



NeighborWorks® America

CREATIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



NeighborWorks of
Western Vermont
Bright Spot Case Study

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Working Together for Strong Communities





ART STRENGTHENS COMMUNITY COHESION

Fall Festival.

Photo credit: Shannon Kennelly

Over the past two years, folks living in northwest Rutland have started to come together to participate in numerous creative community development activities designed to nurture a collective spirit and improve health and safety.

“Economically and spiritually depressed” is how one interviewee characterized Rutland in rural central Vermont. Industry left and highways bypassed it in the mid-1990s. The opioid crisis hit “early and severely” and many residents stopped even hoping for positive change.

But over the past two years, folks living in northwest Rutland have started to come together to participate in numerous creative community development activities designed to nurture a collective spirit and improve health and safety. Residents have painted garden rocks, decorated flower pots, made hula hoops, watched outdoor movies in a vacant lot, enjoyed the artwork and music of their neighbors in a pop-up gallery, and participated in the planning stages of a youth-directed public art project.

Founded in 1986, NeighborWorks of Western Vermont (NWWVT) strives to strengthen the regional economy through the development of safe, healthy and efficient homes, as well as community projects.¹ Its work goes beyond physical infrastructure.

“There’s just no point in redoing a house and expecting that we’ll sell it if the neighborhood is still one people want to run away from,” explains Executive Director Ludy Biddle.

¹ “Home,” NeighborWorks of Western Vermont, accessed September 23, 2017, <https://www.nwwvt.org/>.

It strives to bring people “out of their shells, homes and feelings of insecurity. The arts can do that.”

The nonprofit focuses on Northwest Rutland, a quadrant of the city designated as a revitalization district and the subject of Project VISION, a community collaborative effort that seeks to “empower our community, strengthen our neighborhoods and change the future.”²

Through all of its programming, NWWVT seeks to strengthen “communities that have been underserved, neglected or are too hard to reach,” says Biddle. It strives to bring people “out of their shells, homes and feelings of insecurity. The arts can do that.”

Despite the shoestring budget, neighbors report seeing their community in a more positive light and NWWVT is using its learnings to expand its work. However, it still faces growing pains and uncertainty around sustainability for its arts-based outreach.

Learning from unexpected consequences

NWWVT staff and Project VISION members attended NeighborWorks America’s 2014 Community Leadership Institute. The result was PhotoVoice, an initiative that used art to achieve Project VISION’s goal of increasing neighborhood cohesion. NWWVT launched PhotoVoice in 2015, hoping it would bring residents of Northwest Rutland together to meet one another, learn photography skills and think differently about their neighborhood.

Community Clothesline Project.
Photo credit: Shannon Kennelly

² “Project VISION and NeighborWorks of Western Vermont: Community Collaboration in Rutland,” NeighborWorks of Western Vermont, accessed November 9, 2017, <https://www.nwwvt.org/project-vision-and-neighborworks-of-western-vermont/>.





Community Clothesline Project.

Photo credit: Shannon Kennelly

“I came into this project being scared of my neighborhood, but now I’m not. I saw beauty and happiness in the place surrounding me.”

The nine participants were charged with capturing and sharing defining community characteristics.³ One team member, Dylan Smith, credits his fellow photographers with inspiring him to embrace the neighborhood in which he lives.⁴ Two other participants, teenaged sisters who recently (and unhappily) moved to the area, learned to appreciate their new community. “I came into this project being scared of my neighborhood, but now I’m not. I saw beauty and happiness in the place surrounding me,” reflected one of the sisters, Evangeline Lapre⁵.

The project’s reach continues to expand. NWWVT exhibited the photos in Rutland’s Chaffee Art Center, with all nine participants attending its opening. The photos next graced the walls of the hospital, and soon they’ll move to the Vermont State House in Montpelier. The photographers bring friends to the exhibits to show off both their art-making skills and positive aspects of their often negatively portrayed community.

Biddle credits PhotoVoice for influencing how NeighborWorks of Western Vermont approaches creative community development: “This little effort has had a far-reaching impact on the respect people feel about themselves and their neighborhood,” she says.

After witnessing how PhotoVoice helped deepen participants’ sense of community and pride of place, as well as learning from a community survey about residents’ desire for more activities for kids, Shannon Kennelly, NWWVT community relations director (then an AmeriCorps member), started organizing small-scale, creativity-based activities. With no budget, Kennelly solicited donations and bargained for discounts. She has learned that while food gets people to events, it’s the creative activities that encourage people to talk with one another. Kennelly hosts the events outside—in the street, yards and driveways—to “increase neighborliness and reclaim public spaces that residents had been afraid to enter.”

³ “PhotoVoice Project,” NeighborWorks of Western Vermont, accessed September 23, 2017, <https://www.nwwvt.org/photovoice/>.

⁴ “Dylan Smith,” NeighborWorks of Western Vermont, accessed September 23, 2017, <https://www.nwwvt.org/dylan-smith/>.

⁵ “Evangeline Lapre,” NeighborWorks of Western Vermont, accessed September 23, 2017, <https://www.nwwvt.org/evangeline-lapre/>.



Hula Hoop Hoopla.

Photo credit: Shannon Kennelly

The nonprofit encouraged the local organizations to host activities such as face painting and small art and craft projects, which increased interactions between the attendees and local groups.

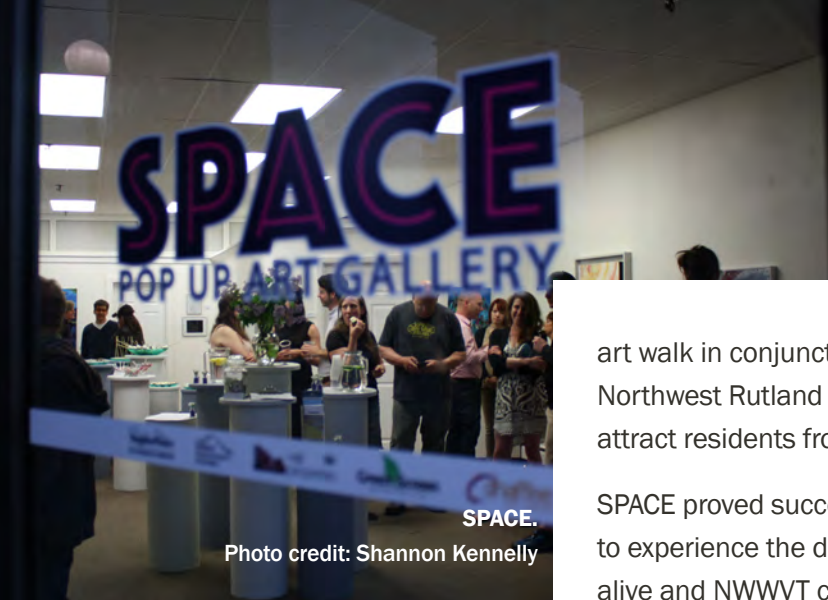
Community interest and support continues to build. After hosting a block party, fall festival and a few outdoor “walk-in” movies in 2016, NWWVT rolled out a full schedule of summer events the next year. Each event featured an art project. For example, at a Park Avenue Party, the organization invited residents to answer the question, “What are you excited for this summer?” They wrote their words on colorful paper and hung them on a porch and front lawn of a vacant house. In another project, neighbors created their own hula hoops and learned some moves amid lots of giggles at the Hula Hoop Hoopla.

NWWVT also hosted National Night Out in Northwest Rutland, an event that drew more than 1,200 Rutlanders and 34 local organizations that exhibited at tables during the evening. The nonprofit encouraged the local organizations to host activities such as face painting and small art and craft projects, which increased interactions between the attendees and local groups. After the success of National Night Out, multiple partners—such as the transitional housing program, women’s shelter and Head Start chapter—pitched in to host creative activities, such as costume making, at NWWVT’s second annual Fall Festival. For the inaugural year of the festival, Kennelly had to do much of the work herself. By supporting more such events, NWWVT hopes residents and community partners will take the lead.

Facing growing pains

Amid its flurry of one-off creative activities, NWWVT also has spearheaded two complex projects with the help of passionate people and grant money—SPACE and Together Art Grows (TAG).

The organization’s AmeriCorps team recently coordinated SPACE, a pop-up art gallery in downtown Rutland, a place for people to come together around art and for local artists and musicians to share their creativity. The team worked with a landlord of a vacant building and organized an



SPACE.
Photo credit: Shannon Kennelly



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Photo credit: Shannon Kennelly

They hoped TAG would build community, re-activate physical space and serve as a “public statement about participants’ investment, pride and happiness in where they live.”

art walk in conjunction with the local university. The gallery featured Northwest Rutland artists in its mix and made a deliberate effort to attract residents from the neighborhood.

SPACE proved successful on multiple fronts: residents came together to experience the downtown in a new way, a vacant storefront came alive and NWWVT cultivated new and cemented existing partnerships. Northwest Rutland residents from all walks of life came to SPACE to see art made by and reflective of their communities. However, despite its success, the future of SPACE remains uncertain. Significant staff time was required to nurture partnerships, recruit and manage volunteers, and oversee event logistics, and the AmeriCorps volunteers who spearheaded the project departed. NWWVT hopes to find another local organization or volunteers to take the reins.

TAG also began with residents passionate about art. A group of Rutland residents attended a NeighborWorks America Community Leadership Institute, where they identified art as a common interest and learned about youth empowerment. Back in Rutland, Kennelly worked with these residents to develop TAG, a youth-directed public art project in which kids choose the creation’s location, medium and message. They hoped TAG would build community, re-activate physical space and serve as a “public statement about participants’ investment, pride and happiness in where they live,” Kennelly says.

However, “we bit off more than we could chew,” she admits. The project took nearly a year to get off the ground due to a variety of factors. The biggest challenge was finding interested youth with availability and the parental support needed to commit to a 10-week project. Competing priorities forced many of the original volunteers to quit the project. To overcome the rocky beginning, Kennelly reached out to the local Boys and Girls Club chapter and recruited other volunteers, as well as hired a new AmeriCorps member to join the team of adults supporting TAG. Once the youths decided on the artistic media, NWWVT tapped into two local artist-experts: a Northwest Rutland sculptor and a muralist from a local graphic art business. Kennelly is optimistic that what she learns through this process will help move future projects along more quickly.



Together Art Grows (TAG).
Photo credit: Shannon Kennelly

To really understand the potential impact, “you have to be there,” she says. “You may not expect anything to happen, but it usually does.”

Now halfway into the 10-week project, Kennelly and her team already have seen positive effects. At first, the youths looked to the adults to steer the project. Now, however, the young participants have grown into their roles as decision-makers. They voted on sculpture and mural art as the media and selected the exhibit locations. Both decisions came as surprises to the team.

“I had made assumptions about what would interest 9-12 year olds. And I think what is so exciting about the youth-empowerment process is learning our assumptions are often incorrect,” notes Kennelly.

The local newspaper has written about TAG, and Kennelly hopes this coverage will inspire more grassroots ideas to improve the community.

The grant NWWVT used to support its creative community development activities runs out at the end of 2018; although the future of the work remains uncertain, Biddle fully supports and appreciates Kennelly’s efforts, and they both understand the importance of generating more awareness of its benefits. As a champion for this work, Kennelly takes lots of photos during events and shares them wherever she can, including Project VISION meetings, the NWWVT newsletter and social media platforms.

In her role as executive director, Biddle strives to celebrate creative community development successes and encourages her staff to get out of their offices and witness these activities in action. To really understand the potential impact, “you have to be there,” she says. “You may not expect anything to happen, but it usually does.”

LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ **Even small and inexpensive creative community development projects can create change.** Kennelly has shed her initial worry that successful art projects require significant financial resources. The materials for many of the activities cost less than \$100 per event and attracted large crowds. Kennelly has found that inexpensive projects, such as the Community Clothesline Project and garden rock painting, are successful in enlivening yards, driveways and streets—drawing neighbors out of their homes and talking with each other. Plus, these smaller-scale activities serve as learning opportunities and jumping-off points for other projects.
- ▶ **Sharing documentation of activities and stories of impact helps build internal and external buy-in.** Biddle fully supports using art and cultural activities as community development tools, but that doesn't mean everyone at the organization or in the larger community does. By sharing photo documentation and stories with her colleagues, Kennelly hopes to instill the importance of this work. Additionally, Kennelly has shared the stories and photos with funders, Project VISION members and city stakeholders. These images and anecdotes help transform the neighborhood's narrative for residents and outsiders. After Kennelly shared images from previous events with the mayor, he attended this year's Fall Festival and called the event evidence of peoples' changing perceptions of the neighborhood⁶.
- ▶ **Community building doesn't require "highbrow" art.** Because she wants people to engage with their neighbors, Kennelly has purposefully planned activities that people of all ages and abilities can participate in and enjoy, such as pumpkin carving and hula hoop making. Biddle advises others to "start with the understanding that the arts are a way to achieve community cohesion, not 'great art.' You will be disappointed if you have the wrong expectations."

⁶ Rich Alcott, "Street Talk: Harvest Fest in the Northwest," Rutland Herald Online, October 21, 2017, <http://www.rutlandherald.com/articles/street-talk-harvest-fest-in-the-northwest/>.



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