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Being a Neighbor in the Hood

Difficult conversations to envision a new neighborhood

By Gilbert Sunghera, S.J.

The University of Detroit Mercy lies at the intersection of two great corridors, Livernois Avenue and 6-Mile Road, also known as McNichols Road in honor of the Jesuit university president who moved the main campus to this location. To the north, across McNichols Road, is one of Detroit's most stable neighborhoods, featuring well-built brick structures along streets with manicured lawns. It is a diverse middle to upper-middle class neighborhood with relatively low levels of unemployment.

To the west (across Livernois Ave.) is a very different set of neighborhoods. Livernois was the main conduit of destruction during the '67 riots, which left in their wake abandoned and burned storefronts and businesses. In the intervening 50 years, most of these businesses never returned, and like most of the city, the shells of burned-out establishments dot this once proud thoroughfare.

The Fitzgerald neighborhood, which lies behind the commercial activity of Livernois, has modest homes, many made of wood; and again, like most of Detroit, these homes did not fair well in the white flight that occurred in full speed after the riots/rebellion. Over 100 lots in the immediate neighborhood are either vacant or have burned shells of homes. The residential neighborhoods to the south and east of the campus are similar to this Fitzgerald neighborhood. As the student population dropped at the university, mirroring the city's population drop, the university slowly began to close off streets and eventually fenced itself off from surrounding danger.

The university has done more than its fair share of providing services to the city. It operates 21 academic-based clinics, serving over 30,000 people annually with free or reduced cost for medical, dental, law, and counseling services; it even has a nonprofit

architectural firm. In addition, students provide direct service to those in need through a variety of service-learning courses, and many clubs and organizations provide direct service to the city in creative ways. However, many of those services leap-frogged the immediate neighborhood to reach more desperate parts of the city.

A notable exception is our Campus Kitchen program, which repackages food not used in our cafeteria for folks in our immediate neighborhood. This past year over 10,000 pounds of food was given to three community partners in the immediate neighborhood. Roughly 54 percent of the children in the surrounding neighborhood live below the poverty level, and 40 percent of the working age population

is unemployed. The university attracts an underserved population of students in the region, and roughly one third of the students are first-generation immigrants.

In the fall of 2015, the university and The Kresge Foundation established the Live6 Alliance (Livernois Avenue and 6 Mile Road), as a non-profit economic development organization chaired by university president, Dr. Antoine Garibaldi. There had been earlier attempts at stabilizing the area; however, this current effort is proving to be the most interesting.

Lauren Hood, the first interim director of Live6, is an alumna of a newly established Master of Community Development program, housed in the school of architecture. Unlike traditional planning programs, MCD roots community development in service, social justice, and sustainability. It is an interdisciplinary approach integrating human, organizational, physical, and economic aspects to guide residents in reimagining their neighborhood.

The Live6 revitalization efforts hosted listening sessions with community stakeholders. These sessions, labeled “speakeasy,” have focused on everything from security, arts and culture, business, youth, and so forth. The lively discussions pit diverse constituents with different visions against each other to help find common cause.

A major sticking point has been the fence that surrounds the campus. The symbolic nature and burden of the fence remind neighbors how difficult it is to attract parents to a campus that is not quickly perceived as safe. In one discussion, I found myself burdened by defending the fence, especially now that I oversee an aging Jesuit community, and as I mentioned at one of these speakeasies, aging Jesuits don’t move fast. Many of the local neighbors nodded their heads in agreement, citing similar concerns about their own aging parents.

At another speakeasy, a neighbor asked, “Why is the university even here? It doesn’t make any business sense.” I explained that as a Catholic institution, we are more than just about training future doctors, lawyers, philosophers, poets; we are concerned with



The University of Detroit Mercy is deeply engaged with its neighbors.



bringing about the Kingdom. That Kingdom has not yet arrived. I also mentioned that what we can do best for the neighborhood is to get suburban students into the city so they can learn from those who have survived, so they can learn to love the city.

These are difficult conversations, and solutions have yet to find solid footing, but small interventions are occurring. A farmers market featuring locally grown vegetables from a group of residents and the Detroit Public School children is providing fresh produce in this food desert. Light up Livernois, a program that started prior to Live6, is helping small businesses repopulate the Avenue of Fashion, a once thriving boutique shopping destination in the city.

The conversations also point out some of the struggles concerning what people want in their neighborhood. Those at the university and the upper middle class neighborhood to our north would love a resurgence of small businesses, while some of the other neighbors want an Applebee's restaurant to prove to the rest of the city that "we have made it." Expectations are difficult to manage in diverse neighborhoods, so this approach of neighborhood conversations is proving useful.

Detroit has made national news for its innovative rehabilitation programs, focused primarily in midtown and downtown neighborhoods. The city's planning department is currently employing other

strategies to minimize the displacement of long-time residents and to amplify the charism of local communities that have survived. But it is highly unlikely that Detroit will ever repopulate its 1950 peak of 1.85 million residents.

One initiative that reflects this new thinking is being launched in the Fitzgerald neighborhood west of the campus, which has over 100 vacant lots. Productive landscape techniques are being employed (small truck farms, tree lots, wildflower fields) to knit the community together and to provide employment opportunities for the local residents. This program is one of five national demonstration projects funded by the Knight Foundation for innovative approaches in shrinking cities. Our students during their freshman orientation will spend half a day preparing the Fitzgerald neighborhood for the first phase of implementation of this aggressive scheme.

A university can be a catalyst for successful neighborhood stabilization and growth if it can empower the community to articulate goals and values and can align the university community's values (students, faculty, staff, alumni, and future parents) with those of the local community.

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