

## A Century of Service: The East Toledo Family Center

By Larry Michaels and Scott Michaelis

### *Introduction*

For a century, the East Toledo Family Center has served the people of East Toledo. It began in 1901 as the Neighborhood Association, but soon became fondly known in the community as simply the “Neighborhood House.” Perhaps the oldest such community organization in this area, it provided aid to the many immigrant families who arrived in the early 1900s, it survived the dark years of the depression in the 1930s when its services were needed all the more, it continued to grow during the post-World War II boom years until a new building was needed in the early 1970s, and at the end of the century it served more people and provides more programs than at any other time in its long history.

### *Part One: Beginnings of the Neighborhood House, 1901 – 1917*

On Sunday, August 4, 1901, Rev. H. Hoover, former pastor of Memorial Baptist Church, held a tent meeting on factory grounds owned by D.J. Nysewander at East Broadway and the NYC tracks in East Toledo. Minutes from that organizational meeting survive in the records of the Family Center. (Photo of minutes) A list also survives of those who contributed toward the “interest on loan, sidewalks, hymn books, lights and piano-tuning” for this first Industrial Heights Mission. Contributors included such well-known East Side names as Metzger, Rideout, Tracy, and Hirzel.

Rev. Hoover was born in 1859 in Selkirk, Ontario, Canada. (Photo of Hoover) He attended Chicago University before becoming a Baptist Minister. In 1893 he married Nellie Titus. (Photo of Mrs. Hoover) He was just past the age of 40 when he began his mission work in East Toledo that resulted in the formation of the Neighborhood House. And that is where he spent all the remaining years of his life. He died in January 1932 at the age of 72.

That Mission in the summer of 1901 lasted for several days, and then was enlarged into “settlement work” to help the many new immigrants in the area become adjusted to life in America. By the summer of 1902, property was obtained on Vinal Street, and adjoining lots were soon added through the generosity of Alexander Black, George Metzger, Isaac Gerson, and Mr. Nysewander. (Photo of any of these men) Rev. Hoover and his wife Nellie moved into a large shed on the grounds until more permanent housing could be built.

The land on Vinal Street near East Broadway, which was originally a neglected dump, was quickly improved. Dirt from the streets was used as fill, grass was sown, East Side florists provided flowers, the Monroe Nurseries gave shrubs, and the old dump became a thing of the past. (Photos of the Vinal Street property) The Ohio Neighborhood Institute, commonly called the Neighborhood House, was incorporated, and the property at 1019 and 1027 Vinal Street developed rapidly. M.J. Riggs,

superintendent of the American Bridge Company in East Toledo, helped purchase playground equipment along with paint, fencing, and ornamental gates and posts.

A depression in 1908 led to what foreign families called the “slim winter.” When no other charities were available to help the many families who were out of work, Mrs. Hoover and East Side businessmen stepped in to provide food and aid through the Neighborhood House. (Early photos of families) During the years of World War 1, there was a need for classes in English for both children and adults, as more and more immigrants came to work in the factories of America. (Photos of Greeks and other immigrant families) Before Oakdale School opened, school classes were held at the Neighborhood House for small children of various grades.

By 1916 the Neighborhood House had a large playground, probably the first in Toledo. It featured a merry-go-round, basket swing, may pole, and other playground equipment. There was also an enormous sand box that could hold many children at one time. A “Sunshine House” donated by Dorothy Kimball was used to help children learn how to keep house. Also, tea parties were held to teach the children “proper manners” when entertaining. And of course, there were sports of all kinds, including boxing matches.

Attendance records from 1916 show just how important the work of the Neighborhood House was to the community. The Vinal Street playground was used by 5,000 children that year. Also, 3,483 attended American Citizenship classes, 2,385 came to other lectures and 2,695 participated in a “School of Conduct.” A satellite ministry of the Neighborhood House, the Ironville Neighborhood Settlement, called Lincoln Place, had 7,860 participants in 1916. For the year, 28,766 people were involved in all the activities of this important East Side ministry.

### *Part Two: Neighborhood House in Good Times and Bad, 1917 – 1946*

The importance of the Neighborhood House to the community is apparent by the number of companies and individuals who contributed to its support. A list from the 1917 records 100s of donors, including the names of Toledo’s most prominent citizens. Here can be found the names of Ernest Tiedtke, Thomas DeVilbiss, Edward Ford, General Sherwood, Mr. Walbridge, Mr. Detwiler, and Mr. LaSalle, along with such East Side names as Winchester, Hoeflinger, Eggleston, Gardner, and Tucker. Edward Drummond Libbey was also an early benefactor.

Immigrants continued to flood into America during the years immediately following World War I. Rev. Hoover and Mark Winchester led the efforts of the Americanization Movement to help these new arrivals adjust to life in this country. As the need increased, the Neighborhood House continued to grow. By 1927, there were three buildings on the Vinal Street property. The original Neighborhood House was more than doubled in size with the addition of a large auditorium, classroom, and refectory. There was also a Neighborhood Residence house for the Hoover family and a neighborhood Cottage behind it for the caretaker to live in. The playground also continued to be enlarged, with the help of some “Jewish friends” who contributed equipment and financial support.

Over the years, musical bands were a feature of the Neighborhood House, usually with a large drum as the focal point. Mayor William Jackson, and East Side boy, also supported the Neighborhood House and was a friend of Rev. Hoover. But as the 1930s began, the Great Depression was beginning to take its toll on the working-class families of East Toledo. Also at this time, the Neighborhood House lost its founder when Rev. Hoover passed away in early 1932. But in these difficult times, the ministry of the Neighborhood House was needed all the more, and many were there to provide help to those in need.

A 1930 article by Isabel Toppin of the East Side Sun family records that “now many are losing the houses they tried too hard to maintain.” She writes that the “streams of little wagons and push carts headed for the city’s dole measures the depression into which we have fallen.” But, she continues, “In the midst of the general unhappiness, the Neighborhood House has striven to relieve the drab hopelessness of the situation.” In these hard times, the Neighborhood House was often a last resort for people. And that’s when it became more important than ever. People would come to borrow a chair for a funeral. They would borrow a table for a wedding or the large coffee pot for a family party. Volunteers would bring in clothing, a baker would send in surplus stock. “Mothers,” it was recorded, “accomplished wonders with a yard of goods and a button.” The Neighborhood House became a clearing house for the needs of the community. And the human spirit would not be extinguished by the hard times.

And by the 1940s, as the economic times began to improve, the Neighborhood House continued to provide a place for people of all ages in the community to grow and become better citizens and better Americans.

### *Part Three: The Densmore Years to the New Center, 1946-1971*

As World War II ended and soldiers came home, Americans wanted to get back to their families and a normal way of life. It was a time of growth and a time of strong family and community feeling. Warren Densmore, who became the Director and held that position for ... years, was the right person to lead the Neighborhood House during those busy years of growth. An agenda survives from the meeting of June 28, 1946, in which it was proposed to hire Mr. Densmore as the Director. A better decision could not have been made.

Under Mr. Densmore’s leadership, along with that of Vince Renda, Helen Corwin, and others, more and more programs were offered to the people of East Toledo. Dances were held, Scouting troops were formed, a new swimming pool was built nearby at Navarre Park in 1949, playground activities increased, and sports teams of all kinds were formed. In addition, children from the Neighborhood House went camping at Camp Miakonda, participated in Christmas parades, and were active in Scouting programs.

An article written in 1960 emphasized the Neighborhoods House’s “vital role” in the community to “help people help themselves.” Some of the programs mentioned in the article were dances, crafts, basketball, scouting, pre-school, mother’s club, school lunch programs, and a chapter of the G.A.R. Membership in the 1960 was 436, with three-fourths of those between the ages of four and eighteen. During the 1960s, the Neighborhood House was called “The Living Room” because of its informal and

welcoming atmosphere. Among other activities at this time were an “Ethnic Choir” in 1964, preparation of community Easter baskets in 1966, and a trip to the circus in 1968.

As the activities of the Neighborhood House kept expanding during the 1950s and 1960s, it became apparent that a larger facility would soon be needed. The site of that first tent mission, even with all the improvements made to the Vinal Street properties over the years, was not large enough to hold all the programs and activities provided to the community. After seventy years of service, it was time for the old Neighborhood House to move to a new location and take on a new identity.

#### *Part Four: The East Toledo Family Center, 1971 – 1990*

On September 9, 1971, a lease was signed for a new East Toledo Family Center at its present site on the corner of Varland, one-half mile down East Broadway from the location of the former Neighborhood House. It was the beginning of a new era.

Already in September 1966 three to five acres of Navarre Park were requested for a \$360,000 new Family Center. Mayor Potter at that time approved of the proposal. By the following summer an agreement was reached with the city to move ahead with the now \$450,000 project. A new building would be built that the City would own, plans were drawn up by Toledo architect Horace Wachter, and a HUD grant was applied for. Three years later, on June 24, 1971, the \$602,000 building was near completion. And finally on September 18<sup>th</sup> the new East Toledo Family Center was dedicated with 500 people in attendance.

The first annual meeting was held at the Center in January 1973, at which time Rev. Philip Lewis of Eastminster Presbyterian Church was given the first Community Service Award. It was reported that the Center was open 70 hours a week, had 145 pre-school children, 22 groups meeting in the building, 88 people in dancing classes, and a total membership of 1,696. In addition, there were many athletic teams using the large new gymnasium and dozens of other activities as well.

Under the agreement with the City of Toledo in 1971, the Recreation Department would provide staff, equipment, and supplies. But by the end of 1980, the City was in a financial crisis and the Family Center faced closing. Other support came in, however, and the Center was able to continue its 80-year-old ministry to the community. In May 1981, a 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Appreciation Dinner was held for its long-time Director, Warren Densmore. Under Mr. Densmore’s long tenure the Neighborhood House-Family Center experienced continued growth and expansion.

Another important event at the Center during the 1980s was the opening of the Navarre Shelter House as a Senior Center in 1986. And of course there were numerous activities and programs at the Center, including soccer banquets, day camp, Halloween parties, and many more. Also, during these years Roger Dodsworth became head of maintenance at the Center and has continued his employment at ETFC for over 25 years.

But by the late 1980s the Center experienced another financial crisis. On February 2, 1989, it was reported that the United Way was withholding \$80,000 of its funding “because of financial

management problems that the agency has failed to resolve.” But the Family Center didn’t close. A strong board of Directors took action, and Tim Yenrick, still in his twenties, was hired as the new director. A Blade editorial from January 1990 noticed the “fresh attitude and new enthusiasm which arrived the same day new Executive Director Tim Yenrick came on board.” Soon the pre-school was going strong, there were before and after school programs for elementary students, tutoring and homework programs, monthly teen nights, summer day camp, support programs for the community, and expanded soccer, softball, basketball, and other athletic activities. Also, on April 26, 1990, the first annual Warren Densmore Scholarship Dinner was held. This annual dinner has become an important tradition at the Center.

There were now three full-time staff, nine part-time staff members, 23 permanent volunteers, and an active Board of Directors. With strong leadership, the East Toledo Family Center was again on firm footing to begin the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Part Five: The East Toledo Family Center, 1990-2003*

During the course of these years, the East Toledo Family Center provided more programs and activities for the East Side community than at any other time in its long history. The Family Center encouraged the development of partnerships and collaborations to provide young children, youth seniors and families programs that are well rounded, affordable, and designed to follow the mission of the Center.

In collaboration with St. Charles Mercy Hospital, the Family Center invited more families into the Center through our newly opened *Parenting Center*. St. Charles Mercy Hospital housed their East Park Health Clinic in the Family Center’s new expansion. The preschool programs became available to East Toledo residents through collaboration with Lucas County Head Start. A collaboration between the East Toledo Family Center, St. Charles Mercy Hospital, United Way, Toledo Public Schools, the New Connecting Point, Lucas County Early Start and the AmeriCorps of Northwest Ohio comprises a program called Changes for Life, which helped teen mothers set and realize life goals.

The East Toledo Family Center understood how important it was for working parents to have a place for their children to go when they are not in school. *Kids Kare*, provided accessible, affordable and high quality before and after school child care for children enrolled in Kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. The Kids Kare program successfully collaborated with over 20 social service and community agencies to offer extended learning opportunities to school age children who attend East Toledo public schools. The Family Center contracted with the Department of Job and Family Services to help low income families afford child care, and with the Children’s Services Bureau to provide a safe place for children that are in temporarily placed in a foster care situation.

Strictly Teens was a free drop-in program for youth when they graduate from elementary into junior high school. The 12-15 year-old boys and girls got involved in activities that interest them, like white-water rafting, camping trips, professional sports events, and Cedar Point. The youth learn in this program to not only have safe and clean fun, but also to give back to the community through service. One project the teens did was to prepare and serve food at the Senior Center for their Senior Evening

Meal one evening a month. The City of Toledo recognizes our success and helped us host thousands of children and their families during our Special Events, which include Hop Hoppening, Family Fun Day, Boo Bash and Holiday Hooray.

Also during this period of time, the East Toledo Family Center housed a community policing office. The officers had access 24 hours a day, along with a community meeting room that is used for block watch meetings. Community Policing is a philosophy based upon a partnership between citizens of East Toledo and our police officers. The Lucas County Juvenile Probation Department provided a *Reaching Out* program supporting services to first time juvenile felony offenders. Through the Lucas County Family Court, the Family Center also provided supervised visits for non-custodial parents, and a community court for minor legal incidents with juveniles.

Other important partnerships for the Family Center originate in the strong relationships we have made within our schools and churches. Pastor Beth and Hans Giller aided in the success of many programs during this time that were held in St. Mark Lutheran Church, and the Family Center has established a link with our local school district, Toledo Public Schools. Hard work and dedication by Bob Clark, who was the Waite School Community Leader, produced many educational programs that members of the East Toledo Family Center and the greater community continued to benefit from.

The Family Center has spent many years planning for success and sustainability of needed programs through state and regional grants, special events, and fundraising efforts, in an attempt to improve the structure and availability of the facility. The Family Center overcame financial challenges with the help of the United Way and built productive relationships in the schools, churches, health care and other social service agencies. We believe that this is the best strategy for sustainability. As the new millennium approached, the Family Center was more than ready to begin its second 100 years. From its humble beginnings in a mission tent in 1901, the Neighborhood House and East Toledo Family Center has provided the East Side community with a century of dedicated service.

At the turn of the century expansion into the various neighborhoods within east Toledo was a focus for the agency. Satellite offices were opened in Weiler Homes and Birmingham and the teen drop-in program was housed at St. Mark Lutheran Church. The Family Center's child care program was the first school-aged program in Northwest Ohio to be accredited by the National School-Aged Care Alliance. The Center also created the Heffner Early Childhood Center in the former Heffner School and moved all ETFC program's that served young children into this building.

In 2002, the Family Center building was rededicated and named the Warren Densmore Building to honor ETFC's prior director. After 15 years of services and to close the year 2003, Tim Yenrick left the East Toledo Family Center. The Board of Trustees then hired, Kim Partin, in 2004 to become the new Director of the Center. Kim had been the Family Resource Director for the agency for a number of years and the board saw her compassions and love for East Toledo and knew the Center would continue to thrive under her direction.

*Part Six: The East Toledo Family Center Today, 2004 - today*

Kim has continued her predecessors' commitment to collaboration by bringing in additional partnerships and programs to offer to the community. Programs that are now housed at the ETFC included Phoenix Academy, Heartbeat, HEAP and WIC. The Center also began offering GED programming on-site through Owens Community College and now through Penta Adult Services. As Toledo Public Schools began requiring all students to wear uniforms to school, the Center began holding annual uniform swaps. A private donation started our "Blankets for Babies" program in which handmade blankets were made and given to families in our Help Me Grow program. This program has expanded from two Service Coordinators to six Service Coordinators and two Home Visitors.

During this time, we partnered with several other groups to offer various parenting education workshops such as WGTE's Ready to Read, Getting Ahead classes with the Community Partnership and UT/MCO's Parents Raising Safe Kids. In 2006, our Preschool Program participated in the State of Ohio's new rating program called "Step Up to Quality". Our program received the highest rating of 3 stars. Also during this year, we expanded our preschool program to offer the Early Learning Initiative program to serve more children.

The Senior Center, under the direction of Mary Wolff, was adding new programs on a regular basis as the aging population grew. The Senior Sunrise Club was formed, monthly evening meal, week long trips and many more increasing the number of participants attending the Senior Center. In addition to new programs, \$70,000 in donations and grants were raised to renovate the kitchen at the Senior Center. The Senior Home Repair Program helped many seniors for several summers in which our local area experiences severe flooding. A new water line in Navarre Park caused many players in our Senior Softball league to be unhappy as the fields were damaged. The agency worked closely with the players and the City of Toledo to make improvements over the course of the next several years. In 2007, Senior Center began using a new swipe card/touch screen system for the participants to use on a daily basis. In 2012, the Senior Center celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary with many of the founding members present.

The Center's phone system was upgraded as well as a series of one day volunteer projects were held. Companies such as O-I, General Motors, FOX Toledo, HRC Manor Care and others volunteered their time to complete a number of projects at the Center, Senior Center and throughout East Toledo. Some of these projects included adding benches and trees by the ball diamonds, landscaping projects, painting the gym and assisting at the local schools.

Several members of the old Neighborhood House approached Kim with an idea to hold an annual Neighborhood House Reunion to bring together those who attend the Neighborhood House as a child to relive old memories. The first Reunion was planned and has been happening every year since. In 2008, the national economy began to decline.

The country entered into a state of recession around 2008 and Toledo was hit very hard. Funding decreased and needs increased. The Center experienced unexpected expenses such as escalating workers compensation costs, defined benefit payments and employee medical insurance that was nearly unaffordable. Tough decisions had to be made in order for the Center to survive and

navigate the troubling economic times. Several other local nonprofits closed. The United Way stopped funding agencies and began to fund programs. The United Way began funding the Financial Stability Collaborative Program which offered coaching and workshop that were focused on budgeting and financial goal setting.

Staff reduction were made and streamlining operations was a priority. All senior services were now housed at the Senior Center and managed by Mary. The State of Ohio ended its funding for the ELI program in 2010, which lead to the Heffner Center closing and all the programs were moved to the Warren Densmore Building. The Toledo Police Department could no longer afford to place police officers in the Community Office here at ETFC. This allowed for additional office space for programs that were housed at Heffner to be relocated.

It was during this time that the Center partnered with several other East Toledo groups such as REERC, Neighborhood Housing Services, Dillion Corp. to create a plan for East Toledo called, "Connecting the Pieces". Once the plan was created, it would be several years before anything would move forward because of the economy. In 2011, the pieces were picked up and a new initiative called, "One Voice for East Toledo" was started by the ETFC which was funded by LISC. Also during this year, two programs were ended. The TPS Alternative Program and the Opportunity Initiative. However, two new programs began including the Pathways Program which helped pregnant women give birth to healthy babies. The Strictly Teens program, which is now run by all volunteers, has traveled to Mississippi twice, Washington D.C., South Dakota, Wyoming, Texas and Maine.

The Center received several awards including the Prism Award for the Financial Stability Collaborative in 2012, Roger Dodsworth was named the Person of the Year by the Eastern Chamber of Commerce in 2013, and the Center received the Nonprofit Excellence Award from the Toledo Community Foundation in 2013, which was quite an honor. A grant also received from ProMedica to renovate the kitchen at the Warren Densmore Building, so that fresh fruits and vegetables could be offered.

In more recent years, the Board of Trustees underwent a fundraising assessment and implementing many of the recommendations from the assessment has been the priority. Society asks a lot of its community centers. To effectively and efficiently deliver support to members of the community. This is not an easy task. The work in not easy and failure in not an option. The Family Center has and always will accept this challenge and responsibility.