The projects take shape, grow to fruition and, more than not, are spun off to exist in the community on their own, although there is always an attempt to continue to collaborate with PN whenever possible.*

*The articles on these pages represent personal stories of how a PN project came into being and the impact that it had on those that were involved in starting it. Readers will recognize most of these institutions now and many may not know how they began. The reason for these short histories is not to claim credit for what they have become but, rather, to show everyone what great things can be done with an idea and a small band of neighbors.*

## Providing a Voice for Our Community

In the year 2000, Congress passed Low Power (LP) legislation allowing the creation of 1000 new 100 watt radio stations. This new legislation was an effort to counter media concentration in the hands of a few huge corporations. It was a token gesture, for sure, but it caught my eye when I read about it in the *Vidette Messenger*.

The new law stipulated that these community radio stations had to be licensed by "established" not-for-profit community organizations. So I went to my friend George Terrell, then President of Project Neighbors (PN), and suggested that PN could be the license holder. He thought it was a good idea, envisioning a radio show he would host entitled *I'm Right and You're Wrong*. George had strong opinions about everything.

We found an ally in Rick Watson, musician and recording studio owner. None of us knew anything about creating a radio station.

We applied to the Federal Communication Commission for a LPFM license and, after raising about \$20,000, putting together a group of workers and installing (by Rick) a broadcast tower on the roof of Front Porch Music, began broadcasting in late October of 2002. WVLP, 103.1 FM has been broadcasting 24/7 ever since then.



*The Morning Show* (news), *Conversations With Community Voices*, *The Morning B.L.A.C.K.* (issues related to the African-American community), *Art on the Air*, *House Rap*, *Matters of Substance* (about the drug epidemic), *Under the Radar* (sports), and *The Buzz* (politics), are all locally produced talk shows. *Songs from Camp* (folk music), *Live in' it Up* (local rock and roll), *Saturday Soundboard* (classical music), *Left of Center* (new and obscure rock), *Mostly Metal* (heavy metal music), *Jazz*, *The Blues Drive*, *Old School Funk* (dance music and humor) and *The Portal* (progressive rock) are a sampling of locally produced music shows.

All show hosts are local residents and volunteers. The mission of WVLP is to provide an alternative to corporate controlled media and to provide a media voice to all members of the community.

WVLP is the only not-for-profit, locally-owned and controlled media outlet in Valparaiso. It can be heard a 103.1 FM in about a five-mile radius around Valpo or anywhere in the world on the Internet at WVLP.org.

*I'm Right and You're Wrong* has yet to be produced.

-Paul Schreiner

## CREATING A COMMUNITY GATHERING PLACE



For years, Walt Reiner had walked by an abandoned pizza parlor next to the law School on Greenwich Ave, thinking "that would make a nice breakfast place" for the surrounding Hilltop community, sorely in need of jobs and a community gathering place. When Cruz Ramos introduced him to Felix Cardenas, then working as a chef in Michigan City, we hit the jackpot. Project Neighbors (PN) bought the place as an economic development project for the poorest community in Valparaiso. Felix quit his job and, together with PN volunteers, spent three months renovating the place. On opening night, Don and Kathy Evans, two local attorneys, held their 25th anniversary party there, inviting friends from throughout the community. None of us had tasted Felix's cooking prior to that evening—we really did not know if he could

cook He blew us away. A great menu—the food was fabulous—generous portions and affordable! Maria Elena's, named after Felix' wife, became an instant hit for rich and poor alike, serving lunch and dinner for 15 years until Felix got sick. Its reputation spread by word of mouth and there was often a waiting line to get seated. Felix provided free lunches for volunteers on the PN building projects in the community and employment for many area residents over the years. And, while we miss Maria Elena's, the location is now the home of Louie Wings and Catfish, an African-American owned and operated restaurant serving excellent food and continuing as a community gathering place.

-George Terrell

# Making Sure Everyone has Access to Quality Healthcare

As we got to know many of the families in Project Neighbors (PN) homes, we heard about the many people in Valpo who had no access to medical services. For a significant number, healthcare meant waiting for as long as possible before seeking service, going to the emergency room when you couldn't wait any longer, and then trying to figure out how to pay that bill as well as to come up with the money to get medications. Ongoing care was not an option.

At that time, in the mid-1990s, I was the Deputy Chief of Cook County Health and Hospitals, the huge system dedicated to caring for the most financial and medically vulnerable people in Chicago and its suburbs. I used to find ways to get those in Valpo in the most serious situations into care in my system, but this was not a sustainable option. A small group of us, including a local physician (Keith Gingerich) and nurse practitioner (Mary Beth Witcher), faculty from the Valparaiso University College of Nursing and Health Professions and others started meeting to develop the concept of a free clinic at the back of the emerging Hilltop Neighborhood House. We worked with those that were developing Hilltop, secured the services of Mary Beth and Keith as the Hilltop Health Center's first providers, and opened the doors. The original group who had put the clinic together continued to assist in developing relationships with local specialists, the hospital, a dentist who donated equipment and others to put together a quality health care operation.

Over those first years, the demand for care grew exponentially and we soon outgrew the limited space. Project Neighbors worked with Hilltop to build and open, in 2003, a new clinic site at the corner of College and Union streets with significantly expanded capacity. We hired a full-time director to oversee operations and to secure federal funding, which it did in 2006. HealthLinc moved into its current Valparaiso site in 2013 and expanded to additional sites throughout the area, providing care today to more than 30,000 people



Nurse Practitioner Marybeth Witcher conferring with a patient at the Hilltop Community Health Center, later to become HealthLinc.

per year, primarily to those with no insurance or publicly-sponsored coverage programs. No one is turned away. Mary Beth continued to care for patients at HealthLinc until last year and Keith has returned to practice there. Ivan Bodensteiner served on the HealthLinc Board for many years as the Project Neighbors liaison and I have come full circle and am playing that role now.

The odyssey of the development of this critical community resource is a model for community action and I am so honored to have been a part of it.

- Pat Terrell



**Today, HealthLinc provides primary medical, dental, behavioral health and optometry care to over 30,000 primarily uninsured and publicly insured patients a year.**

**The basis of our success goes back to our founders, Project Neighbors. Their understanding of how the social drivers of health, education, food and housing interact to create healthier communities and their vision of how to make it happen was ahead of its time.**

**Project Neighbors laid the groundwork for what HealthLinc has become today, a community health center with 14 sites including 10 primary care clinics, two school based telehealth clinics, a mobile medical/dental van and a corporate headquarters dedicate to providing exceptional health care to all of Northern Indiana.**

**- Beth A Wrobel, CEO of HealthLinc**



Inset: Rebecca Reiner, Executive Director of Neighbors Educational Opportunities (NEO), celebrating with a graduate.  
Larger Picture: Students gather in front of New Vista High School, a part of NEO.

## Securing Educational Equity and Opportunity

During my 20 years working as an elementary teacher in Maine, I knew little about adult education nor did I think much about the reasons for or impact of the educational status of my students' parents. Many did not have a high school diploma. It was not until I moved back to Valpo in 2005, that this changed.

When I moved to Valpo, I knew that I wanted to do something different with my teacher and school administrator's credentials and experience. An acquaintance introduced me to Portage Adult Education—a program with a presence in over 21 communities in six NWI counties. Run by Portage Township Schools, this program was a lifeline to over 2,000 people each year who, since 1962, came to earn their high school diploma or GED or learn English as a Second Language.

It did not take long for me to realize that this was “something different” I was looking for and readily joined the administration of this program. It was in this role, that I became cognizant of the breadth and impact of both the educational disparity and opportunities that existed in NWI, especially for those who had not been successful in traditional K-12 schools. It was also in this role that I saw the life-changing impact this program had on students when they realized that there WAS a door open to them and a team of incredible teachers at their side.

Inadequate funding of adult education programs was a perennial issue and as a result, in February of 2011, Portage Township Schools voted to end their sponsorship of this program by that June. The immediacy of this pending closure was the impetus for action, action that was fueled by the knowledge that thousands of students ALSO needed “something different” to achieve their educational goals and were at risk.

Along with a small committed group of Portage Adult Education employees, community leaders and Project Neighbors' (PN) board members Al Trost and Sharon Mortensen, we formed Neighbors' Educational Opportunities, (NEO) as a 501 (c)(3) to fill this need. We also applied for and were granted the charter from Ball State University to run the adult high school as Neighbors' New Vistas High School. With initial financial support from PN, we opened our doors the fall of 2011 under NEO without missing a beat.

Eight years later, NEO has grown. Our growth reflects the need for our programs and is seen in our expanded enrollment, programs, partners and space. The “Neighbors” in our name reflects the coming together of over 800 students and 45 staff and educators from different communities, backgrounds and experiences to form a unique community of learning and teaching. Our programs have benefitted from our expanded partnerships to now include a growing menu of career certifications, immigration support services, and dual enrollment opportunities with Ivy Tech. In 2016, NEO purchased and renovated a 70,000 square foot bowling alley situated on 27 acres of land. The NEO Center is not only an educational home for our students, but a regional meeting place for community events. Over the next year or two, we hope to expand our vocational training spaces and to be the first school in NWI to go solar!

This venture began as a response to a need. What is most significant, however, is the risk many have taken on this journey - from the teachers who chose to stay with NEO to 1st Source Bank that fully leveraged NEO's purchase of our new home to the countless students and parents that turn to us for their education. As NEO's Executive Director, I am blessed to have had this leap of faith and the support and wisdom of many.

- Rebecca Reiner



## The Re-education of a University Professor

When Walt Reiner walked into my office on that Monday in January 1995, my desk was piled high with student papers and tests that needed grading. “Hi, Walt. What’s up?” The answer to that question turned the world around for this Theology professor. After a long explanation about Project Neighbors’ plan to create a childcare and healthcare facility to help low-income families overcome the problem of perpetual poverty, I interrupted Walt and asked, “Sounds like a good idea, Walt, but why did you come up here to tell me all about this plan?”

“Our board has decided that we want you to guide this plan into reality. Make it happen.”

“Me?” I said. “What do I know about childcare or healthcare?”

That’s how it all started. One week later, I told Walt I’d give it a try. “You’ll learn fast. We’ve heard you know how to make people work together to make good things happen. Done! I promise you there will be lots of help.”

We started right off with a meeting of folks Walt had recruited to be the Board Members. Ron Kuker was introduced as President of this new Board, and I was introduced as Executive Director. People started working together to figure out what had to happen first, second, and third. Starting that first Saturday, people gathered around the table at Pat Terrell’s house and plotted what needed to be done to start a health clinic. Nurses, social workers, hospital administrators, all kinds of health professionals went to work on the planning. Meanwhile, childcare professionals began working on the childcare planning.

We worked for a year that way, to get prepared for the time when the building would be available for purchase from the University. It was on January 15, 1996 that a whole series of things brought the reality one huge step closer to reality. We signed the papers for the purchase of Moody Labs; we put up a professional sign, promising the neighborhood what was about to come to them; we had a Board meeting that night setting the work plan for the coming weeks.

We gutted the building and then started putting new walls where they needed to be, and the extreme reconstruction went on for nine more months. When the almost two years of hard work brought us to September, we were ready to welcome families to bring us their children. This is how Hilltop Neighborhood House came into being: a place for childcare and early childhood education, and a place for the family’s medical care.

We had hired a Director of Childcare, who had hired a staff of teachers for each age group. We had hired a Family Nurse Practitioner to manage the Health Clinic. And now, 23 years later both of these have evolved into first-class and separate institutions: Hilltop Neighborhood House, a Level 3 Paths to Quality early childhood educational institution; and Healthlinc, a Community health care institution, now thriving in six satellite clinics in Northwest Indiana, serving thousands of folks with quality healthcare. (You might wish to know more, if so get a copy of *Hilltop Neighborhood House: The Early Years.*)

- Ed Senne

## VOICES OF TODAY: VALPARAISO COMMUNITY YOUTH CHOIR

Growing out of his work in the community with families of color and those of limited economic resources, Gregory A. Jones, Project Neighbors Community Partnership Director organized “Voices of Today” to provide ongoing opportunities throughout the year for young people who would not otherwise have access to music training or to experience the leadership of talented people of color in our community. The Choir has three seasons each year. Each season is comprised of 12 practice sessions and at least 2 public concerts. The Choir’s Music Director, Judith Neville, of Gratz Opus 118, and an accompanist lead all sessions and the participants are provided a small stipend to show that their hard work is valuable. This initiative also provides an opportunity to sponsor other individual students in music lessons in guitar or piano for 3-month courses of study and offers a unique opportunity for young people in our community to learn and socially interact with one another. The number of participants is growing each semester.

The importance of this effort is measured in the social outcomes of this effort and diversity and inclusion of these young people who will grow because of this social interaction. The intentional collaboration of our youth allows the entire city of Valparaiso Indiana to grow as a community. Director Judith Ervin Neville is committed to helping us mature this growing number of diverse youth into a musically creative group of future citizens of our community. Our hope is that the Voice of Today becomes a tool of intentional interaction between parents, instructors and students who add to the diversity of our city and region. We solicit your support and prayers for our continued success in growing this intelligent group of young people in our community.

- Dr. Gregory A Jones & George Terrell



# PILLAR || DEVELOPMENT OF PARTNERSHIPS

*Project Neighbors—and the Valparaíso Builders Association in the early days—were both very small organizations. For most of the past 50 years, there was no staff, just volunteers working at neighboring. Without partnerships, most of the accomplishments described on these pages would have been impossible. So what kind of partnerships have worked? How does an organization form a partnership? What does the partner get out of the relationship?*

*For 50 years Valparaíso University students have done much of the heavy lifting. They are young, strong and willing. The football team, fraternities, sororities, and individual students have given countless Saturdays to build, stuff envelopes, eat donuts and laugh.*

*Project Neighbors has reached out to churches to provide financial support for struggling families and to provide volunteer labor for building projects. One byproduct of these partnerships is that the congregation—or a portion of it—gets invested in the mission and strengthens congregation relationships; they get into doing something with concrete results.*

*The building of Neighbors Place—a massive renovation of an existing building—illustrates a diverse set of partners. The City of Valparaíso; Housing Opportunities; the Porter County Community Foundation; Valpo Life; BRO, a chapel based service fraternity at VU.; and IMPACT, a collection of retired men and women from Immanuel Lutheran Church, all worked together for a year to create 18 living units for women.*

*Finally, local business have been generous. Every year an insurance company spends a day landscaping. A drywall hanging company has eased the burden on volunteers struggling to do that work. A couple of construction companies have come to the rescue with their well-developed skills, equipment and time.*

*How does one form these partnerships? It is easy: you ask. We have found that people are hungry to help, to be part of the solution to unmet needs. They just need to be offered the opportunity.*



MATTHEW FITZPATRICK  
VALPARAISO UNIVERSITY  
CLASS 2017

There are few things in college I am more grateful for than my experience with Project Neighbor. After meeting Paul, his crew, and other like-minded students at Neighbor's Place, I knew that BRO and Project Neighbor would have a long-lasting relationship. I had the pleasure to serve as BRO's service chair, organizing volunteer opportunities on the weekends. When I met Paul my freshman year, I was immediately impressed with the confident humility and passion that he led his projects. His faith and hope for the community of Valpo was incredible and everyone in our group wanted to keep coming back to Neighbor's place.

One of my favorite memories was during the demolition stage of the old doctors' office, we were scraping up old tiles that were being held on by the hand of God himself (glue). By the end, our hands were bleeding and shirts were soaked with sweat, but we ALL wanted to come back. There is something special about working physically hard with people from the community for a common goal. It opens up avenues of conversation that many other paths never do. And the coffee and donuts portion of the morning, led by Paul himself, led to some wonderful conversations.

I will never forget the people I worked with, projects I worked on, or the mission of Project Neighbor. I hope to impact my community one day in a way similar to that of Project Neighbor. I am confident in saying that of any advice I would give a Freshman, the most important piece would be to check out whatever project Paul and his team have in motion, and to see for themselves how amazing an opportunity it is to serve with the best of Valpo.

## Shared Goals: City of Valparaíso and Project Neighbors

As a city, our job is to serve our community while maintaining the order necessary to keep things running smoothly. In many ways, our goals run parallel to those of Project Neighbors as we both provide quality services and welcome people into our community. We're so pleased when we can partner with Project Neighbors to meet shared goals.

The City of Valparaíso is pleased to support progressive projects, such as Neighbors Place and Caroline's Place, making great use of existing space to provide quality housing. Many local people and families are better off, because of the foresight and commitment unique to Project Neighbors. As a city, we applaud the initiative of Project Neighbors as an organization that unites us all for common good.

Over the past 50 years, both the City of Valparaíso and Project Neighbors have experienced so many positive changes – changes that have been possible through hard work, planning, vision, and partnerships. Together, we've become a stronger and more welcoming community.

The City of Valparaíso is pleased to partner with Project Neighbors. We support your mission of inclusion and remain committed to it.

- Mayor Jon Costas



Architect's rendering of soon-to-be-built Respite House II, a halfway house for recovering addicts. Designed by Shive-Hattery.

## Restoration...of Faith

Like many of us in this community, over the years I have become passionate in my efforts to give back to the community, to be of service and to practice the spiritual and Christian principles of my faith. We are truly blessed, because there are so many like-minded people who strive to make our community a better place to live; open to every one, no matter race, creed, religion, gender, social or economic status. As we become more involved, we meet individuals throughout the community, involved in a myriad of civic, social, charitable and religious organizations through which they are passionately serving our community. That is how I became aware of Project Neighbors and the loving and dedicated individuals who are serving our community through that organization.

My passion is trying to save the lives of our children suffering from the disease of addiction. Whether as a criminal defense attorney in the courtroom, as the founder and president of Respite House, as an advisor, mentor and volunteer at Recovery Connection, or speaking in the community to organizations about addiction and treatment, I have dedicated over 30 years of my life to helping individuals recover from addiction. So I understand the dedication, commitment and sacrifice that the members and

volunteers of Project Neighbors have felt over the years; the joys, frustrations and sorrows associated with doing what we do.

I met many of the members of Project Neighbors through Trinity Lutheran Church when they hosted the residents of Respite House for dinners at the Church on several occasions. It was the most kind and loving act, having these young men come in and make pizzas or tacos and meet and talk with members of the church community; a simple act of love... I also got to know Paul as we would both attend the same gym at 5:00 a.m. every day. Given that we are both better at talking than working out, we became friends through our conversations.

Through those conversations, the Respite House II project was conceived. Based upon the need of the community, and the dedication of both of our organizations to helping individuals who have had the worst of it, Project Neighbors agreed to partner with Respite House on this project to construct a new halfway house on the "hill". I can not even describe the feeling of love and emotion I experience as I write this. Fighting the battles we have fought for years, feeling at times alone, unappreciated and misunderstood or maligned, when our very faith is tested to the core, someone steps up and lends a hand or shows support for what you are so passionately advocating. There are no words which can express my feelings for the members and volunteers of Project Neighbors.

I confess there have been times over the years where my faith has faltered; where I begin to believe some in our community are merely paying lip service to the spiritual and Christian principles which they espouse. You at project neighbors have been there every step of the way on this project, supporting us at every turn. The BZA meeting, the public forums, in the community, you have held me in your arms as we moved forward. I am currently continuing with the difficult task of fundraising, moving towards the finalization of this project. While it is difficult, you at Project Neighbors have restored my faith, and over the years the faith of many in our community.

Thank you and God bless you.  
Mitchell A. Peters

## PARTNERSHIP WITH HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES: RESPONSE TO A COMMUNITY NEED

Finding housing, in Valparaiso, at a manageable cost, is challenging for low and even moderate wage earners. This is especially true for single people living on entry-level wages or Social Security.

When HealthLink vacated the building at Union and College, it seemed a good candidate for conversion into single occupancy apartments. Housing Opportunities had a lengthy list of single clients waiting for affordable vacancies. Project Neighbors had expertise in design and construction and an option on the building. A partnership was formed. The community responded, and many organizations and individuals joined forces to create Neighbors Place, a Residence for Women.

The success of Neighbors Place was repeated in the creation of Caroline's Place, a second residence for single women. The combination of these two projects continues to provide comfortable, secure, affordable housing for more than 30 women.

- Jan Jones

## PARTNERSHIP WITH TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH

Trinity Lutheran Church in Valparaiso has had a long and positive connection with Project Neighbors. A common concern has been affordable housing. When Trinity built its first house in 1991, PN provided guidance in organization, finance, building skills and site management. Trinity - in partnership with PN - went on to build seven more single family houses. Congregation members continued to volunteer on the Neighbors Place and Caroline's Place projects.

But Trinity has gained more than a building partner in its relationship with Neighbors. Many Trinity members have furthered their sense of community, their need to reach beyond the walls of the church and move their mission into the world around them. But beyond that, these building projects - sweat, getting dirty, learning new skills on a Saturday morning - have created stronger bonds AMONG OUR CONGREGATION MEMBERS. You get to know each other when you work together.

- Anonymous Member of Trinity Congregation



## Our involvement with Project Neighbors has been Life-changing.

**Working with Project Neighbors has opened our eyes to the world of needs and opportunities that exist in our local community and in the world at large. What began as a request to participate in a "start-up" called Hilltop Neighborhood House, morphed into years of relationships, community and outright joy. We may have been described as workers with Project Neighbors, but we feel like we have been the ones "served." It didn't really matter what the project was. The people who make up the Project Neighbors community taught us how dedicated folks with a vision can make a difference in the world. Working with Project Neighbors reminded us of the value of being part of a community, being part of something bigger than ourselves, and finding purpose through service. Peace.**

- Linda and Ron Kuker

## PILLAR || SPREADING THE MODEL BEYOND VALPARAISO

*I don't know who originated the phrase "Think globally, act locally," but Walt Reiner preached this manta and, for the most part, Project Neighbors has followed this idea. We do our work right here...in our town of Valparaiso, Indiana. However, we do not wear blinders. Thinking globally means we must try to understand how our world is intertwined with the rest of the world and try to connect with people in places beyond our small town. And we should come to understand how our high standard of living is, in many respects, at the expense of people in other places which have been exploited by those more powerful. For many of us, this inequality calls us to action.*

*In addition to our need for world awareness, we share some of our activities, successes and failures. We have a newsletter, a radio station. We speak to university classes...have friends. Word gets around.*

*And we may travel, for business or for pleasure and be personally exposed to the lives of others. And we might be moved by the people we make contact with.*

*And then it happens. An individual approaches, introduces himself or herself and says something like this: "I read about what you have been doing in Valparaiso. Or "I heard you talking about . . . "Do you suppose your organization's activities could work here? And would you be willing to help?"*

*What do you do when someone asks you to help? You must make a decision: Do I have something to offer? Could the Project Neighbors model work here? Do I have the time? Should I just play it safe and say "No." or should I share my gifts, and our relative abundance?*

*Frankly, it is hard to say no.*

*It is neither easy nor convenient to work outside one's community. Travel, money, language, culture, airports, strange food— you name it— they can take a toll on your energy and life style, or, for some of us, all of that energizes and inspires us to do more. Either way, the payoff is amazing.*



### THE ZONGO PROJECT

It was early morning when Greg Jones came to my office in the lower level of Neighbors Place. I greeted him at the office door. He said, "Hi Paul. This is Yusif Bandaogou." He was standing next to a young man I had never met. "He wants to talk to you. Bye."

Without a clue, I invited Yusif into my office, set two chairs facing each other. I listened.

Yusif had just graduated from the Valparaiso University law school. He was from Ghana, raised in the Zongo section of Accra, a city of four million on the Atlantic coast. The Zongo was a tightly packed slum of between 800,000 and a million people, all living in tiny block and tin roofed shacks. He had heard about Project Neighbors and its building efforts. "Could your efforts work in the Zongo?"

Over the next six months we talked. Finally, I said, "Yusif, I can't answer the question unless I can walk the streets of the Zongo, get to know the culture a bit and..." I hesitated. "We need to go there."

The sun rose in Yusif's eyes.

In May 2017, two of my adult sons, Yusif and I flew to the southern edge of the western bulge of Africa. Accra. We did the same in April of 2018. Telling the story of those adventures will have to wait for another time.

We have built nothing so far... except relationships, an embryonic organization, some cultural understanding. We have raise a few dollars; have a loose commitment from one generous individual to fund the first building and—thanks to the architects at Shive-Hattery—a well-designed plan for a three-story, 20-unit building.

But that is not all. From this connection—Project Neighbors and the people of the Zongo—has come the reality that our neighbors, people who may seem unlike us in appearance and culture but who love and live with the same aspirations as ours, may live across the street or across the ocean.

- Paul Schreiner



Caminos de Agua s Community Projects Coordinator, Sál Juárez, educates local school children in Guanajuato, Mexico, about water issues that directly impact their lives.

## Our Work in Mexico: Caminos de Agua

2006 was a year of transition for me. My wife realized I was not happy in the practice of law and encouraged me to make a change. I felt that anti-immigrant discrimination was being used to divide us and thought that I should learn to speak Spanish, so I went to Chiapas, Mexico and over the course of that year in several trips I spent more than 4 months in language immersion, studying six hours a day, living with a Mexican family, and learning about the struggles of the indigenous Mayan People and their long struggle for justice, against colonialism and in defense of their land and culture - akin to the struggle of native Americans in the US. The advantage they have is ownership of their land due to the Mexican Revolution as well as the leadership of the Zapatistas and their program of autonomy from the corrupt government. They decided that the community could serve the education, healthcare and other needs of their people better than the corrupt government, so they kicked the government out of their autonomous region. They have been and are a beacon and model for indigenous peoples around the world in the defense of their land and culture against colonial and corporate efforts to run them out.

When I spoke about my brother-in-law's project of building housing in Rwanda using stabilized compressed earth blocks, they asked if I could help bring that modern twist on an old technology (Adobe) to their communities.

Over the next 4 years, we did just that. Project Neighbors agreed to take on the Chiapas Building Project. We were able to raise the funds necessary to buy the Earthblock presses and materials and do the training in these communities.

Since then, our team of dedicated activist and engineers relocated our operation to Guanajuato and are concentrating on helping develop and implement effective, affordable and appropriate technology to provide safe and healthy drinking water, free of pathogens (which kill 1.8 million people every year, most are children under 5 years old) and free of arsenic and debilitating levels of fluoride. Now this work continues as a separate tax exempt not-for-profit: Caminos des Agua. Our multi-national staff, from the US, Mexico and Europe all live and work in Mexico and work on problems defined by the local community partners. Everyone has gifts that they want to use to make a better community and a better, more equitable world. The first step is to invite people in to participate.

- George Terrell

## THE NEXT 50 YEARS: SUPPORTING PROJECT NEIGHBORS

50 years ago, a small group of individuals started the organization known today as Project Neighbors. The concept was quite simple....see a need and help. The organization has grown significantly since then yet the original concept is still intact....see a need and help. The projects you've read about in this newsletter have been accomplished because someone took the initiative to help. We are an organization of passionate individuals that are motivated by equality and social justice. There seems to be an endless supply of need, and Project Neighbors is committed to helping. We are living proof that "if there is a will, there is a way". We now have three paid staff that are consistently out in the community working on projects and advocating for those less fortunate. We have a voice in the community not only because of our success, but because of the incredible support OF the community. Our amazing group of volunteers and financial supporters have helped sustain us for these 50 years, and the return on investment is demonstrated throughout this newsletter. Please consider supporting Project Neighbor in your annual giving, and with your volunteerism. Both will be an incredibly rewarding experience, and will make a difference a for many in our community.

To contribute to Project Neighbors, go to [projectneighbors.org](http://projectneighbors.org) or send you check to 454 S. College, Valparaiso, IN 46383.

And always, thank you!

Jeff Lewis  
President, Project Neighbors

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219-465-3131  
454 College Ave., Valparaiso, IN 46383

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