

University Park Development Corporation

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Memo: Sarah Vradenburg is a Beacon Journal editorial writer. ** Also see the sidebar - Just another weekend in Akron? Think again:

GRACE PARK AT THE ART OF IT ALL

Sarah Vradenburg

What is a city but a collection of neighborhoods surrounding its business and cultural heart? While much of the business of a city takes place downtown, people make their lives in neighborhoods.

Ideally, neighborhoods are places where people's basic needs for food, shelter and community are met regularly. These areas offer a sense of belonging, a human scale sense of attachment that is difficult to find when speaking of an entire metropolitan area. They have names -- in Akron they are called Goodyear Heights, Highland Square, Ellet, Kenmore, Spicertown. They are, in our memories and affection, "the old neighborhood."

But neighborhoods are human creations. They are born, grow and, too often, decline much like the people who inhabit them. Even the best neighborhoods need care and attention to keep the forces of decay at bay. Still, with age, once-quiet city streets grow ragged at the edges, aging houses outstrip their owners' ability or desire to maintain. Once those forces -- some internal, others external -- take hold, the slide is hard to stop. Longtime residents leave, replaced by those who don't have the same sense of history or belonging. Renters begin to outstrip homeowners, stores leave for greener and safer pastures; pride of place grows dull with abuse.

Is it possible to bring such places back, to recreate a sense of place, to till the urban soil so that new families can put down roots?

The **University Park** Alliance is betting millions of public and private dollars that the answer to that question is a resounding yes. Formed in 2000 as a collaboration of the **University** of Akron, Summa Health System and the city of Akron, the Alliance has grown to include other partners with a keen interest in the neighborhoods surrounding the **university** and bordering downtown, among them the Greater Akron Chamber, the Akron Beacon Journal, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority and the Akron Public Schools.

Long a solid, working-class neighborhood with deep German roots, the area surrounding the **university** began to shrink as the institution began to grow. Proud, turn-of-the-century houses were sold outright or rented to growing numbers of students. As the appearance deteriorated, so, too did its quality of life. In recent years the area has been perceived, rightly, as unsafe.

Increasingly, the **university** felt the need to address the plight of this area, but with an eye toward something beyond more student housing. Rightly, the task became rebuilding the neighborhood and rekindling interest to attract both individuals and families.

The newest partner of the **University Park** Alliance brings perhaps the greatest amount of experience to this task. The **University Park** Development Corp. is an outgrowth of the **University Park** Neighborhood Association, a coalition of churches, block clubs and other grass-roots organizations that have been working to improve life in this part of Akron for more than 20 years.

Propelled by the momentum of the **university's** \$300 million construction program and the energy generated by the alliance's partnerships, the **University Park** Neighborhood Association in 2000 created the development corporation as the workhorse for this eclectic, if struggling, area. As an incorporated 501(c)3 entity, the development corporation does the heavy lifting of housing rehabilitation and new construction, creating the physical environment to attract new residents while keeping the old.

But there is more to a neighborhood than houses and sidewalks. It takes people with a personal as well as financial investment to make a neighborhood home. What is the best way to show people an area's assets if they don't already know about it?

Throw a party and invite the city.

The party is the Art Fair at **Grace Park**, capitalizing on one of the **University Park** area's greatest assets, the tree-shaded **park** named for **Grace** Tod Perkins, daughter-in-law of Akron's founder.

The art festival also capitalizes on another of the area's cultural assets, the talent of its artists. Five tents will be filled with more than 50 artists, working in a cornucopia of media, from wood to digital photography, from painting to jewelry, from ceramics to glass, from fiber and wearable art to leather. Many of the artists will offer demonstrations of their work.

Grace Park's physical neighbor, the Akron Art Museum, will have a booth for making crazy hats. There will be origami -- Japanese paper folding art -- and sidewalk art for children. Everyone will get a chance to help UA art professor Mark Soppeland create a large-scale art project on the theme: "How I Spent My Summer Vacation."

The auditory backdrop for the visual arts will be provided by the UA Steel Drum Band, the IRA Jazz Project and the Miller South School Comedia dell'Arte Troupe. Of course, there will be lots of food.

For those with a taste for sports, the Westfield Cup Soccer Tournament is running concurrently at Lee Jackson Field on the **university** campus. But there is no need to choose; trolleys will shuttle people between the art fair and the tournament at regular intervals throughout the day.

Both its past and its present make **Grace Park** the perfect place for this new event showcasing how a venerable neighborhood is rebuilt.

Always beautiful, full of stately oaks, this **park** has had its ups and downs over the past 162 years.

Akron was only 19 when it was donated to the fledgling city by the children of Akron's founder, Gen. Simon Perkins, making it, along with Union and Perkins **parks** -- also donated by the family -- Akron's oldest public **park**. At one time, it was at the heart of the city's civic and social life, numbering among its neighbors the city's most influential citizens bearing such names as Perkins, Saalfield, Miller and Yeager.

Because the city's development grew far beyond downtown, this seven-acre **park** became all but invisible to those whose busy lives took them east and west on Market Street. **Grace Park** struggled for many years with a reputation for crime and vandalism, its historic roots all but obliterated by the demolition of the turn-of-the-century residences and other buildings that once rimmed the **park**.

But many who live, work or worship in the area never gave up on the **park** or on the neighborhood. Supported by the area's churches -- Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Wesley Temple AME Zion Church, First Congregational Church and First Presbyterian Church -- and by the Perkins Street Area Action Group, the **park** is seeing new life.

Flower gardens tended by the churches add dollops of color to the greenery.

A flagpole has replaced the statue of Gen. Simon Perkins, which once towered over the corner of Prospect and **Park** streets but was moved to the **University** of Akron campus.

A rubberized track invites walkers and joggers. The swing set and playground area, once all but hidden on the **park's** east side near the railroad tracks, now has pride of place at the corner of Perkins and Prospect for use by women and children living at Harvest House, part of the Haven of Rest Ministries. The neighborhood now holds annual community picnics in the **park**, and Friday night family movies are becoming a staple.

Slowly but with surer steps, a neighborhood regains its footing. **University Park** Development Corp. literally is banking on the success of events such as the Art Fair in **Grace Park** to reintroduce Akron to some of its forgotten treasures, polished with new attention while retaining the essence of their original beauty.

Illustration:PHOTO: Two MIKE CARDEW / Akron Beacon Journal photos and

Akron Beacon Journal file photo ** MAP: Akron Beacon Journal map; See microfilm or image database

1- Downtown Akron's **Grace Park**, nearly empty earlier this week for Jerome Laramore and his son, Javon, 9, walking their pooch, will be filled with artists, music and food booths on Saturday. ** 2- Napping may be difficult on Saturday under one of **Grace Park's** many shade trees. ** 3- Residents gathered at **Grace Park** in 1971 for a concert and to celebrate the refurbished **park**.