

Case Study

Latham St. Commons

You can think of Latham St. Commons (LSC) as a living laboratory, where we test ideas and try out new ways of living as a community and provide individuals with new social, educational, and economic opportunities. These opportunities come in various programs, health services, teaching facilities, and small rental units, where local entrepreneurs can launch new businesses.

Principal Investigators

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3

New forms of vertical
growing

297

People will not get
HPV-related cancers

Lost count

Words of wisdom

300

Pounds of produce
grown

130,000

Gallons of rainwater
collected



Public-facing messaging boards encouraged community members to think with us about the potential use of the space. We asked them to share their wishes, needs, and ideas. At one event, we collected over 170 responses, capturing thoughts like “I wish we weren’t afraid to talk to each other.”

Opportunity

A great need exists for improved health within a one-mile radius of Latham St. Commons (LSC), in every aspect of life—physical, emotional, social, economic, and environmental. Neighbors in the Garfield and Friendship communities come from all walks of life, each with their own unique stories, interests and needs. Penn Avenue physically divides the two, but the differences and disparities go far beyond that. Poverty and blight persist in Garfield, a predominantly African-American neighborhood. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 45% of Garfield residents live below the poverty level and 23% of housing stock sits vacant. Friendship, on the other hand, is a predominantly white, gentrified neighborhood where median home values are almost twice that of Garfield. Disparities can be seen in public health indicators as well.

Garfield residents have a disproportionately higher propensity for obesity, diabetes, and tobacco use. According to the latest Allegheny County Health Survey, African-American adults in Allegheny County were more likely to report not being physically active and not having health insurance.¹ A Pennsylvania Department of Health’s Minority Disparity report found that African Americans in Pennsylvania are more likely to find healthcare costs prohibitive. African Americans were also more likely to suffer from mental illness in Pennsylvania.²

LSC sits on the border of these two neighborhoods, so we’re well-positioned—both in physical location and approach—to bridge these divides that perpetuate blight, poverty, and health inequality.

1, 2, <https://www.alleghenycounty.us/healthdepartment/index.aspx>

Approach

LSC focused its efforts on four main areas: underrepresented communities experiencing economic disparity; climate and energy; human health; and the development of an economically viable urban farming ecosystem. Across these four areas, a strategic approach to engaging communities in designing and implementing practical solutions was the hallmark of our work. Our diverse team with specific disciplinary knowledge was uniquely positioned to drive progress and champion socially innovative ideas incorporating forward-thinking energy efficiency technology.

In 2015, when we started, our site was just a vacant set of 100 year-old garages tucked away between Penn Avenue, South Graham, and Latham streets. Over time on this quarter-acre lot, amid all the hustle and bustle of daily life, a novel approach to improving health—working inside-out with this community every step of the way—could be observed. We did this by converting the storage garages into imaginary (work, play, life) spaces where the community could gather to dump into new ways of living and learning about each other.

Located off of Penn Avenue—a bustling stretch through the City, Latham Street



Community Action Days were all about hardworking people volunteering to help make raised and vertical garden beds in exchange for their time. They received free produce coupons at harvest time.

has an urban atmosphere. It involves many different kinds of people, activities, and a beautiful history that makes up this place. But, keep in mind, Penn Ave. also divides two neighborhoods, Garfield and Friendship.

The immediate difference between them is stark, which raises my question: How do divides like this begin? What is fueling this separation? Economy? Education? Healthcare? As we look further into the specific characteristics that make up these diverse groups, we begin to imagine an area that can



Examples of our vertical walls, inviting all generations to touch, smell, and taste.

bridge the differences between them through common denominators like food, education, and health services.

Methods

To start, we used the building to engage the community to focus on our goals and objectives. We ran several events that encouraged community members to think with us about the potential use of the space. We asked them to share their dreams, needs, and how they identified themselves within the community. Our initial findings from our first event were synthesized into major categories (space for the arts, food

access, recreation, space for children, etc.). We developed a participatory design workshop that aimed to answer some of our questions about services that can meet the needs and desires of the community on a more realistic level. We recruited twelve community members to sit down for a 45-minute session to help us brainstorm ideas for what the Commons could be. We created a printed site plan of the garage structures on a large sheet of paper. We also printed paper slips with each category and handed three from each category to participants. Participants were asked

to brainstorm uses for individual garage spaces based off of the categories they were provided. For example, one group put the tags community health, the arts and skill-sharing together. This group designed a holistic medical center to provide low-cost aid to people in surrounding communities. It included a shared community art space where local vendors could sell their wares. Ideas included a garden and a communal kitchen. They would like to see the community host cooking classes.

From there, we hosted a s'mores campfire event on the site as a follow-up to our co-design activity. The gates of Latham St. Commons opened to the public for the first time, allowing residents to experience the space. Our goal was to let these individuals imagine what each one of the garage units might be. Neighbors engaged directly in creating new programs, services, and local businesses that address this community's unmet wants and needs. Then we worked to realize them through a series of summer events called Mash-ups. Careful planning made them seem timeless and organic, inviting people of ages to learn new things. We learned that having a 'common' area and mixing up random events set the stage for strangers with different personalities and backgrounds to connect with one another.

Here are a few examples:

- In a time-banking system, neighbors earn LSC currency for volunteering. That currency was used for healthy products or services, such as yoga classes, dental screening, and eggs.
- A tinker shop and boutique, where kids mentored by local college students make trinkets and wares while learning to run and manage a retail store.
- A community classroom staffed by healthcare providers to talk with kids and families about important health topics like childhood asthma or vaccinations while giving a hands-on lesson on green cleaning products.
- Rooftop and vertical gardens to educate families about our local ecosystem's delicate nature and where our food comes from.
- Unconventional preventive health communications and vaccinations.

While working inside-out with this community, we also applied sustainable practices to all that we did. We thought of the building as a place and a tool to teach our neighbors about resilient practice. Resilient practice is a method for building ecosystems' capacity, including natural and human-made components, to absorb shocks and disturbances while

maintaining function. We designed the whole of LSC as one cohesive project that seamlessly connects seemingly disparate threads of sustainable practice so neighbors can see, understand and play a role in building green infrastructure.

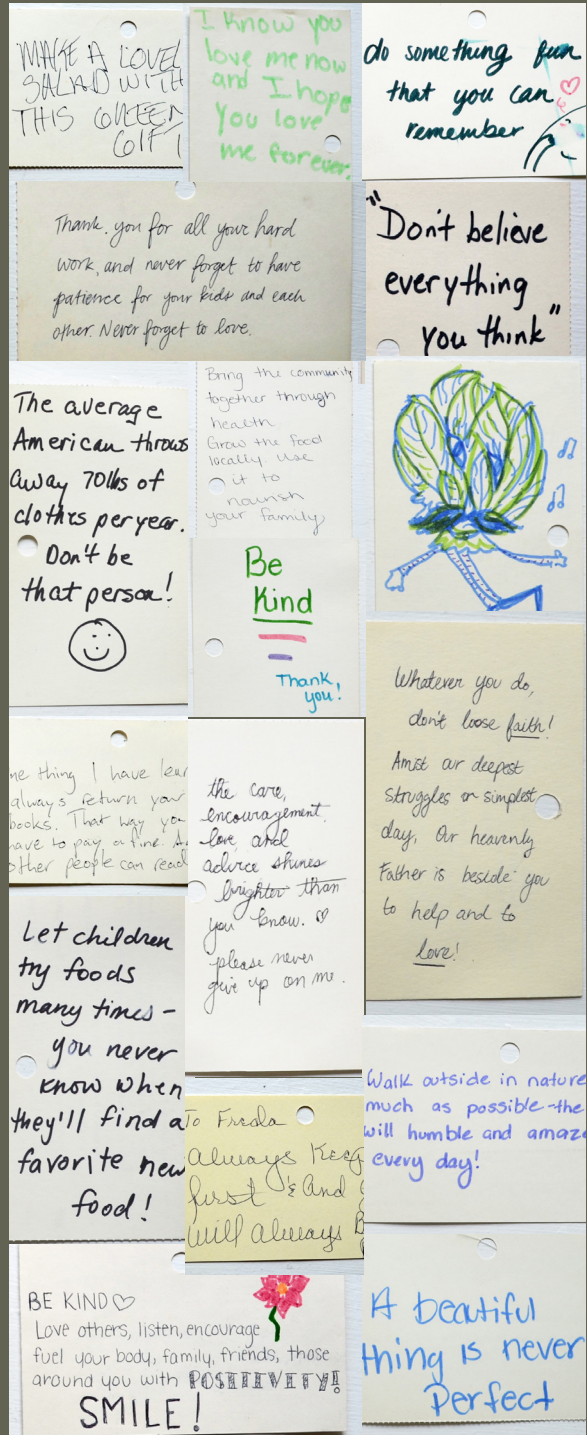
Learning through giving

Our vertical gardens were built from recycled chickpea cans and filled with microgreens, all planted by the community. What's most vivid is seeing how a group of people willing to donate their time, energy, and effort to create a wall of greens filled the neighborhood with clean, positive energy. Each can had a small note attached—words of wisdom—from those who attended our mash-up events. Visitors were asked to write a message to pass on to someone in the neighborhood who would receive the Roaming Gardens delivery. This was the beginning step to our social probing. As we ventured out into the surrounding areas, we began to realize several things. Because the relationships between people often surround food and eating, we thought that the most accessible introduction to conversations about community building would be to give away our produce to neighbors by walking around the communities (we called ourselves Roaming Gardens), we met many new people. We learned that not only are

there several people in the area who are immobile due to health problems, but many were unable to come to the Commons due to the busyness of their schedules. We gave away over 369 bags of produce and walked many miles.

We experimented with ways to control and collect stormwater runoff to use for irrigation. This work resulted in a partnership with the Pittsburgh Water & Sewer Authority (PWSA) and their expertise. They helped us understand that the impervious roofs and paving at our site contributed an estimated annual 137,916-gallon load to the City's sewer system and its overflows. A partnership with People's Gas led to a plan to install a new, innovative system—a combined cooling heat and power (CCHP) system. The CCHP system generates electric power in the same way as traditional electric generators, but it also captures and supplies heat, making it more efficient and less carbon-intensive. The site was growing into a community's classroom.

Another exciting partnership was with the Good Work Institute (non-profit arm of Etsy.com) to run workshops with local entrepreneurs to discuss how their work shapes who they are and how it is used as a vehicle to express their worldview. We wanted to better understand the demands of



Made out of old library cards, these words of wisdom represent the advice and encouraging words from those who attended our mash-up events. Visitors were asked to write a message to pass on to someone in the neighborhood who would receive the Roaming Garden delivery.

building and running successful main street businesses and what happens when problems arise that force young entrepreneurs to compromise those values. This work led to a series of hands-on exercises with the community to help identify and define the various forms of capital that make up a community.

Outcome

Our process utilized social innovation principles and practices to bring sustainable solutions to a grassroots community space. We hosted workshops and events inside and outside of LSC for two years, continually addressing residents' fundamental, unmet needs. Our findings following these workshops and events with residents were the catalyst for our endless curiosity and interest in building a new social venture.

A great example of this is our collaboration with UPMC Saint Margaret Family Health Center to give out free HPV vaccinations inside LSC. This proved to be an effective yet non-conventional method for delivering an essential community health service. Participants had an opportunity to receive the first dose (1 of 3) Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination coupled with positive health messaging and information. Doctors brought this

inspiration back to their health center to create a structured opportunity to practice optimal public health and community medicine, called "Our Sensational HPV Vaccination Trial." Because of this particular partnership and a place like LSC, 297 people will not get HPV-related cancers. This study highlighted the importance of places like Latham St. Commons to reimagine community health interventions. It also helped convince Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Company to work with the LSC team to design and distribute relevant information about the effects of lead in drinking water and the availability of free home lead testing kits.

Zig-zagging Spirals

Pathways to counter structural inequalities in our society are not straightforward and require novel thinking to produce effective strategies. Unfortunately, after three years of hitting many barriers brought on by the current real estate market and lack of institutional support, combined with repair costs, we made the difficult decision to walk away from Latham St. Commons. Not all was lost; sustained engagement with the community planted new seeds for what we now call the Night Owl Bakery.

Dr. Ann McGaffey
March 07, 2021

I keep June and July 2015 Latham Street Commons Mash-up Event fliers on my office door frame as a happy reminder. The mash-up themes from Kristin's, including Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccinations for community teenagers, are the seeds of projects that we continue to build at the UPMC St. Margaret Bloomfield Garfield Family Health Center.

It's best to explain how one of Kristin Hughes' community innovations aimed at underserved people and her thinking has taken root in our health center and nearby. The Latham Street Commons (LSC) project site was a set of vacant storage garages on the border of Friendship and Garfield. Kristin emailed an invitation to think together about the possibilities on 9/14/2014: "Very excited about this new project. I hope we can work together to develop new community health services...imagining these garages to offer flu shots, eye care, check-ups, free gym...I know. I am a dreamer..." The enhanced eye care did eventuate (a health center digital retinal camera). She further brainstormed that HPV vaccinations were misapprehended for safety, not well advertised in understandable terms, and certainly underutilized. This vaccine, approved in June 2006 for females and 2011 for males, is efficacious in preventing cervical, vulvar, anal, penile cancers, and additionally, genital warts.

Kristin's mash-up flyers left an impression because they addressed the audience (ages 9-18 and parents) in simple language and emphasized cancer prevention and that the HPV vaccinations were free. We gained approval from Vaccines for Children for our nurses to bring HPV vaccinations to LSC in coolers with strict and logged temperature control—something all of us are learning about with COVID 19 vaccines now. The mash-ups were fun because of seemingly incongruous activities that attracted disparate people; for example, Friends for Life: free HPV vaccinations, chickens for rent, local artisan goods, haircuts, and rain barrels.

At our health center in 2015-2016, we churned the health literacy, broad activities, and participant lessons into Our Sensational HPV Vaccination Quality Improvement project, co-authored with Kristin, and published (*J Natl Med Assoc.* 2019 Dec;111(6):588-99). This project flowed from the confluence of the LSC experience, a PharmD resident's desire to research HPV vaccinations, the Jewish Healthcare Foundation campaign to foster primary care offices friendly

competition to boost HPV vaccinations, the PittVax 4-Pillars™ strategy trainings to increase vaccinations, and the willingness of every staff, nursing, resident physician, and faculty member to work on this together. Through her work with Fitwits, Kristin taught about different modes of learning, i.e., visual, tactile, auditory, etc.

“Our sensational” is an offshoot: we had a health center waiting room poster contest for voting by any health center entrant and we put zany illustrated posters for every occasion throughout the health center; for example: “Don’t live in the Shadows, get your HPV vaccine for Ground Hog Day.” Patients participated in immediate rewards for any HPV vaccination, such as hitting a 22 inch gong, petting our HPV vaccination and therapy pup Max (tactile), and selections from a treat drawer-rings, play putty, rubber balls, marbles (sight, taste, smell, touch). We used 14 strategies altogether with significant improvements in HPV vaccinations. We have since conducted 2 more UPMC-approved quality improvement projects to boost HPV vaccinations and to continue training our successive resident physician classes. They will disseminate what they have learned to their practices in the eastern and southern United States. We acknowledged Kristin Hughes contribution in our application and won the 2019 HPV Vaccine is Cancer Prevention Champion for Pennsylvania award, sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Association of American Cancer Institutes, and the American Cancer Society.

As I write this impact statement, my team is sending in an abstract today to a graduate medical education conference on safety and quality entitled “Harmonizing Male and Female Human Papillomavirus Vaccination Rates in a Family Medicine Residency Practice Quality Improvement Project.” This project with 2019 baseline and 2020 intervention years was successful in achieving near parity and high vaccination rates (initiation: female 78.8%, male 81.0%; completions: female 68.6%, male 64.9%) for our age 11-26 year-old patients. National data for this HPV vaccine-eligible age range and older adolescents is seldom published. National reporting on patients ages 19-26 years-old (2015-2016 NHANES) estimates for >1 HPV dose were 53.9% for females and 21.3% for males. Our HPV initiation rates for ages 18-26 were 76.8% for females and 74.4% for males. Further, our 2020 age 13-17 year-old male data compares favorably

to Centers for Disease Control published 2019 Teen-National Immunization Survey data (initiation 91.8% vs 69.8%; completion 85.2% vs 51.8%).

We're not done. Working with AIDs Free Pittsburgh, our residents and I have in mind the "Going Anti-Viral: Hexa-Gone" project to next combat 6 viruses with testing, prevention (vaccinations, PrEP), and treatment. They are HIV, hepatitis A, B, and C, HPV, and Herpes zoster and we'll add the Coronavirus vaccine if it comes to primary care offices for patient vaccinations. We will bring to bear the design lessons and thinking from Kristin Hughes: use simple language and health literacy in patient communications; know your audience; assemble a coalition of designer/ thinkers and pay attention to all ideas; educate and reward through different modes of learning; appeal to a broad spectrum of ages, people, and cultures; attend to equity and justice in communities; and, teach learners skills they can apply throughout their careers.



Mash-up event #2, Jeffery Smith providing a haircut.

Project Partners

CMU School of Design
 CMU School of Architecture
 CMU Heinz College
 Chatham University
 Metro 21
 Peoples Gas
 Action Housing
 PGH Water & Sewer Authority
 UPMC St. Margarets Family
 Health Center

Bloomfield Garfield Corp.
 City of Pittsburgh Summer
 Earn Learn
 MyPlace Youth by Action
 Housing
 Community Volunteers
 Student Volunteers
 Jeffery Smith Salon
 Uline
 Good Work Institute