

## Placeworx: A Youth Oriented Neighborhood Planning Project in Pilsen

On June 30, community leaders, local nonprofit organizations, and UIC faculty and staff assembled at the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum (MFACM) to learn about neighborhood planning and the Pilsen neighborhood from an unlikely group: youth. Through their inventive eyes, this group of young urban planners gave presentations about their investigations of the Pilsen neighborhood. Covering traditional urban planning topics such as gentrification, public art and neighborhood safety, the issues and solutions put forth highlighted a different perspective as the youth described the community from their vantage point. These presentations were the culmination of a six-month workshop coordinated by the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative (UICNI), Great Cities Urban Data Visualization Lab (GCUDVL), and Yollocalli Youth Museum, a youth initiative of the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, as part of the Ford Foundation's grant for the Pilsen Community Futures Project, a model university-community partnership formed to preserve the culture and identity of the Pilsen community. As a component of the Community Futures Project, *Placeworx* aimed at:

1. Creating an alternative community learning/teaching technology center
2. Developing youth skills in advanced graphic arts software and multi-media technology
3. Producing several projects showcasing the impacts of youth-initiated urban design/planning that integrates the use of digital spatial multimedia

**Officially launched in July 2003, the Pilsen Community Futures Project is comprised of four components in various stages of development and completion:**

1. **Development of market and financial feasibility plan of strategic buildings**
2. **Training leaders in innovative electronic media**
3. **Designing a multi-layered and dynamic public plaza**
4. **Engaging youth in designing urban spaces**

In partnership with MFACM's Yollocalli Youth Museum, UICNI developed an innovative set of strategies to engage youth in an inclusive decision-making process. The goal of this component was to develop an innovative multi-layered community space that used advanced technology to train young adults and empower the next generation of urban social change agents in a more comprehensive manner by including the arts, culture, and social justice issues impacting the Mexican American community. Utilizing spatial analysis and visualization technologies - electronic community visioning tools, digital charrettes, and e-discussion forums - to design urban spaces, the project incorporated non-traditional urban planning methods of the visual arts and computer technology with an emphasis on community and civic engagement, skill building in the use of advanced software and continual training. Students, aged 14 - 21, were recruited through local schools and organizations, and were not required to have previous experience in computers, art or urban planning. In order to make the innovative community technology center self-sustaining, Yollocalli and MFACM staff members were trained to provide graphic arts services to other not-for-profits.



*Students collecting data on a neighborhood walk-through*

### Why Seek Youth Input in Community Planning?

According to Nacho Gonzalez, UICNI associate director, in his opening remarks at the evening's presentation: it is important to have youth input into community planning decisions because "they have an intimate knowledge of the neighborhood. Young people know every back alley and shortcut in a neighborhood through their daily activities: playing as children, walking to school, and just hanging out. The intent of this component is to incorporate that knowledge into the community planning process." This exercise gave community planners a different lens in which to view Pilsen while challenging the students to critique their neighborhood and develop new skills. Irene Tostado, a youth participant and producer at Radio Arte, the other youth initiative of the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, an educational

radio station that serves the Pilsen/ Little Village neighborhood, focused her investigation on the relationship between gentrification and health. She thought she knew a lot about Pilsen already "but this project gave me the chance to think about the neighborhood in a new way," said Ms. Tostado.

Ms. Tostado's comment points to the many additional benefits that *Placeworx* had on the youth participants. Director of Yollocalli, Karen Indeck remarked that this project has developed the youth's critical-thinking and visualization skills. Lesley Roth, UICNI research assistant and urban planning student, echoed these remarks: "The student's vocabulary has grown tremendously along with their ability to articulate the built environment and express themselves visually. Through this experience, they feel more comfortable leading discussions, expressing their ideas and now know how to communicate their ideas in a visual format." As students presented their research topics to a packed MFACM community room, it was evident that they are capable of being positive, community-focused change agents in Pilsen.

### About Community Futures

Community Futures was made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation to the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative (UICNI), the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum (MFACM), and The Resurrection Project to develop and implement a model university-community partnership that fosters a culturally sustainable mixed-income community in Pilsen. The model develops innovative strategies for mixed-income community development that will preserve the character of the community and involve young people in the community decision-making process. The overall purpose of this project is to work toward developing a model of community development that maximizes local resources, including university expertise, community development experience and capacity, resident knowledge, artistic creativity, and youth inventiveness, combined with state-of-the-art technology and software.

For more information, please contact Nacho Gonzalez (312) 996-7194 or Karen Indeck (312) 455-9652 or visit [www.placeworx.com](http://www.placeworx.com).

## A Letter from the Director: Facing Challenges in Partnership

Dear Colleagues,

Looking forward to a new year gives me the opportunity to reflect on the successes and challenges of 2003 - 2004. Thanks to your dedication, enthusiasm and hard work the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative was able to achieve so much. Success is reflected in the superb presentations and near-perfect attendance of members at Partners Council meetings. Success is measured by the many exciting projects that got off the ground last year including the mentored BSN program or Career Ladders, Community Futures, Suder Parent Literacy Project and the establishment of numerous community technology centers on the West Side.

Our Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion welcomed new partners including Westside Health Authority, the Illinois Coalition of School Health Centers, Integrated Health Systems/Thresholds, Chicago Communities in Schools and Beatrice Caffey. I would also like to welcome two new members to our Partners Council, North Lawndale Employment Network and North Lawndale Community News.

These important achievements were accomplished despite budget cuts, tight control of positions and a climate of concern about State appropriations to the university. Add to these concerns others tied to the well being and needs of

our partners facing the challenges of rapidly changing communities as the West Side public housing demolitions and school closings proceeded as planned. We should all take pride in our great work despite these challenges. Our perseverance and creativity paid off with a positive impact on many lives and communities.

So with a sigh of relief that we made it through and a renewed confidence that our experience has better prepared us for the challenges ahead, I again say "thank you." I look forward to a new year..... greeting familiar partners again and forging new relationships.

Best wishes to all as we embark on the next journey towards accomplishments!



*A Message from UICNI  
Director, Cynthia Barnes-Boyd*

## “intimate portraits: a literacy space for community voices”

Step inside a regular classroom at Suder Elementary School on a Thursday between 11:30am and 1:30pm, where elementary students usually sat, you would have been surprised by a dozen parents busily putting pen to paper. This was not a PTA meeting or a parent-teacher conference but a series of writing and literacy workshops developed for parents of Suder Elementary students. The project, named *intimate portraits*, is supported by a partnership between Suder Elementary School and the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative (UICNI).



Parents at one of the workshops at Suder School

The intimate portraits project is based on the work of UIC professor Hal Adams and modeled after a program launched by the UIC College of Education's Community Writing Project, which hosts writing workshops for "people who do not ordinarily consider themselves to be writers, and publishes their reflections on everyday life in the magazine

Real Conditions." In a similar vein, and in consultation with Dr. Adams, the *intimate portraits* project seeks to provide a literary space for community residents to express their voices - thoughts, feelings, and experiences - in writing in order to critically write about and

discuss the issues they face in their communities.

During weekly sessions facilitated by UICNI staff, parents discussed and reflected upon community issues, personal experiences, parenting challenges and other topics. As parents were encouraged to put their thoughts on paper, UICNI held workshops on writing strategies such as how to begin writing, writing letters, personal journaling, and the use of literary devices to help authors discover the various ways one can express one's thoughts. "There are many goals to this program: To give parents a safe haven for self-expression and reflection, to discuss challenges they face as residents and parents, and to provide the opportunity to learn and practice writing techniques," says Chang Lee, UICNI Program Director, "I think we have successfully accomplished all of these goals."

In May 2004, the writings that arose from these conversations and reflections were published in the first issue of *intimate portraits*. Organized in themes that emerged from the writing sessions, the issue is divided into four main sections: Defining Good Writing, Writing about Change, Writing Toward Change and Reflections on Parenting. Also, in June 2004, a public reading of this first issue was held at Suder School. Attendees included parents, school staff, and students. One of the parent authors, Sandra Shepard, enjoyed reading her writings to others, "I thought it was great fun. A lot of experiences and stories were being shared. I liked it because it helped to express yourself, to be able to speak in front of a crowd. Also, other parent authors enjoyed it too because it gave them a chance to share their experiences and feelings with other parents."

In *My Dedicated Mother*, *A Letter to a Parent* and *To Be God or Not: Terminally Ill* the authors tell stories of hard choices, the hopes and challenges of living in the communities served by Suder School. Located at 2022 W. Washington, Suder is a Chicago Public School (CPS) with Title I status; 99% of its 330 students receive free or reduced-price lunch. According to [www.Greatschools.net](http://www.Greatschools.net), 100% of the school's population is African American. Gangbanging, drugs and unemployment plague this near-westside Chicago community demonstrating the need that these

parents have for a creative outlet, however the future of this successful program is uncertain. Recently CPS announced the closing of Suder Elementary along with several other schools due to declining enrollment, changing boundaries and deteriorating facilities. At the public hearing, parents were very upset. "One parent who participated in the writing program took the opportunity to make a statement to the panel and even mentioned how the literacy program has helped to change the way parents view and utilize the school not just for their children but for themselves," said Mr. Lee. "This program helped others to view the school as a community-wide asset. In spite of the conditions surrounding the community, Suder School has been a place of hope due mainly to the dedication and commitment of their staff, teachers, and parents. This program could not have had the success it had without the support and participation of the entire school. We hope to continue to partner with schools such as Suder and to bring that same sense of ownership to other schools that we work with."

For further questions, or to request copies of the journal, please contact Chang Lee at 312.996.4617 or [clee10@uic.edu](mailto:clee10@uic.edu).

### The Makings of a Mom

If you took a little love;  
Granted from the Man above,

If you took care and concern;  
Which some are born with and others learn,

If you took a smiling face;  
And put it in a gentle place,  
Then mixed with God's almighty grace,

You have headed off to  
a great start;  
Now add in a pure heart.  
Gather up a heap of understanding,  
Remember not to be too demanding.

Don't forget to add  
some trust,  
For we know this is a  
must.

Now take  
just another minute;  
To put together those  
needed limits.

Once all this is done,  
You'll have the  
makings of a mom.

A poem by Angela Ware  
as published in *intimate portraits*,  
May 2004, Issue 1



UIC Neighborhoods Initiative is published quarterly by the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative (UICNI)  
phone 312/996-8700  
fax 312/996-8933  
web <http://uicni.cuppa.uic.edu>  
Please send correspondence to  
Chang Lee at [clee10@uic.edu](mailto:clee10@uic.edu) or  
call 312/996-4617.

UIC Neighborhoods Initiative (M/C 107)  
The University of Illinois at Chicago  
East Campus  
412 South Peoria Street, Suite 400  
Chicago, Illinois 60607-7067  
West Campus  
845 South Damen Street, Suite 506  
Chicago, Illinois 60612

Nonprofit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Chicago, IL  
Permit No. 4860