



NeighborWorks® America

# CREATIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



Community Housing of  
Wyandotte County  
Bright Spot Case Study

April 2018

Working Together for Strong Communities





EPIC Clay Studio

Photo credit: Diosselyn Tot-Velasquez

## RESIDENTS SOW SEEDS OF COMMUNITY CHANGE

**Creative community development strategies are especially effective at bringing residents together and motivating them to take ownership of the changes they want to see in their neighborhoods.**

When the motion activated floodlight Steve Curtis had recently installed in his backyard started blinking on and off in 2011, he thought gang members had tagged his garage. When he peered out his window, he saw a surprising scene. Families had hopped out of their cars to admire four newly painted murals in his alley in the St. Peter’s neighborhood of Kansas City, Kansas. The Art Squad, a group of teenage volunteer artists, had recently painted a skyline at dawn, a circus scene and a landscape inspired by Van Gogh’s “The Starry Night.”

Curtis works for NeighborWorks network member Community Housing of Wyandotte County (CHWC), which over time has learned that creative community development strategies are especially effective at bringing residents together and motivating them to take ownership of the changes they want to see in their neighborhoods. Working alongside residents, the organization has spearheaded many creative community development activities over the last seven years, including murals, a garden, a farm, a park and a ceramics studio. By participating in these fun and engaging activities, residents experiment, take risks and learn problem-solving skills. Through these activities, the organization regularly takes the pulse of the neighborhood, evaluates their impact, and imagines new approaches to addressing critical community issues.

**Art allows individuals to express themselves, see the world differently and practice problem-solving.**

## **Building community and engagement**

Community Housing of Wyandotte County serves families and revitalizes neighborhoods through financial counseling and homebuyer assistance across Kansas City.<sup>1</sup> However, Curtis, who serves as the organization’s director of community building and engagement, and his small team of 2.5 FTEs (including himself) specifically work in five neighborhoods on the east side.<sup>2</sup> Beginning his first day at the organization in 2010, Curtis worked to use art to engage neighbors around community issues. As a photographer himself, Curtis understands how art allows individuals to express themselves, see the world differently and practice problem-solving. He also was aware of the many young people who left Kansas City in the 1980s and ‘90s due to lack of opportunities. Curtis worried about the next generation of local leaders.

Diosselyn Tot-Velasquez, who now heads CHWC’s arts programming, started volunteering at the organization when she was 12. At first, she filed documents, translated materials into Spanish and filled in for the secretary. One day, Tot-Velasquez remembers, “Steve came in and asked, ‘Do you want to get out of the office?’ I said ‘yes’ and we went out into the community and haven’t been back since.”

## **Creating many ‘ripples’ with murals**

Tot-Velasquez and three other teenagers who lived in the community formed the Art Squad in 2011 as part of CHWC’s community building and engagement work, focusing on gang graffiti and the insecurity kids often felt in neighborhood alleys. The Art Squad started as part of the Community Alleyway Renovation and Engagement initiative and soon the team covered several garages with colorful murals. Since that initial project, the Art Squad has painted more than 50 murals in several alleys across the neighborhoods served by the organization.

Tot-Velasquez and Curtis now notice that more people walk through the alleys. In tandem with this increased positive activity, they’ve witnessed less vandalism: “We used to repaint [our] murals over and over again [because they got tagged], and now nobody touches them,” Tot-Velasquez explains. She recently decided that the Art Squad’s



**An Art Squad mural**  
Photo credit: Steve Curtis

1 “Community Housing of Wyandotte County: Rebuilding Our Neighborhoods,” Community Housing of Wyandotte County, accessed September 19, 2017, <http://www.chwck.org/>.

2 “Home,” Community Building and Engagement, accessed September 19, 2017, <http://cbe-kc.org/>.



**An Art Squad mural**

Photo credit: Diosselyn Tot-Velasquez

**The murals provided opportunities for Art Squad members to practice problem-solving and to develop into community leaders.**

murals also can serve educational purposes. The squad's latest works feature images that highlight the importance of environmental preservation, a healthy diet, neighborliness and recycling. Kids from the local elementary school asked to paint the image in conjunction with their efforts to raise money to buy recycling bins for the neighborhood. They raised enough money to equip 100 residents with bins and now recycling trucks regularly do curbside pickups, something they didn't offer before.

The murals also provided opportunities for Art Squad members to practice problem-solving and to develop into community leaders. When it first started the Community Alleyway Renovation and Engagement initiative, the Art Squad cold-knocked on doors to ask if residents wanted murals painted on their garages. When Curtis then told the members to paint the murals freehand, they were "scared to death," he said. "They went from not believing they could do it to suddenly realizing they had power over that [fear]."

Since those first few murals, the Art Squad has initiated other projects, like holding art classes in the park, applying for grants to help fund their projects and attending a NeighborWorks America Community Leadership Institute.<sup>3</sup> Members also serve as role models for neighborhood youths by attending college and pursuing related careers. An example is Tot-Velasquez and her growing staff role at Community Housing of Wyandotte County.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "Art Squad," Community Building and Engagement, accessed October 9, 2017, <http://cbe-kc.org/art-squad/>.

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**An Art Squad mural**

Photo credit: Metris Arts Consulting

Over the years, the four original Art Squad members have recruited friends to help with the organization’s art projects and now the team has evolved into a collection of young artists that includes students from the local high school and the University of Kansas.

When residents agree to a mural, Art Squad members ask about their experiences in the community and design images based on these stories. This act of listening shaped the way for how Tot-Velasquez thinks about her work.

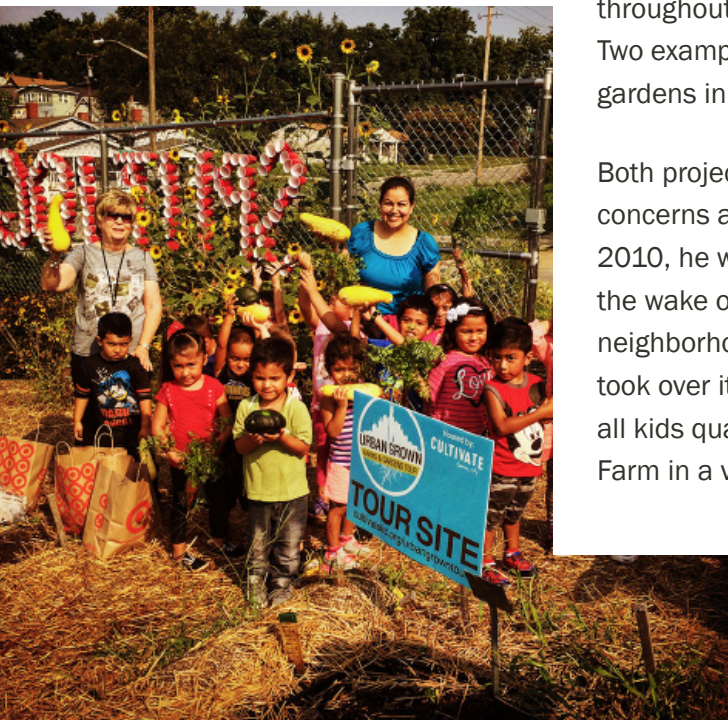
“We don’t come in and think we have solutions,” she explains. “We come in and try to get to know who we’re working with and what could be possible.”

People seem more invested in the project if they feel like they’ve been heard and understand how the project can lead to results they desire, adds Curtis.

## **Transforming empty lots to vibrant gardens**

**Splitlog Farm**

Photo credit: Steve Curtis



The Art Squad now can’t keep up with demand and residents sometimes paint murals themselves, a pattern that has played out throughout CHWC’s other community building and engagement projects. Two examples are Cathedral Garden and Splitlog Farm, two community gardens in the St. Peter’s and Bethany neighborhoods, respectively.

Both projects came about because Curtis heard residents express concerns about the lack of fresh produce and many vacant lots. In 2010, he worked with local youths to construct Cathedral Garden. In the wake of its success in increasing accessibility of healthy foods, neighborhood residents, including students at the local high school, took over its maintenance. In the Bethany neighborhood, where nearly all kids qualify for free or reduced lunches, CHWC staff created Splitlog Farm in a vacant lot next to the elementary school, which Curtis saw as

**In addition to affordable produce and productive use of vacant space, Curtis and his team hoped these projects would build social cohesion—encouraging residents to meet, work and learn together.**

**Waterway Park.**

Photo credit: Steve Curtis



a natural partner. Last year, students grew and harvested 1,600 pounds of vegetables, some of which went right into their school lunches. With a recent \$100,000 grant from the Kansas Health Foundation, CHWC and its partners, including KC Healthy Kids, will build a greenhouse equipped with hydroponics. The organization hopes this new technology will allow students to supply their school with all of its vegetables during the school year.

In addition to affordable produce and productive use of vacant space, Curtis and his team hoped these projects would build social cohesion—encouraging residents to meet, work and learn together. At Splitlog Farm, for example, Burmese and Nepalese elders teach youth about their culture through the food they harvest.

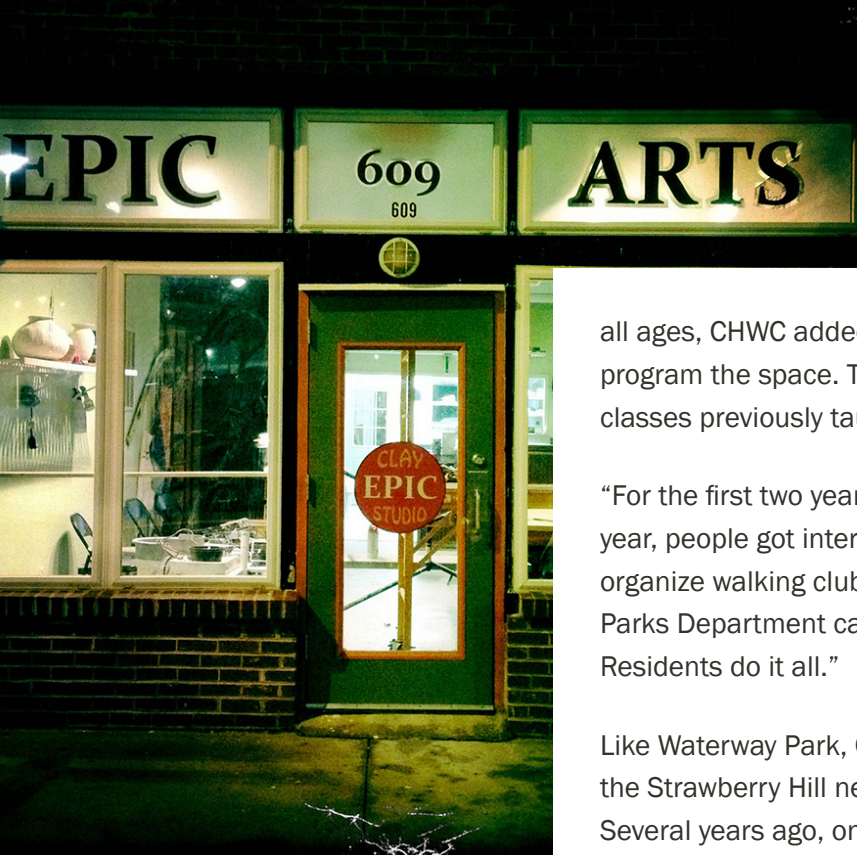
The hundreds of volunteers involved in these two projects indicate successful community engagement. How does the organization attract volunteers? Curtis says people want to volunteer in spaces where they feel comfortable; plus, being offered the opportunity to sample produce and honey “sweetens” the experience. In addition, as residents see positive physical change in their neighborhoods, they’re more likely to want to be involved in the transformation.

Finally, Curtis and Tot-Velasquez live in the neighborhoods; residents see them as neighbors who face the same issues as other residents, which leads to higher levels of trust and engagement.

### **‘Re-activating’ spaces to spur increased use**

Not all of CHWC’s placemaking projects start with a blank garage wall or an empty lot. In the case of Waterway Park and EPIC Clay Studio, the nonprofit redesigned older properties to create places where residents want to gather.

In 2008, the city renovated the 100-year-old Waterway Park. However, there was insufficient community engagement and the park “was a nice place, but no one would go there,” Curtis explains. He and his team observed how people used the park and worked with a landscape architect to create a space where neighborhood residents wanted to hang out, exercise and meet new people. With help from volunteers of



**Epic Art Studio**

Photo credit: Diosselyn Tot-Velasquez

all ages, CHWC added hundreds of trees and plants and then set out to program the space. The nonprofit started walking clubs and moved art classes previously taught on street corners into the park.

“For the first two years, we had to do everything. But after the third year, people got interested [in pitching in],” Curtis says. Neighbors now organize walking clubs, the YMCA facilitates soccer clinics and the Parks Department cares for the plants. “We don’t do anything now. Residents do it all.”

Like Waterway Park, Curtis saw an empty CHWC-owned storefront in the Strawberry Hill neighborhood as an asset in need of some work. Several years ago, one of Curtis’ friends needed space to store no-longer-needed pottery wheels. Curtis realized it was an opportunity to enliven the space and allow neighborhood kids, specifically those with special needs, to learn to make ceramics. Plus, local children lacked safe, structured spaces to hang out.

In 2011, after more than 1,000 hours of volunteer help, the organization opened EPIC Clay Studio. In partnership with local artists and a related nonprofit, CHWC gradually is expanding the studio’s programming to serve kids, seniors and other community members. This past summer, Tot-Velasquez organized a summer art camp at EPIC for a fee of just \$5 per participant per week. She quickly reached capacity. Recently, Kansas University’s School of Architecture moved into an adjoining storefront, also owned by CHWC. The nonprofit gives the university the space rent-free, so faculty and students can “get off of campus and put boots on the ground,” explains Curtis.

Kansas University works with CHWC and other community nonprofits to facilitate charrettes that allow residents to participate in planning programming and exposes youth to the field of architecture. CHWC also wants to develop an artist-in-residence program using the empty apartments above the EPIC studio and the university space.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ **Creative community development activities can help accomplish multiple objectives; however, they may need to change over time.** The Community Alleyway Renovation and Engagement initiative started as a program to engage teenagers in two community issues: graffiti and safety. The results? Less graffiti, safer alleys and empowered young leaders. Today, the program strives to achieve an additional objective: to teach how to positively affect the neighborhood. Community Housing of Wyandotte County remains responsive to community members' needs and adjusts its creative community development strategies accordingly.
- ▶ **People get involved when they feel heard, see results and have fun.** CHWC needs lots of volunteers to get projects off the ground and stay in operation. Volunteers will offer more than 3,000 hours of help this year, doing everything from planting trees to teaching classes. When neighbors see their concerns addressed through positive change, they're more likely to get involved. Plus, Curtis and his team work hard to create welcoming and fun environments in which to volunteer, as well as offer special perks. For example, volunteers at Splitlog Farm sample honey and EPIC's instructors get free studio time to work on their own art. Because residents and other partners feel ownership in CHWC's initiatives, the organization can sustain and grow its creative community development work.
- ▶ **Nonprofits must take advantage of existing assets in imaginative ways.** CHWC knew the community lacked safe places for kids to gather and recognized the opportunity offered both by the need for pottery-wheel storage space and the empty storefront. Neighborhood kids hadn't expressly voiced a desire to learn ceramics before EPIC opened, but Curtis believed in the power of art to positively engage youth. In the same vein, the organization saw vacant lots as assets that could help solve the problem of healthy food access.





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