



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

Summer Newsletter

2022

Summer and Social Connections

As we head into summer, I find myself thinking about the opportunities this season affords many of us to collide with other people. It might be over a 4th of July event, or at a county fair, or at a family vacation. These points of collision help to create the social connection we long for and need.

Edward Garcia, Executive Director of the Foundation for Social Connection, discusses the role of social connection in the introduction to a recent paper published with Social Health Labs. From his experience growing up in and out of poverty he, "learned early on that the power of belonging, access to community, and individual 'angels' who support you when times get tough—literally—can keep a roof over your head, food on the table, and you alive."

This is why I am so deeply grateful that you have joined with Great Lakes Urban in our mission to connect people in community in order to build strong neighborhoods and vibrant cities. Your commitment to the mission is helping build the social connections that enable people to thrive.

I hope you enjoy the stories in this newsletter. Lisa is actively creating spaces where social connection happens. Raul's life trajectory was shaped by living in a neighborhood where people intentionally and regularly collide. And, Stacie's service makes stories like these possible.



Eric Smith, Director

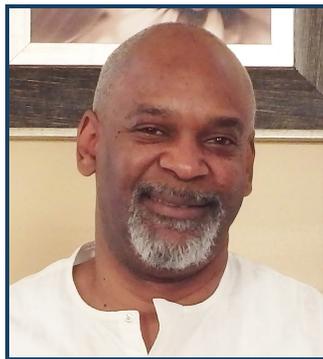
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Help us grow the movement

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

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



Rev. Lynch

will join us at our June Lunch+Learn

We are grateful to Rev. Lynch and colleagues for joining us virtually June 8 from 12p-1p ET to discuss the impact of their 20-year journey implementing asset based community development strategies in Cincinnati, OH. You won't want to miss it!

Join us in Building Social Connections

Have you been longing to inspire a sense of community? To make a difference? You can do that by building a more connected community, or by supporting those that do. Here are some tips to get started.

- **LEARN:** Visit the **Events** page at GreatLakesUrban.org to sign up for upcoming opportunities to learn and connect. Some dates to know:
 - **May 31 from 9am-4pm:** In-person Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) workshop in Holland, MI
 - **June 8 from 12pm-1pm:** Join a virtual Lunch+Learn event with author and ABCD leader, Rev. Lynch, and colleagues, as they share the Roselawn neighborhood story of Cincinnati, OH.
- **DO:** There are multiple ways to generate social connections:
 - Visit the **Good Neighbor** page at GreatLakesUrban.org for ideas and inspiration as you build a more connected neighborhood.
 - Find a volunteer opportunity that interests you at the **Volunteer** tab under GreatLakesUrban.org/rocfundraiser.
- **GIVE:** There are multiple ways to support the mission, including:
 - Setting up a secure, **recurring donation** in the amount that's comfortable for you by visiting GreatLakesUrban.org/donate
 - **Sponsor** our 8th annual Restoring Our Cities (ROC) cycling event. Learn more at GreatLakesUrban.org/rocfundraiser.

Washington School Neighbors: Creating Spaces for Social Connection

Report from the field: A visit with Lisa Kasten and the WSN garden

It's a chilly, yet sunny April day when I pull up to the corner of Maple Ave. and West 10th St. As I park the car, I look across the street, and I find my attention captivated by an oasis of lush green that stands in contrast against a backdrop of houses and concrete sidewalks. This inviting space is a pocket park and community garden conceived of, and built, by the residents that call the Washington School neighborhood home.

At Great Lakes Urban we talk about how *neighborhoods are more than just a place on a map*. They have a function, a role, to play in society. Strong neighborhoods are producers of wellbeing, and the Washington School Neighbors (WSN) garden--which sits on a lot that had been vacant for years because of an underground stream--is a visible reminder of this fact.



Eric Smith visits with **Lisa Kasten** of Washington School Neighbors

Co-creating a space to nourish body and soul, to grow food and social connections

As I walk over to the lot, I see someone waiting by the shed. It turns out to be Lisa Kasten. Lisa is the neighborhood's community connector, and she serves as the Executive Director of Washington School Neighbors (WSN), the organizational structure that ensures progress toward the vision residents have of a flourishing neighborhood. Practically as soon as we meet, Lisa sets about sharing photos and telling me the story of how the park and garden came to be. And that's something you learn quickly about Lisa. She's passionate about her neighborhood, and very committed to the residents in her care.

One of the ways Lisa stands out is her commitment to the principle of co-creation. Projects like this only last over the long haul when they are born out of the collective imagination of neighbors, when they engage people's individual gifts, and when a lot of people's fingerprints are on their implementation. The WSN garden fits all of these criteria. Residents designed the project and provide labor and supplies to keep it up. WSN and the Community Foundation of Holland/Zeeland funded the project, including the land purchase, and the City of Holland assisted with soil and material needs.

Abundance is revealed through reciprocity, the art of giving and receiving from out of our abilities, resources, and care

Of the many stories of contribution that Lisa shared, however, one stood out to me. At one end of the park is a metal figure (*pictured below*) that adds whimsy and charm to the space. The sculpture was donated by a resident just down the street who wanted this work to be enjoyed by others, in part, as a testament to his brother's talent. You see, his brother lives with the "developmentally disabled" label, but standing here in this space today, I realize that we are all "abled," just in different ways. Abundance, it appears, grows when we all give and receive out of our abilities and resources and care.

So, here we are with a park that invites families and neighbors to gather, to connect, to share life together. We have a garden that produces a bountiful harvest for the residents of the Washington School neighborhood. Is there any better example of a neighborhood living into its function, its role, as a producer of wellbeing? I hope you will join me in saying "bravo" to Lisa and the dedicated WSN team. Learn more at washingtonschoolneighbors.com.

Washington School Neighborhood Garden



Meet Raul Garcia: A Leader Shaped by Social Connections

Great Lakes Urban loves to feature the residents that together make up strong neighborhoods. Raul Garcia is one such person who lives in the Westcore neighborhood of Holland, MI. The neighborhood has seen wellbeing grow as the community connector program has blossomed. Living in a neighborhood that is intentional about building healthy social connections has had a impact on the trajectory of Raul's vocational life. We recently caught up with him to learn more.

Raul, you have a fascinating story. You've gone from being an engaged neighbor to a community connector, and from a connector to a city council member. Where did it start for you?

I grew up in the Westcore neighborhood and have an affinity for its culture and life. People who don't grow up here have a certain perception about it. I have always wanted to be a change agent, to help Westcore become a place people desire to live in because it's attractive and because of the quality of its neighborhood relationships. I began honing my skills as an AmeriCorps Volunteer serving our youth and learning about asset based community development. I also created a business plan for my undergrad degree to establish Westcore Neighbors as the organizational structure to help the neighborhood live into its strengths. And together, we got a lot done during the 7 years I served as the community connector for Westcore Neighbors. But in community development we talk about how it's not enough to *give a man a fish*, or even to *teach him to fish*. People need to have access to, and ownership in, the pond. So that's when, after a lot of prayerful reflection, I pursued a seat on city council to represent my ward. And my years of work investing in people and the neighborhood paid off with my being voted in. I've done a lot in my life, but I credit a lot of it to growing up in, and working to build, a connected neighborhood.

You've never forgotten your roots. You continue to be an engaged Westcore neighbor. What's a favorite neighboring story? And what would you say to someone wanting to get started.

My favorite thing started in 2020. I love outdoor lights, and we needed something to do outside during the pandemic. So the idea of these hot cocoa nights came up, and we've been doing them every winter since. These informal gatherings last a couple of hours. For some, this is their first time meeting their neighbors, and they've gone on to make good friends. My advice to others is to be present. Neighboring doesn't happen by accident, it takes intention. But it can be simple. Go outside and do things in your front yard where you can bump into your neighbors and live life together. It sets a different tone. I've even trained my kids to knock on the door of a new neighbor, and to ask neighbors for an egg to finish our recipe. Simple stuff. **Thank you, Raul for sharing your story. We wish you all the best in all your future endeavors!**



Raul Garcia



Stacie Hartwell
with Wanda Siebelink



RESTORING OUR CITIES
Join us September 10!

Stacie Hartwell: Making Social Connections Possible

Want to build strong neighborhoods and cities? There are a lot of ways to contribute. We met with Stacie Hartwell recently to ask her about her support of Great Lakes Urban.

Stacie, how did you first get involved with Great Lakes Urban?

The first thing I volunteered for at Great Lakes Urban was an annual cycling fundraiser called Restoring Our Cities. It's a really fun event, and the proceeds make it possible to support a couple of new neighborhoods every year, which is great.

We hear you did something unique recently to support the mission. Can you share?

Yeah, well, recently it was my birthday. They have a thing where you can sign up through your Facebook account to have people donate to a cause instead of giving you presents you don't really need anyway. So, that's what I did. I listed Great Lakes Urban as the beneficiary.

Thanks, Stacie! Whether it's volunteering, donating, fundraising, or something else, it all adds up. Anyone can become part of the Great Lakes Urban family and help build strong neighborhoods! Reach out to info@greatlakesurban.org with any questions.

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

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

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:



Give the Gift of Neighborhood Transformation



Restoration Network
100 Pine St Suite NW-4
Zeeland, MI 49464