

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Walnut Hills in Cincinnati, Ohio. The image is dominated by large, bright yellow, three-dimensional block letters that spell out "WILL WALNUT HILLS" in three rows. The letters are positioned over a dense urban area with a mix of residential houses, commercial buildings, and green spaces. The lighting suggests a bright, sunny day, casting shadows from the buildings and trees. The overall composition is a striking visual metaphor for the title of the article.

# WILL WALNUT HILLS

➔ TO HEAR KEVIN WRIGHT AND A HOST OF NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVISTS TELL THE TALE, THE RESURRECTION IS NIGH. BUT IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME COMING.

BY ALYSSA KONERMANN

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICK LOHRE

# RISE AGAIN?

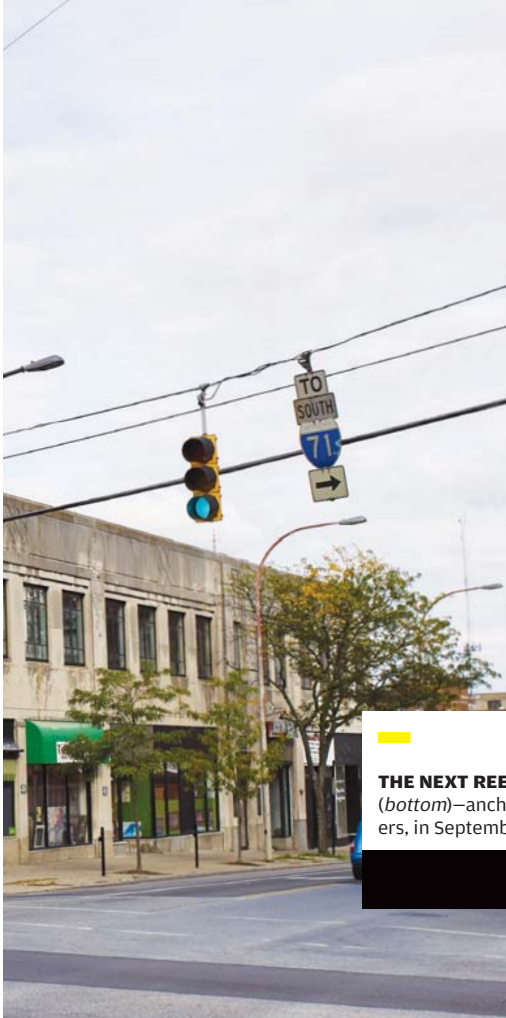
An aerial photograph of a city, likely Washington D.C., showing a mix of residential and commercial buildings, streets, and green spaces. Overlaid on the image is the text 'RISE AGAIN?' in large, bold, 3D yellow letters with white outlines. The letters are positioned in two rows: 'RISE' on top and 'AGAIN?' below it. The perspective is from a high angle, looking down on the city.

# SEPTEMBER 12, 1940:

A NEW-MODEL FORD PULLS AWAY from the curb and heads west on East McMillan, passing a woman who's little more than a blur on a bike. A man stands still, just a few steps into the street, debating his next move as pedestrians weave around him on the sidewalks and streets. Streetcar wires web the sky. Peebles Grocery closed nine years ago—so it goes when a depression hits—but the corner building has already been remade: Under a towering spire advertising the Paramount Theater, the rotunda at Gilbert and East McMillan sports window signs for Franklin Life Insurance Co., Paige Beauty Salon (air conditioned!), and McDevitt menswear shop, with full window displays and large striped awnings. *Turnabout*, starring Adolphe Menjou, is currently playing just down the block, and a tangle of signs and cars and people and shops stretch on beyond the camera's frame.

**SEPTEMBER 12, 2015: IT'S BEEN RAIN-**ing all day, and a deep chill hangs in the air. A few couples walk hand-in-hand up Park Avenue; a drum beat thumps through the walls of the Brew House. It's 7:45 p.m. and Music Off McMillan is underway. A man leans and wails on a saxophone in front of Cuts Plus barbershop, standing on freshly poured sidewalks under the glow of bright new streetlights. Up the street another guy settles back in a chair, his gaze and electric guitar notes fading into the Kroger parking lot. Further than their sound can reach, an acoustic guitarist stands outside of Fireside Pizza's open sliding stacker doors. He's got one avid listener sitting next to him, while the rest keep warm inside. Down around the corner at The Greenwich, a neighborhood mainstay for two decades, the night's closing band prepares to play, while the bar seats fill up across the street at Angst Coffeehouse.





**THE NEXT REEL** The Paramount building—in 1940 (top) and 2015 (bottom)—anchors Peebles Corner. Long-neglected by previous owners, in September WHRF purchased the building for redevelopment.

**I** **N 1960, THE POPULATION OF** Walnut Hills was 20,658. In 1980, it was down to 9,907. And in 2010? 6,495. Although there may be fewer of them these days, the resident leaders—old and new blood alike—are fiercely committed to the neighborhood and its renewal. They’re serious about doing it *their* way, a.k.a. the Walnut Hills Way. That means not wiping the slate clean to build a shiny new place to play, not disregarding the existing residents, not sacrificing the historic character and diversity of the neighborhood, not accepting any development without first taking a close look at what it will ultimately entail. Yet it also means a dogged effort to jumpstart the Walnut Hills economy, to again fill the sidewalks and storefronts and homes, to build anew on vacant land, to re-energize a once-prominent part of town. It’s one neighborhood’s effort, anchored by the dedication of a few longtime advocates and propelled by a recently reinvigorated redevelopment foundation. But it’s also a grand experiment in whether equitable urban redevelopment is possible—here, or anywhere.

It’s early May, a so-this-is-climate-change kind of warm day. At a sidewalk table outside of Fireside Pizza, one of those leaders, Fred Orth, describes his plans to reinstate a 79-inch-tall, 3,979-pound bearded green limestone man across the street, in a vacant lot he’s transforming into Green Man Park. Carved by David Hummel (the stonemason whose work can be seen at City Hall and the Eden Park reservoir pump station), Green Man held court at that corner of East McMillan and Chatham from the 1880s until the building it was a part of was unceremoniously knocked down in 1991.

Orth has been a neighborhood fixture for some time: He bought up several brownstones on Morris Street in 1973 during a spate of foreclosures, though it took a few years to get them rehabbed and into the hands of friends. “Nobody would loan on them because the neighborhood was

redlined,” he says. “*They don’t do that,*” he adds, sarcastically referring to the bankers he approached back then, though that practice most definitely had a hand in shaping the neighborhood’s present. Orth persisted and has been active in Walnut Hills ever since. Before leaving to tour the park and visit Green Man at his temporary home at HGC Construction, Orth hands over a thick green plastic pen emblazoned with perhaps the most bold and hopeful marketing slogan for any of Cincinnati’s 52 neighborhoods: *Historic Walnut Hills 200 Yrs of Diversity Just North of Eden.*

**W** **HEN LYMAN BEECHER** showed up in 1832, the river-boat was king, Cincinnati was booming, and land north of the Ohio was indeed a kind of Eden to the more than 2 million slaves in the antebellum South. The boom was so big that back east, the powers that be worried these western hinterlands would become lawless free-for-alls without some moral oversight. Thankfully, the Presbyterians were on the case. Beecher came to run Lane Theological Seminary, founded in 1829 on land carved from Reverend James Kemper’s farm, Walnut Hill (where Thomson-MacConnell Cadillac stands today), with his family—including his 21-year-old daughter, Harriet, whose book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* would eventually cause such a public uproar about slavery that Abraham Lincoln reportedly called it “the book that made this great war.” What happened at Lane went on to influence how Walnut Hills would identify itself far into the future.

With the Emancipation Proclamation still three decades away, public opinion in the North was split on the institution of slavery; even when white citizens were against it, they leaned heavily toward the concept of repatriation and colonization—re-purchasing Southern slaves and shipping them back to Africa. This was problematic not only logistically but in its fundamental ignorance of the slaves’ humanity. “That prejudice, that racism—this is what lit up [Lane seminarian] Theodore Weld,” says Chris DeSimio, president of the Friends of Harriet Beecher Stowe House, which operates the home today. “So when he came here to look for a place to ‘win the battle of the West,’ he was going after colonization.” Weld sponsored a

series of debates over 18 nights in February 1834 to argue the issue of colonization vs. abolition, the first known public discussion of the issue *anywhere* in the country. More fiery revival meeting than prosaic public assembly, it caused something of a scandal and attracted boisterous crowds. In the end, the seminarians, who came to be known as the Lane Rebels, resoundingly voted for immediate abolition, and also went to work among the free black population downtown, treating them as equals. This made the seminary's trustees nervous enough to forbid any more public talk of abolition, so the students left Lane and carried their fight to Oberlin College.

Nearly two centuries later, this past feels quite present for many in the neighborhood, little known as this particular slice of history may be to the city at large. Kathy Atkinson—by all accounts and introductions a feet-to-the-fire sort of force, the very face of tough love—has been working in and for Walnut Hills since 1993. She started by tutoring high-risk teens through her then-job at New Thought Unity Center and eventually went on to spearhead a grant project that resulted in the Vision 2010 plan, agreed upon and codified by both the Walnut Hills and East Walnut Hills community councils—a first.

“What happened in that corridor—in Lane Seminary, in the Stowe House—is *who we are*,” she says, her voice filling with emotion. “But so many people don’t know that story. So that’s what we work for. Then you have Ferguson, then you have Baltimore—and then you have your

neighborhood. So we have to be that place. We started that story. We just have to keep writing it. That’s why I do what I do.”

What Atkinson does is constantly fight for the renewal of Walnut Hills, and for that renewal to unfold equitably, whether dealing with the physical impact of the new I-71 interchange or the social impact of a new housing development. “We have to tap into the soul of the neighborhood—and yet be very practical about how,” she says. “You can’t just go around and expect everyone to want to fund your recovery based on somebody else’s history. You have to be a vital part of the history you’re writing today.”

**I**T'S 9:45 A.M. ON A WEDNESDAY in the middle of July. Jackhammers are already making a loud racket on East McMillan, busting up concrete and laying the work for the new sidewalks, trees, lighting, and signage coming to the block—the kinds of things urban planners get *really* excited about but will take residents a while to fully appreciate. Just past Kemper, two guys in cherry pickers carefully repair the 120-year-old masonry on the facades of Phase 1 of the Trevarren Flats project. Out back, drywall is hoisted through windows as a century's worth of debris is piled into a dumpster. “These buildings were *bad*,” says Bobby Maly, chief operating officer of Model Group, which is running the gut rehab that will turn the three (long unoccupied) buildings into 30 market-rate apartments and 7,000 square feet of commercial space. “They took on a ton of water. There was fire [damage], asbestos, mold, lead—all the good stuff.” Construction started in February, and it’s moving fast: To meet historic tax credit and investor demands,



they only have until December 31 to get a certificate of occupancy.

Getting this project going was critical for the Walnut Hills Redevelopment Foundation (WHRF). What they’re aiming to do—breathe new life and economic activity into an urban neighborhood that has suffered decades of disinvestment, in a way that respects its character and existing residents—has not been massively successful as a municipal gambit, here or elsewhere. The story, according to Kevin Wright, the executive director of WHRF, typically goes that “as a place begins to change and people begin to move in and investment begins to occur, the soul of the community—the culture and the history—is pushed aside. The question becomes how do you move the community forward in a way that respects that soul?”

Wright and his colleagues at WHRF are determined to find out. So far, the leading strategy has been to create and shape a specific sort of demand, which allows WHRF some leverage over what will fill

**SLOW BURN** Fireside Pizza opened in September 2014, in an historic firehouse barely saved from the wrecking ball.





**GOING UP** Construction is underway on Phase 1 of the Trevarren Flats project (two of the three buildings are shown here).

PHOTOGRAPHS: TREVARREN FLATS (LEFT) ALYSSA KONERMANN, (RIGHT) AARON M. CONWAY; FIRESIDE PIZZA (LEFT) ANDREW STAHLKE, (RIGHT) AARON M. CONWAY

it. The foundation’s aim is to attract businesses (Wright invokes Fireside Pizza and Angst Coffeehouse as two prime examples) that see something—aesthetically, demographically, geographically—in the neighborhood’s bones; something WHRF’s events, such as the Five Points Biergarten, have helped to facilitate. “They’re not choosing it because it’s the next Over-the-Rhine, the next Northside, or the next Hyde Park. They’re choosing it because of the people, because of the community,” says Wright. “The gentrification problem isn’t going to get solved easily, but I feel like that’s [a start].”

The fact that Walnut Hills already had a thoroughly discussed and documented community vision—the result of years of work, with resident and stakeholder input, wrangled by Kathy Atkinson—certainly doesn’t hurt, and neither does her continued eye on things. It’s no secret that Walnut Hills has grappled with high unemployment and generational poverty for decades. A Community Building Institute assessment earlier this year put the neighborhood’s unemployment rate at 25.4 percent for adults ages 16 and up—with staggering rates for the young (45.2 percent for 16- to 24-year-olds) and black (35.8 percent for black adults vs. 6.6 percent for white adults)—and noted that 46.3 percent of families lived below the poverty line. To chip away at these seemingly intractable issues, Atkinson helped

coordinate a job bank with Model Group and other community organizations to put neighborhood residents to work on Trevarren Flats (which the developer says has been successful), and WHRF ran a youth ambassador program this summer with funding from Easter Seals.

Model Group’s approach to development suits what WHRF is trying to do: They’re for-profit, but with a concentration on neighborhood transformation. They prefer to work in areas that have been on some level neglected, areas that make most banks run the other way when it comes to loans. And they don’t go at it piecemeal. “What we get excited about is trying to figure out what pressure points are there. What specific buildings or types of projects can we do to have an impact?” says Maly. “How can we start to recreate a sense of place in a block like this that has a lot of vacancy and blight?”

Which explains why they went straight for the heart: Peebles Corner. “To have your front door have a high degree of vacancy and boarded-up buildings—that affects the rest of the neighborhood,” Maly says.

Model Group also didn’t jump in clueless: The city, WHRF, and the Port of Greater Cincinnati Development Authority (with help from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation and Place Matters funding), have been strategically acquiring parcels on the corner and along East McMillan (see the map on page 60). Plans for future phases of the Trevarren project—encompassing the southeast and northeast blocks of Peebles Corner—are in the works. “We would not be doing this if it was just a one-off,” says Maly. “Not only would that be bad business, it would defeat the purpose of what we’re really trying to do, which is to be a part of a complete redevelopment of this corridor.”

**T**HE BOTTOM LINE IS BUSINESS, and there are reasons—in the bedrock and the buildings—that developers are paying attention to Walnut Hills. The first rule is always location, and that’s been to the neighborhood’s advantage since its founding, when those with means began leaving the basin for the ‘burbs. It’s minutes from both downtown and Uptown, with easy access to the east and west sides. It also has really good bones. There’s stunning historic architecture. There’s Eden Park. There’s Krohn Conservatory (and the Cincinnati Art Museum on the edge). It was built as a dense, walkable urban neighborhood—all the trigger words for *what the market wants now*. Less tangible but no less significant, says Maly, is the “tremendous support and community buy-in for what they want to do. The WHRF is doing a lot with a little. I think that’s all because of good leadership with the community. There’s no such thing as unanimous consent, but I would say 90 percent agree on 90 percent of what general direction they want to go in.”

*“How do we bring in new investment but not do the gentrification route and kick everybody out?” Laura Davis asks. “It’s definitely harder.”*

On top of that, there’s diversity—in race but also in age and income, hitting all steps of the ladder from extreme poverty to extreme wealth. “I can’t think of another neighborhood in Cincinnati where everyone kind of just lives in the same environment and gets along for the most part,” says developer Ed Horgan of AGID Properties.

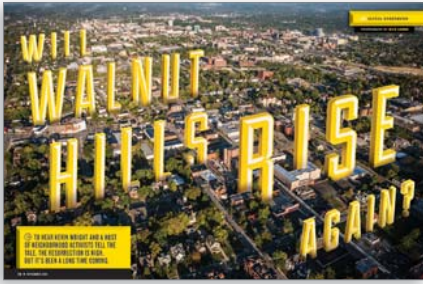
“It happens that diversity, from a purely economic standpoint, is also a really valuable brand because it’s so different,” says Kevin Wright.

And this list of reasons? It’s the same that many residents cite for moving to or staying in the neighborhood.

Horgan • CONTINUED ON PAGE 105

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first invested in Walnut Hills in 2000, buying and rehabbing a 36-unit apartment building at the corner of Park and East McMillan. “[It was right near] the business district, and even though it had fallen upon hard times, you could still walk to the grocery store, the library, restaurants, the dry cleaner, the bank—there were still plenty of core assets that a lot of business districts in town don’t have. So that got us excited,” he says.

And excited they stayed: About three years later came a large condo conversion near Eden Park, then the renovation of the historic Cooper and Verona apartment buildings into condos, which they completed during the recession. In the past few years, and with new partners, Horgan has renovated two abandoned buildings into apartments and retail spaces opposite Beck Paint & Hardware (itself a neighborhood institution since 1959), and plans to rehab 15 apartments and five storefronts on the next block.

The opening of Fireside Pizza is viewed by many as a linchpin in the recent spate of development. Fire Company No. 16—the oldest firehouse still standing in the city—had no roof, no second floor. Vacant and abandoned since 1976, it was slated for demolition until a perfect storm of Fred Orth, then–Vice Mayor Roxanne Qualls, and developer Kent Hardman (who also owns buildings next door and across the street) combined forces with WHRF to change its fate. With help from the city, it was stabilized in 2012; two years later, Fireside began serving beer and wood-fired pizza to hungry neighbors.

Ceramicist Laura Davis is a decade into being a business owner in Walnut Hills. When she opened Core Clay in 2005 in a former thrift store on Gilbert just north of Peebles Corner, she had no further designs on real estate. But then she was able to pur-

chase the apartment building next door in 2009, followed by the Brew House (with her brother) in 2012. Sitting in her pottery studio, she is candid about why redevelopment in Walnut Hills can be such a fraught undertaking. “How do we lift people up who are currently here *and* bring in new investment, but not do the gentrification route and kick everybody out?” she asks. “It’s definitely the harder way.”

Things take longer, too. Her real estate agent told her she was crazy when she bought the space for Core Clay, but Davis was convinced Walnut Hills had a future. She’s watched it grow in fits and starts, only recently seeing changes come to fruition. “There are *huge* social issues” in transitioning a neighborhood, she says, which she’s found herself mired in with her refresh of Brew House, moving too fast for some and too slow for others. She speaks frankly, but not without empathy: “I want a good quality I can be proud of. We just redid the menu and I’m thrilled. But we had to raise the prices.” And encountered some resentment. “It’s: *You’re going to lose your customers if you raise the prices. But I’m paying them to eat the food right now,*” she says. “So I’m not going to keep doing *that*. And I can’t redo the storefront because I can’t get new customers in.”

She goes on, acknowledging the larger issues hovering over the neighborhood’s rebirth. “It’s so hard. I don’t know what the answer is. The history of how people were treated is unfair. But I do know that Walnut Hills is trying really hard to [redevelop itself] fairly.”

→ **WALNUT HILLS WAS THE CITY’S SECOND** downtown, a major streetcar transfer point, a shopping district. “It was the suburbs up until the suburbs became the suburbs,” says Charles Dillard, who returned home to run his medical practice in the neighborhood from 1975 until 2008. He is 80 now. “I grew up here on Burdette,” he says, pointing out the front window of Mardi Gras on Madison, the new Cajun restaurant on DeSales Corner, where he’s covered the table with historic photos. “That was during a time when black people had difficulty getting houses, but my father was a doctor and somehow we lived on Burdette.” He remembers the Paramount and Orpheum

theaters in their heyday, the stores and restaurants and delicatessens that surrounded Peebles Corner—so-called, the story goes, because an enterprising grocer bribed streetcar drivers to use his store, built at the corner of Gilbert and East McMillan in 1883, as the name of the stop.

In 1930, Walnut Hills’s census tract 21—the southwest quadrant near Florence Avenue—housed the highest density of Italians anywhere in the city. “When I grew up,” says Dillard, “we were always told *Don’t cross Gilbert Avenue*. Because they called that Little Italy. And we’d get beat up if we’d cross [into] Little Italy. It was an Italian slum, really—poor Italian families poured into that particular area as they immigrated into the U.S.” Meanwhile, tract 36—the northern part of the neighborhood—was nearly 90 percent black, matched at that point only by the West End, a fact Dillard attributes to Lane Seminary’s tolerant stance in welcoming former slaves to the area.

Barbara Furr, longtime librarian of the Walnut Hills Branch, volunteer coordinator for the Stowe House, and a founder of the Walnut Hills Historical Society, says that from very early on “there was a small black community here because Kemper was one of the few people to rent or sell land to blacks—we’re talking from the early 1800s on.” When Furr moved to the neighborhood in the early ’60s, she remembers Graeter’s, Woolworth’s, a Chinese laundry, and pony kegs all nearby. “It’s always been a place you could walk,” she says.

“We used to come to Walnut Hills on Saturdays to go shopping at Peebles Corner,” says Kathryn Gardette, former WHRF board chair and current Walnut Hills Area Council president, whose voice has a lyrical rhythm that immediately gives her away as a singer. She navigates a mental map of her visits: Ebony Records, Thatched Roof jeweler and seamstress. Later, when she moved to the neighborhood in the mid-’80s, “it had a lot more people. There were businesses all along here. The beauty salon, the pool hall, three meat markets, poultry places, fish markets, a fruit and vegetable market.” She remembers going to parties thrown by artists who lived in the old Trevarren building. Some places had started shuttering—which many attribute to the

## WILL WALNUT HILLS RISE AGAIN?

business district's conversion to one-way streets, as well as a continued pattern of urban flight. But to those living there, the decline of Walnut Hills was gradual, not a jarring, singular event.

"When you're in the midst of something, there's not a demarcation that you can say, 'Oh that happened *then*,'" she says. "It was more of an evolution until you realized that we had blocks that were no longer occupied."

→ **THE IMPACT OF INTERSTATE 71 IS ONE** thing that most everyone agrees hurt Walnut Hills: The highway came in and *there went the neighborhood*. Although spared the wiped-off-the-map fate of swaths of the West End and Evanston, when I-71 came through in the '70s East McMillan and Wm. Howard Taft were switched to one-way streets, forcing drivers to shoot through Walnut Hills as fast as possible. Which, it turned out, was not exactly great for business. So the neighborhood fought

with the city for almost 20 years—paying for a study, then being told *No, it's not feasible*, again and again—until finally their two main drags were switched back to two-way traffic in October 2012. According to Gardette and others, that simple traffic change seems to have turned the clock back for the business district.

Neighborhood leaders and the WHRF spent years developing a form-based code to ensure future development along the new two-way streets fit their vision. Jeff Raser, a principal architect at Glaserworks and a key consultant for the code, describes its aim as preventing bad architecture ("Not aesthetically; I mean buildings like Kroger"—with large blank facades and off-street entrances—"that create an unsafe place and are bad for economic development," he says) and allowing good architecture ("Mixed-use buildings that are up close to the sidewalks, just like the old buildings"). The new code also gives the community the authority to determine

the size and type of buildings—which will soon be evident in new construction along East McMillan.

Crime is not always as quick to change as plans for the landscape, however, and Walnut Hills still has its fair share. According to District Four Police Captain Maris Herold, it stems from a few specific street segments, addresses, and violent offenders. The statistics since 1997 show an overall peak in crime in 2006, with most categories (except theft) on the decline since. Poor-bordering-on-absent property management is the critical issue, Herold says; it allows crime to cluster, gives gangs a foothold, and drains police resources.

Case in point: the Alms Hill Apartments. Opened in 1891 and expanded in 1925, the Hotel Alms was a regal place: the ballroom, the WKRC broadcast studios, the Tokyo Garden and Mermaid Lounge. But in the 1980s it was converted to 200 units of public housing under the Housing Assistance Payments program and has per-

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sisted on various Department of Housing and Urban Development subsidies since. For decades the building's tenants have endured neglectful out-of-town owners and a laundry list of health and safety violations. The city has fought a long battle against its blend of blight and bad living conditions, ultimately leading to a search-warrant inspection last December (resulting in 29 pages of infractions) and a lawsuit set for trial next month.

Herold says many problems start at the Alms and spill over. In September there was a shooting at the Alms's front door, and days later, another shooting in the McDonald's parking lot nearby. (Both incidents are still under investigation.) Yet the District Four captain's outlook is positive. "I think Walnut Hills has a really bright future," she says. "They're very strong as far as neighborhood leadership, concern, and activism. I think we clearly understand what we're up against and we're addressing it, with data and with partnerships."

→ **SOME PEOPLE HAVE ONE BOSS. OTHERS** maybe two. But the number of elected officials, funders, and neighborhood board members who can lay claim to the title Acting Supervisor of Kevin Wright just keeps growing. Fred Orth talks about regularly sending him articles about things happening elsewhere that he'd like to see in Walnut Hills (like Whole Foods's announcement about a lower priced chain of stores—why not here?). Kathy Atkinson just shakes her head. "Poor Kevin," she says. "When he first got hired, we would have lunch or breakfast once a week because I would have to say, 'You have to understand the neighborhood's story. You don't have to do it the way we've done it, but you have to know how we got here and where we want to go. It's not your vision; it's ours.'"

At this point, Wright seems to have accepted his fate. When I ask him how he handles the situation, he just laughs and shrugs: "Yeah, I have like 75 bosses." But it's not a source of resentment. "I've learned so

much," he says. "If Kathy hadn't been there, if Kathrynne hadn't been there, if Clarence [Taylor] hadn't been there, if Fred hadn't been there—I probably would have been the inexperienced sort of urban planner who was just like *Get out of my way, we're going to do this*. I'm kind of a put-my-head-down-and-get-shit-done person. They've embraced that, but said, *Respect this piece or Respect that piece*. I can't imagine waking up every day for 30 years and fighting like they've fought and never seeing much change. It's unbelievable."

WHRF has been through its own ups and downs. Founded in 1977, its first 28 years are now recalled more for a lack of focus, dearth of resources, and occasional ineptitude. Positive things still happened—musician Ric Hordinski opened The Monastery, a recording studio and performance space, in 2005; Parkside Café filled the space vacated by Frisch's in 2007—but generally without the group's direction or assistance. Then in 2010, Greg

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## WILL WALNUT HILLS RISE AGAIN?

Loomis stepped in to assume the role of WHRF's executive director, and projects and partnerships were set in motion. But when Loomis passed away suddenly in August 2011, those in charge of WHRF's future were left to wonder if it would even have one. There was a six-figure budget deficit from the recession, along with heartbreak and disillusionment.

Wright came on that October, his first stop in a second career as an urban planner. He walked into WHRF's office on May Street and found a three-ring binder with Loomis's meticulous notes and little else. Over the past four years Wright has worked hard to find funding, added four full-time staffers, and shown that the group can do a lot with a little (their 2015 operating budget was \$550,000). Wright doesn't punt when it comes to the challenges and tensions that come with WHRF's role, either. Over coffee in February, he laid it out: "We had these listening sessions last year, and there's a trust issue." Residents didn't know what—or who—WHRF was, and were suspicious about what they were up to. So the organi-

heard, eventually cofounding Elevate Walnut Hills to bring residents who might otherwise not have a voice to the table. Does she think WHRF is conscious of trying to preserve the neighborhood's pre-existing diversity and community bonds? "It took them a while," she says. "Had you asked me this question two years ago? *Hell no*. But I think they're really understanding the tenacity of this community. They needed a punch in the face. And Frankie was the punch in the face."

From what Young sees, "there's excitement because things are happening. There's anxiety because neighbors are changing. There is fear, because, for me, the price of rent is going up. There are so many mixed emotions going on. And I think we need to be sensitive to those feelings. On both sides." She praises Fireside Pizza for keeping things friendly, mentioning their intentional choice to keep a \$2 beer among the craft selections and a \$6 pizza on the menu—something Angst Coffeehouse has mirrored with its "beer it forward" neighbors-buying-drinks-for-neighbors idea.

## "I HAVE LIKE 75 BOSSES," SAYS WRIGHT. "I CAN'T IMAGINE FIGHTING LIKE THEY'VE FOUGHT FOR 30 YEARS AND NEVER SEEING MUCH CHANGE. IT'S UNBELIEVABLE."

zation moved its office to a first-floor space on Peebles Corner, and has continued its many-tentacled work of planning weekend music events and input sessions at the same time that it's closing multi-million dollar development deals.

WHRF hasn't been without its critics—or at least its skeptics. Frankie Young spent her early years in Walnut Hills and moved back in 2007 to be closer to family. "When all of this stuff started happening, I admit, I was so angry and so bitter, like *You guys are trying to gentrify Walnut Hills and I hate you people!*," she says. "I had to take a step back and say, *Hey, relax Frankie, no one's trying to gentrify Walnut Hills*. Things change, it happens."

After testing the waters and being frustrated by what she felt was a lack of inclusivity at a few events, Young made her voice

Of course there are people who've had to move out of Walnut Hills due to rising rent, a fact that is discussed somberly. Regardless of race or economic status, though, being a renter vs. a homeowner informs one's specific anxieties or joys with what's changing. "Those [rehabbed] buildings were empty," says Kathryn Gardette. "But when you fill those buildings, how do you structure it so that people who are living in the neighborhood are afforded the ability to stay in the neighborhood? How do we as a neighborhood grab hold of that?"

It is a balance, attracting new residents and visitors without alienating or disregarding the long-standing ones. One of Wright's big concerns is that WHRF maintain the same level of control as development gains speed. For instance, will they be able to achieve a diverse retail district?

In early September, WHRF announced a partnership with Mortar, an organization founded to help entrepreneurial OTR residents left out of the redevelopment surge get their businesses off the ground. In Walnut Hills, Mortar has already held information sessions and planned its first set of classes; it even has a pop-up holiday market slated to run in the former Dollar City. "They completely changed the way we look at a lot of projects," says Wright. "Maybe we retain ownership of a couple of the retail spaces [for] Mortar to put to social-entrepreneur uses. That's a two-fold solution: We have a challenge of having too much vacant retail, so we can make sure a certain percent remains affordable. Mortar is going to be key to that."

→ **THE NEIGHBORHOOD WILL NOT GET** back to 1940 or 1960 overnight—or ever. "In its heyday, the McMillan corridor was a mile long, and the vast majority of that was retail on the first floor," says Jeff Raser of Glaserworks. That's not likely in the new reality. But the I-71 MLK interchange, scheduled to be finished in 2017, will open up easier highway access to the neighborhood (though not without some trepidation about its effects). The Harriet Beecher Stowe House expects to receive some \$2 million for renovations from the Ohio History Connection. At the end of September, WHRF purchased the old Paramount building, arguably Peebles Corner's most prominent, which is currently in abject disrepair. They are working with (but at press time had not yet announced) a developer to construct new apartments and retail spaces on the vacant land next to Fireside Pizza and across from Green Man Park, as well as a future bar tenant for an historic (but long defunct) bath house nearby. The annual Cincinnati Street Food Festival, which gathered a large and diverse crowd in September, continues to grow. Five Points Biergarten and Music Off McMillan are preparing for a 2016 return. Even the Walnut Hills Historical Society is recording an oral history, hoping to document living memories before they're lost.

"*Uncle Tom's Cabin* couldn't have been written were it not for [Harriet Beecher Stowe's] 18 years here in Walnut Hills," says Chris DeSimio. "She had seen enough."

She had lived with slavery across the river, had seen escaping slaves, [and] she picked up her pen. It built on the debates; they were about *These are people too.*"

Standing in line in late June at the weekly Findlay Market Farmstand on East McMillan, Gary Dangel, longtime resident and community volunteer, gets up from the Vitality Cincinnati table to introduce himself and offer a tour of the five gardens he helps run. The Concord Street Community Garden is brimming with beds (up to 60 this year) and a new retention pond and greenhouse. Seven people have gathered nearby in Green Man Park for a free yoga class, despite the 84-degree temperature. It's seven days after the massacre in Charleston, yet things feel refreshingly...not impossible. Walnut Hills is far from carefree, but it's not contrived stock-photo diversity, either; race, equity, change—what they mean and how they do or don't work—is a conversation friends and neighbors are constantly having.

Wright talks about a general apprehension in urban planning about community engagement, that bothering with it means any progress will be slow and small. "And there's truth to that—you can create paralysis, because you're never really going to have consensus. But hopefully we've proven that you can move forward and listen at the same time," he says. "All across the country, cities and neighborhoods are challenged with how to make growth equitable. That's our biggest challenge and my biggest worry. But I'm really hopeful because we're talking about it. Everybody wants to get to that same place, regardless of sometimes differing on tactics."

"I've said for a long time that I believe Walnut Hills is going to be the community the nation looks to when it says *How does redevelopment happen equal for all?*" says Gardette. "We have the opportunity to be the example of how that happens."

For Orth, back at that sidewalk table at a once-abandoned firehouse that's now putting out pizzas, looking over at a park-in-process, it's all just measured strides. "We're working real hard to continue being what we've always been," he says. ☺



## Fall Ambiance at Village Junction



## Village Junction's Holiday Open House

### November 4th – 7th

Holiday Hours:  
Monday – Wednesday, Friday, Saturday 10–6 • Thursday 10–8 • Sunday 12–4

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