



“Good luck with that!”



I feel drawn to this neighborhood in a way I can't explain. The economic diversity appeals to me – perhaps because of challenges in my own family history. When I began to imagine how an art center could build bridges and make a real difference, I paid attention. I'm not sure I would have followed that pull if it hadn't been for my experience with Lumunos. It was easier to think it was a great idea for someone else to work on. Lumunos helped me get into the habit of thinking about call and slowing down enough to connect with what matters most to me. As I did that, my sense of passion and energy for the project continued to grow. I started to think that, if I didn't do something to make it happen, perhaps no one would. Then our neighborhood would miss out on a great opportunity. Charlie Branda

Charlie Branda and her husband Dale made a commitment to move into a diverse area of Chicago in south Old Town just after they were married. A developer they knew was planning a mixed income condominium project as part of the “plan for transformation” of the Cabrini Green public housing project, and invited them to participate. Charlie and Dale were the first ones to sign a contract. They were thinking about starting a family, and wanted to raise their children in a neighborhood with cultural, racial, and economic diversity. Their new home was ready just after their son was born; a daughter followed a few years later. Eventually, their children were admitted by lottery to a public fine arts magnet school on their block. Charlie got involved where she could and was elected to the Local School Council (which she now chairs).

“The school is diverse and small enough to feel like a family,” Charlie said. “But every now and then something happens that hits home the fact that, in many ways, there are two separate worlds intersecting at the same street corner.” Last year, a reminder came in the form of a gang retaliation shooting across the street from Charlie’s house. The young man killed was in the neighborhood visiting his mom and went to the corner store to buy some milk. He wasn’t in a gang. “It’s hard for me to imagine being associated with a gang simply by living or shopping within a turf boundary,” Charlie said. “For my neighbors across the street, it’s a reality.”

Charlie had been reading a book called *Make the Impossible Possible*, by Bill Strickland. The author, who grew up in a tough area of Pittsburgh, shared how a high school ceramics class sparked a transformation in his life. As she read the book, Charlie thought about the empty storefront spaces along Sedgwick Street and began to imagine student artwork replacing broken blinds. She imagined the Sedgwick corridor (which visitor maps with walking

tours circumvent) buzzing with parents walking their children to a ceramics or painting class. She imagined a place in the neighborhood where everyone was welcomed, and where neighbors could connect with the best part of themselves. When she started sharing the idea with neighbors and friends, the first response she heard was, “Well, good luck with that!” That kind of response didn’t discourage her. She kept talking about the idea until it started to get some traction.

“Wow, you’re going to make this happen!”

One of the things that kept Charlie focused during that time was a memory she had from a Lumunos /Faith at Work Couples Retreat in 2006. At the retreat, she and her husband made a collage of things they felt called to as a couple. Charlie found the name of their street in a magazine, cut it out, and pasted it onto their poster board. “I remember feeling a little out of my comfort zone with the project, and it didn’t seem especially significant at the time,” she recalls. “All these years later, the image of that collage with the name of my street in the center has come to mind so many times at discouraging moments. It reminds me what matters to me.”

Part of Charlie’s passion is connected with growing up without opportunities for art and music classes, which motivates her to make art available to others. The countless hours of volunteering to fully open “Art on Sedgwick” do not feel like work to Charlie. Having that mindset has given her courage and discipline to listen and ask: “Is this something I’m supposed to be doing? Yes, it is!”



Last spring, Charlie worked with the Near North Unity Program and received a service grant from Architecture for Humanity Chicago to design the space build-out for the project and to involve the community in the design and vision. The plans call for a smaller space that will house a dedicated ceramics studio with classes in wheel throwing and hand building; and a larger space offering a wider variety of classes in visual and performing arts. Renovations to the space will start this summer.

If fundraising goes as planned, Art on Sedgwick will open its doors for classes in the fall. In the meantime, the advisory board is partnering with the Near North Unity Program and four nearby schools on an art show in May. Students from public and private schools within two blocks will be submitting original artwork that celebrates the neighborhood’s “Faces and Places”.

Speaking from her deep commitment, Charlie says, “We haven’t opened yet, and we’re already making a difference by bringing neighbors together to work on projects. Now, when people talk about improving the neighborhood, they’re also talking about the art center, building bridges, and enlivening the Sedgwick Corridor. We’re influencing the conversation.”