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LIFESTYLES

TIGHTENING COMMUNITY BONDS FOR THE GREATER GOOD

How UA city leaders, community groups and residents are working toward building a more welcoming and connected place

By Mandy Shunnarah

If anything good came from the COVID pandemic, it's that the city of Upper Arlington realized just how important it is to strengthen community bonds and give residents points of connection. Through renewed efforts to welcome new residents, improve parks and recreation, facilitate more cultural events, and build community spaces, Upper Arlington used a time of turbulence and isolation to bring people together in meaningful and safe ways.

Local physician Dr. Jason Sayat is one of nine volunteers on the Community Relations Committee, which welcomes new residents by introducing them to all the resources and amenities UA has

to offer, as well as organizing a "buddy system" where longtime residents invite newer neighbors out to functions.

"We felt established organizations were a good starting point. For example, we have a group in town called Equal UA, which looks at diversity and inclusion, and we have the Upper Arlington Historical Society, the UA Civic Association and the UA Police Department. Those are the organizations that were involved during the first four months of the welcome series that came up with ideas for events specifically aimed at new residents," Sayat says.

But the welcome doesn't stop after four months—UA has too much to offer

after that.

"We have a monthly event or program put on by our groups, and that builds into the spring with our public library, Leadership UA, and a long list of groups who are now lining up to be part of this," Sayat continues. "We felt like one welcome event wasn't going to cover all the endeavors, as well as all the different perspectives that our various groups and residents bring to the table."

The CRC not only welcomes new residents moving to town but also works to ensure all residents feel included. The group recently launched a grant program for community organizers that has helped fund cultural events like UA Pride and St.



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Mark's Culture and Artisans Fair, which adds to the cultural fabric of the area and dovetails nicely with the city of Upper Arlington's diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, which include programming for Black History Month, Pride Month and Juneteenth.

"The city wants to be inclusive of anybody who wants to come here and host any type of event with their organization," says assistant city manager Jackie Thiel. "I think it really brings awareness to different opinions and different ways of living, so when you bring that awareness to people who may not have experienced it before, it just helps us understand each other and make UA a more inclusive community."

In addition to welcoming new residents and inclusion efforts, the city of Upper Arlington is continually investing in infrastructure that helps foster connectivity. While lockdown orders were in effect during the pandemic and people longed to escape their homes for the outdoors, the city used this opportunity to continue increasing access to sidewalks and shared-use paths that connect residential areas to UA's cultural and commercial areas—including parks and schools, making it easier to bike to work and school—as well as revitalize the amenities at local parks.

Revitalizing local parks included updating UA's most popular park, Northam, which is next to the Main Library.

"Northam Park is central to community life in UA," says Debbie McLaughlin, director of parks and recreation. "Over the years, we've been making drainage improvements, grading the ball fields, replacing the playground equipment, and we put in a history walk for our city centennial in 2018."

While Northam Park may be the most visited park in the city, it's far from the only community outdoor space to enjoy.

"Each park is unique. Some are very active with athletic fields, playgrounds and shelters, then we have some very nature-based parks that have naturalized areas," McLaughlin says, describing the naturalized parks as an "oasis in the city."

Even more of an oasis are the community pools spread throughout the city,



Bike and scooter riding at
Fancyburg Park's StoryWalk

which McLaughlin and her team are continuing to make improvements on. With the lap pools, toddler and baby pools and general swimming pools, it's easy to cool off in UA in the summertime.

The Parks and Rec Department works hard to create and maintain spaces for all to enjoy—and "all" includes any financially disadvantaged person who lives or works in the city.

"To allow people to participate in our organized programs, we started a financial assistance program last year called Play UA," McLaughlin says. "On most of our financial transactions, like registering for a program or purchasing a pass to the pool, we charge a \$1 transaction fee that goes into our Play UA fund. Then people who qualify for assistance receive an automatic 50 percent discount on their programs and membership fees."

Since then, the department has seen more people joining and participating thanks to the assistance program. And UA officials expect even more individuals and families will be eager to take part in fun activities when the new Bob Crane Community Center is complete in 2025.

Not having a community center never stopped UA Parks and Rec from offering an abundance of programs, though it did force them to get innovative.

"Our staff has been very creative in creating partnerships with different businesses. We've had dance classes at local dance studios and cooking classes



PHOTO: COURTESY CITY OF UPPER ARLINGTON

A New UA Gathering Spot

The UA community has been considering the community center issue for 40-plus years. Next year, that dream will come true. Currently under construction and expected to be complete in 2025, the \$85 million project will house a plethora of amenities in addition to being adjacent to the senior living facility, providing seniors with a way to stay active and combat loneliness. (There are several options for older adults in UA including the Coventry, First Community Village and Sunrise Senior Living.)

“We’ll have two gymnasiums with hardwood floors, a third gym with a rubberized surface, a walking track, other indoor fitness, a swimming pool and then a variety of different meeting rooms,” says Debbie McLaughlin, director of UA’s Parks and Recreation Department.

“The water slide will even have a virtual component so you can see how fast you’re going,” adds assistant city manager Jackie Thiel. “There’s going to be an indoor playground and indoor cafe space that’s free to the public, so you don’t have to be a member to enjoy it.”

More than anything, the Bob Crane Community Center will be a much-needed gathering space. Parks and Rec’s programming is so popular that spaces tend to fill up. The community center is designed to change that.

“It’ll be a great opportunity to get people together and meet their neighbors they may not otherwise see because everybody is doing things individually,” McLaughlin says. “We know there’s demand and interest for our programming, so we’re looking forward to having this great facility so we can really meet the needs of our community.”

When it comes to fundraising, Upper Arlington Community Foundation executive director Jessica Grisez says, “It takes a village,” which is illustrated in the wide range of donations that the community center project drew, from lemonade stand funds to a lead gift of \$2 million.

“It’s a testament to this community,” Grisez says. “People gave to this community center and really came together, coming out of the woodwork for such a monumental project, which is what a community center is meant to do.”

at businesses that have kitchens. We utilize school facilities gyms, and park shelters, so we’re all over the place. But that does make our classes limited because if we can’t find an appropriate facility for a class then we can’t offer it,” McLaughlin says. “So, bringing everything together under one facility is going to change everything. Families will be able to plan activities for everyone. If someone wants to work out in a fitness area, their child can be in another program, and all their activities can take place concurrently.”

The community center was made possible, in part, thanks to the Upper Arlington Community Foundation’s fundraising campaign, which brought in \$8.1 million from UA residents to contribute toward the cost. With this project, the foundation has truly come full circle—at the time the foundation was established in 2007, it was created in lieu of a community center. While the Bob Crane Community Center is the foundation’s largest project to date, it’s far from the only way the organization supports initiatives that bring the people of UA together.

“We love helping to elevate our local nonprofits, like our libraries. We made a lead grant to their early learning play areas, and we made a grant to Tri-Village Chamber and Rainbow UA for some DEI training for local UA businesses,” says Upper Arlington Community Foundation executive director Jessica Grisez. “It’s all those smaller initiatives that really make



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The Foundation is also in charge of the Good Neighbor Fund.

“We’re really proud of that because [the fund] supports local residents with financial assistance for living expenses, medical bills, etc. We want to show people that there’s a safety net in UA, and it’s neighbors helping neighbors,” Grisez adds.

Overall, making UA a great place to live and work requires the city and its community partners to actively listen to residents—a task the community takes seriously. In a 2022 survey, the city asked how welcoming residents felt UA was. Knowing the next city survey will be coming in two years, the city and community groups, especially the Community Relations Committee, are buckling down and working to improve the sense of welcome in Upper Arlington.

Community leaders hope the next survey will show some measurable



Walking path at Northam Park

PHOTO: COURTESY CITY OF UPPER ARLINGTON

improvement.

As Upper Arlington grows and changes, city leaders are more committed than ever to meeting the needs of all its resi-

dents, and the people are at the heart of every initiative and decision. Grisez says it best: “We’re making leaps and bounds for the community.”



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