

History of the Normal Park Neighborhood Association

BY LISA MILLS WALTERS

Introduction

I have a long-held interest in, and affection for, the Normal Park Neighborhood Association (NPNA). Not only was I a longtime resident of Normal Park and one of its city council representatives, I was also a charter board member of the NPNA and long-serving president, secretary, and newsletter editor. I greatly enjoyed my time living in Normal Park, and after more than thirty years, I thought it might be a good time to look at how the association got its start and realize how far it has come.

NPNA Origins

The NPNA held its first general meeting on August 2, 1990. The idea for such a group, however, was born about a year earlier.

Many residents were concerned about traffic speed on Wallace and other streets in the neighborhood. Three of these neighbors, unaware of the existence of the others, independently contacted then-Ward Two councilmember Mike Homel for assistance. Mike, knowing there was strength in numbers and seeing an opportunity for the neighborhood, suggested that they get together and present a petition to the city council, at the time headed by Mayor Clyde King. As the three neighbors worked on this, they realized that they had other goals and interests in common and that other neighbors probably did, too.

The first newsletter was published in May 1990. At this time, the three volunteers proposed an association that would give residents the opportunity to socialize with each other and through which they could “improve the safety, quality, and appearance of our neighborhood.” The newsletter also explained in detail the traffic/pedestrian concerns of the neighborhood and stated the exact wording of the petition.

Official Beginnings

Both the idea and the petition, which was submitted to the city council that June, were a success. By the time the first NPNA meeting was held in Edith Hefley Park on August 2, 1990, new stop signs had already been installed. Residents quickly got to work on plans to write a charter, elect board members, clean up Recreation Park, and deal with issues regarding the party store on Congress Street near Summit. In January 1991, eleven neighbors and I volunteered to serve on the board, with Cathy Vlisides serving as the first president. We created committees to deal with neighborhood watch, Recreation Park, membership, fundraising, social events, and other issues. Residents were invited to inform the board of their concerns and what they saw as the role of the association.



Sign at one of the four corners of the neighborhood

Creating a name, logo, and signs for the association made for some interesting discussions. The new board determined the general boundaries of the association to be West Cross to the north, North Mansfield to the west, South Congress to the south, and North Summit to the east. “Normal Park” is the legal description of much of this area, specifically from North Wallace Boulevard east; the west part of the area is platted “Orchard Park.” Because of the history of the Michigan State Normal School (now Eastern Michigan University) and the fact that the majority of neighbors lived within the area designated as Normal Park, we went with that name.

Next we discussed the signs that would be posted at the four corners of the neighborhood. One board member and wag suggested that our signs read “Abnormals, Keep Out!” We went with more welcoming text and a picture of what we considered a typical Normal Park home; it was actually inspired by the Nickels home at 311 North Wallace. The signs were erected in 1992 and were funded in part by a grant from the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation.

These signs were our way of announcing that this neighborhood had an identity and proud residents. Previous to this, the neighborhood was sometimes called “the older west side” or just identified by its boundaries. Unlike, for example, College Heights, it had never had an official name. But it wasn’t long before real estate agents were touting the area as one of the city’s most desirable, and within only a few years it was rare to find a city resident who was unfamiliar with Normal Park and its neighborhood association.

Projects and Activities

Through the years we dealt with a few transient issues, such as the party store and excessive street noise, but for the most part, the NPNA focused on its goal of improving the

neighborhood. Probably our most ambitious project was the restoration of Recreation Park. For that, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to neighbor Carol Leyshock who worked tirelessly for many years on park improvements, including a jogging path and playground equipment. Carol and her husband, Rick, also spearheaded the project of returning to its former glory the Rose Garden east of the Senior Center.

Highlights of the NPNA's early days were the annual winter holiday kick-off parties at the Senior Center and the June picnics in Rec Park. Our neighborhood watch program, including block and street captains, was called "the most well-organized and comprehensive" in the city by our then-police chief. (This took some serious planning and a bit of time in the days before email and internet communication, when everything was accomplished via telephone and door-to-door canvassing.) We took part in the Heritage Festival parade, with longtime board member Jim Hetzel in the guise of A. B. Normal, sporting a conehead and carrying a sign promising higher taxes and fewer services ("a promise I can keep!"). We were charter members of the Adopt-a-Street program, and for its significant efforts at improving our environment, the NPNA received an Ypsi PRIDE award in that event's first year.

The annual neighborhood yard sale each June was, and continues to be, an extremely popular event, drawing shoppers from as far away as Toledo and Grand Rapids. Some have called it a very sophisticated recycling system, where items go from neighbor to neighbor, year after year. In 1996, we got the idea to hold a "bargain sale" at the Senior Center the next day, all of the proceeds going to the restoration of Recreation Park. After the regular sale on Saturday, neighbors would bring their unsold goods to the center where volunteers would organize them. We knew from the start that it would be much too complicated to try to price everything and total the cost at the end, so we opted for an easier way with this slogan: "Take what you want and pay what you like." This proved to be a huge success. Of course there were people who would carry out boxes of stuff and hand us a dollar, but just as often someone would take one book and give us \$20. I specifically remember one woman who bought little and donated a lot, saying, "The enjoyment was priceless." The first year's bargain sale brought in \$750, and our total in 1997 was \$1062.12. The "pay what you like" plan worked very well and accounted for the unusual dollar amount ending in twelve cents; many people simply emptied their pockets.

The association's quarterly newsletter informed residents of neighborhood news, local



NPNA in the 1990 Heritage Festival parade. Jim Hetzel, a former president of the NPNA, is on the left.

elections, houses for sale, nearby babysitters, kids' play groups, local concerts and events, and reports for various committees, such as zoning/ordinance, fundraising, membership, and greenscape. The physical newsletter itself is indicative of the growth of the NPNA. We started with a half a page. By 1994, we were printing an 8 x 14 sheet, and in 1997 we had so much news to share that we enlarged our newsletter to a folded 11 x 17 piece. Our number of social events grew, with additions like the Ice Cream Social in 1997, Halloween parade, and Night of Lights. A real estate agent in the neighborhood generously covered the printing costs of many years' worth of newsletters, and a stalwart group of volunteers delivered to homes on their streets.

Quarterly meetings held at the Senior Center featured a variety of speakers on diverse topics like landscaping, Halloween safety, historic preservation, city government, wild birds, homeowners' insurance, and city ordinances. Speakers included such local luminaries as Tony Dearing, managing editor of the *Ypsilanti Press* edition of the *Ann Arbor News*; Barry LaRue, historic preservationist extraordinaire; then-newly appointed City Manager Ed Koryzno; Washtenaw County Circuit Court Judge Kurtis T. Wilder; Alan and Barbara Saxton, local experts on lawn and garden care; then-police chief Len Supenski and several officers; Steve Gross, well-known antiques dealer and auctioneer; Jane Schmiedeke, Historic District Commission chair; Bill Nickels and me, local post-card collectors; and neighbor Lois Katon, who presented a wonderful history of the neighborhood from decades past. This presentation was videotaped and a copy was given to the Ypsilanti Historical Society.

Normal Park was not alone in its desire to create its own identity. Other neighborhood associations sprang up across Ypsilanti: the Historic South Side Neighborhood, located just south of downtown Ypsilanti; the Historic East Side Neighborhood Association, which serves the neighborhood area just east of Depot Town; the College Heights and University Estates Neighborhood Association, located west of Eastern Michigan University; and the Riverside Park Neighborhood Association, serving the area on the west side of the Huron River. In 1997, the NPNA board met with members of these other associations to form Ypsilanti Neighborhoods Organized Together (YNOT?)

Continuing Success

Those of us who have been involved since the beginning are proud of the NPNA's accomplishments and, especially, its longevity. Before 1990, neighbors in many areas of the city often formed alliances when there was a problem to solve. Usually, and often in spite of good intentions, once the problem was solved, the association disbanded. This was not the case with the NPNA, where one of our earliest goals was to enjoy the neighborhood and each other, not just to tackle problems. In 1994, shortly after the city downsized from five wards to three, the *Ann Arbor News* published lengthy profiles of the new wards. I remember one phrase that read something like "In Ward 2, where a neighborhood

association still thrives more than four years after forming.” As then-president, that line pleased me greatly.

And the association continued to thrive. In 2000, the State of Michigan joined with us in celebrating our tenth anniversary; in addition to a proclamation from the Ypsilanti City Council, declaring August 2, 2000, to be “Normal Park Neighborhood Association Day,” we also received tributes from State Representative Ruth Ann Jamnack, State Senator Alma Wheeler Smith, U.S. Congresswoman Lynn Rivers, and Governor John Engler.

As the decades have passed, new residents have volunteered to replace those neighbors who have moved away or grown older, and the board has continued to benefit from an influx of new members with enthusiasm and new ideas. None of the charter board members still live in Normal Park. Some have passed on, some still live in Southeast Michigan, and others have moved out of state. But I know that we all have fond memories of the association and enjoyed our years in such a wonderful neighborhood.



Tenth anniversary cake, July 2000

A Note on Sources

Sources for this account include mainly the author’s personal recollections, supplemented by issues of the NPNA newsletters, copies of which are available at the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives. All images were provided by the author.

About the Author

Lisa Mills Walters moved to Ypsilanti in 1979 to attend graduate school at EMU. In 1980, she married Eric Walters; they raised three sons and lived in Ypsi for thirty-seven years. During that time, Lisa was elected to City Council; was a founder and long-time president of the NPNA; served on the boards of the Ypsi Heritage Foundation, the Riverside Arts Center, the Ypsi Community Choir, and the Historical Society Archives; was a member of the City’s Recreation Commission and Community Promotions Commission; and served as manager of the Friends of the Library Bookshop. She was employed by EMU from 1987 to 2015, first teaching in the English Department and then as the Graduate School’s thesis/dissertation reader. Lisa and Eric retired to Palm Springs, California, but maintain a summer home on Ypsilanti’s Ford Lake.