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Transforming Higher Education through Engagement

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Transforming Higher Education through Engagement

*Imagining America Plenary
Thursday, September 23, 2010
Seattle, Washington*

Chancellor Nancy Cantor's Opening Remarks

Building on the catalytic role that David described for universities as anchor institutions, I want to use my time to paint a rather concrete picture of how this can look based on SU's vision of Scholarship in Action.



The West Street Bridges



A few blocks away from the heart of downtown Syracuse is a six-lane road called West Street that brings thousands of commuters every day. Rusty railroad bridges cross West Street, encircling it like a pair of handcuffs, and creating an ugly and deeply symbolic barrier between Armory Square---now a bustling district ---and its closest neighbor, the Near Westside.

First Year Experience

The Near Westside is the location for one of our most comprehensive community-based engagements of faculty and students from all across campus. In August, when we welcomed 3,450 first year students, we began their “shared experience,” a year of engagement with the Near Westside, with an evening at the Warehouse, our center for design, architecture, arts journalism, and innovation. It’s on a corner of West Street near the railroad bridges.



Public Art to Disrupt Barriers

As it happened, they got there just in time to see the artist Steve Powers working on a public art project, painting the bridges to “visually disrupt” them as barriers to the Near Westside. Powers calls his work “A Love Letter to Syracuse,” and he got the words from residents he met going door to door, talking about everyday things: the weather, paying their bills, and having nothing to do.



When Powers changed their words into art, he transformed the bridges, too, from barriers into **points of connection and conversation** between parts of the city that rarely see---and have had little to say to---each other.

Today, I’m beginning with the bridges because they symbolize the deep and wide connections SU has been making with our city, building a literal and figurative “Connective Corridor” – an urban arts district that comes down off our “university hill” and winds through downtown to West Street, on buses wrapped by our design students.



The Near Westside Initiative **A Democratic Partnership and Catalyst**

Several years ago, SU joined with foundations, businesses, not-for-profits, state and city governments, and neighborhood residents to create the Near Westside Initiative as an exciting and (we hope) deeply democratic partnership that embeds the arts, humanities, and culture with other fields---architecture, entrepreneurship, law, education, engineering, public affairs, and information studies---as catalysts for change, of the kind our design students imagined when they positioned a child of the community drawing her own future on the side of an old warehouse.



Profile of the Near West Side

Change is something the Near Westside badly wants. It was hit hard when Syracuse lost industries and population, and it's now the ninth poorest census district in the nation. It's a multi-ethnic and multi-racial community that faces the most profound challenges of our day, especially the deep chasms that divide our society and our world.

Ideal Venue for Scholarship in Action

- Syracuse University is involved in the Near Westside (and in many other places) because we have a vision of higher education we call Scholarship in Action. We believe that students are best prepared *for the world, in the world*, and that faculty can partner with community members to make a difference in the world and in their scholarship simultaneously.

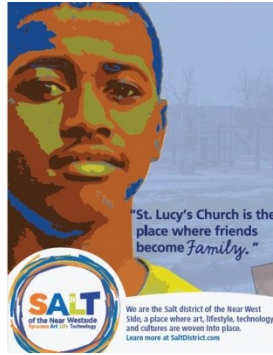
- The Near Westside is a very small place that presents the grand challenges of that world – from the achievement gap in education to the crumbling urban infrastructure that imperils our health and well-being---and it gives these global issues a deeply rooted local face.
- To address them, we are linking our own interdisciplinary efforts with those of the community through flexible, sustainable, and reciprocal partnerships.

What Each Side Contributes

- From SU, we bring to the partnership not only a range of expertise but also a diverse group of participants, as 25 percent of our entering students are eligible for Pell grants, 29 percent are students of color, and many of our faculty members have deep roots in distressed cities and communities, near and far.
- For its part, the board of the Near Westside Initiative is so diverse that you'll find the moral force fo the community – a wise grandmother, Mary Alice Smothers, sitting across the table from one of the city's wealthiest attorneys---sometimes arguing with each other--but nonetheless coming to the table to get things done for a neighborhood they all want to see thrive again.
- Talking across difference is an essential part of the creativity and authenticity of the process. It invites new voices, builds trust, and creates a shared sense of responsibility. It's a two-way street. The students and faculty who are pursuing an inter-group dialog curriculum on campus find that it best comes to life as they cross to the other side of West Street.
- For it is at the intersection of inclusion and action that the university and the community can both be transformed, and it is just at this place we situate our framework, borrowed from the wonderful work of the social legal theorist, Susan Sturm, on “institutional citizenship.”

The “Arts” in SALT

The Near Westside Initiative began its work in the area closest to downtown and in the blocks around an elementary school in the heart of the neighborhood. We call it the SALT District, a play on the neighborhood's 19th Century roots as the center of the salt industry in upstate New York. The letters stand for Syracuse Art, Literacy, and Technology.



The goal is not to gentrify the neighborhood, but to revitalize it with better housing and more home ownership for residents, more jobs and businesses, beautiful public spaces, and quality schools.

- **Our strategy is to encourage the arts, artists, and neighborhood organizations.**

To do this, we purchased two warehouses: one that is being renovated for artists' lofts and for the new home of WCNY, the region's public broadcasting station, and Pro-Literacy International, a pioneer in adult literacy – both of which will move there from the suburbs. Alongside them, will be the other warehouse renovation, with artist lofts and La Casita, a Latino cultural center started by SU faculty, and the offices of Say Yes to Education, our school reform partnership.



A smaller building is being restored for Juan Cruz, a prominent artist with roots in both Puerto Rico and New York, who's one of 90 artists and musicians now working in the community.

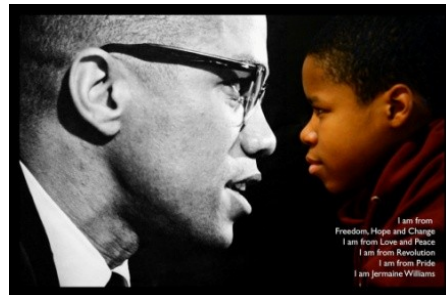


- **We believe the Near Westside can become a stage for all kinds of artists, including those who are not professionals, such as:**

The kids from all parts of Syracuse who a few weeks ago joined in a joyous, gorgeous show of giant puppets, a year-long project organized by Jan Cohen-Cruz of Imagining America.



Schoolchildren have studied photography with faculty member Stephen Mahan as a way of narrating their lives while teaching our SU students a great deal about life in a community they never before knew or considered.



Our social sculpture students have been collaborating with local high school students, recycling old growth timbers and other materials to transform a former drug house next to an elementary school into a center for after-school programming in the arts as well as in entrepreneurship and business.

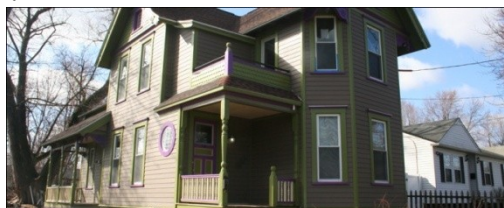


Our communications design students have worked to understand how to tell about the neighborhood's vitality by incorporating their narrative in beautiful designs that transform everyday neighborhood objects such as fences, trash cans, and banners.



Housing and Green Technology

Our partner Home HeadQuarters bought up 76 deteriorated houses, restoring them, and helping local residents buy them. Some---like this one that was covered with graffiti that said, "Burn Me Down"--- have been sold for a dollar and a fix up. Others were torn down, and new homes are under construction.



The university has a profound commitment to sustainability, and our Center of Excellence on Energy and Environmental Systems is working to incorporate green technology into both the new and the existing homes. The Center collaborated with US GreenBuild to designate the Near Westside as a prototype of a new LEEDS certification system for whole neighborhoods.



SU architecture students designed and helped build a single-family prefabricated home. Three other homes, winners in a national design competition, will be testbeds for green technology. One is so airtight it could be heated with the energy it takes to run a hair dryer--- although that's not what they plan to use!

Building wealth through entrepreneurship and business expansion

To build wealth in the community, the Initiative is helping to set up a green property management company that would be a locally owned workers' cooperative. It's also supporting entrepreneurship and has organized a neighborhood entrepreneurs' association.

Say Yes to Education: Closing the Gap

The true wealth and the future of the Near Westside are its children, and they're all included in our citywide school reform collaboration with the Say Yes to Education Foundation and the SCSD. Together, we are working to close the proverbial and very real achievement gap by offering to all 21,000 inner city students the same opportunities for growth and the same college preparation and expectations as their suburban middle class peers.



Woven throughout the project are before school, after school and summer programs, health care, and pro-bono legal aid. In the process, our own faculty and students have extraordinary opportunities to learn from these immensely talented children, as they get on track, not only to survive, but to thrive in post-secondary education.

We've promised that every graduate of a Syracuse high school who can get admitted to one of 90 participating colleges and universities will have the money to attend. Last year 496 students enrolled in college through Say Yes, including 39 at SU.

Connecting in the Future



Before we began our Initiative on the Near Westside, we thought the Warehouse would be the western most anchor of the Connective Corridor. Now, as we learn deeply and broadly

about the stories and the hopes of the Near Westside, we too have great hopes as we seek to expand scholarship and community, opportunity and prosperity across West Street, beyond the bridges.

While it's true that in a small scale city like Syracuse, "a little goes a long way,"¹ I think we're only now starting to imagine just how far the community and the university might be able to go.

¹ Julia Czerniak, director of UPSTATE, a center for design and research at our School of Architecture, interviewed by Sean Kirst in "A Burst of Light Amid Recession," *The Post Standard* (1 Sept 2010) available online at http://www.syracuse.com/kirst/index.ssf/2010/08/post_79.html