OVER-THE-RHINE
VISIONS
“Over-The-Rhine Visions” documentary project was written and photographed by Eric Lose of the University of Cincinnati Community Design Center with support from the University of Cincinnati Niehoff Urban Studio.

Frank Russell, Editor, Thea Munchel Graphic Design. 2006

Dedicated to the Mary Johnson and the other visionaries of Over-The-Rhine
Who does not dream of a place that has been, will be, or let be?

In these dreams see the sameness within diversity; the perseverance of personality and the force of will that comprise our chief assets. Here, in Over-The-Rhine, the fabric of the city is tuned, as an instrument, to the visions of the dreamers.

This beautiful chaos called Over-The-Rhine.
Arlene Turner

If the women of Over-the-Rhine collectively selected a mother it would most likely be Arlene Turner. In her role as director of the Sarah Center, Turner acts as a maternal mentor and regularly enriches the lives of women in the OTR community.
The Sarah Center means a lot more to Turner than just place of employment. It’s become a place for her to give back, learn and grow. Currently she coordinates and implements skill-based programs for women in jewelry making, quilting and sewing. The women participating in these craft-based activities earn supplemental income, learn a marketable skill while developing creativity and establish much-needed support networks. Turner and the Sarah Center also offer holistic activities like tai chi, cultural events, get-away-days, and trainings for job and volunteer opportunities. “We identify assets in women, and we build on those to help enrich and improve the quality of their lives,” she said.

Turner started at the Sarah Center in 1999 as a typist for Sister Jeanette Buehler. Over time Sister Jeanette gave her more responsibilities, and eventually groomed her to take over as director. Watching Turner at work in the Sarah Center can be a personally enriching experience, it’s a reminder that sometimes what is most important to a person in need is to know that someone cares.

Turner estimates that at any given time the Sarah Center might have 30 to 50 clients who actively participate in the program. “But when you include the outreach,” she said, “it’s really a much bigger number. Most people come in because they need something. If we can help them we do, or we might refer them to another agency. In that way we might help 100 people a week.”

There are a lot of different people with a lot of different needs walking into the Sarah Center, and Turner and her staff are prepared to accommodate a wide range of needs on a daily basis. They might be called upon to make a complicated referral for emergency housing, direct someone to job training or help with food assistance. Or it could be as simple as offering a cool glass of water on a hot day.

Sometimes what is most important for people coming through the front door is that someone is there, ready to listen. “I wanted to create a presence that we’re here to help people sort things out,” said Turner. “Whether it is simple or more complicated we’re here to find out what help is available for them.”

Turner knows from first-hand experience what it is like to be on the other side of that agency front desk. Turner said that she, her husband and three children “sort of fell into Over-the-Rhine” after some difficulties in 1994, and by accessing neighborhood resources “we were able to regain our footing.”
It took a lot of hard work for the Turners to regain their footing, but Arlene’s efforts didn’t go unrecognized. In 2004 she received an award called Stories of Success for Women in Over-the-Rhine, an annual honor given by the Emanuel Community Center.

Turner realizes that there are no easy solutions for Over-the-Rhine’s problems. She has a lot of vision for the neighborhood, and knows that to be effective most will require people to learn, grow change and compromise.

“I’d like to see a mixed plan that includes more family-type activities,” she said. She feels that many of the people moving into Over-the-Rhine don’t have children, so the newer amenities that cater to these residents are not family oriented. “The kids need somewhere to go and something to do,” she said. “We have a wonderful recreation center and the Cincinnati Recreation Commission is really good at planning summer activities, but as far as family entertainment we don’t have anything like that in the community.”

Turner said it’s difficult to plan a family outing in Over-the-Rhine because there is no place to see family movies, go bowling, play arcade games, or do other family-oriented activities. “It’s pretty much all for adults,” she said.

She feels that there is a real problem with low income housing. “I’d like to see tenant and landlord relationships improve,” she said. “We need more accountability from both sides.” Turner said that frustrated people bash up their apartments, and she understands that frustrated landlords don’t want to keep fixing things over and over after tenants damage the property.

Turner would like to see the neighborhood schools used for more than just education. “They could turn them into community learning centers,” she said. “The schools would be used for more than educating the kids.” She believes that if the parents get used to going to the facilities for alternate community activities, then they will naturally go there more often for their children’s needs.

Turner believes there is a real need for more OTR-based employment opportunities. “There are a couple labor pools in the area but they are always turning applicants away,” she said. “People want to work, and would if there were more jobs in the neighborhood.”
Brenda Zechmeister

For almost 10 years Brenda Zechmeister nurtured a beautiful and mutually beneficial relationship between the world of art and the community of Over-the-Rhine. In her former role as coordinator of the art programs at Peaslee Neighborhood Center, Zechmeister started a variety of community arts and music programs which repeatedly improved the lives of the participants.

Novice artisans, young and old, have told her that working on projects like the OTR Community Art Collaborative changed their lives. They reported that art helped pull them out of depression, increased their feelings of neighborhood ownership, and gave them a positive way to voice their feelings. Most importantly, to many, art at Peaslee became a symbolic safe haven in a neighborhood that sometimes felt dark, scary and dangerous.

Zechmeister started at Peaslee in the mid-1990s on a part-time basis. She loved the work and the center: there was always a lot happening at Peaslee. Eventually she earned a Master's degree Arts Administration and attained a full time position at Peaslee in 2001.

The Center serves mainly low income families in Over-the-Rhine and offers child care, after-school music and arts programs and girls and women's support groups. It is also home to the Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center, the Peaslee Center for Community Photography and other neighborhood organizations.

Zechmeister job entailed a multitude of responsibilities, but her favorite was any activity that brought her into direct contact with the center's patrons. “I loved working with people involved with the arts,” she said. “I really liked popping in and having conversations with them and learning how much their art means to them.”

The artistic area she most favors is community art, where the work is created by a group for public installation. “Part of our mission is to get people to find their voice,” said Zechmeister. Through the Peaslee programs children and adults often find a voice through the creation of public art pieces. Themes are centered on things of their choosing; past topics have been peace and unity, community, love and freedom.
“The process has always been so fulfilling to me,” said Zechmeister. “They express themselves, especially adults that don’t consider themselves artists. They start by saying ‘I’m not an artist, I can’t do it,’ but eventually fall into it.”

Zechmeister recalled a woman suffering severe depression. By a fluke she got involved with one of Zechmeister’s community art projects. “She started coming every day and told me the project and the interaction with other people became her reasons to get out of bed.”

Community art works produced by OTR residents have gone a long way towards beautifying the local landscape. All through the neighborhood, in places where you’d least expect, mosaics, paintings, and sculptures pop out from the background and brighten up a blank wall or turn a bland doorway into a colorful entrance. Zechmeister believes that art should be a major component of any development plans for Over-the-Rhine. “I’d like to see arts for everyone in Over-the-Rhine, not just those with money; it can bring people together and change how they see their world.”

Zechmeister has wide-ranging visions for Over-the-Rhine; she’d like to see preservation of OTR’s history and architecture coupled with the celebration and growth of the arts and OTR’s diversity.

“I see OTR as a treasure, full of rich history” said Zechmeister. OTR’s history tells the early glory of the neighborhood: the German immigrants; the beer halls; the canal that was called The Rhine; and the great culture exemplified by Music Hall, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and May Festival. “I’d like to see that history preserved and shared with more people, both locals and out-of-towners,” she said. “Perhaps there could be a small museum where people could learn more about the neighborhood’s history and gain an appreciation of it.”

Marge Hammelrath

Marge Hammelrath knows Over-the-Rhine: past, present, and future. As executive director of the Over-the-Rhine Foundation, it’s her job to know how the neighborhood got to its present state, where it’s headed, and the best route to get there for all concerned.

But Hammelrath wasn’t always so knowledgeable or appreciative of Over-the-Rhine. She and her husband knew little about OTR
when they bought a home on Broadway. They hadn’t been too lucky in the stock market, so they decided to try investing in real estate. “As soon as we bought a stock, the value went way down,” said Hammelrath. “We felt like we should send a sympathy card to the company president and say ‘Sorry about that.’”

Hammelrath always loved old homes and lived in two before purchasing her older house on Broadway. “We really didn’t think about the neighborhood or where it was or anything,” she said. “It just seemed to be a beautiful house that needed some love and care.” Soon after buying that home she became a dedicated admirer of the Over-the-Rhine culture.

She made friends with people in the neighborhood that appreciated the unique attributes of OTR. “We believed this was a pretty important neighborhood. A lot of places have historic districts,” said Hammelrath. “But nobody has one the size of this – plus we have the river and beautiful hillsides – we thought we ought to make an asset out of it.”

The Over-the-Rhine Foundation’s goal is revitalization of the neighborhood. “We do everything we can to encourage people to come to Over-the-Rhine,” said Hammelrath. “Our main focus is on housing.”

Right now there’s a lot going on in Over-the-Rhine, and potential property owners can benefit from the Foundation’s in-depth knowledge of the area’s resources. According to Hammelrath OTR is a great place to invest, and the Foundation can help buyers learn about future developments, financing options, and “if that great deal will still be a great deal in 10 or 20 years.”

Hammelrath has far-reaching visions for the neighborhood. “I want this neighborhood to still be intact in 400 years,” she said, but planning for that kind of longevity takes time “We need to sit back and think about what’s going to be the outcome of everything we do,” she said.

While vacationing in Spain Hammelrath walked some neighborhoods near Seville that were four centuries old. She thought to herself “Who saved these? Why did they have the foresight? How did they know that people would want to come here 400 years later?”

Those questions led her to think differently about her work Over-the-Rhine. “We should not be thinking in terms of five years from...
now,” she said. “We lose a building here, lose a building there, and pretty soon we’re down to wondering ‘Is it worth saving?’

For example, occasionally an agency or business will attempt to quickly launch a short-sighted rehab project that is in conflict with longer-ranging goals for OTR. One such plan involved leveling a block of existing buildings for a new school. The planners were in a rush and wanted to start demolition “right now.” “They don’t know what kind of boogers we are,” said Hammelrath. “We don’t talk in ‘right nows’ around here.”

Outsiders might mean well, but according to Hammelrath they often don’t understand how to deal with the Over-the-Rhine community. “They need to think about the real outcome of tearing down a whole block of buildings.”

Without a long-range vision of preservation, Hammelrath fears that 400 years from now no one will know what remarkable structures we had. “We’ve have some amazing successes,” she said. “The Alms and Doepke building was going to come down, but we saved it and it’s still in use.”

A lot of Over-the-Rhine’s early buildings had finishing touches by skilled craftsman, and in many instances these small treasures are hidden from public view. Hammelrath’s office has a tin ceiling which was featured in a tour by the International Sculpture Center in June of 2006. A former owner of Hammelrath’s home on Broadway was the head of a plasterers’ guild and the work he did on the house dates back to around 1875. The ceilings have beautiful hand-sculpted ornamental plaster centerpieces, with cornices and edgings of vines and trumpets and leaves, mandolins and flutes.

Many of the building in Over-the-Rhine are filled with this kind of artistic craftsmanship. Hopefully Hammelrath, the Over-the-Rhine Foundation, and other like her will be able to fend off hurry-up projects that would level aesthetic beauty in the name of progress.
It’s a cool, overcast October afternoon; the morning had a bone-aching, damp, probably-going-to-rain feel to it… but all that changed when Bill Baum bounced into the building.

Baum and his company Urban Sites Properties are converting two large historic structures at 1214-20 Vine St into 15 loft-style condominiums and 6,000 square feet of retail space. The project, named Urban Legacy, is in full swing: the building appears surrounded by a steel cage of scaffolding, walls are gutted, floors are gaping, power tools roaring, and hard-hated construction workers are all moving at a fast past.

Across the street another developer is converting six buildings into 25 condo units, all part of Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation’s (3CDC) plan to revitalize Over-the-Rhine. The neighborhood is a constant roar of construction noise, screaming beepers from backing trucks, the hydraulic whirl of extended lifters, and the boom-thump-BOOM of gutted materials landing in huge dumpsters.

This cacophony of construction sounds is just aggravating noise to most passers-by, but it’s the music of progress to Baum’s ears. When the subject of conversation moves to Urban Legacy, Baum’s posture straightens, his eyes glisten and his tone of voice reverberates with enthusiasm. He’s truly thrilled to be a part of 3CDC’s overall plan for the neighborhood. “It’s really nice to be a part of something that is so big,” said Baum. “We’re doing two buildings right here, but there’s something going on across the street, down at the corner, all around here.”

In the past, Baum said that if he had done just these two buildings by himself “we wouldn’t have a prayer at occupancy. Nobody would feel safe.” But with all of the rehabbing going on at once in OTR, Baum feels that there are a lot of people who will want to be a part of the revitalization. “This entire neighborhood is being reborn,” he said. “There are a lot of people attracted to urban living; they want to be here and won’t feel at all out of place.”

Baum is familiar with housing in Over-the-Rhine. He developed his first OTR properties in 1984 on Main Street. “It was completely vacant then, a blank slate,” he said. “It was so bad that everybody had left, buildings were being boarded up and nothing was going on.” Baum said a budding artists’ community began to take hold. At that time many people attached a stigma to living in Over-the-Rhine, but according to Baum, this new younger group had a different view. “To them OTR was cool, it was urban living.”
Baum’s first units were nothing fancy; he offered neat, clean and affordable living quarters. “They were pretty reasonably priced,” he said. They were 150 to 20 bucks. It was a great deal for the tenants and we were glad to have anything coming in.

Gradually the housing demand began to change, and more and more people were attracted to living in Over-the-Rhine. Baum said the newer demand came from tenants who had lived in urban environments in other cities. “They came to Cincinnati and looked downtown,” he said. “But the city didn’t have a lot to offer. Over-the-Rhine was a great market for professionals who wanted to live near downtown.”

Visiting architects are quick to comment that the architecture of Over-the-Rhine is a real plus, that other cities had bulldozed similar treasures. Keeping this architectural originality intact has heightened the appeal of Over-the-Rhine, making it one of the most unique neighborhoods in the country.

Baum was complimentary of 3CDC’s approach to transforming Over-the-Rhine. “They were smart enough and had the financial clout to buy a lot of property,” he said. “It was incredible; they knew they had to control the neighborhood trouble spots to be successful.” Baum said that long-time nuisance businesses were purchased, sometimes along with surrounding properties and an associated liquor license when necessary, in order to gain control.

Over-the-Rhine struggles with the perception that it’s not a secure place to live. Overall most residents report that they feel safe; it’s mostly outsiders that consider it a dangerous neighborhood. “In the past a lot of people would shy away from this location,” said Baum. “But with all this happening – the Art Academy and all this new development – that’s changing.”

“Let’s face it; there will always be some people who want to feel 100 percent safe,” said Baum. But we’re chipping away at that mentality.” More and more people are becoming attracted to urban living and discovering that Over-the-Rhine is a vibrant, growing and attractive place to settle.

“There are people who are ‘urban people,’” said Baum. “They have a different outlook; they wouldn’t want to be caught dead in a mall or a vanilla box in the suburbs. They want to be a part of this, to be here where it’s happening.” In addition to the committed urban dwellers, Baum said there are new converts being attracted to living in the inner city. “I think there are more and more couples, empty nesters, who are thinking ‘No lawn, leaves, or yard work… Ya know, I could live down there.’ Ten years ago it wouldn’t have been attractive to them, but now… they’re here.”
There are a lot of good, conscientious developers working in Over-the-Rhine. Baum is one of them, but the reputation of Urban Sites Properties goes far beyond honesty. It’s an unfortunate fact of development, but often before an older building can be upgraded tenants need to be displaced. In addition, construction costs necessitate a sizeable increase in rent which often places them out of budget range for former tenants.

In the 1980s Baum purchased some buildings that needed to be developed. “One building had four tenants and was really run down,” he said. “It was substandard and the tenants had to leave.” Baum was able to find the current occupants affordable Section 8 housing, and on moving day brought in trucks and crew and helped the tenants relocate.

Baum’s reputation of being a builder with a heart still follows him in the OTR community. While his work wins awards, his reputation wins hearts: Twenty-five years later, people still talk about “that nice man that helped us move.”

For decades some have felt that Over-the-Rhine was a forced concentration of poverty, a place to warehouse the poor to keep them away from suburban neighborhoods. Baum feels that it’s time for OTR to become a mixed income, diverse neighborhood where everyone can live.

Baum can see his vision happening right now in the two buildings he is developing on Vine Street. “If this is successful, it will be the prototype that will allow this to continue on,” he said. “I’m amazed when I look at the map and see what 3CDC has acquired for future development. They were smart enough and had the financial clout to launch such a big project.”
Katie Laur

Musician and writer Katie Laur is one of the best things to ever happen to Over-the-Rhine. Rooted in blue grass, she began performing locally at Aunt Maudie’s on Main Street in the early 1970s and has been connected to the neighborhood in some fashion ever since.

Spending time with Katie Laur over a cup of tea in a quiet corner of Kaldi’s can quite possibly be one of you life’s most memorable experiences. You’ll walk away enthralled, spellbound, in love with the descriptive qualities of the English language, fascinated by some minor historic event in Over-the-Rhine’s past, saddened with the idea that you just might never again experience so much warmth in conversation, and walking away saying out loud to yourself “Damnation that woman can sure tell a story.”

Laur is a master storyteller. In her CityBeat columns, on stage, or in everyday conversations at Kaldi’s, she can captivate listeners with her folksy, heart-felt tales of what she believes are Over-the-Rhine’s best assets: the people. The tales come from her heart, which makes them so endearing and she has a masterful, natural command of her vocabulary. Laur doesn’t use big, academic, fifty-cent words (the kind that you write down and intend to look up later… but never do). But her descriptors will catch people off guard, maybe by saying that OTR’s Base Gallery was “a yeasty place” (a creative state of turbulence).

Laur began performing in Over-the-Rhine in the early 1970s, and took up residence in 1997. “It was a lively place; I was drawn to it,” she said. “Every night Kaldi’s would be filled with artists and painters, it had a real bohemian atmosphere, really heady stuff.”

Laur loved the free spirited quality of her neighbors; “You didn’t have to be like everyone else to fit in,” she said. “There was always something of interest going on somewhere.”

Like many other current residents, Laur is concerned with neighborhood safety. “The people who hang out on the street corners at night are ominous and menacing,” she said. “But they’re not my neighbors; they’re not from around here.”

Over-the-Rhine has not changed, but to Laur it is people from outside the neighborhood that are coming in and making things unpleasant. “I’m not scared, but I’m tired of people spitting on the sidewalk, the nastiness, the lewdness. We’re in the midst of so much beauty – the art and the architecture, it’s just a wonderful treasure trove – and nobody will come and appreciate it because they don’t feel safe.”
It’s a rare treat to catch Carrie Johnson sitting still long enough to talk about herself and her accomplishments. But most likely she won’t sit still for very long; having just returned from one board meeting and getting ready to head out for another.

Laur would like to see more amenities for residents. Things that suburbanites take for granted are sometimes difficult to obtain in OTR. “There are very few places to shop for my day-to-day needs in Over-the-Rhine,” she said. “I’ve got two or three pair of shoes I can’t wear because there’s no place to buy shoe laces.”

Perturbed by the absence of stores carrying basic necessities in OTR, Laur likened it to living in a frontier town. “You waited for the Wells Fargo wagon to come through to do your shopping,” she said. “I email my mother in Alabama and she sends me shoelaces and washcloths. There’s no way you could buy those down here, and I’m out of two or three pairs of shoes because the strings are broken. I’m always on the lookout for shoe strings… maybe there’s some place on Court Street?”

Despite OTR’s problems, Laur loves the neighborhood because it is rich in diversity. “Neighborhoods like Montgomery or Hyde Park each have a particular clique of people, but Over-the-Rhine has a real cross section. She uses Kaldi’s coffeehouse as sort of a barometer of the neighborhood. In the 80s the neighborhood was bustling, and Kaldi’s was alive every night filled with bohemian types. “That’s what drew me to Over-the-Rhine,” she said. “It was magic, someone would take a vacant building and turn it into a venue and put on shows. Artists are like that, they like to play, and the whole neighborhood was like an adult playground.”

Kaldi’s business dropped off drastically after the riots of 2001. Laur said it would close, and then reopen, “then we went a whole summer without Kaldi’s. But somebody bought it and got it running. It’s got legs again.”

Laur said she’s in the middle on the current controversy over gentrification. She favors preserving the architectural beauty of the neighborhood. Many of the vacant buildings are being restored, and new blood and income are moving into OTR.

But she’s also a bit disturbed. “We won’t have the artists anymore,” she said. Many of her bohemian friends have already left. “It’s not because of safety issues,” she said. “It’s because the rent’s going up. And without them [the artists] there’s no entertainment, that’s why I came here.”

Carrie Johnson
It’s a rare treat to catch Carrie Johnson sitting still long enough to talk about herself and her accomplishments. But most likely she won’t sit still for very long; having just returned from one board meeting and getting ready to head out for another.
Outwardly Johnson can seem modest, quiet, and inconspicuous. But on the inside she's an adamant, driven, hard-charging advocate for the low-income residents of Over-the-Rhine. A recent heart attack slowed the pace of her civic involvement, so at 72 she had to back off and reduce her volunteer load. Johnson is currently an active member on the boards of three community agencies — that's down from her usual six or seven.

Johnson has lived in Over-the-Rhine her entire life. “I like the people I meet here,” she said. “I don’t have problems with anybody.” She’ll admit the neighborhood has had its share of difficulties, but despite the problems there is no place she rather live than Over-the-Rhine.

“Oh, there are problems around here, but you learn to skirt around that.”

Like many of the residents, to Johnson Over-the-Rhine is more than a neighborhood, it’s a part of her heritage. “This is me,” she said. “My mother was here and we were born and raised here. I don’t want to go anywhere else.”

Besides her birthright connection to OTR, the neighborhood has all the amenities Johnson wants in an urban setting: proximity to downtown, access to a variety of metro bus routes, and her favorite, Findlay Market. “I grew up around Findlay Market,” she said. “And since they upgraded it I like it even more.”

More than just a Findlay Market patron, Johnson was on the board overseeing the recent renovation. “We took a bus trip to Cleveland to get some ideas,” she said, “and it’s been working fine. It’s [the renovation] a wonderful thing.”

Johnson felt that the improvements to Findlay Market did a lot more than perk up shopping conditions. The Market became a destination point, bringing people into Over-the-Rhine from outside of the area. “For a while the riot deterred people from coming downtown, but I think the upgrading of Findlay Market and the different proprietors and owners taking over has helped a lot.”

Johnson has one main reason for doing all of her volunteer work: the people. “I’ve been on just about every board there is,” she said. “I want to keep things in the neighborhood for our people.”
“There are some people who won’t or can’t help themselves, but they’re not stupid or lazy, they just need to be educated. They don’t know how to take the steps on their own, so I go out and help them along.”

But Johnson feels there are changes coming to OTR, changes that could interfere with her feelings of residential heritage, and she’s at a loss about what to do. “May of us can’t afford to buy homes, and they’re making these new high-priced condos that we can’t afford. We’re afraid they’ll be no place left to go.”

Johnson holds two visions for Over-the-Rhine close to her heart, and all of her volunteer efforts are focused on making them happen. “I want to see more affordable housing,” she said. “We really need housing for low and moderate income people living in Over-the-Rhine.” She fears that most of the new construction will be what developer’s are calling “market rate housing,” a term she interprets as depicting rents that are well above the affordable range for traditional OTR residents.

Before health problems interfered, Johnson had been on the board of Over-the-Rhine Community Housing. She felt that OTR Community Housing, and its predecessors OTR Housing Network and ReSTOC, have done a lot of help the neighborhood housing situation over the last five years. “ReSTOC and the Housing Network were the only ones helping the low and moderate income people,” said Johnson. “They did their part finding decent places for people to live in Over-the-Rhine.”

After housing, Johnson focuses energy on her other vision of providing opportunities for children. “I’d like to see us do right by the children,” she said. Her goal is to see that all OTR children receive a good education without outside distractions. “Education is such a good thing,” she said, “I want it for our kids; the little ones deserve to have a good start in life,” she said.

Although she’s a powerfully positive person, not every day is upbeat: Johnson has those tough days when things can look bleak. Johnson says that when she gets discouraged she takes a seat at her kitchen table and looks out the window onto McMicken. “I just sit here, look out the window and say my rosary and it soon it will pass,” she said. “I may have to say it six times a day but that’s the way it goes. It keeps me from giving up. I don’t ever want to be that way, to get to where I want to give up.”

With a deep smile and a reflective voice, she said, “My mother told me you can give out but don’t ever give up. I just keep that in mind; I’m not a person to hold onto anything bad for very long … a couple of blessed words and everything will be okay.”
Damon Lynch III, pastor of the New Prospect Baptist Church at Findlay and Elm Streets, has been immersed in the Over-the-Rhine community and its struggles for the last 17 years. While many congregations have left the neighborhood, Lynch and New Prospect have held fast. “We’re committed to Over-the-Rhine and if we leave, it just becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, so we decided to stay,” he said. “I’m here because I love the people, I love the community, and I love the challenge.”

Standing six-feet, four-inches tall, with hair in shoulder-length dreads, Lynch can seem a bit intimidating to strangers. Until he speaks... and then his soft but resonant voice, serene mannerisms and gentle self confidence can make anyone feel safe. If you were on the Titanic – lifeboat or not – you’d stick close to him... well, just because.

But to those who have not met him, Lynch is probably the most misunderstood and oft maligned community leader in Cincinnati. To his detractors and the uninitiated some of his statements can seem inflammatory. But those who have taken the time to know the man, his mission and ideals find him to be calm, down-to-earth, and practical. Lynch’s ideas are not rebellious, he just says what others are afraid to express, and he says it in a blunt, honest fashion.

He came to New Prospect in 1989 to fill in for a pastor that was ill. He’s still there and the church has been growing steadily since he arrived. “It’s hard to grow a church in the inner city,” said Lynch. “Space and parking are always an issue.”

There are many more challenges in running an urban church; one simple solution is to move, but Lynch turned down the chance. “We had the opportunity to buy our cornfield and build the gymnasium, big-box style building, but we decided to stay.” According to Lynch New Prospect Baptist church is a 99.5 percent African American congregation in an 80 percent African American neighborhood. “Over 80 percent of the residents are living in poverty, and if we leave it just becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, so we decided to stay.”

Lynch doesn’t back down from challenges, he digs in and works towards solutions. When he took over New Prospect, only five percent of the congregation lived in Over-the-Rhine; he’s increased neighborhood membership to 35 percent. “We set out to become relevant to the community,” said Lynch. To build the church he had to build the neighborhood; New Prospect became relevant to the residents by getting involved in the Over-the-Rhine community. Lynch has worked with OTR organizations
that range from the extremes: high-powered corporate and business entities to the smallest nonprofit homeless and housing coalitions and everybody in-between. On top of all that, he even made time to run for Cincinnati City Council in 2004.

Doing the right things for the right reasons can be rewarding, but working for long-range social justice ideals can be exasperating. “It’s a daily frustration because things either don’t change or they change slowly,” said Lynch. “Or sometimes that change is not community friendly or community oriented.” Lynch said it’s frustrating because all too many times the visions and community plans for Over-the-Rhine emanate from outside the community and don’t benefit the local residents.

Lynch is not a sit-at-home kind of pastor. He’s widely traveled, visiting urban churches and community groups across the country to get a first-hand look at grass-roots organizational efforts. He learns what has worked elsewhere, and brings those ideas back to Over-the-Rhine.

Lynch would also like to see at least a part of OTR become what he’s coined “an African village, a strong ethnic community with the flair, the clothing, and the music” that reflects the cultural heritage of the residents.

Los Angeles has a Koreatown and San Francisco has a Chinatown; they are vibrant, thriving communities. “But,” said Lynch, “no one has a ‘Black Town.” His vision is for the neighborhood to develop an ethnic village. “I think it’s important for the African American community to give it a sense of history, heritage, culture and economics,” he said. “Over-the-Rhine is 80 percent African American but they don’t control their neighborhood.”

“If I had made City Council and proposed a Chinatown for Over-the-Rhine, I would have earned all nine votes and they’d have thrown money at my feet,” said Lynch. But he doubts that Cincinnati is ready to get behind his ethnic village concept.

Another of Lynch’s visions for Over-the-Rhine is to see more community economic development. “There’s a big difference between economic development and community economic development,” he said. “Economic development is the 16 million dollars that went into Findlay Market; it’s beautiful and shopping has increased, but very few local residents received jobs and even fewer opened new businesses. Community economic development says that if we spend 16 million dollars we have to make sure that the community will benefit.”
Community development benefits the bankers, the construction companies and the established merchants; community economic development benefits all of those, plus the working poor single mother who lives a block from Findlay Market… and all of her neighbors.

Community economic development was one of the planks for Lynch’s 2004 unsuccessful run at Cincinnati City Council. Losing was frustrating, but he doubts he’ll run again. “I have to find something else to do,” he said. But you’d think that a man that runs a large urban church, sits on umpteen boards, and works with a plethora of civic groups should already have enough to do. “No,” said Lynch, “because things aren’t right; things just aren’t right.”

Damon Lynch’s dream is to see Over-the-Rhine as a great community of commerce that wakes up with energy and comes to life every morning. “Where everybody is engaged in some kind of legitimate, economic enterprise to better their families, the city and this community,” he said. “A community where everybody is economically connected based upon their skills, their gifts, and their abilities: A community where everybody is welcome.”
Denny Dellinger lives in what feels like an isolated, peaceful, forested castle... except it's located on a hillside in an active urban neighborhood.

Dellinger owns the 60,000 square-foot Cincinnati Metal Blast building located at the dead-end of Mohawk Street in Over-the-Rhine. The lot is on the hillside just below Clifton's Belleview Hill Park and overlooks the Mohawk area. Standing in one of the open doorways of the loading dock offers a beautiful, elevated wide-angled view of Over-the-Rhine.

It's an uncharacteristically serene setting, especially for being smack in the middle of a busy urban neighborhood. The building is at least 100 yards from the nearest neighbor on all four sides. To the rear and east is tree-covered hillside. It's a little unnerving to be that isolated in this neighborhood: there were three break-ins during Dellinger's first year of residency.

But the break-ins have ceased since Dellinger adopted three viscous-barking, but secretly mushy German Sheppard-looking female dogs. The biggest all-white one is Cagney, next is her running buddy, a brown and black named Jackie, and the youngest and most affable is simply called Brown Dog. Anyone approaching the fenced gate at the dead end of Mohawk Place will encounter the three: snarling, guttural, and fanged. Even the bravest and most desperate thief would back off.

But a few words from Dellinger and his watch dogs fall silent... a few sniffs and they're friendly... and after a more few minutes – if you scratch her ears – Jackie will permanently plant her head in your lap.

But the Cincinnati Metal Blast building is a lot more than a huge urban castle and home to a deceiving dog pack. The building envisions all of Dellinger's long-time dreams for the revitalization of Over-the-Rhine.

Denny Dellinger is a successful architect with a yen and talent for the revitalization of old buildings. For that kind of an architect, Over-the-Rhine is a gold mine of opportunity but Dellinger's love of the neighborhood is much deeper. You can hear excitement in his voice when he recounts the history of his building and the Brewery District and his eyes glisten at the idea of bringing back trolley cars.
“We can run them up Elm Street to West McMicken, and back down Race or Walnut,” he said. “That will connect us to downtown and stimulate all kinds of additional growth.” The trolley system could then connect to a shuttle system in Clifton that would serve UC and the hospitals.

It’s not just a pipe dream, Dellinger and others in Over-the-Rhine have seriously worked on the idea for several years. In the previous trolley system, Clifton and OTR were connected with the Belleview Incline. Dellinger feels that would be an expensive use of valuable ground space and favors a suspended tram system. “An incline would be a slightly more expensive way up the hill than the tram, and not having those tracks in the ground leaves more potential for developing the hillside,” he said. “We could even shape the cars like flying pigs.”

Dellinger bought his building by accident early in 2001. A real estate friend was showing the property and suggested Denny come along because the building was old and the buyer would surely need some architectural services. The buyer had no interest but Dellinger fell in love with the property. “I made an offer I didn’t think the owner would possibly accept,” he said. “He countered just little higher and I wound up with it.”

The building was erected 1860 as the Jackson Brewery. The basement and subbasement have served as storage for kegs of aging lager beer. The rooms are massive with high vaulted ceilings with the feel of a Frankenstein castle. Although he’d like to remodel the entire facility for himself, he admits “I love it here,” he said. “I tell people I live in the largest single-family home in Cincinnati, but keeping it all for me just isn’t an economic reality.” Dellinger’s been searching for investors to develop the property into apartments, loft condos and studio space, and the basement and sub-basement for entertainment events or a restaurant and nightclub.

Searching for investors at times can be a daunting process. Dellinger felt good about his prospects until April of 2001 when unarmed Timothy Thomas was shot and killed by a Cincinnati police officer. Thomas’ death set off three days of rioting in Over-the-Rhine, and most OTR development came to a screeching halt.

There are still scars, anger, problems and fear in Over-the-Rhine: Outsiders are afraid to come in, and insiders don’t always want new neighbors. But in 2006 prospects for OTR are beginning to perk up. “I think the move back to the inner cities is inevitable,” said
Dellinger. “Urban revitalization is definitely a trend that’s happening all over. More and more people want a lifestyle where they don’t have to cut the grass, and drive an hour or so back and forth to work.”

The Jackson Brewery folded during prohibition, and then reopened in 1933 after the amendment was repealed. They made some additions and improvements to the property but closed for good in 1942. The next tenant of note was the Gibson wine company which distilled wine and champagne and filled the lower levels with barrels for aging. Following Gibson was Cincinnati Metal Blast, a metal refinishing company who painted their name high up, partially obliterating the old Jackson logo. Dellinger said the last occupant was A to Z All time Service and Supply, “sort of a junk yard for restaurant equipment. The guy had a watch dog he never let out; the floors were a mess.”

Dellinger’s building is definitely solid. He said that when measured from the exterior wall surfaces the building is 60,000 square feet, but net floor area is 48,000 square feet. “So the building is 20 percent wall.” He constructed living quarters in one end of the building and moved in two years ago; eventually he plans to move his architect business in from Silverton. “I hope to live here and have my office here and spend the rest of my life here,” he said.

Dellinger said he feels very safe in the neighborhood “since I got the dogs” and the police have been very effective. “When I first moved in there were crack dealers living next door,” he said. “They threatened to shoot my dogs, but eventually the S.W.A.T. team raided them and it’s stayed pretty quiet.”

Dellinger has accomplished a lot in the five years he’s owned his Over-the-Rhine castle. He’s a professional, well-established architect and what he does best is design. But before he designs, there’s a fair amount of thinking. Not staring-at-the-wall, daydreaming-about-the-lottery kind of thinking, but productive, wheels-are-spinning, creative-talent-in-gear thoughts where ideas are popping, his skin tingles and eyes light up.

Dellinger spends a lot of time developing various ideas and plans for marketing his property; there’s no time for resting, if one plan falls through he’s back with another. Some of his ideas seem standard fare for the neighborhood, like loft condos and nightclubs, but others are quite creative. One of his current marketing inspirations has an artistic angle to it. He’s been promoting the structure as Cincinnati Metal Blast Artistic Freedom Center, located at the pinnacle of the Avenue of the Arts. “I’d like to see a
vibrant group of people here,” he said. “It would be the type of environment where creative people live and work, and also have the entertainment aspect as part of the building and the neighborhood, like a commune.”

Dellinger’s goals for the neighborhood are the same as his goals for his property: a progressive, vibrant community. He’s worked a long time with only intermittent victories, yet he never quits. He said that when things don’t go his way he “just keeps thinking, talking to people, and trying to find a way to make things happen.” So far nothing big has happened, except he’s living in the largest and most unique single-family home in all of Cincinnati. Dellinger said “It’s like being I the middle of nowhere but right in the middle of the city and I’ve got a forest preserve next door. I love it here.”

Jim Tarbell

Often called “Mr. Over-the-Rhine,” Cincinnati’s Vice Mayor Jim Tarbell is the neighborhood’s most outspoken ambassador for revitalization. Tarbell took up residence in Over-the-Rhine in the early 1970s and soon became enthralled with the neighborhood’s history and culture. “I became fascinated by stories that I would hear,” he said. “I searched for everything I could get on Over-the-Rhine: oral histories from the older people, this school library, that church library, the more I read, the more I delved, and the more questions I asked the better it got.”

Tarbell’s passion about the neighborhood is infectious. Anyone who dares ask him “What is so special about Over-the-Rhine” will be converted within 30 minutes and ready to move in. “People need to understand how unique Over-the-Rhine was,” he said “It wasn’t just one of many 19th century neighborhoods that has survived; it has a totally unique history. Every time I turn around there’s another story that is unbelievable,” said Tarbell. “Whenever I walk down the street I have a fear of being late because there’s always this wonderful distraction.”

And what nice distractions there are. Wherever he goes, there’s always someone who wants to talk about something related to Over-the-Rhine. And it’s not that politician glad-handing kind of prattle: he’s always smiling, he loves the neighborhood, and he’s always got something inside he’s just busting to share.

Tarbell might get held up because he saw Katie Laur at Kaldi’s and he remembers it’s almost her birthday which this year
coincides with the 60th anniversary of bluegrass music and he just ran across a fiddler she played with in the Stoney Mountain Boys bluegrass band. Now that kind of distraction doesn't happen very often, unless you're Jim Tarbell in Over-the-Rhine, and it surely rates some reminiscing, even if it means he only gets a bite or two of lunch before scootering off on his Stella to the next appointment.

Tarbell is a native of Cincinnati. Always an adventurous type, he made an early attempt at pre-medical school; "I was a terrible science student," he said, and ended up working as a commercial fisherman in New England. After 18 months at sea he was lured back to Cincinnati to run a teen center in Hyde Park. "I'd always been interested in music as an instrument for social change," he said. Tarbell hired a then unknown group called the Grateful Dead from San Francisco to perform at the teen center. He said the concerts at the center were "too much of a good thing, too expensive, and they ran their course."

But Tarbell's interest in music as a means for social change and his love for OTR led him to additional ventures. In the late 60s he operated the Ludlow Garage in Clifton, an alcohol-free rock night club. Eventually he took his business interests near Over-the-Rhine and opened Arnold's Bar and Grill on Eighth Street, which he said was a place for all the crazies that had moved downtown from the suburbs. "We weren't interested in all the fern bars and this was an attempt to reclaim a local place with our print on it."

Arnold's offered musical entertainment, and eventually Tarbell lured a Dixieland jazz group out of retirement to be the house band.

Tarbell's love affair with Over-the-Rhine started when he returned to Cincinnati from New England. "At that time I got a nice sized apartment, furnished, utilities included, fresh linens once a week, for 50 bucks a month. And I thought, 'Where else can you get that and live next door to Music Hall, be walking distance from the market, walking distance from the main library, and in a few more minutes and I could be at the river.'"

Tarbell said the setting was ideal, with hills on three sides of the neighborhood and the Ohio River on the fourth. But what interested him most were the people. "I was young and there were so many interesting people; they were all different than me. There were a lot of mom and pop places and Over-the-Rhine was the epitome of a total neighborhood, with living, working, shopping, playing, school and church all in the same area."

Tarbell was fascinated by the stories he heard from the older residents. He went to the main library and any church or school
library he could locate to learn about the history of Over-the-Rhine.

Tarbell has become a one-man historic collection of Over-the-Rhine information, and can often be seen leading walking tours through the area. Many Cincinnatians do not realize the significance of OTR. “It isn’t just one of many 19th century neighborhoods that survived,” he said. “It is one of its own with a totally unique history.”

Over-the-Rhine is remembered for its German heritage, but it was a true melting pot of cultures. “When I moved down here,” said Tarbell, “there was still a convincing link with the past. There was a real mix of German, Italian, African American, and Appalachian.”

In addition to the diverse cultural mix, in the late 1800s commerce was booming in Over-the-Rhine. According to Tarbell Vine Street at the turn of the century was called the Paris of America. “That’s a stretch, but in terms of the intensity and the concentration of entertainment and activity it was arguably more so than any other city in America.” During that period Vine Street had more saloons per square foot than any other street in America, more bakeries than any other district, and more beer consumed per capita than any other city in the country.

During it’s heyday Over-the-Rhine had a major symphony, was the fourth largest brewing center in the US, had a major exposition center (Music Hall) and the May Festival was unique in this country as a music festival.

Tarbell singled out Music Hall as an OTR landmark. “It has such grandeur,” he said, “and then when you realize it was built by the people living across the street. The artisans and craftsmen that built Music Hall weren’t from Chicago; they were from Over-the-Rhine. Music Hall is just one example of the density, intensity, character and quality of the environment.”

Music Hall was planned and constructed with a dual purpose in mind: it was built for music, but also as an exposition center. “Cincinnati was a center of commerce and industry,” said Tarbell, “and music hall was away of showing that off.”

Tarbell would like to see OTR reclaim its historical context. “I want to see it get back to when it was a melting pot, a mixture of cultures,” he said. “I’d like it to return to being a truly a mixed-use neighborhood.” He feels the biggest challenge is “overcoming the financial hurdles to get these vacant buildings filled up.”
Jim Verdin

The Verdin Company in Over-the-Rhine has been in business for more than 160 years. They’ve lasted through six generations because they’re good. In fact they’re more than good; they’re one-of-a-kind best and continually excel well beyond client’s expectations.

The company makes the best bells in the world in every imaginable size, setting and arrangement. A bell manufacturer might not be high on most people’s list of things to be admired, but spend a little time with Jim Verdin and you’ll walk away in awe of his company’s artistic creativity, innovative technology, and dedication to being the very best. The company is currently run by the fifth generation, Jim, Bob, and Dave Verdin. They believe that when their customers buy a Verdin product they become a partner in the company’s legacy.

That legacy goes into everything they do, from the smallest table-top two-inch souvenir bell to the world’s largest 66,000-pound World Peace Bell in Newport, Kentucky. In addition to standard bells of all types, uses and sizes, over the years they have expanded their product lines to include: individualized street and tower clocks; cast-bell and electronic carillons; bell and clock towers; and veterans’ and firemen’s monuments and memorials.

The Verdin Company is one of the oldest family-owned businesses in America and the oldest family-owned manufacturer in Ohio. Their reputation and longevity are the result of a multitude of reasons, but very simply it’s because each generation has outdone their predecessor with new products and ideas and they continually improve on customer relationships and service.

Jim Verdin said that the company does not have much competition. “We started in 1842, and it’s so complicated now, that to have somebody start up [a business like ours] wouldn’t make any sense. You need so many skills it would be just too expensive.” Most of Verdin’s employees have been with the company for their entire career. “We have a lot of father-daughter and mother-son teams here,” he said. “We even have some third-generation teams.”

To sell and maintain their merchandise, Verdin employs technicians and sales representatives in 30 locations all across America. The service and sales staff often need several years of on-the-job training before they are ready to work independently.”
something breaks down in Missoula, Montana we have someone close that can take care of it,” said Jim Verdin. “There’s no place they can go to school for it, so we have to train them here.”

An example of Verdin’s one-of-a-kind ingenuity and superior customer service is their Bell Foundry on Wheels. Ohio commissioned the Verdin Company to cast a bronze bell for each of its 88 counties for the State’s bicentennial. The State also requested that the bells be cast on location in each county, as part of a traveling celebration. The Verdin’s constructed a traveling foundry on a truck and conducted the entire bell-making operation from mould-building through finishing and commemoration as a two-day community exhibit and civic event.

The Verdin Company does a lot more than just bells and monuments. Throughout its history the company has cultivated a close relationship with Over-the-Rhine. Their very first project was the installation of a tower clock in Old St. Mary’s church in Over-the-Rhine in 1842. In 1981 the company purchased and restored St. Paul’s church, a five-building complex in the Pendleton District of Over-the-Rhine.

Restoration of St. Paul’s was a two-year $1.5 million project. After completion the main building housed the company’s corporate headquarters, the Verdin Bell and Clock Museum, and a lavish reception hall.

The St. Paul’s project was more than just restoration for the company’s headquarters: the Verdin’s are dedicated to the revitalization of Over-the-Rhine. Jim Verdin said the church had been vacant for five years and was ready to be torn down. “We bought it mainly to save it,” he said. “But we liked it here, it’s close to downtown.”

More than convenient locale, Verdin’s love and appreciation for the Pendleton District and Over-the-Rhine are another reason for their long-term investment in the neighborhood. “The architecture is so great here, last week we had some people in from Philadelphia who were just amazed that these building we still standing,” he said.

“In most cities they’ve already been torn down.” Like many others, Verdin believes there are enormous opportunities for investment and restoration in OTR. “This area can be saved, and now is the time to do it,” he said.
According to Jim Verdin, the company's projects were at the lead of the current OTR development push. “When we came in [to St. Paul] we were the first ones to put any investment in OTR in a long time.”

It wasn’t an easy project to get started, but their commitment to the area helped them overcome some major obstacles. “You’d try to borrow money, and couldn’t. The banks said ‘absolutely no,’ they had truly redlined the area,” he said. “But that’s changed. Funds had to be available, and they are. Today if somebody’s interested they can easily get the money.”

Their creativity shows through in the various Verdin products and installations. Their bell and clock towers are often the signatures of a town square or college campus and their fire and soldiers memorials are the centerpieces for many public parks and city centers. Plus, their artistic side has a big influence on the company's property investments.

In addition to their commercial holdings, Verdin Company operates three large art centers which serve as studios and public gallery spaces for developing artists. The gallery centers are located in Ashland, Ky., Rising Sun, Ind., and the Pendleton District of Over-the-Rhine in Cincinnati.

Jim Verdin has been living his vision for Over-the-Rhine. He'd like to see the area restored to its glory days; a vibrant, thriving neighborhood whose residents reflect the unique beauty and individuality of its structures.

Twenty-five years ago Jim Verdin had a lot of dreams for his company and the Pendleton District: wide scale revitalization, increased police patrols and lower crime, improved public perception, growing residency, development of an artists’ community and an influx of local businesses. Accomplishments like these don’t happen fast but are milestones of commitment ... and lucky for Over-the-Rhine, there’s a sixth generation of Verdin’s coming into their own and they are just as determined and committed as their predecessors.
Julie Fay has been investing time, money, labor and love into Over-the-Rhine since she arrived in the late 1980s. “I had relatives who lived here before the turn of the century,” she said. “I always loved the neighborhood and the architecture.”

In 1987 Fay was looking to make some real estate investments, and a number of factors drew her to Over-the-Rhine. She had a long-standing ancestral connection: all eight of her great-grandparents had lived here. She was also attracted to the area by a budding group of artisans.

“I loved the artists’ community that was here,” she said. “I like good design and contemporary crafts and the neighborhood is full of it.”

Fay’s first purchase was the Iris building on Main Street, which was primarily residential with a small storefront. She had additional plans for future purchases. Fay developed a plan to buy another building every three years, and continued to invest. “I wanted to do lofts for artists,” she said.

When she acquired the first building it was in less than desirable shape: “The floors were sagging, the joists were bad, and it was marginally occupied,” said Fay. “And there was a hot dog vendor using the storefront; he drained the hot dog water through the floor into the basement and he didn’t even have a hand-washing sink. I thought ‘I’ll never buy another hot dog.’”

Aside from the obvious sanitation troubles, the vendor posed other problems. “His carts were heated by propane and I told him I thought I smelled gas.” she said. “He lit a match to show me they weren’t leaking, and I thought ‘This guy needs to go before the building gets blown up.’”

Since then things have gone well for Fay, but it took a lot of work and worry. “After I bought the first one, buyer’s remorse set in,” she said. “I thought, ‘Oh no, the buildings on three sides are boarded up and vacant, there are people living on the street, pigeons everywhere. What did I do?’”

Fay took action, organized nearby property owners and together they launched various streetscape and facade programs to
improve the neighborhood. “We had a nice mix of property owners,” she said. “We had some low-income providers and some young folks who owned individual buildings. We really made a difference.”

Fay has stayed true to her initial vision for the neighborhood: she’d like to see Over-the-Rhine be a place where people can comfortably live, artists are welcome and there’s opportunity for reasonable rent. “There are obvious physical factors that make it a great place to live,” she said, “it’s close to downtown, Findlay Market is a walkable distance, and it’s a beautiful place to live.” In addition, Fay believes what makes Over-the-Rhine most attractive is the diversity. “There’s a wonderful cross section of people here.”

Fay would like to see OTR grow and continue to offer additional reasonably affordable housing. “It’s mostly the creative people who have been attracted to living here,” she said. “I’d like to see more diversity, circular transportation and more storefront shops occupied.”

In 2001 Fay opened a storefront she named Urban Eden in her building at 1313 Main. “I opened this after the riots, when other shopkeepers were leaving,” said Fay. “There was minor property damage, but most of the damage was to the neighborhood’s reputation, which was hard to overcome.” Fay said that outsiders were afraid to come to Over-the-Rhine. “They stopped buying art, actually they stopped buying anything,” she said.

Urban Eden carries jewelry, pottery and other contemporary crafts from local and regional artists plus a large assortment of giftware. The rear of the shop opens into a small but artfully landscaped courtyard; the space is a quiet, shaded and peaceful Eden of its own. It gives visitors a delightful feeling of peace, a hidden zone just a few feet away from the hectic urban world of Main Street. Building tenants pass through Fay’s Urban Eden landscaped oasis anytime they enter or exit the building; a delightful way to subliminally soothe jangled nerves after a hectic day.

Just as Fay’s customers and tenants are refreshed by her small courtyard, the rejuvenation of the Main Street section of Over-the-Rhine has benefited from Fay’s involvement. Neighborhood residents and merchants have banded together and worked to improve the area with various streetscapes and facades that have resulted in a multitude of improvements like new sidewalks, parking meters, planters and gas street lamps.
Fay hopes that the creative environment in Over-the-Rhine will continue to expand. “I’d like to see people of all income levels be able to make a home in the neighborhood,” she said. Fay does her best to provide attractive housing and keep her rents as low as possible. “Some day I may do co-housing or go to some sort of condos.”

Fay has been involved with various neighborhood groups since she arrived in Over-the-Rhine. “I came in the late 1980s,” she said. “I feel like my daughter grew up coming to meetings.” Fay said the meetings often started as just a collection of neighbors throwing out ideas. But what counted was they didn’t stop after making suggestions, but looked and asked questions and did whatever they needed to take action.
Bob Schneider

Bob Schneider began investing in real estate in the mid-1980s and eventually founded River City Development focused on Over-the-Rhine properties. “It was an ideal neighborhood for us to invest; property was cheap and there was good proximity to downtown,” he said.

Schneider had worked for a marketing research firm for 25 years. “Time Inc. bought the company and I decided it was time for me to get out,” he said. He’d had a real estate partnership on the side, and had done some historical renovations. Schneider researched Over-the-Rhine and decided to go into commercial real estate development fulltime.

“What I needed was a place to go every day,” he said. “My wife said my desk was a mess and ruined the house. The real fascination of the whole deal was it gave me an office, someplace to go every day. I’ve got a big TV, a computer, and a bathroom with a shower; I’m set.”

Underlying each of Schneider’s real estate deals are his trademark characteristics of honesty and good common sense. He’s done repairs on property he didn’t own yet in a manner of good faith, and been trusting enough to settle major deals with a handshake.

For Schneider’s first OTR venture, he identified four buildings in a row on Main Street that he thought would make a nice manageable project. “I knew I needed to get all four so I could control the alley behind,” he said. “It was a mess, full of drugs and prostitution.” Schneider wound up buying additional adjoining properties to secure the location. As a show of good faith, Schneider did considerable work on the last property before the owner agreed to sell. Some might consider this a rather expensive gamble to show he’s a trusting man. But in a business where a deal can hinge on your reputation, Schneider is well-known for his integrity.

Schneider’s first OTR venture on Main Street was groundbreaking for the neighborhood. He invested about $2 million and established the entertainment district. “As a business man I expected to come down here and everything would change within five years,” he said. But things didn’t progress at the pace he anticipated. “The condo movement that started five years ago… I was hoping would have started 15 years ago.”
Mary Burke

Mary Burke has spent almost two decades working in the social services, and almost as much time as a volunteer. All of that professional and personal experience has helped her develop an excellent understanding of the needs – both short and long term – of people whose lives are in crisis.

Burke began her career as a social worker for Hamilton County and is currently the director of Over-the-Rhine Community Housing. “Early on I was exposed to the deep need for affordable housing and to all the barriers that people face,” she said. “I decided that community housing was the main issue because if you don’t have any place to live how are you going to tackle the rest?”

Burke said that her job became very frustrating. While helping clients for the County, she and other case managers were often forced to put people in housing situations that they knew would not work long term. “That’s when I started getting interested in housing,” she said. “I would be getting my clients into counseling and discover that housing was a major issue for many of them.”

Many of Burke’s clients had not one, but multiple housing issues: they might have moved three times in six months, or were about to be evicted, had no money and no place to go. Eventually Burke took a position with the County as a housing specialist. “My focus was finding adequate housing for people,” she said. “I really got exposed to the deep need for housing, the lack of affordable housing, and all the barriers that people face.”
Up until the early-90s the County and other agencies were using the Milner Hotel on Garfield Place as a housing stopgap or solution of last resort. “If a family was in trouble and needed housing we tried to keep them together above all else,” said Burke. “So instead of sending the kids to foster care and the adults someplace else, we sent them to the Milner Hotel.”

The City of Cincinnati had plans to take the property through eminent domain and turn it over to a developer, but homeless and housing advocates turned the Milner situation into a battlefront. The City eventually won out, but not before demonstrations and marches brought attention to Cincinnati’s inner-city housing dilemma. Burke and many concerned citizens like her had supported the “Save the Milner” campaign and made contacts with buddy gray, Bonnie Neumeier and other housing advocates.

“I grew up in the suburbs so I didn’t know about Over-the-Rhine,” said Burke. “But the experience with buddy and Bonnie was how I learned. You don’t see or experience much if you just drive through the neighborhood; one of the things buddy was so good at was engaging with the community. He’d take people on walking tours and he knew everybody and you saw the community in a different way through different eyes.”

Burke’s involvement in the struggle to save the Milner Hotel gave her some direction and a clearer focus on what she wanted to do. “I wanted to be a part of a group that worked for people to have a good, quality place to live,” she said.

There are setbacks, and sometimes things just move too slowly and Burke said she can get discouraged, “But never for very long. Something good usually happens just around the corner.”

When things get her down, Burke said “I do different things like exercise more. I have a spiritual program so I try to meditate and pray. I have this sense that if I show up and do the best I can something will happen and things will turn out alright.”

Sometimes the rewards are little things that wind up meaning a lot. “We had a meeting to plan a resident picnic,” she said, “and the residents just took over. One said ‘I’ll make five dozen deviled eggs,’ and another said, ‘I’ll make all the macaroni salad,’ and I thought to myself, ‘All right, looks like we have a community here, where there wasn’t one before.’ It convinced me that there are good people who care and care about each other.”
Burke wants to see Over-the-Rhine develop a strong feeling of community. “I want to see people living here and coming and going from school and work and knowing each other,” she said. “I want to be able to see that kids are playing and laughing; that somebody’s walking down the street and someone sitting on their stoop says ‘Hey’ and there’s always something going on.”

Burke’s dreams for OTR reflect the past generations of community spirit inherit within the neighborhood. “I’d like to see kids on their way to a rec center,” she said, “walking past a community garden where a senior is teaching a first-time gardener how to plant.

“When I walk down the street I’d like to be able to see and hear and smell the community spirit,” said Burke. “Like hear people talking and grills are going and you can see trees and green spaces and the schools are loud with fun and activity.”

Burke hopes there will be a mixture of different levels of housing and a mixture of residential and commercial properties. “If there are commercial properties, that means the businesses are alive and serving the community,” said Burke, “and the community is doing better because it can afford to support the businesses.”

It will be easy to know when all of Burke’s visions come together. “It’ll be in all the senses,” she said. “You’ll smell it, you’ll see it, taste it … because it’s alive.”
Mary Johnson

Mary Johnson lives in a first-floor apartment on a quite, dark, narrow and exceptionally tidy block of Republic Street, between 14th and 15th, in Over-the-Rhine. Not one to sit still, she’s energetic and moves up and down her block faster than people half her age.

Johnson moves fast and keeps an eye on what’s happening on her stretch of Republic because it is her home. And more so than most people in a suburban neighborhood, Johnson takes great pride in where she lives and acts accordingly.

Four years ago Mary Johnson, together with neighbors Georgia and Milton Keith, formed the Republic Street Block Club. Because of efforts of their Block Club, their short stretch of Republic stands out as one of the neater and more orderly sections of the neighborhood, and is a living testament to what a small group of committed, organized residents can accomplish.

Twice a year Johnson fires up her grill out front, while volunteers help with a clean up day. “We get Coke to provide drinks, and Butternut gives us bread,” said Johnson. The food donations are a nice help, but the labor comes from committed residents and volunteers who care about their surroundings.

But the Block Club does a lot more than pick up litter. One cleanup day is usually scheduled mid-to late October, just prior to local elections. “We clean from 9 until 1 p.m.,” said Johnson. “Then we invite the city council people over.” Knowing that news cameras can lure politicians, Johnson also arranged for Channel Five to film the event.

Through the Club’s efforts, overgrown, trash-filled vacant lots have been turned from eyesores into pleasant greenspace and playgrounds with regularly mowed grass and flower gardens.

Johnson has lived on Republic for 12 years. “I like the neighbors,” she said. “And I like the rent. I can’t afford those high rents, and lately some of these rents are out of site.” Although she loves her neighborhood now, there were some pretty dark days in the past. When she first moved in Republic was a pretty quiet street... but then the drugs hit. “It’s not bad now,” she said, “but I’ve seen a lot of drugs going on in the past.”
According to Johnson the corner on 15th used to be packed with sellers and buyers, the vast majority coming from outside the area. “There have been drugs going on for years,” she said. “But then it started just right out in the open. They don’t care and don’t respect.” Republic’s clean greenspaces where children played were getting littered with used syringes, and one day an IV addict made the mistake of using openly in the ReSTOC playground in front of playing children. The kids told Mary, and she confronted the user. “I’m a diabetic,” he said. “No your not, you’re lying,” said Johnson. And she berated him till he left.

Many people wouldn’t have the nerve to confront such a situation, but Johnson said “I’ll say something to them, I’ll let them know.”

Things were getting bad enough that Johnson considered moving from her beloved Republic. “I was afraid to leave home because there might be people breaking in,” she said. “But I thought ‘There’s no point in me leaving because the drugs are everywhere, not just Over-the-Rhine.’” Sticking it out has paid off for Johnson. “It’s changed a lot this last year,” she said. “The police and the Sheriff have really made it much better.”

Johnson has seen Over-the-Rhine in a different light than most. She’s seen the neighborhood change from good to bad and now start heading back to the plus side. Her visions for the area are simple, but ones that require long-range complex solutions. She hopes for more low-income housing, local jobs, and eradication or at the very least a major reduction of the street drug trade.

“There are a lot of buildings in OTR that are nailed up,” she said. “There are plenty of people who would live here if they had a nice affordable place to stay.”

Johnson has worked in the soup kitchen at St Frances for the last 18 years. “There are really no jobs in the neighborhood,” she said. “There used to be Hudepohl and another brewery, but they’re gone.” Along with the breweries, Johnson has seen many other companies leave Over-the-Rhine, but no one has been able to attract any sizeable new employers to the area.

Many residents have placed much hope with the new plans enacted by 3CDC. There’s a lot of activity now in OTR; abandoned building are being gutted, rehabbed and turned in to market rate and high-end apartments and condos. The increased police patrols and construction activity have caused a noticeable decrease in crime. However, Johnson and others fear that not enough is being done to preserve affordable housing for the low-income residents.
3CDC has done a lot to keep the community informed and abreast of developments. However, they haven’t won any ribbons with Johnson and the Republic Street Block Club. Community meetings are a lot of work to organize, but sometimes it’s the littlest things that can undermine good intentions.

The Block Clubbers put a lot of effort into cleaning and beautifying the vacant lots on their street. Mary, Georgia and volunteers picked up trash and planted flowers while Milton kept the lawns neatly mowed and trimmed. Instead of vacant, trash-filled eyesores, the properties became little floral-filled oases dotting the street.

3CDC acquired the lots along with a number of vacant properties for redevelopment. In many instances vacant buildings had been drug havens and vacant lots were used as get-a-way routes to escape police. 3CDC’s first move after acquisition was intended as a safety measure: they secured the properties and fenced off the lots. Johnson came home one evening to a rude surprise. “They put up fences and dug up the flowers,” she said. “We were locked out.”

Johnson complained. Dealing with a bureaucracy can be frustrating, but she’s a charming, determined, and extremely focused woman. After months of wrangling, and some help from a neighbor, Johnson got keys to the fenced lots and the promise of more flowers and planters for next season.

A few flowers might seem a small victory to some, but when it’s your street, and your neighborhood and your pride… it’s a major victory.

A block south on Vine Street, 3CDC has two developers in a landmark project are turning a cadre of historic buildings into loft-style condos. The developers are good, conscientious builders with many years of experience in rehabbing Over-the-Rhine properties. They do top-of-the-line quality, one-of-a-kind work and the upper floor units are rumored to be priced in the $300 to $500,000 range. The new residents can rightfully be proud that they’ll own some of the classiest urban properties in Cincinnati. They’ll surely vote, and quite possibly have a city council candidate visit their home… but it’s doubtful that those pristine units will house anything akin to the heart, soul, and Over-the-Rhine community spirit found at gatherings of the Republic Street Block Club.
Monica McGloin, O.P.

Sister Monica McGloin has been involved with the residents of Over-the-Rhine for 35 years. She arrived here just after the Vatican Council II. “It was an exciting time,” she said. “The Church was saying we need to get back to our roots. A lot of Catholic groups became involved: a bible center was opened, seminarians and religious and lay women were involved and a lot of things were happening in the neighborhood.”

McGloin was administrator of the home health care agency run by her order, the Dominican Sister’s of Hope, which operated in and Cincinnati’s West End and Over-the-Rhine neighborhoods. Eventually she was elected president of her congregation, and as a member of the leadership team she returned to headquarters in New York. McGloin was a native New Yorker, but she had established strong ties to OTR which eventually drew her back to Cincinnati. “I really felt connected. I wanted to be in the inner city and work with low income populations,” said McGloin. “I liked the fact that people here were really working together. New York was rather big and complicated and it just felt right to come back here.”

McGloin returned to Cincinnati in 1992. When asked what she’s been doing since her return, she replied, “A lot.” To some, simply saying “a lot” can sound sarcastic or conceited, but in McGloin’s case it’s a humble understatement. She filled her days with a lot of part-time jobs, all of which were aimed at helping low-income individuals find paths to a better life. Just a few of the many roles she took on were: on the board of Power Inspires Progress, an inner city employment education program; on the board of Visions Community Services, which helped economically disadvantaged teen parents finish school and prepare to raise families; worked part-time at St Francis Seraph; worked with Cincinnati Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice; worked with the Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center; and the list kept growing.

McGloin still sits on the boards of three nonprofits and works fulltime on the leadership team which oversees her congregation. “Those are my biggest commitments,” she said. “And then I just do whatever.”

For McGloin the “whatever” is a pretty big chunk of time and commitment. She attends city council meetings and is involved with various neighborhood organizations. Her reason for being so involved with Over-the-Rhine community organizations is simple: “I do things because I live here,” she said. “I live here and want to be involved.”
McGloin has always been deeply involved in Over-the-Rhine. She and a select group of dedicated residents worked tirelessly on the in-depth Over-the-Rhine Comprehensive Plan. McGloin and others put heart and soul into the plan which was to be a blueprint for resurrecting the neighborhood. What the City of Cincinnati eventually did with the plan is uncertain. Some claim it was used as a blueprint for the current 3CDC revitalization of OTR, while others’ claim it was cherry-picked – leaving it bereft of any benefits for low-income residents – and then mothballed.

“I think in the end the plan was good,” said McGloin. “It wasn’t perfect but everybody gave a little bit.” After completion the group had the feeling that things would finally be moving. But nothing happened, and eventually City Council did away with the planning department and two years of hard work started to unravel.

McGloin’s not the only one concerned for the current direction of housing development in Over-the-Rhine. She and many others feel that low-income residents are being pushed out in order to rehab buildings for “market rate housing.” On one hand it gets rid of the troublemakers, but an eviction notice does not differentiate between a drug dealer and a hard-working low-income family: the good often gets pushed away with the problems.

The West End neighborhood of Cincinnati used to be home to a two large subsidized housing complexes, which physically and socially deteriorated; eventually most of those apartments were raised to make way for newer market-rate condo units. “I go down to the West End occasionally just to see how they’re doing,” said McGloin. “And I’m not sure the market-rate places are occupied. I see lots of new buildings but no signs of a renewed community, no sign of new life.”

McGloin doesn’t want to stop development and growth, but she doesn’t want to see anyone pushed out in the name of progress. Her vision for Over-the-Rhine would include a return to the good things she experienced when she first arrived.

“When I first came to Over-the-Rhine it was much more of a neighborhood like in New York. There were different kinds of people, they got up every day and went to work, had children, and they were involved in things,” said McGloin. The biggest difference McGloin recalls was that people could afford to live in the neighborhood where they worked.

Today there aren’t too many jobs in Over-the-Rhine; most local employment is low-paying, and a lot of low-end subsidized
housing is being converted into mid and high-end condo units. She wants the neighborhood to remain inclusive, and doubts that the checkout clerks at Kroger’s on Vine Street “can afford to live in this high-end stuff they’re building.”

Another of McGloin’s big visions is to develop a holistic approach to job training and employment. “Many of the folks who go to the Drop Inn Center or other neighborhood treatment programs have good job skills,” she said. “And they certainly have the capacity to be reintegrated. And we should be reaching out to schools where there are young people who want to learn those skills. The new young workers and reintegrating workers could couple with the unions on all his construction and rehab work that’s going on, and that’s what we mean by a holistic way to help the neighborhood.” McGloin’s idea boils down to train them here, employ them here, and keep them here in Over-the-Rhine.
Norma Petersen

Over the last 44 years Norma Petersen has spent more than 25,000 hours promoting the arts in Over-the-Rhine. The majority of those hours have been as a volunteer, and Norma feels that she is the biggest beneficiary of all. “It’s been wonderful,” she said. “What do you think keeps me young?”

Every volunteer encounters setbacks and roadblocks along the way, but Petersen never gets discouraged. “There are too many positives going on,” she said. She has the unique ability to be fascinated by new people and events.

Petersen recalled attending a Cincinnati Women’s Club performance when entertainer Kitty Carlisle sang and narrated the history of musical theater. “It was unbelievable,” said Petersen. “She’s 95 and was so inspirational.”

Petersen said she learned a lot more from Carlisle’s performance than song and history. “If your health is good and you love what you are doing, you should just keep doing it and never stop. I hope I’m still going that strong at her age.”

Petersen has worked on a wide range of Over-the-Rhine projects. Her primary focus over the years has been with three OTR artistic institutions: Music Hall, the Symphony Orchestra, and the School for the Creative and Performing Arts. Currently Petersen is president of the Society for the Preservation of Music Hall and the Greater Cincinnati Arts and Education Center.

Music Hall, with its world-famous acoustics, has been Over-the-Rhine’s showcase establishment since its dedication in 1878. Originally designed to house both musical activities and industrial exhibitions it was recognized as a national historic landmark in 1975. The preservation society provides ongoing financial and volunteer support to maintain and improve the Hall’s facilities.

Petersen got involved with Over-the-Rhine arts associations when she first arrived in Cincinnati in 1962. After a number of years as a volunteer with the symphony, she was hired on as volunteer coordinator for the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, and later became executive director of the Cincinnati chamber Orchestra.

During her tenure as staff with the Symphony, Jim Tarbell approached her to be involved with the formation of the Over-the-Rhine Chamber of Commerce. “Jim thought the neighborhood was so unique it needed its own chamber,” she said. “Over-the-Rhine was
the first German settlement. This neighborhood was the beginnings of what made Cincinnati great.”

In Petersen’s life, one experience has always led to another, and another, and yet another. Her involvement with the Symphony and the OTR Chamber led to her biggest and most exciting purpose. Erich Kunzel, Cincinnati Pops director, had a dream: he wanted to build a new school next to music hall. Kunzel wanted the school to focus on all aspects of creative and performing arts for grades K through 12; it would be the first if its kind in the US.

Kunzel called Petersen and asked “Will you help me?” Together they set out to form a nonprofit organization to partner with Cincinnati Public Schools and plan for the new School for the Creative and Performing Arts (SCPA). The school opened in 1973 and in a few short years was recognized as the premier pre-professional arts training and college preparatory program in America.

SCPA is in the process of constructing new facilities in the style of a community learning center on Central Parkway. The new school will be the largest Over-the-Rhine economic development project since Music Hall, and its design will act as a “gateway” into the OTR neighborhood. Over-the-Rhine has had its share of bad publicity the last few years which many feel negatively over-emphasizes the neighborhood’s problems. Hopefully the new SCPA will help put the focus on the positive aspects of OTR’s revitalization.

For many, working on a big project like the new SCPA can be overwhelming: at times, to many it can feel like a constant stream of fundraising, feasibility studies, planning committees, bidding processes and endless meetings. But Petersen said she never gets tired, frustrated or overwhelmed, “I’m an optimist. It’s about the future, it’s about art, and it’s all about kids fulfilling their lives. How can anyone get down when their working for that?”

Petersen has several visions for Over-the-Rhine, and they’re not just daydreams, she actively works to see that all of them become reality. “I want to see Over-the-Rhine revitalized,” she said. “I want to see people living here like they used to, and I want to see all the arts cooperating and receiving the recognition they deserve.”

Petersen believes that Over-the-Rhine is the focal area of culture in Cincinnati. “It always has been,” she said. “But a lot of people don’t realize that yet. We need to change that and focus more on Over-the-Rhine as the artistic center of Cincinnati.”
Petersen would also like to see the return of a tram system in Over-the-Rhine. “The tracks are already there,” she said. Besides the nostalgic appeal of trams and trolleys, an economical mass transit system would form a mutually beneficial link between downtown, OTR, and Clifton.

Norma Petersen, always energetic, positive, and on the move, is one more reason to believe in the future of Over-the-Rhine. The neighborhood has been the center for creativity in Cincinnati. Petersen and many like her are hard at work to ensure that arts continue to flourish in OTR.
Pat Clifford

There are a lot of places to sleep in Cincinnati, but Pat Clifford's place is probably the most important. Clifford is general coordinator for the Drop Inn Center at 12th and Elm streets in Over-the-Rhine, which provides emergency housing and a raft of other essential services to the homeless.

Clifford began working with the homeless while still in high school as part of a service project. “It really opened my eyes,” he said. “I grew up in a middle-class lifestyle and didn’t realize all that people were going through.”

The Drop Inn Center has come a long way since it opened in a one-room storefront on Vine Street in 1973, currently serving an average of 200 clients per day. Clifford began working at the Center as a volunteer while in college, and after graduation was hired by founder buddy gray as the first fulltime administrative staff.

Homelessness boomed in the 1980s; economic conditions and deinstitutionalization pushed many people into the streets with no safety net. There will always be a small group of people that wind up homeless because of temporary hard times and set backs. However the need is greatest for individuals dealing with physical, mental health and substance abuse issues. This population needs supportive housing, case management and sobriety support.

The Drop Inn Center has grown considerably since its opening. “We were lucky to have a decent three hots and a cot,” said Clifford. “But we’re not satisfied with that anymore. We want to know everyone who’s staying here, their needs and how we can help them with the appropriate services.” Clients who stay long term have a six-person case management team.

Just as the Drop Inn Center has had to grow and adapted to the times, so has Over-the-Rhine. Careful planning for the future of the neighborhood is essential; what happens in OTR will directly impact the low-income population and the agencies that serve them.

“There’s room for great synergy in Over-the-Rhine,” said Clifford. “We can all be working together and have high quality social services, high quality art, and high quality education.” Clifford does more than talk about this vision; he’s long been active in neighborhood planning for the area. His goals are to increase the residents’ overall quality of life, better the neighborhood, and provide support for people in need.
“We need to see a mix of housing in the [OTR] plan,” he said. “Too often when gentrification goes unchecked, the low income and working poor are just moved to the next ghetto. We need to have all levels in the same neighborhood.”

Clifford wants to eventually see what he called “a rainbow composite of housing” for Over-the-Rhine. He feels a good plan will offer supportive housing for working poor and other low income residents. Tax credits for market rate housing will encourage middle and upper end construction. In some cities gentrification goes unchecked, which results in a rehabbed neighborhood full of upper-end housing and the low-income residents are priced out and are forced to move to the next ghetto.

In addition to providing a needed service, the Drop Inn Center has a positive affect on the neighborhood. They discovered that 95 percent of the people who stayed at the shelter had no run-ins with the police in the last six months. Of the five percent who encountered police, the biggest percentage was for open flask violations. “We need to do more outreach to the chronic alcoholics,” said Clifford. “We need new programs that will address themselves to the chronic alcoholics, the people that traditional treatment programs have not been able to help.”

The Drop Inn Center does more than offer help to the homeless; they’re hard at work trying to prevent the causes. Of the people who are helped by the Center, 40 percent need two weeks or less of assistance. “These are people with temporary problems,” said Clifford. “If we can meet them at the door and tailor our services, we might reduce their stay from two weeks to one, or prevent their stay altogether.”

With experience and good planning, the Drop Inn Center is working on the problem from both ends of the spectrum, by trying to shorten the long-term stays and prevent shorter-term visits. “Hopefully we’ll wind up with a system where, overall, there is less homelessness,” said Clifford.

Thomas A. Dutton

Tom Dutton lives 45 miles from Cincinnati, but his heart is right smack in the middle of Over-the-Rhine. Dutton has been involved with the neighborhood for more than 25 years; it’s part of his academic career but it’s also his purpose.
Dutton is a professor of architecture and director of Miami University’s Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine. The Center is a unique educational opportunity for Miami students and a valuable resource for numerous OTR community groups and social justice organizations.

Over the years Dutton has established relationships with Over-the-Rhine residents and community leaders that have cemented him in a most unusual position: He’s an academic who is highly respected and trusted in a world that is slow to accept outsiders. Tom Dutton is in that unusual position of trust because he cares. And it’s not that guilty-conscience-salving, write-a-check kind of caring that comes out during a fund drive or sermon.

Dutton’s care can be seen in many ways, one of which is a lot of late-night hours spent getting the word out about the Center and Over-the-Rhine. He has authored a considerable number of articles that discuss the neighborhood’s social justice issues, which have been published in periodicals ranging from prestigious academic journals to Streetvibes, the newsletter of the local homeless coalition.

Dutton has worked with Miami’s Center for Community Engagement since its founding in 2002. The Center serves three purposes: as an educational center, as outreach for Miami University functions, and as the base for a residency program that gives students first-hand experience with social justice. There are architecture and non-architecture students in the residency program; both take courses at the Center and on nearby campuses. The residency students live close by in neighborhood housing. Architecture residents work on a variety of projects such as creating designs and interior alterations for an OTR low-income housing agency. The non-architecture residents come from a variety of disciplines and spend 15 to 20 hours a week working on service learning projects with neighborhood nonprofit agencies.

The educational experiences are invaluable; students earn credits towards their degrees while engaging with people from a wide variety of cultures and ethnicities. The Center’s residency program gives students something they could never get in any campus classroom: extended first-hand exposure to the realities of race and class in America.

And Dutton’s students are learning the lessons. Eavesdropping on them outside of the classroom is morally uplifting. You’ll hear the usual campus topics about beer parties, new movies, cars, dates and clothing, but interspersed through the conversations are discussions about poverty, health care, senior services, political power and what’s right instead of what’s popular.
Dutton believes that learning about differences in race and class in America is more important now than ever before in our history. “We are more geographically segregated in this country than we’ve ever been,” said Dutton. “That doesn’t bode well for future race relations, especially since the world is becoming more global and integrated than ever.”

Some might call him an activist, others think of him as just a concerned citizen. Either way Dutton has been actively involved with the struggles of OTR residents since 1981. But for every situation he’s been involved with, you can be certain he’s researched the problem from multiple viewpoints.

There are no quick fixes for Over-the-Rhine. The neighborhood’s problems have existed for generations; some have improved but many have deteriorated. Ask Dutton’s opinion on an issue and you’d best be prepared to listen to a thorough answer. He’ll know the history of the problem, the players, parallel situations, successful solutions, and failed and current attempts. He looks at everything from multiple angles, and fortunately – for the next generation of urban problem solvers – his students are learning the same approach.

One of Dutton’s goals is to expand the Miami program. He’s pleased with what he sees in the students that have participated and would like to increase the numbers. “There’s an interesting fire that’s developed in them,” he said. Dutton said that the participating students have mostly come from rural and suburban neighborhoods, and they have certain preconceptions about living in an area that is predominantly made up of working-poor residents.

The students’ social misconceptions are repeatedly reinforced by popular media. In the early stages of their community engagement experience, the reality sets in: life in Over-the-Rhine isn’t what they’ve been seeing on TV and at the movies. Students are hit with a lot of reality in a short period of time. Dutton sees that they are prepared with different ways of explaining what’s happened.

Dutton said the students might hear that the OTR residents need more jobs. “They begin asking ‘where are the jobs? What happened to them?’” Armed with theories and explanations, the students then begin to consider what factors influenced the current job situation, like: the nature of the local economy over the last 20 years, de-industrialization, globalization and
outsourcing. “Then they go into the ‘no wonder’ and ‘now I see why’ phases,” said Dutton. “They realize that Over-the-Rhine and other places like this are the land that time forgot, where the people are idle because they’ve been left behind.”

Learning this intense can’t happen in a classroom. Dutton’s students live and experience, then learn, and then reinforce lessons that will never be forgotten. They don’t need to be tested: you can feel the fire, it radiates. Once their eyes are opened, and they experience the problems, and then are armed with knowledge, on their own they move to the next step. “They start looking for the solutions,” said Dutton. “They start reading and looking for answers.”

Dutton has worked on social justice issues in Over-the-Rhine for a long time. The successes are small and slow in coming and the setbacks can be big and disheartening. “You have to be an optimist that there can be a better future,” he said.

Dutton worked a lot with OTR activist buddy gray (buddy preferred his name in lower case). “I still hold on to the buddy vision,” said Dutton. Before and after buddy gray’s death there has been a lot of distortion of what he and other members of the People’s Movement wanted for Over-the-Rhine. “Buddy believed we should have rich and poor living together, next to each other,” said Dutton. “No homogeneity by geography. That’s what we sounded like.”

And that’s just what it sounds like today at Dutton’s Miami University’s Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine. It should be comforting to America to know that in Over-the-Rhine there’s a second generation of young people who support those beliefs, and they’re being armed with theory and practical knowledge and the internal fire to keep those beliefs alive.

Vanessa Sparks

Self-taught, self-styled and self-propelled, Vanessa Sparks looks after the Mohawk area of Over-the-Rhine with an energetic passion. Sparks started as a grant writer for the Mohawk Area Development Corporation (MADCo) in 1993. When the original incorporators dropped out, she didn’t quit, but took the reins, hit the library for information, and forged ahead on her own.

It’s not an easy job to run a nonprofit with 501 3C status, especially stepping in cold. And on top of keeping MADCo afloat, she also had to make a living. “I’ve done everything from selling security systems to selling newspaper ads,” she said. “But I’ve been blessed to be able to stay in the forefront in Mohawk because I knew it was essential that I be around.”
And stay around she did. Sparks has worked hard to establish herself as the preferred developer for the Mohawk area, but she has a lot more on her mind than just rehabs and real estate. “I’m building a comprehensive vision that includes housing, home ownership, transportation and economic development; they’re all important to have a sustainable community,” she said.

She’s got a full plate – but then add on the most important part – kids. Sparks has launched and maintained numerous youth programs on her own and in partnership with other organizations. “I’ve worked with at least 1000 children since 1996, probably 40 to 100 at any given time,” she said.

Sparks does a wide variety of activities with the children. They do everything from learning to play the recorder to taking classes on postponing sexual involvement; “we even visited the Mayor’s office and sat in his chair,” she said.

Sparks partnered with young men in Over-the-Rhine and the West End and launched a basketball program called Str8 Ballin’, a neighborhood project open to boys and girls of all ages. “Everybody had the opportunity to play,” said Sparks, “whether they were experienced or beginners. It was another very successful summer for us.”

Sparks has accomplished a lot, but at the same time she feels there’s even more needs to be done, but she never seems to get too discouraged or feel burned out. “About three years ago it really started to get to me,” she said. “But I prayed, then fasted, then prayed some more. I realized there was no great shining knight on a big white horse that was going to rescue me.

“I had to roll with the punches and believe in myself enough to know I could accomplish the things that I set out to do, both professionally and in the neighborhood.”

When asked if she ever gets discouraged, she answered “If I have to I cry, or I can laugh too.” Sparks has learned that she has to be honest with whatever the problem is, and realize that setbacks are not a personal attack. Years ago a mentor told her to be aware of power and control. “He told me never to give those two things up. Keeping that in the back of my mind has helped me through a lot of tough times,” she said.
The rewards are few and far between, but all of them count. She knows some are a log way off, but eventually they will come. MADCo has a contract with the City of Cincinnati for her first housing project. She’ll do some new home construction on Mohawk Street, and its nice motivating thought to anticipate the ground-breaking.

And some of the rewards come as a pleasant surprise. “Like when one of the neighborhood kids knocks on my door and asks me for some help,” she said, “or just asks me how I’m doing.”

Sparks has well defined visions for the Mohawk neighborhood. She said she wants to see “new businesses for neighborhood folks and the opportunity for people to compete on a competitive and fair level.” She also feels that there should be more of an effort to sustain and keep current residents in the area. “The priority seems to be on rehabbing as many buildings as we can so new people can move in” said Sparks. “There needs to be a bigger effort to be more inclusive; residents in Over-the-Rhine have a lot to offer.”

“If the right leadership is in place and if we start to value the youth more things will work out,” she said. Sparks and others believe that a match was lit in Over-the-Rhine at the start of the riots, and that hopelessness was the gasoline that fueled the fire. “Everyday people see prosperity going by and they’re not a part of it,” she said. “It’s sad, it’s just not what a good community should be. I don’t know anybody that is poor who wants to stay poor.”

But Vanessa Sparks has hope, “Otherwise I’d be gone.”
Walter Reinhaus

Originally from Chicago, Water Reinhaus became acquainted with OTR while visiting a friend. “I kept coming back,” he said. “It was the only place that suited me.” Reinhaus eventually bought a large industrial building on West McMicken and began developing it into a multi-purpose facility.

The property currently is home to a consignment shop and McMicken Place, an intentional community housed in loft-style apartments, with plans for additional businesses and a youth-operated coffee shop. The residents of the McMicken Place community share Reinhaus’ OTR oriented goals for improving the neighborhood.

The community members live together, hold common beliefs and enjoy getting to know and working with neighbors. “One of our common goals is to better the community, and we do that by working with the kids and getting involved through volunteer opportunities,” said Reinhaus.

Reinhaus has three main goals he’d like to attain for Over-the-Rhine: improve safety, increase Over-the-Rhine residents’ feelings of ownership, and help neighborhood youth.

Reinhaus favors holistic solutions to safety and helping the young people in OTR. “There’s nothing constructive for the eight to 12 year-old to do,” he said. “They can’t get into job programs until they’re 14, and by then they’ve been pulled into trouble by the older guys.”

Holistically solving problem in Over-the-Rhine is a tall order, it means finding the root problems and designing thorough solutions. It’s easy to say that crime can be solved with providing jobs, but the problems are deeper and the solutions more complex. A multitude of challenges arise, like: Where would these jobs come from? Does the employment offer the chance at lifetime income above the poverty line? Who provides the training and in what manner?

Reinhaus wants to see an increase in the residents’ feelings of ownership. “Not just home ownership owner-occupied rentals,” he said, “but increased feelings of ownership when it comes to their community, their public parks and public institutions. An
organization that exists within a neighborhood should have residents on the board. It gives people the feeling that ‘this is my neighborhood.’“

Reinhaus just doesn’t talk about community involvement, he walks it too; after a number of years of involvement he is the current president of the Over-the-Rhine Community. It’s an important and time consuming volunteer role, but not what he feels is his most important job. “I could go to three meetings a day, that’s over 1000 a year and nothing would get accomplished,” he said. “The meetings don’t mean much but spending that amount of time with the kids will mean something more a few years down the road.”

Reinhaus takes local kids on frequent camping trips, teaches them job skills that could be beneficial in their future. A large space in Reinhaus’ McMicken Avenue property is being converted into a youth coffee shop. “It will be run by the youth themselves,” he said. Progress is slow but steady. The kids learn while they work and you can hear some pride in their voices when they discuss ideas for design.

Over-the-Rhine is a big area. Reinhaus feels that one of the roadblocks to progress is self-separation of individual segments or blocks. “Some think that Over-the-Rhine is too big to help all at once and they’ve begun little neighborhoods faction projects like Main Street or Washington Park,” said Reinhaus. “If you only help one little section, one block, then it promotes the segregation, the small segment is helped and the rest are left out. People tend to look at their problem in partial ways.”

Brandon Smith

In many ways, the urban neighborhoods in Cincinnati are changing. There is a new breed of tenant, the scope and size of development projects are markedly different, and there are a lot of new faces among the developers. As a prime example of change, Brandon Smith and his partners in B2B Equities bring charismatic youth, energy and drive to development projects managed by their company in Over-the-Rhine.

Real estate developers have a lot of responsibilities and wear a lot of different hats throughout the run a project. To an outsider Smith is just some guy wearing a hardhat, carrying a pile of plans, running around a block-long group of gutted building with an
expression that rapidly flicks from smiling to harried. But no matter what, Smith appears to be always on the move… and always on top of whatever.

Only 30, Smith grew up in Detroit, attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, and went to Toyota in Northern Kentucky as a purchasing agent before launching a career in development in Over-the-Rhine. A career in real estate development seems like a long stretch from being an automotive purchasing agent, but not to Smith.

“In a lot of cases a developer is the owner of the land and their job is to secure financing, put the development team together, hire the architect, structural engineer, and the contractors,” said Smith. “After you assemble all that and get the financing in place, it’s essentially project management; you manage the project to its completion.” In Smith’s case “managing the project” means tracking the money, finalizing the designs, making calls on finishes, and handling budget issues. “Day to day you want to be under budget and on time,” said Smith. “That doesn’t always happen but that’s the goal.”

Smith first encountered OTR after he moved to Cincinnati in 1999. “I found Over-the-Rhine and loved it,” he said. “It was pretty much a safe place; I loved the architecture and proximity to downtown. The neighborhood had some problems but I thought it was a wonderful place to live.”

While working at Toyota, Smith and a group of friends formed B2B Equities and began developing real estate. The company and size of projects grew, and eventually Smith moved into real estate fulltime. Moving from a Fortune 500 company to self-employed developer in a depressed neighborhood is a big change, but Smith said he wasn’t scared “because I knew this was what I wanted to do.”

Smith has seen marked improvements in OTR in recent months. “A year ago, 12th and Vine was an open-air drug market; the dealers were sitting in lawn chairs,” he said. “But the construction and increased police presence has moved them away. There have been a lot of subtle changes that all together have really made a difference.”

Smith would like to see OTR continue to improve and become a vibrant, self-sustaining mixed-use neighborhood with market rate
Since the 60s OTR has traditionally been a concentration of low income housing, and that model doesn’t work,” he said. What we’re trying to do is bring market rate housing back to OTR.

According to Smith, “market rate” means whatever rate a particular neighborhood will pay for housing. “It’s not subsidized,” said Smith. “You make affordable housing for people that want to stay here, but you need a balance, so you bring in people who have higher income.”

Smith believes that a mixed neighborhood is vibrant and self-sustaining. “Over-the-Rhine has great potential,” he said. “It has retail and is a tourist attraction because of the beautiful architecture.” He believes the area is growing and will continue to gain population because “it’s a place to go. The downtown business district is its own attraction, but people want a place to go for the arts and entertainment, and Over-the-Rhine meets those needs.”

“It potentially is a tourist attraction because of the architecture,” he said. “It’s growing, it’s gaining popularity, it’s becoming a place to go for entertainment and the arts.” Smith believes that, initially, the biggest challenge will be to fill the retail and commercial spots.” Right now we’re focusing on the housing,” he said. “There’s always a debate about which should come first, retail or housing. But we’re banking on the idea that once the people are living here the businesses will come.”

Sure, there are occasional days when things don’t go well for Brandon Smith in the world of real estate development. Those times when he feels like he’s been second-guessed, that maybe he didn’t make the right decision on a finish or could have done better. “But it’s part of life, everything can’t be perfect and I just work through it,” he said.

But for Smith there’s great fulfillment in seeing a depressed neighborhood become vibrant. “I get personal satisfaction in taking something that had potential but was underutilized and bringing it to it’s maximum potential,” he said. “On a personal level that feels really good.”
Margery Spinney

When Margery Spinney gets a good idea she sticks to it. She’s been hanging tough with her current plans for Over-the-Rhine for more than 10 years and doesn’t appear to be anywhere near letting go. Spinney doesn’t develop schemes that will line her pockets; instead her satisfaction will come from filling someone else’s bank account.

There are a lot of low-income families in America that have lived for generations without owning any real assets. “They’ve never owned a home or had a pension fund,” said Spinney. For many, assets are an economic safety net, a cushion for rough times. According to Spinney the average American family has $67,000 in assets, but low-income families usually have less than $1,000; that’s not much of an economic cushion to fall back on.

Spinney’s has a plan to help low-income people build personal assets, which works hand-in-hand with a low-income housing program. While working poor families build their first-ever nest egg, they can enter into a mutually beneficial relationship with a landlord which will improve occupancy, save money on maintenance and upkeep, and will eventually help tenants build some cash equity.

Spinney began working with the nonprofit Cornerstone Community Loan Fund ten years ago. The organization does a lot, but their primary focus is in two areas, a loan fund for non-profits and Spinney’s Renter Equity program. The Community Loan Fund began in 1981. It was a socially conscious investment fund that loaned money to local nonprofits primarily for rehab and low-income housing in Over-the-Rhine.

Cornerstone’s other major operation is the Renter Equity Program, in which tenants contribute to the maintenance and upkeep of their property and are given a chance to earn equity. “The traditional renter program gives no credit to tenants for taking care of their property,” said Spinney. In the Renter Equity Program, renters are financially rewarded for being good tenants.

Renter Equity is a simple concept which is beneficial to both sides, but Spinney has a hard time getting property owners to participate. “Nobody seems to want to stick their neck out and go first,” she said. According to Spinney, renter equity is an alternative system, whereby residents who fulfill certain conditions can build cash equity. Equity-building arrangements usually require tenants to pay their rent on time, remain in the building for at least five years, participate in monthly residents’ meetings.
and do a regular work assignment like sweep the sidewalk or clean a hallway. Spinney said the assigned jobs may only take an hour a week, “but when you put them all together it really keeps the place looking beautiful.”

Before settling in Cincinnati Spinney worked housing-related jobs in urban and Appalachian areas and also has a master’s degree in Montessori education. When she first arrived in Cincinnati she worked in economic development for Hamilton County but Spinney said her heart was longing to work someplace like Cornerstone. “I came to the Loan Fund and my idea kind of got legs,” she said. “The opportunity was here to create something that never existed before, and I launched the Renter Equity program.”

People have come from all across the country to learn about Spinney’s renter equity program. It’s a new and exciting concept that can help revitalize depressed neighborhoods. But Spinney said it’s frustrating because several times she’s had the program almost in place, when someone along the chain backed out. “We still don’t have someone willing to put their money into renter equity; we don’t have a fully working model yet,” she said. “But we’re getting close. Partial success feels good; it’s been gratifying because it shows this can work.”

It’s difficult for Spinney to verbalize her vision for Over-the-Rhine; renter equity is an economic plan, a concept that can bring about vast improvements in the neighborhood. “Currently we have a legal system that’s based on a hierarchy,” said Spinney. Long term renters have no financial assets of their own and don’t really have a way to earn them. There’s no benefit or incentive for the renters to participate and take care of the property.

In traditional low income housing situations, the owners are usually responsible for maintenance, cleaning, and keeping the property safe and attractive. However these duties are costly and often neglected. In renter equity situations, the tenants receive economic value for contributing to the care and maintenance of their property.

Spinney has seen remarkable successes in situations were she has been able to launch even a partial form of a renter equity program. The properties stand out; tenants are concerned with their building, not just their individual apartments. Occupant turnover is exceptionally low, there’s a waiting list for any vacancies, and common areas like porches and sidewalks are immaculate. These collective improvements represent Spinney’s vision for Over-the-Rhine. “If residents who lived here for a long time were credited for taking care of their properties, how different would Over-the-Rhine look?”