

Growth of Neighborhood Organizations

The Vollintine/Evergreen section has a long history of active civic clubs and organizations. In 1909 residents of two present-day neighborhoods, i.e. M-MIA and VECA, formed the Evergreen Club, which was the first civic club in Memphis and one of the first in the country. It had two branches, the Woman's Evergreen Improvement Club and the Men's Evergreen Improvement Club. These began about the same time, but they remained separate until 1935 when they merged as the Evergreen Club. Their northern boundary was at first Faxon Avenue, but by 1925 it had expanded to Jackson Avenue.

The groups were attentive to the needs of the neighborhood. They played an important role in obtaining Snowden School and in locating both the zoo and Southwestern in Memphis. The group remained active through World War II after which it lost momentum. In 1959 it relinquished its charter, sold the clubhouse, and disposed of its funds primarily to Southwestern and other institutions.¹

The Jackson Boulevard Improvement Club held its first official meeting in the Lutheran Church at 1548 Jackson, April 4, 1927. A. J. Jenkins, temporary chairman, presided. The next month it considered whether to take women into the club as members. The ladies won and were invited to join. Notices were sent to every home in the neighborhood, a total of 900.² Some of the early leaders were Henry Clayton, an employee of MLG&W; Dr. King, a podiatrist; Harry Thomas; and a Mr. Ryan, remembers Ethel Barham.³ In 1931 the club modified its boundaries to include the intersection of Watkins and Faxon; "thence along Faxon Avenue carline to the terminus at University Circle, then due east to Trezevant, north on Trezevant to Chelsea, and west to Watkins and south to Faxon."⁴ They did not exclude members who then lived outside the boundaries; they could still be members. The Jackson Boulevard Improvement Club offered enticing prizes, a two and a half dollar gold piece, for example, to the member bringing in the most new memberships. Entertainment was a part of their activities. There was the annual summer

picnic, such as the one in 1932 where Constable Tom Robinson supplied and personally barbecued two fine pigs, dances which they sponsored, readings, and musical programs.⁵

Their more serious activities included working on extending the carline to serve the neighborhood, obtaining Vollentine School, and complaining to the city about lack of fire and police protection. Success came their way on many of these activities.

They renamed themselves the Jackson Avenue Civic Club and by 1934 claimed 664 members, "the largest civic club in Memphis." Their 1935 brochure listed considerable accomplishments. The club was responsible for:

Erection of Vollentine School, extension of Jackson Avenue carline, removal of an abattoir that created odors, expedited laying of sidewalks on Jackson and Vollintine, defeated movement to erect Negro College, pre-vented erection of Radio Broadcasting Station on account of interference with local reception, sponsored City Beautiful Drive, raised funds to build and equip Vollentine Playground, raised fifty dollars for Respirator Fund, cooperated in Fire Prevention Drive, and annual picnic for all members free.

Later, in 1935, their representative, Julia Farley Aaron became Miss Shelby County. This organization continued until approximately 1935.⁶

The Hein Park Subdivision organized a Garden Club January 1, 1935, with Mrs. D. H. James as founder. She was ". . . a community spirit," recalls Mrs. Tom White, Jr. She and her husband, Dr. James, lived on Cypress Drive. This is one of the city's oldest garden clubs. Residents believe that through the years the garden club has been very supportive of the neighborhood. It began the annual

picnic which is still continued. In addition, the club has an annual tea and monthly meetings in members' homes. "I think it's very instrumental in keeping neighborhood feeling. It certainly isn't a snobbish thing because anybody who wanted to come was allowed to . . .,"⁷ said Mrs. White.

There is also the Hein Park Civic Association which exists to meet the needs of the subdivision; it is made up of all the residents of Hein Park. Mrs. White thinks that it was organized at least twenty-five years ago, because it began as an organization to fight commercialism at Jackson and Springdale.⁸ It generally lies dormant until it is confronted by an issue that needs attention. In order to be ready for any crisis that might arise the group elects annual officers; the 1979 president is Richard H. Eckels. Two meetings were held last year.

There have been other garden clubs in various parts of the neighborhood. Belvedere Garden Club and Evergreen Garden Club started on their particular streets. The Chloris Garden Club began in the 1930s, and it continues to function. Of its twenty-one members, four now live in the area. The Flora Garden Club was organized in the 1950s, and it like the others was interested in beautifying the immediate neighborhood.⁹

VECA is the organization which has been the most representative of the present-day neighborhood; it grew out of a fellowship of area ministers. Their efforts to understand the reasons behind their declining church memberships in the 1960s led them to the realization that large numbers of white families were moving out of the area as a result of the recent influx of black families. If that trend continued the Vollintine/Evergreen area would be all black in a short time. They determined to work toward a stable, biracial neighborhood.

In May of 1970 the newly formed Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association sponsored a conference on "Orientation to the City," which dealt with these urban problems.

One of the participants was Father Tom Kirk, associate pastor of St. Teresa Catholic Church; he, in turn, invited some community leaders to a meeting in the parish house of his church. Attending the meeting were Monseigneur Joseph Leppert, pastor of St. Teresa; The Rev. Lloyd O. Barker, pastor of McLean Baptist; attorney George Brown, Jr., at that time Director of Legal Aid; Miss Margaret Dichtel, who is now Director of Family Service; Mrs. Harry Thompson, a social worker at Family Service; Miss Velma Lois Jones, teacher at Cypress Jr., current president of NAACP and a former president of MEA; and Drs. Julius Melton and M. T. Williams of the Southwestern staff.¹⁰

This group along with Father Milton Guthrie of Holy Names Catholic Church, Warren Lowery, a layman from McLean Baptist, who designed the VECA logo, and Kenneth Cole, an employee of E.E.O.C., became the steering committee of the newly formed VECA(A), i.e. Vollintine-Evergreen Community Action Association. (See introduction) An open invitation was sent to the community to attend a meeting at McLean Baptist Church on September 21, 1970. At 7:30 p.m. approximately one hundred and fifty people gathered in the chapel. Margaret Dichtel was elected president and John Appling treasurer. Certain committees were named. J. Kimbrough Johnson chaired the communication committee; Joe Hough and Father Tom Kirk headed the real estate committee; and Dr. Bruce Sells, the education committee. The association's purpose was "to cooperatively maintain and enhance a healthy biracial community."¹¹ The group was encouraged from the first by the Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association (MIFA) and by MIFA's Executive Director Berkeley Poole. Immediately there was a need for a vehicle for communication and for a study of the schools and housing situation. A newspaper, The EvergreeNews, was conceived; Dr. John A. Bruhwiler and Dr. George Bradfute became co-editors. Southwestern allowed them to use its press. The first edition appeared on January 25, 1971.¹² It has consistently been a readable paper. Rick Thomas, Sociology professor at Southwestern, was "the moving force" for many years.¹³ Karen Tynes served as editor for several years; Ann Moore is the current editor.

In the early days the paper was enlivened by the cartoons of Brad McMillan, a graduate of Southwestern and a neighborhood resident. The EvergreenNews became the voice of VECA and as such has done a first rate job causing Joe Hough, real estate economist and longtime resident to say, "the most important thing about VECA was The EvergreenNews."¹⁴ Coming out monthly, it is delivered by volunteers such as Southwestern professor, Dr. Fred Neal. "The circulation of the paper has done much to make the section into a cohesive community."¹⁵ (See picture)

The organization did not try to keep blacks out of the neighborhood but tried to encourage whites to stay. "We were trying to educate them (whites) not to panic, not to sell unless you have to."¹⁶

From the first VECA attacked the climate of fear in the area. Neighbors were encouraged to call on one another. It was found that many of the blacks moving in were professional people with the same concerns for their families as the original residents. The EvergreenNews made an effort to dispel rumors through the "Meet Your Neighbors" column, which shared information about the newcomers with the community.

Monthly meetings of VECA were held; committees were formed using the neighborhood's wealth of professional talent. By August 1971, president Margaret Dichtel was quoted as saying:

This neighborhood is more vital than it has ever been before. This is the most exciting and religious thing I've ever done.¹⁷

Soon VECA found it necessary to go on the offensive. Real estate agents using blockbusting tactics were moving into the neighborhood. In 1971 the VECA Real Estate Committee, headed by Joe Hough, sent to the Attorney General a report on the practices of some of the real

estate agents. The April 1971 EvergreenNews warned the residents of questionable real estate practices, and the May 1971 issue named three agents.¹⁸ Though the questionable practices were common knowledge, VECA did not sue but chose to handle the matter through the real estate companies. One agent, not mentioned in the article, was fired. This helped control flagrant blockbusting tactics. When another agent, who was mentioned in the newspaper, threatened to sue VECA, the organization incorporated to protect its individual members.

The organization is still very vigilant against any sort of blockbusting. It does not hesitate to send out letters to real estate firms who appear to use scare tactics in the neighborhood. If necessary, the Real Estate Committee moves in for a closer watch and a possible report to the Real Estate Board, the Real Estate Commissioner's office or the Attorney General's office. The committee may send out a letter to the company which states that the agent's actions in the neighborhood are being monitored. Joe Hough calls this their "most successful tactic."¹⁹ Keeping out blockbusting "... is a continuing crisis, it never stops," says Margaret Dichtel.²⁰ Racial steering is even more subtle, and unfortunately it seems to continue.

The school situation was of major importance to this neighborhood. VECA intervened in city school desegregation and became a "friend of the court" in 1971. (See Chapter 6) VECA worked with parents to help them accept desegregation and to urge them to continue their support of public schools. "VECA is the impersonal somebody that tried to get things done."²¹

Jackson remains a boulevard today because of citizen action. In 1973 VECA went to court to stop the city from taking up the median strip for left turn lanes. U. S. District Judge Bailey Brown heard the case and issued a consent order which rescued the 4,105 square feet of "grassy tree-lined median"²² along Jackson Avenue. VECA attorney, Marvin Ratner, argued that the median strip should be considered parkland and therefore covered by federal environmental protection laws.²³

VECA has worked to combat crime and the deterioration of commercial areas and housing. Joe Sohm, real estate agent and resident, says that "for the past five years I've been given the thankless job of being the housing committee chairperson."²⁴ His committee is charged with the broad responsibility of trying to keep the properties upgraded. At first they decided that the direct approach was the best way, but this caused people to be defensive. Now the committee deals through the City Housing Improvement Department under Mr. R. H. Holladay, Jr. VECA has found him to be extremely helpful. The committee then makes an effort to follow up and to make sure the situation has been corrected. Sohm has found that this is a slow, difficult job but one that "it is doing something." On occasion he has visited an eyesore, taken photographs, and delivered them to the city. "Finally we'll see some results."²⁵ A VECA resident convinced the City Council to prohibit truck traffic on its residential streets and called on the city to enforce the regulations as they exist.²⁶

VECA conducted its own survey of housing code violations ". . . and working with other neighborhood groups obtained a Federal National Mortgage lending program for the area."²⁷

In many ways VECA has been successful. In the words of one of its founders, Father Tom Kirk, VECA has done more than he hoped. "It is involved in political things like I-40, 'Saints Courts,' and it has spawned leadership for the city . . . it is the city's most recognizable civic group."²⁸

It has received good publicity. In 1976 a NBC film crew came to VECA "to report on it as one of the few successfully integrated communities it could find in the country."²⁹

VECA accomplished many things, but as is often the pattern of a volunteer organization, when its initial crises were resolved, it relaxed. VECA sank into a period of inactivity in 1976-77. In 1978 it was necessary to reorganize. A letter was sent out February 14, 1978 calling for "a reorganizational meeting" on Sunday, February 26, 1978, at Southwestern Student Center. It said:

VECA(A) has floundered without direction and goals for the past year or more as a result of virtually complete apathy by area residents. Maybe our past success and recognition have been the cause of this downfall. Everyone seems to be assuming that somebody else is minding the store. However, such has not been the case for some time. The current inactivity is well illustrated by the fact that our monthly "EvergreeNews" (copies enclosed) has only been published three times during the past six months. Also although numerous problems and concerns still exist, at present there are no functioning ad hoc and/or standing committees other than the skeleton Executive Committee. We should have an Education Committee deeply involved seeking amiable solutions to the overcrowding at Vollentine School, etc., etc.

Whatever the various reasons are for all of this stagnation and apathy, it is quite clear that now is the time for revitalization. We once again solicit your cooperation to see that the churches and church-people of the neighborhood are directly involved in the activities of VECA(A).

Miss Margaret Dichtel became president for the second time in 1979. That spring the name was shortened officially to Vollintine/Evergreen Community Association, i.e. VECA. Lindsay Memorial Presbyterian Church made space available for the organization's office and meetings. The dormant organization is now awake and working. However, there are only 150 dues-paying members. While people work for VECA who don't pay dues, they could add to its effectiveness by officially joining. The \$2.50 annual dues are the best

bargain in town. Also disappointing is the fact that the VECA role only shows fifteen black families as members.³⁰ Some like Modeane Thompson are active in their own block clubs and find that do not have time for both. She expressed what other black residents may also believe.

. . . people on our street since it was separated weren't particularly interested in being involved with VECA, because they felt that our neighborhood, for the most part, was a black neighborhood, . . . they felt the whole idea of integrating the neighborhood didn't affect us one way or the other. Our street was essentially and still is essentially black.³¹

VECA does not attract many members from Hein Park, though the Civic Club does have a representative at VECA meetings. VECA did not support Hein Park's petition to close West Drive, and that put a slight wedge between the groups. VECA also did not take an official stand opposing the interstate through Overton Park. The organization found the only official stand the group would take was to oppose the L & N tracks and right of way as an alternate route for the expressway.³² This does not imply that individual members have not worked for certain causes, but there is a wide range of opinion among the VECA membership on the above issues.

It appears that VECA deserves more active support from more people. There is an outstanding long-term leadership which works tirelessly, but it needs more active interest from all the residents of the neighborhood. Such important issues loom on the horizon that all need to be informed and enlisted in protecting the total neighborhood. Though VECA removed the word "action" from its name, it is very actively and intelligently involved with the neighborhood and can serve as a good example to other groups.

In the 1970s Brother N. T. Greene headed an activist group named The Cypress Health and Safety Committee. He

grew up in Hyde Park, an area north of VECA; now he and his family live at 1073 Terry Circle. His group began under the name of the 40-2 Shelby Democratic Club, but it changed to the Cypress Health and Safety Committee when he attacked the sewage problem at Cypress Junior High School. The committee filed suit in 1974 seeking \$340,000 damages from the city. Judge Bailey Brown dismissed the case. The dismissal was upheld by the U. S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals on April 1, 1975. The sewage problem has now been solved.³³

The group fought against the closing of West Drive claiming racial discrimination. Greene has taken the case through the courts for several years. In the most recent action the U. S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals supported his view and ruled that the barrier on West Drive must be removed.³⁴ The city has appealed this decision.

Brother Greene fights hard and often seems unreasonable to his opponents. Many think he is looking for a political base; others wonder how he earns a living, for he has no visible means of support. Greene has accomplished some benefits for the residents of VECA, but his means are so divisive they leave permanent wounds in the neighborhood.

The VECA neighborhood has been extremely fortunate in having strong neighborhood organizations which know how to affect public policy. It is desirable that the groups be less antagonistic toward one another, and all work to overcome the trend of racial polarization.