

Building Multicultural Neighborhood Place in Asylum Hill, from the Ground Up

***Judy Wyman Kelly,
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It's true: everyone is so busy, running from work to home to school to after-school activities and beyond. When is there a chance for us to take the time to honor and celebrate our family and friendships or share our wonderful cultures and traditions with others?

A new Multicultural Neighborhood Place might provide just the answer, thanks to an initiative by the Asylum Hill Neighborhood Association (AHNA) and Hartford Public Library. To launch this new venture, on Tuesday evening, September 16, 2014, over 50 Asylum Hill residents gathered at the Lincoln Technical Institute for dinner and brainstorming about what they envision taking place at the Neighborhood Place. The international diversity of Hartford's population was well represented with attendees from the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Cameroon, Nigeria, Peru, Ethiopia, Burma, Thailand, Bhutan, Nepal, and Albania, as well as the United States.

After self-introductions all around, co-facilitators Linda Bayer and Jim Boucher gave an overview of the project, including slides of urban and suburban neighborhood centers in other parts of the country, and then they opened the floor to discussion. After all, as the co-facilitators emphasized to the group, "It is your work that will make this happen." To that end, during September, October, and November, Asylum Hill residents have the opportunity to participate in one of five focus groups to tease out the why's, how's, and where's of establishing a neighborhood place. To ease communication, the groups are divided into age and language groups: youth, Arabic and Middle Eastern languages, Bhutanese and Nepalese, African languages, and Karen. The series will culminate in a report and celebration over dinner in mid-November, as the various groups come together and share their ideas and visions of a neighborhood place open to all residents.

Yet even at this preliminary meeting, the enthusiasm was evident as participants generated a long list of possible uses for this communal gathering place. There was no shortage of ideas as people suggested a helping center for homework, a location for the elderly to congregate, a kitchen, a place for studying, sports, cultural and arts events, dance classes, employment services, English and computer classes, community theater, and a place to relax.

There was also discussion of the steps involved to make the center successful and sustainable, such as who are the stakeholders, what is the mission statement, will there be by-laws, how will the center be financed and supported, who will run and administer it, and so on. All of these questions will be answered as the process unfolds. For now the journey has just begun.

If you are interested in joining one of the focus groups or helping to make this neighborhood place a reality, please call 860-695-6316 or email: ncaddigan@hplct.org.



Participants enjoying some food, catered by the Lincoln Technical Institute, before the meeting begins.



Padam Bharati of Bhutan interpreting from English into Nepalese and Bhutanese.



Co-facilitators Jim Boucher (standing) and Linda Bayer (sitting, bottom left) leading the group in a lively discussion about the Neighborhood Place.