

The Light in Brightmoor

By Ben Evans

Mahindra NATC was proud to award a \$5,000 grant to Neighbors Building Brightmoor in 2015. This grant was used to help build a community kitchen available to all of Brightmoor's residents.

Of the many urban renewal projects currently happening in the City of Detroit, Neighbors Building Brightmoor (NBB) is among the most compelling. Co-founded by Riet Schumack (with her husband and neighbors) in 2009, the non-profit organization has, to date, transformed 14 blocks of once blighted, crime-ridden property into a haven of community gardens, parks, walking paths, and visual art. These 14 blocks are now referred to as Brightmoor Farmway, and serve as a reminder of the power of hard work and communal ownership and investment.

Schumack and friends first set out to reinvigorate Brightmoor believing that blight was not simply decrepit buildings and litter-strewn lots, but an outward manifestation of inner turmoil stemming from one's lack of hope or possibility. To restore both, Schumack mobilized a small



Brightmoor residents work to beautify their neighborhood

group of local residents and volunteers to clean up vacant lots, paint murals on abandoned houses, and perhaps most importantly, plant farms and gardens—a lot of them. These farms and gardens drew in neighborhood children—the future—whom Schumack and others then guided in planting, nurturing, and harvesting flowers and produce. The first of these gardens—the Brightmoor Youth Garden—was created prior to NBB's formation in 2006 by Schumack and Sheila Hoerauf. Over the subsequent two years it expanded, evolving into a youth market garden that enabled children to realize a profit from their work. Earning money for their efforts only enhanced the young gardeners' sense of accountability, pride, and self-esteem, impelling them to expand the garden from one lot to six and engage even more of their friends and family. Not only did string beans, cucumbers, and carrots grow, so too, did positive momentum. This translated into the formal incorporation of Neighbors Building Brightmoor and, for the first time in years, people moving in to buy or build homes in the area.



Riet Schumack & Brittany Bradd in the new Brightmoor Artisans Community Kitchen

A recent meeting with several of the neighbors who have built Brightmoor reveals—seven years into the endeavor—how vibrant their energy and community ethic remains. Brittney Bradd, who first relocated to the neighborhood from Ann Arbor, spoke about Brightmoor's appeal: "People matter here. Opportunities for exploration and growth are exponentially more accessible than in the rigid, standardized world I was living in before." Bradd has certainly seized on these opportunities. In 2014, she joined an affiliated neighborhood collective called the Brightmoor

Artisans. In just over two years, Bradd helped manage and lead the collective to complete the Brightmoor Artisans Community Kitchen—a glowing new space open to the neighborhood public that promotes nutrition and hosts cooking classes so residents may prepare the fresh produce they harvest. In addition to these classes, the kitchen’s lot now serves as a farmer’s market and hub for neighborhood events and celebrations. Among the many using the kitchen is Lisa Rivera, a transplant from the Chicago suburbs who moved to Brightmoor with her husband and four year-old daughter in order to start a community garden. Rivera, too, discussed the unique draw of Brightmoor: “We were thinking we’d move to North Carolina or Colorado before we came here to visit. Then we did and met tons of the neighbors; everyone was just chill, cool. Not: *hey what do you do for a job?; how much money do you make?*” I found a similar calm and tolerant demeanor possessed by all Brightmoor residents I encountered. Perhaps it can be attributed to the neighborhood’s garden landscapes and small river that flows just beyond them. Both are favorite aspects of Rivera and her young daughter, “We have this river here, and my daughter and I are always outside exploring. She’s not raised in front of the TV or video games. She’s raised in the woods and in the gardens. It’s how I dreamed of being raised.”



People gather at the Community Kitchen Opening

That kids are today being raised in Brightmoor at all is a wonder. Only a short time ago the neighborhood was a hotbed of gang activity, prostitution, drug-trafficking, and harrowing blight. Now families make lives in long-vacant houses and kids play in gardens amid tomatoes, sunflowers, ducks, and goats. The creation of these 14 blocks in Brightmoor has mirrored that of the gardens that ensured it. Hard work, positive intention, and belief were invested in land that has now ripened into a thriving and verdant community. And, as founder Riet Schumack reminds us, without light there can be no growth: “Neighbors Building Brightmoor has always emphasized the positive. If you keep proactively doing what is good, ultimately, you’re going to win. As soon as you start making something positive, there’s light there.” There certainly is.

**Mahindra’s Urban Agricultural Grant Program, initiated in 2015, is committed to helping organizations like Neighbors Building Brightmoor realize positive change in and around Detroit through the growth of healthy, sustainable food. Mahindra’s urban agriculture grants are awarded annually. For more information visit [here](#).*