

WHERE IS OUR SENSE OF COMMUNITY?

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These comments by Bonnie were read at a panel on affordable housing and gentrification at the 2014 SOS Art Show at the Art Academy in Cincinnati. The panel was also part of the unveiling of the *Homes for All Report* of the *Right to the City* national movement.

I have lived in Over-the-Rhine for over 40 years. I paid \$33 a month for my first apartment in Over-the-Rhine. Two of the apartments I lived in still had the owner living next door; or in the building I was living in. There were many more “Mom and Pop” landlords serving people with low incomes back in the early 70’s. I saw an advertisement the other day for the rental of a townhouse apartment for \$2015 a month.

People in our neighborhood are a “displaced” people. Shoved off their lands when someone else found a reason to make a profit on the land we call home. We feared that when our neighborhood became an historic district, gentrification would follow. It has. We were 99 percent renters and 95% of our housing was substandard and needing upgraded and improved.

In 1973 a 65-year old male living with the disease of alcoholism was the face of homelessness. In 2014 that face is a 9-year old child. And the numbers continue to grow. In that picture something is tragically going wrong.

Our people were not sitting on our laurels waiting for a hand out. Our neighborhood people organized a movement that tried and still tries to figure out community-based solutions to issues facing us. People sleeping on our stoops and in our streets, we started the Drop Inn Center; to really end homelessness we knew we needed to maintain and build affordable housing, which Over-the-Rhine

Community Housing is accomplishing; and when our Peaslee school closed we fought hard to save it, lost but turned it into an educational resource now called Peaslee Neighborhood Center. We created the Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition to give voice to those struggling on our streets. We worked for policy changes and fought for ordinances that would help us seek some control or voice over what was going on in our community; and yes sometimes we did civil disobedience to make a point. We pushed for neighborhood plans...the 5520 Plan was in 1985. We called for protecting the 5520 units of affordable housing, wanting development without displacement.

The housing crisis speaks to this country's loss of moral fortitude, not caring for our brothers and sisters on the margins. We have become a profit making consumerist society, not caring whether we condemn those at the bottom to live in squalor, as if it was their fault. Where is our sense of community? Did any one of us make it on our own? I doubt it. If people live in housing security, can't we see we all benefit? I am so frustrated with so many neighborhoods crying "not in my back yard."

I think part of the problem is that people with more power rarely see the beauty and assets of a community that looks and lives differently. How we live is going to "look differently" because we don't have the same amount of resources to spend on our dreams. But that doesn't mean that we don't do the best we can with what little we have. We know the importance of leaning on our neighbors in time of need. We know the value of coming together to figure things out collectively, rather than individually. We know how to pool our resources so we can create a communal garden in our affordable housing project. We watch out for each other's children because we know the stressors living in poverty. We value the little of what each can give. We don't weigh our success on how much we spend, but we weigh our success by the relationships we have built and whether we feel a sense of belonging. We don't know what it's like to have the arrogance to just bombard a neighborhood with a plan that suits self-interest. We have quietly inhabited spaces that others have abandoned or discarded, and made it our home. We put our sweat labor and tear

into this less than a square mile of land and every day work to build something for ourselves that we are proud of.

And now because we don't have the almighty dollar, or enough political quarterbacks to stand up for our rights, someone with more money can steal it from us over night. That's not right. We work hard everyday to build community, and now that Over-the-Rhine land has become valuable, we experience that no one regards the people as valuable.

I miss the people that used to live around me. I miss neighborhood-serving businesses that cared we had a place to shop for an aspirin, a curtain rod, socks and underwear, or a place to do laundry. Mostly the new restaurants our families can't afford to eat in. When I walk down the street, I have to admit I feel like a stranger in my own land. We've called for changes; upgrades to our streets and alleys; wanting good recreational places; better lighting; where was all the investment when we the poor and working class asked for these improvements. There is some just anger out in our streets because people see that investment discriminates. And with all the improvements going on now, the question is: will we still be here to benefit from the changes. We were never too concentrated with the poor until another class of people desired our land.

I have always felt we need our government, and local government, to legislate our protection through ordinances/policies or something because it's not going to happen letting market forces go amok. Developers should not be getting a way with condo development and market rentals without also doing units for people poor and with low incomes. The old SCPA building should have some affordable units. We saved this neighborhood. How is it that corporate Cincinnati can dictate what stays, what goes, when neighborhood people for as long as I've been around have been strong actors in our history making, we were not victims sitting along the sidelines doing nothing. We should have a say so in what's going on in our neighborhood. We created "family" on our neighborhood blocks. Our stories weaved a web of connection.

It feels like our lives are invisible to planners, developers, and newcomers rushing in to revitalize. This renaissance refuses to recognize that we are a community with strong connections. It hurts when we get busted up. We need more allies to help name what's going on and call for more accountability from the City and 3CDC and work to not have this be another city that pushes people poor and working class out of its urban core neighborhoods, like many cities across this country have already done. I want to live in a city that values my brothers and sisters who are on the margins. With that core belief in humanity, maybe we can turn things around, because for now we are going somewhere that's not good for any of us.