

If these walls could talk...

Robinson Theater breaks the silence

Lynette Mutter is a renowned writer of both fiction and nonfiction. In this entertaining and informative piece, Lynette tells the story of the Robinson Theater Community Arts Center through "Robinson", which is an amalgam of all the people who have been a part of the Center dating back to 1936.

words | LYNETTE MUTTER

Dear Church Hill North Community:

I have forever been hearing you all say, "If these walls could only talk." Well, I'm here to talk and I've got a lot to say. First and most importantly, I want to thank you for saving my life. Seriously. I know I'm prone to drama—Drama. Get it? Just a little theater humor!—but that's the truth.

We got off to a great start together and then, well, things changed. You know how it goes. Life happens. I fell into disrepair and disgrace. But look at me now—renovated, revitalized and reconnected! I can't tell you how grateful I am.

But for those of you who aren't familiar with me, let me start from the beginning. I am the Robinson Theater Community Arts Center at 2903 Q Street. You can just call me Robinson. I came on the Church Hill North scene in 1937 as one of the first movie theaters for African Americans. I was named after Bill Robinson, better known as Mr. Bojangles, the "World's Best Tap Dancer," they say.

Betsy Hart, my executive director, says that I was once the "social hub of the community, with kids and adults coming and going from here all day long."

Betsy Hart, Executive Director of the Robinson Theater Community Arts Center

They say that I am once again the "Heart and Hub" of this neighborhood and it's all thanks to the people who rescued me and fixed me back up, and you, my neighbors.

These days, you and your neighbors are the main attraction! There's not a day goes by that you're not dancing the Zumba, hoopin' it up, doing yoga or channeling your inner ninja in karate and tae kwon do classes. And oh my, the singing! I look forward to the East End Fellowship's Sunday service all week long.

They say that I am once again the "Heart and Hub" of this neighborhood and it's all thanks to the people who rescued me and fixed me back up, and you, my neighbors. Hart works hard to find volunteers from neighborhood churches and partners with other local nonprofits. I love being a place where people can worship, learn new things, exercise and find support in making healthy lifestyle choices.

You know, I once heard Joel Silverman, MD, a psychiatrist at VCU Medical Center, talk about the importance of social support to a person's health. "There are two major determining factors for health," he said. "One is genetics, which you are born with, and the other is what happens in the environment or what the environment provides for you—such as relationships, networks and social support."

"When people have good support, we can objectively determine that their health is likely to be better. Social support is Mother Nature's cure, whether recovering from pneumonia or depression," Dr. Silverman said.

He went on to talk about how people might need help solving problems or we might need resources—a little money to get us through a tight spot—or maybe we feel lonely or helpless. When someone helps us, we're better off. But there's more to it than that.

According to Dr. Silverman, "Research has shown that simply paying a compliment (like 'that's a pretty dress' or 'I like your new hairstyle'), makes a person feel better for about a week. The same happens for the compliment giver too. It's a two-way street."

Dr. Silverman also said that in a healthy community, chances are there will be more activity. "People may exercise, eat better or stay away from destructive behaviors, such as drinking too much."

I'd say Church Hill North is a very active community! Just ask Madgeannette Fields. In 2009, she and her husband moved back to the neighborhood and renovated the house he grew up in. Fields found out about our Zumba class from a friend she walked with. Fields started coming here because it was close and convenient, but she's finding a whole lot more.

"I work at home and don't have colleagues to visit with and vent to if I'm having a stressful day," she says. "Sometimes

someone says hello or someone smiles, after the class, I leave feeling totally different. Not only does coming here help me maintain my health, but I have also met new people and made new friends. There's a real sense of community here."

Warms me to the core to see people connecting, learning and growing together. We've come a long way, Church Hill North! Around the '50s and '60s, the working class folk began moving to the suburbs and the neighborhood started going downhill. I became a reflection of that. I was no longer a place for children. I was a disco, bar, pool hall and nightclub over the next couple of decades. At some point, they took down my marquis! That was such a sad day. But frankly, I was a mess. In the early '80s the lights went out and the boards went up. You could say I fell into a 20-year hibernation or depression. The Dark Ages, I call it.

"Change your environment and you can change your life." That's what they say. And let me tell you, they are right! With a vision, goals, combined resources, hard work and determination, Robinson Theater is once again a shining star in the Church Hill North community. I owe a special thanks to the people who bought me and fixed me up: Mitch and Debbie Bennett and Michael and Sharon Thaler. They even gave me a brand-new marquis! I see my transformation as a reflection of the neighborhood's strength, making good choices and a commitment to helping one another.

As you know, we serve folks of all ages, but I'm especially happy to be here again for the children. According to Hart, many of our kids need a strong male role model. She says that I'm kind of like "a father figure who welcomes with open arms...loves, supports, protects, influences and encourages." Now that is a legacy to be proud of, and it's one we share.

Well, if you wanted talking walls, you sure got it!

I just have one thing to leave you with—a wish. Here it is: Please stop by and visit with us. Folks find things here they didn't even know they needed or wanted. And keep coming back! Fill me with your smiles and love. Continue to take care of me and each other. Share your talent, hopes and aspirations. We're here for you to explore what helps you thrive. Please, oh please, let me hear lots of laughter and singing! It's good for our souls. And by all means, dance! Show Mr. Bojangles that we've still got it. Never stop striving to be your best. You'll find support here. Like Fields says, "We're all in this together." So come see me, and bring a friend!

Yours truly,

"Robinson"

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