Faith in Northeast

Civic engagement begins with the community, not with the powers that be

By Mischa Webley
NECN Staff Writer

In the insular world of local politics, a recent controversy has sparked a heated conversation in Portland around civic engagement. In short, the City of Portland’s Office of Community and Civic Life (Civic Life) has undertaken an effort that would, theoretically, expand the focus of the neighborhood system (that’s us) to be more inclusive of other groups, and less focused on neighborhood associations (note: Civic Life is NECN’s primary funder).

The plan, broadly called Code Change, has been met with fierce opposition from a broad alliance of Portlanders. Critics see the move as a way to undermine public involvement in a city that still doesn’t elect its commissioners by district, leaving the neighborhood system as one of the only avenues for most Portlanders to directly access their government. The City, for its part, maintains that Code Change is simply an effort to widen the tent of recognized organizations.

Few on either side disagree with that mission. But after a two-year long process that has been less-than-transparent and at times openly hostile to neighborhood groups, the plan has proven to be more divisive than inclusive. Here at NECN, it’s led us to reflect on our own history of civic engagement and the partnerships we’ve made over the years.

NECN has a long history in Northeast Portland. We’ve been operating out of the King Elementary School Annex since 1974, when a group of neighborhood leaders banded together to fight the city’s strategic disinvestment and negligence of the (then) predominantly black communities of Northeast. Neighborhoods joined together to amplify the voices of the community and build strength in numbers to demand representation from the city. In other words, NECN was born out of opposition to - not because of - city policy. That’s because real, meaningful civic engagement doesn’t come top-down from the city. It comes from the ground up, from the people. NECN’s focus is, and always has been, to support and uplift our community by promoting, funding, and enabling any way we can other grassroots and nonprofit organizations in Northeast, including neighborhood associations. From working with all these groups over the years, one thing is clear: people don’t fight for their community, engage with their city, vote for their representatives or volunteer in their community because the city government gives them their blessing. People do it out of faith: that their neighbors are good, that their community needs them, that things will get better. And they often do it in spite of the decisions made in City Hall, not because of them.

So, in this issue we shine a light on just a few leaders around Northeast who have made it their life’s work to improve this place. For some, faith in community and faith in a higher power are one in the same. For others, faith is what they need to keep fighting for a community that presents different daily challenges. Whether it’s in the news or not, the hard work of building up communities goes on, everyday, with or without the government’s stamp of approval.

Albina Green Celebrates 20 Years

Green neighborhood greenspace in 1999 as a grassroots effort to create an outdoor gathering place for everybody. Now, twenty years later, they’re celebrating its anniversary with a community art event and neighborhood picnic on Sunday, October 6th, 2019 from 4-9 p.m.

Stewardship efforts in the first ten years went towards maintaining the grounds as many people began to discover the place with their children. When we rede-signed the greenspace to include a grass stage that is wheelchair accessible, more activities began to materialize. Twenty years later, the local community looks very different and many people who helped cre-

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**RESIDENT PROFILE: Rena Williams**

By Mischa Weylby, NECN Staff Writer

 Rena’s story is one you can say that will inspire you, but not that uncommon a woman like Rena Williams. As the founder of a grassroots organization dedicated to supporting survivors of sex trafficking and a former sex worker herself, she’s seen it all, heard it all, and built up walls around all those hard experiences. No matter how thick those outside walls may be, her heart is on full display when she works with her clients. She’s the small things, like a poem that a client once wrote for her, that tug at her heart and help to prevent what is coming crumbling down. It has been a hard path for Rena to get to the place where she could help others. When Rena was pushed into the lifestyle as a teenager it began a vicious cycle common to sex trafficking victims a serum of shame led her to accept violent behavior from others to cope with the violence. She turned to drugs. The added addiction, she related more on personal experience. 

Prostitution, she says, is in a kind of addiction, a fleeting sense of power that disappears and leads her back to shame. That shame also kept her from an abusive marriage for years until she finally began to wonder if she didn’t have a life of her own. At that point, she also had to face the guilt she had left behind. She had set for herself a goal of being a mother and a whole life had followed in her footsteps. 

Despite all this, she’s managed to break through and she began to see the road in her life. First, she enrolled in a program called Reassignment Alter- natives that helped her envision a life outside of the streets. Then she kicked a nasty crack cocaine habit and went into recovery. She never went back to either one. In her training, she learned an important lesson: it wasn’t her fault. She could stop blaming herself for what’s happening, understand self to survive. She took that lesson and ran with it when, a few years later while attending a seminar about sex trafficking, it dawned on her that there were countless others like her who needed help. Just like she had decided right then and there that she would help others, Level, her support group for survivors, and soon after, Booted as a Recovery Mentor. 

Her role is complex, difficult and exhausting but she makes it seem simple: it’s just about listening to her clients, understanding them, and leading them to recognize triggers and unhealthy relationships. It’s about helping them redefine in their own shared experience. But government services for survivors are still sorely lacking and only recently has there been movement from lawmakers toward tackling the issue in a meaningful way. This has put Rena in high demand from policy-makers who are eager to gain an understanding of how to approach such a complex issue. 

Rena’s own story offers hope to others who are hungry to see that a life can exist beyond the streets, beyond the violence. She is living, breathing proof that there is something better waiting for all of us. 

Rena was named a Certified Peer Specialist for survivors, and soon after became a Certified Peer Specialist. “You can’t just be thinking about yourself. You have to think about the future and your kids and their kids.” How do we create a world that is safe for them?”

**Unexpected Visitor Drops In On Northeast Portland**

By Margaret O’Hartigan, King Neighborhood

N orth Portland residents got an unexpected visitor July 1 when a weak tornado touched down between 50th and 52nd Ave. On the National Weather Service map, a line showing the tornado first touched down near NE 45th St, but quickly moved to NE 44th St. The two sycamore trees actually began near Mal- ken and Summer, the funnel cloud bouncing up a hundred feet and hopping over MLK before landing again near King School. 

I was at home on Garfield Avenue, sitting on my front porch, when the twister struck. I thought I got Parallel to the ground, while smaller trees were destroyed. Amazingly, there were only four to four tornadoes back in Min- nesota, and new exactly what was happening.

As an engineer of nature’s power goes, there were no fatalities, no injuries and no serious damage to property. Even after electrical service was restored, power kept flowing throughout Northeast Portland over the next several days as a direct result of the storm. On November 1, approximately 300 customers of Pacific Power & Light lost electricity when a tele-

**Five Questions with Tawna Sanchez, State Representative, District 43**

By Mischa Weylby, NECN Staff Writer

T awna Sanchez was elected to the legislature in 2016. Since then she has tackled a number of state-level initiatives, accomplishments, most significantly the state’s record-setting cycle of violence, drug trafficking, and Murdering Indigenous Women’s Act passed, which directs state resources to tackle the massive and underreported issue of violence against women, especially indigenous women, in tribal areas. She has also worked for 23 years as program director at the Native American Youth and Family Center and currently serves as the Director of Family Services. She is a longtime resident of Northeast Portland.

Why did you turn to public office?

Well, my first response when it was suggested was to laugh. But thought about it and realized that had only been one: Native American person to represent Native American tribes in the legislature. So, as indigenous person, I have no one that has anybody represent us. We’ve already had a voice of color in the legislature.

But I also recognized that I had to go ahead and do this. I think I’ve been doing this for years to help bring what the Native American tribe and center from its small beginning place to a multi-million dollar organization that provides resources like housing and energy assistance and domestic violence services. I got to keep bringing all that and that I realized, I could continue to do that. Continue to do that. That’s the way I continue. That’s the way I change and the way I go about it. But I also recognized that I had to go ahead and do this. I think I’ve been doing this for years to help bring what the Native American tribe and center from its small beginning place to a multi-million dollar organization.

Has all the change that’s gone on in the Northeast Portland community changed your work?

Change and gentrification have shifted our community so much. So the mindset of how the people in the community is different, but when it comes to the basic people of this neighborhood and housing and transportation and all the things that are involved with that. It’s changed a lot and it’s changed a lot, but it’s still the same. Come down to it, people are dealing with the same problems. Some of them may have more income than others of them, but they still have different thoughts of how do you do different things, but for the most part it’s the same. It’s the same human it seems to still work great.

How do you balance public service with taking care of yourself and your family?

I don’t like the concept of self-care. It feels selfish in the way we put it all there all the time. When I look for 200 people it seems like we would like to work other someplace else.
Faith Is Work

By Moscha Webly, NECN Staff Writer

A cross Northeast Portland community churches are undergoing dramatic transformations. A combination of economic displacement along with the growing age of the average church-goer has led to the pews in many churches getting emptier by the week, while other churches have simply shut their doors for good.

In response, the churches that still remain are being forced to rethink their role in the community, and redefine themselves for the future. In a break from the past, some of them are finding success with opening their doors even wider, getting rid of the hierarchical structures that bind them, and asking themselves a simple question: what can we do for the community that’s here today?

Faith Is Work

For some, this kind of work is nothing new. In the heart of the Concordia neighborhood, just off NE 20th, Ainsworth an elegant brick building houses Ainsworth United Church of Christ (AUCC). Built by German immigrants in the early part of last century, AUCC as it is today came into being when two different churches in the neighborhood—two majority white and the other majority black—merged with one another in the 1980s. Soon after, Pastor Lynne Saumon Lopez arrived in Portland in the mid-90’s, fresh off an eight-year stint in the heart of South Central Los Angeles. And she came with a charge to push the church in a new direction.

Pastor Lynne and her new congregation wasted no time pushing AUCC ahead of the curve in Portland. Soon after arriving, they opened an HIV day clinic in the church’s basement at a time when the fear of AIDS and HIV were at a peak. They also became one of the first churches in Portland a nonprofit incubated by the Salt and Light Lutheran Church, previously Redeemer Lutheran, which has been in the Northeast community for decades.

Starting in 2010, the church began to rethink everything. Seeing the neighborhood changes rapidly around them, and the feelings about church and religion changing with it, they decided that the answer was to lean into the change wholeheartedly and embrace it. To do that, they hired a community organizer and spent three years soul-searching and simply listening to their neighbors: they knocked on doors, held public meetings and heard about what holes in the community they could fill. They had decided that the key to moving forward wasn’t to serve the community in a one-way relationship. Rather, it was to build a platform that could become whatever it was the community decided it should be.

“People come here because they want to be in a diverse congregation”

It’s not always easy. “People come here because they want to be in a diverse congregation,” she says, pointing out that they are a multi-racial and multi-generational congregation with a wide variety of income levels represented. “But living it out,” she adds, “is harder than they expect.”

Pastor Lynne doesn’t take credit for it, or anyone really, if anything, it’s the other way around her congregants, she says, are very active and they volunteer countless hours serving the community. AUCC is simply a catalyst. “One of our biggest roles is to nurture that fire, nurture the people, help feed them so that they can go out and do the work they’re doing to serve the community.”

“We create spaces that could become whatever it was the community decided it should be.”

The result was Leaven Community, an organic and constantly evolving project that, among other things, hosts a variety of grassroots community organizations, as well as the Salt and Light Church of Christ. The change has been an undertaking that’s much bigger than a single church. In fact, most of the groups are not faith-based at all. “It’s a practice-based community,” says Mira Ayala, a Leaven Community member and organizer with Oregon Synod, the regional arm of the Lutheran church. “It’s about practices, not an expectation to subscribe to any set of beliefs.”

The groups on-site are diverse, and decidedly secular: there’s the Portland Tool Library, for example, which loans out tools to neighbors; there’s a Buddhist meditation group; a feminist women’s group; a food collective; and an innovative Salt and Light program called Intercambio, an intercultural language exchange that hosts churches for people who speak different languages to come together and learn from one another. It’s all part of a broader philosophy that defines the role of their church as providing the journey, but not necessarily the destination. In the words of Leaven’s Gilmore Jones, Co-Executive Director of Leaven Community, “We create spaces for people to be who they are through the exploration of their spiritual journeys and to act together out of our stories and the love we have for one another to do systemic and structural change so that we have more thriving neighborhoods.”

“People come here because they want to be in a diverse congregation.”

The main problem they face, he says, is a conflict between old and new. “This church,” he says, “is caught in a crossfire between maintaining tradition and gentrification.”

The change isn’t easy, but change is exactly what Reverend Randy West signed up for at Berean Baptist Church on North Vancouver Avenue when he started ministering there two years ago. Berean has been around for generations, but in recent years it has seen a steep decline in enrollment. With a background in both business and theology, Reverend West armed to shake things up and turn around the struggling church.

Reverend West envisions a new establishment that will be climate-neutral and affordable housing, that would fit an indoor gym and childcare center when he surveys the empty land behind the church. He imagines building affordable homes on it, with barbeques and sports games on the weekends where there is now just an empty field.

But the real change is about a lot more than just the paint color. He’s preparing to retire the old church as it is and launch an entirely new one on the same site, with a new name, for a new generation. It’s a generation, he says, “that may have given up on church, but they haven’t given up on God.”

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Vernon Happenings this Fall!

Vernon Neighborhood Association (VNA) is reorganizing the way we operate to collaborate more directly with the Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods (NECN). This revamp will free up resources and increase our ability to support our community partners and their initiatives. This fall we are organizing a social meet up with our other Vernon Neighborhood associations to discuss new ways to collaborate in light of our ever-changing City.

If you are interested in finding ways to help create more community within Vernon and our supportive neighborhoods, we will be hosting elections on October 23rd for board member positions. There are many opportunities within VNA such as putting on social events within the community, being the land use representative with NECN, working on a project with the city, helping with fundraising, securing sponsorships, and much more.

Please come to our elections to be held on October 23rd at 7pm in the Leaven Community Center, 5431 NE 20th Ave. This is a chance to bring your ideas on future community event plans. We look forward to hearing more from you!

http://vernonpdx.org

PCC Seeks Ideas for Local Project

By Jonathan Konkel, Elot Neighborhood Association board member and Vice-Chair of its Land Use and Transportation Committee

Portland has struggled to accommodate growth in the decade since the Great Recession, and our conversations about growth neighborhood change have become operational and abstract. It doesn’t have to be this way.

Cities around Oregon have been given until 2022 to come up with plans to implement HB 2001, a bill that will eliminate single-family residential zoning and make for more allowed density on all lots. This poses many challenges for code reviewers that want to be intentional about what historic buildings, trees and other features are preserved for future generations.

“What if we could preserve what we love in Portland’s classic neighborhoods while creating opportunities for new households in the coming decades? What if historic preservation and affordability advocates could find common ground? Imagine a future where neighborhoods are partners in growth and change, playing a collaborative role in finding new rooms for homes for our growing population.”

Recently, three friends from diverse backgrounds and political persuasions got together to try to answer these challenges under the umbrella of The Re-Urbanist Collaborative.

“People who don’t work in the design and planning worlds usually don’t have much exposure to talk about ‘typologies’ and density. We want to show people what these terms look like on the ground and what they already have in their communities with self-guided walking tours, assisted by a mobile app. The app will guide people around examples of higher density development and allow them to make a first-hand impression of traditional building types that already exist in our neighborhoods.”

Author: Jonathan Konkel and partner Miles Sark on a neighborhood tour with a resident

It’s Not If We Grow, It’s How We Grow

By Rebecca Ocken, PCC Community College (PCC) asked voters to approve a bond measure that includes rebuilding the Metropolitan Workforce Training Center at 42nd Avenue and NE Kilgore Street. Now it’s asking what services there could serve the community as well as students.

PCC and the Oregon Department of Human Services serve 185 students and clients weekly at the site. “We expect that number to grow significantly if we provide wrap-around services, like daycare, healthcare and more.”

It’s a new/old way of looking at change is called Dynamic Density. It’s a new way of looking at urban neighborhoods based on the idea of finding our urban future in our urban past. This proposal uses the existing framework of neighborhood associations to make local decisions on how to allocate new buildings while preserving existing assets.

“Density looks like; lead a mapping exercise to place druzer housing types in neighborhoods, develop a plan to implement the neighborhood’s preferred scenario. Drawing on what they have learned about growth targets, existing conditions, priorities for preservation, and a knowledge of what higher density housing can look like, neighbors choose the puzzle pieces, and assembles them on the board. We provide a pattern book of compatible, historically-trained building types based on examples we’ve documented from months of walking neighborhoods with our cameras and talking to neighbors on the way.”

The Re-Urbanist Collaborative includes the author, Jonathan Konkel, AICP – Planner & Urban Designer, Richard Potestio, AIA, Architect & Troublemaker; and Miles Sark – Political Consultant & Property Manager. If you’d like to get involved, you can find out more at www.reurbanistcollaborative.com or contact the author at jonathankonkel@gmail.com.

Sanchez contrib from pg 3

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Taking care of others and serving others is taking care of yourself.

What gives you hope?

What gives me hope is that we’ve been able to bring more people of color into the legislature here in Oregon and throughout the country because of [the election in 2016]. And it gives me hope because I believe truly that many people are good and can recognize lies and inappropriate behavior. One of the struggles we have as a society or a country around these issues is to legislate political correctness or legislate anti-racism or anti-oppression. I think this is an area we can’t do that. We have to change people culturally.

But we have a generation of folks coming up - children and young people - who are growing up with much better knowledge and understanding of their own humanness and who are pushing us to grow. We have others that are not doing it so much. But I think we’re doing better at helping people understand that we have a responsibility to help people be decent human beings. We just have to fill the balance to help them do that.

Potestio contrib from pg 3

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Woodlawn Yoga: A Gathering Space In the Community, For the Community

By Diane Englert, Woodlawn Neighbor

On the corner of NE Dekum Street and 8th Avenue sits the Woodlawn Wellness Center. The gray and sage building houses an acupuncturist, chiropractor and a yoga studio. I live in Woodlawn and always wanted yoga classes within walking distance. When the studio opened three years ago, I checked it out. Sunlight streams through plate glass windows giving the floor a warm glow. The instructor greets students at the door. I bring my yoga mat, but you can borrow one—no charge. Music plays softly, sometimes accompanied by the neighborhood sounds of chickens clucking and children laughing. At the end of class, feeling rejuvenated and somehow taller, I stay to drink the complimentary tea or kombucha and chat with my classmates.

“Welcome!” A Portland native and owner/teacher Crystal Covelle said in 1 Corinthians Chapter 13, “For this is the greatest.” I wanted to make things I love available to everyone, “says Covelle, who also makes candles. Most teachers and students live in the neighborhood. Students range from babies coming with a parent for the Tiny Tots yoga and music class to seniors and everyone, “I wanted to make things I love available to everyone,” says Covelle, who also makes candles.

This is the most inviting and affordable studio I’ve found in 22 years in Portland.

“Most teachers and students live in the neighborhood. Students range from babies coming with a parent for the Tiny Tots yoga and music class to seniors and everyone,” says Covelle, who also makes candles.

Love Is The Greatest

By Ike Harris, Concordia Neighborhood Association Board Member

Remember Muhammad Ali, the greatest heavy weight boxer of all time? I do. Those quick hands and feet. Once upon a time he made this statement. He said to his audience and followers and fans, “I wish you would love everybody the way you show affection for me.”

If we are to be truly great – here at home, across the country and throughout the world – we need to love. I can identify six types of love:

• Eros: romantic love
• Philoc: affectionate love
• Philautia: self love
• Storage: familiar love
• Pragma: enduring love
• Agape: unconditional love

That latter – unconditional love – is the greatest. It was important 2,000 years ago and it’s important to achieve today. Look what was said in 1 Corinthians Chapter 13, New English version:

What if I could speak all languages of humans and angels? If I did not love others, I would be nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
What if I could prophecy and understand all secrets and all knowledge? And what if I had faith that moved mountains? I would be nothing unless I loved others.
What if I gave away all that I owned and let myself be burned alive? I would gain nothing unless I loved others.

Love is kind and patient, never jealous, boastful, proud or rude. Love isn’t selfish or quick tempered. It doesn’t keep record of wrongs that others do. Love rejoices in the truth, but not in evil. Love is always supportive, loyal, hopeful and trusting. Love never fails. For now there are faith, hope and love, but of these three the greatest is love.

Isham “Ike” Harris has served on the Concordia Neighborhood Association Board of Directors for countless years. Husband for 43 years, father of three and grandfather of four, he is a retired postal carrier and a pastor for Upper Room Church.

Editor’s note: CNA respects the views and beliefs of all cultures and faiths. The views expressed by this writer do not necessarily reflect the views of CNA.