

Growing in Community: Matt's Story



"My name is Matt Jason and I live here on the Eastside. I'm a teacher at Lansing Eastern High School, a brewer, a business owner, and a father. I'm an Eastsider, which means I'm all different things, I guess.

I came to this area in 1993 to go to MSU. By 1996, I was living here on the Eastside and just really fell in love with it. You live in the city and there are all kinds of people around you. For some people that's kind of unsettling; there are people who aren't like you, right? But I – I dunno – I have really grown to appreciate and love that. On my block there are several people who have PhDs, there are professors, high-ranking folks in government...and then there are folks who never graduated from high school. There are folks who come here from war-torn areas. The Eastside feels sorta like a gritty Sesame Street. Most of the people are really nice and they're curious, and some people are a little odd and a little different. I remember growing up as a kid in a middle class, white, suburban area. Watching Sesame Street I thought it looked so cool. So when I came to the Eastside, I was like, 'This is what I saw on TV! I love this!' It's been such a great thing for us, for my family, to live amongst all these people. I think a lot of people look at the Eastside and in some ways, it's what they think of when they think of America. There are problems, there is poverty, but it really strikes me as what truly is America. Sesame Street is slightly contrived, but the Eastside is naturally real.

My wife Corie and I had been interested in travel, so we went to Japan from 2000-2001 where I had an exchange teaching position. When we came back, we bought our house on the Eastside. Within a few months we somehow met Joan - I think she saw we were a family and had young kids and she was excited to see us in the neighborhood. Then in 2004, Corie became the market

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manager for the first season of the Allen Farmers Market, and since then, has been on the board. I volunteered; I would come and help out at the market because I found it had such a fun atmosphere. My sons have gone through or are still in Youth Service Corps. They love it. Henry, our youngest, especially loves cooking with YSC, and he'll come back that same day and want to cook for us. That's awesome! I feel like we've always been involved with ANC in some way.

For the past year and a half, Jeremy Sprague and I have been running our business, Sleepwalker Spirits and Ale, in a 200 square foot brewery in the back of the kitchen in the Allen Market Place. The business model is that its community owned – which is fairly unique especially in the brewing industry. A key part of our business plan is that we are organized as a corporation, but are approved by the state to bring on up to 100 investors; the typical corporation can bring 25 on. We did this because we wanted different people to be a part of the business, and for less of an investment than what is normal for a typical brewery. For us, it was not only a fundraising tool, but a way to have a business that was representative of all kinds of people. Right now we have 56 investors. Soon, we'll have a pub space and a manufacturing space right around the corner from our current taproom. Sleepwalker's motto is 'dream. play.' and that came out of the rough translation of Sleepwalker in Japanese. It really is what this whole thing has been for Jeremy and I: our origin was during conversations as he went off to work at night as a musician and as I was ending my day as a teacher, and you know, this is a dream of ours but we never forget to have fun with it. We're trying to build a new livelihood for ourselves. Being here at the Allen Neighborhood Center, we're constantly being connected to people. There are so many opportunities with ANC that we would not have had anywhere else. This has been a great launching pad to start and grow from.

I think about everything that happens here, and it's hard to put it all into words. There was a concert here the other night, and there was a food pantry and then a farmers market a few days prior. There are kids in the kitchen making salsa, there are seed starting workshops, seniors holding meetings every week, and even kids making garden boxes. It truly is a vibrant and amazing place.

I've met a lot of different staff, AmeriCorps Members, interns, and volunteers over the years, and they all leave their mark on this place - they bring their personality and their traits, but then when they leave, they take part of it away with them. I'm a different person because of the people I've met and the things I've seen here. I've seen it grow for over 12 years now, and it just amazes me. I feel like the word diversity is thrown around so much, but the Eastside truly is, and ANC truly symbolizes that.

I believe that in the future we will need more Allen Neighborhood Centers. I think people want to live in a gritty Sesame Street. ANC is a model for how we can continue to cross boundaries, break down walls, and help people live together.”