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Local settlement house organizers spreading 'Good Neighbor' mission

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Staff photo— Rod Aydelotte

Volunteer Lilly Ettinger waters the garden in the backyard of the Good Neighbor House, a building that organizers wish to transform into a hub of community activity and service outreach. Ettinger is one of the "settlers" who help maintain the property.

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Good Neighbor House donations

The Good Neighbor Settlement House, 2301 Colcord Ave., will serve as a community hub for art and musical performances, educational programming, spiritual services and social outreach in North Waco.

The nonprofit group's board of directors seeks more than \$100,000 in donations to renovate the property to have it include a free café and library, community-use kitchen, meeting and classroom space, rental living quarters for volunteers who will oversee the center, and various building code improvements.

The shabby building on the corner of Colcord Avenue and 23rd Street has quite a distance to go in realizing Waco-area residents' vision of a hub for art, education, spiritual service and social outreach.

Asbestos must be removed from the 3,000-square-foot building. A new roof is needed. The windows could stand to be upgraded. And walls and rooms have to be renovated. Organizers think all of this work will cost more than \$100,000.

Then the center can be used fully as the Good Neighbor House, a nonprofit facility that fosters community activities and encourages social service among the area's residents.

But the looming list of construction projects hasn't stopped the group's organizers from being good neighbors anyway.

"We're trying to make the contacts we need in the neighborhood while we're raising funds," said Laine Scales, a higher education professor at Baylor University and the

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visionary driving the effort.

Last spring, the backyard hosted a Cinco de Mayo celebration for residents. Then for Halloween, organizers passed out candy and supported the holiday-themed block carnival

spearheaded by the Sanger Heights Neighborhood Association.

A group of residents has hosted Sunday evening worship services in the yard. Board members are in the process of organizing an evening running club to spread the message that the surrounding North Waco area is safe for outdoor activities.

Volunteers have set up vegetable gardens in the backyard and handed out the organically raised crops to neighbors and visitors to the Waco Downtown Farmers Market, literally sowing good will and encouraging interest in the house's mission.

"There are places where communities can meet and do meet right now, and those are traditionally churches and schools, but that also comes with the context that you have to believe a certain way to be friends or to see each other," said Dustin Morrow, president of Good Neighbor House's governing board and a resident in the surrounding neighborhood.

"When you meet people, you have compassion for them and you understand their situation, and then you lose some of the judgments and stereotypes that you had," he said.

Settlement history

The concept of the Good Neighbor House is based on Scales' research into settlement houses, centers created in impoverished communities during the late 19th and early 20th centuries where volunteers lived and worked to empower residents and families.

"This is different in that you're living in a neighborhood that's already established and you're making community with neighbors who are diverse. They're from different walks of life, different socioeconomic backgrounds, different races," said Scales, who also taught social work for 17 years.

"We think that if there's a place that people will come out of their houses to something we all love — music, art — then we'll get to know those neighbors . . . so it becomes a kind of common ground-building kind of place as well."

Plans for the building include a cafe and library with free coffee or tea and Internet, a kitchen that could host events or cooking classes, and meeting and classroom space that could support art classes, language lessons, musical performances, and community gatherings, as well as the residential space on the second floor for the volunteer "settlers."

Lilly Ettinger, a student at Baylor's George Truett Theological Seminary, became the first official settler for the Good Neighbor House in September. She lives in a neighboring home Scales previously lived in and rents out while the main Good Neighbor House awaits repairs.

Ettinger lived near campus as an undergraduate but wanted to live outside the "Baylor bubble" and be part of a true residential neighborhood community.



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She has helped care for the gardens and transform the yard at the Good Neighbor House, which was covered in gravel when it once was a child's playground. And she has spent time walking the neighborhood to get to know the residents and share the plans and dreams for the facility.

"It's more work than I think I expected, but it for sure has been an amazing opportunity," Ettinger said. "We've got a great group of visionaries, but there's been a change to be much more practical, take things one step at a time and complete them to get going."

Scales purchased the now 90-year-old building in 2011, a year after the city green-tagged it because of neglect and damage caused by vandals. The building was used as the Jack and Jill School from 1939 until the mid-2000s, when a private owner ran it as a day care center, but it was closed by the end of the decade.

Diverse settlers

Eventually, the Good Neighbor House will accommodate up to 10 settlers and their families who will live on the second floor, in Scales' rental home, and in a garage apartment behind the main building. The settlers will have to make a one-year commitment to renting those spaces and volunteer at least 10 to 20 hours a week overseeing the property and assisting with programs.

"Our preference is to have people from all different areas of interests, because to have a community, you need everybody having something different to offer," Scales said.

"It's also an education of the settler, so that the settler is being formed in a way to understand things in a much deeper way than if they were just doing a charity event or service day, so we expect that this will be a really important formation time, whether they're students or not, whether they're young or old."

Ettinger said the goal is to complete the transformation of the yard by this summer with help from groups like Baylor's CHI's Service Organization.

Scales said the asbestos removal and first-floor renovations may cost around \$60,000, while the construction for the whole building could tally up to as much as \$125,000. The board is seeking in-kind and financial donations to complete the work and open the interior of the house to the community.

The group already has invested about \$50,000 in improvements to the property, including the yard work and fixing the foundation on the house.

"There's a lot of stuff that's happened behind the scenes that's hard to make visible until we can really start construction," Morrow said. "The next step is the asbestos abatement and then fixing the roof, and then once those things are done we can start clearing out the space and have someone in here (demolishing) walls."

Good Neighbor House donations

The Good Neighbor Settlement House, 2301 Colcord Ave., will serve as a community hub for



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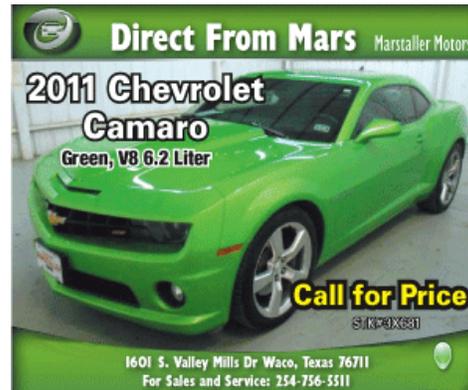
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For more information or to make a donation, visit www.goodneighborwaco.org.



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