

# East Village

Magazine

March 2017



*Photograph by Edwin D. Custer*

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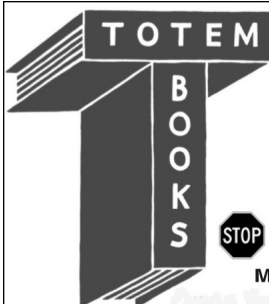
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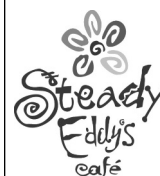


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# East Village Magazine

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## Commentary *Trees, transparency and trust in Flint*

By Paul Rozycki

*"Except during the nine months before he draws his first breath, no man manages his affairs as well as a tree does."*

- George Bernard Shaw

*"A hypocrite is the kind of politician who would cut down a redwood tree, then mount the stump and make a speech for conservation."*

- Adlai E. Stevenson

*"Peace and trust take years to build and seconds to shatter."*

- Mahogany SilverRain

The problem with destroying trust is that it's not limited to one area.

Without a doubt, trust in government was devastated with the Flint water crisis – and for good reason. The ineptitude, insensitivity, callousness and criminality of all levels of government has become more obvious as the three years of crisis have unfolded. It will take much more time and effort to restore trust in the system than it will to repair or replace the pipes in Flint.

With distrust so high, it's all too easy to distrust all institutions of government (and non-government) as well.

That distrust in so many institutions (the government, corporations, the media) has fueled the candidacy and election of Donald Trump. Ironically, that same level of distrust has given Trump the lowest ratings of any newly inaugurated president.

It is also impacting Flint neighborhoods. Long known as Tree City USA, Flint has joined with the Genesee Conservation District (GCD) to remove dead and diseased trees from the city curbs and trim trees for public safety. The project's many details are outlined in Jan Worth-Nelson's story in this issue of the *EVM*.

From all indications, the project is well-intentioned to preserve and protect Flint's tree-covered heritage and assure that future generations will live under the shade of as many trees as we do. However, as documented in Jan's story, sometimes even programs with the best of intentions can go astray.

At a recent neighborhood meeting, the

College and Cultural Neighborhood Association (CCNA) president Mike Keeler said that, after a recent bike ride around the neighborhood, he found 180 stumps of freshly cut trees. On inspection, some of the trees were diseased or dying and clearly needed to be cut down. However, a good many others seemed to be perfectly healthy and may have suffered only from being "elderly" in tree years (which, I assume, are somewhat longer than dog years).

The meeting, and later inquiries as cited in Jan's story, produced conflicting sets of facts and figures about the cost of trimming a tree as opposed to cutting it down. The well-intentioned, and needed program, faced a rising tide of distrust. Some of it may have been the fault of the Genesee Conservation District, the companies they hired, or the City of Flint. Much of it may have been a reflection of the high level of distrust we have in nearly all organized institutions today.

In any case, cutting back on the distrust may be a more challenging job than taking a chainsaw to a few dead trees. But the job needs to be done and in the long run should be more rewarding and more important.

As a first step in restoring trust, there are a few questions that need to be answered about Flint's tree-cutting program.

1) What are the real criteria for deciding when a tree should be cut down? When it's dead? Or when it's going to cost too much to trim it over the next few years? I suspect that the residents could live with an honest answer to the question.

2) Is there a contract between the GCD, the tree-cutting companies and the City of Flint? What does that contract spell out about who gets paid and how much they get paid for their services? What does it say about who has the right to sell the wood from the trees? Has there been a violation of the contract?

3) Is there a meaningful way to communicate with property owners who are about to have their trees cut down? Do they have the ability to respond or object?

(Continued on Page 11.)

Cover: Door lamp at St. Paul's



*Photograph by Edwin D. Custer*

Photo of the month: First signs of spring – snowbells

## *CCNA residents stumped on tree campaign; cutting pauses*

*By Jan Worth-Nelson*

A group of College Cultural Neighborhood residents concerned about the recent disappearance of 180 trees from their leafy neighborhood have been getting a tutorial on Flint city bureaucracy and politics as they attempt to get answers from the city and the Genesee Conservation District.

In the meantime, tree cutting in the CCN has been temporarily halted by City Council – though College Cultural Neighborhood Association (CCNA) members say that is not what they wanted – as talks continue.

The story began last summer when Mike Keeler, long-time president of the CCNA and a college-trained wildlife biologist and Sierra Club activist, noticed a sudden rash of new stumps in the Seventh Ward neighborhood east of downtown.

Investigating further, on several afternoons biking the blocks north and south of Court Street, he counted and documented the locations of 180 new stumps. Some appeared indeed to have rotten cores, indicating they were dead or dying and candidates for removal.

But a number also appeared healthy, making Keeler wonder who was deciding which ones to cut and why. As he probed further, he learned many residents at the addresses of the stumps said they had not been notified of removals – or, discovered a door hanger with no contact information for follow up.

The CCNA is known for its trees. In fact, it uses its lush canopies as a selling point in an association brochure. The trees, many of them silver maples, were planted when the houses, a mix of Tudor and colonial, were built in the '20s and '30s.

The lifespan of a silver maple is about 75 to 80 years, so the venerable trees are in their dotage. In fact, some homeowners see them as a liability, as brittle old branches crack off, sometimes unexpectedly or in windstorms.

But Keeler said he wants to be sure when decisions about the trees are made, that they are made well and that residents have a voice. In January, he and three others went to a meeting of the Genesee Conservation District, a publicly elected body that partners with the city to manage its trees.

They learned that the recent cut-downs are part of a 2015 urban forestry plan produced by an Ann Arbor consultant for the GCD, following completion of an inventory of the city's 30,000 "street trees" on easements the city owns – known as parkways – between sidewalks and streets.

As Angela Warren, administrator of the GCD explained in a November 2016 article in *East Village Magazine*, the inventory, available on the city's website, shows every street tree in the city, at least as of 2015. Residents saw that every tree was ranked, ranging from

"good" to "dead." An additional ranking classified 4,200 for immediate removal, 2,100 for "critical removal" and another 12,000 as needing "raises" – where overhanging branches are cut up from the bottom.

CCNA members say the GCD needs to communicate better with the community.

"They never shared their plan with anybody," Keeler told EVM. "Not MLive, the TV stations, nothing. What were we supposed to think when 180 trees are gone from our neighborhood? Did they think we wouldn't notice?"

A tender point for all concerned, as Keeler and others have noted, is that the 2015 forestry plan originally was set in motion by one of the city's emergency managers, Mike Brown, who, as Keeler put it, "wasn't required to let anybody know. He had his own powers." Still, CCNA representatives said there could have been – and should have been – outreach from the GCD.

Among other emerging information, Jeffrey Johnson, GCD senior conservation coordinator, acknowledged door hangers did originally lack contact information, and said that has been corrected.

Following the meeting with the GCD board, which Keeler said led to more questions and conflicts between residents and GCD staff about which trees should come down, the CCNA invited their city councilperson, Monica Galloway, to a CCNA spe-

*(Continued on Page 7.)*

# Charter revision on track for Aug. 8 ballot; public responds

By Harold C. Ford

A draft of the first Flint city charter revision in 43 years was reviewed by about 100 Flint citizens at a 4 1/2-hour community meeting Feb. 25 at Flint's Bethel United Methodist Church. The draft represented two years of work by the nine-member City of Flint Charter Review Commission.

The revision is the fifth in the city's 162-year history since incorporation in 1855.

At the forefront of the commission's proposed changes to the charter are ethics, office qualifications and finance. According to Commission member Jim Richardson, the principles that guided the group in its work were: government accountability; government transparency; public involvement in government; and effective government. A commission document about the proposed changes advises, "These changes all reflect those values."

## Ethical standards board proposed

The revised charter would establish a board to enforce ethical standards and set in place a financial overhaul requiring clear budget timelines and a ban on raiding restricting funds. What it would not do is change the city's existing strong mayor-council structure.

After the period of state and public review concluded Mar. 6, commission members aim to have the proposed charter ready to go to voters Aug. 8.



Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson

## Charter commission vice-chair John Cherry leads discussion.

Following the Feb. 25 public meeting, commission vice-chairperson John Cherry told *East Village Magazine*, "I anticipate there will be changes; I have no idea how major they'll be." When asked about the likelihood of changes being done in time for the Aug. 8 election, he responded with an emphatic, "Yes! Because if we don't, we're going to miss the deadline for the ballot."

The Charter Review Commission expects to submit its 77-page charter document to the Michigan Attorney General's office early this month for review. "The reason is that the

Attorney General's office has to review the entire charter we are proposing to make sure it doesn't violate any state law," commission member Jim Richardson said during a presentation to the Central Park Neighborhood Association Feb. 9.

First Ward city councilman Eric Mays, the only member of the council at the Feb. 25 meeting, told *EVM*, "I know that they (commission members) worked hard. They made some changes; some of them I agree with, some of them I don't."

## Mays urges November ballot

Mays urged the commission to take its time and aim to get on the ballot in November rather than August. "They want to have two shots at it – August and November," he said. "I would probably go one-shot, get it right, and do it by November. By the time they get to August, I'll go yea or nay and tell the people I represent what I think."



Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson

## Residents Koen Driesen, Carrie Nelson, Mark Baldwin and Lynn Williams consider Charter plan

On being the only member of the City Council at the culminating event of the public feedback period, Mays said: "I've been attending the Charter Revision Commission meetings back and forth. I'm a different kind of councilperson; I'm not disappointed in being different. This is important and it's our duty to pay attention. I wish other council people had been here, but I'll take the honor of being the

only one that's educated at this point."

## Ward-council structure left unchanged

The commission's draft revision does not include changes to the existing strong mayor-council form of government. Nor does it change the current ward-council structure. Already-existing wards and a nine-person city council are retained in the draft revision, Richardson stated.



Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson

## Charter Commission Chair Cleora McGee

"When we looked at all of the things and heard community feedback ... there was an extreme amount of divergent points of view around those two issues and they were quite striking in many respects," commission member Jim Richardson reported. "The amount of change and improvement it would make to government would not be enough of a return in response to the amount of disruption that it would generate."

In addition to Richardson, members of the commission, elected by city of Flint residents in May 2015, are Cleora McGee, chairperson; John Cherry, vice-chairperson; Quincy Murphy; Victoria McKenzie; Charles Metcalf; Heidi Phaneuf; Marsha Wesley; and Barry Williams.

A longer version of this story, along with an analysis, history and timeline, is at [eastvillagemagazine.org](http://eastvillagemagazine.org).

*EVM staff writer Harold C. Ford can be reached at [hcford1185@gmail.com](mailto:hcford1185@gmail.com).*



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# ***“Triumph over Trauma” summit focuses on community resilience***

***By Jan Worth-Nelson***

In a major step forward, ReCAST grant program director Vicki Johnson-Lawrence and City of Flint Public Health Advisor Pamela Pugh are in the final planning stages for a March 15-17 Resiliency Summit at the Riverfront Banquet Center on trauma-informed care.

Titled, “Triumph over Trauma: Celebrating the Resilience of Our Community,” the three-day event features nationally recognized trauma expert, Lora Haynes of the University of Louisville as the keynote speaker, followed by nine speakers in breakout sessions.

The event includes a free lunch and free parking. To register for the summit, email: [www.genhs.org/TriumphOverTrauma](mailto:www.genhs.org/TriumphOverTrauma).

Haynes, an associate professor in psychological and brain sciences, will speak

on “The Science of Resilience.”

Nine other speakers will address breakout sessions including “Community Resilience Toolkit,” “ACEs and Toxic Stress and its Impact on Health,” “Trauma Informed Care,” “Mindfulness and Meditation: Caring for the Caregiver,” “Essential Multidisciplinary Partnerships,” “Resilience Can Be Taught,” “Secondary Trauma, Compassion Fatigue and Caregivers,” “Coping Skills Post Trauma and Coping Kits for Children,” and “Health Barriers to Learning and Resiliency.”

Closing remarks will be offered by Mona Hanna-Attisha, the Hurley Medical Center pediatrician who played and continues to play a key role in the Flint lead-in-the-water crisis.

The events of the Wednesday session, scheduled from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., will be repeated Friday.

Thursday, March 16 features a “World Café” and Resource Fair from 3-7:30 p.m. A documentary film, “Resilience: The Biology of Stress and the Science of Hope,” will be shown at 6 p.m.

More information on the resource fair is available at [SafeKids@Hurleymc.com](mailto:SafeKids@Hurleymc.com) or at 810-262-9462.

In addition to ReCAST, sponsors of the summit include Genesee Health System, Genesee Intermediate School District, Hurley Children’s Hospital, and Safe Kids Greater Flint.

*EVM Editor Jan Worth-Nelson can be reached at [janworth1118@gmail.com](mailto:janworth1118@gmail.com).*

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## ***ReCast director guides \$4.9 million grant addressing Flint stress***

***By Megan Ockert***

Vicki Johnson-Lawrence, an assistant professor at UM-Flint, is a social epidemiologist interested in determining how psychosocial factors such as low-income and early childhood trauma, influence the life expectancy of individuals.

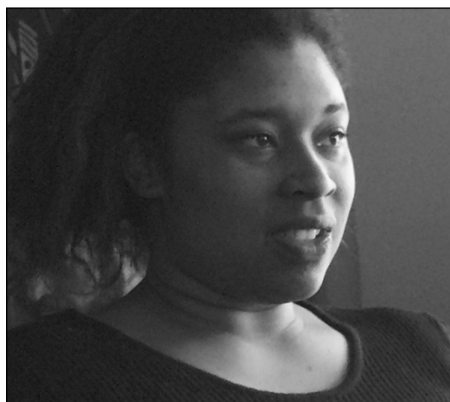


Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson

**Vicki Johnson-Lawrence**

Despite having only been in Flint for four years, she is determined to have a positive impact on the Flint community as program director of the Flint ReCAST grant, awarded to the city of Flint in September 2016.

As detailed in an earlier *East Village Magazine* article, Flint is one of eight cities in the country receiving funds in response to community trauma. The Resiliency in Communities After Stress and Trauma (ReCAST) grant is designed to promote resilience, community empowerment, and long-term well-being for families and youth. Flint received \$5 million with its goals to be

implemented over five years.

A major highlight of the ReCAST program moving forward, a three-day “resiliency summit,” titled “Triumph Over Trauma: Celebrating the Resilience of Our Community,” will be held March 15-17 at the Riverfront Banquet Center, 1 Riverfront Plaza (see related story).

The March summit is a continuation of work begun last fall, spearheaded by Johnson-Lawrence and City of Flint Public Health Advisor Pamela Pugh. Their planning and outreach continued in January and February with a series of confabs seeking community input, developing strategies for moving forward, and offering training in how to understand and respond to trauma.

In January, the ReCAST team provided an introductory training seminar at Berston Field House with over 120 attendees at both the morning and evening sessions. According to Johnson-Lawrence, the event was designed to provide training about the experiences and impact of trauma on families and provided expertise from the perspectives of three consultants from the National Center for Trauma Informed Care (NCTIC) from Baltimore, MD.

More specifically, Johnson-Lawrence explained, “These consultants provided insight about addressing trauma impacts from a community organizer, a health care professional and a faith-based approach within a hospital system.”

In addition, Johnson-Lawrence stated, the session presented information on Adverse

Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the relationships between having many ACEs and traumatic experiences.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), there are 10 major ACEs that can greatly impact the overall life expectancy of individuals, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect, a mother who is treated violently, substance misuse in the household, household mental illness, parental separation or divorce, and an incarcerated household member.

The ReCAST grant is built on five aims, Johnson-Lawrence stated. First is to build a local range of programs and partnerships to support at-risk youth and families in developing resilience, reducing violence and developing a vibrant community.

The second aim specifically targets the Flint water crisis and how it has been a “community-wide traumatic stressor” with funding aiming to alleviate potential behavioral impacts of the crisis on Flint families and youth.

Third, the ReCAST grant funds will also strive to mitigate violence within the Flint community by integrating “evidence-based violence prevention programming to enhance ongoing community organization-led activities to encourage youth at risk for developing symptoms of traumatic stress and avoiding a school-to-prison pipeline.

Fourth, the grant aims to create a trauma-informed first responder community by pro-

*(Continued on Page 7.)*

## ... Grant

(Continued from Page 6.)

viding trauma training to local police, first responders, corrections officers and others.

Finally, the grant aims to increase the capacity for youth and families in the Flint community to support skill building and career opportunities to implement evidence-based programs.

Johnson-Lawrence admits her goals for the ReCAST funding are high, but also states that, "Resilience is a process." Furthermore she said she recognizes that trauma is based on the individual, and that through this grant, she is not trying to "diagnose others' trauma."

Success of the ReCAST grant is highly dependent on community involvement, Johnson-Lawrence stated. Because of this, the grant specifies benchmarks to monitor its success. Organizers are looking for participation from 25 Flint-area organizations focused on health, arts, education, sports, faith-based groups, culture and others to use trauma-informed mental health promotion services and activities within the Flint community.

The ReCAST grant is designed to train 100 families using its Skills for Psychological Recovery by the end of the first year, with at least three follow-up visits that offer psycho-educational insight to the families, and to facilitate familial concerns with the application of this program within their households.

Organizers also are aiming to engage 50 youth to serve as ReCAST program ambassadors, providing these youth aged 13 to 18 with Skills for Psychological Recovery training, and creating a youth liaison training across the 25 Flint area organizations that commit to the project.

According to Johnson-Lawrence, the Skills for Psychological Recovery training will be given by certified clinicians to teach others how to interact with someone going through trauma. Some of the skills include avoiding negative language and, as Johnson-Lawrence states, "being a person to another person."

Johnson-Lawrence defines resiliency as "finding your new normal," and adds, "Resiliency is seeing success in your future."

And, she said, "Flint is full of people who want Flint to succeed."

Questions and comments regarding the ReCAST grant are welcome and can be emailed to [projectrecast@umflint.edu](mailto:projectrecast@umflint.edu) or mailed to UM-Flint Public Health and Health Services c/o Dr. Vicki Johnson-Lawrence – ReCAST, 3124 William S. White Building, 303 E. Kearsley St. Flint, MI 48502.

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## ... Trees

(Continued from Page 4.)

cial meeting to discuss the situation.

Also at that meeting were Councilpersons Kate Fields, Fourth Ward; Scott Kincaid, Ninth Ward; and Council President Kerry Nelson, Third Ward.

After hearing the CCNA's presentation, Council President Nelson voiced support for the CCNA concerns, called for an immediate pause to the cutting and said he would write a letter to that effect to the GCD, who were not present, asking for answers to CCNA questions.

Next, though, Galloway convened a meeting between CCNA residents and representatives from the GCD, Warren and Johnson. City Council President Nelson also was present. Although the *EVM* editor, invited by the CCNA, was asked to leave the meeting, reports afterward were that after four hours, Nelson dropped his offer to write a letter and the matter was put on a city council agenda.

Contacted afterward for comment, Warren said she was preparing a written response but *EVM* hasn't received it.

Warren has contended throughout that, in a time of limited resources, hard decisions have to be made and in some cases – based on six-year assessments – propping up aging trees isn't worth it.

She explained the removal of many trees last year in the CCNA was part of the 2015 forestry plan. She said the work was proceeding across four quadrants of the city, having begun in the north end and reaching the Seventh Ward last summer.

She said the work appears dramatic partly because of years of neglect, suggesting that there's been a lot of catching up to do.

And she said there are scarce resources for planting replacement trees – only enough for 100 new trees a year.

The CCNA residents next came to a Feb. 27 city council meeting for a "special order" discussion about the trees at Galloway's request. Though 15 CCNA residents were present and had signed up to speak, only Keeler was given air time.

Keeler's two main points were that the GCD needs better communication with the community and that the CCNA wants more emphasis on trimming and less on cutting.

Warren introduced Dennis Bowles, the GCD forester who also had worked for the city for many years. He explained that the condition of some of the trees had altered since the forestry plan went into effect, leading to different decisions.

"Trees are dynamic," Bowles said. "As

time progresses, things change."

Fields pointed out that a GCD forester, Erica Barlow, is related to the owner of J&B Tree and Yard Service, one of five contractors used by the GCD for tree maintenance, and suggested a conflict of interest. Nelson agreed this was an issue to look into.

After an hour of discussion, the tree matter was referred to the council's "government operations" committee.

Contacted afterward, Council President Nelson said, "The council is not the right frame for these discussions. We are by no means trying to take this off the books. I feel we made some progress in our discussions, but it belongs better in committee."

In the meantime, the city council has instructed the GCD to stop cutting trees – in the Seventh Ward only – while information-gathering and meetings continue.

However, Nelson noted, "If they're city-owned trees, the city could cut down all the trees if they want."

"This is not what we wanted," Keeler said in exasperation. "We're looking out for all the trees in the city, not just in the Seventh Ward – this is not just a Seventh Ward issue."

"We know it's a city easement," he said. "But they have to realize we ARE the city. We've put our own sweat equity into these trees – the leaves we rake, the money we spent to get the roots out of the drain. You owe us the respect that if you're going to cut the tree down, talk to us, and let us have some input – we might be able to compromise."

"If they only base their decisions on dollars and cents," he added, "the tree loses every time. But the GCD's own plan says you can't just do that," he said – noting benefits like shade, reducing CO2, facilitating storm runoff – "and the aesthetics," he said, "our neighborhood values."

"When you take all of those into consideration, the tree wins every time."

Asked what he has learned so far in the process, Keeler said, "We've learned that the city is dysfunctional."

"We tried to go through the system – we've spent a lot of emotional time with this," he said, "and we got nowhere. But we're not done."

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# Review: Art in the era of Trump at MW Gallery

By Harold C. Ford

MW Gallery, located in the heart of downtown Flint at the corner of Saginaw and Court Streets, is the permanent home of the Mott-Warsh Collection (MWC). Promoting “cutting-edge art,” Flint’s newest art venue opened to the public in June 2016. The latest exhibit, titled “Where Do We Go From Here?” opened Jan. 13.

The Mott-Warsh Collection, according to the MWC’s website, was established in 2001 by Maryanne Mott and her late husband, Herman Warsh. It features work by “artists of the African diaspora and those who reflect on it. It comprises over 600 works by more than 185 artists working in varied media and stylistic approaches.”

“Where Do We Go From Here?” is inspired by recent political events in the United States, according to Maryanne Mott, the daughter of Charles and Ruth Mott and the gallery’s namesake. Mott told *East Village Magazine* the exhibit “has many sources of inspiration but certainly the current political climate was a strong factor. We hope that it will prompt curiosity, reflection and discussion.”

“It is” a response to “the elephant in the room,” conceded Stephanie James, MW Gallery’s director, curator and collection educator, in an interview with *EVM*. “To be honest,” James said, “I had another theme in mind coming into time for the changeover (of the exhibits), but I really felt because there was so much going on, so much anxiety from all directions, frustrations that led to our current president being put into place.”

“We, as a society, are going through a difficult time right now in trying to understand one another, hear one another out,” James acknowledged. She offered the exhibit as “an opportunity to reflect on some of these issues through the artists’ reflections.”

“It’s ironic that, while much of this work seems to come out of yesterday’s headlines, some of it is over 50 years old [such as] the photojournalists’ work on the civil rights movement,” James said. “So many of those shots you could just imagine having taken during one of the Black Lives Matter movements [or] the Women’s March on Washington.”

Others are more blunt in their assessment about the intersection of the arts with wealth and power in the age of Trump. “The Orangeman looms large in the collective creative imagination,” asserted Jason Rhode in a January, 2017 article for *Paste Magazine*. “All of this is understandable, even predictable: the necessary, healthy backlash by a

progressive cultural bloc against the likelihood of a reactionary Presidency.”

That wealth, power, and art are interconnected in the human experience is virtually inarguable. “Additionally, because patrons are important for artists, art has always commented on wealth or influence,” opined Rhode. “Whether praising it or critiquing it, art is inherently concerned with power. At its best, this includes patrons like the Medicis of Florence backing the works of the Renaissance giants.”



Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson

**MW Gallery assistant Carla Harden with “I Do Not Always Feel Colored” 1992, ©Glenn Ligon**

“In our own era, this usually takes the form of the public funding creative work through direct purchase,” Rhode wrote. “When we buy a ticket to a Scorsese movie, we don’t think of ourselves as playing the role of a Rockefeller funding a filmmaker, but in effect, that’s what we’re doing,” he continued. “Bernini had Pope Urban VIII as his patron; The Pixies had the American consumer.”



Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson

**MW Gallery Curator Stephanie James with “Prophecy: Untitled #9,” 2013, © Fabrice Monteiro.**

Flint has Maryanne Mott, Herman Warsh, and the MW Gallery. “My connection to social justice came largely from many sources including values to which I was

exposed at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, both in the formal service and discussions in Sunday school,” Mott told *EVM*. Other sources included “my mother’s quiet but active and compassionate concern for others less fortunate, conversations with Dr. Art Tuuri, and the dissonance I felt between my family’s circumstances, privilege and prominence and those of others.”

Of her late husband, she said, “Herman’s commitment to social justice, I believe, emerged from the strong social justice values of his immigrant parents, growing up poor and being a bright, curious and questioning student of current events as well as history.”

The role of artists – and their patrons – during times of political and social tension is critical. Tony Morrison supported this notion in a recent piece for *Nation Magazine*: “Dictators and tyrants routinely begin their reigns and sustain their power with the deliberate and calculated destruction of art: the censorship and book-burning of unpoliced prose, the harassment and detention of painters, journalists, poets, playwrights, novelists, essayists.”

“This is the first step of a despot whose instinctive acts of malevolence are not simply mindless or evil; they are also perceptive,” she wrote. Such despots know very well that their strategy of repression will allow the real tools of oppressive power to flourish.”

In her *Nation* piece, Morrison warned: “This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal ... like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge – even wisdom. Like art.”

Like art. Indeed. Like the art you’ll find right now at MW Gallery. Some samples:

**“I Feel Most Colored,” 1992, by Glenn Ligon, b. 1960, etching on BFK paper:** What appears to be paper is glass-encased in an approximately 2-foot-by-3-foot frame. Printed on the paper is the sentence, “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background ... I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background ...,” repeated line after line, finally disappearing into a smudged, indistinguishable nothingness at the bottom of the page. The sensitive student of Ligon’s piece might swallow hard in response to his representation of what happens to blackness, or “colored,” in a white-dominant society. Or, one might conjecture about the ramifications

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## ... Gallery

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of miscegenation in America.

Ligon offers the visitor to his piece a confident, insightful and generous reflection considering the context of the times in which we live: "My country, right or wrong. Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me." A companion piece by Ligon with a similar presentation is titled "I Do Not Always Feel Colored."

**"Decide Who You Are #6; You'r History," 1992, Adrian Piper, b. 1948, multimedia:**

"You'rHistory" is a tour de force, seven-piece presentation that deserves time and patience and a left-to-right exploration that seems to be chronological. The first panel begins your journey into Piper's work: "You'r history, a discontinued discount, that's the shelf where they'd find you, ripped out of your natural habitat, dropped onto an alien planet, broken into useful pieces ..."

Your journey ends with the last panel, sort of, with the image of a little black girl that probably integrated an all-white school, someone like Ruby Bridges, surrounded by all-too-familiar racist rationalizations: "I don't know what you mean. I didn't notice anything wrong. It seems fine to me. It wasn't intentional. Just calm down. I just can't relate. You're making too much of this." And on, and on, ad infinitum; a piece of art about excuses that are centuries in the making. That little girl, it turns out, is actually Anita Hill.

**"The Prophecy, Untitled #1," 2013, Fabrice Monteiro, b. 1972.**

From afar, Monteiro's piece is dominated by a tall and stunning human figure, cloaked in colorful garments, atop, atop ... getting closer, coming into focus ... a mountain of refuse! And the tall, likely African woman is wrapped in a long, flowing garment of interwoven trash: plastic bottles, packaging materials, plastic bags, a large skillet, used snack bags, brown paper. Her head is covered with a black, tar-like substance; her hair features freakishly long braids of hair interwoven with refuse, extending in all directions from the crown of her head. She is adorned with colorful necklaces and bracelets, also made of refuse.

According to the description accompanying the piece, Monteiro's project is "informed by the critical environmental problems that plague many parts of the African landscape [that feature a] harrowing series of photographs to visually represent the urgent ecological issues." The stunning "prophecy"

project photos were shot at ten locations in Senegal. His work may remind you of Tyree Guyton's "Heidelberg Project" in Detroit.

**"From the Cabinet: Squall"; Radcliffe Bailey, b 1968, mixed media:**

Perhaps the most disquieting of the pieces in the current MW Gallery exhibit, Bailey's dark, brooding "Squall" includes piano keys that are meant to be an homage to musicians like Thelonius Monk, Sun Ra, and Duke Ellington. "Squall" is the artist's brutal representation of the African diaspora, a frequent theme of his artwork.

**"Lakesha, Jackie, and Crystal," 1996, Dawoud Bey, b. 1953, Polacolor ER print:**



Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson

**Visitor ponders "Lakesha, Jackie and Crystal" 1996, ©Dawoud Bey**

"Lakesha, Jackie, and Crystal" is an eight-panel photographic representation of three girls that could very well be Flint natives. The work is a tender, loving portrait of three girls that appear pensive, perhaps forlorn as if during the wake of a kinsman. The three are clearly connected and supportive of one another: Lakesha's hand is resting on the shoulder of Jackie; Jackie's shoulder is supporting Crystal's head. The piece is a larger than life and a dignified representation of youth.

Bey's accompanying biographical information states that "he uses his artwork as a platform to challenge stereotypical images of African Americans and other historically marginalized groups." He has endeavored "to broaden the participation of various people whose voices have often been absent in these [art] institutions."

The "absent voices" referenced by Bey are likely present in the current exhibition at MW Gallery. That would include the voice of America's diminished labor movement, featuring the contributions of women, in Michele Tejoula Turner's 2008 work, "1936-37 Sit-Down Strike and the Women's Brigade" as represented on a painted gourd. Nonetheless, it is the "voices" of African American artists that are most evident in "Where Do We Go From Here?"

According to Maisha Kai in an article

published by *The Root*: "Historically, moments like the one in which we currently find ourselves are those in which black art, in particular, thrives in America. Not discounting the incalculable artistry that emerged prior to and during slavery – or more accurately, in spite of it – it's indisputable that the rise of black art in America has almost always been directly correlative to the adversities facing the black American."

As Bryan Mason, one-half of interior design duo AphroChic, noted, "Black art has always been political ... everything has been a troublesome moment for us."

MW Gallery is open Thursdays and Fridays, 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.; Saturdays, 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.; and 2nd Friday of each month, 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. In her interview with *EVM*, Maryanne Mott exclaimed, "Visitors welcome!"

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*(Editor's note: The reader should know that Harold C. Ford had an association with Maryanne Mott and her late husband Herman Warsh since October 2000. It began on a professional basis but Ford would like to believe that it evolved into a friendship over the years. The relationship started when Mott and Warsh gave Ford the opportunity to build a scholarship program for students in the Beecher School District supported by funds from the newly-created Ruth Mott Foundation, now Flint's second largest foundation. At a press conference that announced the inaugural RMF-funded projects, Ford described Mott and Warsh as "blue bloods with a blue collar orientation.")*

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# Weaver, Ananich, Kildee respond to Civil Rights report

By Jan Worth-Nelson

The findings of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission (MCRC) characterizing the Flint water crisis as a debacle causing “unprecedented harm and hardship” and linked to decades of “implicit racism,” came as no surprise to local elected officials.

The eight-member commission, co-chaired by Rasha Demashkieh of Ft. Gratiot and Laura Kopack of Livonia, unanimously approved the report, titled “The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Lens of Flint” in a public meeting and presentation at UM - Flint’s Northbank Center Feb. 17.



Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson

**Flint water activist Tony Palladeno responds to the report, with granddaughter Ky’Leah. She said, “I wish I could take a bath.”**

The document represented the findings of more than a year of investigations, more than 100 interviews and three hearings, held in Flint Jan. 25, July 14 and Sept. 8, 2016. It offered seven recommendations intended to ensure, they wrote, “that another Flint does not happen again.”

Several elements of the report, such as the commission’s critique of the state’s emergency manager (EM) law and admonitions addressing environmental injustices, strongly resonated for area politicians.

## Repeal, not replace EM law

In particular, Flint Mayor Karen Weaver and State Senate Minority Leader Jim Ananich rued the commission’s recommendation to revise – not repeal – the EM law.

For four years, from 2011 to 2015, Flint was taken over by a series of four EMs, two of whom – Darnell Earley and Gerald Ambrose – have been indicted by the state attorney general along with 11 others, in water crisis spillover.

“I do not agree with all of the recom-

mendations provided,” Weaver said, “and I’m disappointed that the report stops short of calling for an end to emergency management.”

Ananich zeroed in on the commission’s comments about broken trust between Flint and state officials.

“Flint and the government need to rebuild trust,” he agreed. “Yet the state is planning to cut off utility credits at the end of the month [February] and our water still isn’t safe to drink from the tap. We can’t, and we won’t, trust the state until the current administration proves that it is on our side.”

The report implicated the emergency manager system in much of what has happened in Flint, stating that “what is clear is that its application in Michigan has had a racially disparate effect,” and that the EM law has been used to “balance the books by slashing the budget ... widening “existing gaps between urban and suburban communities” instead of addressing root causes of urban financial distress.

“The Michigan Civil Rights Commission’s affirmation that the emergency manager law disproportionately hurts communities of color is an important reminder of just how bad the policy is,” Ananich stated.

“Now is the time to address this flawed law,” he added. “The people of Flint deserve the same level of safety, opportunity and justice that any other city in Michigan enjoys.”

## Two follow-up conferences

Weaver combined her comments reacting to the report with the announcement of two conferences – a water infrastructure conference scheduled for March 7-9 and an environmental justice summit scheduled for March 9-10. Those events featured a lineup of nationally known environmental justice experts from the NAACP, University of Michigan, and Michigan State University, along with Flint-area social justice activists. Weaver said both connect with recommendations of the Civil Rights Commission report.

Concurring with the commission’s view that Michigan needs to be better prepared to handle environmental justice issues, Ananich said, “I agree that this needs to be a priority – I have already introduced legislation for an environmental justice plan for public concerns to be heard and handled.”

In commending the commission for “its critique on some of the historical factors that led to the tragedy, Weaver stated, “The residents of Flint have long suffered from social and racial injustices and as captured in the Michigan Civil Rights Commission report, the Flint water crisis



Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson

**Longtime community activist Claire McClinton to the the panel: “I’m tired of talking.”**

epitomizes such racism.

“The report alludes to that fact that in order for Flint to move forward, there needs to be an assurance that all government systems are rid of the residue left

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## ... Report

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behind by previous unjust laws and practices," she said.

U.S. Congressman Dan Kildee also weighed in, agreeing that decades of racist practices unduly hurt the city.

"Sadly, there is an implicit bias against older cities, particularly majority minority communities like Flint," he said.

### **Kildee: bias toward poor cities hurts**

"It's hard for me to imagine that the governor and state government would exhibit the same indifference that we've seen in Flint water crisis if the same thing had happened in a much more affluent community," he said.

While asserting that there were no "overt racist actions" that created the Flint water crisis, the Commission stated that if the question is "Was race a factor in the Flint Water Crisis?" the answer would be "an unreserved and undeniable - 'Yes.'"

They speculated a crisis like Flint's would not have happened in Birmingham, Ann Arbor or Grand Rapids, relatively wealthy cities with primarily majority populations.

### **Racism dating back a century**

Yet the sources of that racism were not attached so much to individual actions or persons by name in the crisis as to a much broader, complicating set of triggering conditions - "dating back nearly a century," they said. The people of Flint, they wrote, "have been subjected to unprecedented harm and hardship, much of it caused by structural and systemic discrimination and racism that have corroded your city, your institutions, and your water pipes, for generations."

Among those conditions were "redlining" practices in real estate and housing over decades that led to spirals of white flight and barriers to black home ownership, employment discrimination against blacks, the loss of revenue sharing, depletions of local resources and a shrinking tax base due to industry departures, the decline of neighborhood schools, and a consequent neglect over time of basic infrastructure.

### **Systemic racism, widespread damage**

"Reviewing the historical governmental actions impacting the living and health conditions of Flint residents, i.e., the legacy of Flint, was sobering and left a deep impression," Commission members wrote. "We must come to terms with the ongoing effects of systemic racism that

repeatedly led to disparate racial outcomes as exemplified by the Flint Water Crisis. This can no longer be ignored."

They pointed out the effects of those corrosions have hurt the entire city, not just the minority communities.

Among the seven recommendations were calls to train top state officials in implicit bias and its effects; to create a "Truth and Reconciliation" Commission similar to those established in South Africa in the wake of apartheid; to create an "environmental justice plan" and -- to cheers from the Flint audience -- replace or restructure Michigan's emergency manager law.

The recommendations were presented by Michigan Department of Civil Rights Department Executive Director Agustin Arbulu and MDCR Legal and Policy Director Dan Levy.

More detail on the recommendations is available at [eastvillagemagazine.com](http://eastvillagemagazine.com). short link [wp.me/p6Ue43-y8](http://wp.me/p6Ue43-y8). The full MCRC report is available at [www.michigan.gov/mdcr](http://www.michigan.gov/mdcr).

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## ... Trust

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4) What are the plans to replace the trees in the near future?

5) Will the GCD, the CCNA and the Flint City Council work with residents to assure that there is full transparency and all the relevant information is available to the media and the public?

To be honest, this probably isn't the biggest problem facing the city of Flint today. We still have the water crisis and the ever-changing Karegnondi Pipeline plans, with all their massive financial implications. But in an atmosphere of distrust, a truly honest response to these questions, with honest answers, will be a first step toward restoring the battered level of trust with the citizens of Flint.

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# Village Life

## Community, character and craziness – that explains it all

By Kurt and Danielle Neiswender

### “So why would you ever move to Flint?”

Besides being one of the rudest things we’re asked about our recent move, this is also the most frequent question we get.

We are Flintstones – relatively recent Flintstones. We run the blog, this-groundup.com, and now you’re going to hear, straight from the horses’ mouths exactly why we did it.

It should be said that the reasons we moved into our Flint house last year are probably different than the reasons our near neighbors think we moved here. Most likely, our near neighbors think we moved here because we are not-so-secret flashers. They probably think we plan our day around the ninja moves required to “accidentally” flash everyone through our curtainless windows.

Well, we’re not really nudists, we just haven’t bought curtains yet.

If the neighbors don’t think it’s the flashing, then they certainly think that we are training our pets for synchronized dog yelling. We must be avid believers in the

art of cacophonous barking spread neighborhood wide, otherwise, why would our dogs bark their heads off a few times a day when they are let outside?

Our neighbors might also think we moved here simply for the joy of a short walk home after too much to drink at a housewarming party in the backyard. Sorry, Chris and Jazzmin ... a keg and a beer lover do not a good mix make!

As fantastic as these reasons are, they aren’t the ones we picked to move to the good ol’ city of Flint. We moved here for the three C’s: Community, Character and a little Craziness.

We’ve been all over – all over the country and all over Genesee County. We’ve lived together in various parts of Los Angeles County and apart in a few different spots in Michigan, Minnesota and Connecticut.

The one thing in common in virtually all those places was that we didn’t really know our neighbors. The last time we knew our neighbors, or at least knew more than their faces and a general idea of their names, was childhood, when we all played together outside. Outdoorsy though we aren’t, we’ve heard that College Cultural is a ‘hood that still plays together outside, or inside, or wherever we all end up. It seems to be a close-knit bunch, and we’ve missed that.

We knew we would get along here when about three months after purchasing the house, during the height of summer, we suddenly realized we hadn’t mowed the lawn. Not even one time. This isn’t surprising being that we are deadbeats, but still. Upon investigation, we noticed that the grass was still the acceptable height. How could this be?

Security cameras showed us the culprit. A man was secretly mowing our front lawn, showing up responsibly every week, with nary a complaint or blade of grass out of place. It turns out, this man, who has been caring for the lawn of our 85-years young neighbor for quite some time, decided to add a second lawn to his weekly grass mowing round up. Thank you, lawn bandit, thank you. (Seriously, thank you, we couldn’t see your face on the camera, so we aren’t sure who you really are.) Grass mowing aside, a sense of community is important, and we’re pretty sure we’ve found it here.

Now, character. This one is probably not surprising to a single person reading this, since you live here and you know what it’s like. For fun, let me tell you what character is not. Character is not our previous home built in 1992 that had a rectangular fluorescent box light in the kitchen. Character is also not having zero places within safe walking distance, and having one gas station a mile away as the only cultural space available. Character is built-in shelving, bright pink bathroom tile, old tree-lined streets, and neighbors who still sit outside on their front lawn on bright sunny days. Character is running groups on Saturday mornings, coffee meet-ups at the local joint, hundreds of dogs walked with waving owners.

In other words, character is here. In Flint we have hit the character jackpot.

As for craziness – that needs a little explaining. We don’t actually think you have to be crazy to move here. We do think that any new adventure needs a little crazy and a lot of courage, and Flint is no exception. It’s hard to come to a new place and make a home for yourself while respecting the legacy left by a previous owner. It’s hard to get used to having close neighbors again. It’s hard to come to a place that has had the struggles we’ve had here and remain positive. But, positive we are. This place has an energy like no other place we’ve lived and we know it’s more about the people that live here with us than the houses we all happen to own.

So, please come meet us. Our door is always open. Just kidding – it’s always locked. But, we will absolutely open it if it means we get to meet you, share a meal and maybe some laughs. We have no shame and would be happy to bribe you with a fantastic meal. We’re so excited to know you, because really, all of you are why we would ever move here. Flint may not be perfect, but it is perfect for us, and we are so thankful to add it and you to our story.

Danielle and Kurt Neiswender can be reached at [danielle.neiswender@icloud.com](mailto:danielle.neiswender@icloud.com)

**Thanks to Village Life guest columnists this month – Danielle Neiswender, 33, a makeup artist; and Kurt Neiswender, 36, an architect. They bought their Flint home in May and moved in in October – Ed.**

### ENRAPTURED By Grayce Scholt

What must it be like  
to live only in rapture  
when a snake on the sidewalk  
is a circle of rainbow,  
when a rose  
is a nymphet  
blowing kisses to bees,

when a bus is a chariot  
a *basso profundus*  
a walrus that’s wailing,  
that’s belching black stars,

or a poet with a pencil  
painting pitters on dewdrops,

while the fire gods are screaming  
and the sky’s raining  
blood.

*Grayce Scholt is a retired English professor from Mott College who wrote art reviews for the Flint Journal. Her book of poetry, Bang! Go All the Porch Swings, is available online from Amazon. A personal narrative of the poet’s life in Europe in the early 1950s, Vienna, Only You, is available at [gscholt09@comcast.net](mailto:gscholt09@comcast.net). The author’s new book of poems, Night Song, is available from Friesen Press ([www.friesenpress.com](http://www.friesenpress.com)) and Amazon.*