

EVERYDAY ACTIVISTS

in

Austin & Oak Park

Tear down that invisible wall on Austin Boulevard and replace it with a bridge.

Pastor Ira Acree, Leader's Network



Everyday Activists Participants' Narratives*

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*Participants' names are listed in the sequence of their photographs. These are abbreviated versions of their longer interviews.

One Earth Collective bridges to Austin with the Austin Grown program. In collaboration with Build, Inc. the program teaches youth leadership communication skills as they learn how to grow summer vegetables in their urban garden, cook healthy food, visit other food enterprises and hear from various local adult thought leaders.

Jim Babcock, One Earth Collective

Jim grew up hiking and camping enjoying the natural world firsthand. He became an activist after reading Bill McKibben's "The End of Nature" that detailed the consequences of fossil fuel use for a warming planet. He set out to find ways to persuade others of the urgency of changing how we live to reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

Jim has contributed to numerous environmental initiatives. For instance, he worked with the Shawnash Institute to support "a program that helps LINK card holders afford healthy food from the Oak Park Farmers' Market." Trying to find ways to increase involvement Jim and his colleagues in the One Earth Collective discovered that films offered a powerful and persuasive tool for communicating not only the causes and consequences of climate change but stimulating a sense of urgency and even motivate action. They started the *One Earth Film Festival* celebrating the 10th Anniversary in March 2021. Films included: *Cooked: Survival By Zip Code* a documentary showing the deadly impact of the 1995 Chicago heat wave in poor minority neighborhoods; *Flint: Who Can You Trust?* detailing the toxic contamination of water supply in a mostly African American city.

Jim expects that the One Earth Collective and the Interfaith Green Network will continue to provide input for more ambitious local sustainability and climate action plans that include racial equity.

"What I observe is that our major institutions, including political leadership, corporations, cultural and social organizations, have yet to demonstrate that they are serious about several related existential issues: climate change, the economic system based on a paradigm of constant growth on a finite planet, and the ever-expanding gap between the rich and the poor of the world."

Creating public understanding and mobilizing action remain crucial in the face of continued indifference.

I'm probably most interested in the social justice and equity aspects of various environmental issues. I feel like a lot of people have the tendency to forget about the people who actually live in bad environmental conditions and don't have a voice for change.

Madeleine "Maddie" Howe, "It's Our Future," Environmental Activist

Several years ago, Oak Park students were invited to join the environmental youth organization "It's Our Future" sponsored by *Seven Generations Ahead*. 15 students from Oak Park River Forest (OPRFHS) joined up. They developed podcasts, collaborated with the One Earth Film Festival to orchestrate film screenings, met with teachers to develop composting schemes and hosted evening climate change events combining music, speakers and discussion.

COVID did not stop Maddie who has continued her environment focused youth organizing. "I have had a lot of opportunities to reach out and to speak to people directly. I feel I am being heard when I speak up, which...shows that more and more people are interested in these topics and are especially interested in what young people have to say."

The greatest challenge in our environmental activism has been getting people to realize that these are major issues that are going to hurt everyone all over the world. A lot of people do not accept the growing threat of climate change because they think it does not impact them. Maddie and her young advocates work hard to show what these impacts mean both now and in the future.

Taking practical steps to remedy environmental problems can help people realize the interdependence we share with the living world we inhabit. This can awaken a sense of solidarity with those vulnerable people of color who currently bear the greatest burden of environmental damage.

I decided to create Forty Acres Fresh Market in Austin because I wanted to become an entrepreneur in an area where a community most needed me. ...It was a community that had been divested in for generations.

Elizabeth “Liz” Abunaw, Entrepreneur, Food Justice Activist

Liz prefers the term “food apartheid” versus “food desert” because food shortage is not an ecological accident but political. “The government navigates how food is produced and zoned and politics control multiple food distribution areas.” Food justice then requires not just economic, but political change that includes a lot of actors. “Food Justice encompasses a large umbrella. “

Liz launched her first of many Forty Acres Fresh Market pop-ups at Sankofa Cultural Arts and Business Center in 2018. She selected her market’s name because Black customers know what the name means “even as it retains a “nice grocery feel.” Offering affordable product prices and food deliveries encourages customers as does attending community events and networking with local

Her MBA provided business knowledge and mentors, but growing up working as part of a family grocery in the community taught Liz practical savvy. She learned how relationships matter. Who can help and how to obtain that help; how to nurture and expand this network to improve business exposure.

Liz offers food for all income levels. “We use multiple forms of payment cash, credit, senior coupons, SNAP, or Link bucks. The City of Chicago sponsors these markets and underserved neighborhoods, and Forty Acres Fresh Market has a contract.” She also works hard to find local suppliers like Windy City Harvest and Urban Canopy not only obtaining reasonable prices but building solidarity. “This industry has enough room for companies to collaborate and support each other.”

Currently Liz has partnered with Westside Health Authority to obtain a location for a physical store. The neighborhood grocery store will supply the community with fresh produce, meat, essential household items, and feature products from local vendors. “From a social infrastructure standpoint, a grocery store is part of the community.” Liz explains, “It’s community cohesiveness and social cohesion that makes the neighborhood better to live in. It makes it safer.”

“I never thought my dreams as an entrepreneur would come true, but I have done it, and I am proud of myself.”

I ran for 37th Ward Alderman in 2015 because this community was not receiving the representation that it deserved. My platform was “Inform to Empower”.

Leroy Duncan, Civic Activist

Leroy has lived in Austin for 47 years. “I was voted President of our neighborhood block club” Leroy proudly describes as his entry to activism. He has been active in the North Avenue Neighbors Association, the Westside Men’s Network, and For Action in Togetherness Holdfast Inc (F.A.I.T.H. Inc). Deeply committed to community security and safety he worked with the Community Justice Center as a community representative for the 25th Police District. The Center brings neighbors and police together to not only enforce the law but take steps to prevent crime. Also as a Beat Facilitator for the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS) Leroy worked to make police-community partnerships and problem solving easier and more effective. Leroy was able to do just that.

“There was a problem at the Amoco McDonald’s at North Avenue and Laramie. Drugs were being sold in the parking lot; residents in the area brought it to my attention. I worked with the CAPS Sergeant and the owners of the businesses to eliminate the problem.”

Leroy follows what he nicknamed the FADE process: F-Focus on the problem, A-Analyze the problem, D-Determine solutions, and E-Execute the solutions. His unsuccessful bid for 37th Ward Alderman did not deter him from his commitment to three community goals: increase local allocation of City services; partner with police to fight crime and recruit business investment. Reaching these goals requires community involvement, something Leroy champions.

We know about racial steering, and we know how communities have changed because of bad real estate practices. Our realtors were educated early on by the Village Community Relations Department, and the Housing Center how to treat people fairly and correctly.

Sandra Sokol, Community Advocate, Former Oak Park Village Clerk

After moving her family to Oak Park in 1972 Sandra together with others formed a Community Council. The organization focused on education, housing and business issues. They found and supported candidates for school board. They lobbied the Village to help investigate illegal practices by landlords who owned large apartment buildings. Taking direct action to intervene and assist tenants discouraged the sort of disinvestment that accompanied white flight in nearby Austin. Sandra and her fellow activists went to housing court to testify on behalf of tenants. They worked with Village officials to collect data on the good and the bad using this information to spur investment in building improvements.

Sandra was hired by the Village of Oak Park in the mid 1980s. She played an important liaison role advising and educating residents, elected officials and government employees about ways to assure fairness in housing, public safety and education. For instance, Sandra helped organize consultant-led training for police to understand and respond to African American as well as gay and lesbian residents. Elected Village Clerk in 1993 Sandra spent four terms running local elections. She helped establish a domestic partnership registry and recalls fondly presiding over many domestic partnership ceremonies.

“I am proud of the accomplishments of the Village, not only during my tenure as clerk, but overall. The Village has been proactive in many areas. Folks from all around the country look to Oak Park for guidance on how diverse people can work together for the betterment of community.”

The government codifies housing discrimination. Discrimination and segregation have occurred for many generations. Disinvestment is related to violence. In minority communities funding is needed for schools, employment, job training, and education. These social issues intersect each other. We need to put civics back in schools to teach students their roles in society.

Marsha Borders, Civic Activist, League of Women Voters

Marsha moved from the Southside to Oak Park 35 years ago because “I found this community to be more stimulating, engaging and full of opportunity.” Marsha first cut her teeth as an activist as a member of the Housing Subcommittee for the Oak Park Community Relations Commission. She grew up in Robert Taylor Homes experiencing the effects of racially segregated housing firsthand. Discrimination fueled community disinvestment in African American neighborhoods. If households do not “have a bakery, a flower shop, or a grocery store, a candy shop and programs to support youth” they become hollowed out and vulnerable to violence.

Mentored by an Oak Park Village trustee dedicated to ending racial discrimination practices that fostered white flight, Marsha learned strategies for resistance and innovation. Marsha finds practical ways to advance her commitment to transformative racial justice. She is an official voter registrar. An active member of the League of Women voters she took steps to formally report voting violations including: “Taking people off voter rolls. Closing polling places so people have to wait longer to vote. Providing broken voting equipment. Requiring people to show unnecessary identification to get to vote. Tactics that challenge citizens’ right to vote.

Currently Marsha chairs the local League’s Environmental Committee “trying to get the community to go green, getting rid of plastic in Lake Michigan. We need clean energy, jobs, water.” Through Unity Temple in Oak Park, Marsha is involved in prison ministry, the Restorative Justice Team and the Grassroots Alliance for police accountability (GAPA). Conducting Beloved Conversations Marsha helps people learn the impacts of white privilege and small racial aggressions. These conversations address taboo topics that foster awareness and compassion.

I try to build bridges. All the walls, all the silos, all the division, I am not trying to do that. I am trying to bring people together. We are trying to build leaders on the block. We can keep connected. We can be caring.

Steve Robinson, Community Organizer, Northwest Austin Council

Steve purchased an abandoned two flat in Austin four decades ago with the assistance of the Northwest Austin Council (NAC). Founded in 1972 by local community residents who lived, worked or worshiped within Austin, NAC seeks to empower people to keep their community safe, improve schools and upgrade the housing stock. The organization collaborates with many grassroots community organizations including churches and block clubs to pursue this mission. Steve joined the staff of NAC in 1991 and now serves as Executive Director.

Austin encompasses a large array of neighborhoods only a portion of the residential blocks harbor open air drug markets that incite and invite gun violence.

Efforts to concentrate solely on these problem areas has proven distressingly ineffective. Despite 15 years of effort only minor improvements happen. “We talk to those dudes, be like, ‘Man! No! There is a better way. We can help you find a job. We can get you a job, get exposure, job readiness and even clothes.’ We hit him up like that.” They listen, but the choice remains too distant and implausible. Steve struggles to leverage the many fine relationships he enjoys with residents in the surrounding areas. The good things they do and the community they build together have offered powerful connections.

Steve told about effective community organizing efforts like the one that leveraged neighbor led pothole filling that shamed the Deputy of Streets and Sanitation into action. Unwilling to give up he describes the new Network of Neighbors campaign launched in 2020 that seeks to knit together the 40 blocks of Austin weaving the strong with the weak, the secure with the insecure. Perhaps this time the larger social changes inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement will erode the racial segregation and perverse incentives that make local drug dealing, gang life and violence an attractive option for some young men. Steve remains hopeful, “I always tell people, not so much me and so much we. How can we all be a part of the bigger picture?”

I am an advocate because I see opportunities in my community. I believe that I am standing up for everything that my community needs. I put myself in spaces to speak to the things that we need, but also to create solutions.

Deondre Rutues, Northwest Austin Council, Organizer & Graduate Student

Deondre grew up in Austin graduated Austin High School eventually attaining a dual MBA MA degree in Industrial-Organizational Psychology from Roosevelt University. Currently studying for a PhD in Business Psychology Deondre wants to understand how Austin works and what can be done to create a safe sustainable community. Deondre agreed to work with Steve Robinson providing research assistance for the roll out of the ambitious Austin 40 block Network for Neighbors campaign. He designed the interview survey and the framework for analysis. “I love statistics. I love numbers and figuring out how to convey the calculated results.”

He and Steve walked each of the blocks visiting and interviewing residents. “We hypothesized that neighborhoods that are more connected, communicating and caring are also safer neighborhoods.” Early results have inspired creation of new safety initiatives for North Austin Council (NAC). Leadership development is underway revealing blocks that show promise for improvement. Deondre shared, “Our goal is to find at least one leader per block and get them connected to one another. The leader will be able to spread necessary information to the rest of the block, keeping other community members informed.”

Deondre recognized a generation gap among residents and developed a podcast show that links important accomplishments of the past with emerging possibilities.

For many years I worked for social services agencies in other communities. And one day I realized that help was also needed in my community, and our residents needed to be empowered. That's the short story.

Tina Augustus, Austin Block Club Association Organizer

Thirty years ago, Tina and her family moved to Austin after the birth of her fourth child. We moved “for the building versus the community.” Since 2009 she has run her marketing and communication company, Elevate Services, out of the garden unit of their two-flat. “I started with the Austin Chamber of Commerce in 2012” Now as Executive Director, “I am restructuring the organization.”

Tina started out “attending community meetings and the 29th Ward meetings and hearing residents complain about poor city services, criminal activities that affected senior citizens who lived in the community and who were not able to defend themselves.” Interested in action Tina organized a block club, the Austin Adams Block Club. “I was tired of the disconnect. I started with our next-door neighbors and it grew from there.” Over time one block club morphed into the *Block Club Association* that “encompasses a six-block radius including about 1000 households.” Interested and supportive neighbors improved the security of each block. “We are only as strong as our links.” Tina insists. “The Club Association uses Facebook messages, zoom meetings and email to foster communication and collect information about events that it sends out as press releases.” The Association affiliated with the Fifteenth Police District that Faith-based Organizations Initiative formed 3 years ago. Police attend the meetings. “When you have a team, there is courage within that. It gives others who aren't able to speak a voice.”

Tina believes the best way to discourage crime is to collaborate with others at the grassroots level. “It's the people that make me feel safe. There is strength in numbers. The next person is no stronger than you are.” Instead of retreating from vulnerability we need to embrace what it offers. “Hurt people hurt other people” Tina explains as a matter of fact. As people recognize their shared humanity awakened through interracial activism then real change happens. “George Floyd's death put a spotlight on marginalized Black and Brown people and revealed social injustice. When whites are involved [in anti-racist movements] closed doors start opening.”

We all felt it was important to find and help build resources where these young men could create positive relationships, moving through their lives in the public schools.

George Bailey, Oak Park resident organizer

Writer, artist, educator, musician, scholar — Oak Park resident Bailey is many things, but for the village's young people, he has been their advocate, their friend and their mentor. For the last 15 years, Bailey has volunteered his time to the Oak Park Township as a member of the Youth Services Committee, trying to make sure Oak Park's youth are set up for future success in their adult lives.

Looking out for kids has been Bailey's priority. He even met his wife while she was working at a youth center in Chicago's Old Town neighborhood. When the couple moved to Oak Park to raise their children, Bailey began a mentoring program for young Black men out of his living room with four other men, after noticing the substantial achievement gap between Black and white students. "A lot of those young people didn't have anywhere to go to expend that energy," he said, "which contrasts with white kids who had a lot of places they could go to participate in organized activities."

A year or so after the mentoring program started, Bailey was encouraged to join the township's Youth Services Committee by John Williams, then the youth services director. Throughout their years working together, Williams and Bailey not only forged a close friendship but implemented many programs to enhance the lives of all Oak Park's youth, particularly African Americans.

Williams' successor, Megan Traficano believes that kids relate to Bailey because he can connect with them on multiple levels, using his skills as a musician, educator and artist to communicate with them and help them communicate in return. "With George, they know he's going to listen, he's going to let them finish their thoughts, he's going to be respectful and he's also going to be honest with them."

A longer version of this article originally appeared in the *Oak Park Wednesday Journal*, January 6, 2021

When we look at the judicial system that we currently have in this country, it is not about rehabilitation at all. It is about chastising and keeping that person down because they made a mistake. I have a passion for restorative justice. I view it as a way of life, cultivating relationships and building community.

Edwina Hamilton, Restorative Justice, BUILD, Inc.

Restorative justice motivates Edwina's work in the social services. She started working as an anti-violence counselor with Catholic Charities and eventually joined Broader Urban Involvement & Leadership Development (BUILD) to create restorative justice circles with youth in Austin.

Circles include at most 13 members. Participants learn to listen to others using practical guides borrowed from Native American community dispute practices. For instance, only those holding a designated object may speak. This helps people learn to listen with patience. Circle keepers help members learn how to build community as they take turns. Circles usually meet more than once, at least two or three times. The circle helps turn conversations about a problem or task into a resource for community building. Convening circles to discuss resource mapping, plan an event or grieve the George Floyd murder can provide a social scaffold for restorative justice. The ongoing conversation leads to changed relationships that in turn allow for innovative imaginative forms of atonement.

Edwina tells how a young man damaged a woman's car. She was outraged and wanted money to repair the car. The young man was broke. Both agreed to join a circle and discuss what restitution the young man might make. During the conversations all learned that the man had artistic talent. The woman shared her desire for a large Tinkerbell painting for her garden wall. The shared trust made it possible for the woman to agree to drop her claim for money in return for a garden painting. Edwina explained, "That was the repair of harm, and that was the restitution that she needed."

Edwina has worked hard with a planning team to create a Restorative Justice Community Court in Austin. Progress is slow. She hopes to create a Restorative Justice Community Center in the near term that will offer public legitimacy and support for peace circles and other restorative justice practices. The challenge is "helping the community to embrace restorative justice. Be part of the change."

At Youth Council this past summer we worked on a journalism project “Austin has the mic” in partnership with Youth Westside Health Authority and other local partners. The youth talked to people doing community work and explored what makes their community unique. It’s a long-term project that involves editing and archiving these stories.

Jeremy Mercado, Youth Activist, BUILD,Inc.

Involved in youth programs when he was younger, Jeremy appreciates their importance, and now years later he engages with youth through his position at BUILD in Austin. Under the umbrella of My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) a national program, BUILD is focused on creating safe and supportive communities of collective care that help clear pathways to opportunity.

Jeremy regularly engages with 2 different cohorts of boys, ages 12-16 and 17-21. “The older cohort act as supports, mentors and role models for the younger cohort.” Jeremy works on two teams. One offers enrichment activity and the other leadership development.

BUILD’s after school enrichment opportunities for youth include: work with an artist to learn design, access to a digital studio space to create music or podcasts, story gathering from community members and garden lessons teaching basic horticulture. Recently during spring break the younger cohort participated in a photography camp that culminated in a jointly produced visual project.

The Youth Council meets several times each week contributing to the Learning and Leadership Program. Young participants practice finding their voice, making decisions and leading others in civic engagement activities. These circles of active participation guide all group work. “The structure provides intentionality to the gatherings. When the community gathers we respect the space we have created so youth can be heard and seen.”

Forty years ago, when I first moved into Austin it was a more friendly, positive environment; a thriving community with more businesses, more family oriented. I saw that change. I became an activist to try and recreate that community.

Dollie Sherman, Youth Outreach & Community Revitalization

Austin Coming Together (ACT) recruited Dollie in 2012 as a volunteer youth worker. Founded in 2010 ACT coordinates a network of 50 non-profit, faith-based, public and private agencies. This enables the organization to offer a young person educational and employment assistance while building up self-confidence. “I find it ironic that I am a Youth Outreach Coordinator at my age. I discovered that once you are accepted by one group of youngsters, they beget other youngsters.” But kids not only recruit other kids but each brings family and extended kin into the mix. These intergenerational circles, Dollie explains, “bring in multiple generations of people to have a conversation. This interaction is so people of all ages can understand how different individuals behave, no matter their age. Restore respect so that everybody can listen and understand the other person's perspective.”

Dollie describes how ACT actively fosters intergenerational family programs that use special occasions like Father’s Day and other holidays to reunite fathers and sons often separated by the legacy of divorce and incarceration. Other similar outreach efforts include women and mixed gender circles.

Beyond her work with youth, Dottie contributes to her local Block Club. “There are great and positive things in the community, but people are not aware of those activities.” Reflecting on her knack for community building Dollie comments, “I do not know why God gave me the ability to identify an underdog who is willing to elevate their living situations.” The many people she helps are glad he did.

The greatest strength in Austin is that the people are so resilient. They never stop, they keep on going. People here are so generous and so giving and loving. It's like living in a big little city. I'm not going anywhere soon.

Vanessa Stokes, Photo Journalist, Arts Activist

Eight years ago, at a pivotal point in her life Vanessa moved with her children from West Pullman to join her mother and sister in Austin.

Both she and her sister are the curators of their father, Dorrell Creightney's, 300,000 plus photographs. And In 2017, they combined their artistic sensibility selecting 17 photos from the archive to be installed on two Westside "L" stops. These displays garnered attention. They had selected photos with a particular purpose in mind, "The whole purpose was using these images to show people, regular people, and what they do on a daily basis, and remind folks of who we are—happy people," she said. "We might have our challenges, but we're still regular people, working and living. We wanted to show positive Black images" (*Austin Talks*, 11/20/2017).

A busy woman, Vanessa has her own business, Creative Consulting. One of its goals—is community engagement and she sees herself as a community activist using art and culture. Vanessa insists that more art centers and art spaces are needed in Austin. She takes action to make this happen. "I see great public art here, but it is not maintained or ever changed. We need to create organizations that just focus on art."

Vanessa currently works closely with others to revitalize an empty lot to create "Pop Courts" an outdoor event space to get people out of their houses. She envisions the transformation of this lot will include outdoor seating, food vendors and food trucks, DJs with live music, art projects including murals, and painted sidewalks and streets. The launch is scheduled for June 11th, 2021. There are "not many places in Austin to celebrate, enjoy, and participate in," Vanessa reports. This will provide an "awesome" place to gather, celebrate, eat and play.

The Spoken Word Club is home to a lot of students for a lot of reasons. They come and unpack themselves here. There is an emphasis on student leadership. All Spoken Word participants are active in making decisions for the club. This empowers the students.

Christian Robinson, Spoken Word Teacher & Mentor, OPRFHS

Spoken Word is oral poetic performance art. Founded in 1999, Oak Park River Forest High School's (OPRFHS's) Spoken Word program has grown into the largest afterschool program of its kind. For Christian Robinson, now teaching and mentoring students in this medium, Spoken Word is also his activist practice.

Before attending Oak Park River Forest High School (OPRFHS), Christian had no prior Spoken Word experience. In his freshman year there was a week-long poetry unit in his English class taught by the founder and director of Spoken Word at OPRFHS, Peter Kahn. Kahn has 20 plus years as an English teacher and Spoken Word educator. This one-week immersive unit repeats again sophomore year concluding with a Poetry Slam event. "Kahn brings his faith and skills and reaches out to the students who would be a good fit for Spoken Word." Christian shared, "I was one of those students."

Christian credits Spoken Word for his social and intellectual development. "Most of my friends came from the Spoken Word Club." He also discovered his love for writing. "Kahn's mentoring continued into college, and even until today." Christian returned to OPRFHS in 2018 to work full time becoming "Spoken Word Teaching Assistant" with Kahn.

Christian explains the salience of Spoken Word for learning beyond the classroom. Teenagers do not just absorb knowledge but adapt it to their emotional experiences putting the rhythms of life into the cadences of poetry. "The majority of student participants are students of color—African American and Hispanic. White students also do participate...but for students of color it is a necessary space." Students join just by coming to the afterschool meetings. There is no mandatory attendance. Students who commit to performing in a showcase performance (50-70 students) in a Fall, Winter, Spring cycle sign an accountability contract. Peer pressure assures compliance. Christian observes, "The Club members, they are part of a team, a community, a family."

My journey through Spoken Word at Oak Park River Forest High School (OPRFHS) has laid the foundation for who I am today. To be honest, it scares me when I think about where I would be if I never had started in Spoken Word. My poetry is political.

Anandita Vidyarthi, Political Activist

Anandita, a South Asian American teen, entered Oak Park River Forest High School as a sophomore. She had just spent her freshman year studying at a private school in India. Anandita was surprised when invited to join the Spoken Word Club. She hesitated at first, “I felt uncomfortable in my own skin.” After joining and experiencing the honest exposure of creative work she found herself “most comfortable in that Club’s environment.”

Her first poetry prompt was “color” Anandita wrote about brown. “Since I am brown, and I had just returned from India, I wrote about how colorism affects individuals within their cultures. In my own families, we have varying degrees of color and I am considered a black sheep because I am one of the darkest skinned.” While living in India she discovered that, “My mixed caste background was like being a biracial individual in the US.”

Anandita writes poetry not only as a tonic for self-discovery, but a tool for grasping and understanding social and cultural practices. Creating poetry “penetrates into my current life experience” providing confidence to launch activist efforts. Leveraging her social experience in Spoken Word she created South Asian Youth (SAY). She hoped to create a cultural haven for students like herself who feel torn among conflicting social, cultural and racial norms. SAY is now in its third year at OPRF. When Anandita started college at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) she built on her earlier experience helping cofound ASIAN Ink. This campus organization offers resources for Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander (AAIP) students to embrace familiar shared cultural values while learning ways to cope, challenge and shape the contours of American cultural norms. During the recent George Floyd protests Anandita organized donations, provided care packages/food, and helped facilitate spaces for AAIP individuals to be better allies.

Anandita views defunding the police as a crucial issue. “We hope and pray that it will prevent racial profiling and encourage family stability by not having authorities constantly watching over people of color.” There needs to be a “systemic shift. Young people are fighting for their lives!” Anandita concludes, “My biggest hope is that the next generation will also take on this challenge. I truly respect individuals who try and make a difference.”

When people are asked to share vulnerable things about themselves, it is demanding and challenging. They open themselves to listening to others' questions and curiosities about different perspectives. Understanding what it means to be white or a person of color. Understanding vulnerabilities and how people deal with their own identities.

Clara L., Immigrant & Refugee Rights Activist, Beloved Conversations Facilitator, Unity Temple

Oak Park's Unity Temple (UT) tapped Clara's international relations training right out of school. According to Clara, "I was a liaison between the refugees and church volunteers for UT's Immigrant and Refugee Response Team (IRRT)." This included refugee resettlement for five immigrant families in Chicago including everything from contacting landlords about neglected household repairs to English tutoring for the families. Clara followed up "talking with the families about how they were adjusting to the new environment and checking to see if we had resources they needed." Clara and other IRRT team members also advocate for immigrant rights, offer post-detention accompaniment, and mobilize rapid response to ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids.

In 2017 Unity Temple's IRRT partnered with Saint Christopher's Episcopal Church to provide asylum for an undocumented young man from Guatemala referred to them by the immigration advocacy group - PASO. He suffered with a severe medical condition, and after hospital discharge, became homeless. Clara explained his situation, "Immigration authorities told him to 'figure out where he was going to find food and shelter, and that you will be notified when your court date is.'" Within 24 hours Clara and the IRRT team created a welcoming and secure living space in the Episcopal church basement. UT Congregants agreed to provide meals and importantly arrange social visits to alleviate loneliness. After months of waiting the immigration board granted asylum status. He moved into a transitional housing facility while he underwent needed surgeries.

Clara served as a Unity Temple facilitator in the challenging education program - Beloved Conversations, Clara explained it as a conversational journey "for volunteer members of the church to discuss race and their racial identity but also to try and understand buzzwords like 'anti-racist' and to be more accepting. Participants discuss their own biases about race...everyone is trying to be open and honest with themselves and each other and it stirs up a lot of emotions." Most participants were white and had little experience living in a racially diverse setting. "The listening part was the most difficult... We offer a nonjudgmental space and try to meet people where they are coming from because people come to this group wanting to be challenged" to change.

Clara helps people navigate the practical journey of finding social justice on the borderline of social, national and cultural difference.

You need to be willing to be led. Try and see. What do you need? Have a listening ear. Share, 'We're here, what can we help you with? What is helpful for the community?'

Rabbi Max Weiss, Oak Park Temple, Community of Congregations

Rabbi Weiss joined the Oak Park B'nai Abraham Zion Temple 11 years ago. "When I came to interview with about 300 members of the congregation, they were clear that they were a social justice and social issues congregation. I thought this is a good fit." He learned that many people in Oak Park and nearby Austin congregations shared these values.

"I crossed the bridge into the Austin community when I, along with two other Oak Park ministers, was invited by Pastor Marshall Hatch of the New Mount Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church to a Unity Service to commemorate the Charleston Church Massacre (June 17, 2015) in Garfield Park." The relationship with Reverend Hatch deepened. Together their congregations conducted joint services, Passover Seders and a joint visit to the National Museum of African American History and the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.

Alan Taylor, pastor of Oak Park's Unity Temple introduced Rabbi Weiss to the Community of Congregations that provided a vehicle for activating collaborative social justice efforts. Started as the Oak Park Council of Churches, the organization cultivated relationships with people of faith in adjacent neighborhoods in Maywood, Garfield Park and Austin. The collaborations include for instance, support in the creation of *Housing Forward* the service program helping feed and shelter the homeless, *Celebrating Seniors* acknowledging civic contributions of older persons and now support the *Leaders Network* plans for a local Austin Credit Union.

Rabbi Weiss joined the Board of Directors of the Community of Congregations encouraging members of his congregation to participate. Weiss and his congregants take their inspiration and advocacy cues from the residents and activists on the ground. They collaborate, not dictate.

Tear down the invisible divisive wall on Austin Boulevard and replace it with a bridge.

Pastor Ira Acree, Civil Rights Leader, Leaders Network

Three years old Ira Acree moved to Austin in 1970. “We were the second black family on the block. We experienced the great white flight.” The once prosperous white neighborhood became much less so. The economic decline was accompanied by systemic institutional discrimination and police violence. Ira was only seven years old when 15 police officers beat up his father. Calls for reviving trust in the police falls on deaf ears for Pastor Acree, “It was not there. It was never there.”

Reverend Acree worked with the Reverend Jesse Jackson Jr. on Operation Push in 1999 organizing Rainbow Push West. Pastor Acree had served eight years at a church on Austin Boulevard witnessing the legacy of racial division that the highway had come to symbolize. Later as Pastor at Greater St. John Bible Church in Austin he wanted to do more. Hurricane Katrina in 2005 provided a catalyst. Witnessing the diaspora of African American households displaced by the disaster he and other westside ministers formed a disaster relief effort: The African American Christian Relief Network. The Network raised \$56,000 for World Vision, and organization dedicated to help house and relocate the people displaced.

The organization morphed into the *Leaders Network* becoming a voice of advocacy for the westside - a social justice organization. Currently the Network is pursuing creation of a credit union as a tool for economic empowerment. Pastor Acree harbors hope for the “Soul City Corridor” championed by Malcolm Crawford, Executive Director of Austin African American Business Networking Association. The envisioned cultural and economic hub for African Americans will not only bind Austin together but provide an opportunity for bridging the Austin divide with neighboring Oak Park across the Chicago corridor. “Austin has a history of activism. The people of Austin are resilient. They know how to make the best of incredibly challenging situations. Action does motivate. It brings hope.”

“...that we are each other’s harvest:/
we are each other’s business:/
we are each other’s magnitude and bond.”

Gwendolyn Brooks, “Paul Robeson” from
Blacks, Third World Press, 1984