



Mercy St. Vincent Takes on the Neighborhood

By SARAH BEDNARSKI, APR, and SARAH VELLIQUETTE

Karen Rogalski's introduction to the neighborhood around Mercy St. Vincent Medical Center in Toledo, Ohio, could not have been simpler. In April of 2009, the hospital had hired her to work with neighbors to improve the surrounding community. She had been on the job only a short time when she approached Carol Martin, the neighborhood's block watch leader, to offer a meeting room for the group's use.

"How much?" Martin asked.

Nothing — block watch members would be guests, Rogalski replied. What's more, they could use the medical center's valet service for meetings, making it the only block watch in Toledo with valet parking.

From that simple start, a partnership was born. This partnership would eventually involve dozens of people and community members and achieve an impressive portfolio of accomplishments.

Mercy St. Vincent is located in the historic Toledo Olde Towne area, a neighborhood with large houses built during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Over 150 of these houses are registered with the State Historic Office. On those same streets, however, you can find many of the same problems that face urban neighbor-

hoods throughout the country. Quality of life has deteriorated, neighborhood vacancy rates range from 25 percent to 42 percent and there are more than 100 vacant lots. At least 70 homes in the area need demolition.

Mercy's mission is to "extend the healing ministry of Jesus by improving the health of our communities with emphasis on people who are poor and under-served." The organization knew it needed to look beyond traditional health care to make the community surrounding Mercy St. Vincent a better place to live and work. For more than 155 years, Mercy St. Vincent has called

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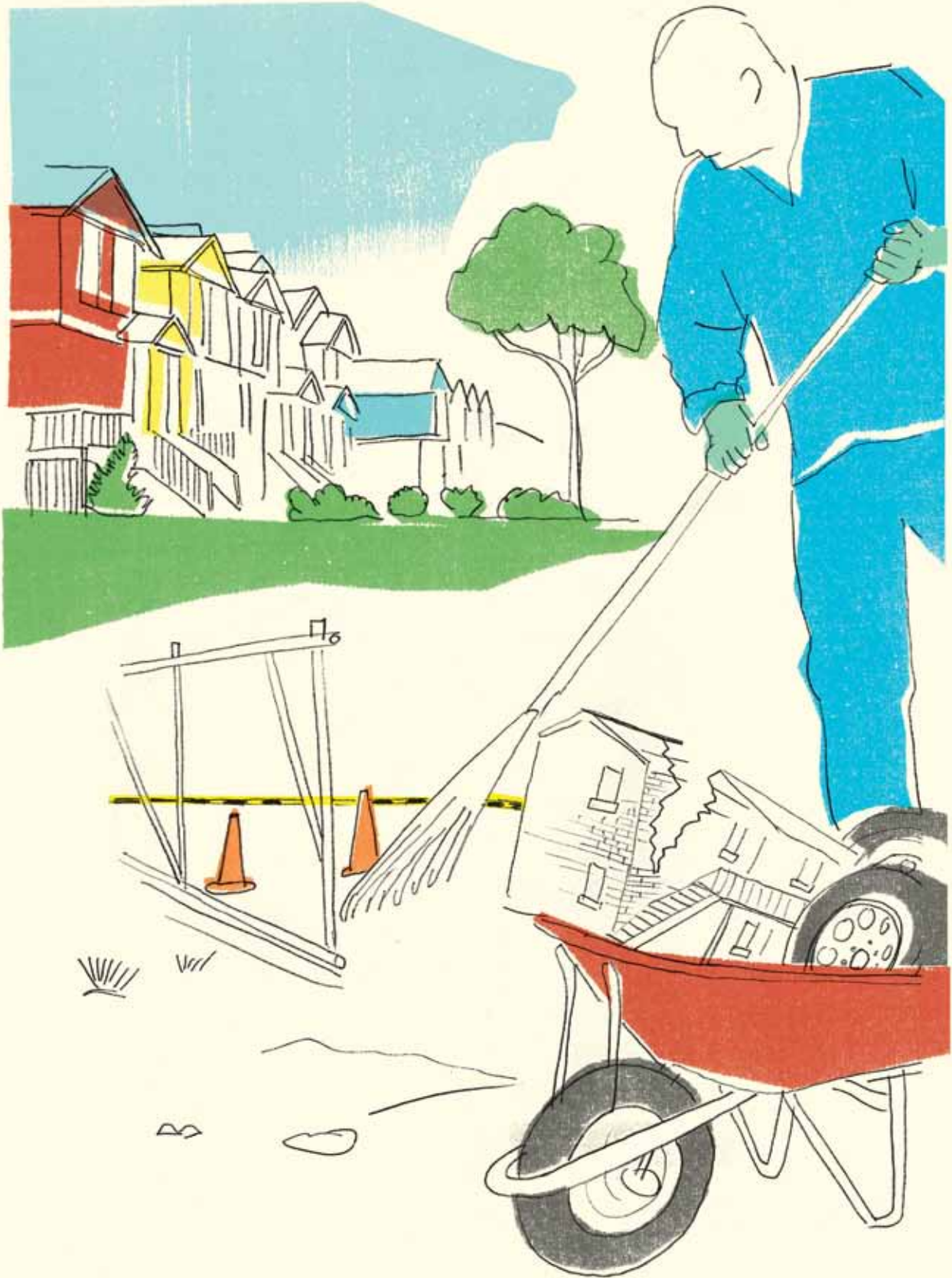
KAREN ROGALSKI

Toledo's central city home and it is here the health care campus has grown and expanded. However, at the same time, the surrounding neighborhood had begun to deteriorate.

Thus began Mercy St. Vincent's conversations with community leaders, block watch groups, businesses, etc., to learn how everyone could come together to preserve and rebuild the community. The initiative — later known as the Cherry Street Legacy Project — was groundbreaking for the hospital in many ways.

Mercy St. Vincent Medical Center has been located on Cherry Street in the neighborhood since its founding in 1855 by the Sisters of Charity of Montreal (the Grey Nuns). The medical center has consistently worked to do more than just heal the sick — it has invested significantly in neighborhood initiatives designed to help improve quality of life and by doing so, promote better health and well-being among the hospital neighbors.

"Mercy is committed to improving the health of the communities we serve. We firmly believe the quality of life of residents in our neighborhoods is a critical component to this equation," said John Schaeufele, MD, CEO of Mercy Children's Hospital, located on



Mercy St. Vincent's campus. "Our interest in this community does not stop within the four walls of our medical center."

The Cherry Street Legacy Project built upon an unprecedented level of collaboration with the people who lived in the neighborhood. For its part, the medical center, opened doors, facilitated and listened, contributing its own credibility as one of Toledo's largest employers.

"People have been waiting for someone to help negotiate the waters of the government on their behalf and find answers to their questions," said Rogalski. "Today, when I walk down the street, people come running out to show me things that need fixing or ask me questions."

By offering Rogalski's services, Mercy St. Vincent gave Toledo Olde Towne's hardworking, caring and passionate citizens a voice. With that voice, and hours upon hours of volunteer work, the Cherry Street Legacy Project grew as a collaborative effort to rebuild their neighborhood so it could thrive again.

As block watch leader Carole Martin says, "By giving us one person to contact, the hospital helped all of us get involved. And that one person was the right person, too."

The Cherry Street Legacy Project is organized around two specific areas: crime reduction and neighborhood stabilization, the two most important (and interrelated) challenges facing the neighbors.

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REDUCING CRIME

Everyone recognized that for their neighborhood to thrive again, there must be a reduction in crime. Working together, Cherry Street Legacy Project participants identified the potential factors of crime, ranging from the commonly accepted (youth culture and gangs) to the lesser-known (abandoned cars and houses, parks for youth to loiter in).

Work began quickly on addressing those issues. The first, and perhaps the most vital step, was for Mercy St. Vincent and its neighbors to initiate a dialogue with the Toledo police department. The police were interested in implementing community policing, where law enforcement and communities work together to deal with the causes of crime and, in the end, create a safer neighborhood.

"We were able to gather and pinpoint the primary concerns of the neighbors," Schaeufele said. "We listened to what they said regarding crime and safety and thought, 'What can we do?' We knew that we had to take action, and the best way to do that was to work in tandem with the Toledo police. Mercy supported the hiring of off-duty police officers to boost patrols and create added enforcement visibility in the area, which resulted in positive improvements in the area."

The community discussions also helped create the "Hot Spot Criminal Reporting Form" that allows any citizen to anonymously report suspicious activity, ranging from drugs and fighting to defacing property. Citizens write down physical descriptions as well as information on vehicles and weapons.

The patrols and the hot spot forms help the Toledo Police Department assemble credible information they can use in reducing crime. Last winter, for example, thanks to the forms and patrols, more than a dozen abandoned cars from neighborhood streets were reported and removed.

Similarly, neighbors recognized that Hyde Park, a small, city-owned green space located on one of the main streets in the neighborhood, offered residents little recreational value and instead had become a common gathering space for crime. First, the city was able to remove the overgrown vegetation, opening it up and reducing





its value for criminal activity. Nearby residents were invited to develop a plan to reduce common green space in favor of more home ownership green space. Consensus came easily, and the park is in the process of being declared “excess land” by the City of Toledo and sold to the adjacent neighbors.

The neighbors also have taken on a much bigger project, one that is part of judicial reform around the United States: restorative justice. Under this process, a group of 30 neighbors has received intensive training provided by the University of Toledo. When a juvenile is charged with a crime in the neighborhood, the juvenile court system has the option of ordering that juvenile to participate in a formal restorative process with these neighbors.

Both the offender and the victim discuss the crime, what preceded it and how it affected the parties. Neighborhood members also discuss the nature and impact of the offense with the offender. The dialogue continues until all agree on actions for the offender to take within a specified time frame. Restitution is sometimes included, but more commonly the action plan involves specific things the offender will do to make his/her crime right with the victim and the community at large. Subsequently, the offender documents his or her progress in fulfilling the agreement. After the deadline passes, the board submits a compliance report to the court, ending the board’s involvement. If the offender completes the action plan, he or she will not be referred to the court. Otherwise the offender will go back to the juvenile justice system to receive a formal sentence.

STABILIZING THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Neighborhoods are cohesive places. They have a strong ecology, and everything is interconnected. The Olde Towne neighbors had watched abandoned homes be taken over by gangs. These houses were looted, stripped and sometimes burned. Research shows that open, unsecured buildings are magnets for crime, trash and vermin. These nuisances drain local resources and reduce the residents’ quality of life.

The crime reduction committee believed demolishing the abandoned structures would increase the neighborhood’s safety. The City of Toledo code enforcement office already had a list of more than 150 “nuisance” properties slated for demolition in the area — many of the houses

had been on the list for years. However because these homes were in the Toledo Olde Towne area, a district registered with the State of Ohio Historic Preservation Office, the city was required to work through the state preservation office to gain permission to demolish — a long and tedious process. Even with permission, the city was banned by statute from using public money to pay for the tear-down.

To tackle that problem, participants in the collaborative community project helped develop a formal approach to proposed demolition in a historic area. When a house on the city’s demolition list was deemed to be of architectural and environmental significance, a neighborhood stabilization committee took up the case for discussion, review and agreement over whether the house should be

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torn down. Among the criteria that would seal an abandoned, derelict property’s fate were:

- Proximity to neighborhood assets, existing redevelopment projects or newly constructed schools
- Location on highly travelled streets near the hospital or neighborhood schools
- Access to existing or planned commercial corridors

The City of Toledo agreed to demolish blighted structures in the neighborhood that were not historic, and it managed the gas and water disconnects. Mercy St. Vincent paid the city to take down identified blighted, abandoned, vacant structures where public dollars could not be used. This type of private-public partnership process had never been completed before in the city.

“Having been a part of the community for over 155 years, we are very tied to the history of this neighborhood. We are witness to those houses that have been around for numerous decades and have fallen in utter disrepair,” Schaeufele said. “These structures created an eyesore, not only for residents, but visitors as well. They did not foster neighborhood pride; they create a negative perception of an historic neighborhood that Mercy St. Vincent is proud to be a part of. We wanted to

be an active partner with the city and help revitalize and stabilize the neighborhood.”

On their own, the demolitions made a significant positive impact on the quality of life in the neighborhood. Land was cleared and parcels com-

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bined to reduce density and increase green space. Fence rows had debris and shrubbery removed to implement crime prevention through environmental design — that is, by increasing the line of sight.

TRIUMPH OF HOPE

The larger picture then was to figure out how to create “in-fill” housing in a historic area. The neighborhood residents and block watch group insisted that new housing must fit into the historic neighborhood, be built with high quality materials and incorporate a historic design with modern amenities and the highest levels of energy efficiency. A local architectural firm, Thomas Porter Architects, stepped up to design a prototype for the next generation of affordable housing.

Neighborhood Housing Services of Toledo, Inc. is an operational partner of the Cherry Street Legacy Project and has accepted the responsibility for implementing a number of housing-related components, including a community-level outcomes evaluation protocol in the neighborhood. Neighborhood Housing Services has completed approximately 600 surveys that included evaluation of the condition of the roof, sidewalks, gutters, windows, doors, foundation, porches, balconies and garages. This will set a baseline for outcome measurement and will drive decision-making.

In the Cherry Street Legacy area, Neighborhood Housing Services was an adviser and mentor to the neighborhood’s Grace Temple Church for the development of a single house on Fulton

Street. That effort triggered the concept for a 36-unit, in-fill housing tax credit proposal known as the Cherry Street Legacy Homes, submitted to the Ohio Housing Finance Agency in October, 2010. Mercy St. Vincent Medical Center and Neighborhood Housing Services are the project’s co-developers.

Because of the work of the Cherry Street Legacy Project, the first new homes in a generation are being built in an area that only a few years ago, many people would have written off as lost. The neighborhood has been physically improved, it has increased relationships with local government and it enjoys a cohesion that previously didn’t exist. With the initial success of the Cherry Street Legacy Project came hope that things could change, and people have been energized by that hope.

Perhaps the best illustration of that energy was when two busloads of Cherry Street neighbors took a trip down to Toledo’s government center to speak at a public hearing. They wanted their vision for their neighborhood to be included in the Toledo-Lucas County master plan.

They carried the day. The Cherry Street Legacy Project is the only citizen-driven initiative connected to a larger organization that has been adopted into the city’s master plan.

While many challenges still remain, the Cherry Street neighborhood is on its way to being a livable and walkable community once more. Investment in the neighborhood by Mercy St. Vincent Medical Center and partnerships with local government and non-profits unlocked the passion and voice of citizens who want their neighborhood to thrive again.

In the words of block watch leader Martin, “this is what happens when a neighborhood comes together.”

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