

*“Message from a Founder” is a profound and timely reflection of the state of being in northeast Kansas City, Kansas. Written by Mrs. Dorothy McField, one of the founders of the Historic Northeast Midtown Association (HNMA), she read it at the organization’s 2017 annual meeting and 5-year celebration that was held on September 21, 2017 at the newly named Beatrice L. Lee Community Center. The audience hailed the narrative as an excellent position paper. On behalf of the Board of Directors, I thank Mrs. McField for this “one to grow on” lesson on love, commitment, passion and hope for a northeast area to come—*  
*Elnora Tellis Jefferson, President, HNMA.*

### Message from a Founder

Good Afternoon. I’ve been asked, as one of the organizers of HNMA, to bring my comments to this Five Year Celebration. I’ve written, rewritten and written again what my message would be...and I’m still not sure exactly what is going to come out of my mouth. So I’ll just start and see where I take you.

It’s only been five years, but it seems like ages ago, when representatives of many of the neighborhood groups in the Northeast Area got together and made a commitment to establishing the NBR (Neighborhood Business Revitalization Organization) that is known today as the Historic Northeast Midtown Association. NBR’s had existed in the city/county for numbers of years providing voices and representation for their areas, contributing their points of view they felt were important pieces in the direction of growth and development of the city/county. The Northeast area had tried unsuccessfully for a number of years to make this happen and for numerous reasons had not succeeded. Determined to make ourselves a functioning participant in the growth and development of Wyandotte County, we committed ourselves to sticking with this creation of the NBR until it was finalized and recognized by the Unified Government as a representative of the Northeast area of Wyandotte County/Kansas City Kansas. These persons, the Founders, on good days and bad, in good weather and not-so-good weather, refused to give up the commitment and here we are five years later celebrating the creation of the Historic Northeast Midtown Association.

During these past five years HNMA has been able to join with other organizations in the city which have been designed to create models for healthy lifestyles, been able to assist residents in accessing the Affordable Care Act, to promote the improvement and enhancement of Jersey Creek Park and Parkwood Park, among many other things. One of their signature accomplishments has been the operation of the Learn to Earn Program which

has connected young people aged 10 to 16 with numerous businesses in the area, where they have learned skills and techniques which will assist them in their futures, as well as supplying them with monetary rewards for their summertime activities. HNMA has been one of the agencies responsible for setting up Candidate Forums in previous and current election cycles. Through the diligence of the Executive Director and the current Board, HNMA has made small grants available to Neighborhood associations to implement small projects that enhance their neighborhoods. The quarterly meetings of HNMA have provided the public with opportunities to learn what numerous individuals and agencies are engaged in relative to the operation of City/County government and non-government activities; and annual Chili Cook-offs are gaining quite a positive reputation.

Neighborhood groups, which are formed to be representatives of their neighbors, make up the bulk of NBR's and HNMA is no different. Yet, as I go about, and visit with neighbors I find that not enough of our current residents know what the initials NBR stand for, know what an NBR is created to do, why it exists, or how it can represent and benefit the citizens, and that many of our citizens have no clue to the presence, purpose or activities of HNMA. I'm convinced that part of the reason people don't know is because we have varied and limited methods of informing all the community. We have no radio station (devoted to local information and concerns), no television station (focused on the local up-side of activities, concerns, etc.), no "community gathering place" where ideas can be exchanged and discussed, and among other things, we often have so many conflicting activities we can't divide ourselves into enough pieces to attend all the ones we know about. I was told that my reasoning is "flawed" because I'm reminded, we have Cable TV (where the UG Commission meetings are televised and broadcast), and after all, we have Facebook, and Next Door and Instagram, and texting and web sites and blogs and tweets and twitters and all these "new-age" means of communication. I tell myself, that in spite of all the latest communication gadgets, much of the public still appears to be quite uninformed, and I console myself with the reminder that back in the "Dark Ages" when smoke signals and drumming were our means of communication, the whole village received the same news at the same time.

There was a time, not too long ago however, when communication appeared to be much easier and more efficient. This was a time when, because of segregation, we saw ourselves as more of a "community", exhibited more "community spirit". Our businesses were thriving and passed on to our young people, our residents were active, our schools held us together, and our teachers and other professional people lived among us. Then "progress" came to "River City" – with Fair Housing and Integration came opportunities to take flight: many of our residents who could, chose to move away; many of our young people, educated and unable to find places to experience and ply their talents, left for more "fertile" ground; businesses which formerly denied service and employment to many of our residents, now

were opened up to accepting our money and hiring our people; what we called our “community” was dissolving. Over time the Northeast Area of our city/county has been given a “bad rap”, not necessarily through any fault of our own. If all you know about us comes from the media, then you may believe that our area is so crime-ridden, derelict, depraved and deprived, that no one but losers maintains a residence here. Some residents who remain are older persons who could not afford to “take advantage” of these newly found “opportunities”, however many who stay own their own homes, love the area, long for better times and choose to stay. As the residents and businesses re-locate to other areas, the tax base diminishes, so that much of what is done to maintain other communities is lacking in this Northeast Corridor. When the affluent leave, guess what’s left?

Through the years, our area has been studied, surveyed, and reported on in order to remedy this lack; we have been asked “What do you want?” We, the residents have answered numerous times; yet the results of the studies and reports have failed to show a positive effect in our community. We still have high infant mortality rates, high teen pregnancy rates, low educational levels, high unemployment levels, high medical incidents, a sparse and struggling business community, huge swaths of boarded houses and buildings, vacant lots, crumbling curbs and sidewalks ... however we no longer have a full service grocery store! Using the results of numerous Surveys, funds have been generated to assist in providing improvements. Major projects designed to benefit this area have been introduced into City Planning and instead of our area benefitting, the end result was that funds filled the pockets of consultants, surveyors, developers, and the area which was responsible for creating the justification for the monetary “largesse” was and is still wanting. Time and time again, results from the surveys brought the funds in but left the community holding the empty bag, labeled “used again”. To answer the question, “What do we want?” It’s simple – we want everything that makes a community a “community” – with all the amenities other communities have!

One more opportunity to answer the question of what we want, comes with the creation of a Northeast Area Master Plan that is currently under way, with the UG and Consultants again seeking input from the citizens, to develop whatever is considered the long term plan for the Northeast area. (As none of the consultants come from this area, it is imperative that local residents participate so that the consultants understand who we are and what we want). Because this area has undergone so many surveys previously, with no positive results, some residents have nearly reached the point of believing that nothing will come of this search either, and feel this effort is another waste of time and energy. Many residents actually believe that there is already a “plan” for this area...which includes replacing existing older structures with new more expensive ones, turning this area into a “garden community for Kansas City Missouri” and doesn’t include them. Residents see infrastructure work being

completed and sidewalks constructed in areas where there are currently no residents and the question is asked, “who is to benefit from all these improvements?”; some residents, seeking to get out from under near impossible rehab costs are selling their lands to the folks who “buy ugly houses” and they ask, “What’s going to be done with the houses and the land?” In spite of our suspicions this is one more opportunity to voice individual and group opinions and desires, and though this process has been initiated by other entities on more than one occasion, we can only hope that something positive...visibly, structurally, physically positive...will come of these results. Keep in mind that if the residents refuse to participate, we will then likely be labeled as “uncooperative, negative, and all the other downers”, which gives the “powers that be” the “go” sign to do whatever they choose, which may happen anyway under any circumstance.

We have changing faces in our neighborhoods...both in the physical structures and in the people who are becoming our neighbors and we must reach out, include them as much as possible, teach them and learn from them. Many of our neighborhood groups are currently composed of elderly people who are running out of energy. If these groups are to remain a viable, functioning structure in our communities, and continuing to support HNMA, the memberships must expand to include the young, the new, the newly retired, the new residents.

As we see more and more houses becoming abandoned and being demolished, with more and more vacant land available, we need to explore the possibilities of how this land might be utilized for the benefit of the community. As we see new people moving in and doing rehabilitation on older residences, we must develop ways our young people can learn and develop the skills that are necessary for them to take advantage of any opportunities that present themselves. As we see more and more absentee landlords with more renters, we must find ways to encourage more home ownership in order to create a more positive and stable impact in our neighborhoods. We must develop the ability to see these changes as assets and not liabilities. We must find a way to develop a passion for creating a new “community”, a “common unity” that each individual desires enough to make him/her want to help create the best in our surroundings; creating something that will make neighbors take ownership in our surroundings and be willing to do whatever is necessary to see that our positive desires become realities. In addition to determining what we want for our Northeast Area, we must establish a new mentality...one that sees the relationship with our neighbors as more important than whatever has been our previous mentality. Can we work toward improving the quality of life for each one in our community, all the people...young and old...rich and poor...healthy and ill? We must become educated, informed, encouraged to know the issues and speak our interests to the people who want our vote to positions of power in this community, understanding at the same time that perhaps even that is not

enough. Our new mentality must include an individual and a group philosophy of self-sufficiency and self-sustainability. We must use whatever means we can to strengthen our neighborhoods. We must engage the creativity of our young residents and the talents of our diverse residents so that ideas “outside the box” can become commonplace. We must get the word out, through every means necessary; we must have more people involved in the process...single individuals cannot do it alone; we cannot rely on the institutions where we pay taxes to do what the people will, unless the people let their will be known. One major purpose for the founding of HNMA was “the creation of a place where the community could speak with one voice.” And the people need to be encouraged to use HNMA to represent their consolidated “voice”.

The founders’ challenge was holding ourselves together long enough to get HNMA recognized as a valued entity. While that was accomplished the struggle continues to allow HNMA to be the representative of this Northeast Area. The current challenge is to encourage active participation in HNMA as individuals and through our neighborhood groups in order to keep HNMA viable, to insure that HNMA truly becomes the representative of the Northeast Area. So I ask, “Where will HNMA be five years from now”? Will we have put our dreams on paper and seen any of them come to fruition? One of the biggest issues this community has dealt with for the last several years is the lack of a full service grocery store that provides fresh, healthy food for our residents. Five years from now will we still be begging the establishment for a Grocery Store or will we have used our ingenuity and created one of our own? Will our vacant lands still be vacant and unproductive? Will more and more of our older houses end up on the demolition list or will we have been able to save and rehab some? Will our young men still be part of the school to prison pipeline? There was an old expression years ago that said “If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem”. Use your imagination and try to visualize the next five years and see yourself as the solution to whatever challenges the area will face.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you at this Fifth Anniversary of HNMA. As I close, my question for you to ponder is “What message will the 10th Anniversary Speaker bring?”