

Connections

NEWS FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD — SUMMER 2019



Connecting with Jerry Baker

By Grace Ruiters, Bates Place Neighbors board member

Jerry Baker just wanted to get Randy Buursma off his back.

Bates Place needed a new community connector, and Pastor Randy was insisting to Jerry that he was perfect for it. Jerry wasn't interested. He was self-employed at the time, and he didn't want to work for someone else.

"Randy was really persistent," Jerry recalls. "So I thought I'd go to the interview, and then tell Randy I gave it a shot and didn't really like it."

At the interview, the team from Bates Place started telling Jerry about asset-based community development, or ABCD.

"I hadn't ever heard of ABCD, but I really liked the idea," Jerry says. "Society conditions you to focus on the negative, but I believe that the city has so many gifts to offer. I liked that this was all about focusing on the positive things about the neighborhood."

By the time Jerry walked out of the interview, he was sold.

Since he joined the Bates Place team, Jerry has been involved in a neighborhood Halloween bash and a summer bash, regular community brunches, and setting up a community garden at Allen Manor, a senior living facility in the neighborhood. But most of his time as a connector is devoted to the slow, steady work of building relationships as he walks the neighborhood and strikes up conversations.

It's more challenging than Jerry expected.

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Welcome to Wayne's World

Wayne Squires

BPN Director



The authors of a helpful book called “The Art of Neighboring” begin the first chapter with a thought-provoking question: *What if the solution to our society’s biggest issues has been right under our noses for the past two thousand years?* They, of course, make reference to Jesus’ summary of God’s call upon our lives: 1) Love God with everything you have, and 2) Love your neighbor as yourself. And then there is the follow-up question. What if Jesus meant we should love our actual neighbors? You know, the people who live next door and on the same block!

The staff and board of Bates Place Neighbors are nearly two years into a renewed journey that assumes a positive response to the above questions. **Yes**, prioritizing love of neighbor as a genuine, intentional expression of love for God will help develop needed trust and energy to address significant cultural-social challenges. **Yes**, the starting point is getting to know and work with those who live and work in close proximity. For us, this means connecting with those who live and spend a lot of time in southeast Grand Rapids, especially in the area bounded by Franklin, Eastern, Wealthy, and Madison.

We are figuring out that the art of neighboring includes consistent presence and simple conversations. It involves celebrating and sharing good food and good conversation. It means working with others to nurture and care for the neighborhood. It creates natural opportunities to pray with folks and encourage their participation in a life of faith, a life that embraces the example and teaching of Jesus. You will note that the images in this newsletter edition emphasize the celebrating and nurturing aspects of our neighbor-focused work this summer. The Bates Bash in July was an incredibly joyful event, and the Harvest Party in August at the Allen Manor Gardens was a beautiful reminder of what a collaborative effort can literally produce.

Thanks to all of you who continue to support and pray for us. With your ongoing encouragement, we will become more skilled in the neighboring arts! And hopefully, our mission of neighbor-centered social change will encourage you to bloom as a loving neighbor ... right where you are planted!

Until next time — Wayne



Mark Oostindie

BPN Community Assessment Coordinator

Bates Place Neighbors Partners with Neighboring Church to Better Serve Neighbors

We are pleased to announce a recent agreement between Bates Place Neighbors (BPN) and Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church (Neland) to develop a more effective community benevolence response in Neland’s parish area. As part of the agreement, Bates Place and its Community Assessment Coordinator, Mark Oostindie, will function as the initial response organization for emerging needs from residents in the Neland area. Mark will be responsible for managing telephone and in-person intakes, setting up appointments, forming recommendations for appropriate responses for both neighbors and Neland deacons. The intent is to not only provide helpful connections to available resources for southeast side neighbors, but also to create space for Neland deacons to pursue relational and community development approaches to their local mission.

The partnership was formally launched in June, and early reports are encouraging. Mary Kuiper, a diaconal leader for community engagement, says that Mark’s professionalism is greatly appreciated. Neland deacons have taken note of how Mark helps folks “navigate available resources and work toward solutions” all while treating these neighbors with “dignity, grace, and respect.”

“I experience it a lot where I meet people and have a really good conversation. They give me their email, but then they never respond when I email them,” Jerry says.

So he’s learned not to take it personally, and he’s come to rely on support of the connector team. “Every time I felt that I couldn’t keep doing this—I was by myself,” Jerry says. “So I learned to take advantage of being part of a group of connectors. I go out to walk the neighborhood with other people instead of by myself.”

With work that is so relational, it helps that Jerry *really* likes people.

“I’ve always liked talking to people. At some point, I realized it wasn’t just talking with people that I liked. It’s people in general,” Jerry says. “People emphasize their differences too much. If you talk to someone long enough, you find something you have in common.”

Surrounded by people from a young age, Jerry’s got plenty of experience. He grew up on the southeast side of Grand Rapids in a large, close-knit family.

“There were eight kids in my family—two brothers and six sisters—and I was the sixth in the family,” he says.

Jerry’s dad owned a construction business, and he worked hard to provide for his family, but he was also a strict disciplinarian. “That made me want to rebel,” Jerry says. “I started doing things like staying out later and got in trouble. I ended up doing a couple prison stints. But I’ve been straight about 30 years now. The last time I got out, I decided to try something different. I did the church thing. I’m not saying I’m an overly religious guy, but I believe in God, and he helped me.”

Jerry’s connection to First Church stems from when he owned a house nearby. Pastor Randy struck up a conversation with him, and they became good friends. “He invited me to the men’s prayer breakfast at the church, but I had never come,” Jerry recalls. “One day he came over and just said, ‘you’ve been promising to come, and you never come.’ I appreciated his bluntness.”

Jerry started coming to the breakfast, and Randy’s persistence paid off again two years later when he told Jerry about the job at Bates Place.

“He saw something in me I didn’t see,” Jerry says. Now Jerry approaches the Bates Place neighborhood with similar persistence.

“I think of how I came to this work. It took someone else to see what I could bring to it,” Jerry says. “I didn’t see it. But I do now.

People here might not see the potential that they have to bring to the community. My goal is to show them.”

And Jerry is still full of excitement about bringing out that potential through ABCD “I wholeheartedly believe in ABCD. I believe it’s going to work,” he says. “People just need to realize we are here to stay. So many programs have come and gone in this neighborhood...I want people to know I’m in this for the long haul. I’m in it because my heart is in it, and I’m not going anywhere!”

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BATES PLACE NEIGHBORS

Bates Place Neighbors exists to support neighbor – initiated improvement and to be a catalyst for engaging citizens and developing local leaders so that neighborhood life becomes increasingly strong.

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Contact us:

Wayne Squires

Director

batesplacegr@gmail.com

616.241.2283

Former Intern Joins Bates Place Staff as a Connector

Araceli Eikenberry



When Calvin University student, Araceli Eikenberry, joined our work as an intern last spring, she brought an infusion of curiosity and energy to the team. And now, fresh off another internship experience – this time over the summer months down in Memphis – she’s back for her senior year at Calvin, back living in the neighborhood, and back on the Bates Place Neighbors team as a staff connector.

Araceli appreciates the power of story and during her internship, she proved to be naturally gifted in listening, in taking conversations to deeper levels and in capturing neighbor feedback. Araceli is excited to rejoin the work and to start interacting with her fellow neighbors again.

Welcome back Araceli!

Can you help us continue to make a difference?

Bates Place Neighbors exists because of the generosity of individuals, churches, programming partners, businesses, and grant-making organizations. Your gift to Bates Place Neighbors supports its important community development work in the city. You can mail us your tax-deductible gift or make it online through our website.

Mail to: 651 Franklin SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49507

Online: www.batesplacegr.org

Thanks for supporting this impactful work!