

Presentation at Washington Ethical Society
Honoring the 50th Anniversary of Neighbors Inc.

By Loretta Neumann – November 12, 2008

Introduction

I want to thank the Washington Ethical Society – especially Clare Donaher and Patti Absher – for putting together tonight’s program. I’ve been a member of WES for more than 12 years and a member of Neighbors Inc. for nearly 35 years. Both organizations are extremely important in my life.

On this occasion honoring the 50th anniversary of Neighbors Inc., I want to start by recognizing some of the past and present Neighbors Inc. leaders who are here this evening—in particular, our current president, Chris Turner, and past presidents Rosemary Reed Miller, Jean Bennett, and Ramona Green. Past President Nate Sims had eye surgery this morning but said he would try to come. And I’m hoping that Joe Hairston, another past president and early Neighbors Inc. activist will join us later.

We also have former executive directors Ed Hollander and Susan Kincade with us tonight. And Rabbi Nathan Abramowitz, former Rabbi at Tifereth Israel Congregation, who worked closely with our founders to foster racial harmony in our community.

I would like to ask that **everyone** who is a current or past member of Neighbors Inc. to stand and be recognized. [Note: About 30 people stood of the more than 100 people who attended.]

In preparing this presentation I contacted many of you, and you told me lots of wonderful stories, which I don’t have time to repeat now. I hope you will speak up during the discussion period, as you can talk much better than I can about your own experiences. Also, after the forum, check out the two poster boards that Jean Bennett made, which contain more information and pictures from past events.

I’m lucky, in preparing for this, that in addition to serving as a past president of Neighbors Inc, I was for many years an editor of its newsletter. So I’ve been re-reading old newsletters and revisiting what we did in the past. More than just nostalgia, they remind me of how much this organization accomplished, yet how much remains to be done.

Also, thanks to Clare Donaher, I read a newly published book by Phyllis Palmer, a professor at George Washington University, entitled **Living as Equals: How three white communities struggled to make interracial connections during the civil rights era**. Two of the chapters are about Neighbors Inc. The author gives an excellent history of Neighbors Inc.

Equally important, she provides a context for understanding what caused the problems people faced, not just personal but societal and institutional. Several people here tonight are quoted in the book, including Maija Hay (whose husband Ray Hay was president of Neighbors Inc. during the 1970s), Conrad (Chris) and Marilyn Christiano, and Harry and Gretchen Schafft.

Next, I'd like to ask - How many people here are more than 50 years old? [Note- the majority of the audience held up their hands.] At a time when we've just elected our first black President of the United States, it's hard to realize how different our nation was during our lifetimes, just five decades ago. Back then, there was a major social upheaval, based on race, in cities throughout the United States.

Context and History

In 1948, President Truman desegregated the Army and the Supreme Court ruled that racial covenants restricting home ownership were legally unenforceable. Then in 1954 the Supreme Court decreed an end to segregated schools. As African Americans increasingly moved into the cities to find good jobs, decent homes and better lives, whites began fleeing to newly built, homes in all white suburbs.

Also, during the mid 1950's in Washington DC, Congress authorized construction of the Southwest Freeway and began a massive urban renewal project that dislocated thousands of black families from their homes. They started moving northward, up from Howard University to Brightwood and Manor Park, formerly all white neighborhoods **east** of Rock Creek. Those neighborhoods, and later Shepherd Park and Takoma, were gradually earmarked to become "colored," while the neighborhoods **west** of Rock Creek -- Chevy Chase, Cleveland Park and Georgetown—were slated to remain all white.

At the same time, unscrupulous real estate operators took advantage of the situation. They used a practice known as "block busting" to frightened white owners into selling homes for low prices. They literally went block by block, spreading panic at the suggestion that blacks were moving in. For example, they would buy a small house and move a large black family into it to suggest that African American families would downgrade the neighborhood.

They hounded white residents day and night with phone calls and visits to their homes. They often offered to pay cash to encourage a quick sale. They then resold the houses at significantly higher prices to incoming blacks eager for a chance to live in good homes in nice neighborhoods.

As Ruth Jordan, who lived in Shepherd Park, told Phyllis Palmer, the push on white families to sell and move to the suburbs was intense.

Ruth told an amusing story:

...one of my joyous moments came when one of these guys was knocking next door, and my neighbor called me and said, "What do I do? This guy won't leave me alone. This is the third night he's been here."

So I called the police, and I said, "I don't know who this guy is, but I think he's a burglar."

And so of course the cops came, and they had him against the car with his hands behind his back. I was thrilled. (Palmer, 119)

It was in this context that Neighbors Inc. was founded in 1958 by Marvin Caplan, a white journalist, and Warren Van Hook, a black pharmacist. Their goal was to demonstrate and affirm the concept that people could and would live in an integrated community. They convened the first meeting of Neighbors Inc. in June 1958 at the Brightwood Park Church with about 50 people of both races—Christians and Jews and others who lived in the area. They discussed a plan to create an organization that would help integrate the community. The local citizens association was segregated; hence the need for a new organization. Marvin Caplan became its first president.

The Neighbors Inc. area included Takoma and Shepherd Park, in addition to Brightwood and Manor Park. The goal of the organization was to stabilize the entire community. Neighbors Inc. sought to show that blacks and whites could live together. And they wanted to assure that real estate agents showed houses to white as well as black home seekers.

In 1961, Neighbors Inc. hired an executive director, Marjorie Ware, to coordinate their work. An Air Force pilot during World War II, Mrs. Ware was a Unitarian and an accomplished woman in her own right. She died two years ago at the age of 91. In her Washington Post obituary, reporter Joe Holley wrote:

Mrs. Ware and her cohorts set up a system of 75 "block spotters" and block committees to combat rumors, and they persuaded the city's three major newspapers to stop mentioning race in advertisements for houses to rent or sell. They also worked to cut "the white noose" around the District, the almost-lily-white close-in suburbs where African Americans had trouble buying homes.

Marvin Caplan and others testified before Congress and successfully lobbied for a DC ordinance that would prohibit discrimination in home sales after January 1964.

In her book, **Living as Equals**, Phyllis Palmer gives a chilling description of what happened when Neighbors Inc. tried to enforce the new law. Black lawyer Joe Hairston and his wife Anne paired with white lawyer Ed Cogan and his wife Ruth to test it in the white areas west of Rock Creek. They rehearsed their questions so they would ask the same things, then met separately with the real estate agents handling the same homes.

Both couples were received equally cordially, so Joe thought their test was a success. Then he found out otherwise:

At the end of the afternoon, my wife and I came home with the feeling that we had not been subject to racism. The agents were all pleasant. But it was when we compared our answers that we found how much different we were. One of the questions we asked is, "Will the owner take back a second trust?" Now, uniformly, my white friend was told "I think we can arrange that." Uniformly, I was told it was all cash. (Palmer, 121-122)

Palmer notes that it was even worse. Not only were the Hairstons offered less favorable financial terms, but the prices quoted them were from 25 to more than 50 percent more than the Cogens. This was a practice called "super pricing," used "to discourage black buyers or to make them pay a hefty premium for living in a white neighborhood."

But it wasn't just the agents themselves who caused the problems. Banks routinely red-lined the area as too risky for home loans. The government was no better, as houses in what were defined as "transitional areas" had difficulty getting federally insured mortgages from FHA and VA. Again, Neighbors Inc. monitored and disputed FHA judgments that unfairly discriminated homes in the area.

Another tactic agents used was "steering." They avoided showing homes in this area to white couples or homes west of Rock Creek to black couples. In response, Neighbors Inc. started a housing service that showed homes in the community on an integrated basis. They placed ads in national, liberal publications, such as the *New Republic*, marketing the neighborhood as an attractive, interesting place to live.

Neighbors Inc. also held social functions for neighbors to get to know each other—monthly open houses and other parties. They sponsored a house and garden tour in Shepherd Park, featuring lovely homes of both black and white owners. They sponsored a "baby-sitting co-op" for young parents. They started a "Junior Neighbors" program for teenagers. And to demonstrate that the area was interesting as well as integrated, they held an annual art and book fair. It was well publicized and attended. The first one, in 1963, was opened by Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

Neighbors Inc. members also worked hard to maintain good schools. In this case, they were less successful, as by the 1970s most of the schools were nearly all black and suffered from a lack of funding and attention from the city. The only school that has remained integrated is Shepherd Park Elementary, and that is largely due to a very active PTA, supportive principals, innovative programs, and good teachers.

I'm not an expert on education, but many of my neighbors here tonight are and can speak to the problems then and now of our local schools. Phyllis Palmer's book covers the issue extensively.

I will just add parenthetically that a meeting is being held tonight at the Takoma Elementary School with residents in the area and the new principal, Rikki Taylor. Unlike her predecessor, Ms. Taylor has been reaching out to the community. She wants to create a cadre of volunteers in mentoring, tutoring and helping students. A number of former Neighbors Inc activists are there tonight instead of here—Nancy Smith, Peachy Murray and Alice Giancola, among them. I'm eager to hear what they decide to do.

The other major issue in our area during the 1960s was the planned construction of the 8 to 10-lane North Central Freeway. The freeway would have taken hundreds of homes and displaced thousands of residents in Takoma, Manor Park, Brookland, and Michigan Park. Neighbors Inc. joined a coalition of national and local groups to fight it. The rallying cry was, "No white men's roads through black men's homes." (As Phyllis Palmer notes, a cheaper and less destructive route west of Rock Creek Park up Wisconsin Avenue was rejected by the District's highway department.) The coalition's unwavering, no-compromise opposition was finally successful in 1970. Funds for the freeway were diverted into construction of the Red Line of the Metrorail, and today, one of the main stops is the Takoma Station.

The Recent Past

By the time I moved into Takoma in 1974, the overt racial strife caused by the real estate firms had largely been abated. A realtor friend, Harriett Dekona, introduced us to the neighborhood and helped me buy a home. To me, as a newcomer to the area, it just seemed like a very pleasant urban neighborhood, one that also had a small town feel.

Those days, many of Neighbors Inc's battles were over zoning issues, traffic, and liquor store licenses. We continued to work to improve schools and libraries, and we undertook many general community improvement projects. With the opening of the Metro Station, Neighbors Inc. sponsored Plan Takoma, a local organization that worked on the land use plans for the area around the Metro Station.

I joined the Neighbors Inc. board in 1976. A major accomplishment during that period, for which I can take no credit, was the famous water line suit. Previously, if a city water line broke under the street in front of your home, you as homeowner were responsible for paying for it. Neighbors Inc. sued to limit the responsibility of owners only to that portion of the water line on their property. Although we lost the suit in court, we won the battle when the District Council passed a law in 1977 affirming what we had proposed.

During the 1970s the Art and Book show had been transformed into a crafts show, held at area churches and other religious institutions. From what I learned from our newsletters, the last one apparently was in 1978, when it was held here at WES.

The activities of Neighbors Inc. during the next two decades were similar to those of the 1970's. I served as president from 1980 to 1982. We re-invigorated the old Valentine's Day cabaret dances at Tifereth Israel, including performing musical skits. We continued having open houses for our members. During the mid 1980's we tackled liquor licenses, and with the leadership of our then-president Ramona Green, successfully fought off four nude go-go bars and an illicit massage parlor and sexually oriented bath house.

At that time, with Joe Hairston's urging, I served for a couple of years on the board of National Neighbors. The organization brought together people from all over the United States who were committed to integrated living. They came from neighborhoods like ours, and also from groups working on education and others dealing with fair housing issues. In 1981, Neighbors Inc. hosted the annual conference of National Neighbors, attended by more than 200 people at Catholic University. We had a congressional reception, plenary sessions with outstanding speakers, and workshops on topical issues. It was an uplifting experience.

For the past 10 years or so, Neighbors Inc has been more quiet. We still hold occasional meetings and open houses. Thanks largely to Rosemary Reed Miller, who served as president for 9 years, the Valentine Dance has continued at Tifereth Israel and Neighbors Inc has sponsored several political forums. We have also contributed funds to area schools, including Coolidge High School, the Takoma and Shepherd Park Libraries and other organizations, such as the Takoma Theatre Conservancy.

The Future

Looking to the future, I would love to see a reinvigorated Neighbors Inc. for at least three reasons:

- (1) It's the only nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that covers more than one neighborhood in upper Ward 4, offering people a chance to meet and share common cause with others in the wider community.

- (2) I don't think Neighbors Inc's work is finished. Our older residents need support if they want to age in place in their homes. Our schools are still predominately segregated, and younger people need our help. And frankly, our homes remain devalued, largely because of the conditions and perceptions about our schools. Our house is big and nice and sits on nearly an acre of land. Yet it would be worth twice as much in Chevy Chase or Cleveland Park and three times as much in Georgetown. This doesn't make sense. But at least it makes our neighborhood more affordable and our property taxes significantly lower.

- (3) Lastly, we are still a role model. The world outside our community largely remains socially segregated. We need to continue to promote the ideals and goals of Neighbors Inc. --namely, to demonstrate and affirm the concept that people **can and will live happily in an integrated community**, one that is even more diverse than 50 years ago, as we welcome Hispanics and Asian Americans and come to know and respect people of other ethnic backgrounds and sexual persuasions who chose to live here.

My husband Dan, who is the son of a slave and was a member of the civil rights movement in the south where he nearly lost his life, knows what discrimination is about. And while things have improved, we're still not there yet. I do think that with the election of Barack Obama as President we have new possibilities for further improving racial and ethnic relations and creating true social integration in the United States.

It's up to us to take advantage of this—not only for ourselves, but for the people living here 50 years from now.

Thank you.

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Sources:

Adam Bernstein, "D.C. Integrationist Marvin Caplan Dies At 80; Civil Rights Champion Founded Group To Fight Racism In City Real Estate Market," *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2000, B07.

Joe Holley, "Former Pilot Helped Calm D.C. Neighbors' Anxiety Over Housing Integration," *The Washington Post*, December 24, 2006, C07.

Neighbors Ink, newsletter of North Washington Neighbors Inc., various issues from 1959 to 1995, especially the 25th anniversary issue, June 1983.

Phyllis Palmer, *Living As Equals: How Three White Communities Struggled to make Interracial Connections During the Civil Rights Era* (Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2008).