“Be Nosey!” exhorted Tymika Hawthorne, a resident of the Martin Drive neighborhood when we interviewed her. Hawthorne was not encouraging people to be inquisitive in ways that may invade others’ privacy; on the contrary, she was encouraging us to look out for our neighbors. She was advocating a culture of caring that would bind members of this residential community in enduring ways. Her philosophy of life is simple and direct: she desires that her neighbors could come together, grow, and become more well-informed in the process.

Hawthorne has been leading by example. She attends neighborhood meetings at the nearby Harley Davidson campus punctually. She is never absent in neighborhood watch meetings at Phyllis Reitter’s home. She signs up for neighborhood clean-ups and participates in the neighborhood watch duties. Ms. Hawthorne and her spouse Kenneth, share a belief that the only way to grow as a community is to involve and encourage younger kids and members of the new generation of residents to become part of something productive and positive.

The Hawthornes have only lived in the Martin Drive neighborhood for a short time but they have actively contributed to the betterment of this community. As renters, the Hawthornes take immense pride in their home—designing, decorating, and carefully organizing the interiors. They have taken care of the neighborhood too, by doing landscaping for their neighbors and tending the yards of properties that are currently unoccupied. Their consideration for their neighbors extends to Ms. Phyllis Reitter and the Hawthornes have been offering to hold some of the community meetings at their own home to lessen the burden on Ms. Reitter.
Bobby McQuay moved to Milwaukee in 1979, from his home in Gary, Indiana. He has been part of the Washington Park neighborhood since then. McQuay graduated from Washington High School and postponed enrolling in college. Instead he bought a property and opened his own business. His business was successful and he gave back to his community by supporting various local events. He always contributed time, energy and money to worthy causes, but he felt like there was more he could do for his community. After taking “Making Connection,” a twelve-week course on community development, McQuay found his true calling. He is currently pursuing a degree as a Social Worker in the Helen Bader School of Social Welfare at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.

McQuay continues to be a proud and proactive member of the Washington Park community. He works as a community organizer for the Washington Park Partners. McQuay is devoted to seeing his community prosper. He is committed to “bringing the resources to the people and then connecting the people to the resources.” He believes that Milwaukee’s central city has a chance to rebound and escape the fate of many inner-city minority communities across the country, which are on the verge of a total collapse.

McQuay goes door to door two times a week in order to introduce himself to community members and give them information on upcoming events in the area. He informs them of the services that the Washington Park Partners (WPP) offer. McQuay considers it a success even if he knocks on 70 doors and leaves 150 flyers and only two new people become involved. He believes in the WPP mantra that ‘we are the change’—whether by instituting a food bank, or supporting a clothing bank, or by offering information about job openings to those in need.
Pat Mueller

Pat Mueller is the owner of Heritage West Properties in the Martin Drive neighborhood and is very knowledgeable of the surrounding area. Mueller has lived in the area since 1986 after seeing the promise and inner beauty of the buildings and surrounding neighborhood. She has a strong focus on revitalizing the neighborhood and hopes to do so by influencing the use of space, whether it be in parks, vacant lots, or existing buildings. Mueller advertises homes to possible tenants and fights to bring prosperous businesses into the community.

In 2002, Mueller bought a crumbling corner store in order to set up her office. She thought the building was a detriment to the community. It was in disrepair, and the phone booth outside was linked to crime. She fully renovated it, replacing much of the interior and exterior. Fixing this store up created a desirable place to run a small business and a hub for new activities.

Mueller says that positive thinking is what is needed to make changes in the neighborhood. She says negative thinking is a very temporary bonding agent in the community, while positive thinking creates increasingly stronger ties. There are many misconceptions about the area surrounding Vliet Street. Mueller thinks getting over these misconceptions is key to revitalizing the area. She hopes to get people and businesses to move in by changing the way people think about the neighborhood.
Ahmad Muhammad

“When the student is ready, the teacher will appear,” explained Ahmad Muhammad, born in Wauwatosa in 1955 to Fredrick Pinkerton and Maddie Jobe. Uplifting, touching and enhancing all our senses by his very presence, brother Ahmad Muhammad inspires everyone who engages with him. Muhammad is the second oldest of his seven siblings, including his brother on his fathers side. He went to school in Milwaukee and remembers all his teachers by their names. Recruited by universities because of his talent in football, Ahmad decided to enroll in Alcorn University, a land-grant institution of higher learning in Mississippi. He left Alcorn University after his first semester in search of a higher calling. In 1981, after going to a lecture by Minister Louis Farrakhan in Philadelphia, he converted to the Nation of Islam. He has not looked back since. Today, Ahmad Muhammad is growing his own business, the Inception Consulting Group.

When Muhammad first came to Washington Park, he was homeless, but he received, and continues to receive, much love and support from the community. He knows a variety of residents in the community. He loves all of them and still has support from them. Among his friends, David Boucher and Stephanie Shipley helped him get back on his feet.

We asked Muhammad to compare Washington Park, his current home to neighboring Wauwatosa, where he started his life’s journey. He replied that one of the main differences is that residents of Washington Park have to focus more on the art of daily survival. He gave the example of valiant single mothers, who need to provide for their families even while going to school to better themselves. These hardworking individuals may not have free time to attend community meetings or organize neighborhood cleanups, even if they wanted to, because they have to strive to survive on a daily basis.

Unlike the suburbs, Washington Park has more renters and many absentee landlords. Some of these renters, like Ms. Tymiika Hawthorne, take great care of their rental property. Others don’t. Muhammad believes that residents need to do something tangible in order for change to come. He urges us to act upon our good intentions and dreams. Ahmad is proud of Washington Park since, according to him, this neighborhood is “in the midst of a renaissance.”
Martina Patterson

Martina Patterson, 30 year old, is an accomplished artist who lives and works in the Washington Park neighborhood. She has resided in this neighborhood for most of her life and she vividly remembers her childhood home at 40th Street. Patterson went to the Messmer Catholic School before studying fashion design at Illinois Institute of Art, Chicago. She received her Bachelor of Fine Art with a focus in fashion design in 2008. Currently, Patterson lives with her 18 year old sister and her cat in Washington Park. Her apartment appears spacious, filled with only items of value and necessity and her art work. She told us the story of her cat, who she found after hearing a meowing through the heating vents of her new home. She named her “Cygnus” after her favorite Rush song.

Patterson sees the Washington Park neighborhood as a community with a potential to “thrive.” She wants to see the people of this neighborhood come together and get to know one another. She believes that out of such interaction will emerge a community that cares, where people look out for each other. She believes that simple acts of caring can bring about great transformations.

One of two jobs that Patterson holds is at Express Yourself Milwaukee. This organization uses art programs to change the lives of at-risk youth and youth with mental illness. She believes that the neighborhood can be improved by simply spreading awareness of extracurricular programs for children. Many parents aren’t aware of the extracurricular activities available for their children in this neighborhood and Ms. Patterson hopes to spread this message far and wide.
Phyllis Reitter

Phyllis Reitter is a retired psychiatric RN who currently lives in the Martin Drive neighborhood. Living in the neighborhood as a child and recently moving back to care for her mother in 2000, Reitter has been involved in the Martin Drive community throughout her life. She actively participates in the community through Washington Park Partners and is captain of the community block watch, an organization that raises awareness of problems and changes in the neighborhood.

Reitter purchased her family’s house in 2008 and takes a lot of pride in its original finishes and various decorations. This home has been cared for dutifully by Reitter. A lot of hard work went into a new garden in the rear and into keeping the woodwork in great shape. The walls and cabinets of the home are covered with meaningful photos of friends and family, certificates and awards, as well as many ornaments acquired over her lifetime. Reitter currently cares for four rescued dogs and had many foster children in the past. The home is also used to host the block watch meetings.

There is a fondness of past intimacy in the community found in Reitter’s stories. This nostalgia drives her to make a difference in the community, to recreate the space of her childhood. Reitter recalls a closeness in the neighborhood. “It was one big family” she says. There were numerous block parties on Saturdays and everybody looked out for each other. Now, Reitter seeks to reinstate a sense of camaraderie in the community. Through the block watch, Washington Park Partners, and other community organizations, Reitter plans on bringing the community together by creating a friendly and safe environment.
“Let the music play, we all will hear something!” Ralsten Shanklin’s music has touched many lives. Shanklin grew up in a bicultural home. His father was Jamaican and his mother was of Cuban descent. Because of this, he did not feel accepted in his neighborhood. Growing up, his talents were apparent. He played multiple sports, excelled in dance, and was known for his singing abilities. At high school, his counselor suggested that he explore a career in singing. However, his father, who was a boxer, wanted him to pursue pugilism. He did not follow that path, but did become involved in martial arts. He was also good at basketball and he tried out for the Milwaukee Bucks team, but a hip injury brought him back to music.

Shanklin wrote his first song when he was 18. His first memories of songs were that of his mother singing Gospel in the kitchen. He found inspiration from almost anything he experienced in his life. However there were genre barriers for him as he produced R&B, Hip-Hop, Pop, and Gospel music. He found that music was his escape because, as he explained, it isn’t how he created the music but why he created it that mattered most. Ralsten Shanklin creates music in the hope that his music will help people in need and improve life in Milwaukee’s residents.
NJ Unaka

NJ Unaka is a truly renaissance man. He is a teacher and practitioner of architecture, an artist and a person who touches and transforms many lives. NJ always has some instruction, life advice, or blessing for anyone who is interested in listening.

Unaka moved to Milwaukee in 2007. He lives in Washington Park and is one of the few homeowners on his block. He was a doctoral student at UWM’s School of Architecture and Urban Planning for 5 years. He graduated in 2014. During his tenure there, he became invested in the City of Milwaukee and the university. He advised and supported a myriad students from diverse financial and locational backgrounds. His help and support transformed many lives, and many students remember Unaka with respect and love. Together with his spouse, also a part of the Washington Park Neighborhood Association, Unaka has transformed an empty adjacent lot into a community garden in his neighborhood.

NJ has lived in this neighborhood for the past 8 years and, during this period, he has seen immense change in this area. He remembers how once abandoned homes have turned into prospering properties and how the social and economic landscape of Washington Park have improved due to the dedicated perseverance of its residents. Crime and drug trading have reduced because of proactive neighbors, but so have many previously thriving businesses, so much so that Unaka wistfully points out that the most thriving business in his neighborhood is a casket maker! Yet, Unaka remains optimistic about Washington Park and its residents’ ability to implement change and new ideas.

NJ Unaka, interviewed by Damir McCurty and Hyrom Stokes, June 2015
Dr. Chia Youyee Vang

Vang's parents were farmers. She and her siblings never went to summer school. The biggest challenge that Dr. Vang faced when she first arrived was learning English because America was a completely new country and culture for her. Therefore, communication was a big problem. Vang was never officially enrolled in any school prior to coming to America. She attended public schools in St. Paul after she arrived in the U.S. She had to study English in addition to her regular classes. She would run home every day to watch her favorite television show—that really helped with her English learning! She graduated from high school in 1990 and was accepted to Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota.

It is typical for Hmong girls to marry at an early age. However, Vang chose not to get married early because she wanted to pursue her dreams and her education. Professor Vang majored in political science and French while she was in college. During her junior year in college, Vang was able to study abroad in Paris, France. While in France, she visited other Hmong refugee families who had settled there. During the year that she studied abroad, Dr. Vang visited 13 different European countries. She received a fellowship to study public policy at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs after she graduated from college. After receiving an MA in 1996, she worked as a policy analyst. Professor Vang returned to the University of Minnesota in 2002 for her doctorate studies in American Studies. She received her doctoral degree in 2006 and has been teaching at UWM for almost 10 years. She is fluent in Hmong, English, and French and she has also studied Japanese and Lao.
Mae Vang

Kazau Vang, also called Mae, is a 23 year old Hmong American resident of the Washington Park neighborhood. She resides with her extended family in a duplex house. She lives downstairs with her mother, her brother and her nephew while her older brother, his wife and their 2 children live upstairs. She is excited that she will soon become an aunt since her sister-in-law is expecting a third child. Growing up around many younger siblings, nieces and nephews made Mae interested in elementary education. She studied education before switching to a business major.

Her parents were refugees from Laos, but she lost her father in November of 2000. Vang comes from a traditional shaman household. Although she has chosen to practice Christianity since she was 14 years old, Vang sees her beliefs as a hybrid between her shaman upbringing and her Christian views.

Although Vang was born and raised in Milwaukee she has moved around in the city, living in at least five different locations and homes. She has lived in three different houses in the Washington Park area itself. She likes her current home the most because, unlike her previous houses, Vang got her own room in this abode. The kitchen is her favorite room and she talks about the importance of cooking in Hmong family life, “We always cook for each other, cook enough for the whole family to eat. That’s how we grew up.” Despite being the youngest sibling in her family, Vang tries to be as independent as possible. She explains, “I spoil myself. Everything I have I bought myself. My Mom is proud of me for that because growing up I always had hand-me-downs.”

Vang’s stories of the Washington Park neighborhood are varied and have not always been positive. Her car was broken into and there are issues with neighbors using their property without her permission. Nevertheless she feels comfortable and safe in the neighborhood, has great dreams for this community and has tremendous respect for her neighbors. Recalling an incident in which her mother’s turtle was stolen from her backyard, Vang explains how her neighbor witnessed what happened and reported the situation to them. She appreciates having neighbors who look out for each other, and hopes to see more examples of this for the future.
Mychoua Vang

Mychoua Vang, the eldest daughter in a Hmong American family, grew up with eight siblings. She was born in Des Moines, Iowa in 1987 but spent her formative years in Milwaukee. She attended High School at South Milwaukee. Growing up as a first generation Hmong American, Mychoua often juggled expectations of being “Hmong” and “American.” She explained “you’re no longer just Hmong, you’re American and Hmong. You have to learn how to live in two worlds. You have to please your parents and you have to please whatever American standards you have.”

Mychoua Vang serves as receptionist and youth coordinator at the Hmong American Friendship Association (HAFA). Before gaining employment at HAFA, Vang volunteered as a tutor and mentor to participants in HAFA youth programs. She was also working towards her undergraduate degree in sociology at this time. It was during this volunteer experience with HAFA that she realized her passion for working with Hmong youth in Milwaukee.

Mychoua’s experiences in the United States as a Hmong-American give her a unique vantage point in observing and absorbing mainstream American culture. As someone who straddles multiple worlds, she has developed a unique perspective on ways multiple cultures affect one another; “I think that even the American culture is changing as well, you know, the faces of what American is is no longer just white it’s all different colors and shade.”

Few people make it through adolescence unscathed by bullying and discrimination due to real or perceived differences. This is particularly true for cultural minorities in the United States. When confronted with bigotry, Mychoua speaks for so many when she astutely asserts that intolerance of our differences “makes you angry, not just at who you are but at the people making fun of you for it.” According to Mychoua the struggle for the youth at HAFA is not just about identifying or being identified as Hmong or American. Rather, it is about translating one’s inherited culture in a manner that also allows for convergence with western ethos. It is about forging a unique individual identity.
ZongSae Vang was born in 1966 and was raised in Laos. His given name was Zongsae at birth but later on he gained the name Shue. Eventually he fled Laos with his family to go to a camp in Thailand. In 1988, he arrived in the United States as a refugee from the Vietnam war. Spending his childhood amidst the horror and hardships of war Shue had one wish. He hoped for peace so he could sleep soundly. Shue is a family man. At home he shares Hmong culture and traditions with his kids. He explained that family is always a priority for him. According to him, “Hmong people do not have friends they have family.” He was quick to clarify that to him the term “family” meant more than just his wife and children. Rather, he considered his Hmong relatives, extended family and the entire Hmong community as his family. According to Shue, members of the Hmong community share the love of family, even if they may not know each other.

When he came to Milwaukee, Shue discovered the Hmong American Friendship Association (HAFA), a non-profit organization. HAFA was founded in 1983 by Hmong refugees to help improve the quality of life for all Hmong refugee families in the Greater Milwaukee area. The primary goal of HAFA is to “promote self-sufficiency... by bridging cultural, social and language barriers and identifying resources that meet the needs of those they serve.” Shue serves as a community organizer, elderly specialist, and bilingual translator for HAFA.

Zongsae Vang, interviewed by Denise Zahran and Qianfei Xu, June 2015
Goeliang Yang

Goeliang Yang is a 19 year old Hmong American woman living in Washington Park. We met her in 2015 when she was about to begin her sophomore year of college at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee with a major in Business Marketing. She has been living in Washington Park for 5 years and currently lives with her parents, her two brothers and her brother’s family. Initially when she moved into this area she was concerned about safety but her perception of the neighborhood has changed quite a bit. Yang has made friends, likes the neighborhood and describes it as “quiet.” However she wishes that people were able to communicate with each other more effectively.

Yang remembers her childhood home in North Carolina, a family-owned forested property with four buildings housing relatives. Her family moved to Washington Park when she was around the age of 14. After moving to Milwaukee she found that she had a lot more opportunities in her life. This includes being part of Upward Bound, a pre-college achievement program, which helped her advance academically.

Yang describes the dynamics of Hmong family life: She finds that sometimes there are barriers between different generations within the family. As a Hmong woman, she feels that she is expected to take care of domestic responsibilities. However, Yang finds joy in cooking for her family, despite having to wake up early to do so. Her mother has been a great source of knowledge and education for her. Yang talks about meals that she learned to cook, as well as values such as kindness, compassion, and helping others that she inherited from her mother.

Goeliang Yang, interview by Elizabeth Rose Osborne, Matthew Karl Stuessy & Wei Ye, June 2015
Proctor Yang

Proctor Yang is a Hmong American elder who lives in the city of Milwaukee. When he first arrived in America he lived in Fresno, CA. He stayed there until 1994, and then moved to North Carolina. In 2011, Yang decided to move again, this time to Milwaukee’s Washington Park neighborhood. He chose Milwaukee because he had relatives in this city. Even though he had to deal with frequent readjustments and moves, he is proud of his decision to settle in Milwaukee where he has a stable career and a home.

Dreams of unification and consolidation of Hmong society underpin many stories that Yang told us. Yang calls upon young Hmong students to unify the Hmong community. He emphasizes that there is a need for Hmong classes focusing on cultural tradition and practices so that the younger generations may learn and sustain their heritage: “When they know about this, they can help each other out. If there is no Hmong classes, at the end, these students will not care anymore. The American way [mainstream traditions and practices] will encourage the decrease of engagement in the Hmong community. We must learn about Hmong traditions and follow them so the kids can also learn and know how to fortify the Hmong and help...”

Yang describes sees himself as an elder who is concerned about the day to day living of his people [noj ib hnbr xam ib hnbr]. Money and education are important issues for him. He wishes that young adults in the Hmong community will push for higher education. Once these students are educated, Yang believes that they will be able to help strengthen the community and create stronger social networks. He envisions a united Hmong society where the act of caring for each other is a priority.

Proctor Neej Kos Yang, interview by Tommy Yang, Jia Jun Yin, HongYan Yang, June 2015
Tommy CheeMou Yang describes Washington Park’s allure, “Washington Park is an very unique neighborhood, a neighborhood that [is] very diverse, a neighborhood that [is] filled with population, [and] filled with many different colors! But no one not really knows about it!” Yang is a 22 year old Hmong American student enrolled in the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. An artist, activist and poet, Yang lives in the Washington Park neighborhood in his uncle’s house. He is involved with the Hmong American Friendship Association Inc. (HAFA) and serves the Hmong American community at his university campus and in his neighborhood. He volunteers with Milwaukee youth, serves as a Lawton Scholar Success Advocate, and is a WiscAMP - STEM scholar mentor. He serves as an office bearer of the National Organization of Minority Architecture Students (NOMAS) at UWM. Currently he is working with the BLC Field School where he is documenting Hmong American life at Washington Park.

Growing up in Appleton, WI, a predominately white town, Yang often explored his identity and role as Hmong and American. When he moved to Washington Park three years ago, he discovered a different cultural context within which he had to rediscover himself. Initially, at Washington Park, he didn’t feel comfortable to go out of his home because he thought it was unsafe. Soon he discovered otherwise and was enamored with the neighborhood’s unique, rich, and multicultural community. He has developed deep friendships with residents of different economic, ethnic and racial backgrounds and shares their love for this neighborhood. He points out that despite being resilient and strong there remains important issues that need to be addressed in this neighborhood. He lists the many abandoned houses and the persistent economic disinvestment heaped upon this community as some such urgent problems. Yang wants to see more business such as retail stores, grocery stores and restaurants return to Washington Park. He hopes that the vacant lands could be reused as public spaces.

In traditional Hmong culture, food plays a big role. The smell of good food can wake Tommy Yang up in the morning. He loves the smell of Hmong food— it makes him feel at home. As a result, Yang experiments with Hmong recipes and cuisine in his spare time.
Yee Yang

Yee Yang straddles multiple worlds. He is enrolled as a student at the Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), where he is majoring in business and marketing. As a child, Yang used to roam the streets of Washington Park with other Hmong kids who were his neighbors. Yang narrated his childhood memories, “...we were like rebels ... We would just do whatever, go into peoples’ backyards ... we would play with other peoples’ toys!” He remembered a close knit community where living was fun and life was carefree.

Today, he has moved out to the East Side in order to pursue his dreams. He hopes that one day he will be able to go to bigger cities such as New York. As a young adult, Yang wishes to break out from the ties of traditional Hmong practices and explore his life on his own terms. He believes that the newer generation can choose what they desire and craft their lives in an independent manner. Even when I was living with my parents,” he explains, “I had grown to a mature state ... I really didn’t need my parents only for financial support...At the end it is just you fighting for yourself.”

Despite his dreams, Yang continues to remain part of the Hmong community. He visits Washington Park regularly and helps out in his parent’s C&S Supermarket. He hopes to update the family business with new business practices. “My parents ... always wants to be inside of their own little box,” Yang explained. “I’m a marketing major, and I’ve always wanted to go do ... online marketing. ... but my parents are more traditional and they want to do advertisement on paper and do word [of] mouth.” Although Yang may not agree with his parent’s perspectives in marketing and handling the store, he still tries his best to care for the business and help his family. He has big dreams for the supermarket and he hopes to cater to the greater Hmong community and expand this business in order to fulfill his mother’s dream. Yang explains, “there’s more to the store than just coming here to grab grocery for the house.”

Yee Yang, interview by Tommy Yang, Jia Jun Yin, HongYan Yang, June 2015