

Celebrating The Peaslee Neighborhood Center's Thirty-Seven Years Of Leadership In Over-The-Rhine

(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

The Peaslee Neighborhood Center's Annual Report arrived in my mailbox several weeks ago. Full of information about its current programs and activities, it, nevertheless, prompted me to think back to Peaslee's beginnings. Formerly a Cincinnati Public School serving Over-the-Rhine children, the Board of Education and Administration decided it was no longer needed and closed it in the early 1980s. That left the question, what was going to happen to the building?



Neighborhood leaders like Bonnie Neumeier decided that OTR badly needed a neighborhood center and launched a campaign to use the now empty school building for this purpose. It was a daunting effort that seemed destined for defeat, because of the large price tag established for purchasing the building. Nevertheless, Neumeier and others waged a successful grassroots effort that raised funds from a diverse group of religious and civic

groups and individuals to overcome this initial obstacle.

Next, they turned their attention to making this center useful to OTR-residents. As a member of Christ Church Cathedral's Outreach Committee, a group that provided some early grants to Peaslee, I was a witness to these first initiatives. For about five years, our Committee held its monthly meetings in one of the former school's first floor classrooms. Peaslee quickly launched some after school programs for neighborhood children as well as evening activities for adults.

The most important initiative in those early years was a health clinic designed to serve low-income residents who rarely received medical services beyond emergency rooms. So needed and successful did this clinic prove to be that it eventually had to expand its services and move to its own building. Then, several years later, Peaslee became home to a daycare program. Christ Church Cathedral and other groups provided funding to this venture that proved to be an essential service to this under serviced neighborhood.

Thus, from its beginning in 1985, Peaslee became a vital center of activities and services for neighborhood residents. Now, thirty seven years later, Peaslee still serves a key role in the lives of OTR-residents. Blessed with leadership continuity on its board with individuals like Bonnie Neumeier, it operates day to day with some very able and caring women at the helm. Three key staff members are Jennifer Summers, Executive Director, Jennifer Arens, and Joele Newman.



A significant role currently played by Peaslee is community organizing. OTR-residents, who often are neglected and exploited by gentrification, have been able to rally under the leadership of the Center's community organizing program. A few years ago, Peaslee staff organized a

successful grassroots campaign that stopped the development of a large housing project designed for upper-income clients that would have deprived current residents of already scarce public space and the only outdoor basketball court in the area.

This organizing in OTR has led Peaslee to take a leadership role in developing strategies and a process designed to prevent proposed major developments from harming the quality of life of neighborhood residents. Known as the Equitable Development Rubric, it has won support from a number of other neighborhoods. Peaslee leaders in the past year have testified twice before City Council Committees about the need for the City to adopt such a policy. In another critical policy area, Peaslee has been an active member of the grassroots coalition advocating for greater City funding for the Affordable Housing Trust Fund.

Peaslee also continues to offer an array of services and programs to OTR residents. An area in Peaslee's front yard served as the outdoor classroom for the Center's 2021 summer camp for children ages six to nine. A variety of learning experiences included swimming, gardening, and field trips, and teachers also read books with the children and led discussions about "different aspects of social justice." Risers, a second summer camp program for ten to twelve year olds also took place focusing on personal development through art appreciation and writing personal journals.

A longstanding music program continues at the Center. Seventeen students took piano lessons in 2021. During the summer, students studied piano online, but lessons resumed at the Center by the fall. Meanwhile, Agents of Change, a program that involves Public School youth, took place at the Center that summer. It focused on critical public issues such as climate change and some of the discussions were captured in a Pod Cast.

At the height of the pandemic, the Center embarked on a critical program in coalition with the the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center and the Free Store Food Bank to deliver food to families and children who could not afford to buy groceries during this period. The Center then added a healthy addition to this program by providing fresh vegetables and fruit to residents at a monthly event in its parking lot. Approximately three-hundred and fifty households received this fresh produce.

These short depictions of some of the activities taking place at the Center don't do justice to the positive impact of this organization on the lives of children and families in OTR. At a time when we are besieged by bad news, it is refreshing to celebrate an organization that is doing so much positive work. Clearly, the Peaslee Neighborhood Center is a model for effective community organizing and for providing needed neighborhood services. With such an able and committed board and staff, the Center will certainly continue to be innovative in responding to the next round of challenges that confront it and Over-the-Rhine.