

Imagine Englewood...if! Working to Collaborate, Communicate, and Connect

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The vision began with a simple act.

In 1999, members of the 56th Street and Paulina Avenue block club in the Englewood community area of Chicago, attended an Ogden Park block club fair, seeking information. One display in particular caught their eye: The “Imagine Englewood...if!” exhibit. In fact, it drew the block club members into the group of dedicated residents who participated in Imagine Englewood...if! citizen leader workshops.

The 56th and Paulina block club, which renamed themselves Neighbors in Bloom, had a clear vision of what their block might look like. They saw streets with less gang activity, with united neighbors; a lot without vacant buildings, and alive with blooming neighborhood gardens. They also envisioned a strong block club.

Working with Imagine Englewood...if!, Neighbors in Bloom learned to connect with fellow block members, encouraging them to focus on the positive and to design strategies that would include as many block residents as possible. Imagine Englewood...if! connected the block members to the City of Chicago’s Green Corps program, an organization that links neighborhood residents with gardening resources. Through Green Corps, the block received seeds and flowers and participated in a gardening workshop on the West Side.

The fruits of these connections were evident one spring, several years after the block club made its way to the block club fair. It was nearly almost time for planting on 56th and Paulina. This time, Neighbors in Bloom knew where to turn for city resources that would help them keep their block beautiful. And that year, there were be more residents outside attending to the budding flowers. Neighbors in Bloom expanded, and might soon embrace the block next door.

The community of Englewood cannot be neatly drawn on a map. Though Community Area 68, labeled Englewood, has delineated boundaries, a resident’s description of Englewood cannot be so easily contained. Residents will tell you that Englewood and West Englewood (officially



Community Area 67) are all Englewood, and that their community stretches, roughly, from 55th Street on the north to 75th Street on the south, from the Dan Ryan Expressway on the east to Hamilton Avenue (alongside the railroad tracks)

on the west. And within Englewood lie several smaller communities' seven little wards. As a result, Englewood's sense of community can be a fragile one.

It wasn't always this way. Longtime Englewood residents remember a time when their community was not carved into these seven wards. In 1947, Englewood had just three wards and roughly 150,000 people; by 1998, Englewood had seven wards and a population of under 100,000 people (U.S. Census). One resident noted, "With re-mapping and the community split among several aldermen, it was different to see how they did not get along, even though the same community and the same issues were being served. There is a bad neighbor policy, because involvement is strictly defined by ward lines."



Imagine Englewood...if!, a community-based, volunteer organization in Englewood, looks beyond those strict boundaries. It sees neither seven separate wards nor two community areas. "We have a vision of a greater Englewood community that is empowered because it communicates, collaborates, and connects," notes Jean Carter-Hill, director of Imagine Englewood...if!

Having a vision is one thing. Bringing it to life is a whole different matter. How does one unite a divided community, one in which many residents have never had a stake? How does one overcome the fragmentation caused by seven different wards?

Imagine Englewood...if! succeeds in answering those questions. To reconnect their community, the group's members cultivate indigenous community leaders, share information on local resources with residents, and link community organizations to one another as well as to groups outside of Englewood.

Imagine Englewood...if!'s first step: conducting a workshop for community leaders. This workshop was based on the Imagine Chicago program that trains citizen leaders. Sessions focused on seemingly small matters—how Englewood residents could improve their community simply by organizing their own block, or by taking a small idea growing in the back of their mind and making it a reality.

But as residents worked together, big things began to happen. They cleaned up a block. They created a neighborhood garden. They published an informative newsletter for residents. And they helped the Imagine Englewood...if!/Nicholson Dance Exploration dance group travel to Ohio. Most importantly, as they worked together, they connected with other residents and shared information about their block clubs and their activities.

While Imagine Englewood...if! worked to strengthen community leaders, they also began to amass information on community resources. Much of this information has been put into the Englewood Web site, www.englewoodfutures.org, a project Imagine Englewood...if! hopes will grow. This is no mere formality. The Web site will not only keep its own residents informed, but it will broadcast a positive image to those beyond Englewood, letting outsiders know that Englewood is a vibrant, resource-rich community, and not merely the impoverished, crime-infested neighborhood often portrayed in the media.

The group's first real test occurred on Oct. 28, 2000, the date of the first Make a Difference Day. For this event, Imagine Englewood...if! brought together Englewood residents both young and old. The goal? To help neighbors connect with one another by sharing information and by discussing critical community topics. The group arranged tours that highlighted exciting neighborhood activities—activities that took many residents by surprise. Said one resident: "I have been living here for fourteen years, and I live in the heart of Englewood, and the things that I learned today, I never knew existed in the Englewood area."

In their feedback on Make a Difference Day, residents called for more information about Englewood resources and requested networking opportunities that would bring together residents and organizations. Creating links between various Englewood groups will be an integral part of Imagine Englewood...if!'s work in the future. The success of Make a Difference Day suggested that Imagine Englewood...if!'s goals of connection, collaboration, and communication are shared by many Englewood residents.

While Imagine Englewood...if! has been working to connect entities within Englewood, Imagine Chicago and the Web site have worked to bring the outside in. Imagine Chicago has created an impressive link between the director of the Human City Institute, based in Birmingham, England, and Imagine Englewood...if! Twice, representatives of the Human City Institute have traveled to Chicago to see Imagine Englewood...if! in action. The two groups remain connected via the Web. A member of the Upper Skeena Learning Community Partnerships in Canada—a group whose vision mirrors that of Imagine Englewood...if!—discovered Imagine Englewood...if! on the World Wide Web. They have reached out to Imagine Englewood...if! through e-mail to share ideas and experiences. Perhaps one day Imagine Englewood...if! leaders will travel to Canada.

Today Imagine Englewood...if! continues working toward its vision of communication, collaboration, and connection. Make a Difference Day reinforced the belief that without those three elements, residents cannot become empowered. Imagine Englewood...if! hopes to become a clearinghouse for information that will flow throughout the entire Englewood “community,” including West Englewood, and not merely to one or two wards. Those who graduated from the Imagine Englewood...if! program, such as the members of The Real Throopers block club, continue to participate in the work of Imagine Englewood...if! and to contribute to the growing storehouse of community information.

Imagine Englewood...if! believes that by realizing its vision of one community, collaborations will blossom—between wards, between young and old, between park district and church and school. As resources are leveraged and flow into the community, residents will develop a sense of ownership in Englewood. They will receive the tools they need to educate themselves, to start a community business, to create a safe block for their families.

Imagine Englewood...if!



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