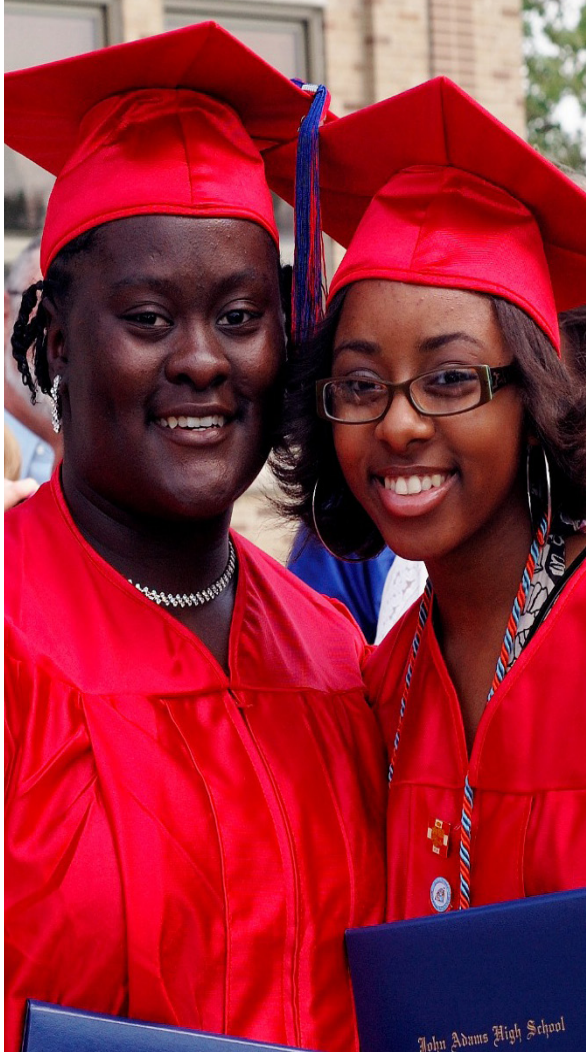




Building the Robinson Center



One Relationship at a Time



*A history of the first 15 years of the
Robinson Community Learning Center*

Building the Robinson Center, One Relationship at a Time

The Robinson Community Learning Center welcomes community and Notre Dame partners who strengthen the Northeast Neighborhood of South Bend through relationship building and educational opportunities. By promoting innovation and excellence, the Center builds individual capacity and enhances existing systems throughout South Bend.



“

When they consulted me about [this project], I said ‘We’ve got to talk to Renelda Robinson.’ She is the one who knows exactly what’s needed in this community.

*-Fr. Don McNeill,
CSC*

The leaders of Notre Dame, a world-renowned university, created in 1842 under the direction of Father Edward F. Sorin, a priest of the Congregation of Holy Cross, have rarely done things the easy way. From the very start, the university eschewed beginning construction in the idyllic spring months of northern Indiana, but rather founded the university in late November, when any native could tell you that intemperate weather is possible, if not likely. No matter. The university made its mission serving the then ridiculed Irish immigrants, a group that was neither prosperous nor popular. Faced with an opportunity to nestle quietly and discretely, the university leaders chose the hard path.

Chartered by the state of Indiana in 1844, the university was founded adjacent to the city of South Bend, but more precisely, the

university is located next to an area now known as the Northeast Neighborhood (NEN). The boundaries of the NEN are Angela Boulevard and Edison Road on the north; Twyckenham Drive on the east; Colfax on the south; and the St. Joseph River and Michigan Avenue on the west. The characterization of the university and NEN being adjacent to one another is purposeful. For many decades there was little interaction between the campus community and its residential neighbors. The Northeast Neighborhood Council was created in 1966, in part, to promote needed community services to the residents of the northeast side of South Bend and to develop partnerships between the residents and inter-community relations with neighboring communities, including universities, colleges, businesses, religious

institutions, government agencies, and any other interested parties.

There was some recognition among university leaders that a more positive interaction with the community could be mutually beneficial. In the century since Notre Dame's founding, it had become a suburban campus, which beckoned a closer relationship with its neighboring community. Father Edward "Monk" Malloy, the University of Notre Dame's 16th president, was instrumental in recognizing that the extant relationship needed transformation. In doing so,

Father Malloy was in keeping with the university's founder, Father Sorin. He famously wrote to his superior, Father Moreau, that Notre Dame would become "one of the most powerful means for doing good in this country." Despite the university's grand vision, its neighbors didn't feel included. Marguerite Taylor, a lifetime resident of the NEN, may have more accurately described the relationship when she said, "a dividing line existed at Angela Boulevard." Notre Dame faculty and students rarely spent much time in the neighborhood and neighborhood residents

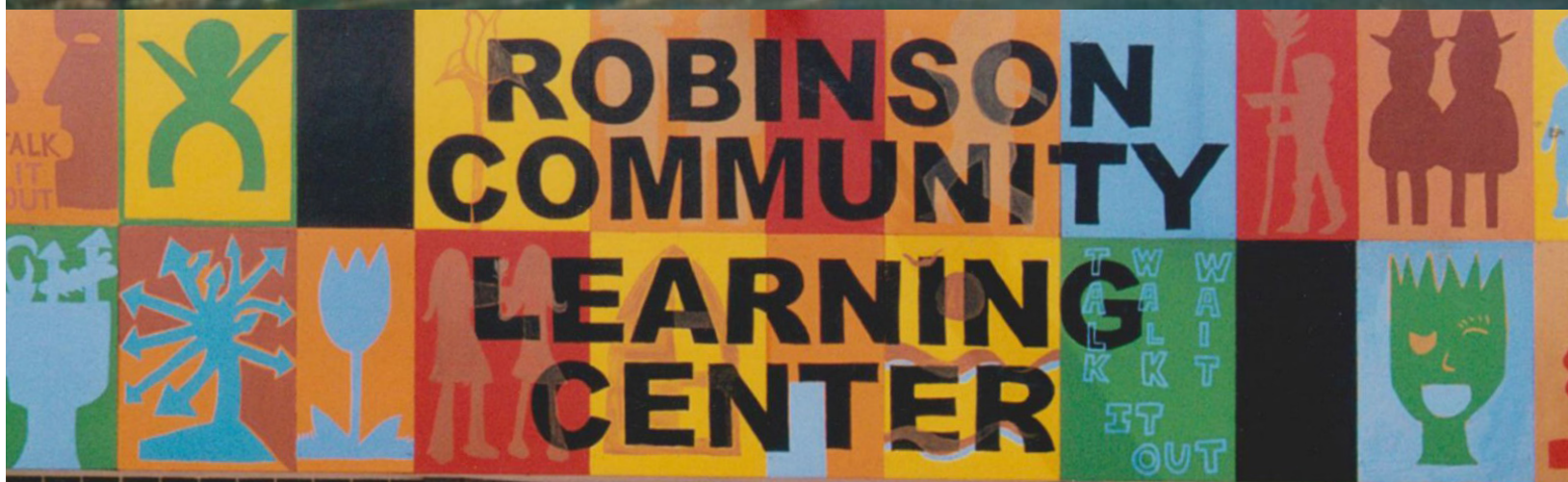
seldom walked the campus greens. More disturbingly, when students did trek through the neighborhood they would often "make a mess" while returning from house parties or bars. When residents complained of student behavior, their complaints often went unheeded. Such circumstances bred distrust between the two communities with perhaps a bit of antipathy here and there.

The University of Notre Dame often does things in big ways. It undertakes vast construction projects, engages with communities



Jay Caponigro leads a community meeting with Northeast Neighborhood residents, Notre Dame students and community partners.

3



Above: The RCLC in 2000.
Below: The RCLC in 2016.



worldwide, and underwrites ventures that have a global impact. But Angela Boulevard presented an insurmountable hurdle? The university needed an ambassador.

Father Don McNeill took many titles throughout his career. He was a Catholic priest, a professor of Theology, and the founder of the Center for Social Concerns. The Center for Social Concerns (CSC) was created at Notre Dame to integrate and expand on programs in volunteer service and experiential learning. While the title, neighborhood ambassador, may not appear on Fr. McNeill's curriculum vitae, it was his relationship with Renelda Robinson, a longtime NEN resident, which gave the university entrée into the community and allowed the varying entities to begin warily trusting one another. Fr. McNeill and Mrs. Robinson were neighbors. Theirs was not an artificial partnership created to attack a problem. Mrs. Robinson knew Fr. McNeill as a conscientious neighbor who worked at Notre Dame but lived in her community and understood its needs and concerns and rode his bicycle to campus. Fr. McNeill knew Mrs. Robinson as an invested community leader and a knowledgeable source of the community's needs. They both realized that they needed each other.

The need and opportunity

to build authentic community and to collaborate in mutually beneficial ways, coalesced in 1998 when Aldi, a national grocery chain, and Goodwill Industries decided to leave the location where the Robinson Center is now located.

The university bought the property for the dual purposes of preventing undesired development and to solidify its own effort to develop the area along Eddy Street. Neighborhood residents were uncertain as to what would develop. Their preference was for another grocery store to occupy the space. They were largely distrustful that Notre Dame would take their considerations to heart when redeveloping the property. That distrust began to dissipate when focus groups were held in neighbor's homes, attended by CSC staff, for approximately three months. In addition to meeting in focus groups, CSC staff met with local church congregations, area school administrators, and vested community members about the potential shape of the building and programs. They inventoried existing community programs because they did not want to replicate efforts. The challenge was twofold: To build community, which meant more than just a building; and to match services to resources. The spirit of cooperation, inspired by Mrs. Robinson and Fr. McNeill, permeated the conversations



“

Everything you see at the Robinson Center, even with the color combinations, we made a point to not look Notre Dame-ish. That was because they [the community members] got to decide.

*-Jim Paladino,
Notre Dame
Center for Social
Concerns.*



5

Four goals were identified for the new community center:

- 1. The center should be something that area kids need, which must include tutoring.*
- 2. The center should include computer training for adults.*
- 3. The center should provide a gathering space for community members.*
- 4. Programming for senior citizens should be available.*



and helped to bring a positive result.

The desire of the neighborhood residents became evident during the conversations that took place over the course of the year. Neighbors wanted a community center that would be useful to residents of all ages. Four goals were identified:

- 1. The center should be something that area kids need, which must include tutoring.*
- 2. The center should include computer training for adults.*
- 3. The center should provide a gathering space for community members.*
- 4. Programming for senior citizens should be available.*

Those initial guidelines still instruct Center staff today.

There have been a host of programs, many successful but some not, that the Center has offered, but the mandate of the community has remained consistent. To ensure that the Center remain true to its origin, the Center from its inception had an advisory board that included parents, students, and community members, some holding multiple roles. The Center was initially accountable to a governance council, largely comprised of Notre Dame administrators, which enabled it to receive financial and personnel support from the university. Further, the governance council's direction allowed the

RCLC to remain congruent with the ongoing development in the area.

Fr. McNeill encouraged some donors to provide funding for computer purchase, which ultimately fell within the university's Campus Workstation Program, meaning that the computers would be maintained by campus technicians. The multipurpose room was aptly named because at various times during the day it hosted after school tutoring, a game room, or served as an exercise room. Additionally, another room was designated for entrepreneurial initiatives. Fr. McNeill's initial idea was to have Notre Dame students and faculty, especially retired faculty, be involved with Center programming; and they certainly were.

As the idea of the RCLC became a reality, Fr. McNeill leaned heavily on his Center for Social Concerns colleagues to do the necessary groundwork. While Jim Paladino, Associate Director, Center for Social Concerns and Director of Program and Resource Administration, recalls that Fr. McNeill would often preface his request by saying, "this should take no more than 4-6 hours a week," staff recall working many hours attending community forums and interviewing neighborhood residents. Annie Cahill Kelly, Director,

Community Partnerships and Service Learning at the CSC, and her students went door-to-door conducting surveys about community needs. None recalls it taking fewer than 4-6 hours a week.

Jay Caponigro was integral to RCLC's early success. A

1991 Notre Dame graduate, Caponigro holds a master's degree in religious studies from the University of Chicago. From 1995 to 1999, he was executive director of Chicago's Southwest Organizing Project, which included 25 churches

and schools in the racially diverse neighborhoods of that city's southwest side. His background in working with violence prevention, and his appointment as Director of Urban Programs at CSC in 1999 was fortuitous. Caponigro was named



The Robinson Community Learning Center officially opened its doors in February 2001.



Robinson Shakespeare Company members perform a Bollywood-style dance number during a production of *Richard III*.

the inaugural director of the Center and his efforts gave shape to the Center's planning. Caponigro surveyed the extant community programs in order to avoid duplicative efforts. His vision called for complementing existing efforts and using the Center's resources to augment efforts that were already underway in the neighborhood.

The RCLC opened its doors in February 2001. Crucial to the eventual success was the practice of evaluating the efficacy of

the varied programs. They weren't afraid to try things, especially with external partners. Establishing relations with external partners was a central strategy, which remains, whereby external partners provide their programs on site. For instance, the South Bend Community School Corporation's Adult Education initiative has worked with RCLC for fifteen years. When a volunteer offered to provide free guitar lessons to interested community members, staff made space for the lessons. An

evaluation that took place after a semester found that while the volunteer was well intentioned, there wasn't a demand for the service so it was discontinued. It's fair to say that many are aware of the successful programs that continue to this day, but vital to RCLC's success is also that there were many other programs that were started, completed, and were discontinued. Some might call them failures, others that the effort to serve was made.

Three programs that have stood the test of time and have provided a model



for others to emulate are the after school tutoring program, the Take Ten anti-violence initiative, and the Robinson Center Shakespeare Company.

In some ways, the after school-tutoring program is the pulse of the RCLC. Like a metronome it is ongoing and is sustained through the efforts of many people dedicated to a single idea. What makes the RCLC tutoring unique is that two university students are assigned to each RCLC youth and they each meet with their youth twice a week for an entire semester; longer if their schedules allow. In so doing, the college student becomes aware of their youth's strengths and weaknesses, their stalling techniques and their frustrations. Moreover, bonds between student and tutor form that last well beyond the prescribed tutoring period. It is not uncommon for student and tutor to attend each other's respective graduation. On-site at RCLC and through the staff's involvement in literacy tutoring throughout the city, over 200 hundred students a year benefit from RCLC efforts in their educational journey. It is through the tutoring program that most children learn of the RCLC and its other program offerings.

The Take Ten project came with Jay Caponigro to the Center. Caponigro had been involved with violence prevention programs in

Chicago and believed that such a program would be helpful in establishing a relationship between neighboring schools and their staffs. Take Ten's mission statement is, "To promote choices and strategies that cultivate nonviolent communities." The program's slogan is simple and memorable, "Talk it Out, Walk it Out, Wait it Out." Students are taught to follow the mantra rather than engaging in violent behavior. The RCLC has exported the program to local schools, community centers, and local groups where RCLC employees offer seminars on anti-violence. The Center was envisioned to serve the nearby community, but over time the boundaries of the community expanded.

When the Advisory Board was presented with a proposal to start a Shakespeare troupe at the RCLC, some may have recalled the erstwhile guitar instructor. The idea that the RCLC could provide high quality theater instruction to kids in the local community, at a location with no stage or dressing rooms seemed less than implausible. It seemed incredulous, but no more so than the Entrepreneur Club, the Robotics Club, or the financial literacy classes that are a staple of RCLC offerings. The Robotics Team, in 2011, won Indiana's League Championship and went on to represent the United States at the Open European



“ The students embraced the programs because of the relationships that were formed, because they were unique, and because it gave them a chance to shine.

*-Jay Caponigro,
Inaugural Director,
RCLC*





Where will the Robinson Center be 15 years from now? I see us as continuing to deepen our programs, continuing to expand our outreach, but also staying true to our foundation and the community, and always following our motto of 'Changing Lives, One Relationship At A Time.'

-Jennifer Knapp Beudert, Manager, RCLC

Championships in Mannheim, Germany. The RCLC has never been constrained by space or credulity. The Robinson Shakespeare Company (RSC) was founded in 2008 with the objective of bringing high quality theater instruction to children from diverse backgrounds. Over the years, the program has grown from 12 participants to over 30 and through a generous Community Foundation Grant from the Community Foundation of St. Joseph County, the RSC has been able to start an outreach into area schools that currently reaches approximately 430 students through after-school programs and in-class workshops. The Robinson Shakespeare Company exists because it's needed.

The neighborhood is ever evolving and whom we call neighbors changes, too. The diverse community within which the RCLC is located encompasses neighbors for whom English is a new language. One may call the English as a New Language endeavor a program, and certainly it would be labeled as such on a spreadsheet, but it might be more aptly termed a neighborly accommodation. Each week, a class full of adults speaking varied languages work to learn English, taught by South Bend Schools' instructors and volunteers. And if those adults have preschool age children, then they, too, may learn

English down the hall from their parents. In providing a location for that essential work, the Robinson Center is fulfilling its most fundamental role; being a good neighbor.

Sadly, Mrs. Robinson did not live to see the building that bears her name come to fruition. She died in April 1999. Fr. McNeill recommended that the Center bear her name because she had been such a tireless advocate for the community. Reportedly, the Robinson Center is the first building at Notre Dame not named for a priest, benefactor, or alumnus. Undoubtedly, her character runs through the place. Perhaps she would have been among the seniors learning skills in the RCLC's computer lab or, perhaps, she would have been a member of the thriving senior's book club. It's hard to imagine that she could have envisioned all that the RCLC has become, but those that knew her surmise that she would want the Center to do even more. And the RCLC will do more. It will do so in the same way it has done in the past; with a fearless attitude to serve the community, dedicated workers who can certainly devote "4-6 hours" for a new initiative, and an honest appraisal of program efficacy. Mrs. Robinson wanted more than for something to be done, she wanted all to be done well.



10



Students in the Take Ten program learn to "Talk it out. Walk it out. Wait it out."





The Robinson Community Learning Center would like to thank the following people for their contributions to this project:

Richard Pierce, Department of History/Africana Studies
Nicole MacLaughlin, University Writing Program
Daniel Graff, Department of History/Higgins Labor Program
Annie Cahill Kelly, Center for Social Concerns
Jay Caponigro, ND Director of Community Engagement for Public Affairs
Marguerite Taylor, RCLC Community Liaison
Fr. Don McNeill, CSC, Center for Social Concerns
Jim Paladino, Center for Social Concerns
Jennifer Knapp Beudert, Manager, Robinson Community Learning Center
The students of the Community History Research Project
Nathalia Casiano, Center for Social Concerns
Randal Sean Harrison, Hesburgh Libraries
Kiana Jackson, RCLC Advisory Board History Committee
Caitlin Kinser, RCLC Advisory Board and Graphic Designer
The RCLC Advisory Board
The RCLC staff, volunteers, AmeriCorps members, and participants

