Community Leadership
Institute Team

2019-2020 Report

Roosevelt Apartments
525 W. Summit Muskegon Heights, MI

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Community Leadership Institute 2019-2020

Summary

Resident leaders from Muskegon Heights, Michigan came together in the fall of 2019 to improve their community. They embarked together on a trip to Chicago, IL to attend a national leadership conference to hone their vision, and set off with projects ranging from multigenerational events to improvements to a park in their neighborhood. Over the following 10 months, team members completed projects, persevered through a global pandemic, met nine times as a group, and shifted to accommodate community-building in a time of social-distancing. Contained in this report are the results of passionate leadership and the ongoing efforts of the Community Leadership Institute (CLI) team.

Context

Dwelling Place, a housing non-profit, opened Roosevelt Apartments in 2017 in Muskegon Heights, MI. Given its status as a renovated historic 1920's school, it was already an attractive property. However, it sat on a mostly vacant city block, so the question emerged: how can this block be transformed into a community hub? A community garden was a good start, but with more space available for development, conversations with the nearby Bethlehem Neighborhood Park Association and then-mayor Kim Sims turned into plans for a senior exercise park. Over the next two years, Dwelling Place installed workout equipment and a 1/7th-of-a-mile walking path through the new park space, all with the help of residents. However, there were still some missing pieces and problems to solve. First off, there was no focal point or identifying feature to the park, and, more importantly, it didn't have a name! Additionally, the community garden was seeing inappropriate behavior by neighboring young people. Some of these "final touches" to the space, along with a general interest in connecting neighbors to one another, served as the basis for the CLI team's projects.
About the Team

Comprised of five residents from Roosevelt Apartments and from the surrounding community, plus two staff persons, the Community Leadership Team developed goals to focus their year together. They decided that all projects should: 1. Engage with kids ages 10-13 and their parents, 2. Build community between residents across the neighborhood, and 3. Create an activity that encourages resident use of the park space. The team also established that boundaries for our projects should fall between Seaway Dr. and Sanford St. (from West to East) and Broadway Ave. to Norton Ave (North to South).

To kick off projects and begin working together, the team traveled to the Community Leadership Institute (CLI) training event in Chicago Illinois. Hosted by NeighborWorks, the national, invitation-only, three-day training aims to strengthen the voices and skills of over 1000 community leaders from across the country. The CLI weekend is intended to be a jumping-off point that helps shape best practices and solutions in low- and moderate-income communities. The Dwelling Place team participated in three days of workshops and classes, networking with neighborhood activists from around the country. After the conference, they grabbed a Chicago deep dish pizza and enjoyed a Chicago Architecture Tour.
Projects

Sculpture Commission

With an interest in involving all residents in a central neighborhood feature, the CLI team agreed to vision an artwork by local sculptor Lee S. Brown to adorn the park and unify neighbors. The final design, called "Leaning In" (pictured bottom left) comes from a rigorous round of feedback with the team and the artist. Initially, Brown met with CLI members to discuss design priorities. From there, he produced four design options for the team to discuss and choose from (pictured above left). While team members found the concept illustrations beautiful, we had comments that pushed Lee to revise and adopt some of our priorities for the space we call home. "Should [public art] reflect the Community I live in? I’m not sure" (CLI team member Lela). "I just want to know if [Lee] can put something interactive in it” (SaRah).

Brown took this feedback and created the brand-new, community-centered design of Leaning In. He says "[The work is] based on ancient meeting places, temples, round houses, etc., where the curved walls amplified the voice and music of those gathered, reflecting back the sound and interactions of the community. I see the space as just a beginning possibility for celebrations, artworks, drama, music, games, discussions, as the Roosevelt Community interacts with and within the piece."

"Leaning In" will be located in a central and highly visible section of the park that bisects an existing walking path. The site plan, pictured right, shows the meandering 1/7th of-a-mile path in grey and the proposed location of "Leaning In" in blue. Note the three periphery benches and central sitting area, which add relaxation options to the space. The "straddling" placement of the sculpture invites another level of interaction as park-goers walk along the winding path.
Park Naming

During the fall and early winter of 2019, team members went door-to-door in the Bethlehem Neighborhood to distribute over 100 surveys and invitation letters to residents sharing news about the park creation. The map below shows the nearby streets and households that were canvased by staff and residents (in yellow). The location of the park is marked by a red circle.

The survey, which was also offered online, asked for name suggestions and feedback about the use of the park. More than a dozen residents from within Roosevelt Apartments and the near neighborhood suggested names and future park activities. The team narrowed down the park name to four top suggestions and, along with Dwelling Place staff, selected the winning suggestion: “A Little Slice of Heaven.” The name, submitted by CLI team member SaRah Eley, is a reference to the peaceful experience of being in a beautiful public space that "has it all:" fruit trees, public art, play space, birds and trees, garden beds, benches, and workout equipment for health.

Artist Lee Brown agreed to design and fabricate a sign that proudly displays the park name. This design (pictured above) mimics the materials and "feel" of the sculpture to create a consistent visual experience.

The "Short List" of Top Name Suggestions

- Sunshine Park - When it’s sunny, a heightened feeling is evoked universally by people. This echoes the purpose of a park; a space of common ground.
- Glover’s Park - After Mr. Mark Glover, who has made a great difference in the former students of Roosevelt School and the community as a whole. Glover also serves as a baseball reference, nodding to the former use of the space as a baseball diamond.
- Verity Park - Verity means truth in Latin. When you come to the park, you find the truth about yourself. Also, given the fact that there are negative connotations about the Heights, Verity speaks to the truths about the community, and parks are oftentimes where you experience the hidden gems in the community.
"Anywhere but Home" Event & Door-Decorating Competition

The CLI team, along with staff at Roosevelt Apartments, had been spending the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2020 planning the annual summer cookout. Unfortunately, COVID 19 got in the way, and the team had to re-imagine what type of event could bring people together while remaining safe. An idea for a door-decorating competition from staff member and close collaborator Niyata Brown gained excitement from team members, and work began on planning a special event that followed social distancing while building community.

In the spirit of the claustrophobia of the stay-at-home era, team members SaRah and Rosa decided on the theme "Anywhere But Home," where residents were encouraged to display their dream vacation on their doors. The at-home social event combined a locally-catered meal, delivered directly to 75 residents doors, and a door-decorating competition. Residents signed up to have decorating supplies delivered to their apartments, and selected winners received gift certificates. The door décor spread neighborly cheer, and in fact, the event inspired staff from a Grand Rapids Dwelling Place property to host their own door decorating competition.

Neighborhood Connections

Part of the CLI team’s goal was to connect neighbors from Roosevelt Apartments to the surrounding neighborhood, and vice-versa. Although much of this work was going to take the form of a large community cookout (which was cancelled because of COVID-19), residents still managed to forge connections with several outside groups and leaders. CLI team members Kellie Kitchen, SaRah Eley, and Amarye Scott appeared several times at Bethlehem Neighborhood Park Association meetings to invite fellow neighborhood leaders into the projects listed in this report. Naming suggestions for the park came in from at least two members of the surrounding community, likely due to the door-knocking of team members. Targeted beautification efforts are being planned to reach neighbors that can keep "eyes on the park," inspiring others to take accountability and action to protect and contribute to "A Little Slice of Heaven" Park.
Future Work

Recommendations for Activating "A Little Slice of Heaven"

The following is a list of projects and focus areas that the CLI team recommends for further activation:

- Add lighting improvements and a drinking fountain to “A Little Slice of Heaven”
- Host a spring Park Dedication Event in 2021
- Add more signage about the use of the workout equipment
- Continue to plan neighborhood engagement activities, improve cross generational neighbor relations, community garden improvements
- Increase neighborhood pride and connection to the garden

Current Projects and Needs

While the "Leaning In" sculpture commission and design phases are complete, the installation itself is still in progress. Although the team has fund-raised about half of the project cost, much is needed to make this community vision come to life. Target installation for the work is spring of 2021.

CLI team members and other community gardeners from Roosevelt Apartments are also putting together an outdoor "Property Pride" event for the fall of 2020 with hopes of engaging neighborhood kids and their families. Resident leaders are hoping to get specific neighbors involved in gardening projects to build a sense of shared ownership and value.

Bios

Rosa was born and grew up in Muskegon Heights, MI, and considers herself a "lifer" to the region. Rosa spent years in public and nonprofit administration, and now enjoys gardening and spending time with her family. An avid naturalist, Rosa grows herbs, teas, and natural medicines alongside her wide range of vegetables. Her dream is to own a tiny home and "live off the land" in nearby vacant city lots.

SaRah Eley

Originally from Harlem, New York, SaRah has lived in Roosevelt Apartments since the building’s completion in 2017. She serves on a local advisory council for mental health services and has lived in Muskegon Heights for about ten years. In her free time, SaRah enjoys cultivating the community garden, where she grows flowers and vegetables. She is also a poet and rapper.
Bios, cont.

Kellie Kitchen

Councilwoman Kitchen lives the busy life of a public servant, balancing several leadership positions both on the City Council and as a member of the Bethlehem Neighborhood Park Association. She also brings expertise from her full-time job for Muskegon County Department of Health and Human Services. One of Kellie’s many neighborhood projects is to start a beekeeping station in the Heights.

Lela Lyons

Lela was born in Muskegon Heights' heyday, and wants to bring back the vitality that made the Heights such an attractive place to live. Lela's firecracker attitude and "30,000-ft view" perspective make her well-positioned to have conversations about neighborhood projects and create lasting change. She volunteers regularly for Supper House, a free meal program put on by nearby Temple United Methodist Church.

Brian Molhoek

Brian loves connecting people to unique projects in their neighborhood. As Dwelling Place Volunteer Coordinator, he is passionate about the intersections of power, social change, and culture. Brian is a resident of Muskegon, and has served neighbors across Dwelling Place’s property portfolio.

Amarye Scott

Not only is Amarye a former student of Roosevelt School, the building now occupied by Roosevelt Apartments, she is also involved in the Bethlehem Neighborhood Park Association. Amarye brings memories of her school days to CLI conversations and also centers multi-generational goals with her lens for access. Amarye works for a local company called Pioneer Resources that provides programming for seniors in the area.

Jenn Schaub

Jenn is passionate about collaborative creative grassroots initiatives. As the Director of Community Building & Engagement for Dwelling Place, Jenn endeavors to energize neighborhoods, infuse public spaces with creativity and support passionate citizens across West Michigan.

Lee S. Brown

Lee is a native of West Michigan based in Muskegon. He has won multiple awards locally and has shown work across the country. "I am constantly loading images, writings and music, waiting for the subconscious soup to simmer and form a new idea (at least new to me)." He was brought to the attention of Dwelling Place by Muskegon Heights community members and was recommended for his prominence in the area.