

# Report from Strengthening Neighborhoods 2010-2011



Strengthening Neighborhoods  
A program of The Denver Foundation



Convening

# Dear Friends,

Over the past fourteen years, we have heard repeatedly from our neighborhood partners that “Strengthening Neighborhoods needs to find more ways to connect us, and then you all need to get out of the way.” In this annual report we are celebrating the power of folks getting together to share their stories and learn from one another.

At the heart of the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program are the residents who lead and shape our partnerships with our communities.

In the following pages you will learn about the different ways our community partners have found to connect across neighborhoods, differences, and shared experiences. You’ll read about NeighborCircles, a way of gathering that helps people share their life journeys and discover common values and interests, and about how we help folks connect who share a specific interest—urban farming—so they can learn from one another.

These methods of “convening” enhance the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program’s core principles of sharing and learning. By helping residents come together to share their stories and to learn from one another, SN helps residents anchor solutions to neighborhood issues in their own neighborhoods.

While we are limited to sharing just a couple of stories in these pages, we know that our resident partners have many more stories to share about the amazing things that happen when people come together. We look forward to learning from all of them!

Sincerely,

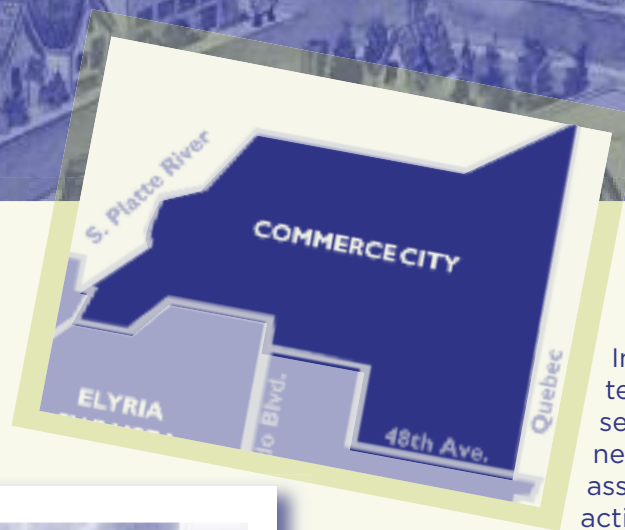
Linda Campbell, Chair, Strengthening Neighborhoods Committee  
Patrick Horvath, Director, Strengthening Neighborhoods Program



Original Aurora leaders, Emma Lopez, Teresa Vargas, and Yolanda Fernandez share their school project ideas.

# NeighborCircles

*A Fun and Easy Way  
to Meet, Eat, and Act*



In 1998, Bill Traynor, a community activist in a textile mill town northwest of Boston, set out with several partners to rebuild his community's dying neighborhoods. They created neighborhood associations to serve as vehicles for civic action. Before long, Bill realized that the

associations' primary focus had become "deciding who gets to decide" about community issues and needs. In response, Bill and his staff developed another way of bringing people together called **NeighborCircles**.

**How they work:** a neighborhood resident invites ten or so neighbors to a series of three dinners. At the first dinner, the neighbors map their journeys, sharing where they came from and how they ended up in the neighborhood. At the second dinner, the neighbors share their thoughts about what is best and worst about their neighborhood. At the third dinner, folks talk about something they might like to do together to take advantage of the good and/or to deal with the bad.

In late March of 2011, a group from the Denver Metro area traveled to Lawrence, MA, the town where Bill Traynor developed NeighborCircles. There they joined with neighborhood leaders from Cleveland, OH to learn and think about how NeighborCircles could help residents in the Denver and Cleveland regions to build stronger communities.

One of the travelers, Ruben Medina, returned from Lawrence inspired to host a NeighborCircle in Original Aurora at Moorhead Recreation Center, where he is the Facility Manager. Local resident Vanessa Hernandez led the Circle and invited ten others from the community to join, none of whom knew each other. The neighbors learned that they had the common history of coming to this country as small children. Through the conversations that followed they realized that they also share common goals and aspirations: to see their children finish high school, go on to college, and become positive, productive citizens. As Ruben tells it, "The Circles helped them to develop relationships with more people in their community. They felt honored



Top: Consuelo, a Derby leader, maps her journey at a NeighborCircle.

Bottom: Commerce City Community Enterprise staff interpreting during a bilingual NeighborCircle at their office.





to have been invited to tell their own stories. As a result of the voice they found in the Circle, participants have begun to engage in their children's school functions, and to volunteer for community groups and at the Rec Center. The Circle has given them a platform to strive for a better life and to seek their aspirations and dreams!"

Ruben's fellow traveler Cristie Jophlin and her staff at Commerce City Community Enterprise also organized their own NeighborCircles. Three Commerce City Circles brought together English and Spanish-speaking residents to share their journeys and to think together about how they can break down the barriers that divide the community. Another Circle, made up of monolingual Spanish-speaking moms, led to the development of trusting relationships between women who are from the same region in Mexico and live on the same block in Commerce City, but who had not met before the Circle. As a result of the Circle, membership in the Derby Neighborhood Group more than doubled. Circle participants are now actively connecting with other leaders in Derby to make their neighborhood stronger.

Civic Canopy, a Northeast Denver group that works to bring communities together, also journeyed to Lawrence. They returned to convene neighborhood associations to begin circle work, including a NeighborCircle in the Clayton neighborhood.

Strengthening Neighborhoods is eager to see how the power of NeighborCircles can affect all of our partner neighborhoods, by bringing people together to share their stories. Yours is the next story we'd like to share. Send an email to SN staff member David Portillo, [dportillo@denverfoundation.org](mailto:dportillo@denverfoundation.org), to find out how you can host a NeighborCircle in your community.

**Commerce City residents talk about their journey to their neighborhood.**



*Participants at the first NeighborCircle in the Clayton Neighborhood.*

# Community Farms Come Together



Nothing brings people together like food! This is one of the driving philosophies of the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program. Over the years we've found this to be true even when the food that gathers people together is food that needs to be gathered from the ground. This love of gardening recently provided fertile ground for residents of SN partner neighborhoods to connect and address such issues as a lack of access to fresh produce (many of our partner neighborhoods are known as "food deserts" because of their lack of access to fresh, healthy food), and lack of economic opportunity.

Because we are not farming experts ourselves, we invited staff from some local community farms and a number of key leaders to a planning circle. Immediately the circle buzzed with discussion about the dilemmas and possibilities associated with urban farming. "I think we should create a way for community farmers to store their food during the long non-growing season," one person suggested. "I think the marketplace for urban farms is really the public schools," offered another. Our heads spun as these thought leaders moved quickly to big themes and big solutions.

In the midst of this, we realized that key representation was missing from the room: the neighborhood farmer. Our role should be to provide a space for urban/community farmers, who don't really have a network, to learn from one another and begin to look at ways they could work together. It was time to re-group.

Top: Ollin Farms farmer teaches Westwood Neighborhood farmers preservation techniques for harvest.  
Bottom: Food stand at Kepner Middle School in Westwood run by youth farming members of ReVision International.



Our next step was to speak with community farms that worked directly with volunteer farmers. **Feed Denver** has a farm on 42nd and Steele St. where the group works with farmers from Denver Housing Authority's nearby homes, some of whom have attended the National Black Farmers Convention. **GrowHaus'** aquaponic indoor farm in Elyria Swansea also helps organic farmers, and is located in one of the worst food deserts in the Denver region. Both are committed to putting neighborhood residents at the center of their work, and see urban farming as a path to economic opportunity. We also invited **ReVision International**, which has created a network of residents on Denver's West side who farm a part of their property and market their produce at a local middle school. We decided to find out what these folks most wanted to learn from one another.

One of our first opportunities to learn turned out to be a journey. We had heard about a program in Longmont through which a community group teamed with a local farm and the YMCA to ask community members their opinions about access to healthy food. The results of this study spurred the group into action: they created a **Produce Food Stand** at the YMCA to serve as the central market for community-grown food, and as a place where they could also hold cooking demonstrations. The Denver community farmers visited Longmont in early September.

In addition to this learning journey, the neighborhood farmers who are working with ReVision International shared their idea of convening a **food justice summit** to examine the links between access to food and racial and economic justice in low-income neighborhoods. Community leaders are hard at work planning this meeting, which will be held in Westwood in the late fall.

We are quite certain that the food the farmers bring to share, as well as the opportunity to talk about food, will make this gathering a great success. After all, nothing brings people—and neighbors—together like food!

For more information about SN's convening of urban farmers, contact David Portillo, [dportillo@denverfoundation.org](mailto:dportillo@denverfoundation.org).



Top: Feed Denver youth placing soil on asphalt on 42nd & Steele.  
Bottom: Bhutanese and other neighborhood farmers volunteering at 42nd & Steele.

# About Strengthening Neighborhoods



## SN Staff (L to R):

Patrick Horvath, LaDawn Sullivan,  
David Portillo, and Mario Flores

**Strengthening Neighborhoods (SN)** is The Denver Foundation's grassroots neighborhood development program. SN helps residents of ten partner neighborhoods use their existing strengths and assets to make their communities better places to live.

**History:** In 1996, The Denver Foundation asked 100 leading members of the community to share ideas about how the Foundation could expand its impact. Their number one suggestion was "Neighborhood and Community Capacity Building." In response, The Denver Foundation created Strengthening Neighborhoods.

**Partner Neighborhoods:** Commerce City, Original Aurora, and the Denver neighborhoods of Clayton, Elyria Swansea, Globeville, Highland, Northeast Park Hill, Skyland, Sunnyside, and Whittier.

**Grants:** For a complete list of grants, please visit [www.strengtheningneighborhoods.org](http://www.strengtheningneighborhoods.org).

## Strengthening Neighborhoods Committee 2010-2011

Mark Berzins, term ended 2010  
Sarah Bock  
Linda Campbell, Chair 2011  
Jack Fox  
David Goens  
María Gonzalez  
Cookie Hansen, term ended 2010  
Michael Martinez, Chair 2010  
Ruben Medina  
Paul Tamburello  
María Zubia

**How it works:** SN makes grants directly to residents for projects that the residents develop and lead.

**Grants:** SN has two grantmaking programs:

- Planning Grants up to \$500 (average grant size is \$250)
- Project Grants up to \$5,000 (average grant size is \$2,300)

## Guidelines:

- Grants are limited to residents and projects in the ten partner neighborhoods.
- Although the maximum grant size is \$5,000, proposals with much smaller budgets are strongly encouraged.
- All proposed projects must be created and led by residents.
- Projects must build on assets or strengths already existing in the neighborhood, such as residents' specific skills, a local park, or the resources available in an existing neighborhood group.
- Groups do not need to be tax-exempt nonprofit organizations to qualify for funding.

**How to Apply:** Please read the Strengthening Neighborhoods Guidelines before applying for a grant. The guidelines, as well as the online grant application, can be found at [www.strengtheningneighborhoods.org](http://www.strengtheningneighborhoods.org). You can also receive the guidelines by calling The Denver Foundation at 303.300.1790.