

Growing in Community: John's Story



"I am John McNamara. I'm a gardener at Paradise Community Garden, the best named garden in the area. I am an individual who has always – how do you say – moved to my own beat. That was something that was instilled in me by my dad. I've always been geared towards spiritual gain and being a very nonmaterialistic person. I realize there's more to be gained out of life than fattening the wallet and talking about what I have; I'd rather talk to my neighbors. I'm very embracing and accepting of my community, and I just want to give back.

I have lived on the Eastside since 1999 and became aware of the Allen Neighborhood Center back in 2013. At first, I needed access to a phone in order to call in for unemployment insurance. Eventually, thanks to a wonderful woman by the name of Barb Laxton, who was an absolute saint here, I got a free phone; an 'Obama phone' if you will. I also got assistance in terms of applying for SNAP when my income was insufficient. So that helped put food on the table. I also had assistance in finding a place to get my taxes done for free, issues with landlord and rental problems, help with applying for jobs, and I got signed up for Medicaid. The Allen Neighborhood Center has always been with me and backed me up when I needed help. Indeed.

In the time that I have known about the Allen Neighborhood Center, it has grown tremendously and expanded its horizons. It's a great asset for the community. If anybody was interested in truly understanding this place, come in here! Take a look at it! I challenge whoever is thinking of

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going ahead and making an offer of assistance whether it's monetary, physical labor, or community service, come in here and see what you can experience.

Come here on a Wednesday when you can hear the music playing at the farmers market and you can realize the soul of the place. Look at the people who come in – a vibrant neighborhood coming together. This place is like a magnet for the community. Come in here when you are waiting to get some help, and observe what the outreach staff is doing for others. You will see an array of issues that people are facing, and there are folks here who are willing to listen and guide them to resources that will help them. I've come in here and seen women who were connected to the Women's Center up on Michigan Avenue. People who were homeless and were given information about shelters. People who needed food and were signed up for SNAP and referred to BreadBasket. It's hard to go ahead and on the spot think of everything in all of my experiences coming in here, but it's pretty impressive in terms of the philosophy of being an asset in a community – an asset in so many different ways when neighbors need someplace to turn.

How dare I forget the GardenHouse down at Hunter Park. If you are in the middle of the winter blahs in January and want to make a visit to Rita O'Brien and lift your spirits, you can go ahead and walk around and see some green. On Wednesdays there is a Senior Discovery Group and people in their older days having a chance get out of the house and be part of the community and get informed! Kids come here for programming and there's even Market Walk where folks can learn that there is more to life than electronics and staying inside.

The overall attitude of ANC is shown in their willingness to sit down and listen and help with an incredible level of sincerity. You find that all the time here. In this day and age, they are a godsend. All too often in our very hectic world there aren't people who are willing to give of themselves in that way. Allen Neighborhood Center shows people of all ages and all backgrounds that there is more to life than wanting what your neighbors have. The center gives people of all ages and all backgrounds acceptance and the ability to go ahead and grow; whether it be digging your hands in the dirt and grow, getting out and exercising, coming here and talking to local farmers, or growing in community. I just get excited coming here.

ANC will steer you where you need to go. They will give you answers, they will give you their time, and they will give you their hearts, collectively. You have an opportunity to go ahead and be a better, more positive person because of the Allen Neighborhood Center. Absolutely."