

PROJECT NEIGHBORS

2024 NEWSLETTER

DONATE



www.projectneighbors.org



IF IT'S WORTH DOING, IT'S WORTH DOING TWICE

Paul Schreiner, Executive Director

In 2024, two identical houses were built by the Project Neighbors team of volunteers: Brown Street and Cyrus Street. Both lots are narrow—45 feet compared to the standard 66 feet—which necessitated putting the required parking slab in front of the house.



We broke ground on the Brown Street site in late October of 2023 and completed the house in May of 2024. During that same month, we broke ground on the Cyrus Street house, which we completed this fall. Both houses are 1,200 square foot, single story houses with one bath, three bedrooms, and built on a slab.



These are basic, no frills—but well built—housing. With our tax exempt status (no sales tax on materials and no property tax), and with the benefit of volunteer labor on many tasks, we built these houses for about \$125,000 including the land! With the spike in interest rates, rental costs are higher than we like, but still half or less than half of market rate.

While neither house will make the cover of Architectural Digest, two families will come home each day to safe, comfortable, and affordable housing.

Thank you, loyal volunteers!

A LIFE WELL-LIVED

REFLECTIONS AS RETIREMENT APPROACHES

Paul Schreiner, Executive Director

A life well-lived includes—beyond the necessities of shelter and food—some kind of close relationships, art or creativity, and meaningful work.

Frankly, my experience with Project Neighbors has provided much of all three, but especially meaningful work.

Every morning, I get up early, infused with energy to build, or write, or just clean up a mess, not just for personal gain, but for a higher purpose. Call it religion, or community, or legacy... I do not know what to call it. But it sure beats working for corporate profit.

And while I do this work, others—with enthusiasm and a sense of humor—join in the effort. These people include amazing volunteers who show up week after week and year after year and the Project Neighbors Board of Directors who keep me focused. Beyond my wife of fifty-plus years and my children, these people are my closest friends, and this work is my social life.

Imagine this: a dozen university students arrive at a job site at 8 AM. The concrete has been poured, the forms stripped and hauled away, and all the construction debris gone. The students are there to spread black dirt, seed, and straw over a new lawn. It is hot and the wheelbarrow is heavy, the dirt sticky. By noon, we take a break to eat and then wrap it up by 2 PM. The lawn is in with sprinklers running. There will be a backyard for kids to play in. As I load rakes and shovels into my truck, a student interrupts my work. She is covered in dirt and sweat, with bits of straw clinging to her hair. She says, "Thank you for the opportunity to serve. This was great!"

How can you beat that? And I feel that way every day.



Young volunteers are great, but day-to-day, they are not available. Frankly, for the six months or so it takes to build a small house, the regular volunteers are "the old guys," and not all guys. There is a core of faithful, retired volunteers who do routine tasks. We save the big jobs requiring minimal skills—like landscaping and major clean-up—for the

sororities, fraternities, and church groups with kids, but the framing, flooring installation, cabinetry, trimming, roofing, drywall work...these jobs are done by volunteers who come to the site between seven and eight in the morning. A couple are former tradesmen with polished skills. Other are great analytical people who love a challenge and have to figure it out. All take immense pride in doing the job right. They come with work clothes, knee pads, toolboxes, and a sense of humor. They have become the crew, the workers who make our mission possible, and my friends.

"See you tomorrow," a volunteer says at the end of a work session.

Finally, and most importantly, there are the families and individuals who live in the results of our work. Some have slept in their cars. Some have jammed their entire family into a two-room apartment. Some have couch surfed. All have experienced insecure housing. Rarely after moving into a Project Neighbors house or apartment do folks move out. So, over the years I have gotten to know them. I have seen their children grow up, observed their backyard activity, fixed their leaky sinks (and been thanked), seen the dignity of their lives, and, at times, been present to hold a hand or give a hug.

A rich life.

SOLAR

FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL

Cody Wilson, Housing Director

2024 was a year of doubling down in our commitment to sustainable construction. One means was by bringing solar energy to our residents and offices at Neighbors Place. Along with improving construction envelopes, increasing insulation values, and installing high-efficiency appliances, solar power is becoming our favorite strategy to lower the cost of living for our residents. Solar helps future-proof our projects from foreseeable rising energy costs, and it improves our organization's impact on our local environment.

Thanks to Gilles and several volunteers, we now have solar on Neighbors Place. Since active, we have seen promising signs of the system's ability to subsidize our energy usage and offset our carbon consumption. From June to August, Neighbors Place saw an output of 3.84 MWh of electricity

generated, leading to an equivalent energy savings of \$638. Our summer energy costs decreased by \$200–260/month.

In just the first quarter of this system's operation, it prevented the release of nearly 6 tons of carbon gases into the atmosphere by NIPSCO. Over the expected life of the system, it will impede the release of approximately 720 tons of Co2.



Our solar energy investment, like many of our projects, is a mission that is measured in the way it reveals its effects, but broad in the many ways it impacts our residents and community.

Our most recently completed Cyrus Street home is receiving its own solar energy system to offset energy costs incurred by its residents. We gave care to decreasing the energy consumption in ways beyond solar, too. It will likely be one of the most energy-efficient properties enjoyed by Project Neighbors residents, and it will serve as a field test for future high energy efficient construction methods.

We are now determining which other Project Neighbor homes are good sites for solar. Not only will this ensure that cost-saving renewable energy is benefiting our families who need it most, it benefits everyone in the community who longs to breathe clean air and yearns for environmental justice.

Often, renewable energy systems and strategies are gatekept by economic forces that dictate that only those who can afford them can have them. This market-based approach ignores the fact that, while the whole world benefits from the implementation of renewable energy, for many people, and especially those who Project Neighbors serves, these technologies are out of reach.



Project Neighbors' commitment to environmental justice compels us to pursue a vision of health and sustainability for our residents, our community, and our world. While we seek out opportunities that will support our push for energy efficiency, we know that our community has always been, and will continue to be, the heart of our support for meaningful, justice-bringing initiatives like solar energy systems. Ultimately, with your support and participation, our energy-saving strategies will be a ray of hope for all.

JUST DON'T GIVE UP

Paul Schreiner, Executive Director

When Harley Snyder poked his finger in my chest and asked, "When are you gonna build studio apartments for the men like you did at Neighbors Place and Caroline's Place?" I mumbled some ill-prepared response.

We were at a wine and cheese event at George and Pat Terrell's house to thank supporters of Project Neighbors' efforts in the community. This was well before the election of 2020. My guess is this occurred in 2018. This egg of an idea was laid six—almost seven—years ago.

Harley called me a week later and said, "Hey Paul, if you can get that studio apartment going, I've got an anonymous donor who will give Project Neighbors \$100,000." That got my attention. In rapid fire, here's what happened.

Project Neighbors (PN) agreed to collaborate with Housing Opportunities (HO) to build 18 units on donated land on Franklin Street. Jeff Lewis of Shive-Hattery drew conceptual plans. The Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA) approved the necessary variances in June of 2020. The newly elected Murphy Administration indicated opposition to the proposed plan. HO backed out of the collaboration with PN and sold the Franklin Street property to the City, splitting the proceeds with PN. An alternate site owned by the City on Don Hovey Drive that had been offered to the PN–HO collaboration was given to Respite House for an emergency shelter for men.

Then, Porter County received \$33 million from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). PN applied for a grant to build a studio apartment building and was awarded \$700,000. PN offered to purchase a site west of the former VU law school. VU accepted the offer, but it required a zoning change. We found out that City Council would oppose the zoning change. We then offered to purchase a site on the north side of Highway 30, but we learned it lacked utilities and the City had no intention of providing them. We withdrew our offer.

After the election of 2023, a city official contacted me about the sale of two acres at the intersection of Axe and Nickle Plate Drives. It was a former industrial site for Ralston Paving Company and therefore required variances to be used for residential purposes.

PN offered to purchase the Nickle Plate site pending BZA action. Shive-Hattery created new conceptual drawings in preparation for the BZA. PN, in conversation with the leadership of local American Legion Post 94, agreed to reserve a portion of the apartments for veterans.

On February 20, 2024, the BZA unanimously approved variances necessary to build the 24-unit studio apartment. In March, we received the finalized environmental study and purchased the Nickle Plate site. Shive-Hattery began working on construction drawings. On September 3, 2024, we applied for a building permit from the City of Valparaiso. We now await final site plans from the surveyor and Storm Water Management Plan approval from the Indiana Department of Environmental Management, both prerequisites to obtaining a building permit.

A 24-unit apartment building is a common sense solution to a need: low-income, disabled, or older single individuals cannot afford market rate apartments, but can afford 300-square-foot studio apartments with full bath and kitchenette built and managed by a non-profit.

The estimated total cost is between \$1.3 and \$1.5 million. With the ARPA grant and community donations, we have raised roughly one million dollars.



Architect's rendering of the front and back of the studio apartment building.

Here is where we sit today: with winter approaching, we plan to break ground this spring. Come spring, a seven-year idea will sprout into being, and 24 individuals will soon have comfortable, stable, and affordable housing. You can contribute at projectneighbors.org or mail a check to Project Neighbors at 454 College Ave., Valparaiso, IN 46383.

RECOGNIZING GOOD WORK

On November 7, 2024, Project Neighbors was awarded the “2024 Leadership Award for Diversity and Inclusion” given annually by the Urban League of Northwest Indiana. Receiving the award for Project Neighbors were Rebecca Reiner, Lois Reiner, Jamal Watkins, and Paul Schreiner.



THE FREEDOM RECOVERY FUND CONTINUES TO GROW

Pat Terrell, Board Member

The Freedom Recovery Fund (FRF) was established as a core activity of Project Neighbors three years ago. Initiated by board members who wanted a deliberate response to the growing inequity between Black and White wealth, the FRF was created to address this disparity and build wealth in the Black community in and around Valparaiso through:

- **Personal Incentive Accounts (PIA)** program that couples significant savings incentives with comprehensive financial training provided by Project Neighbors’ partner, 1st Source Bank
- **Young Entrepreneur Grants** that provide support to those seeking to build or expand businesses
- **Merit Scholarships** to encourage continued excellence in academics
- **Emergency Grants and Loans** to help people through rough times as they build their lives in our community

Since its inception, three cohorts of six individuals completed their financial training and were able to receive a four-to-one match of their savings through the PIA program. More than a dozen individuals received grants for their new business ventures. Merit scholarships have been awarded to ten

college students in the community. Grants and loans have been given to scores of individuals throughout the area to address significant emergencies.

The FRF committee, led by Project Neighbors’ Black board members and staff, continues to explore new ways to close the wide gap in opportunity for Black residents in Valparaiso.

NOW SHOWING

PROJECT NEIGHBORS TRANSFORMING...

Let’s go to the movies!

A short documentary film presenting the history, accomplishments, and current efforts of Project Neighbors is now available to watch. The film is the work of Ben, Peter, and Ander Schreiner, adult sons of Paul and Jane Schreiner. Led by videographer Ben, the three brothers interviewed and filmed in early summer and then edited the hours of video down to a 15-minute film.



Trace the history of Project Neighbors: Walt and Lois Reiner’s launch, the early years building Barbara Cotton’s house, initiatives from Hilltop Neighborhood House and HealthLinc to the Freedom Recovery Fund, and our most ambitious building project yet—the upcoming 24-unit studio apartment!



For a presentation of the film to your civic or church group, call Paul Schreiner at 219-405-3070 or email him at schreiner1927@aol.com.

Find the film on YouTube by scanning the QR code or searching for “Project Neighbors Transforming Communities.”

TUNE INTO WVLP

Ken Luther, Board Member

2024 seems to have been a year of unusual peace and tranquility at WVLP. We’ve a pretty stable lineup of shows and no severe technical problems. This is in part due to the great team of volunteers who handle all the programming, and most of all due to the efforts of station manager Gregg Kovatch.

We welcomed two additions to our programming. Cricket's Jazz Club now airs Wednesday at noon and Sunday at 8 AM. Veteran show host Bill Koch returned after a several-year hiatus to fire up his rock and roll show, Center Stage, where he focuses on one artist each week, complete with stories about their live performances. Center Stage airs Thursdays from 9-11 PM and Sundays from 5-7 PM.

This fall, we relocated our broadcast antenna from Front Porch Music to the rooftop of Neighbors Place. This will save a few hundred dollars a month in the digital transmission costs that get our signal from the studio to the antenna to your home or car.

By the time this newsletter makes its way around, WVLP will have held a fall fundraiser in the form of a Radio Marathon, or "Radiothon." Mark Maloney, host of the Mark Mo Show and After Hours, is spearheading this 24-hour effort. This should be a lot of fun, and hopefully you will have had a chance to tune in, and maybe even to make a contribution! Don't worry, no turkeys will have been harmed in the course of this radio event, unlike at our sister station WKRP.

ANOTHER WAY TO GIVE

Paul Schreiner, Executive Director

In October 2024, I received a text message from an occasional construction volunteer—let's call him Nathan. He told me he, with the help of a local attorney, had just written his will, and that upon his death, the deed to his house would go to Project Neighbors to further its mission. I immediately wrote back to Nathan, "May you have a long life! And thank you for your thoughtful generosity."

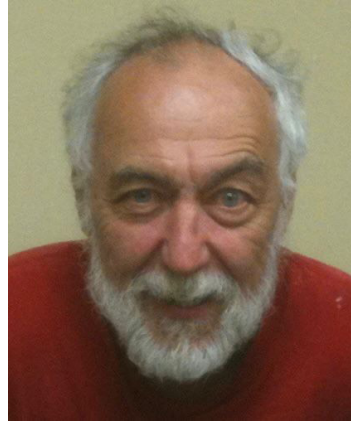
Nathan's action may not be for everybody, but if your situation fits, be assured your act of giving will empower Project Neighbors to ensure affordable, quality housing for many families to come.

THANK YOU, PAUL!

For nearly 20 years, Paul Schreiner has been the most recognizable public face of Project Neighbors. He has been the person that has responded to tenants' needs, organized and worked alongside an army of regular and periodic volunteers, and served as an engaging voice on various WVLP radio programs. Paul has walked the halls and offices of City Hall to seek assistance for building projects, made presentations in large and small events about the unique work of the organization, forged new partnerships to expand the scope of Project Neighbor's reach, and supported and nurtured new ideas emanating from the organization's board.

At the end of 2024, Paul is retiring as Project Neighbors' Executive Director. We are thankful that he will remain on the board and continue to be actively involved in building projects. It is undeniable that Paul's tenure as Executive Director has been one of creativity and growth, and it is worth taking a moment to reflect on his impact.

Project Neighbors was founded in 1969 and functioned for the subsequent thirty-seven years as an entirely volunteer organization, with Walt Reiner serving as the Executive Director. In the late 1980s, Paul started volunteering on building projects, renovating old houses and building new ones. As the former owner of a construction company, Paul brought enormous skill and experience and became a partner to Walt as the projects got more complex and expansive.



In addition to continuing to build housing units, Project Neighbors took on the design and construction of Hilltop Neighborhood House daycare center, the first HealthLinc clinic, a neighborhood restaurant, and other projects. Further, as a Project Neighbors board member, Paul envisioned and led other initiatives, including the establishment of WVLP as a community radio station.

When Walt Reiner died in 2006, the Board asked Paul to consider becoming the organization's first paid Executive Director. He sold his company and risked everything to take Project Neighbors to a new level. Over the past 18 years, Paul has overseen the construction of dozens of housing units for the most vulnerable in our community, led WVLP to become a trusted forum, built new alliances with organizations that have resulted in lasting resources for the community, and brought opportunities for new ideas to grow roots.



Paul has built a strong and creative board and an expansive community of volunteers and supporters. These efforts have resulted in a better community for everyone. Paul is widely respected for his skill, musicianship, eloquence, and willingness to be there whenever needed. He is a friend to all of us and an example of what it means to take seriously Walt Reiner's saying: "If you give up the need for money, power, and credit, the whole world will open up to you."

The Project Neighbors Board of Directors thanks Paul for his leadership and wishes him the best as he moves into his next act.

WELCOME, CARMEN!

We are thrilled to announce our incoming Executive Director, Carmen Vincent! Carmen is an Emmy Award-winning filmmaker and passionate advocate for social justice. Growing up with a pastor for a father, Carmen learned the importance of community service and the value of helping those experiencing housing insecurity.



After earning a B.A. in Digital Media with Christ College honors from Valparaiso University, Carmen honed storytelling skills while working with organizations like NAMI and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Carmen leads a successful business focused on innovative digital media strategies and is excited to bring that expertise to Project Neighbors as our next Executive Director. Join us in welcoming Carmen Vincent!

WHO WE ARE

Staff

Paul Schreiner, *Executive Director*
Dr. Gregory Jones, *Community Partnerships Director*
Cody Wilson, *Housing Manager*
Kate Gong, *Office Manager*

Jan Jones
Lois Reiner
Rebecca Reiner
George Terrell
Willow Walsh
Jamal Watkins
Liz Wuerffel

Board of Directors

Richard Sèvre, *President*
Pat Terrell, *Vice President*
Matt Puffer, *Treasurer*
Ken Luther, *Secretary*
Tina Allen-Abulhassan
Larry Bass
Patrick Dalton

Board Emeriti

Ivan Bodensteiner
Byron Martin
Marge Leoschke
Ed Senne

PARTNER CORNER

NEO'S INCREDIBLE GROWTH AND IMPACT

Rebecca Reiner, *Executive Director, NEO*

When Project Neighbors “gave birth” to Neighbors’ Educational Opportunities (NEO) 13 years ago, no one could have predicted NEO’s rapid growth and scope of our impact. 2024 highlighted this like no other year.

In January, NEO assumed the helm of the adult education programs in Valparaiso (at Trinity Lutheran Church) and in Chesterton, expanding our network of adult learning centers to include sites in East Chicago, Gary, Lake Station, the Porter County Jail, and at NEO in Portage.

With the help of a team of Impact volunteers, NEO completed the first phase of transforming 10,000 square feet of space at NEO into the NEO Training Academy. This space includes a state-of-the-art testing center and will include a 3,500 square foot Makers Space and green jobs training space for community members and NEO’s New Vistas High School and Adult Education students.

In April, thanks to the generosity of dozens of donors and \$1.5 million raised in grants from Indiana United Ways, First Things First, Early Years Initiative, and 1st Source Foundation, we launched the construction of Creekside Early Learning Center at NEO.

In June, we celebrated the graduation of 165 students, now equipped with a high school diploma or equivalency diploma and with confidence and hope for the future. Luke, a recent

graduate, said it best: “I came to New Vistas with little hope for my future. Instead, I found success for the first time and am ready to take the next step forward!”

Fast forward to October and the 9,000 square foot Paths to Quality childcare center is complete and ready to welcome 130 children, ages six weeks through school age!

Finally, we expanded our outdoor learning space to include a greenhouse, patio, and pavilion, that, along with our 20 acres of wet and woodland, one-acre solar field, and garden, give students hands-on, real-life learning experiences.

With 2024 coming to an end, NEO still needs \$450,000 to cross the finish line of our \$2.2 million Rising Up Campaign. This campaign will secure 130 young futures and the futures of our hundreds of high school and adult students. To give, visit: neoadulted.org/rising-up





454 College Ave., Valparaiso, IN 46383



DONATE



www.projectneighbors.org