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“From the House Come Everything”:

Macler Shepard and JeffVanderLou, Inc’s Effort to Rebuild a North St. Louis City
Neighborhood, 1966-1978

Mark Loehrer

B.A. History, University of Missouri, St. Louis 2014

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in History

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Thesis Committee

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Abstract

This thesis charts the course of the JeffVanderLou (JVL) organization between the pivotal years of 1966 to 1976, using the life of a man named Macler Shepard as the primary lens of exploration. Born in Marvell Arkansas, Macler Shepard followed in the footsteps of tens of thousands of other Southern migrants to cities like St. Louis, hoping to find a new life in the industrial North. However, no sooner had he settled in, he was displaced by the construction of Pruitt-Igoe, one of St. Louis' first large-scale urban renewal programs. In response, Shepard became involved in neighborhood organizing, focusing on tackling problems which had made his neighborhood a target for clearance, namely, the lack of good housing. When the City of St. Louis proposed a \$90 Million dollar bond issue in 1966 which would have financed a highway to carve through the near-northside, Shepard and neighbors launched an unlikely grassroots challenge, they vowed City Hall would not displace one more black family. They won, proving to themselves that real power lay at the grassroots. Shepard and others argued they could orchestrate their own program, from the bottom up, to revitalize their neighborhood, with the central focus on housing. Through Shepard's passionate yet pragmatic leadership, JVL became a coalition of partners, from religious institutions to private enterprise, and from medicine, to construction. Over the ten-year span of this thesis' focus, Shepard and JVL created a measurably successful community development program around Shepard's one simple saying, "From the house come everything."

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin these acknowledgements by thanking the late Macler Shepard. It is a curious thing that Macler accomplished so much and clearly touched the lives of so many and yet remains largely absent from our contemporary narrative of St. Louis history. I am fascinated by the stories of Macler staring down the political establishment and winning—but just as impressive are the stories I didn't share in this thesis. The stories Cecil told me of Satchel Paige, Cool Papa Bell and Macler Shepard hanging out at the Handle Coffeehouse or going on fishing trips on the Mississippi. These are the stories that helped paint Macler as someone ordinary. Someone who was, as Gregory Freeman described, “a plain black man.” This is really what my thesis is about, a handful of ordinary people figuring out how to do what they had to in order to protect their homes—and that itself was so unusual in a city used to knocking down buildings, that it was extraordinary. My hope is that my thesis can serve as one step towards mending this injustice and yet I assure the reader I'm not even close to done telling this amazing story.

This thesis has taken a long time to complete. I have to thank my committee, Dr. Andrew Hurley, Dr. Walter Johnson and my chair, Dr. Priscilla Dowden-White, for never suggesting I pick another topic. Dr. Dowden-White's successful attempt to reign in my research and focus by suggesting that I write a micro-biography, allowed me to channel several earlier drafts of unwieldy research, find my center, and to tell what I hope readers will find as a compelling and historically significant story, that has important implications for the present. For that I am most thankful because at the end of the day, JVL was Macler's organization.

Determined to leave no stone unturned I have traveled the country finding people connected to JeffVanderLou. I am indebted to the hospitality and friendship of Mary and Hubert Schwartzenruber. Not once but twice have they hosted me. Hubert took so many calls. Sometimes I'd forget to start my recorder, other times I'd have to make sure I heard something right, and each time he'd happily pick up the phone and answer my questions. He will never admit it, but Hubert certainly played a decisive role in the success of JeffVanderLou early on. My hope is that his passion to help his dear friend Macler shines through my thesis as brightly as it did when I read his letters.

I owe an equal hearty thanks to Cecil Miller. Cecil is probably cited on just about every other page in this thesis. He was Macler's office manager for about five years and like Schwartzenruber, his love and memory of his departed friend Macler Shepard still shines extremely bright. 'Cec' gave me a driving tour of JVL, pointing out the sites, many of which are simply vacant lots in 2021. He took me into the Shepard apartments and let me look through the office filing cabinet. Through Cec, I was able to access a paper trail few others will ever see the light of. I'm incredibly thankful for that opportunity. I'm pretty sure for a while there Cecil got sick of me. Like my parents he wanted me to stop doing research and finish the damn paper already. I finished Cec, I finished.

If Cecil has anyone to blame for me becoming a constant headache it's Lois Conley. In 2017, I began an internship at the Griot Museum of Black History. There, I began working on

Macler Shepard's papers. It bears mentioning, while Shepard is largely absent in the local historiography, he does have a permanent exhibition at the Griot Museum. Joined by Cecil, Lois and I explored Macler's abandoned house in early 2019 with the invitation of its present owner James "Fats" Woods, there we found Macler's bible, his name inscribed in the front. The image of Cecil pouring over it and Lois with her hands clasped over her mouth will be an image I will not soon forget.

And now comes a rapid fire of acknowledgements. I owe a ton of gratitude to the folks who read various iterations of my thesis. Professor Robin McDowell and recently Andrew Olden, who provided much needed last second feedback in the waning months of 2021. Michael Brickey gets a thanks both for reading a terrible rough draft but also, his thesis providing me a model that really helped tie me down. I also of course owe a huge debt of gratitude to my mother who read every iteration and tried her best to make suggestions to a son who couldn't stand to read his own writing and to my late Grandmother who read my work and always provided stellar ratings.

Then too I must credit my discovery of the Mennonite archives in Elkhart. Archivist Jason Kauffman let me spend two days there, scanning thousands of papers, many of them correspondences between Hubert and the Church which are cited in this paper. I also owe special thanks to archivist Miranda Rectenwald at Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections, whose intern did scanning from the Urban League papers last spring, a vital source which informed a complete reversal of my interpretation of JVL's dispute with the League. I also owe a big thanks to folks like Mo Speller and Sarah Siegel whose work with JVL discovered through presentations at SACRPH in Cleveland helped push me to work even harder on getting my own research down on paper. Sarah also turned up a stash of JVL Newspapers at the very museum I work at, that I had never seen before—and for that I'm truly thankful!

This thesis is dedicated to the legacy of JeffVanderLou, which was an organization that succeeded in spite of ward and city politics. JVL demonstrated that with private money and a lot of hard work, neighborhood development could take place outside of the traditional system. This study represents the first chapter in retelling the story of how neighborhood organizing can birth a renaissance in spite of the overwhelming challenges of concentrated poverty and political mismanagement.

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Introduction

During the 1960s, at the corner of Leffingwell and Sheridan in the St. Louis neighborhood of Yeatman, stood a coffeehouse, The Handle. Inside, neighbors met to discuss ways they could address declining conditions in their community. Chairing these community discussions was an older-looking African American man with a crop of greying hair and a slow Arkansas drawl, whose name was Macler Shepard. He had a way with words, it was said. Shepard could bring the room to cheers through his charismatic manner of speaking and his almost prophetic vision of what might be possible if residents simply worked together.

Shepard was emphatic during these neighborhood discussions: to avoid having their homes wiped out by urban renewal, citizens needed to take a stand, for only the people themselves, not the politicians, could save Yeatman.¹ The Handle became to Yeatman what Café de Procope was to Paris in the late 1700s. However while in Paris Marat, Robespierre, and Danton plotted revolution, in St. Louis an interracial and intergenerational group met at The Handle and talked neighborhood self-determination. Over the course of several weeks in the spring of 1966, the coffeehouse became the center of a new militancy, grassroots and interracial in nature, working class in composition, determined to fight for better and more just living conditions. The energy that poured from the Handle would eventually unify under one name,

¹ Throughout the narrative I make reference to Yeatman, which was until about the late 1980s, the neighborhood in which JeffVanderLou operated. The name Yeatman comes from a mid-19th century city businessman, James E. Yeatman, whose credits include a founder of Washington University, the Mercantile Library among others. Compositionally at the time of Shepard's rise to lead JVL, and in the context of this narrative between 1965 and 1978, Yeatman was one of the largest neighborhoods in area, and population, with some projecting population as high as 70,000 to as low as 54,000 people. According to Norbury Wayman's neighborhood profile for Yeatman, in the 1970s the area was primarily residential in nature but decay was well established, Wayman noting of the units in Yeatman, "about 80% multi-family flats of brick construction, with a serious deterioration problem. Many have been torn down or vandalized."

JeffVanderLou (JVL)—with Macler Shepard at the helm for nearly twenty years. Shepard was the leading force in a unique and successful movement to bring “power to the people.”

Community empowerment with the purpose of neighborhood revitalization were more than just lofty ideals for Shepard. Over several decades, Shepard, working through JVL, Inc demonstrated that persistence and focus on drawing energy and participation from the community, could yield real results, both through physical redevelopment and political restructuring. The activists who in 1966 challenged a city-wide bond issue would by 1970 put down placards and pick up hammers, rebuilding their neighborhood under the banner of JVL, house by house. City and regional economic elites were initially opposed to Shepard’s vision of bringing investment into the Yeatman neighborhood through efforts to steer reinvestment dollars for infrastructure and housing into the area. After a tense beginning, several city elites formed a coalition with Shepard’s organization. These partnerships gave JVL access to services and capital that allowed the program to flourish, while other local federally funded anti-poverty programs experienced programmatic cuts.²

Moreover, JVL, under Shepard’s supervision, sought to leverage new federal programs offering low interest loans to grow the neighborhood’s base of homeowners in an effort to give former renters a personal stake in their neighborhood, instilling pride in the community through

² This is in fact a running current in the narrative, that as JVL gained in reputation through its deeds and the message of its spokesman (Macler Shepard), competing programs which involved organizations working within JeffVanderLou’s neighborhood of Yeatman—that chose to work directly with Model Cities for example—saw their fortunes fall short as the federal government shifted away from urban reinvestment due to political changes in Washington. Shepard’s insistence that JVL be managed internally, and locally, and not follow stringent bureaucratic rules of federal anti-poverty programs like Model Cities would prove to be decisive in the longevity of JeffVanderLou, coupled with Shepard’s courting of beneficial financial relations with wealthy donors, providing JVL with financial independence that others lacked.

personal ownership.³ For example, Rosie Willis, who still lives in JVL nearly 50 years later, described why she wanted to move into the neighborhood: “I wanted to show people that you can be very poor, as I am, but still have some pride about yourself. And have some pride about where you live and have pride in wanting to improve where you live.”⁴ As houses were upgraded, sold, or rented, JVL became a place where people wanted to live, a “frontier” on the edge of the ghetto, a bastion of hope and determination. Through hard work and participation, residents of the area helped Macler Shepard restore a part of the city that many had written off.

This thesis charts the course of the JVL organization between the pivotal years of 1966 to 1976, using the life of Macler Shepard as the primary lens of exploration. Shepard’s path from rural Arkansas to the heart of the St. Louis urban core was in fact an experience similar to many of the Yeatman neighborhood. Like his neighbors, Shepard was one of many first- and second-generation southern migrants who came to St. Louis for jobs during the Second World War. By the early 1960s, urban renewal displaced a number of Yeatman residents—including Macler Shepard—who were forced to rebuild their lives, homes and businesses. With his compelling personality and friendly demeanor, Shepard built lifelong relationships across Yeatman—identifying with both their hopes and discontent. Macler’s unique ability to empower and empathize led to friendship with people from all walks of life including single mothers, pastors, business owners, hoodlums, and revolutionaries.

³ Again to clarify that while JVL largely worked outside of federal anti-poverty programs like Model Cities and the Community Action Program (in St. Louis, managed by the Human Development Corporation), they did opt for programming through the FHA—which predates Johnsons’ ambitious War on Poverty.

⁴ Siegel, Sarah Rachel. “‘By the People Most Affected’: Model Cities, Citizen Control, and the Broken Promises of Urban Renewal.” Washington University Open Scholarship. Accessed October 24, 2020. https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/1759/. 185.

In the early 1960s, Shepard spoke openly of his desire to build a neighborhood center of power, one that could not be easily disrupted by politicized planners from the outside. In 1965, on the steps of City Hall, Shepard spoke to a crowd of Yeatman protesters who were responding to a spree of police brutality. He promised, “This [the protest] is just the beginning to the way we are going to call attention to what is going on in the 19th Ward.”⁵ Ultimately, from the meetings at the Handle emerged JVL, an organization that was also a statement emphasizing Shepard’s core idea of community power, the power to guide the revitalization of the Yeatman neighborhood not by the whims of city planners or bankers, but neighborhood residents. Through Shepard’s passionate yet pragmatic leadership, JVL became a coalition of partners, from religious institutions to private enterprise, and from medicine, to construction. Over the ten-year span of this thesis’ focus, Shepard and JVL created a measurably successful community development program around Shepard’s one simple saying, “From the house come everything.”⁶

Yet, while those who worked with Shepard view him with almost Biblical reverence—he was not a man without weakness. One of the most persistent problems dogging Shepard was that he was extremely naïve. In 1965, for example, Shepard worked with the local chapter of the Marxist-Leninist DuBois Club to organize a march against police brutality. Despite emerging from the march with a handful of concessions from the Police Department, Shepard was stunned the press chose to focus not on the march, but rather, Shepard’s open and admitted association with Communists.⁷ This naivety would play out again, and again, from JVL’s attempt to ask the

⁵ “250 Negroes in March on City Hall Assail Police Tactics.” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 17, 1965.

⁶ Miller, Cecil. Interview with the Author, November 4th, 2021

⁷ As it turns out, this lengthy piece which would appear in the *Post-Dispatch* following the September 1965 march on City Hall would provide one of the most in-depth and detailed sources of information about the origins of Shepard’s roots in community development, bringing to light information on Shepard which I was unable to obtain from any known written record or from those I interviewed for this research. This is discussed more in chapter two.

city to enforce housing codes against wealthy and politically connected slumlords, to Shepard's attempts to woo bankers to lend in the heavily redlined Yeatman neighborhood. What emerged was a pattern of organizational evolution where Shepard's naivety was consistently checked through a long, sometimes frustrating process of trial and error. Sometimes this worked out in JVL's favor, other times the group was forced to learn that to overcome the odds against them, they would need to be resolute and push forward.

Through twelve chapters, this thesis seeks to analyze the central role of Macler Shepard as the pivotal leader of JVL, showing that while Shepard was not the only driver behind the success of JVL, he was the glue which cemented this unique and storied organization together. JVL presents a unique opportunity to observe a convergence of multiple topics in the study of urban history. Individually these topics include urban renewal, community organizing, protest politics and working class African American attempts to claim agency and later ownership over the planning and operation of programs targeting poverty in their neighborhoods. Within just the timeframe of this narrative, the first decade of JVL's organizational work—these topics find refuge, each intimately tied to the other.

The starting point of my research was to locate and to analyze any existing local narrative of JVL in published scholarly works, specifically looking for how scholars had portrayed JVL as vehicles of working class interests. Unfortunately, despite JVL's relevance across a broad spectrum of fields within urban history and studies of social work, little contemporary focus has been given on the St. Louis based community organization. Where it has been mentioned, in the context of the protests and anti-poverty activities of the 1960s, JVL is almost an afterthought. For example, while Shepard was present as an organizer of marches against police brutality in the mid-1960s, his name is largely absent save for mention where he crossed paths with more

pronounced personalities associated with the struggle for Civil Rights in St. Louis.⁸ Moreover, where scholarship looking at St. Louis based working class struggle is concerned, JVL has often been pigeonholed as largely confined to the work of an anti-poverty spinoff⁹ or as a supporting ally, playing second fiddle to more militant organizations like the Black Liberators such as Jolly's discussion of JVL as a partner to the Black United Front.¹⁰ While in Jolly's example JVL did join an alliance with more militant organizations, it's unclear as to why they are viewed as a less important participant, especially given their track record by 1968-1969, which I strongly contend dwarfed that of even more militaristic groups like the Liberators, in terms of disrupting city business as usual or mobilizing the masses to become involved in agitating for political and social changes.¹¹ One reason to explain this may be that indeed, early on JVL often was seen working through Model Cities and briefly as an extension of the city's Community Action Program, the Human Development Corporation.¹² However neither author demonstrates a

⁸ One example of this is the brief mention of Shepard's organization in George Lipsitz's micro biographical study of St. Louis based activist Ivory Perry. Explained later in chapter two of this thesis, Perry himself was awed by the sophistication of Shepard's organizing in the 19th ward in 1965—this being almost one year exactly before the founding of JeffVanderLou. Lipsitz, George. *A Life in the Struggle*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995

⁹ Lang, Clarence. *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75*. Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press, 2009. 216

¹⁰ Lang for example includes only one sentence in his work chronicling the work of working class organizers in St. Louis during the 1960s, "The JVL focused mainly on housing rehabilitation, and the corollary opportunities of black employment and home ownership." Lang, Clarence. *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75*. Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press, 2009. 216. See also Jolly, Kenneth. *Black Liberation in the Midwest The Struggle in St. Louis, Missouri, 1964-1970*. 2013. <http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9780203960622>, whose work largely paints JeffVanderLou as solely concerned with housing development—partially true, but ignoring both Shepard's organizational work prior to 1966 and the group's more radical work in the 1970s organizing united fronts against highway construction and Team 4.

¹¹ This references the 1966 challenge waged by Yeatman activists (just prior to their renaming as JeffVanderLou) to a nearly \$100 Million dollar city-wide bond issue, which had the support of the majority of black and white civic elites. JeffVanderLou didn't simply challenge this issue rhetorically, it mobilized a grassroots response, allied with conservatives in south city and ultimately defeated the bond issue in a stunning defeat for Mayor Cervantes and the powerful economic interests which composed the downtown businessman's organization Civic Progress.

¹² In fact, the brief marriage of JeffVanderLou and Model Cities is discussed in Chapter 6, while JVL's very public and very contentious fight for neighborhood authority with the HDC is the subject of Chapters 7 and Chapter 8. However by and large, I have chosen to minimize focus on these two bodies in this narrative of JVL as both on

thorough study of the ‘why,’ behind JVL’s program goals, much less a ‘how,’ which is what this thesis will most demonstrate. Thus while I do not intend to argue that JVL was in any way as militant as organizations that both Clarence Lang and Kenneth Jolly characterize as leading the efforts for militant working class struggle in St. Louis during the 1960s, I do intend to show that Shepard and JVL are just as deserving of credit as leaders in organizing for working class economic and social progress.

While Shepard and JVL are difficult to sell as leaders of the militant protest culture which was the dominant thread of activism in the latter half the 1960s locally, they are more easily recognizable as leaders in community organizing. To help better explain what this means, I refer largely to Richard Rosenbloom’s essay reflecting on the progress and dubious future of the Neighborhood Movement, authored in 1981, at the dawn of Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Here, Rosenbloom charts the beginning of the Neighborhood Movement to several factors including the twin programs of the War on Poverty (Community Action Program and later Model Cities) as well as the continued efforts of city governments to use federal dollars to stimulate urban revitalization through costly (in expense and physical scale) urban renewal and highway construction projects. Rosenbloom writes that as neighborhood after neighborhood fell to urban renewal, “people in affected neighborhoods began to recognize that these programs were imposing high costs on them and providing inadequate compensation, they began to mobilize in protest.”¹³ In my research I have found similar veins, with JVL activists citing the inclusion of money to plan for a proposed North-South Distributor Highway, as well as the likely

paper and according to those interviewed for my thesis, JVL largely operated autonomously. The anti-poverty programs sought out JVL’s participation by 1968, not the other way around.

¹³ Rosenbloom, Robert A. “The Neighborhood Movement: Where Has It Come From? Where Is It Going?” *Journal of Voluntary Action Research* 10, no. 2 (April 1981): <https://doi.org/10.1177/089976408101000203> 5

displacement and overcrowding of surrounding neighborhoods as reason for Yeatman activists to challenge the 1966 Bond Issues. The bond issue fight and JVL's success in its defeat then became one of the chief moments in JVL's organizational birth, discussed more in Chapter 5. Moreover, and relating back to my previous paragraph, Rosenbloom asserts that one of the most powerful catalysts for the Neighborhood Movement's growth in the 1960s was the energy generated by the social upheavals caused by the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements, which he concludes made organizing such an attractive method of mobilizing mass movements for social change at the local level.¹⁴

Picking up on this last point, what distinguished the 1960s and 1970s Neighborhood Movement from previous generations, argues Rosenbloom was that with the ongoing struggles for social justice the emergence of a militancy in the latter half of the decade, came a more open embrace of confrontational, unconventional tactics in order to win power. Rosenbloom writes that, "while militant advocacy was decried by the target groups as outside the rules of the game, it was justified by many organizers as the only way poor people could exercise power."¹⁵ Necessary here is to point out here is that many organizations born of this era didn't need to reinvent the process, but rather, many derived strategies from the works of Saul Alinsky. With the success in the 1930s of the Back of The Yards organization and later in the 1960s of The Woodlawn Organization, Alinsky has an outsized presence in any discussion of community organizing at the grassroots. Like Rosenbloom, Alinsky wrote that a successful organization could ride the wave of social change, such as the Civil Rights Movement, and achieve levels of

¹⁴ Rosenbloom, Robert A. "The Neighborhood Movement: Where Has It Come From? Where Is It Going?" 5

¹⁵ Rosenbloom, Robert A. 6

stunning success.¹⁶ Yet at the same time, Alinsky shied from the militarism he witnessed in the latter half of the 1960s, stating that successful organizations must avoid the tendency to fall into an ideological trap, which could then taint or drown out the voice of the people in favor of a preconceived notion of effective strategies and tactics. According to Fisher, of utmost importance to any credible organization is, “To let the people decide,” and that Alinsky advocated, “no matter what they decide, is the essence of democracy.”¹⁷ In JVL, the space where democracy was experienced was the Handle Coffeehouse, where neighbors gathered to listen and articulate desires which soon became agenda items for organizations like the 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association and later JVL. It is for this reason that some interviewed for this research felt strongly that JVL was the sole voice of the working class residents of Yeatman, in contrast to the college educated militants who merely performed the role of community spokespeople without first sitting down and listening to the residents themselves. But could change come outside of revolution?

Robert Fisher states that Alinsky believed that working class interests could be advanced through the system as it was, if they managed to elbow their way to the negotiating table, without revolution or abolition.¹⁸ He writes, “once they got there, they could make those in power,

¹⁶ Fisher, Robert. *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America*. New York: Dwayne Publishers, 1994. 52

¹⁷ Fisher, Robert. *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America* 54

¹⁸ In her work analyzing Alinsky’s organizing approach. Joan Lancourt highlights the sentiments of organizers working from within Alinsky’s most high profile success of the early 1960s, The Woodlawn Organization, based in Chicago. There, Lancourt observed “The apparent goal of the predominant number of organizational leaders and organizers was to make the system work for them; to include them in it as full participants without a fundamental restructuring of society.” Lancourt, Joan E. *Confront or Concede, the Alinsky Citizen-Action Organizations*. Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1979. 32-33. For an example of where this was applied by JeffVanderLou, Mo Speller’s research has shown, despite being critical of municipal action like urban renewal, JeffVanderLou was highly skilled at using municipal tools, tools like the city’s newly enshrined code enforcement ordinance, to force city officials and landlords to the negotiating table.¹⁸ Speller, Mo. “Enforcing Community Development: St. Louis and Jeff-Vander-Lou, Inc., 1964-1974,” Paper for SACRPH October 2018 9

whether government officials or corporate executives, responsive to their needs,” concluding that central to Alinsky was, “skillful, nonideological, democratic organizations willing to use any and all means can ultimately obtain more power and be more effective than ideological radical groups.”¹⁹ This is visible in the activities of Macler’s first organization, the 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association, which joined groups like CORE and the NAACP to protest a spate of police slayings in 1965. Differing from the other groups however, Shepard’s organization didn’t demand the dramatic, be it a civilian review board or immediate hiring of more African American police officers—but rather, chose to ask for something Shepard knew could serve as a half-step that served neighborhood interests and was politically feasible (a neighborhood substation). Is this capitulation? No. It is, instead, an example of Shepard’s embrace of a pragmatic leadership style. Arthur Brazier who observe the rise of The Woodlawn Organization in Chicago states the wisdom of such an approach, “residents of ghettos are exceedingly skeptical about community organizations. They feel, “well we’ve been in organizations before; we’ve heard this kind of talk before; we have fought and nothing has come of it...why should we do it again,” adding that pragmatic leadership was the answer, “The criterion for action is not necessarily that the issue be the largest one or even the most important one. The issue must be one that the organization can win—an issue that will solidify organization and demonstrate its power in a small but significant way.”²⁰ This is exactly the approach with which Macler Shepard led his community from the 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association to JVL. Perhaps it is even a better explanation for why scholars looking to document working class organizing in St. Louis during the 1960s have overlooked JVL as a subject of study, and yet, while not as colorful

¹⁹ Fisher, Robert, 82

²⁰ Brazier, Arthur M. *Black Self-Determination: The Story of the Woodlawn Organization*. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 1969, 31-32

as militaristic Black Power organizations, JVL objectively accomplished much of its agenda, consistently year over year, by the close of its first ten years.²¹

Yet while Rosenbloom's argument for the uniqueness of the neighborhood movement to the 1960s is appetizing, it erases the work of organizations like the Urban League, which at least in the St. Louis context, had already established a widely-adopted and popular mechanism for affecting neighborhood level change—the Federation of Block Units. While largely dismissed as mere beautification committees responsible for street cleanups and freshly painted fences, in St. Louis, as Priscilla Dowden-White has chronicled in her work, the block units had become both widely adopted and effective at addressing a broad range of issues.²² While less militant, the Urban League produced an effective model for at the very least, creating the groundwork for mobilizing residents, both through neighborhood clubs and later block units and very likely, eventually the organizations which Shepard himself founded.²³ Of the League programs, Dowden-White shows, “neighborhood work as league officials embraced it, aimed to develop ‘a consciousness among Negro residents that many civic, social and economic’ problems they faced could be improved by group interest and group action,” as well as a desire to train and educate a new class of leadership to guide such groups to achieve community goals.²⁴ Adding to my

²¹ One possible way of demonstrating how non-ideological JVL was, was their willingness to work with individuals such as Thomas Nelson Depew, one of their primary private financiers through the 1970s. Depew, a white, conservative downtown businessman, was not naturally inclined to work with JVL but quickly was cultivated and brought in by Shepard who he found to be both convincing and non-ideological as well as business minded.

²² Dowden-White, Priscilla A. *Groping Toward Democracy African American Social Welfare Reform in St. Louis, 1910-1949*

²³ I believe this to be true because as block captain Shepard, in addition to being a known small business owner in the neighborhood, would have already established enough neighborhood credibility to reach this position and in doing so, cultivated enough community support to lead effectively. By the time he founded the 19th Ward organization in early 1965, using resources of CORE, one could make the argument that he had been groomed by the League to lead such an organization. It should be noted that when Ivory Perry visited the neighborhood, as recalled in Lipsitz' book, he found Shepard to have been very capable and the organization to have been well constructed.

²⁴ Dowden-White, Priscilla A. *Groping Toward Democracy African American Social Welfare Reform in St. Louis, 1910-1949* 219

interest in studying the League as creating the blueprint for groups like JVL was that they did not operate supervisory authority in a traditional to-down manner over block units, favoring instead what Dowden-White describes as a decentralized web of macro level organizations.²⁵

This last idea then strikes me as relevant in explaining why JVL activists felt no strong feeling of attachment to the League when it assumed direct supervision over the Yeatman neighborhood's anti-poverty program.²⁶ If Shepard and Spotts were already content as block unit leaders, to work within a decentralized program, any proposed attempt to institute a top-down structure, by the League or anyone else, would likely have come as an unwelcomed shock. While my thesis further explores the collapse of the relationship between JVL and the Urban League, more important still is that the city's CAP, the HDC itself, did not fully embrace the idea of "maximum feasible participation."²⁷ Locke's work details a continuing series of rifts between residents and HDC operators, culminating about the same time that Shepard and JVL decide to leave the HDC and work alone. Explaining why he felt resident outrage was of such a high tenor, Locke states, "Instead, once these citizen groups were established, they began to demand a greater voice in policy and decision making. This is not surprising in view of the fact for the first

²⁵ Writing more of on this, Dowden-White writes, "the focal point...emanated not from a center, church or school...but from its self-chosen leadership and consequently the home and immediate neighborhood of its members [which] is the center of its interest."²⁵ Dowden-White, Priscilla A 222

²⁶ The Human Development Corporation, the city's CAP to manage OEO funding and supervise anti-poverty programming, contracted with the League in 1965 to supervise a handful of stations. Interestingly, while I earlier stated that CAP oftentimes caused tension with municipal elites used to controlling federal dollars to cities, it was the League that was most displeased by the rise of the HDC, as it saw it as an insult and attempt to crowd out the League which had since 1931 operated the highly successful block unit program. For further reading on the contentious relationship between the HDC and the League, see William Locke's study of the HDC. Locke, William Paul. *A History and Analysis of the Origin and Development of the Human Development Corporation of Metropolitan St. Louis, Missouri, 1962-1970*. St. Louis, MO: publisher not identified, 1974

²⁷ According to Locke, "In interviews with Mr. Wittcoff and Mrs. I Bettman, the writer learned that the Board had considerable apprehension about the neighborhood system...there was a fantastic delay for implementation as the Board lacked conviction." Locke, William Paul. *A History and Analysis of the Origin and Development of the Human Development Corporation of Metropolitan St. Louis, Missouri, 1962-1970*. St. Louis, MO: publisher not identified, 1974. 150

time in their lives, the poor through a national mandate, had been given a voice in matters affecting them. In a very short time the poor who had never been confronted with such an opportunity before, made it clear that a mere advisory role was not enough!”²⁸ Thus arises another important aspect of why a study of JVL is so needed, to give a dominant voice to those living in poverty, who wish to control the programs which will help them out of poverty.

Perhaps no work of secondary work is more important and influential to mine than that of Sarah Siegel’s study of resident participation in the St. Louis Model Cities Program. In contrast to Richard Kerstein, whose study of the program largely overlooks the work of resident planners,²⁹ Siegel finds that in St. Louis, residents fought to make themselves imperative to the success of the overall program. She writes,

Residents used what I call an “expertise of place” argument to establish themselves as indispensable players in antipoverty programs. They asserted they had the right and the ability to control city planning for their community due to their personal experiences living in poor neighborhoods, calling for antipoverty programs run by and for residents to ensure programs reached their intended beneficiaries. They cast their plans in direct contrast to conventional, state-run, profit-oriented urban renewal initiatives that had been displacing poor and black people around the country for decades.³⁰

Siegel also hammers on scholars of urban planning, like Colin Gordon, for oversimplifying the experience of large, complex programs like Model Cities, judging them by the failures at the time of their expiration, and thus erasing the multi-year role that residents played as key planners and instigators in the development of equitable city planning for the ghetto. Of this she writes, “These scholars fall into the trap...[of those] who focus on top-down

²⁸ Locke, 256

²⁹ Kerstein, Robert Jacob, *The Political Consequences of Federal Intervention: The Economic Opportunity Act and Model Cities in the City of St. Louis*, August 1975

³⁰ Siegel, Sarah Rachel. “‘By the People Most Affected’: Model Cities, Citizen Control, and the Broken Promises of Urban Renewal.” Washington University Open Scholarship. Accessed October 24, 2020. https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/1759/. 4

planning to the detriment of implementation, missing the ways residents in St. Louis and other cities used experiences from earlier War on Poverty programs to gain more control over antipoverty planning and attempted to carve out a permanent role in city planning.”³¹ In many ways I feel my work is joined with Siegel’s, together these two narratives demonstrate the tenacity and pride residents felt working both within and from without the Anti-Poverty Programs, in the near-Northside of St. Louis, to own their neighborhood’s future.

Ironically, while Siegel largely seeks to revise Kerstein’s account of the Model Cities program in St. Louis, his research into the policy discussions which produced Model Cities, perhaps hints most closely at what became JVL. He writes of how architects in Washington marveled at the chances of organizations established within the Anti-Poverty movement might become self-sustaining, political and effective vehicles for mobilizing residents and challenging existing structures of power. Kerstein writes, “These new structures could lead to shifts in existing neighborhood and city wide leadership hierarchies. More fundamentally, “spin off” groups,” he continues, adding that the concept of “citizen participation” promised to upset the politics in local communities, and that “The quality of political action and decision making in the cities would be greatly altered if the poor and blacks were to mobilize en masse. Through these programs, residents might be able to pressure established organizations so that they would be included in the decisions which affected their communities.”³² In fact, this is exactly what JVL became. Long after more militant organizations like the Black Liberators had disappeared, JVL,

³¹ Siegel, Sarah Rachel. “By the People Most Affected” 19

³² Kerstein, Robert Jacobo, *The Political Consequences of Federal Intervention*, 2-3

was leading a coalition of neighborhood organizations in protest of the city's new proposed development strategy, which has become known as the "Team 4 Plan."³³

This brings me to my last area of focus, how researchers of community organizing itself have viewed the work of JVL. While contemporary sources are scarce, at least one study of the neighborhood organization was conducted by Barry Checkoway, who corresponded with a number of JVL sources including Washington University professor Jack Kirkland.³⁴ At the dawn of the 1980s, Checkoway observed JVL as functionally sound and effective as a vehicle for neighborhood interests, "the tangible JVL accomplishments—the new neighborhood housing, shoe factory, child care program, communications center and plans for new economic development contrast sharply with the surrounding area," which Checkoway observes to have been devastated by continued population loss, overcrowded housing and an overall appearance of poor maintenance.³⁵ It is an educated guess that a similar fate would have been found for the area JVL guarded, if not for the existence of that organization, in a setting where urban triage is the conventional wisdom guiding planning decisions. Checkoway asserts that perhaps standing in the way of this, was in fact that JVL's leaders, Macler Shepard, Florence A. Spotts, and Hubert Schwartzenruber, made a stand,

JVL demonstrates the importance of community organization in neighborhood planning. Organization served to mobilize individuals, to develop a common program, and to generate power to carry out that program. By organizing, JVL residents not only

³³ Cooper-McCann, Patrick D. *Urban Triage in Cleveland and St. Louis*. [United States]: Patrick D. Cooper-McCann, 2013. 29

³⁴ Kirkland was interviewed early on in my research but requested not to be recorded. Subsequent communication between myself and Kirkland, while interesting, did not relate to the thesis in its final form and thus was not included.

³⁵ Checkoway, Barry. *The Metropolitan Midwest: Policy Problems and Prospects for Change*. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1985 262.

determined their boundaries and gave themselves a name, but they also came to view their neighborhood as a political unit.³⁶

With this statement, Checkoway thus has shown JVL to have become what Kerstein had referenced earlier, an autonomous voice for resident interests that is distinct from the traditional power structure. At the same time Checkoway shows that within the existing field of work around neighborhood planning very few examples outside of JVL exist where plans are directly derived from the residents themselves, “only exceptional studies focus on “neighborhood planning” in which self-starting community organizations exercise power over neighborhood decisions.”³⁷ Thus I have found the space in which I rest my thesis—demonstrating the steps taken by residents like Macler Shepard, to affect neighborhood change at the grassroots through non-ideological but also confrontational community organizing.

³⁶ Checkoway, Barry. *The Metropolitan Midwest: Policy Problems and Prospects for Change “Revitalizing an Urban Neighborhood: A St. Louis Case Study,”* Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1985 256

³⁷ Checkoway, Barry. 257

Chapter 1

Rural Beginnings

Despite a name synonymous with building housing in the heart of St. Louis' dense and overcrowded near-northside neighborhood JVL, Macler Shepard's roots actually lay in the rural farmland of south-central Arkansas. Piecing together Shepard's early life is difficult due to a lack of written accounts, as well as the inability to reach close relatives who might shed light on Shepard's family history. Still, through conversations with friends and newspaper accounts, an image of his youth emerges; the most complete source of information comes from interviews with Shepard's friend and co-worker, Cecil Miller. Such information provides insights into Shepard's experience with racism and displacement; his own self-doubt; the handicap he experienced because of his difficulty with reading and writing, and his generally spotty education. It also highlights his pragmatic, common sense approach to problem solving; his deep faith; his ability to lead others, and his determination, even in the face of defeat.

...

As a boy, Macler loved hunting and fishing, activities he enjoyed when spending summers on his grandmother's farm in Marvell, Arkansas. According to Cecil Miller, Shepard's Grandmother was not simply a farmhand and family matriarch but also a renowned marksman who earned prizes for her accuracy with the rifle. Her rifle proved a valuable tool one evening, recounts Miller. One day when Shepard was still young, his older brother came home from school in a panic. He had apparently made advances towards a young white girl, and this incident had ignited a furor among the town's white population. According to Shepard, who shared this story with Miller as an example of Southern racism at the time, deputies came to arrest Shepard's

brother early the next morning.¹ What they didn't count on, however, was that instead of meekly acquiescing, Shepard's grandmother met the sheriff at the door, her gun loaded and her finger on the trigger, insistent that should her grandson need to visit the courthouse it would be her, not them, who would escort the young boy. At first the deputies attempted to intimidate Shepard's grandmother, an approach to which the sheriff reacted sharply, pointing out that she was a trained marksman and unless they wished to go back to town in a casket, they had best settle down. The resolution for the situation turned out to be much less violent; a neighbor down the road from the family's farm approached Shepard's grandmother and offered to smuggle the young boy to relatives in Kansas City to save him from an almost-certain death by the mob. The lesson taken by Shepard, according to Miller, was that African Americans living in the South truly were not seen as equal citizens, and that a mere suggestion of affection expressed between Shepard's older brother and a white girl nearly resulted in death for the black child. This reality both troubled Shepard and hardened his resolve to challenge racial prejudice and injustice in all forms, implied or acted upon.

While a young boy, his mother died and Shepard moved with his father to Helena, a small town on the banks of the Mississippi River in eastern Arkansas. There, he worked shining shoes in his father's barbershop, where he was exposed to long hours of conversation between Dave Shepard and various men who worked in town or farmed on the outskirts, gaining what Miller explains was Macler's "wisdom of experience."² It was from the preachers, the farmers, the small businessmen, and the young rebel rousers who sat in Dave Shepard's chair that difficult questions of life and survival in an unjust society were debated and where solutions were

¹ Cecil Miller, interview by author, St. Louis, Missouri, February 10th, 2021.

² Ibid.

weighed against generations of experiences. Macler was not overly fond of the work in his father's barbershop, especially when he was shining the shoes of the church ministers, who, Shepard exclaimed "always had, you know, the big expensive shoes that really took some effort to shine." Yet, it was from these conversations, Miller asserts, that Macler gained his intuitive wisdom on life and more importantly still, gained an appreciation for the ability of every man, no matter his economic class or education, to find solutions to problems plaguing his community.³

Sometime in the early to mid-1930s, Macler Shepard moved to St. Louis. Despite extensive research, little is known of Macler's life in this period, beyond Miller's recollections and facts gathered from public documents. According to Miller, Shepard was not alone when he relocated to St. Louis; rather, he was joined by his younger brother Hazel and his aunt, his late mother's sister, whom Macler and other family members called "Big Mama." Big Mama was Macler's caregiver for much of his boyhood⁴. According to Miller, Shepard had talked of Big Mama as if she were his mother. Her presence in his life both in Arkansas and later in St. Louis often informed key decisions in Shepard's moral and personal life.

Big Mama's religiosity seems to have played a vital role in Macler coming to terms with a gambling addiction which he developed sometime between arriving in St. Louis and graduating from Vashon High School in the 1930s.⁵ The reason this specific "vice" bears mention is that it conflicts with the idealized image of Shepard that many ascribe to him. Miller recounts that in fact, young Shepard was quite rebellious, engaging not just in gambling but attempting to weasel

³ Ibid.

⁴ According to Miller as well as others, Big Mama was Shepard's aunt, taking over care of Shepard following his move to St. Louis in the 1940s. Following his birth mother's death, and the loss of his grandmother, Big Mama assumed many of the primary responsibilities for Shepard and his siblings.

⁵ There is some conflicting information about this fact, in George Curry's profile of Shepard for the *Post* in 1973, Shepard seems to state that he graduated from high school in Helena. However, documents retrieved from the office of JeffVanderLou Inc, including a rare interview with Shepard himself, seem to suggest he graduated from Vashon High School.

his way out of the draft during World War Two by feigning deafness. Miller continues, “He tried, he tried to fake that he couldn't hear, but they dropped something on the floor behind Macler in the examination office—and of course it startled him, causing him to jump visibly. So, the jig was up. Next thing he knew, he was on a boat to Europe.”⁶

Enroute to the boat Shepard is said to have had a spiritual experience. On the eve of his departure he prayed, telling God that he did not want to be wounded or maimed in anyway while serving abroad; that in fact, he would rather be killed than return to Big Mama “a cripple,” to which Miller adds that a “voice” spoke to Shepard in his sleep, assuring him that “not a hair on your head will be touched.”⁷ Once in Europe, Shepard appears to have found a measure of success; he was ultimately made a leader of a small squad of other African American soldiers. In fact, Shepard’s obituary, published in the *St. Louis American*, describes him as “among the few black engineers that served during World War II.”⁸

Shepard’s early addiction to gambling remained a problem even in the Army. Once free of Big Mama’s watchful eye, Shepard told Miller, he scored his largest winnings, and sent much of his money back home to Big Mama. That was, until she said to stop. Miller recounts, “Well you know he sent so much home to her that she became alarmed and wondered what he was doing to get that kind of money. And she eventually told him, ‘Look, I don't know what you're doing, but do not send any more money home.’”⁹ Miller continues, one of the first conversations Shepard after returning to St. Louis was with her: “Big Mama finally confronts him, asking what

⁶ Cecil Miller, interview by author, St. Louis, Missouri, February 10th, 2021.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Macler Shephard, Housing ACTIVIST, Dies at 88.” *St. Louis American*, December 14, 2010. http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local_news/macler-shephard-housing-activist-dies-at-88/article_07de16e0-ccb3-595e-92ec-7f8d647c5d1a.html.

⁹ Cecil Miller, interview by author, St. Louis, Missouri, February 10th, 2021.

are you doing...and why are you into this lifestyle? And she pulled him up tight and said, ‘Look, the Lord kept his side of the promise. You are not keeping your side of the promise to serve him.’ And at that point he quit gambling and really devoted himself” [to Christ and a new life].¹⁰

After the War, Shepard met his future wife and best friend, Jessie Stevenson. Stevenson was a native of Elaine, a small town in Phillips County, Arkansas. Like Macler, she grew up in an environment where it was impossible to ignore the realities of Southern racism, Elaine being the site of the Elaine Massacre of 1919, where 237 black sharecroppers attempting to unionize were cut down and murdered by anti-union white residents.¹¹ Stevenson was almost fifteen years his junior at the time of their marriage 1950.¹²

In the early 50s, Shepard was working as a repairman in local shops and cafeterias, where, Miller explains, at one point his supervisor approached him and recommended that he pursue a technical training. The supervisor suggested that he use benefits offered by the GI Bill, especially given that Shepard had served with honors as an engineer in the service.¹³ Shepard obliged, using the benefits to apply and attend a program offered by the Missouri Valley School for Upholstering, where he earned a certification that helped him find employment at a St. Louis-based upholstery business, Ideal Furniture Company.¹⁴ According to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Shepard worked for Ideal for almost a decade.¹⁵ During this period Shepard and Stevenson resided at a residence with Big Mama and Shepard’s younger brother Hazel at 1404

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “A Rural Town CONFRONTS Its Buried History of Mass Killings of Black Americans.” *The Guardian*. *Guardian News and Media*, August 18, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/18/a-rural-town-confronts-its-buried-history-of-mass-killings-of-black-americans>.

¹² Cecil Miller, interview by author, St. Louis, Missouri, February 10th, 2021. Despite the age difference, Jessie Stevenson preceded Shepard in death, passing away in 1999 after a long battle with cancer.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Curry, George. “Award Winners’ Goals Same, Backgrounds far apart,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 12th, 1974. 41.

¹⁵ Ibid.

N. 22nd Street, which maps indicate was a two story brick flat at the intersection of 22nd and Dickson.¹⁶ Here, it is believed Shepard founded his first small business, a backyard upholstery shop that both he and Jessie operated. However, this business was short lived. Shepard's family and business were soon displaced by the city's proposed Desoto-Carr Public Housing project, better known as Pruitt-Igoe, which began construction in the early 1950s.¹⁷ The experience of this displacement, which occurred with little warning or financial compensation, deeply affected Shepard. In at least two interviews with individuals who knew Shepard closely, he is described as having been displaced at least twice by the Pruitt-Igoe construction process.¹⁸ The frustration and trauma of this displacement was later described by Shepard as one of the motivating factors for his activism as a community organizer, first taking on slumlords and then later, as chairman of JVL, rehabilitating buildings, house by house, and selling them to first time home buyers.

Shepard found a space for his family to relocate and re-established their upholstery business. He moved first to 1717 N. Leffingwell, a duplex the couple rented with Big Mama, and later a few doors north to 1727 N. Leffingwell, the couple's first house.¹⁹ They no longer lived in the Desoto-Carr neighborhood; rather, the Shepards had relocated west of Pruitt Igoe, in the Yeatman neighborhood. Shepard and others described the neighborhood as a sort of refuge for those displaced by urban renewal. Shepard re-established his business in the 2800 block of

¹⁶ Marriage Licenses, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* September 19th 1950. 5.

¹⁷ United States. "People, Building Neighborhoods: Final Report to the President and the Congress of the United States / the National Commission on Neighborhoods. V.2." HathiTrust. Accessed August 6, 2021. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015007222063&view=1up&seq=117&skin=2021>. 769.

¹⁸ Interview with Rev. Hubert Schwartzentruber by author, September 10th, 2018, and Interview with Cecil Miller by author, St. Louis, Missouri, November 14th, 2017.

¹⁹ Interview with Cecil Miller by author, November 14th, 2017.

Sheridan, just south of the couple's house and renamed to it reflect its location, Sheridan Upholstering and Refinishing Shop.²⁰

...

Macler Shephard's experiences with racism in the South helped him empathize with fellow St. Louisans facing political and racial discrimination. His experience with displacement in St. Louis alerted him to the importance of stable neighborhoods and home ownership. His experience with addiction, the spiritual guidance of Big Mama, and his exposure to his father's barbershop "community" counseling worked to instill determination and faith, including the belief that problems could be best resolved by those who experienced them. By the 1960s, residents of Yeatman were familiar with Macler Shepard's name. They knew that if they had a problem, Mac would make time to talk with them. From the boardroom "suit" to the back-alley junkie, Macler Shepard had a way of reaching people across the spectrum of society. He was able to speak frankly with cops, earnestly with mayors, and casually with business executives. He commanded their respect. As a community organizer and later the president of a community organization, Macler's "people skills" proved useful in building unique and fruitful partnerships with parties across the city that would ultimately bring tangible positive change to his neighborhood.

²⁰ "Macler Shephard, Housing ACTIVIST, Dies at 88." *St. Louis American*, December 14, 2010. http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local_news/macler-shephard-housing-activist-dies-at-88/article_07de16e0-ccb3-595e-92ec-7f8d647c5d1a.html.

Chapter 2

The Birth of an Activist

Macler Shepard first attempted to become involved in solving neighborhood problems through electoral politics. When this route failed, he pursued an alternative avenue, neighborhood organizing. As chairman and co-founder of the 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association, Shepard sought to stir grassroots energy to attack problems such as poor housing, absentee landlords and later, police brutality; he worked directly both with organizers from more militant bodies such as Percy Green and ACTION or Ivory Perry and with more established organizations like the St. Louis chapter of CORE and the Urban League. This coalition building defined Shepard's leadership style, not simply within the 19th Ward Citizen's Improvement Association, but later, in JVL.

.....

In August of 1960, Macler Shepard found himself on the wrong end of a gun. Shepard alleged that "muscle," hired thugs on the payroll of 19th Ward Jordan Chambers, had chased him from the corner where he was handing out sample ballots for George Curry. Initially, Shepard told investigators that he attempted to play ignorant of the men's intentions but, "When I pretended to ignore them, a large heavy-set negro said, 'I guess you don't believe we mean it,' and pulled a pistol from his hip pocket."¹ The gunman warned Shepard that if he was still on the corner when they returned, he would likely face violence. Later, in response to charges that he was responsible for paying off poll watchers and paid thugs to guard corners like Shepard's,

¹ "Tells Board Ward Leader Gave Cash to Poll Officials," *St. Louis Post-dispatch*, August 10, 1960. 5.

Chambers pled innocent, telling the *Post*, “He had no knowledge of alleged threats by his campaign workers.”²

This was Macler Shepard’s introduction to St. Louis ward politics. It was not just any committeeman that Shepard’s candidate, George Curry, was challenging; it was Jordan Chambers. By day Chambers was a constable and a committee man, but by night, a funeral director and manager and proprietor of Club Riviera. Since 1936, Chambers was seen by many as not simply a ward machine boss, but rather, as the kingmaker for black and white Democratic politics for several decades. Chambers first rose to prominence in the late 1930s, being credited with pulling black voters to the Democratic ticket and thus causing a full-scale shift in the balance of St. Louis city politics.³ Political Scientist Lana Stein describes Chambers both as “unschooled,” but gifted noting his ability to pull votes across party lines by: “commanding the respect of both black voters and white power brokers.”⁴ Relating the description of Chambers by Civil Rights Attorney David Grant, Stein continues, “He was a natural organizer. He was of this odd brand...and a very wise man...”⁵ Yet at the same time, he was also shrewd, and as a machine boss he worked his staff and polls hard. Stein quotes African American alderman Eugene “Tink” Bradley’s description of Chambers: “Hard, knock-down, drag out, abusive, sometimes gregarious involved and based on retribution.”⁶ In this moment, Macler Shepard felt as though he was a victim of one of Chambers’ infamous political squeezes.

Despite his hardnosed entrance into the world of St. Louis politics, Shepard was not deterred by his first experience in political organization, filing for 19th ward committeeman in

² Ibid. 1.

³ Lana Stein, *St. Louis Politics: The Triumph of Tradition*, (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2002), 22.

⁴ Stein, *St. Louis Politics: The Triumph of Tradition*, 23.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. 24.

1964, two years later. Shepard lost, capturing just over 400 votes to incumbent John Harvey's 2,000 plus votes. Shepard seemingly accepted that politics would not be his best route to pursue, never filing for political office again. A year later, Shepard was standing in the hallway outside of Mayor Alfonso Cervantes's office, not as an elected official but rather as an activist and as chairman of a newly formed organization, the 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association, seeking to build power from the ground up.

By 1965, Shepard had been participating in the Urban League's Federation of Block Units program as chairman of Unit 326 in District 3 of the League's program. In this capacity, Shepard managed, through his block unit programs, minor beautification tasks designed to encourage community participation and pride, as well as working to eliminate minor aesthetic nuisances. However, in 1965, his participation in 19th Ward Citizen's Improvement Association reflected a more confrontational attitude towards addressing neighborhood problems. One of his constituents primary concerns was their landlords continued to raise rent prices, while failing to provide basic maintenance on the Yeatman neighborhood properties. The 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association not only protested slum landlords but did so outside of the landlord's home in St. Louis County. In one instance, described in the *Post*, the group, joined by CORE leader and housing advocate Loretta Hall, protested at the home of Meyer Goldenberg in University City. Goldenberg was a landlord who owned many properties in the Yeatman neighborhood.⁷ According to Hall, the protesters picketed Goldenberg's home to call attention to the failure of the property owner to work with them to address tenant complaints, adding that they were pursuing the City's building commissioner to force the issue.⁸ As a matter of speaking,

⁷ "CORE and Another Group Picket Reality Man." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 23, 1965.

⁸ *Ibid.* 1965.

“forcing the issue” is an appropriate way to describe Shepard’s view on demonstrations. Largely resulting from the Mayor’s refusal to meet with Yeatman neighbors, it was his belief that existing programs aimed at urban renewal largely operated on the basis of tolerating its motivation (blight) instead of tackling it head on.⁹ Thus, grassroots organizations like the 19th Ward group and later JVL, were attempts by neighborhood activists to not only inform City Hall of the residents’ problems, but to make maintaining the status quo as uncomfortable as possible.

Just as it was nationally, the summer of 1965 proved to be violent in St. Louis. However, instead of violence in the streets, such as uprisings, St. Louis violence was exacted upon the black population by the police department, which by September of 1965 had shot and killed three black minors for various petty offenses.¹⁰ The last of these incidents took place just a block over from Shepard’s house at Curtis School, near Cass and Leffingwell. Responding to a call for an alleged break-in at the school, officers arrived to find Melvin Childs (15), who, according to the police report, refused to heed officers’ calls to cease his flight. The officers opened fire, killing Childs leaving the 15 year old’s deceased body on the school grounds.¹¹ According to activist Ivory Perry’s, the mood in the neighborhood was ripe for mass-action. Perry, a seasoned activist and skilled organizer, arrived in Shepard’s neighborhood to coordinate an action but was surprised to learn the 19th Ward organization was already organizing: “from friends in CORE he heard about the activities of the 19th Ward Improvement Association, a coalition of neighborhood businessmen, community residents, and political activists trying to address

⁹ Cecil Miller, interview by author, November 14th, 2017.

¹⁰ Green, Percy. Working paper. *Thugs in Blue Uniform: White Police, Judge, Jury and Executioner*. St. Louis, MO: A.C.T.I.O.N, 1970.

¹¹ “Officer Shoots Youth Fleeing from Burglary.” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 8, 1965. 1.

problems in a deteriorated part of the city.”¹² With little delay, the organizers worked together to form a public response to the police violence. On September 16th, their first march began at the 19th Ward group’s office and carried forth through the Pruitt Igoe projects into the downtown business district. According to Perry, by the end of the march the number of marchers had grown from roughly one hundred to over two hundred and fifty.¹³ Joining Perry and Shepard were other representatives, including Percy Green of ACTION, Lucian Richards of CORE, and members of the local chapter of the DuBois Club.

According to both Shepard and Perry’s recounting of events, despite the crowd’s presence at City Hall and later at Police Headquarters, officials refused to meet with demonstrators. Shepherd warned that attempts to keep protesters from meeting with public officials would not discourage future actions: “This is just the beginning to the way we are going to call attention to what is going on in the Nineteenth.”¹⁴ In addition to marching on City Hall, a unified call for reform was published by leaders of CORE, ACTION, the NAACP and the 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association: “They called for disciplinary action against officers that discharged their weapons at unarmed suspects, the creation of a civilian review board to monitor complaints about brutality, and for the police department to employ more black officers.”¹⁵ More specifically, in a press release produced by CORE on behalf of others, including Shepard’s group, the petitioners wanted the police department to integrate two-man

¹² Lipsitz, George. *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995). 11.

¹³ Lipsitz, George, *A Life in the Struggle*, 118.

¹⁴ “250 Negroes in March on City Hall Assail Police Tactics,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 17, 1965. 3.

¹⁵ Lipsitz, George. *A Life in the Struggle*, 118.

patrols and provide opportunities for the police and community to develop a better understanding of one another, through activities such as patrol ride-alongs.¹⁶

When the groups eventually did meet with Mayor Alfonso Cervantes, the demand for integration and hiring of officers from St. Louis stood out: “The department’s program of recruiting men in outstate Missouri and northern Arkansas is not acceptable to Civil Rights groups, which say that men from those areas are not particularly fitted for duty in a city in which racial differences are involved.”¹⁷ Cecil Miller feels that unlike the demands for a review board, the demands such as police force integration and ride-alongs to spur police-community understanding were likely suggested by Macler Shepard and the 19th Ward Improvement Association, due to the immediate impact such changes would have at the neighborhood level. Lipsitz contends that the efforts of the organizers to see through a progressive agenda of police reforms was ultimately a failure. On one hand, the call for a civilian review board was ignored, and for those expecting justice in the case of Melvin Childs, St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department’s internal investigation exonerated officers of possible wrongdoing in the death. Yet while the wider group of organizers including ACTION, CORE and the NAACP did not realize their goals for substantive city-wide police reform in Yeatman itself, those of the 19th Ward Citizen’s Improvement Association, including Mennonite minister Rev. Hubert Schwartzenruber, claim change did occur. Schwartzenruber, reflecting on his observations of police actions in the weeks following the protests, described small, piecemeal changes to how the police worked within the 19th Ward. In his memoir, Schwartzenruber posits that, at least for the 19th Ward Citizen’s Improvement Association, “The goal of the organizers of the march was to

¹⁶ *Plan of Action to Prevent Continued Police Intimidation and Brutality in St. Louis*, September 1965, Charles Klotzer Publications Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri St. Louis.

¹⁷ “Rights Groups Urge Review Board,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 20, 1965. 10.

bring about communication and reconciliation between the police department and the community.” There were improvements, according to Schwartzentruber: “It resulted in the police opening a storefront community relations office. They made a bus available to the community for special outings for children and adults.”¹⁸ Schwartzentruber’s view differs from that of Lipsitz, revealing how differently activists working for neighborhood-level change viewed outcomes versus groups like CORE and the NAACP, who were looking for change at the institutional level.

Throughout these years, Shepard’s sense that neighborhood change should take precedent over wider ideological causes (such as the national Civil Rights movement) can be seen throughout his organizational leadership. His narrow concentration on neighborhood building perhaps explains, in part, the dearth of scholarly research surrounding him. Shepard’s insistence that neighborhood residents’ voices dictate his organization’s demands is a pervasive theme in his work and words. Yet Shepard was not a “loner”; he was realistic about his neighborhood’s needs, and while he was prone to avoid entanglements with protests, sometimes Shepard and his organizations found themselves side by side with radicals. One example of this was that of the Black United Front, a coalition of activist organizations including CORE, ACTION, the West End Community Conference and JVL, organized around the idea of securing greater economic opportunity for Black residents of St. Louis.¹⁹ As is discussed at length in Chapter Seven and

¹⁸ Schwartzentruber, Hubert. *Jesus in Back Alleys: the Story and Reflections of a Contemporary Prophet*. (Telford, PA: Dreamseeker Books, 2002), p. 41.

¹⁹ Jolly, Kenneth. *Black Liberation in the Midwest, The Struggle in St. Louis Missouri, 1964-1970*. (New York, Routledge, 2006) 89. Note: The Black United Front was formed in 1968 expressly to articulate the message of better jobs and housing opportunities for African Americans in St. Louis. To get the coalition’s message across the group organized a protest at the dedication ceremony for the Gateway Arch on the St. Louis Riverfront. Outlining their agenda, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch published the group’s full list of demands which were submitted to the Mayor including, “25% of all city contracts be awarded to Negro businessmen, that there be an immediate increase in Negro police recruitment.” See: “New Negro Group Presents 15 Demands to Cervantes,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 2nd, 1968 p. 17

onwards, revitalizing the Yeatman neighborhood, as Shepard found out, couldn't be accomplished simply by building houses. It required building equity through gainful employment. When asked of how he viewed Shepard, both as an activist and a public figure, Percy Green, founder of the St. Louis based militant protest organization A.C.T.I.O.N. was emphatic—Macler Shepard was an ally, approachable no matter the circumstances and a stalwart fighter for economic progress for the Black community.²⁰

At this time, Shepard, according to Miller, never refused someone wanting to volunteer time and expertise to assist him. But assistance was contingent, always, on the understanding that decision making powers lay only with 19th Ward residents. In 1965, a clear example of Shepard's belief in "people power" can be seen in his response to press accusations that the 19th Ward organization had worked with communists from the DuBois Club. The DuBois Club's presence in the 19th ward march may have caught the press off their guard but according to Jolly, the white Marxist-Leninist organization openly stated their interests in "organizing the ghetto," and that specifically, "the organization was concerned with issues involving young people, the working class, and African Americans."²¹ Shepard responded to the *Post-Dispatch*, "They have been in our strategy meetings. They have been with us like members of other groups. The members of the DuBois club make suggestions as we go along," adding an important caveat, "but the leaders of the 19th ward citizens improvement association are running it. No outsiders are running our organization."²² Confirming that the communists had no power over Shepard, Lucian Richards,

²⁰ Interview with Percy Green by the Author, September 26, 2021

²¹ Jolly, Kenneth. *Black Liberation in the Midwest*, 86. Jolly adds that the group itself took its name for W.E.B. DuBois, "because DuBois was committed to working for the welfare, progress and security of the American People. With his vision, we are striving for a world of Peace and economic and social justice."

²² Robert H. Collins, "DuBois Club Had Part in Rights Protests Here Against Police," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 27, 1965. 3.

chairman of the local CORE chapter, stated that his organization had helped the 19th Ward group plan the two marches to City Hall, during which he did not see any serious attempt by the communists to co-opt the neighborhood group's work. He continued, "The members of the association are dedicated to making much needed improvements in their neighborhood. They are good people, many of them, outstanding people."²³ In the span of only a couple of years, Shepard had shown that by taking the initiative he could orchestrate and lead a powerful new grassroots constituency in Yeatman. Going forward, Shepard would seek to expand this organization to encompass more than protesters and communists, he would seek out the cooperation of other Yeatman based community organizers for the goal of creating a new center of power, at the grassroots.

²³ Schwartzenruber, Hubert. *Jesus in Back Alleys: The Story and Reflections of a Contemporary Prophet*. Telford, PA: Dreamseeker Books, 2002.

Chapter 3

Hubert Schwartzenruber

As Shepard began to piece together the makings of a united front in the Yeatman neighborhood, one of his immediate tasks became assembling a team of allies among existing neighborhood organizers. Shepard did not fashion himself a radical, and while he could hold a conversation with activists like Ivory Perry and Percy Green, he was not interested in the social justice battles that extended beyond his neighborhood's borders.¹ Again, he desired to create a team of activists who had established themselves in the Yeatman neighborhood, one that offered unique resources and skillsets which complemented his own. One of those recruited, a Canadian Mennonite by the name of Hubert Schwartzenruber, became a key figure in both Shepard's personal life and the trajectory of Shepard's work as an organizer of JVL.

Both Shepard and Swartzenruber came from rural backgrounds. Both were motivated and sustained by a deep faith. Together these two men, whose friendship lasted for Shepard's lifetime, began to rethink what was possible for community organizing in the ghetto. For Schwartzenruber, his partnership with Macler Shepard proved to be an almost spiritual rebirth, one which he has said was like a baptism in the "theology of the streets."² This chapter discusses

¹ According to Green himself while Shepard was not one to engage himself or his organizations in protest outside of the neighborhood, he was also not one to be labeled as an "Uncle Tom," or "respectable." In a long phone call with the veteran activist, Green explained that Shepard was "always willing to listen to us (ACTION), our plans and provide suggestions," and that though he might not be on the front lines of the protest movement, Green felt as though Shepard respected and stood in solidarity with nearly all of ACTION's activities. When pressed on whether or not Shepard, by later working with white individuals connected to what Green had outlined as the economic-political "white power structure," Green was adamant that Shepard's motives were true and aligned with the interests of black people. Green, Percy Interview by the author, September 25th, 2021.

² Schwartzenruber, Hubert Interview by author, January 23rd, 2019. This is a phrase Schwartzenruber uses commonly when speaking of how, while schooled by the faithful in Bible College, it was only by walking the streets of Yeatman with Macler, seeing both the ills and the hopes of many, and seeing Shepard bring life to these hopes, that he was truly baptized. It is not the author's intent to insert hyperbole when speaking of how reverent many of those interviewed are in speaking of Macler Shepard. They seriously view him as something of a modern prophet.

Schwartzentruber's thoughts on Shepard, providing a helpful study of a man largely known only for his house building. Examining Schwartzentruber's thoughts on Yeatman offers important insight into how Shepard began to build a coalition. Shepard, by recruiting and cultivating Schwartzentruber as an organizational ally, began to sow the seeds of a much larger, broad-based neighborhood front for community renewal.

...

Just barely thirty years old when they arrived in St. Louis from rural Ontario, newly married Hubert and June Schwartzentrubers oversaw the development of a new mission church that outpaced expectations of all, including themselves. From the living room of their apartment in the Pruitt Igoe housing complex, the Schwartzentrubers expanded their Mission, in just under five years, obtaining a small but respectable sanctuary at 2823 Dayton Street in the Yeatman neighborhood. According to all of those interviewed of the Mennonite faith, residents of Yeatman largely welcomed the visiting Mennonites and treated them as guests. Roz Norman remembers fondly the friendships developed with the Mennonites, one of her first jobs, she recounts was working at the church secretary at Bethesda.³ Dave Hershberger, who lived in St. Louis in the mid-1960s and worked with his wife Miriam as a long-term volunteer service worker with Bethesda remembers fondly his experience as well, noting that he enjoyed teaching young men in the congregation how to do woodworking, and that at least one young man later confided that Hershberger's instruction was imperative in his later pursuit in carpentry.⁴ Others interviewed like Helen Robinson, whose children attended Bible Study at Bethesda before she herself became a member, remember how the community began to look out for the Mennonites,

³ Rosalind, Norman, Interview with the Author, November 16th 2017

⁴ Hershberger, Dave and Miriam, Interview with the Author, July 7th, 2018

including Hubert and his family, providing them with escorts through the neighborhood until others became accustomed to seeing the out of place, white missionaries in the area.⁵ Robinson herself soon joined the church. She found it unassuming, and the pastor kind and empathetic. Robinson looks back now, still a member at Bethesda Mennonite Church at 2823 Dayton, and reminisces fondly of the Schwartzentruber era. It was Schwartzentruber who gave her a job working for the nearby Northside Team Ministries in Pruitt Igoe where she worked as secretary, a position she held until retirement in the 1990s.⁶

Schwartzentruber, who considered himself a church liberal, understood that growing the cause of the mission depended not simply on preaching the gospel on Sunday, but offering his ministry as a resource center. Early on, he became involved in prison ministry,⁷ job placement services, and adult education programs for those in his congregation and outside. Beyond Sunday services, the ministry offered Bible study, Sunday school, summer camp and programs for teenagers that, by 1962, had increased to over 500 enrollees.⁸ He worked closely with the ecumenical Northside Team Ministries in Pruitt Igoe, inviting children from the sprawling high-rises to participate in summer camps and daytime activities to ease the pressure of single parents.⁹ While impressive achievements for his supervisors in rural Indiana, these figures meant

⁵ Robinson, Helen. Interview with the Author, October 5th, 2017.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ An interesting side note, one of those who Schwartzentruber communicated with was Curtis Burrell, who would later leave prison and briefly live with the Schwartzentrubers. Burrell became a dedicated Mennonite attending college in Ontario and returning to the United States to serve as associate pastor under Vincent Harding and Delton Franz at Woodlawn in Chicago. Later in the decade he would take on a more radical and direct role, tackling issues including gangs and youth violence—precipitating his departure from the Church which felt as though he became too involved in social issues at the cost of his leadership of the congregation.

⁸ Development and Planning Report for Bethesda Church, December 10 1962 Box 1, Folder 17, Financial and Congregational Reports, Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana

⁹ Schwartzentruber, Hubert, interview by author, St. Louis, Missouri, January 23rd, 2019.

little to the idealistic Schwartzentruber, who was overwhelmed with the violence and physical decay in the neighborhood that surrounded his sanctuary.

As early as 1962 church papers document an increasing friction between Schwartzentruber and his brethren in the Mennonite Mission Board located in rural Indiana. It was tension caused by Schwartzentruber's desire to apply ministry resources broadly in order to address problems of absentee landlords, to provide rent support for those in the projects, and assistance for those seeking to access social services. While supportive of his social concerns, Schwartzentruber's rural Mission supervisors cautioned him away from straying too far from his traditional duties as an evangelical church builder. In other words, Schwartzentruber's emergent social gospel, or his "whole man ministry," encompassing expanded recreational activities (non-spiritual) and adult education, was "appreciated" but not encouraged by Mennonite leadership.¹⁰ Instead, Church leaders stressed that Schwartzentruber's role as a minister was to evangelize and to grow the Church Mission. Yet Schwartzentruber persisted in finding ways to become involved in the community.

Schwartzentruber recalls that he had heard of Macler Shepard's work with the 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association. The development of such a body was an exciting turn of events that the pastor no doubt was eager to contribute to.¹¹ Yet in his mind, he was still unable to envision himself, a white man with a Canadian accent, being welcomed into such an organization. This changed. On September 17th, 1965, Macler visited Schwartzentruber at his parish on Dayton Street. According to Schwartzentruber, Shepard asked him to join the community in its march to City Hall, a march discussed earlier. This was a decision which

¹⁰ Schwartzentruber, Hubert. *Jesus in Back Alleys: The Story and Reflections of a Contemporary Prophet*. Telford, PA: Dreamseeker Books, 2002. 3

¹¹ Schwartzentruber, Hubert, interview by author, January 23rd, 2019.

Schwartzentruber describes in his memoir as having a significant impact on how he viewed himself within the larger Yeatman community, and indeed, society:

I quickly had to make a decision. If I don't go, I argued with myself, then I am giving a message that I am on the side of the oppressor. If I go I am identifying myself with the oppressed. But if I go, I further reasoned, some people there may not be Christians. There may be communists in the crowd. I grew up having been taught that we must not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. But a word seemed to come to me, You must show whose side you are on.¹²

The violence being protested by the community was not invisible to the Canadian pastor. Shepard did not have to inform him of a tragedy that Schwartzentruber could not forget. In his memoir he writes about the plague of police-community violence, recalling the story of how the first young man whom he eulogized had perished, at the hands of a police officer.

Schwartzentruber writes:

The young men in the street were afraid of the police, knowing that if they were arrested, they would be taken to the police station and beaten within an inch of their life until they confessed to the crime, whether they had committed it or not. This young man was familiar with those stories...while he was running the police shot him in the leg. While he lay wounded in the alley, I was told, the police pumped three more bullets into his head.¹³

Schwartzentruber understood that within his own conservative Mennonite faith, participation in the march would pose problems. Yet he felt called to expand his personal outreach. Going forward, Schwartzentruber would no longer yield to what others thought of his actions, especially if the judgement were coming from the conservative Mennonite leadership. Being mistaken for an ally of the oppressor was something Schwartzentruber was not willing to allow: "A mistaken identity is too great a price for kingdom people to pay. We may never keep people guessing as to whose side we are on. Nor can we wait till we have the answers before we

¹² Schwartzentruber, Hubert. *Jesus in Back Alleys*, 38-39. During the march to city hall Schwartzentruber writes in his memoir of being identified by a white bartender along the way who let out a yell "hey come and look at this stupid pastor marching with them today," to which Schwartzentruber further credits with solidifying his membership to the community and more importantly to the side of justice.

¹³ Schwartzentruber, Hubert, *Jesus in Back Alleys*, 37.

can walk with and stand behind those who are oppressed. The answers come as we are walking.”¹⁴

From Schwartzentruber’s account of the events, we learn more about the consequences of the march to City Hall. One outcome is recounted in his memoir and from personal phone conversations. Schwartzentruber explains that after the march he invited those returning to Yeatman to come inside the sanctuary to cool off over cold drinks and discuss the day’s events. For Schwartzentruber, psychologically, this fellowship after the demonstration triggered a breakthrough. He writes, “I felt for the first time that all the doors in the community were open to me. I had identified myself. The community knew with whom I identified. I felt that I had gained the trust and respect of the community.”¹⁵

Additionally, Schwartzentruber’s account of the event provides us with key information as to how the demonstration resulted in changes to the community-police relationship. As mentioned in the previous chapter, he described changes such as the establishment of a police substation to improve relations between the community and police. Also, after the march he observed a noticeable positive change in how police and the community interacted. Suddenly the police were interested in doing for the northside Yeatman neighborhood something he had only heard of being done in white neighborhoods in south city. He writes, “The newly opened Community Police Relations office made a significant difference in the community,” discussing further the time when the police recruited Gene Gentry for the role of a community Santa; the plan was to fly Santa into the neighborhood via a police helicopter. According to Schwartzentruber, though Gentry was petrified by the helicopter ride, the children in the

¹⁴ Schwartzentruber, Hubert, *Jesus in Back Alleys*, 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 42.

community talked of this event for days.¹⁶ Even if this was not substantive policy change, such as the creation of a civilian review board, for neighbors like Schwartzentruber and Shepard it demonstrated that they could at the very least negotiate with the police department to try and improve everyday life in the neighborhood. If, as Schwartzentruber contends, the goal of the 19th Ward organizers was to bring about communication and reconciliation between the police and the neighborhood, then the small steps taken, from the substation to the Santa Claus visit, demonstrate some progress towards that end.

Even more than just making him feel more welcomed into the group, the events of September 17th, 1965, provided Schwartzentruber an opportunity to act more fully upon a “social gospel,” and as a result, brought him closer to the community of the “streets.” It freed him of his hesitancy to trust his instincts and encouraged him to pursue a greater emphasis on social programming, one which his supervisors had cautioned him about earlier. His memoirs describe his realization that to affect change in the community, the community would need a proactive and aggressive presence by the Church. Speaking of what this meant spiritually, Schwartzentruber writes in his memoir of what he feared most, representing an Apostate Church:

An apostate church is not a church that has ceased believing in the scriptures. Nor is it a church that denies the resurrection, problematic as these moves may be. What makes a church apostate is that it no longer cares for the poor and the oppressed. It no longer hears the voices of the homeless in the street. It cannot see through the fog of the unjust political systems. It cannot feel the hopelessness of surviving on welfare. An apostate church supports politicians who make laws that favor the wealthy and take from the poor.¹⁷

Key to Schwartzentruber reaching this realization was that he, as a white, rural pastor did not always have the answers. Therefore, he sought Macler Shepard’s counsel and friendship,

¹⁶ Ibid. 42.

¹⁷ Schwartzentruber, Hubert, *Jesus in Back Alleys*, 40.

writing, “Macler is an unusual man...in my continuing search for ways the church could begin to address the pain and dehumanization evident in St. Louis, I listened. I spent many hours with Macler Shepard, sitting in his furniture repair shop on Sheridan Street imagining what this community could again become.”¹⁸ Shepard encouraged the young pastor to walk in the back alleys and dark streets, and to listen for answers from the community about what work the Church needed to address most aggressively. Schwartzentruber writes,

As I walked the streets of the city, I saw the broken-down houses, looked into the empty eyes of children, witnessed the devastation of substance abuse, observed the inferior educational opportunities, brushed against police brutality, heard the noise of churches indifferent to the needs of the community...I often wondered where God was.¹⁹

Schwartzentruber notes that in the absence of an effective neighborhood church outreach, it was Macler Shepard who filled a void in the community. In Shepard’s upholstery shop, not only Schwartzentruber but the larger community sought Macler’s counsel:

His furniture shop became a shop to repair broken people. The welfare mother could always get a listening ear and some advice on how to cope with the problems of her teenage boy. Senior citizens who needed help always went to Macler first. When young men needed jobs, Macler would counsel them to be the best person they could be, regardless of their position, “if you are the janitor,” he would say, “be the best janitor you can be.” He usually warned them not to try to start from the top of the ladder: “if you fall from the top of the ladder, you could fall hard.”²⁰

Following the march to City Hall, the two men began to work closely on how they could align themselves to address the 19th Ward Citizen’s Improvement Association’s goals. One of Shepard’s goals, according to Schwartzentruber, involved creating a space where the group could plant the seeds of a larger neighborhood improvement movement improvement, a place that could welcome both activists and business owners. What evolved from these discussions was a proposal that Schwartzentruber had first made years earlier as a means of increasing his Church’s

¹⁸ Ibid, 50.

¹⁹ Ibid, 46.

²⁰ Ibid, 50.

presence in the social fabric of the community—a coffee shop. Coffeehouses had been opened before in the Church, as points of introduction for quiet, passive missionary work, especially in urban areas. At a planning meeting in December 1965, Schwartzentruber introduced the topic of the coffee house, stating, “This would be a coordinated religious and civic effort, not necessarily to exhort or to proselytize, but to help individuals in the spectrum of their daily involvement in community life.”²¹

Schwartzentruber sought to include not simply his own brethren but also other groups working to address community problems in the Yeatman area. He also recruited voices from the North Side Team Ministries, an ecumenical group that he had worked with previously, based in Pruitt Igoe, which included Nelson Parnell and later, Rev. Donald Register. Representing the community voices of the Yeatman neighborhood in this meeting was Macler Shepard, chairman of the 19th Ward Citizen’s Improvement Association. When Church leadership questioned using the coffeehouse as a secular meeting space, Schwartzentruber replied, “What would Jesus do? Luke 4... “to preach the gospel to the poor,” adding that evangelical preaching did not conflict with nor outweigh community participation, nor being mindful of their suffering and struggle.”²² Within just months, he had evolved from a pastor questioning whether he should participate in community affairs to one justifying his work as biblically sound.

When the Handle Coffeehouse opened at its location near the intersection of Sheridan and Leffingwell, the community threw a party. The event even earned a mention in the

²¹ Hershberger, Dave. “Civic Meeting for the Purpose of Establishing a Coffee House.” St. Louis: Bethesda Mennonite Church, December 12, 1965. Metropolitan Church Federation records, S0618, The State Historical Society of Missouri, Manuscript Collection.

²² “Church Planning and Evaluation,” August 10-12, 1966. Box 1, Folder 23. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana

Mennonite publication *The Gospel Herald*: “The coffeeshop is sponsored by a community committee in St. Louis...It is intended to be a youth center in an area otherwise without such facilities.”²³ It was staffed by Volunteer Service members from Bethesda but other than a weekly Church-sponsored movie night, the Handle was largely embraced as a community gathering space, patronized by members of all faiths. It quickly grew into the annual meeting space for the 19th Ward Citizen’s Improvement Association. Discussing the coffeeshop years later, Schwartzentruber described the importance of the Handle: “It became a gathering place for many people. Where people could talk about concerns and ideas for solutions. It was a fruitful place.”²⁴

Future events unfolding in the Yeatman neighborhood, and later in JVL, were frequently rooted in discussions and debates introduced at the Handle. Schwartzentruber was often involved in a supporting role under Macler Shepard. Schwartzentruber’s theology continued to evolve, broadening to encompass peace work in roles outside of St. Louis, such as anti-nuclear advocacy and later, LGBTQ inclusion. He sometimes repeated a statement in our discussions, one he attributes to Shepard, and which became guiding advice for his theological studies long after he left St. Louis: “We talk the gospel by the mile and walk it by the inch.”²⁵ Schwartzentruber helped Shepard, but Shepard inspired Schwartzentruber, modeling empathy and determination that clarified and molded the preacher’s spirituality.

²³ Bauman, Harold “A Congregation Speaks and Listens,” *Gospel Herald* April 19th, 1966. 356.

²⁴ Lee, Betty. “A Lee, Betty. Phoenix Rising: JeffVanderLou.” *Proud Magazine*, 1980.

²⁵Schwartzentruber, Hubert, *Jesus in Back Alleys*, 50.

Chapter 4: The 19th Ward Beautification Committee

Schwartzentruber's and Shepard's realization of their vision of what would become JVL came not through the Citizens Improvement Association itself, but rather as a new development, the 19th Ward Beautification Committee. The experience of leading the Beautification Committee provided a lesson to Shepard and his cohorts, a lesson on the limitations that the city could place on what citizen organizers could and could not do. This experience precipitated events leading directly to the founding of JVL.

...

In March of 1965, Lady Bird Johnson posed for photographers as she planted flowers on the Washington Mall. It was the start of what Lady Bird Johnson felt would be a new push to beautify, through cleanup programs and tree-planting, an effort that would help to curb the unsightly scenes that had come to characterize the nation's inner cities. Commenting to those in attendance for the Mall planting event, Johnson told reporters the event would “mark the beginning of an extensive floral beautification program throughout the nation in residential and public housing areas, in schools, in parks, along highways and elsewhere.”¹ Born officially out of the Highway Beautification Act the movement for neighborhood beautification as experienced by Shepard and others in the 19th ward has its roots in much older eras dating back to the dawn of the Progressive Era in the early 20th Century, with City Beautiful. While scaled down to the

¹“Groundwork for Beautification Program,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 9, 1965. 35. For greater analysis of how City Beautiful unfolded from a historical perspective read-- Dowden-White, *Groping toward democracy: African American social welfare reform in St. Louis, 1910-1949* and for a planning perspective, Tranel, Mark. 2007. *St. Louis plans: the ideal and the real St. Louis*. St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press.

neighborhood level including activities like alley cleanups and exterior home painting, the interests of the beautification program implemented in the 1960s differed little from City Beautiful as to the wider goal—the development of a new civic spirit. Specifically in the case of the 19th ward and areas along the near-north corridor the program also worked to prime neighborhood organizers for later programs like Model Cities which would focus on strong community input as part of a core function of revitalization planning efforts.

In late 1965, discussion began in St. Louis City Hall about capitalizing on federal interest in beautification, starting with the appointment of a Mayoral commission to address the needs of community improvement. Speaking on the subject, Mayor Cervantes told reporters that his goal involved, “a total effort to get the entire city working together on beautification, with the people [citizens] working with city departments.”² According to Cervantes, targets of the program, in the short term, included junkyards and abandoned cars. Echoing the excitement of the Mayor, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote glowingly of the civic pride such a program could inspire in residents across all walks of life: “By encouraging and commending civic pride in individuals, they can be made missionaries to their less ardent neighbors.”³ However, the program was stalled through much of 1965, finally taking form early in 1966. Still, the city made inroads towards its ambitious goals through several programs outlined in a prospectus report submitted to the mayor by Whitelaw T. Terry, the chairman of the Mayor’s Beautification Commission. Some of the projects completed include:

1,770 loads of trash were hauled from our city streets and alleys...approximately 3,540 tons. A special program of hiring the chronically unemployed for

²Adolph J Rahm, “Mayor Asks for Commission on City's Beautification,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 5, 1965. 3.

³“For A Better-Looking St. Louis,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 9, 1965. 15.

community betterment projects was instituted under the Nelson Amendment Program. There were 5,664 truckloads of debris picked up by Nelson Amendment crews.⁴

The primary mechanism for organizing these programs, as Terry points out in his report to the mayor, was the organization of ward-based beautification committees. According to the report, the committees' purpose was to localize beautification and cleanup activities at the ward and neighborhood level. Accordingly, their responsibilities would include "clearing lots for playgrounds, painting, planting trees and flowers, alley cleaning, building repairs, removal of derelict cars, triangle beautification, and home and lawn clinics of a variety of programs."⁵ An interesting addition is the report's embrace of "citizen participation," which, Terry argues, "can be done by the formation of block-by-block committees."⁶

In the spring of 1966, Mayor Alfonso Cervantes appointed Rev. Schwartzentruber to lead the 19th Ward Beautification Committee. It was not a role he was sure he had earned, and certainly not one he was comfortable in accepting.⁷ But according to Cecil Miller, Macler Shepard was not in the good graces of City Hall, which still hadn't forgotten that Shepard had orchestrated a march the previous summer.⁸ In his memoir, Schwartzentruber writes of the

⁴ "Urban Beautification and Improvement Prospectus for the City of St. Louis," November 1966. City of St. Louis, Office of the Mayor: Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, 1965-1973 Box 7, Folder 11. University Archives, Washington University in St. Louis. 6-7.

⁵ Ibid, 6.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ There's a strong likelihood that Schwartzentruber himself was chosen for this role because he was in the unique role as a white pastor with a black congregation. While Shepard was already known to City Hall as the leader of the 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association, he was also associated with the still politically unpopular protest against police brutality and probably more specifically, his association with the DuBois Club would likely have won him a number of enemies, or at the very least, political skepticism towards official recognition of Shepard as a politically sound entity in the 19th ward. Schwartzentruber, Hubert Interview by the author, January 19th, 2019.

⁸ Cecil Miller, interview by author, St. Louis, Missouri, February 10th, 2021.

political sphere's feelings towards Macler noting "[Macler's] astute insights into the political system were not appreciated by those who used the system for their own self-interest." In the end, Schwartzenruber writes, he passed the mantle onto Macler: "I immediately involved Macler, and he became the real leader while I served as the designated leader. I did not know the community; he did."⁹ The city's own guidelines for the beautification campaign envisioned a largely aesthetic, external program, one that would clean alleyways and paint fences, but not involve the homes themselves. To the organizers meeting at The Handle, the problems in the neighborhood were not simply those seen from the street, but the everyday reality for the people occupying substandard houses, the actual buildings themselves. At least, this is how James Sporleder remembered it. According to Sporleder, quoted in Michael Watson's piece on JVL in *FOCUS Midwest*, "Attempts were made to use the beautification program to begin to rebuild the community. Surveys of the area were done to set priorities. The rehabilitation of existing housing became the goal."¹⁰ Due to the scarcity of early JVL documents, let alone those relating to Shepard's activities pre-JVL like the Beautification Committee, little is documented about the extent of the group's efforts to use Beautification program dollars to mend other, structural problems facing the Yeatman community. Much later, in a case study produced by the Presidential Commission on Neighborhoods, published in the late 1970s, it was stated of JVL's attempts to use the money outside of program rules was largely based in the organizers' frustrating that because of a "high number of deteriorating houses," in the area, activists had felt

⁹ Schwartzenruber, Hubert. *Jesus in Back Alleys: the Story and Reflections of a Contemporary Prophet*. Telford, PA: Dreamseeker Books, 2002 51

¹⁰ Watson, Michael. "Jeff Vander Lou: Against All Odds." *FOCUS/Midwest* 12, no. 75, 1977.

they were unable to fully communicate how serious their situation was, nor was it apparent that city cared.¹¹

This story is echoed by Cecil Miller, who recalls Shepard telling the story as an example of why the group could NOT rely on the politicians to have the best interests of the neighborhoods in mind.¹² According to Miller and Sporleder's retelling, the city resisted citizens' efforts to use the beautification program for something other than painting fences or planting trees. Sporleder recalls, "Free paint was supplied by the city and delivered to the area...but the paint came with instructions that it was only to be used on exterior surfaces, once over lightly and the area could be beautiful."¹³ In a response which would become characteristic of the group's sentiments towards the mayor and the political class, the 19th Ward committee returned the paint with a note, instructing the Mayor "where he could put the paint."¹⁴

While frustrated by the city's refusal to loosen restrictions for where and for what Beautification Program dollars could be spent upon, the 19th Ward organization very quickly became a stand-out star in terms of work accomplished that DID fit into the programmatic outline. Evidence shows that the 19th Ward group used every available opportunity to stir community pride and participation with the beautification program, even garnering an appearance by St Louis Mayor Alphonso Cervantes in an August kickoff of the "Big Sweep" program. Newspaper accounts show that organizers attempted to use the group to stir up

¹¹ "People, Building Neighborhoods: Final Report to the President and the Congress of the United States / the National Commission on Neighborhoods. V.2." Hathi Trust. Accessed August 6, 2021. 770. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015007222063&view=1up&seq=117&skin=2021>.

¹² Cecil Miller, interview by author, St. Louis, Missouri, February 10th, 2021.

¹³ Watson, JeffVanderLou: Against All Odds, 17

¹⁴ Ibid.

neighborhood energy, including organizing an early summer parade. According to an announcement in the *St. Louis Argus*, “The parade route stretched from the Carver House to 2823 Dayton, the Mennonite Mission,” and “The purpose of the rally is to demonstrate the need for more citizen participation in working towards the many solutions to the community's problems.”¹⁵

In August of that year, Mayor Cervantes’ aides contacted the leaders of the 19th Ward Beautification Committee to coordinate the kickoff, essentially an alley cleaning program. Just two blocks east of Bethesda Mennonite Church, on the 2600 Block of Dayton Street, a photo in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* shows Cervantes standing alongside Whitelaw Terry, chairman of St. Louis’s Beautification Commission. Schwartzentruber remembers the day vividly: “He [Cervantes] stood here with this big stupid broom, and with a big smile on his face. And then the cameramen told him to give it a few strokes and in just a few minutes it snapped. It broke in half at the handle, and I thought that was a great metaphor,” for the city’s handling of neighborhood improvement programming.¹⁶

Following the event, Schwartzentruber recalls that he and Shepard asked the mayor to stay and walk the alleyways with them so that they might point out some of the improvements they had hoped the program would allow them to address. The inner city’s foreignness to the mayor, whose family lived in St. Louis’ gated Portland Place neighborhood, was not lost on the committee’s organizers. Schwartzentruber recalls, “We walked around a couple blocks near the church, through some of the most cluttered alleyways and broken up sidewalks, and I can recall

¹⁵ “19th Ward Plans Parade, Rally,” *St. Louis Argus*, June 3rd, 1966. 3-A.

¹⁶ Schwartzentruber, Hubert, interview by author, St. Louis, Missouri, January 23rd, 2019.

vividly the mayor kept cuddling up to me asking, ‘Is it safe here? Is it safe here?’ And I would say, ‘Yes’ and he’d settle down for a couple minutes before asking again.”¹⁷

Despite the appearance of warming relations between the 19th Ward Beautification Committee and the city government, as emphasized by the two’s collaboration with the Big Sweep, the appearances were largely nothing more than a thin veneer. The year was still young in late August of 1966, and by Thanksgiving the two sides would come into explosive direct opposition. Where Cervantes had once viewed Schwartzenruber an ally on the Northside, by October the Yeatman activists, both black and white, were openly attacked in the press for their opposition to one of Cervantes’s most ambitious political gambles, the 1966 Bond Issues. This confrontation would alter Shepard and the Yeatman organization’s future forever.

¹⁷ Schwartzenruber, Hubert, interview by author, St. Louis, Missouri, January 23rd, 2019.

Chapter 5: The Bond Issue

Chapter Three introduced an important new voice in Macler Shepard's work as a community organizer, Rev. Hubert Schwartzentruber. When the Mayor appointed Schwartzentruber to lead the new 19th Ward Beautification Committee, Schwartzentruber immediately ceded leadership to Macler Shepard. Shepard skillfully led the group's activities, even earning praise from the mayor himself, who used the 19th ward organization as an example of the Beautification's Program in developing community pride. However, internally, Shepard harbored doubts about his ability to lead such an effort, questioning whether he was the right man for the role of organization leader.

In Chapter Five, I explore two important developments which would inextricably alter the course of the Yeatman neighborhood and Macler Shepard's life, reaffirming his role as the preeminent community leader in the Yeatman neighborhood. The first and most important development in terms of Shepard's evolution as a community leader was the arrival of a new voice at the Handle Coffeehouse, Florence A. Spotts. As one who had lived in the community since the 1920s and had been involved in both ward and city-wide political organizations, she brought to Shepard's organization an authoritative voice. With her advice and encouragement, Shepard and the 19th Ward activists would do more than pass notes to city hall.¹ Instead, when apprised of the mayor's intention to bring a large package of bonds before the public in the November election for civic improvements and community development projects, Shepard and those of the 19th Ward Beautification Committee launched a political campaign to defeat the

¹ This is in reference to the oft repeated story, discussed in Chapter 3, of Shepard, upset at the inability to glean more resources from the Beautification Program to make substantial physical upgrades to the neighborhood, sending a note with a paint bucket to the Program chief and "telling him where can put it."

measure. Shephard cited a lack of specific language in the bonds, which totaled almost \$100 million, language addressing Yeatman's needs and the city leaders' unwillingness to meet with the Yeatman group. Shephard declared war on the bonds. Through the use of unorthodox tactics and Spotts' characteristic tenacity, Yeatman organizers, led by Shephard, would defeat the massive bond issue. While proving a setback for the mayor's agenda the defeat also proved decisive in demonstrating to Yeatman organizers themselves that they could, through direct action, do more than paint fences.

As Cervantes began the city's new beautification program, he also revealed that he planned to place before City voters a substantial bond issue package in the fall of 1966. This package, he explained, would finance a broad new urban development and neighborhood reinvestment program. To assure voters that the bond issue proposals would target community interests and not simply his own, he appointed a task force called the Citizens Bond Issue Screening Committee to draw up and analyze potential bond projects, ranging from highway construction to capital improvements. Demonstrating his commitment to appointing a representative body of residents to the screening committee, Cervantes appointed over 200 citizens to his screening committee for the bond issue. For bodies responsible for the investigation into the needs of bond dollars to support improvements to city hospitals, like that of the historic African American hospital in north city, named for Homer G. Phillips, Cervantes tapped notable allies like Dr. James Whittico. Whittico, whose impressive career stretched until the age of 99, was by 1966 already a city-wide celebrity and noted physician in his field. By the time of his appointment he had helped found the Mound City Medical Clinic at 2715 N. Union Blvd, the first African American multidisciplinary practice in St. Louis, and had held teaching

positions at Homer G. Phillips School of Nursing and St. Mary's Infirmary School of Nursing.² Though not a specialist in one field, Florence A. Spotts had been involved in a number of Democratic Party political campaigns and causes as well as groups like the League of Women Voters.³ At her request, Cervantes appointed Spotts to the committee overseeing street and highway bonds analysis. The work of the committee was largely confined to examination of various projects already pitched by city engineers and planners, including improvements to the existing highway system as well as bridges. Befitting her personality, Spotts likely made herself a presence at every meeting. We have limited evidence of this fact in one photo featured in *Post-Dispatch* from June of 1966, where Spotts is seen alongside other members of the Highways subcommittee touring the 12th Street viaduct, one of the project's targets.⁴ Aside from improvements to the viaduct, by mid-summer the *Post-Dispatch* also noted one of the committee's key focal points, "Improvements to streets and alleys would be financed under an \$11, 400,000 proposal." It was here that Spotts learned of the city's intention to pursue more than mere resurfacing projects, but in fact to address more ambitious goals including work to secure land and planning contracts for a North-South Distributor Highway. According to Cecil Miller, this was likely the point at which Spotts brought the issue of the impending bonds

² "Leaders Named for Screening Bond Proposals," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 26, 1955. 3A.

³ In contrast to the national organization of the League, locally, League of Women Voters became an outlet for early efforts of African American women to become active in city politics, specifically where the topic related to public policy around community development, healthcare and voter participation. Participation with the League became an attractive ideal to many women in the African American community who wanted to be active in public policy discussions affecting their community's welfare, and who had witnessed older organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) grow increasingly non-partisan and less prone to openly lobbying around social issues of concern to the black community. See further, Dowden-White, "Dowden-White, Priscilla A. 2011. *Groping toward democracy: African American social welfare reform in St. Louis, 1910-1949*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

⁴ "Inspecting 12th Street Viaduct" Photograph Caption, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, June 17, 1966. 6.

program for a discussion at the Handle. If there was such a discussion, as Miller suspects, it was from here that the 19th Ward Beautification Committee began to discussions.

Just weeks following their walk through the alleyways of Dayton Street with Mayor Cervantes, the Yeatman organizers suddenly found themselves once more at odds with City Hall. The city was no longer interested in talking about beautification, nor would it entertain the Yeatman group's petitions for money to address physical problems like shoddy roofs or poor plumbing. Now, it was solely focused on the bond issue.

For most of St. Louisans, it was not clear until at least mid-September, what bonds or bond projects voters were being asked to vote for. In Yeatman, where many had experienced the disruptive effects of previous bond campaigns⁵ the mystery around the bonds was not a welcome development. Even Mrs. Spotts, herself a member to the subcommittee for streets and highways, knew little of the full scope of the bonds that were included in the package being put before voters. The facts she did know were, for her and others in the Yeatman neighborhood, cause for great concern. The North-South Distributor highway's path would carve through the near-northside just east of Pruitt Igoe and was to have a \$3,000,000 cutout to finance a program of land acquisition for the highway. When asked about his sentiments at the time, Schwartzentruber

⁵ I reference for this the 1955 Bond Issue which was a follow up to the 1948 bonds, sold under the slogan of "Progress or Decay?" The 1955 bond issue was drawn up to finance, with federal matching grants, the city's ambitious urban renewal program which centered around a scorched earth slum clearance program in the central city neighborhood of Mill Creek—ultimately displacing 20,000 and over 800 businesses, many of whom never recovered. According to her son Dorsey Spotts, friends and extended family of Mrs. Spotts were directly affected by the Mill Creek project and it has been implied through conversations with Schwartzentruber than numerous members of the Bethesda congregation were themselves former Mill Creek residents. For further discussion of the contentious relationship between the African American community and city-led efforts at community development through bond issues see a wide array of works including Dowden-White, Priscilla A. 2011. *Groping toward democracy: African American social welfare reform in St. Louis, 1910-1949*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press (Specifically, Chapter 6, "The Neighborhood Club and Block Unit Management." Covering the internal debate within the St. Louis Chapter of the Urban League over that group's stance on the contentious 1948 Slum Clearance bond issue, a failed predecessor which proved a blueprint of the larger and more ambitious 1955 Bond issue. Discussion over the mechanisms of funding community development through taxes and later bond issues can be found in Colin Gordon's extensively researched and GIS mapped Mapping Decline (Gordon, Colin E. 2008. *Mapping decline: St. Louis and the fate of the American city*. Philadelphia, Penna: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.)

recalls there was real sense of anxiety in the community as talk of possible urban renewal began to grow. Given the context, it is likely what he is referring to were the twin bonds created to finance “community renewal,” and “neighborhood rehabilitation.”⁶

By 1966, the meaning of city-led “community renewal” had become well known to African Americans living in St. Louis. Unlike smaller efforts of grassroots organizations including the Federation of Block Units, which offered residents the opportunity to organize and take ownership over problems like dumping and nuisance properties in their communities, the city’s approach to “renewal” was one of mass clearance. The 1955 Bond Issue, which drew up funding (combined with a federal matching grant) for the clearance of the Mill Creek and Kosciusko neighborhoods had received, by 1966, little in way of direct economic returns for private real estate developers that the city had given stewardship to, concerning the cleared spaces for the purpose of managing redevelopment. Whereas nearly 20,000 African Americans had been displaced from Mill Creek, as well as over 800 businesses, churches, and community institutions, and nearly 3,000 poor white residents removed from Kosciusko, yet little in the way of repopulation had taken place in either neighborhood by the 1960s. This quickly earned Mill Creek, a vast 400+ acre stretch, the moniker “Hiroshima Flats.” For Kosciusko, a neighborhood which hugged the Mississippi just south of downtown, city boosters had promised immediate industrial redevelopment once the neighborhood was cleared. Yet according to Chris Nafziger, even this was not to be realized. He writes, “City officials had originally forecast \$100,000,000 in new investment in Kosciusko—but four years in, and three years before its scheduled completion, the development had only attracted \$1.6 million, 1.6 percent of the projected investment. Even worse, not a single new company had moved in where 3,000 “slum dwellings”

⁶ Schwartzenruber, Hubert, personal interview by author, November 21, 2019.

had been demolished.”⁷ Thus by 1966, with city leaders once more promising a wave of “renewal,” even with qualifications that their plan would not result in Mill Creek-style clearance, residents like Shepard and Spotts were highly suspicious.

Adding to Yeatman organizers’ concern was talk of a new federal program to address urban poverty, then known as “Demonstration Cities,” but later referred to as the Model Cities program.⁸ In public statements by the city bond proponents, the Demonstration Cities program was floated as potentially being tested in St. Louis, but with the precondition of the passage of the bonds packages.⁹ In the *Post*, Theodore McMillan, Judge and chairman of the city’s Community Action Program—the Human Development Corporation—stated that unless voters showed a strong sentiment in favor of the bonds program, the federal government might pass St. Louis over for participation in the Demonstration Cities program.¹⁰ Adding to this the West End Community Conference, a west-side community organization mirrored McMillan’s sentiments but called for greater detail about the specifics of what the Demonstration Cities project would

⁷ Naffziger, Chris. “How We Wiped out Kosciusko, Which Could Have Been Another Souldard.” *St. Louis Magazine*, October 9, 2019. <https://www.stlmag.com/history/architecture/the-annihilation-of-kosciusko/>.

⁸ Perhaps the largest and most ambitious of Johnson’s programs created under Great Society and the War on Poverty, Model Cities was seen as a holistic attack on the problems plaguing central city blight and poverty including inequities in quality of housing, access to quality healthcare, education and economic opportunity. In St. Louis, the program was initially seen by scholars like Barbara Arnstein as a model of citizen participation in public policy programming. Arnstein, Sherry R. “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” *JAIP*, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224. While nationally the program was deemed largely a failure, due in part to power struggles between citizen councils and municipal officials, the program was the first to specifically articulate an idea first proposed at the start of the War on Poverty, “Maximum Feasible Participation.” Through councils of neighborhood residents, Model Cities was to be a program where the solutions of problems plaguing cities like St. Louis were offered by those living in poverty themselves. How residents contended with unwilling municipal officials, shrinking budgets and changing national politics (as Nixon was hostile towards many of the Johnson era programs under Great Society) is the subject of two large studies of the St. Louis Model Cities Program. See: Robert J. Kerstein, “The Political Consequences of Federal Intervention: The Economic Opportunity Act and Model Cities in the City of St. Louis” (Washington University in St. Louis, 1975) and Siegel, Sarah Rachel. 2019. *“By the people most affected”: model cities, citizen control, and the broken promises of urban renewal*. <https://doi.org/10.7936/0x01-ks37>.

⁹“Citizens Group as Watchdog on Bonds Planned,” *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, October 30, 1966. 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

entail. Yet at the same time, Spotts, quietly dispatched a letter not to the Mayor for clarification of the Demonstration Cities program but to the office of HUD Secretary Robert Weaver himself, demanding to know what the program would do for St. Louis—or rather do TO St. Louis, such as urban renewal through displacement and replacement of African American neighborhoods. The letter also seeks clarification about the supposed tie between the city bond issue and the chances of St. Louis qualifying to participate in the new HUD program.¹¹

Opposition to the bonds programs therefore could be framed as an act of self-harm. With all of these worries present in their mind, in early October of 1966, the 19th Ward Beautification Committee requested a meeting with Mayor Cervantes, seeking clarity on the bonds and how they might benefit Yeatman. According to Schwartzentruber, those assembled from Yeatman were rebuffed.¹² The group tried again the following week, joined by a representatives of a second organization whose sentiments mirrored that of Yeatman’s, as to the true nature of the bonds program, and again they were met with hostility.¹³ From to letters between Schwartzentruber and his supervisors at the Mennonite Mission Board, we can glean details as to the day-to-day activities of the Yeatman organizers during the campaign to challenge the bonds. For example, speaking of the day that Spotts, Shepard and he had declared opposition to the bond issue on the steps of Bethesda Mennonite Church to the assembled press, Schwartzentruber writes, “After our response [from the meeting with the mayor] was a negative one we proceeded

¹¹ Spotts, Florence. Correspondence from Florence A. Spotts HUD Secretary Robert Weaver. October 16th, 1966. Box 1, Folder 33. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana.

¹² Schwartzentruber, Hubert. Correspondence from Rev. Hubert Schwartzentruber to Nelson Kauffman. October 10th, 1966. Box 1, Folder 36. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana.

¹³ Ibid. It is not articulated by Schwartzentruber that the group that joined the Yeatman activists is specifically CORE, however, later in October, CORE publicly declared its opposition, and joined the Yeatman campaign to defeat the bond issue. It is my contention, given the close work between CORE and Shepard dating back to at least 1965, that it was likely CORE that worked with the Yeatman organizers at this time.

to organize people. That very night by 8 o'clock we had our church so full of people, we did not have room for one more chair."¹⁴ More still, in these letters Schwartzentruber details the nearly daily protests, including events where Yeatman activists led by Shepard and Spotts overtook, shouted down or nearly chased the Mayor and other Bond Issue supporters from their public campaign events. Evident from Schwartzentruber's notes is that there was a tangible energy coursing through the 19th ward in this time, and the Shepard and others had the makings of something larger than a Beautification committee or a political protest, in their hands—they had the makings of a movement. But if Shepard was to succeed in defeating the bonds he would need more than just the 19th ward to vote “no,” the Yeatman organizers would need project the energy they had stirred outward and across the city.

Outlining their position in opposition of the Bond Issue, the Yeatman activists produced a multipage pamphlet entitled “Should We Do It?,” referring to the City's own bond issue slogan, “Let's Do It!” One of the major points of consternation for Yeatman activists was the absence of city residents on the Bond Issue executive committee during the screening process in the summer of 1966. According to Michael Watson, upwards to seventeen of the twenty-three members of the bond issue committee lived in St. Louis County.¹⁵ Moreover, they argued, despite Yeatman housing nearly 70,000 residents, making it the largest neighborhood by far on the near-northside, it was only represented with one appointee to the subcommittees (that being Spotts, on the highway and streets committee), concluding, “One need not ask why the Yeatman district has

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Watson, Michael. “Jeff Vander Lou: Against All Odds.” *FOCUS/Midwest* 12, no. 75, 1977. 20.

been overlooked in this bond issue—we have been overlooked because no one was appointed to represent us!”¹⁶

Framing their opposition to the bonds out of self-interest for their neighborhood, Shepard and others picked apart the city’s planned bonds for “rehabilitation” and “renewal,” arguing that the sheer size of Yeatman, which comprised 1/10th of the city’s overall population, coupled with its advanced stages of divestment, made the dollar amount outlined in the bonds for the proposed community renewal programs pale in comparison to Yeatman’s needs. According to one document produced by the group, “It would take more than 50% the total requested to even partially correct the horrendous conditions that are now existent in the Yeatman Area, especially in the area that constitutes the 19th Ward Beautification Committee.”¹⁷ Other issues of concern specified by the group included street lighting, which the group tied directly to reducing crime; street improvements, which the group insinuated had not been made in Yeatman since the 1930s, and the lack of park space, which the group made sure to point out was promised to the area as part of the 1955 bond issue.¹⁸ Moreover, organizers built upon the fact that problems in Yeatman stood to overshadow other areas which had been specifically targeted for bond issue improvement, areas including the West End neighborhood of Tandy and the nearby Murphy-Desoto-Carr neighborhoods. In “Should We Do It?” Yeatman organizers wrote emphatically that the needs of the many in Yeatman far outweighed those of the few in other, smaller neighborhoods, including those targeted by the bond committee, specifically in terms of health

¹⁶“Should We Do It?” Press Release. From the City of St. Louis, Office of the Mayor, Alfonso Cervantes Records 1965-1973, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 27, University Archives, Washington University in St. Louis.

¹⁷ Correspondence from H. Ralph Taylor, Assistant Secretary to Robert Weaver. October 26th, 1966. Box 1, Folder 33. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana.

¹⁸ Ibid.

inequities. Justifying their demand that a new healthcare facility be built in the Yeatman district, the organizers cite jarring statistics about Yeatman:

The Yeatman District has a population of 70,000 people. It is the largest of the eleven arbitrarily created “poverty areas” in Metropolitan St. Louis. The Yeatman district is the largest population area and it is seven times larger than the smallest poverty district. The major portions of five different health districts are included in the Yeatman area. Statistics indicate that one of the above areas has the city’s fourth highest birth rate, the greatest tuberculosis death rate, the highest accidental death rate, while still another has the highest infant mortality rate.¹⁹

Concluding their argument in “Should We Do It?” organizers pointed to the large amounts of money in bonds aimed at improving tourist attractions such as the zoo, compared to the dearth of investment in neighborhoods like Yeatman. They write, “Since the city sees fit to allocate \$1.5 million for lions, aardvarks, armadillos etc., at the St. Louis Zoo, it would seem reasonable and humane to allow at least ten times if not more money for Yeatman, in which 70,000 humans make their homes!”²⁰

If Shepard and his compatriots were going to seriously challenge the bond issue, it would not be an easy task, especially with the city’s business community leading the bonds campaign itself. Undeterred, Shepard and others in the 19th Ward Beautification Committee immediately mobilized a grassroots campaign which put the bond issue supporters on the defensive.

According to Watson, one of the first ways they expanded their campaign was by attacking pro-bond issue signage throughout the city, “The city put up large outdoor signs reading “Let’s Do It’,” adding that Yeatman activists in turn, “paid for junior poster under key signs saying “Let’s Don’t!”, listing a phone number that people called and were informed.”²¹ Watson adds that in addition to a campaign waged against the bond issue campaign’s print messaging, Yeatman

¹⁹ Ibid, 3.

²⁰ “Should We Do It?” Press Release. From the City of St. Louis, Office of the Mayor, Alfonso Cervantes Records 1965-1973, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 27, University Archives, Washington University in St. Louis. 6.

²¹ Watson, 20.

activists led by Macler Shepard began attending conservative, white south city neighborhood association meetings to begin conversations around opposing the bond issue. According to Watson, “The message that they carried was that race aside, neighborhoods that got no direct benefit from the bond issue had a common cause.”²² The strategy, pitting south St. Louisans against the mayor, proved to be a brilliant example of both Shepard’s shrewd understanding of St. Louis as well as of his skill salesmanship.

To sell the Yeatman group’s opposition to the bonds in south city, Shepard had to be an expert at selling more than a (one) “no vote.” He had to convince the south side voters to talk to their neighbors and families as well. Beyond simply pointing to the fact that neither south city nor Yeatman would see direct benefit, Shepard appealed to the conservative voter’s instinct to mistrust government spending, especially in cases where money would be going into parts of the city far from the southside. This raised a key area of focus that Shepard zeroed in on, the city’s lack of detail about how and where money would be spent. For this, Shepard and Spotts could speak from experience. He pointed to the very points raised by “Should we Do It?” including broken promises of neighborhood parks and street lighting that Yeatman residents had been promised in previous bond elections, but which had not been acted upon. According to Watson and Schwartzentruber, Shepard’s pitches began to stir conversation that questioned the bonds.

Almost immediately in response to the Yeatman group’s public campaign challenging the bonds, City Hall sought to find a resolution which would meet the demands of Yeatman organizers. According to Schwartzentruber’s October 10th letter, following the press conference where Spotts and Shepard read aloud “Should We Do It?”, the mayor’s office relayed to

²² Ibid.

Schwartzentruber the city's intention to move ahead with the long-promised pocket park that Yeatman activists demanded. Schwartzentruber writes, "The mayor's office called to tell me that the city would like to help us now develop that play area, and a bulldozer will be over tomorrow."²³ Perhaps not by coincidence, the pocket park was to be only a few addresses away from Shepard's Sheridan Street upholstery shop! Schwartzentruber further writes that the Yeatman organizers interpreted the offer as a bribe, and more importantly as a sign that the city was not taking the Yeatman activists for granted: "The city does know that we have the power if we can organize to defeat the bond issue, so they are selling us a mess of potage to pacify us."²⁴ According to Schwartzentruber, however, the Yeatman activists declined the city's offer.

By late October, as the election inched closer the actions undertaken by supporters of the bonds indicate a growing anxiety around the effectiveness of bond issue opponents. On October 28th, the *Post-Dispatch* carried a front-page piece describing a new "watchdog" committee to be established, to ensure spending of bond issue monies targeted appropriate programs and neighborhood needs across the city. More importantly, the article was accompanied with a piercing statement aimed at Yeatman activists from the chairman of the bonds campaign, Preston Estep. In response to the Yeatman organization's complaints that the bonds programs would not help ease Yeatman problems, Estep told the *Post-Dispatch*, "For any group to threaten that their own particular street, their own particular alley, their own particular area is given every promise and that they must have everything they demand or no one else in the city will get anything at all, says more about the group than it does about the issues in the bond issue campaign."²⁵ Adding to

²³ Schwartzentruber, Hubert. Correspondence from Rev. Hubert Schwartzentruber to Nelson Kauffman. October 10th, 1966. Box 1, Folder 36. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "City Wide Group to Be Set Up to Guide Spending if Bonds Pass," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* October 28th, 1966. 1.

his statement, Estep praised the work of the initial 220 member citizen's bond issue committee, stating that their decisions were based on taking into consideration the best interests of the city as a whole, not one specific neighborhood. He continued by casting doubt on how widely the opinions of Yeatman activists towards the bonds was shared: "We cannot believe that the opposition expresses the views of any large section of our city's citizens. We do not even believe that they express the views of those who live in that area."²⁶ Yet Estep was wrong on an important fact.

Despite Estep's insistence that all neighborhoods would see benefits from the community renewal bonds and that it was selfish for Yeatman activists to expect special treatment, he failed to make mention that in fact, the two bond issues concerned with community building were drawn up specifically to benefit two neighborhoods, Murphy and Tandy. Since at least 1962, downtown business interests had been pushing city leadership for a major redevelopment program to deal with the Murphy neighborhood, immediately north of downtown. Repeatedly however, bonds written to finance urban renewal activities in the large Murphy area had been voted down by voters. In late 1965, city officials talked openly in the press of their intention to once more piece together a bond issue for voters in 1966 which would deal with the Murphy and Tandy areas.²⁷ Moreover, in the proposals submitted to city hall by the committees responsible for study and recommendation of bond issue projects, these two neighborhoods were specifically mentioned as primary investments of bond issue financing. Furthermore, in the executive committee summary of proposals recommended by the Committee on Community Development, authored July 6, 1966, Tandy is specifically discussed as becoming a focal point for

²⁶ Ibid, 10.

²⁷ "\$75,000,000 Murphy Area Renewal Plan," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 5th, 1966. 1.

experimentation in the city's expanding program of neighborhood rehabilitation.²⁸ In the summary of proposals submitted to the Executive committee for the 1966 bond issue, the committee on community development strongly endorsed a plan for the Murphy neighborhood to be the focus of bond issue dollars because of that neighborhood's proximity to downtown and its likelihood to harm visitor impressions of the city.²⁹ Mayor Cervantes doubled down a few days later, remarking that despite what Yeatman activists had accused the city of, no precise locations had been determined for neighborhood rehabilitation projects.³⁰

As the campaign approached election-day one last surprise lay in store for those in the media. On the front page of the *Post Dispatch's* November 1st edition the headline read "CORE Opposes City Bond Issue as Being of No Aid to Negroes." CORE's arrival as an ally of the Yeatman cause was not entirely surprising, however, for two important reasons. On one hand, as has been previously discussed, CORE likely played an important role in assisting Shepard to create the 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association in early 1965 and enjoined the organization in their anti-police brutality march in September of that year. Thus, it was likely that Shepard had sought their participation to add weight to the Yeatman group's cause and sew further doubt in the minds of those within the black community about the legitimacy of the bonds. While it could be argued this move by CORE was illustrative of the focus that civil rights groups had made towards economic opportunities for African Americans, CORE went further to specify who within the African American community it believed would not see benefits from the

²⁸ Subcommittee on Community Development July 6, 1966, Proposals Outline. From the City of St. Louis, Office of the Mayor, Alfonso Cervantes Records 1965-1973, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 27, University Archives, Washington University in St. Louis. 3.

²⁹ Subcommittee on Community Development and Urban Renewal, July 6, 1966, from the City of St. Louis, Office of the Mayor, Alfonso Cervantes Records 1965-1973, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 27, University Archives, Washington University in St. Louis. 6.

³⁰ "Citizens' Group as Watchdog on Bonds Planned." 1.

bonds: the poor and disenfranchised living East of Grand. By 1965, CORE had become vocal about its belief that the full economic benefits of the Civil Rights movement had not been shared across the whole of the community. CORE's Lucien Richards articulated this point: "Job opportunities had increased for skilled negroes, that housing had opened somewhat for middle class Negroes and advances had occurred in public accommodations," yet in contrast, "Deep resentment and frustration are still felt by many negroes in the slums who cannot find jobs, who feel they are being exploited by landlords and merchants, and who feel that they are trapped in a ghetto."³¹ Outlining their case for opposing the bonds, CORE was quoted as basing its judgement largely on the fact that African American workers would likely pay more in taxes because of the bonds than they would benefit in terms of material improvements and more importantly, job opportunities. For example, outlining the unlikelihood of black laborers to secure employment on any of the Bond Issue funded projects due to workplace discrimination the activist organization stated, "Most labor unions including the carpenters, electricians, sheet metal workers...only admit a token number of negroes to membership. There is no guarantee in the bond proposals that the unions and contractors will be required to hire a pro rata number of negroes in all job categories across the board."³²

The reaction to CORE's message was swift from papers, including the *St. Louis Argus* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. The *Post* chided CORE for overstating the problems with labor and discrimination, asserting that this problem would largely be sorted out by requirements for city contracts: "City ordinances require city contractors and city suppliers to hire without racial discrimination. CORE would better serve the laudable objectives of racial equality and progress,

³¹ Jolly, *Black Liberation in the Midwest*. 44.

³² "CORE Opposes Bond Issues," *St. Louis American* November 3rd, 1966. 6.

we think, by reconsidering its position.”³³ While the *Post* sounded a somewhat conciliatory note, the black owned *Argus* did not. A rare front-page editorial in the *Argus* challenged CORE’s primary assertion that African American laborers would be excluded from bond issue projects

Opposition to the upcoming bond issue by CORE is ill advised. CORE opposes because they say, Negro workers and contractors will not be hired in constructing improvements. Aside from the obvious guesswork of this hostile prophecy, CORE’s statement ignores the existence of local fair employment ordinances...How can the pattern of discriminatory hiring and contracting be changed if there are no opportunities for challenge? We say SUPPORT ALL BOND PROPOSALS.³⁴

The pointed critique of the bonds by CORE also helped attract greater attention to the divergent class and geographic divisions in the mid-1960s St. Louis African American community and explains why Tandy area citizens supported the broad, civic-minded agenda of the bonds project as opposed to Yeatman residents like Shepard and Spotts who demanded more programs to help their specific neighborhood. Rather than coincidence, Percy Green, founder of the CORE splinter group A.C.T.I.O.N (Action Committee To Improve Opportunities for Negroes), states that it spoke to the shallowness of the relationship between the “white power structure” in St. Louis, amounting to what was essentially a play by those operating the bond campaign to “purchase the negro vote.”³⁵

Geographically speaking, the poverty and physical decay existing in Yeatman stood was in stark contrast to life west of Grand, in the Tandy/Ville neighborhood, where many of the city’s prominent African American citizens still lived and worked. While the Ville area may have had needs in terms of physical stabilization, Green states that his reading is that the inclusion of a specific program around community rehabilitation for the Tandy area was nothing short of a

³³ “CORE and the Bonds” Editorial, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 2nd, 1966. 30.

³⁴ “A Bond Issue Editorial,” *St. Louis Argus*, November 4th, 1966. 1.

³⁵ Interview with Percy Green by the Author, September 27th, 2021

bribe intended to win the support of prominent middle class African American voters.³⁶

Noticeably absent in media coverage were statements supporting the bond issues by prominent doctors and pastors living and working in the Tandy area, who specifically stood to benefit from the bond package.

In the days leading up to the vote, the *Post's* tone continued to grow more anxious; dreading the failure to pass the bond issues, the *Post* all but concluded that the city would face a new status that it would not enjoy: "second rate." Still, the Yeatman activists maintained their energy and confidence that their sentiments were not, as Estep and others had alleged, "selfish." Reached for comment on the matter by the *St. Louis American*, Spotts, who the paper identified as the group's spokesperson, made the closing case of the Yeatman opposition to the bonds:

I have never, never, opposed a bond issue before, and I am not against bond issues. My objection to this one is based on the behalf that it is not well defined. It was put together for presentation with too much haste and without consideration for the needs of residents of long deprived areas. All we are asking for is a re-written proposal, accomplished through the unselfish labor of city dwellers who are well acquainted with the problems of the areas in which they live.³⁷

On November 8th, 1966, all but two of the bonds in the \$79 Million dollar bonds package supported by the city and opposed by Shepard and the Yeatman activists failed to pass the threshold of 2/3s support. The Yeatman group had won an upset.

³⁶ Interview with Percy Green by the Author, September 26, 2021. Green added further that this was not necessarily a unique occurrence and that combined with frequently appointing prominent middle class African Americans from the business and medical community to city boards and committees, it in fact reflected a very cynical political mindset of the St. Louis white power structure, one where they could feel assured that the black vote could be purchased, if need be, to support the policy agenda of the moment. When pressed for whether or not middle-class organizations specifically sought out participation Green firmly answered "Yes," specifically naming the Urban League and more recently the NAACP as groups prone to being targeted and that in return "every issue, every proposal that Civic Progress wanted, well, the NAACP and Douthit (The Urban League) was on board."

³⁷ "CORE Opposes Bond Issues." 6.

Did the defeat of the bonds amount to a victory for Macler Shepard and the Yeatman organizers? The answer to this can be broken down in several important ways. Most immediately, the defeat of the bond measure proved a devastating setback for one of the most threatening measures in the bond package, one which had drawn fire from both Shepard and Spotts. It defeated planned spending for surveying the route of the North-South Distributor. While it would not have carved through Yeatman, it likely would displace many persons just east of Jefferson Avenue, with Spotts contending that Yeatman neighborhood, which had seen a population influx following the construction of Pruitt Igoe and later the Mill Creek urban renewal project, would again be bombarded with an influx of refugees. They would almost surely worsen the already challenging living conditions in Yeatman. However, while providing a momentary setback, the distributor highway would not be so easily dismissed by the city. It took up the issue again in the early 1970s and later by Mayor Conway in the late 1970s. At each point in time, Yeatman activists, then under the name of JVL, opposed the construction of the highway.³⁸ Yet, by eliminating the short-term threat of a serious highway construction project, Yeatman activists won at least a temporary sense of security.

It is important to also make clear that the Yeatman activists fight was largely one based on self-interest rather than ideology. Despite being labeled as “anti-Cervantes democrats” in the press, Shepard and Spotts had in fact not once made their fight against the bond issues a political issue; for them, this conflict represented a fight for neighborhood survival. Just days before the

³⁸ In one memorable speech before a city hall committee meeting to discuss the highway in the 1970s and republished in the *Post-Dispatch*, longtime JeffVanderLou activist and Washington University Brown School professor Frederick Smith invoked the name of Florence A. Spotts to warn against the further discussion of the highway, “Let me bring you greetings from Mrs. Florence Aritha Spotts who reaches from her grave to fight this insidious and useless band of concrete...I warn you the spirit of Aritha is here in this room. She would be the first one to testify. She would first, softly ask “Why? Why do you continue to punish us with this serialized version of a Greek tragedy? When...when will it all end? Enough is enough!” Smith, Frederick. “Neighborhoods or Highways,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 3rd, 1979. 4.

election, Spotts had continued to maintain publicly that the Yeatman organizers were willing to negotiate with Estep and Cervantes. Even in the face of the city's refusal, however, and in keeping with Shepard's pragmatic approach to politics, the Yeatman activists never once, at least according to available evidence in print, made their campaign personal. They did not intend to make enemies with City Hall even as they were pointedly insulted in the press and by campaign boosters and derided as "selfish." In the next chapter it becomes clear that Shepard's pragmatic approach towards the bond challenge would pay dividends as the mayor proved to be a vital ally in negotiating a compromise in Shepard's next fight, a fight against absentee landlords and the building commissioner.

The importance of Shepard demonstrating that he was someone the city could work with cannot be understated. Long before the bond campaign, Shepard had shown his flexibility when his organization, the 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association, won concessions from the Police Department following the previously discussed march on City Hall. Shepard's organization did not win radical concessions such as those that CORE and ACTION sought, like a citizens review board, but it focused on small steps to change the relationship between authority (the police) and the neighborhood (Yeatman). The march may have been the incident that gave Shepard the conviction that he could negotiate a resolution with City Hall in the bond campaign. Though he was wrong, there is no evidence to show he held a grudge. Nor did the city, despite losing the bond campaign. Schwartzentruber notes that the day after the bonds were defeated the streetlights on Dayton Street near the Mennonite Mission and on Leffingwell outside the Handle Coffeehouse on Leffingwell were changed by the city, a sign interpreted by

organizers as a show of respect for the Yeatman group,³⁹ and perhaps an attempt to hit the reset button on their work towards the mutual goal of community redevelopment for the northside.

Shepard and the Yeatman activists concluded that their success in challenging the bonds demonstrated their effectiveness at leading a grassroots coalition to affect city politics. They had agency and more importantly, if used in combination with others, they could shake things up. Shepard and Spotts believed that if they could upset the plans of City Hall and their allies in Civic Progress there was no reason Yeatman organizers couldn't also direct their energies towards the physical and social revitalization of their neighborhood. As the bond campaign made clear, even when the city was shown the necessity of supporting neighborhood renewal in Yeatman, the city would not do it for them. They would have to do it for themselves. The result of this period of self-reflection was a meeting in the living room of Florence Aritha Spotts' Thomas Street home in late October of 1966, where Shepard was named chairman of a newly incorporated neighborhood organization, JVL Inc. Outlined in the objectives of the newly formed organization were the following

To plan, administer, promote, and sponsor programs which will help renew the physical and moral structures of the community. To work with the community residents, businesses, churches, and other community groups to plan for community renewal; To assist families in the community in beautifying and bringing property up to Building code standards for the City of St. Louis; To seek ways of providing new housing to replace old, abandoned structures.⁴⁰

This chapter focused on examining why and how Macler Shepard, aided by Yeatman activists including Florence A. Spotts, challenged and defeated a large and important city-wide bond issue in 1966. Justifying their opposition as based in self-defense, citing previous bond issues which had financed "community renewal" only to become, in fact, projects amounting to

³⁹ Interview with Hubert Schwartzentruber by the author, October 16, 201.8

⁴⁰ Articles of Incorporation for JeffVanderLou Inc, October 1966.

“negro removal,” JVL activists mobilized an all-out, city-wide challenge to the bond issue. By bringing their message to south city, engaging in town halls, and sowing resentment and doubt towards the stated intentions of the bond campaign organizers, JVL succeeded in the failure of the bond issues. The fight proved to the activists that they were capable of disrupting the status quo through grassroots organizing, and accepting this, they reorganized themselves under the JVL name, arguing that if the city was not interested in stopping the spread of decay in their neighborhood, they would do it themselves.

Chapter 6

Taking on the Slumlords

Shepard felt it imperative to begin addressing the newly formed organization's objectives immediately. There was one problem, however: JVL still lacked money and technical assistance. Where would they begin? Shepard turned to the Church, specifically to Rev. Schwartzentruber and the Mennonite Church. Through letters gathered in the Mennonite archive, I have assembled a timeline showing JVL's first formal actions after incorporation. This timeline reveals its intention to begin a housing rehabilitation program despite the lack of funding. Chapter Six demonstrates that Shepard resolved to work within the system in the short term, by petitioning the city building inspector to survey the Yeatman neighborhood and to compel slumlords to bring properties up to code. What Shepard did not anticipate, perhaps due to his own naivety, was that City Hall, just weeks after losing to Yeatman in the bonds campaign, would once again say "no."

...

In the days following the defeat of the bonds, Shepard began to plot the path forward for JVL. While the group had ideas as to where their community needed improvement, it didn't fully understand how to approach such a monumental task. The group would need money, so Shepard turned to Rev. Schwartzentruber, asking him to petition those in the Mennonite Church for their assistance. Schwartzentruber was eager to do so; the experience of the Beautification Committee post and then the Bond Issue campaign had inspired and radicalized the young pastor.¹ In a letter

¹ Schwartzentruber, Hubert. Correspondence from Hubert Schwartzentruber to Simon Gingerich, December 2nd, 1966. Box 1, Folder 37. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana.

to his immediate supervisor, Simon Gingerich, Schwartzentruber explicitly outlines why he felt that the Church MUST act immediately and decisively, to assist Shepard and JVL. He writes, “Up to now our church has been involved in focusing and identifying problems that exist as well as planning for future progress. To not become more involved would be to retreat. Can we do that? Can we dangle meat in front of a hungry dog...” before exhorting Gingerich by defining what Mennonites uniquely could bring to the table, “We desperately need the voice of the church in this...quiet, honest people working in the background are the real cohesive force to continue a positive organization.”² Where previous letters had shown a curiosity about working more fully with Shepard, the December 2nd correspondence is very abrasive and confrontational towards his church’s preference for non-involvement. Further, he outlines an explicit agenda which parallels very closely the outline of what Saul Alinsky would model as the ideal “People’s Organization,” namely with the goal of building power. He writes, “We must...Involve ourselves in politics. Make use of power...(if need be with other self-interest groups)...be very vocal in registering complaints with the city...Attacking the power structure by creating another power structure. Demonstrations and Protests.”³

Shortly after his letter to Gingerich, a party of Mennonite leaders arrived in St. Louis to meet with JVL leadership and discuss short term plans, namely, JVL’s desire to begin a broad housing rehabilitation program to stabilize the physical landscape in the Yeatman neighborhood. One of these meetings included representatives of the Metropolitan Church Federation, one of whom recommended that the Mennonite delegation speak with Washington University professor

² Ibid.

³ Correspondence from Hubert Schwartzentruber to Simon Gingerich, December 2nd, 1966. Box 1, Folder 37. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana

and architect Roger Montgomery, who, it was felt, could provide the Mennonites with a better understanding of JVL's chances of finding federal or local financing for their housing program.

Montgomery's assessment was harsh: "Montgomery told us that there is no federal money available for single family residences," adding that there was little hope for financial support from local government either.⁴ Furthermore, Montgomery flatly stated that JVL was not fit, or "strong enough," to possibly manage such an ambitious project targeting both economic development and housing improvements but should instead work on small projects. The report from the church delegation continues, "He thought that there were lesser matters that an organization could concern itself with and that it might see tangible results in better garbage collection, better police protection, street lighting etc."⁵ Montgomery was likely unaware of JVL's past work both with the beautification program and as part of the 1965 protests around police brutality, and thus was so uninformed that by late 1966 his recommendations for JVL were dismissed. In the exchanges between Schwartzentruber and church leadership there was little indication that Montgomery's expert analysis had moved either party; the Church remained cautious of investing resources in the short term.⁶ The tone of the correspondences kept by Gingerich and others visiting St. Louis implies a looming skepticism of the prospects of Schwartzentruber and Shepard to find success—much less with the Church's assistance. Gingerich and others seemingly believed that Shepard had yet to prove himself, or his ideas. This would then play into the decision undertaken soon after by Shepard and JVL board members to

⁴ Correspondence from Simon Gingerich to Hubert Schwartzentruber, Paul Peachy, Nelson Kauffman and Chester Slagell, December 2nd, 1966. Box 1, Folder 37. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana. 3.

⁵ Ibid.

seek out an opportunity to create a prototype of a neighborhood led rehabilitation, in order to demonstrate the practical nature of a rehabilitation program.

Though Montgomery may have seemed to have nothing but bad news for JVL, he did at the very least give the organizers two important leads which would be instrumental in setting the near-term agenda of JVL. Montgomery suggested two names: Sam Dardick, chief planner for the newly established St. Louis Model Cities program, and John M. McEwen, a young architect soon to be working full time with JVL.⁷ Dardick brought JVL activists good news in early 1967, according to one of Schwartzentruber's letters, informing the group that there was an almost "99 percent chance," that JVL's area of Yeatman would be included in the new anti-poverty program.⁸

For Schwartzentruber and others, this all but contradicted Montgomery's warning that the federal government was not interested in investing in neighborhoods like Yeatman. Moreover, Schwartzentruber recounts a walk through the neighborhood by Macler Shepard, Spotts, himself, and John McEwen, whom Schwartzentruber states, "has the impression that a rehabilitation program is very feasible and that the condition of the housing is such that at this time that it is possible to rehabilitate them since many of the buildings are structurally sound."⁹

Schwartzentruber's letter also reveals that JVL was not simply discussing its plans with architects, but that Shepard was bringing into neighborhood meetings a number of fellow neighborhood-based "merchants and businesses in the area."¹⁰ Perhaps as good an illustration as any of the electric atmosphere in Yeatman at the time surrounding the work and vision of

⁷ Correspondence from Hubert Schwartzentruber to Simon Gingerich, January 16th, 1967. Box 1, Folder 34. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana. 1-2

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Shepard and JVL was that conversations with neighborhood businessmen yielded immediate effects, producing at least one considerable pledge of at least \$6,000 towards JVL's fund for rehabilitation.¹¹ Unfortunately, the organization still lacked the resources to purchase a property to rehabilitate, and thus was left powerless to effect tangible change.

Without the money to purchase homes outright, JVL needed to achieve some sort of short-term victory to maintain grassroots momentum. Shepard, who had now overseen two groups since 1965, understood that too much focus on talk and planning would likely hurt his organization's ability to energize the neighborhood. Worse, it would be admitting that it didn't have the tools to deliver on its agenda. It was suggested that if JVL could not afford to directly improve housing in the short term (at least until Model Cities money was allocated), maybe it could use its potent and proven grassroots power to force others, namely absentee landlords, to bring existing properties up to code. A challenge to the slumlords seemed like an obvious way to move forward. Of the JVL campaign against the slumlords, a JVL member recalled:

Although some of us owned our homes, most of the homes in these 500 square block areas were owned by 13 real estate slumlords who controlled over 85% of the housing stock, and made super profits, profits that would drain from our neighborhoods. Most of them refused to keep up their properties, over the years of use and neglect, the housing decayed. 70% without plumbing, old wiring, crumbling tuckpointing, tumbling porches, leaking roofs, and just plastic to keep out the cold. Unlivable, unlivable, unlivable.¹²

To force the slumlords to fix their properties, JVL didn't need to mobilize or picket the homes as they had back in 1965 under the name of the 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association. Rather, Shepard and Spotts figured that a better route was to put to test the newly passed slum receivership bill passed into law the previous year. In the fall of 1965, Board of Alderman President Donald Gunn and Alderman Stephen Darst introduced a bill allowing the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lee, Betty. "A Lee, Betty. Phoenix Rising: JeffVanderLou." *Proud Magazine*, 1980

city counselor, “to seek court action to handle abandoned properties whose owners cannot be found or refused to keep properties in repair.”¹³ The challenge facing the absentee landlords bill was, for a time, monumental; the mayor appeared to slow pedal the bill even as aldermanic pressure grew to pass it. According to the *St. Louis Argus*, the receivership program presented by Gunn and Darst would not operate on the premise of taking property away from owners outright, but rather to require them to repair properties and bring them up to code. However, if an owner failed to address concerns raised by the building commissioner within 60 days, “the receiver of the property would then begin to collect rents and set aside monies to make necessary repairs.”¹⁴ The benefits for the community were great, argued *Argus* editor Frank Mitchell. In an editorial written in late January 1966, Mitchell argued that the bill before the board was common sense: “It appears to be the most effective method yet devised to assure that the badly deteriorated areas of the community are not allowed to grow worse,” as slumlords profited off the poor.”¹⁵ The bill was debated, passed, and signed in spring of 1966.

By early January of 1967, with the backing of McEwen and the support of JVL membership, Macler Shepard appealed to the city building commissioner to conduct a thorough investigation into substandard housing in the Yeatman neighborhood. To make their case, JVL activists cited key problems which were known violations of the newly enacted ordinances guarding against slum properties, lack of hot water plumbing and sinks.¹⁶ Shepard was optimistic that the city would work with JVL according to Schwartzentruber, with the bond issue fight fresh in everyone’s mind and with the group’s previous good track record with the Beautification program, Schwartzentruber and others including Shepard thought this time the city would listen

¹³ “The Slum Landlord Bill,” *St. Louis Argus*, January 7, 1966. 2b.

¹⁴ Mitchell, Frank. “The Slum Receivership Bill,” editorial *St. Louis Argus* January 28, 1966.

¹⁵ Mitchell, Frank. “The Slum Landlord Bill” 2b

¹⁶ “Residential Inspection Begins in Yeatman Area,” January 4th, 1967, *Post-Dispatch*. 7A.

to the petitions of the Yeatman residents.¹⁷ In analyzing the letters from Schwartzentruber to his brethren in the Mennonite Church it seems as though the city was in fact treating JVL as a legitimate community voice, inviting them to meetings to discuss the forthcoming Model Cities legislation that would be targeting the near-northside, including Yeatman.¹⁸ While Schwartzentruber's letter mentions the meeting to discuss Model Cities it also makes mention of continued visits by representatives of JVL to the City Planner's office—including one where the city official in charge of the Housing Authority, Irv Dagan was "very bitter, almost hostile" towards the JVL petitioners. The reason for the visits to the office while initially unclear, were later determined to be related to residual fears in the JVL community that Yeatman was slated to be the target of slum clearance—an outgrowth of some of their fears around the bonds that were designated for "community renewal."¹⁹ However once the JVL representatives had made contact with the city commissioner in charge of implementing neighborhood surveys and enforcing the housing code they found themselves little in the way of answers. The commissioner on multiple occasions where JVL representatives visited his office, refused to conduct a survey in Yeatman. According to Speller, the building commissioner didn't think that code enforcement was an appropriate solution to apply to houses in areas like Yeatman which had been designated by the city's planning body as a "slum." Rather, the commissioner replied to Shepard and JVL, "Inspections would only be carried out on the basis of 'a specific complaint, rather than on a community wide basis' or what is known as "concentrated code enforcement."²⁰ The rebuff was

¹⁷ Interview with Hubert Schwartzentruber by the Author, December 2019.

¹⁸ Letter from Hubert Schwartzentruber to Simon Gingerich, November 23, 1966. 1. (INSERT FULL MENNONITE ARCHIVE CITATION)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Speller, Mo. "Enforcing Community Development: St. Louis and Jeff-Vander-Lou, Inc., 1964-1974," Paper for SACRPH October 2018, Cleveland, Ohio.

met with confusion and accusations of unfairness on the part of the city officials, yet Shepard and his organization did not give in.

Yet again, like with the bonds, Yeatman was being passed over. This time, the commissioner went a step further to say that not only would he not enforce the law in Yeatman, to do so would be inappropriate because Yeatman was, in his judgement, too far gone. Shepard was unmoved, he was determined to see the city enforce its ordinances equitably, even in areas of the city that planners had already discounted. He reasoned that if the city building commissioner would not listen to one organization's petition for inspections, demands made by dozens of individual complaints from Yeatman would have to be addressed, slum or no slum. Thus, JVL activists once more mobilized, going door to door through the cold winter of February 1967, gathering close to 300 individual complaints from renters in the neighborhood who lived in properties owned by known slumlords.²¹ Shepard was counting on the volume of complaints to move the commissioner to act. This time, the commissioner did, but not in the way that Shepard had foreseen.

Over several weeks, the city building commissioner inspected streets in the area around Bethesda Mennonite Church, the heart of what JVL considered their "turf." However, the commissioner didn't simply inspect homes where residents had filed a complaint. He went door to door even to the homes owned by residents. His judgement painted a dim picture for the Yeatman neighborhood. Most of the homes were not up to code. The judgement went far beyond what even McEwen had noted in his walkthrough of the neighborhood just weeks earlier. According to the building commissioner's recommendations for the first seventy buildings that

²¹ "Handling of Slum Report on Sheridan Area Criticized" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 28th, 1967. 10.

were subject to renters' complaints, nearly all fell well below code and would be recommended for condemnation for occupancy.²² Worse still, many additional inspections of homes where JVL members lived and owned the property were well below the minimal code requirements, and they would be recommended for condemnation. Shepard and others argued this was not merely a scorched earth approach, but a targeted and politically motivated action undertaken by the building commissioner to silence or worse, to evict, JVL members from the area. Evictions and demolitions were not part of Shepard's vision. He was hoping for the opportunity to rehabilitate the neighborhood. At the same time, Shepard contended, properties owned by absentee landlords, those who were disinterested in the neighborhood beyond collecting rent, were overlooked, and allowed to remain unkempt and vacant. Explaining the organization's frustration in how this scenario was playing out, Shepard told the *Post*, "The people are living in ratholes. The buildings are structurally sound if the owners are willing to spend the money to fix them. Many of them have been vacant for three years... We cannot stand another Mill Creek with all the demolition. We want to get a rehabilitation program in the area."²³

Shepard felt as strongly as he did in part because of the looming problem of displacement if the commissioner were to in fact go ahead and issue condemnations, even in cases where residents owned their properties. The City's inspection implied a terrible cost to the neighborhood if it chose to proceed with the evictions: "The city estimated that, if carried out, the condemnation proceedings would force 1,000 families to be relocated in less than 30 days and described the prospect as "a crisis both for the families and for the city."²⁴

²² "Handling of Slum Report on Sheridan Area Criticized" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 10

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Speller, Mo. "Enforcing Community Development: St. Louis and Jeff-Vander-Lou, Inc., 1964-1974," 8.

Shepard claimed that mass condemnation would achieve the opposite effect of JVL's goal; it would be demoralizing and, based upon past experience, instead of bringing vacant properties up to code, most landlords would likely sooner demolish them.²⁵ We know this to be true thanks to Speller's research, which confirms Shepard's fears; large landlords in the neighborhood were already communicating to the mayor their intention not to bring their properties up to code. He writes:

Charles Liebert, Vice President of the Property Owners Guild of Greater St. Louis, and soon to be Deputy Executive Director of the Urban Renewal Authority, wrote, "The notices that have been received by members of the Guild thus far are impossible to comply with and all of the owners declare that they would abandon the property rather than make these repairs."²⁶ Liebert stressed that since the Yeatman neighborhood was being considered for the Model City Program, it was most prudent to "wait and see" whether that program might provide other solutions to the housing problems in the neighborhood. In closing, Liebert requested a meeting with the mayor to discuss the property owned by the Property Owners Guild, saying, "I would venture that members of this organization own or manage approximately 80% of the investment real estate in the City of St. Louis."²⁷

Neither party wanted to move forward with mass condemnation. It was not profitable for landlords to lose their investments before the Model Cities program became a reality, a program which had hoped would bring in money for housing stabilization. Nor was it productive for Shepard and JVL to inflict self-harm upon their neighborhood by triggering a wave of displacement. A striking finding from Speller's research shows that the city met privately with Liebert and other large landlords in an attempt to encourage them to meet some basic code improvements: "The Mayor also held a special meeting with "a small representative committee of landlords" to discuss strategies to deal with "the tenants' needs for safe and sanitary housing while at that same time recognizing the economic problems that are involved in the

²⁵ "Handling of Slum Report on Sheridan Area Criticized" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 10

²⁶Speller, Mo. "Enforcing Community Development: St. Louis and Jeff-Vander-Lou, Inc., 1964-1974," 9

²⁷ *Ibid.* 10

improvements of such property.”²⁸ While not enforcing code requirements at the municipal level, encouraging slumlords to bring properties up to code was at least a small acknowledgement by the city that Yeatman had a problem that could at least be addressed with a modicum of investment by private interests.

To further deescalate the situation between the city, the slumlords, and JVL, Mayor Cervantes approached Macler Shepard with a compromise. The city was involved in a proposal to HUD, asking to participate in the Model Cities Program. It was revealed that landlords had privately agreed to work towards bringing their properties up to code as part of this initiative. Now, the city suggested it would empower JVL to author the Yeatman neighborhood’s housing rehabilitation program, if JVL would back down from its campaign to enforce the housing code against landlords. Shepard immediately accepted the deal. Now, not only was JVL assured that large property owners were going to address renter complaints about their properties in Yeatman, but JVL, just a few months after its inception, would be given authority to create its own vision of housing rehabilitation, at the neighborhood-wide sale, with City Hall’s approval. It was a win-win, and a miraculous turnaround from a situation that nearly became very ugly.²⁹

It was an interesting turn of events considering that just a few months prior, Spotts had written a letter to Secretary Weaver of the Housing and Urban Development department, demanding to know whether the city’s rumored participation in Model Cities would lead to further displacement and urban renewal. The announcement of JVL’s agreement to lead this effort came in the press in early March, outlining that it was seen as a practical end to the building commissioner episode, one which allowed JVL to save face and to do as it had been

²⁸ Ibid. 10

pushing to do since 1965, plan Yeatman's neighborhood renewal at the grassroots level. A statement released to the *Post* stated, "Both sides agreed that hasty enforcement of the minimum housing code would force an unprecedented relocation problem."³⁰

Speller writes that in fact, rather than solely a product of JVL, the plan submitted for the Yeatman neighborhood's Model Cities program also had the involvement of large real estate stakeholders in Yeatman:

Twenty resident volunteers, and Model City staff worked together on an intensive "social and architectural survey" of Yeatman. Jeff-Vander-Lou, Inc., leaders, and Model Cities staff compiled this data into a proposal to HUD, "which expressed the plans residents made to solve problems of their own neighborhood." Macler Shepard, the Director of Model Cities, real estate broker Charles Liebert, submitted the plan together in Washington DC on March 31, 1967, just weeks after residents and landlords met with city administrators.³¹

Shepard was at times criticized for his lack of organizational skills. Taken together, the events of 1966 and early 1967 demonstrate that he was not without a degree of organizational ability. He could mobilize his membership to affect city wide politics and bring pressure to effect change at the neighborhood level. As a result of these two important feats, Shepard and JVL's profile expanded to such a level that they became the politically recognized voice of Yeatman.

Of this Siegel states:

Residents' experience protesting the bond issue taught them two important lessons. First, their protests could force the municipal government to make concessions to the neighborhood. Second, staking a claim based on neighborhood residence, or place, was

³⁰ "Rehabilitation sought in a block slum area," *Post-Dispatch*, March 14th, 1967. 25. It is noteworthy that while the *Post* reports this event as late as the second week of March a letter authored by JeffVanderLou and Macler Shepard addressed to the businessmen of the Franklin Avenue Business District dated February 28th informs the community of the agreement to allow JeffVanderLou authority over the Yeatman Model Cities Plan.

³¹ Speller, Mo. "Enforcing Community Development: St. Louis and Jeff-Vander-Lou, Inc., 1964-1974," 10-11

an effective means of consolidating support and asserting authority that would translate to control in War on Poverty planning.³²

By the end of spring in 1967 Shepard had made impressive gains in improving his reputation within City Hall becoming seen not as the troublesome meddler that Cervantes and the press had labeled him as during the fight over the bonds in 1966, but instead as a reliable partner in community development. True to his pragmatic nature, Shepard was willing to put the events of 1966 behind him, if the mayor kept his word and allowed JVL to take a leading role in the Yeatman neighborhood Model Cities project. However, as the next chapter shows, the rise of JVL in Yeatman development politics would begin to heighten tensions in the existing HDC-Urban League operated anti-poverty program in the wider Yeatman area. Was JVL the real voice of the Yeatman neighborhood? Or was Macler Shepard overestimating JVL's reach? The events during the summer of 1967 would have a tremendous effect on how JVL would relate to anti-poverty programming at the municipal level for rest of its organizational lifetime.

³² Siegel, Sarah Rachel. "'By the People Most Affected': Model Cities, Citizen Control, and the Broken Promises of Urban Renewal." Washington University Open Scholarship. Accessed October 24, 2020. https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/1759/. 32.

Chapter 7

Who speaks for Yeatman?

Moving into the spring and summer months of 1967, the wider Yeatman neighborhood began to question exactly how accurate Shepard and JVL's claims of popular support actually were. As JVL sought to represent itself as the neighborhood's voice in matters of federal anti-poverty assistance spending, new voices threatened to undermine Shepard and JVL's assertion that they alone spoke for Yeatman. This chapter explores Shepard's attempts to centralize anti-poverty programmatic planning in Yeatman under the banner of JVL. To make this possible, JVL had to contend with two major established organizations working in the Yeatman area, the supervisory authority of the city's anti-poverty program, the Human Development Corporation (HDC), and its partner organization, The Urban League. In challenging these organizations for control of Yeatman's anti-poverty programming, Shepard and JVL began to clarify and refine their goal: total resident control of anti-poverty funding for Yeatman, under the name of JVL Inc.

...

By 1966, the War on Poverty had arrived in St. Louis, supervised by the Community Action Agency (CAA), The Human Development Corporation. Despite problems which plagued the HDC in its infancy,¹ by 1967 it had established a system of centralized control over participating neighborhoods and municipalities. The organization had to balance how much

¹ See Locke, Locke, William Paul. *A History and Analysis of the Origin and Development of the Human Development Corporation of Metropolitan St. Louis, Missouri, 1962-1970*. St. Louis, MO, 1974. Locke's research covers the first decade and more of the HDC's work supervising the city's anti-poverty programs from 1964-. Locke's research benefits from interviews with a number of former HDC administrators as well as use of HDC internal materials which are assumed lost since the organization was dissolved in a storm of public allegations of misuse of money.

authority it could actually give professional planners and social workers on its payroll, with public opinion. This was especially true in one matter that was frequently discussed in the press, how did the HDC encompassed the OEO ideal of “maximum feasible citizen participation?” To demonstrate the organization’s commitment to citizen participation in anti-poverty program planning and implementation in areas like Yeatman, HDC chairman Samuel Bernstein created within the organization’s target area dozens of distinct neighborhood-based offices in the city, calling these offices “neighborhood stations.” In part because the HDC could not micromanage each neighborhood’s problems itself, the neighborhood stations’ “decentralized” arrangement allowed residents and HDC staff to brainstorm, design, and implement social programming specific to each neighborhood’s problems. In some cases, such as the Yeatman neighborhood, the HDC contracted with outside organizations such as the Urban League to manage neighborhood stations and programming.² While the neighborhood station approach was created as a means of communication between residents and anti-poverty staff, bringing staff and program resources into community-based offices sometimes actually created distance between neighborhood office staff and their supervisors, especially in the case of the Delmar and Fairfax stations in the Yeatman neighborhood program, operated by the League.

As early as spring of 1966, staff members on the payroll of the Urban League in the Delmar neighborhood station closest to The Handle began to attend and participate in conversations about neighborhood organizing with Macler Shepard and other leaders in the 19th Ward Beautification Committee.³ The Yeatman station manager in contact with Shepard was

³ Correspondence from Rev. Hubert Schwartzentruber to Nelson Kauffman. October 10th, 1966. Box 1, Folder 36. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana

Fred Smith, a highly skilled organizer working through Washington University's Brown School of Social Work. Joining Smith was his young white assistant, James Sporleder, also a Brown School alum and organizer working with housing causes in St. Louis through organizations such as Greater St. Louis Freedom of Residence.⁴ In Shepard, these organizers found a natural leader, someone whom they felt was receptive to technical advice but also strongly motivated not by personal desire for power, but by his vision of his neighborhood's overall success.⁵ According to Beverly Sporleder, James Sporleder's widow, who later became a longtime office manager for JVL, James admired Shepard for his natural abilities to lead. Shepard was quiet and humble, exceedingly approachable to every person who would seek an audience with him. Yet he could be, when passions ran high, charismatic, and convincing without breaking a sweat.⁶

As early as 1966, when the organizers of the 19th Ward Beautification Committee began to debate the possibility of fighting the city's 1966 bond issues, Smith and Sporleder, as well as the remaining Yeatman neighborhood staff under Smith's supervision, committed themselves and their station's resources to aiding Shepard. Immediately after this, according to Sporleder, multiple warnings from the program director for the Urban League arrived at the Yeatman neighborhood station, warning the office staff against participating in political activities.⁷ They ignored these memos.⁸ The degree to which the Yeatman staff provided resources to Shepard and

⁴ Sporleder, Beverly, Interview by the author, October 30th, 2019. While Smith would have varying roles in JVL over time, including positions on the board of directors and often speaking on behalf of JVL at city hall he later moved on from organizing activities to take on a full-time role within the Brown School. Sporleder's life was largely dedicated to work for Shepard, serving off and on again in roles of administrator for the organization until 1973 when he became Shepard's primary office manager and assistant a role he served in until at least the late 1980s.

⁵ Sporleder, Beverly, Interview by the author, October 30th, 2019

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Watson, Michael. "Jeff Vander Lou: Against All Odds." *FOCUS/Midwest* 12, no. 75, 1977. 21.

⁸ The tone of memos sent by League supervisors including Rev. Paul Smith and Director Bill Douthit reach a peak in late October and November of 1966, both before and after the election on the city bonds. In one memo Douthit writes a scathing rebuke of a "rumor" traced back to Smith's neighborhood station which accused a prominent member of the African American community, Frankie Freeman, of being either slumlords themselves or tied to

other Yeatman activists to aid in their challenge to the bonds is unclear; however, memos distributed between Smith and League director Bill Douthit describe Douthit's frustration with the activities undertaken by many in Yeatman.

While newspaper accounts seem to indicate Urban League support for JVL's early 1967 challenge to the city, its challenge to enforce housing codes on slumlords, a fraught relationship between JVL and the Urban League surfaced publicly for the first time in April of that year. On April 16th the *Post-Dispatch's* front page announced, "Urban League Drops Control of Anti-Poverty Project Here," wherein JVL accused the Urban League of being ineffective, and in its defense, the League argued back that it could not operate on such pithy budgets.⁹ Florence A. Spotts told the *Post*, "We don't feel the Urban League did one thing in this area for the poor...Its program set up nothing for the poor and it didn't involve the poor."¹⁰ Far from limited to just the sentiments of JVL organizers, Kerstein writes that complaints with the handling of neighborhood programming by the Urban League in other neighborhoods—like Easton-Taylor and Old North, demonstrated growing frustration with Douthit and Rev. Smith's supervision. He writes, "'There were other complaints. The NAC of the Urban League's Easton-Taylor station wrote to Bernstein in April 1967, that "in exchange for our service, our programs have been plundered, our elected officials abused, our clergy profaned, and our needs and desires ignored." And again, "At the September 22 1967 CAC meeting, representatives of Carr-Central, Grace Hill, and Wells-Goodfellow another Urban League station, all voiced complaints against their respective delegate agencies concerning such matters as hiring practices, fiscal mismanagement and a general lack of

family who owned slum properties. Despite an increasing harshness to Douthit and Smith's to the Yeatman workers no terminations were pursued in 1966.

⁹ Jacobs, Richard. "Urban League Drops Control of Anti-Poverty Project Here," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 17th, 1967. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

citizen involvement."¹¹ In the weeks leading up to the *Post* story, Fred Smith resigned, with Sporleder and several others following soon after in response to continued efforts they felt by League supervisors to harm JVL's organizing activities.¹² Kerstein presents this situation differently stating that in response to not working for the League endorsed bond issues that staff at the Yeatman station friendly to JVL were outright fired,

The refusal by a number of staff employed in the Urban League's Yeatman Gateway Center to back the bond issue proposals was a major aspect of a series of events which led to their being dismissed by the League. These staff members belonged to a community group called Jeff-Vander-Lou. This organization voiced opposition to a number of Urban League practices. It charged for example, that the League had forced the cancellation of a proposed action against a negligent landlord when it was learned that she was an influential citizen.¹³

Outlining JVL's specific charges against the Urban League, one former station staffer stated that the League had not performed services for which it had been contracted with the HDC; it had failed to develop a meaningful program to help residents; it had not maintained the facility of the Yeatman neighborhood...it had blocked a voter education program, and it had muzzled anti-poverty workers when a campaign against slum lords allegedly implicated a prominent Negro.¹⁴

Douthit defended the League's work in Yeatman, highlighting various program achievements which he said disproved JVL's allegations. Douthit noted, "351 Yeatman residents were placed in jobs...58 enrolled in the League's clerical training course...41 placed in a League

¹¹ Robert J. Kerstein, "The Political Consequences of Federal Intervention: The Economic Opportunity Act and Model Cities in the City of St. Louis" (Washington University in St. Louis, 1975). 139.

¹² Letters available in the organizational archive for the Urban League at Washington University however suggest it may have actually been, in at least one case—Fred Smith—a resignation. **See:** Douthit *Correspondence between Fredrick Smith and William Stix and William Douthit*, March 3rd, 1967. Urban League of St. Louis Records, 1910-1986. Box 6a, Folder 6. University Archives, Washington University, St. Louis

¹³ Kerstein, Robert. *The Political Consequences of Federal Intervention*, 138

¹⁴ Jacobs, Richard. "Urban League Drops Control of Anti-Poverty Project Here," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 17th, 1967 22.

pre-vocational training project and 60 served by a League on-the-job training program.”¹⁵

Despite these achievements, Douthit’s words were more of a parting shot than evidence of the League’s intent to stay the course in Yeatman; in April, Douthit and the League abandoned their management of Yeatman’s neighborhood stations. Although short-lived, this was a victory for JVL. In addition to the demand that the League’s contract with the HDC be terminated, JVL insisted that the League also be audited.

The Human Development Corporation had a different agenda. The HDC stated that counter to Shepard’s wishes, the HDC would not be audit the League. Rather, it would investigate complaints lodged by those citizens in the greater Yeatman neighborhood who decried JVL’s influence over Yeatman programming.¹⁶ This came as a surprise to JVL. According to the HDC, the decision was not personal. Federal guidelines required that neighborhoods receiving CAP money be represented by a broad coalition of neighbors. Alphonse Lynch, whom the HDC quickly appointed to lead the HDC’s Neighborhood Service Program (NSP) over Yeatman, claimed that Shepard approached him directly to petition that JVL “be made the designate agency to administer the NSP.” Lynch added that he had explained to Shepard that JVL could only be granted this position if it allowed its board members to be voted on by the larger Yeatman neighborhood.¹⁷ Shepard declined.¹⁸

At this point, a series of elections was planned in order to determine exactly what representative body (60) would compose Yeatman’s new HDC-operated neighborhood advisory council. According to JVL’s story, both as written in organizational literature and as repeated by

¹⁵ Ibid, 22.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Tye, Donald G., and Joseph L. Zarefsky. *The Yeatman District Community Corporation in St. Louis: a Description of Anti-Poverty Innovations*. St. Louis, MO, 1973. 8-9.

¹⁸ Tye, 9.

Schwartzentruber and Miller, the elections were conducted with the purpose of diluting JVL's power in the Yeatman neighborhood.¹⁹ In response, JVL pressured the HDC in the press and raised complaints with the regional office of HUD, decrying what it saw as a power grab to stifle citizen control in Yeatman.

The HDC argued that it was not attempting to suppress JVL but was merely following federal directives for neighborhood advisory councils, ensuring that they were composed of democratically elected neighborhood residents. New federal guidelines monitoring the administration of CAP programs emphasized creating diverse advisory councils. The advisory council was a slight modification of the HDC model operated in Yeatman previously by the Urban League. It was centralized versus spread out across two or three substations; by its nature it necessitated an at-large elected body. Also adding confusion for residents like Shepard was the HDC's decision to create a second citizen participation body, the CAC, or central advisory committee, to provide another layer of oversight. William Locke, whose study of the HDC forms the most complete analysis of the St. Louis CAP, explains,

Neighborhood advisory councils composed of residents, had been established in each district to express their concerns and to provide advice to the district coordinator on perceived needs. Each neighborhood advisory council (NAC) sent representatives to the recently formed CAC (central advisory council) which was to act as a clearing house for individual NAC needs and concerns, and to advise top staff and the Board on overall Corporation policies and programs.²⁰

Locke adds that the creation of these new bodies added more confusion and more frustration to a growing problem with the local CAP, because now residents felt more distant from positions of influence over programming. He writes,

¹⁹ Schwartzentruber, Hubert, interview by the author, August 12th 2018, and Miller, Cecil Miller, interview by the author May 20th 2020.

²⁰ Locke, William Paul. *A History and Analysis of the Origin and Development of the Human Development Corporation of Metropolitan St. Louis, Missouri, 1962-1970*. St. Louis, MO, 1974. 256.

“However the development of this mechanism did not solve the issue of citizen participation for the HDC. Instead, once these citizen groups were established, they began to demand a greater voice in policy and decision making. This is not surprising in view of the fact for the first time in their lives, the poor through a national mandate, had been given a voice in matters affecting them. In a very short time, the poor who had never been confronted with such an opportunity before, made it clear that a mere advisory role was not enough.”²¹

In August of 1967, representatives from HUD and the Office of Economic Opportunity met with JVL, Model Cities, and HDC officials to discuss the JVL’s complaints. Despite their hope that appealing to the federal government would help their cause, Shepard and JVL were met with pushback. Jack Harrington, representing the regional office for the government’s anti-poverty programming, stated, “The federal position is that there must be democratic representation. The details are for the local communities to work out.”²² Yet further complicating the feud was that JVL was not entirely without its supporters; the Model Cities Agency had already publicly acknowledged JVL as the representative authority for the Yeatman neighborhood.²³ In order to resolve the conflict between the HDC and JVL, the government finally ordered the election of new NAC representatives.

The first two elections were contested by JVL, which argued that the elections were not legitimate because they were improperly organized and not widely advertised.²⁴ In August, the HDC sponsored a third and final election, using HDC personnel and resources to finance the election and provide greater legitimacy. The third election resulted in a devastating loss for JVL, which only captured 14 of 60 seats.²⁵ Those elected from JVL included Jesse Shepard (Macler’s wife), Cecil Miller, and Minesteen McDonald (a future longtime JVL board member).²⁶ Going

²¹ *Ibid.* 256

²² “US Stresses Citizen Role in Yeatman Plan” *Post-Dispatch*, August 17, 1967. 24.

²³ “Mayor Renames McMillan to Board of HDC” *Post-Dispatch* April 29, 1967. 7.

²⁴ Tye, 9.

²⁵ Miller, Cecil, interview by the author, May 20th, 2020.

²⁶ “Yeatman Center Advisors Elected,” *Post-Dispatch* Aug 31, 1967. 102.

forward from 1967, it was rare for JVL to capture more than a handful of Yeatman board seats, though according to Miller for programs such as the Summer Youth Program and to a limited degree, housing development, JVL still worked in coordination with Yeatman.²⁷

Miller recalls a wide spread belief that JVL was the victim of a coordinated effort to diminish its organizational power,²⁸ adding that Shepard and Spotts pointed out JVL's opposition to the bond issues in 1966, a political cause the Urban League and the HDC publicly supported.²⁹ Shepard himself attributed the Urban League's animosity towards JVL and its supporters like Fred Smith and Sporleder, because of their work against the 1966 bond issue.³⁰ Because JVL succeeded in in defeating the bonds, it was felt that it was now being squeezed, both by the League and later HDC, as punishment for its political engagement and to send a message to other would-be challengers seeking to challenge an 'establishment' controlled anti-poverty effort.³¹

According to Miller and Schwartzentruber there was yet another layer to this ongoing conflict. Shepard felt as if attempts to undermine JVL were specifically due to beliefs that Shepard and those around him in JVL were somehow less than competent. By summer of 1967, Shepard had been involved in leading or participating in community work for close to a decade, while managing his upholstery business on the side. The success of the 19th Ward Beautification Committee in programming, leading so successfully that the mayor himself visited the neighborhood for a press-photo op, suggests that Shepard was, in fact, a significant and capable leader of neighborhood wide activities. More broadly, the defeat of the bond issue had shown that beyond the boundaries of the 19th ward, Shepard was capable of affecting city-wide politics,

²⁷ Schwartzentruber, Hubert, interview by the author, November 21st, 2019.

²⁸ Miller, Cecil, interview by the author, May 20th, 2020.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Poverty Program Inquiry Sought," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 23, 1967. 6.

³¹ Interview with Cecil Miller by the author, April 12th, 2021.

if he so chose. Given this background, Miller contends that to be told by the HDC that a faceless body in Washington DC (The OEO) would not accept JVL leadership over the Yeatman neighborhood advisory council was insulting to Shepard and JVL leadership.³² How could a body that had no understanding of JVL's past work hold such authority over local affairs, and why would the HDC go to such lengths, through multiple elections, to undermine JVL's standing?

As the title of this thesis implies, at the very core of Shepard's work and worldview was the ideal of good housing. To achieve this, Shepard would work through JVL to emphasize programs of taking back properties from absentee landlords and rehabilitating the housing in the area for Yeatman neighbors. It was a radical departure from previous programs in St. Louis, including the construction of large complexes of public housing which necessitated the mass-clearance of old housing, like the one Shepard had occupied prior to move to Pruitt Igoe. But who profited from this process of creating neighborhoods ripe for urban renewal and mass clearance? Macler Shepard would answer "slumlords." In a letter to the Presbyterian Church in 1983, Shepard outlines the framework of a conspiracy composed of two primary partners, politicians and slumlords, that JVL fought against to regain control of their neighborhood, writing,

The political system, influenced by slum real estate dealers and related carpet baggers, was destroying the community. The economic system, while profiting the politicians and slum dealers, was stripping the JVL neighborhood people of gainful employment, decent housing, critical city services and a healthy economy. Slum Dealers owned 85% of our properties. City hall allowed them windfall profits by not requiring even the most basic code standards of running water...federal urban renewal funds were ready to complete the economic rip-off by buying dilapidated structures, displace the people again in order to "rebuild an ideal community." Politics and economics, hand in hand, doing business

³² Interview with Cecil Miller by the author, February 22nd, 2019.

and making profit on the one hand while destroying the buildings, social fabric, and soul of another minority community on the other.³³

With this framework in mind, Shepard felt passionately that the forces pushing for JVL's ouster from leadership over the new Yeatman organization were very likely connected to the political and real estate lobbies. On one hand, as Miller has noted on several occasions, Shepard viewed his refusal to run as a Democrat for political office in the early 1960s likely made him a target at least within black politics. Adding weight to this was Shepard's friendship with Bob Morgan, a black Republican businessman in Yeatman who was friendly towards JVL's interests while briefly chairing the Yeatman group in early 1967.³⁴ Still, this seems a tenuous explanation. The advisory council was not political, and Shepard had already been working closely with Democratic Mayor, Alfonso Cervantes for several years. At this point in JVL's organizational lifetime, Shepard had not yet used JVL or his other organizations for explicitly political ends beyond the bond issue, so the assumption that ward-based politicians held a grudge is extremely hard to prove.

There does exist some circumstantial evidence to warrant further analysis of the possibility that those in the real estate business might be driving the HDC's effort to oust JVL and Shepard. The previous chapter's discussion of JVL's campaign to force landlords to bring properties up to code suggests that there were grounds for these parties to fear for their investment so long as JVL had authority over the spending of anti-poverty dollars. As stated in Shepard's above description of how he saw landlords as intentionally holding down the quality of their housing so as to one day cash out through urban renewal, JVL's efforts in early 1967 would be fresh in the minds of the real estate lobby in the summer months of 1967. Adding to

³³ Correspondence between Macler Shepard, President of JeffVanderLou Inc and unnamed recipients at the Elijah Lovejoy Parish, dated April 18, 1983. JeffVanderLou Inc Organizational office papers.

³⁴ Miller, Cecil Interview with the author, May 20th, 2020.

this was continued vagaries around what exactly the Yeatman Corporation could do; could it legislate at the neighborhood level; could it enforce housing codes at the neighborhood level; could it use eminent domain to take properties from slumlords? Large property owners in the neighborhood would only have one point of reference, Shepard's activities with the building commissioner. That may well have been enough reason for them to pressure political allies to force the HDC to marginalize JVL's authority.

Yet from the perspective of others in Yeatman, including Alfonse Lynch, the incoming HDC advisor for the neighborhood, JVL was simply looking for a conspiracy which did not exist. Recall Lynch had offered JVL status as the operating agency for Yeatman programming. But to meet requirements by the OEO, the JVL board had to be elected at large from across Yeatman; Shepard had declined. From Lynch's perspective, the loss in the subsequent election merely proved the necessity of the elections, indicating that JVL did not represent the interests of all in Yeatman. PT Bosley, another Yeatman resident and longtime Yeatman board member, agreed with Lynch's sentiments, "If JVL had won the election they would have assumed control of Yeatman...but they lost badly. Their claim that they were run by all Yeatman residents and that the district was all behind them was proven otherwise."³⁵

When confronted with this observation that JVL had exaggerated the group's popularity across the neighborhood of Yeatman at large, Miller opines that this conclusion and the election results are suspect due to the evidence. What evidence? Miller contends that the fact HDC held multiple elections until JVL influence was significantly marginalized demonstrates a bias on the part of the HDC.³⁶ No evidence, however, exists to show that JVL sought to block or protest the

³⁵ Tye, 2.

³⁶ Miller, Cecil interview by the author, February 22nd, 2019.

final election. In fact, we know that JVL understood the stakes at play and was a signatory to the election process which would ultimately result in its marginalization, according to an HDC-JVL compact signed by JVL office manager Edward Truax in August of 1967.³⁷ In the contemporary retelling of this struggle published in the 1978 wrap-up report published by the National Commission on Neighborhoods, of which Shepard was a member, the discussion of the HDC-JVL election contest repeats the belief of JVL activists that had been sidelined, with the implication that it was intentional. The report concludes that after accepting defeat, JVL organizers may have attempted to adjust, and to work within the larger NAC body, using its small party of electors to try and steer programming decisions—but ultimately found itself incapable of achieving this.

With their influence over the new Yeatman neighborhood advisory council significantly reduced after the summer elections, Shepard and the leadership of JVL had to make a decision that would shape their organization's future path. Would they remain a minority party in the larger Yeatman advisory council and attempt to force their way of thinking on others, or would they leave Yeatman behind and attempt to pave a path that was purely defined by the interests of those who called themselves JVL?

³⁷ Correspondence between William Biggs, Chief Program Development and Planning Coordinator for HDC to Jim Masters, Office of Economic Opportunity, Region VI, August 24, 1967, JeffVanderLou Inc. Office. The contents of this letter which was found in a filing cabinet in the informal office space maintained by the JeffVanderLou organization pertains to the HDC work to comply with OEO demands for the new Yeatman Neighborhood Advisory Council to be a representative body and the procedure whereby NAC members would be chosen through an election.

Chapter 8

Going it Alone

Despite losing a significant number of seats on the Yeatman advisory council, and thus its organizational control over the agenda and spending power of the Yeatman organization, JVL pushed on. Shepard and Spotts remained convinced that their cause was just: a resident-driven program not framed by the rules of OEO or HDC or even Model Cities but defined by the members of JVL who lived and worked in the neighborhood of Yeatman itself. Yet moving forward, JVL faced a new set of problems. Working outside of the HDC program, JVL had a thinning staff (primarily composed of those previously employed by the Urban League in Yeatman who were sympathetic to JVL), and more importantly, a mounting funding problem. Against this backdrop, was ongoing work on JVL's first residential rehabilitation project, began in early spring using money raised from a canvass of neighborhood businessmen. If the rehab were completed, Shepard argued, it would prove the worth of JVL's grassroots, neighborhood planned and implemented rehabilitation program. It would likely open the group to more resources from both the business and non-profit community. This chapter explores how Shepard sought to manage the mounting problems facing JVL by calling once again upon his allies in the Mennonite Church for help. Important to this discussion is a further analysis of Schwartzentruber's own deepening belief in the need for his Church to become more invested in social action, and, specifically working with JVL, to help stave off irrelevance. Against this, Schwartzentruber found himself faced once more with resistance from those in his own church who felt still resistant to apply Mennonite resources to problems not specifically aligned with Mennonite mission building goals.

...

In the waning months of the summer of 1967, JVL was organizationally in disarray. It lacked a budget, kept sparse records and receipts, and was losing what was left of its all-volunteer office staff. Competing for the time of these volunteers (many of whom were formerly employed by the Yeatman Station operated by the Urban League) was their own career aspirations, for Fred Smith, it was his role with Washington University, and for James Sporleder, his rise at the integrationist housing organization, Freedom of Residence.¹ Remaining with JVL, however, was one former Urban League holdout, Edward Truax. Truax, a college graduate whose former job was with the City Health Department was described in the *St. Joseph News-Press* as working both days and nights in a sparsely decorated office adjacent to the Handle, the “nerve center” for the JVL organization, with little pay.² According to Schwartzentruber, the shortage of help was compromising the organization’s ability to accomplish its work. Schwartzentruber notes in a letter to his brethren, “We are at a very low ebb in [administrative] leadership for the organization. Mr. Truax...is not working out very well. It is clear to me that he does not have the leadership that we need to make this an ongoing program...Mr. Shepard works hard but needs someone to do organization [office] work for him.”³ With this the reality facing the organization, the decision was made to seek out a full-time replacement for Truax, one who would understand his role as an office manager.⁴ In this period JVL’s future was uncertain. It

¹ Sporleder, Beverly, interview by the author, St. Louis, Missouri, October 30th, 2019.

² “Café is headquarters for St. Louis Anti-Slum Project” *St. Joseph News Press* June 7 1967. 9.

³ Schwartzentruber, Hubert, letter to Simon, Paul and Ivan, June 14, 1967, Hubert Kauffman, 1964-1968. Box 1, Folder 36. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana.

⁴ An important clarification for the reader to clarify this passage. As Schwartzentruber’s letters reveal, and Miller has offered in contemporary interviews, the situation with Truax largely involved his desire to fill two roles—both that as the office manager (in charge of bookkeeping and clerical work) as well as leading strategy and planning. The latter, according to Miller, was an encroachment on the role Shepard, Spotts and others felt was reserved for neighborhood residents. In Schwartzentruber’s mind, what JVL needed was someone who could capably manage

needed to find new ways of getting money, outside of the HDC or Model Cities, both to pay its staff and also to begin to invest in housing rehabilitation and social programming. With Sporleder wrapped up in Freedom of Residence and Smith fully invested in his work for the Brown School, Shepard asked Rev. Schwartzentruber to find a capable office manager for JVL from the ranks of the Mennonite Church.

The decision to approach the Mennonites for help likely was due to the already expanding role Schwartzentruber was playing within JVL, both through his individual time commitments and through his application of his church's volunteer service workers to the needs of JVL. Since at least 1960, Schwartzentruber's church had been accepting multi-year assistance from several Volunteer Service couples who traditionally were charged with helping expand the programming of the Mission church. But for couples like the Hershbergers and later the Gochenours, Garbers and Stutzmans, the couples found themselves often working two fronts, one for the Church and the other for JVL.⁵ Truex's part-time commitment had shown the needs of JVL to be something more demanding than could be accomplished through further use of an already over-extended VSer couple, thus, what Shepard asked Schwartzentruber for was a Mennonite service worker who could work full-time, committed wholly to the mission of JVL.

Schwartzentruber was eager to help. At the same time, he had grown tired of appeals to his direct supervisors at the Mission Board, who he felt were too disconnected to the realities of

the business side of JVL, while understanding it was Shepard, Spotts and black JVL members who would control the organization's agenda.

⁵ Previous iterations of this research included a more detailed analysis of the development of Bethesda's work in St. Louis as a black Mennonite mission, as such extensive interviews were made with the couples who worked locally as VSers. The Hershbergers were the first couple to have their church work merged with that of Bethesda's cooperation with JVL, following their departure Bethesda recruited a new couple, the Gochenours, who arrived in 1965 and wrote extensively in their VSer journals of doing odd jobs for JVL, including painting rooms, co-leading early educational activities for adults of the neighborhood through JVL and working the Handle Coffeehouse counter while JVL facilitated community discussions.

mission building in an urban setting. While not outright racist in their dealings with Shepard, past visits had shown Mission Board leadership to be reluctant to commit any form of direct aid to a non-Mennonite organization like JVL, who it still contended had yet to prove itself.⁶ Schwartzentruber proposed multiple ways that the Church could lend its support to JVL, if not simply financing rehabilitation work. In one of Schwartzentruber's earlier letters addressed to his direct lead just before the vote on the Bond Issue, Schwartzentruber proposed a radical idea, imploring the Church to hire Macler Shepard as part of the Bethesda staff. Introducing the idea, he writes, "Mr. Shepard knows almost everyone. He is the only real "minister" in the area. He gives the major portion of his time to simply helping people...I am proposing that we hire Mr. Shepard to be on our staff...If we are ever going to strike in this community we must do it now and look at the price tag later."⁷ Building on his proposal, Schwartzentruber lists a number of reasons explaining how the Church would benefit from Shepard's hiring, and more importantly, why having a financial stake in the community, such as through Shepard, would be in the Church's best interest. Describing Shepard's importance to the neighborhood, he writes

It is a known fact that when people have any sort of trouble they will come to him before they turn anywhere else. In fact this is the only place some people know where to turn to. He is also personally concerned that his own church is not meeting the needs of the people and is approachable. I can not stretch myself any thinner and yet we must be involved in the "thick of things." If we want a strong ongoing program we must have someone to represent the church who knows what he is doing and is committed to the church and knows the people. This, Mr. Shepard is known to be.⁸

⁶ The Mennonite Church is one of several potential investors JVL had felt would prove a reliable partner in their rehabilitation program, should they complete their first rehabilitation project (which at the time of Schwartzentruber and Shepard's work to find a Truex replacement was still under construction). In letters between Schwartzentruber and his brethren the rehabilitation project took on the appearance of an asset that would help prove the JVL organization as capable to deliver on Shepard's vision, and thus worthy of Mennonite investment.

⁷ Schwartzentruber, Hubert, correspondence from Rev. Hubert Schwartzentruber to Nelson Kauffman. October 10th, 1966. Box 1, Folder 36. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana.

⁸ Ibid, 2

He continued, “I hear people express very negative attitudes towards the church. Every conceivable organization and agency has forgotten this area. I am convinced that right now if we play our cards right we can have a tremendous influence in the community.”⁹ Concluding his letter, Schwartzentruber asks about alternative funding sources for the Yeatman cause, including use of funding from the MCC.¹⁰

The date of the above letter is important, as is the man addressed, Nelson Kauffman. Kauffman had been Schwartzentruber’s first direct supervisor since he arrived in St. Louis to lead the Mission at Bethesda in the late 1950s. Importantly, he had observed Schwartzentruber’s evolution from an evangelical church builder to one deeply concerned for building community. Initially Kauffman had tried to reel Schwartzentruber in, but he empathized with Schwartzentruber’s problems in St. Louis and eventually became an outspoken advocate. One example of this was Kauffman’s editorial in the Mennonite periodical the *Gospel Herald* where Kauffman wrote emphatically of the need to not simply talk about being responsive to the needs of the poor, but to do something and become part of the solution. In the January of 1967 editorial, Nelson Kauffman implores the Church to listen to pastors like Schwartzentruber and to not take for granted the struggles of their urban congregations. Concluding his essay, Kauffman writes, “Let us pray about it, talk about it, consult with each other about it, but by all means do something constructive about it and do it now!”¹¹ But by 1967 Schwartzentruber was under new

⁹ Ibid, 2.

¹⁰ The MCC is a body in the Mennonite Church that is concerned primarily with peace and aid work both domestically and abroad. Prior to reduced church finances (in contemporary times) the MCC would send groups of Mennonite couples to nations like Nigeria to provide services and labor similar to that of the Peace Corps. Because its work dealt more directly with volunteerism, it generally attracted more liberal church members—its leader Ivan Kauffman, discussed at length in this chapter, was one of these leaders. Kauffman often felt the Church had neglected a fuller role in movements like Civil Rights and would view the activities in St. Louis in which his friend Schwartzentruber was involved, as a unique opportunity to force the Church into a reckoning.

¹¹ Kauffman, Nelson. “To Do or Not to Do,” *The Gospel Herald*, January 3, 1967. Pg 12-13.

supervision, that of Simon Gingerich, who Schwartzentruber is reluctant to describe, save to suggest that Gingerich was largely ignorant of much of the challenges faced by pastors like Schwartzentrubers working in urban settings. Over the course of the early months of 1967, Schwartzentruber's letters reveal a growing despair at the lack of commitment by Gingerich and the Mission Board to the work of JVL, which Schwartzentruber began to frame as inseparable from the work of the Mennonite Mission, in part because of Schwartzentruber's current full commitment to building a social action-oriented ministry.¹²

Far from unique, Schwartzentruber's struggle to pull his rural church further into the emerging "urban crisis" was one shared by a number of urban missionaries from the Mennonite faith. Church periodicals including *The Mennonite* and *The Gospel Herald* were peppered with thoughtful essays in the waning years of the 1960s, debating whether or not the Church was fully committing to the right path. Should that path be one of traditional, bold evangelism, or one leading to irrelevance as the Church remained silent in terms of the Civil Rights movement. Rev. John Powell, an outspoken African American missionary leader and future leader of the Minority Ministries Council for the Mennonite Church, described Schwartzentruber's problem as emblematic of the Mennonite Church's larger problem with race. When asked if Schwartzentruber had made enemies for pushing hard for the Church to commit itself in endeavors reflecting social action, Powell responded,

Yes, it was quite an unpopular approach to ministry. Vincent Harding began his ministry in Chicago [as a Mennonite] and really engaged in social ministry. And even in the general conference, his views were awkward. One of the reasons he left the church, was because the church's refusal to embrace the social gospel. So, Hubert of course didn't make a lot of friends as a white pastor walking that same path in St. Louis. And Hubert

¹² Schwartzentruber, Hubert, interview by the author, November 21st, 2019.

like Harding, wasn't afraid to call out the Church for neglecting social needs in the community.¹³

What motivated the Church to remain hostile towards social action-oriented pastors like himself or Schwartzentruber? Was it purely based in prejudice or something else? To answer this, Powell asserts that the hostility was owed to something deeper, the Mennonite tradition of remaining apart from society. While not committed to the extreme Anabaptist avoidance of modern life, such as the Amish sect practices, Mennonites like Gingerich and others in the Board of Missions were reflective, according to Powell, of a Church which to this day values approaching social issues from a distance. He explained,

Mennonites then as they are now, they like to say they aren't part of the world--they're disconnected, but at the same time they're not. They envelop the whole idea, immersed in that. Locked away in their little enclaves they develop a sheltered view of the world, and of course their prejudice comes from that. And I've seen that. The attitudes. This is partially why I left.¹⁴

With this philosophical context in mind, it becomes understandable why, as early as mid to late 1966, before JVL was even incorporated, Schwartzentruber began to communicate with the one openly social action-oriented church leader he knew, Ivan Kauffman, executive secretary of the Mennonite Central Committee. The MCC was by definition socially oriented.¹⁵ It oversaw overseas mission programs including those that sent long-term volunteers to other continents to

¹³ Interview with John Powell by the author, October 18th, 2018.

¹⁴ Interview with John Powell by the Author, October 18th, 2018. Additional and important context to the departure of Powell, who was not the only African American leader to leave the church in the 1970s, was the Church hierarchy's conservative leadership who sought and eventually succeeded in crushing the Minority Ministries Council, which had served as the only open channel of communication and resources between urban missions and church leadership. This discussion ultimately led to Powell's views on Shepard which prompted a surprising statement from Powell—he had been so fond of JVL that he had intended to move the office of the Minority Ministries Council there, but it was dissolved before this could take place.

¹⁵ At the same time as characterizing the work of MCC as socially oriented, it's good to be mindful of the fact that voices like John Powell and Schwartzentruber were highly critical of how the Church often used volunteerism, both abroad and in cities like St. Louis (through the VS program) as shallow exercises of "do goodery." Powell, discussing the program states, "VS was an arm of evangelism. Not an arm of empowerment. It was also a way of allowing rural Mennonites kids to have an experience and "do good experience." Ibid.

engage in mission oriented social work, and it lobbied hard on social issues with a clarity not offered by the Missions Board. Kauffman was himself also, like Schwartzentruber, experiencing a spiritual dilemma where the faith he was raised in, that of the Anabaptist creed, was failing to speak out forcefully against the issues of great concern to Kauffman, including the Vietnam War and the ongoing Modern Civil Rights Movement. Eventually, this precipitated Kauffman's departure of the faith and his attraction to Catholicism.¹⁶ But importantly for the sake of this narrative, Kauffman was the first person to work with Schwartzentruber beyond just vague promises to help recruit Mennonite assistance for JVL.

According to letters from Kauffman, who visited St. Louis in late 1966, he was highly impressed not simply with Schwartzentruber's work within the community but also by those whom Schwartzentruber sought to allay the Church with, JVL and in particular Macler Shepard.¹⁷ Following JVL's defeat of the Bond Issue, Kauffman wrote to Schwartzentruber on the matter of hiring Shepard as a salaried worker for the church, an idea Schwartzentruber had first pitched to Nelson Kauffman (no relation). In his letter, Kauffman praises Shepard as a visionary leader yet questions whether it was best for the Mennonite Church to be his primary sponsor. Cautioning against this move, he expressed concern that doing so might undermine Shepard's credibility: "Might it not be that giving him a role as a paid professional might destroy his standing as a community leader?"¹⁸ Adding to this question, Kauffman continues by

¹⁶ Extensive resources are available online for Kauffman, whose twin faiths of Anabaptism and Catholicism influenced his many published columns on faith under duress of social pressures. According to Hubert, Kauffman was one of a very select few Mennonite leaders he could trust completely and with whom he shared a life-long appreciation for, as a theologian who acted on his faith. Schwartzentruber, Hubert, Interview with the Author, January 23rd, 2019

¹⁷ Kauffman, Ivan, correspondence from Ivan Kauffman to Simon Gingerich and Hubert Schwartzentruber. November 8th, 1966. Box 1, Folder 36. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana.

¹⁸ Ibid.

suggesting that perhaps a more appropriate body to hire Shepard would be the Northside Team Ministry, which by 1967 was now led by JVL ally, Rev. Donald Register.

Kauffman's question strikes me as ill-informed. By the late 1960s multiple high profile community organizers, even militant protesters, had been hired by the city to work in community roles, even within the HDC itself. Civil Rights lawyer long associated with the NAACP, Margaret Bush Wilson had by 1967 taken on a role as co-leading the early St. Louis Model Cities Program and both Norman Seay and Ivory Perry, long associated with activities of the St. Louis Chapter of CORE, had taken positions within the HDC.¹⁹ For each, especially Ivory Perry, it was the close connection to the African American community, and their personal interest in advocacy on the part of those who needed assistance—which drew them into working within the anti-poverty agencies as “professional organizers.” Thus, it become very hard to understand why Shepard would lose any appeal to those in the JVL area, because he was paid by the Church.

Yet Kauffman wondered, could the Church do more to leverage its internal resources, possibly by recruiting a couple with experience in intercultural situations who would live in St. Louis on a semi-permanent basis, a couple with training that would address Shepard's desire to find someone who could reliably handle office management needs and allow him to remain focused on the external political and community relations aspects of JVL.²⁰

By February of 1967, as JVL embarked on its door-to-door canvass of slum properties during the feud with the building commissioner, Ivan Kauffman wrote to Schwartzentruber,

¹⁹ Lang, Clarence. 2009. *Grassroots at the Gateway Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75*. University of Michigan Press. Pg. 215

²⁰ *Ibid.*

telling his friend that he had found a group of Mennonite businessmen in Hesston, Kansas, who were eager to work with JVL. Kauffman wrote of one individual who had shown special interest:

I believe that Cecil Miller would be willing to commit himself to a full- time staff assignment in which he could possibly be employed by the group in Hesston to serve as their agent in St. Louis. It would appear to me that this sort of administrative function would be very crucial. Cecil has two good years of experience in this kind of thing working in Nigeria in a community development project there in which he was quite successful.²¹

In late March, Cecil and Judy Miller traveled to meet Rev. Schwartzentruber and Macler Shepard and tour the community that Ivan Kauffman had told them so much about. According to Judy Miller, the reasons for Shepard's strong positive impression on Schwartzentruber became immediately apparent; she later claimed that Shepard was profoundly visionary yet grounded in the realities of what it would take to achieve such visions.²² The Millers also learned that they would have additional lifelines in the community to help them. The couple looked up to Florence A. Spotts, whom they quickly judged to be the "matriarch" of JVL as well as perhaps an anchor for Shepard himself.²³ Describing how she understood the relationship between Spotts and Shepard, Miller states, "She was a lady to behold. Dignified, knowledgeable and very self-confident. And she helped define Macler's vision, she was very [goal oriented] while he sometimes appeared disorganized. And she helped define goals and keep him on track."²⁴ While Spotts played an important role in keeping JVL's vision in line, Shepard also had need of assistance in managing the business side of JVL, a role Cecil was expected to fill.

²¹ Correspondence from Ivan Kauffman to Hubert Schwartzentruber. February 23rd, 1967. Box 1, Folder 37. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana

²² Miller, Judy, interview by the author, July 17th, 2018.

²³ Miller, Cecil, interview by the author, November 14th, 2017.

²⁴ Miller, Judy, interview by the author, July 17th, 2018.

In late August of 1967, the Millers moved to St. Louis, initially working on a trial basis with the JVL organization, participating in Bethesda activities, and working part time in the St. Louis City School District. Upon his arrival, Miller learned that Shepard was already planning to embed him deeply into JVL affairs as well as Yeatman politics. Cecil recalls one of his first conversations Shepard, a conversation surrounding his appointment to the new HDC-operated Yeatman NAC. Miller explains, “Macler put me on that board, really before I even hit town. He didn’t ask me,” he continues, explaining that Shepard’s appointment accelerated Miller’s socialization into Yeatman: “How do you even begin to educate someone [with no past in working in black communities], how do you even educate someone to swim? Macler put me on the high dive and pushed me off,” adding that in that situation he had to learn to sink or swim with the current.²⁵ Accordingly, Miller says, he learned to “swim.”

By the summer of the following year, he quit teaching to become JVL’s full-time office manager and Shepard’s assistant.²⁶ To help finance this position, the businessmen in Kansas formed an organization they called “S.H.A.R.E” (Self-Help and Rehabilitation Enterprises), which financed Miller and brought new financial resources to JVL. A 1968 piece in the Mennonite periodical *The Gospel Herald* described S.H.A.R.E as “working through JVL to avoid misunderstanding²⁷ ...SHARE believes that a real contribution can only be made through community leadership and coordination as well as continued housing rehabilitation.”²⁸ Of importance is the recognition of “through JVL”; that wording is key to understanding how SHARE and the Mennonites in general (as they would do through their expanded role in JVL in

²⁵ Miller, Cecil, interview by the author, May 20th, 2020.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The start of the relationship between the Mennonite Church and JeffVanderLou may have its roots going back to the Handle but formally speaking it began with the hiring of Miller by SHARE to work with

²⁸ Zook, Ruby “What is S.H.A.R.E. Inc?” *Gospel Herald*, December 31, 1968. 1152.

1968-1969) saw their work in the neighborhood: not as contractors or co-leaders but as people working in service to JVL and the community. It was an almost revolutionary relationship; in the past, the Church was used to participating in projects where it contributed skilled labor or financial resources in the cases of natural disasters. Miller worked for Shepard until 1972, when he and his wife left St. Louis. Despite their departure, Miller maintained close ties to the organization and to Shepard himself, returning annually for board meetings which continue to this day.

The Millers' importance to the JVL organization cannot be understated. In that moment, recall Schwartzentruber's letter describing the failing leadership of Truax, just as JVL approached the HDC elections. With the Millers arrival, JVL now had a bookkeeper and office manager, allowing Shepard to do what he did best, work with the community. Miller, in his own right, would be instrumental in the years ahead, proposing novel ideas which would be implemented with tremendous benefit for JVL's programming, including the use of the Mennonite Disaster Service. Where Shepard was street smart, Miller was acutely aware of the needs of JVL from a business perspective. In this capacity, he grew to be one of Shepard's closest confidants, perhaps mainly because Miller was capable of saying "no," which he did only when the best interest of the organization was motivating his advice.²⁹ With the JVL office now in order, the organization limped towards the conclusion of 1967.

²⁹ Miller, Cecil, interview with author, May 20, 2020. This is not a reflection on Shepard so to speak but rather that those around Shepard were constantly proposing new schemes, new solutions for problems that weren't readily apparent. In Miller's own words, he states that Macler's biggest weakness was that he wanted to solve everyone's problems—the problem though was that the organization didn't have the money to do this. Miller explains that leadership later on in JVL may have been less willing to firmly guide Shepard away from programmatic decisions that the organization could not sustain.

Just a few weeks following the HDC election and Cecil Miller's arrival, the JVL organization once again made headlines, on the occasion of the completion of the first housing rehab, a joint project undertaken by Yeatman (the body as it existed prior to the HDC elections) and JVL. Located at 1400-1402 Glasgow, at the corner of Sheridan Street, the building (which still stands to this day) was rehabbed with a loan by Lindell Trust Company and substantial fundraising by JVL from businesses in both the MLK and Franklin Avenue business districts, totaling just over \$18,000.³⁰ To celebrate the house's successful rehab, the organizations orchestrated a public open house, attracting city officials including Irv Dagan of the Housing Authority. Dagan praised the project as "one of the most promising concepts in slum rehabilitation we've seen...if something like this could have started 20 years ago, perhaps we wouldn't be in this fix we're in now."³¹ Others at the showing included Bob Morgan, a Republican candidate for office and friend of Shepard's.

Morgan, like Shepard, owned a business in Yeatman and viewed the project as beneficial to those in the business community who were looking for stability through neighborhood development.³² The rehab helped shore up sinking morale in the JVL organization near the end of the year, offsetting doubts expressed by Shepard's critics related to his handling of the HDC elections. Now, Shepard could point to two substantial achievements in the organization's first full year: the negotiation with the city to enforce housing codes for properties owned by those JVL termed "slumlords," and the successful rehab of two housing units from a building which previously sat vacant in the JVL neighborhood.

³⁰ "People, Building Neighborhoods: Final Report to the President and the Congress of the United States." Catalog Record: People, building Neighborhoods: final report. HathiTrust Digital Library. Accessed August 6, 2021. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000303116>. 772.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Behind the scenes, these successes also proved to be important developments for Shepard's organization, confirming its reputation as an organization capable of delivering on its rhetoric to those in the Mennonite Church which had, since at least 1965, warned Schwartzentruber that the Church would not commit resources to an unproven neighborhood venture like JVL. Investors from SHARE who visited St. Louis in fall of that year were overwhelmingly impressed with the rehabilitation project, and committed financial resources towards a second rehab project at 1344 N. Leffingwell, the building adjacent to the Handle, which became, for a decade, JVL's office.³³ Yet JVL still lacked the financing to acquire more properties outside of 1344 N. Leffingwell, and still lacked the necessary construction insurance which lenders required to secure a loan. Yeatman was overwhelmingly, if not entirely, redlined. Despite the group's open house and the headlines surrounding it, even Lindell Bank, which supplied the loan for the Glasgow property, refused to finance a second purchase and rehab. Shepard was admittedly dumbfounded, "The first thing they told us, we cannot each, we cannot lend you money because of the insurance, we are not gonna lend any insurance east of grand, and we couldn't believe it. We went to the savings and loans and the banks, we went to any place we thought we could make loans from"; none would consider JVL's plans.³⁴ However, in the final

³³ Schwartzentruber, Hubert, correspondence from Rev. Hubert Schwartzentruber to Simon Gingerich. November 27th, 1967. Box 1, Folder 34. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA. This is not explicitly stated that Share committed the money (in the letter itself) however the meeting of share with JVL took place at the time, as is noted in the letter. Cecil recalls that it was after this meeting that the Share investors decided to go forward with the provision of about \$5,000 for a rehab of 1344 N. Leffingwell. A lot of work in doing the chronicling of Mennonite participation in JVL is in reading between the lines of Hubert's correspondences, things discussed in one letter often took place in the interceding period before his next correspondence, that is the case here.

³⁴ Lee, Betty. "A Lee, Betty. Phoenix Rising: JeffVanderLou." *Proud Magazine*, 1980.

months of 1967, the solution to Shepard and the JVL organizers' frustration was about to appear, wearing in a suit and tie.

Chapter 9

Thomas Depew

With the completion of the first rehabilitation project by JVL in late 1967 Shepard believed that JVL now had the prototype it needed. With this house JVL could now demonstrate to skeptical groups like the Mennonite Church and HUD the feasibility of their neighborhood rehabilitation project. Yet, before Shepard could meet the Mennonites or federal bureaucrats an unexpected visitor arrived at the JVL. Thomas Depew, a wealthy, white inventor and businessman who had read of the JVL rehabilitation arrived in the Yeatman area hoping to see if Shepard could duplicate JVL's success for Depew's late mother's birth house on Thomas street. From this conversation Depew and Shepard's friendship emerged, aligned around a simple concept which both men had found useful in their own business endeavors—if you want to something to be done, do it yourself. Depew became not simply a wealthy benefactor; he became a loudspeaker projecting into his elite circle the rhetoric and vision of Macler Shepard and JVL. In chapter 9, I introduce Thomas Depew, his motivations for working with Shepard and some of the concrete ways in which Depew's connections helped facilitate JVL's forward momentum as they geared up to launch their rehabilitation program. Additionally discussed in this chapter is Macler's own focus on home ownership as the basis for how JVL would translate rehabilitated homes into the makings of a community renewal program. What programs did they use? How did Depew's participation fit in with national trends of private investment in urban communities? These questions and more are explained in chapter 9 setting the stage for the discussions in the final two chapters which explore how JVL implemented and expanded their program into the 1970s.

Sometime in late September of 1967, Thomas N. Depew, an inventor and wealthy businessman, sought assistance from Yeatman neighborhood and JVL in rehabilitating his mother's childhood home at 2925 Dickson Street. Located just blocks from Bethesda Mennonite Church, Depew's family had deep roots in the neighborhood of Yeatman. Settling in St. Louis in 1855, Depew's maternal grandfather, William F. Wernse, a German immigrant, served with the Union in the Civil War, later establishing himself in the banking industry.¹ Wernse became one of the leading investors in the emerging privately-owned streetcar lines that were quickly overtaking St. Louis throughfare. According to Depew Jr., his grandfather's streetcars ran along Jefferson and connected the Yeatman neighborhood to Mill Creek Valley.² Success ran deep on the paternal side of Depew's family as well. His father had owned J.R. Perkins, a major wholesale lumber company which had proven exceedingly profitable selling lumber to the City of St. Louis for construction of facilities for the 1904 World's Fair.³

Yet, when Thomas Depew himself arrived in Yeatman he was coming off a decade of personal business success. His son recalled that Depew's achievements were of his own making, having by then patented at least a dozen or more individual inventions or improvements. Depew was awash in money, money that he hoped to put towards rehabilitating his mother's home.⁴ Shepard, however, did not let Depew walk away; instead, he made what both Miller and Depew Jr. described as a "sales pitch." The plan laid out by Shepard was direct, "Depew would finance the rehabilitation of a different house in the neighborhood, one of JVL's choosing, to serve as a model home, rehabilitated using materials purchased by DePew" and labor supplied by the

¹ "Wilhelm Frederick Wernse." Family Tree Maker, April 25, 2019. <https://www.geni.com/people/Wilhelm-Wernse/6000000091764938988>.

² Depew, Thomas Jr., interview by the author, June 10th, 2021.

³ Ibid.

⁴Ibid. The details of this visit are unclear, both to Miller or Depew Jr, however their accounts both speak to a decision being made by Shepard that the home previously owned by Depew's family was dilapidated beyond repair.

neighborhood.⁵ This would help JVL produce a second rehab—to prove the first was not a fluke, and further it would demonstrate to Depew that JVL would use his money and resources appropriately.

Shepard may have had something else helping him in his pitch. Depew had secondary motives for his visit to Yeatman; he was there to show his son, Tom Depew Jr., that he was not the ‘out of touch conservative square’ that the junior Depew had labeled him as.⁶ According to his son, Thomas Depew, Jr., family disagreements over political issues of the late 1960s, from Vietnam to Civil Rights, had caused deep family divisions: “My father was a patriot, a conservative by every meaning of the word—and he hated hippies, and anyone that questioned authority.”⁷ Tom Jr. had refused to join the service when the draft board called, obtaining CO status, and in the process angered his father. This set Thomas Depew Sr. upon a trek which he describes in a 1974 column as something like a search for meaning. Depew states, “I started to ask, ‘What’s this all about? Why are they raising hell?’ Then I heard someone say if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem. That really stuck with me.”⁸ DePew was fully on board.

In late 1967 and into 1968, Shepard was desperate for the sort of help that Depew, perhaps uniquely, could provide. Like Schwartzentruber, Depew’s search for meaning and direction brought him face to face with Macler Shepard—and that moving forward, like Schwartzentruber, Depew’s own biases would be challenged and redefined by his experience working with JVL. While we can interpret Depew’s entry into the affairs of JVL as at least

⁵ Miller, Cecil, interview by the author, May 20th, 2020.

⁶ Depew, Thomas Jr., interview by the author June 10th, 2021.

⁷ Depew, Thomas Jr., interview by the author December 29th, 2019.

⁸ Curry, George. “Award Winners’ Goals Same, Backgrounds far apart,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 12th, 1974. 41.

partially traced to his search for his son's approval we can also determine that the short term impact for JVL was decisive. Just weeks prior the organization was facing probably financial ruin however with Depew's partnership seemingly secure, JVL now had assurances that it could survive through 1967. Important at this moment was that if JVL moved forward, that it not simply be rehabilitating houses—but that those houses be sold to a specific body of individuals and families—first time home buyers. In Shepard's eyes, home ownership would be the basis of making the physical rehabilitation of Yeatman a long-term cause. But to do this, JVL would again need to demonstrate that it had sufficient resources to meet the minimum demands of bodies which would facilitate a home ownership program, entities like the Federal Housing Administration.

In late 1967 and early 1968 the problem for Macler Shepard was not simply that the organization had no money, they also lacked access to programs emerging from both HUD and the FHA. These programs were designed to offset the harm of urban renewal and generations of lending discrimination by spurring local organizations to rehabilitate existing central city housing, with a stress on building a new class of black first-time home buyers. Off to a slow start, the Federal response became panicked following nationwide damaging riots that had erupted following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, resulting ultimately in the passage of the 1968 Fair Housing Act.⁹ In this sweeping act, the long held practice of lending institutions to redline, or prevent lending to homebuyers or those seeking to rehabilitate homes in areas with large populations of African Americans, was finally outlawed. While the Fair Housing Act was important Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor contends in *Race for Profit* that, for the next decade, the

⁹ Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. 2021. *Race for profit: how banks and the real estate industry undermined black homeownership*. Pg. 1

Housing and Urban Development Act, passed shortly after the Fair Housing Act (1968), was more immediate for the next decade of housing programs. This act she writes, “was to massively expand the amount of housing available for poor and working class families. It was offered as a solution to the decades of scant affordable housing...Most importantly, the HUD act would correct earlier legislation from the 1930s that had excluded African Americans from homeownership programs created by the Federal Government.”¹⁰ Yet while Taylor’s narrative largely focuses on some of the more widely abused programs created in this era to facilitate new construction with an emphasis for black home ownership, JVL seems to have largely sidestepped this experience.

In an era of massive suburban growth, Shepard did not see the value in new construction, not when there were so many existing brick homes that could be rehabilitated. Nor did he favor new construction for the purpose of making a profit—JVL instead viewed homes-as vehicles for social change.¹¹ More importantly, though their budgets were largely constrained, JVL oversaw every facet of each project—the guarantee of the house’s quality rested on Shepard himself, and he made certain home buyers understood that they could come to JVL for repairs if they were unable to afford them. This contrasts pointedly with the experiences of the vast majority of home buyers who fell victim to what Taylor highlights as a devastating ‘get rich quick’ scam operated by speculators and the real estate industry. Abuses of the section 235 program would come into light later in the 1970s, showing evidence of collusion between agents, inspectors and speculators to facilitate sales which never should have happened. According to Taylor, in one

¹⁰ Taylor, 1..

¹¹ One can make the case that this may indeed have been a fault owed to Shepard and JVL, because they were so generous with their properties, generally selling them for no more than the price of rehabilitation, they generally were revenue neutral. When federal programs like 221h would be terminated in the 1970s, and JVL forced to turn to rehabilitating and tenant management—they were unprepared, and underfunded.

HUD report showing the abuses in St. Louis, “In St. Louis, speculators sold 29% of the houses receiving FHA backing or subsidy, and in some cases houses that had been rejected by other FHA programs had been approved by the 235 program.”¹² JVL by emphasizing complete rehabilitation and offering what amounts to wrap-around services like repairs, largely bucked these national problems which haunted other housing programs like Section 235. Yet even here, there was a catch. Programs like 221d and Section 235 (which JVL did not use) came with stipulations requiring local support like work-site insurance, skilled labor and stable neighborhood economics. Yeatman was for a lack of a better word, officially viewed as a “slum,” and as a slum, it had been the target of redlining since at least the 1930s.¹³ Nobody would lend to JVL, nobody would provide insurance—even with the Glasgow rehab in his pocket, Shepard was denied over and over. This is where Depew’s value greatly emerged for Shepard and JVL, not simply in that he invested in their program, but that he lent his weight through his connections to friends in the lending and insurance industry. Yet perhaps more important to moving JVL’s home ownership program forward was something out of Shepard’s control—the violence which swept across the nation in the late 1960s and the lackluster results from previously implemented anti-poverty programs like CAP (the HDC in St. Louis).

As Shepard and JVL began to loudly sound the theme of rehabilitation for the purpose of growing a new base of home owners in the Yeatman neighborhood, nationally, the conversation around how to address the “urban crisis” was building. Keeanga Taylor has written extensively on this issue, albeit positing that the national emphasis on inner city home ownership came not in response to a desire to see neighborhoods like Yeatman thrive, but rather to offset both the

¹² Taylor, 145

¹³ Note that redlining would become officially outlawed in 1968 with the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968

violence that had swept across urban neighborhoods and the address the desire by some in the Civil Rights community to pursue more aggressive suburban integration. Taylor writes:

Since the exclusionary practices of the FHA had been such a focal point in explaining the distressed condition of Black communities, the logical solution, then, was inclusion. The logic flowed from the ways the market had created middle-class status for white homeowners. Given the tumult at the center of urban life through the 1960s, the hope was that property ownership could tame the Black rebellion coursing through cities across the country. It was also hoped that opening homeownership possibilities for African Americans in cities would curtail demands for entry into white suburban communities.¹⁴

Taylor writes that as President Lyndon B. Johnson's approval slipped after the 1966 midterms, the conversation among policy makers regarding the War on Poverty continued to lean away from government as the solution. This even as new programs such as Model Cities, the most comprehensive attack on poverty at the local level, ramped up.¹⁵ This was made clear on the part of some prominent African Americans, Taylor writes, by testimony given to the Kerner Commission such as that offered by Kenneth Clark, who stated, "Business and industry are our last home. They are the most realistic elements of our society. Other areas of our society—government, education, churches, labor—have defaulted in dealing with Negro problems."¹⁶ Relevant to the discussion of housing, the Kerner Commission's report outlined the need for federal collaboration with private interests in "providing 6,000,000 units of decent housing for low- and moderate-income families in the next five years...creating a program of ownership

¹⁴ Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. "Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership." Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 17.

¹⁵ Taylor, 63. This new attention given to the role of private enterprise in becoming the solution to the problems facing American cities was not simply limited to real estate and lending industries, rather, Taylor writes that businesses across the spectrum of American capitalism began to reflect on their relationships with African American communities. The idea of the private sector bolstering public initiatives to target societal problems, like poverty, 'socio-commercial enterprise' became a sticking point in conversations Taylor writes, as businesses recast themselves as the potential savior of the inner city. Taylor writes that business leaders saw 'socio-commercial enterprise' as a term "intended to recast business as vehicle for social change."

¹⁶ Taylor, 61. Importantly Clark also lamented to the Commission that the testimony and findings compiled were not new to those who had either lived this reality (as an African American) or paid attention to the communities pleas, in the Post he is quoted as telling the commission "I must in candor say to you members of this commission—it is a kind of Alice in Wonderland—with the same moving picture shown over and over, the same analysis, the same the same recommendations, the same inaction."

supplement assistance to help poor families buy homes...¹⁷ Importantly, what emerged from the emergent renewed focus on addressing the core of the ‘urban crisis’ were a series of programs sponsored by HUD with FHA participation to ease lending fears with federal subsidies, aimed at stimulating housing development in central city communities.

As a business owner himself, Shepard saw the national conversation as an opening to sell JVL as an investment model for local businesses looking to become “part of the solution.”¹⁸ Heading into 1968 and 1969, Shepard targeted the lending institutions and businesses that wrote insurance on housing development projects. These entities had thus far been most less than helpful for JVL, yet Shepard contended that if they could be won over, JVL would have prized access to new HUD and FHA programs designed to subsidize the rehabilitation and sale of homes to first time homebuyers. Unfortunately, like previous engagements with these parties, Shepard and JVL were rebuffed. Explaining this rejection, Shepard states,

When we first went it, we weren’t intending to be a landlord, we’d be an instrument to act as a conduit for those who wanted to become homeowners and we were going to act on that behalf as a liaison and working that out we found out we had a lot more to do than we had an idea of. We really didn’t understand what it was all about till we went to the investors. The investors are like very difficult to deal with, if you don’t have certain things in your hands, such as “collateral” we thought we was enough collateral as people, but that was not true.¹⁹

What type of collateral did the lenders want? According to Shepard, it was gainful employment. Too few in the neighborhood had dependable sources of income, prompting lenders to question whether the risk was too great to invest in Shepard’s cause. He stated: “We had to

¹⁷ Millstone, James “Vast Spending in slums urged in riot report,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 1, 1968. 14.

¹⁸ This pursuit began as early as the spring of 1967, when JVL collaborated with local business owners in the Franklin Business district to create the first iteration of the Yeatman Model Cities program. It then turned towards raising money from these districts to finance the first JVL-Yeatman rehab on Glasgow. Thus, Shepard’s turn towards private enterprise to bolster JVL programming does not represent so much an epiphany as it does a continuation. The only difference is that in 1968, with Depew, Shepard began to seek collaboration with large, white owned corporate partners.

¹⁹ Lee, Betty. “A Lee, Betty. Phoenix Rising: JeffVanderLou.” *Proud Magazine*, 1980.

come up with some employment and unemployment was awful high, and therefore we had to talk about then getting some of these people more of an employment basis, which they would consider gainfully employed, not someone working short gigs, they had to have a couple of years under their belt in order to be that.”²⁰ Mirroring Shepard’s admission that jobs available in the ghetto were not conducive to building wealth, the Kerner Commission found broad similarities in cities across the country: “Negro men are more than three times likely as white men to be in low paying, unskilled or service jobs. In one study of low-income neighborhoods, the ‘subemployment rate,’ including both unemployment and underemployment rate was 33% or 8.8 times greater than the overall unemployment rate for workers as a whole.”²¹

At first, Shepard and JVL canvassed neighborhood businesses, seeking employment opportunities for residents of the neighborhood who had expressed interest in owning a home, should JVL rehab one. Dating back to 1967, the Franklin Avenue Business District was one of the first monetary supporters of JVL’s program. Shepard wagered that this was the most sensible place to start.²² Yet here, Shepard ran into opposition; many employers were hesitant, like the lenders, to take risks hiring residents who themselves had been unable to hold long-term jobs or who lacked permanent housing or stable home situations.²³ Without a clear answer in mind, Shepard turned to his new patron, Thomas Depew, asking how Depew could leverage his weight in the larger St. Louis business community to help JVL find jobs for Yeatman residents. The

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Millstone, James. “Vast Spending in the Slums is Urged in Riot Report,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 1, 1968. Pg. 14

²² Describing this process in the film *Lee, Betty. Phoenix Rising*, Shepard states “we had to work on the businesses. We went to businesses and small businesses and talked to them about employment and talked to existing companies in our area, did a door-to-door survey of the business district and asked them, they were here in our neighborhood, and we protect them in some way by virtue of living here, we let them know when they gone, we secure their neighborhood. But you know hiring people who had long segments of unemployment, it wasn’t able to pass the application process because of their discomfort”

²³ *Lee, Betty. Phoenix Rising*

solution Depew landed upon, according to his son, was merely a phone call away, to family friend Monte Shoemaker, Chairman of the Board at Brown Shoe Company.²⁴ According to Depew Jr, Shoemaker was a friend of his father and someone to whom he turned for counsel in business matters. Internally, Depew Jr. suspects that Shoemaker, like Depew Sr, harbored sentiments towards the needs of men of a “certain class” to be more engaged in the affairs of groups working to improve life in the ghetto. He explains that Shoemaker and his father likely saw themselves “as men of a certain class of people in this country, who have prospered, who should have reached a point in their development that they recognized the needs of these communities that have been left out of the prosperity.”²⁵ Depew wasn’t interested in doing Shepard’s work for him; he respected Shepard too much to rob him of doing what Thomas Depew Jr. jokes was likely a “master salesman demonstrating his art of the sales pitch.”²⁶ According to the *Post-Dispatch*, a company spokesman for Brown Shoe explained it another way, “The JVL people came to us. They presented their case very ably. They told us they had been rehabilitating houses and now they needed jobs to that people could afford to keep and maintain these houses. They are not high falutin’. They are a street organization, and they will stay that way. But we were tremendously impressed.”²⁷

Brown Shoe was sold on JVL. The announcement made front page headlines in late May, 1968, where officials including Mayor Cervantes hailed the development as evidence of fruitful collaboration between community groups and local industry. In an accompanying editorial, the *Post* hailed the development as proof that Shepard’s organization must have been the determining factor in Brown’s decision to build its first St. Louis factory since 1906, given that

²⁴ Depew, Thomas Jr., interview by the author on June 10th, 2021.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Bleck, Timothy, “JeffVanderLou Gives a New Look to Slum Area,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 16, 1968. 36.

other neighborhoods needed jobs just as much as Yeatman.²⁸ Depew Jr. sees it as a brilliant public relations coup for Brown Shoe, explaining “Shoemaker was a reasonable man, he understood that there was a social responsibility of businesses to help in the community) and he convinced his board that 200 jobs, would be a symbol. The first new factory, first new jobs that have been created in an inner-city community anywhere.”²⁹ More important is what Shoemaker said himself, telling the *Globe-Democrat* JVL is the stabilizing organization, the chamber of commerce “which convinced us we would have good community relations...the yeoman effort that JVL citizens have made to help themselves was the turning point.”³⁰

Shoemaker’s statement leaves little doubt that it was Shepard who convinced him to bring Brown Shoe to Yeatman, and furthermore, that Brown Shoe recognized JVL as the representative voice for the residents of that neighborhood. More importantly, Brown Shoe let it be known that the company would immediately begin working with JVL to establish a training program, so that when construction finished, the company could commence with little interruption.³¹ Moreover, after the fact, a company representative reflected that any paranoia about the area in which Brown Shoe had decided to make its investment was quickly shown to be unfounded, as JVL provided a stabilizing and secure environment for business to be conducted,

During the construction period we set up a training facility in the second floor of a nearby building so that there would be a workforce who had learned the basics of shoe manufacturing and could promptly begin at least limited operations we had as you can imagine then given warnings that the construction product would bring problems that there where might see loss of equipment and all kinds of things. All this proved to be

²⁸ “Brown’s Breakthrough,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* Editorial, June 3rd, 1968. 22.

²⁹ Depew, Thomas, interview by the author, June 10th 2021.

³⁰ *Luna, Mell “xxx” St. Louis Globe Democrat* June 15th-16th 1968. 3F.

³¹ The plant would be built at Dayton and Jefferson, across from the Pruitt Igoe projects, at a cost of between \$750,000 to \$1 Million dollars, and it would employ upwards to two hundred or more workers, with priority employment going to those living in the general area of JeffVanderLou, a significant victory for Shepard and JVL.

entirely unfounded. It was clear to us that the Jeff Vander Lou community wanted this plant there and had already developed a feeling of pride in it during the construction period of the building and training of the initial workforce.³²

Having secured Brown Shoe Company's commitment, Shepard and JVL once more pressed local lenders to work with them. In *Phoenix Rising* Shepard describes the impression that Brown Shoe left in the minds of investors and insurance agencies that had previously turned JVL down, "The shoe company brought in the jobs, they also brought along the finance community because they at that time had a large company with both insurance and also the prestige with whatever banks in this area."³³ At the same time, Depew was also aiding the company.

According to Thomas Depew Jr, his father had a friend in the insurance business who wanted to help but had maintained to Depew that despite Brown Shoe's announcement, insurers were still hesitant to invest in JVL's program and the Yeatman neighborhood, without evidence that construction sites would not be the victim of neighborhood thieves. Depew contends that his father sat his friend down, "and he explained to him that somebody had to be the first one, somebody would have to agree to take the risk," because once one company goes, Depew Sr. suggested, everyone else would follow, "and wouldn't it be better to be the first one with your foot in the door of this new market?"³⁴ What came of this conversation was a strained promise from the insurer; if Shepard and JVL could demonstrate that they could maintain a trial site, keeping it free of theft or harassment, then the investment company would be willing to move forward with JVL. Chuckling when recalling how this played out, Depew Jr. insists that Shepard pulled every card he had in his hand with neighborhood "thugs, bosses and even the kids," making it clear that no harm should come to JVL's next project, or Shepard would personally

³² Lee, Betty. *Phoenix Rising*

³³ Lee, Betty. *Phoenix Rising*

³⁴ Depew, Thomas Jr., interview by the author, June 10th, 2021.

deal with those responsible.³⁵ According to all present during this time, Shepard was able to prevent theft. Not only did one company begin working with JVL; by mid-1968, Shepard was working with almost a dozen insurance companies. Although the risk of investment into the neighborhood remained high among those institutions lending to and insuring JVL projects, Shepard found that by spreading that risk over multiple companies, no one insurer felt as though it was assuming too much risk. Accordingly, the arrangement, which allowed JVL scale up its rehabilitation plans, worked out by spreading the risk involved between the ten participating firms, “through a rotation process, each company insured one unit in every ten completed,” adding that between 1968 and 1970, a total of 85 were insured this way.³⁶

JVL was now in a position to begin scaling its rehabilitation projects to match Shepard’s desire. To move forward with the program, which Shepard hoped to build around home ownership, Miller advised the organization of an experimental HUD program, 221h. This program, 221h, was designed to help non-profits like JVL rehabilitate homes and, with FHA guarantees, sell them at low cost to first-time home buyers. The program itself could not have been more applicable to JVL’s needs, nor Shepard’s own tendency towards local solutions. That is to say, HUD’s program, 221h, was created specifically to help another St. Louis-based non-profit pursue its housing program, that of Father Shocklee’s Bicentennial Development

³⁵ Ibid. There are several instances where I have been told that Shepard essentially pooled together neighborhood criminal elements to negotiate truces, such as if an important bureaucrat or investor was visiting the area. Sources for this include Schwartzentruber, Miller, Depew Jr, Beverly Sporleder and Judy Miller. Adding weight to this idea is the relationship between Pruitt Igoe crime boss James Woods and Shepard. After Woods, who essentially was said to have ‘run’ Pruitt Igoe was released from prison, Shepard offered him a job and a space to house his family in the neighborhood. To this day, Woods works at the Shepard senior apartments, and speaks very highly of his former boss, remarking that Shepard “He was for the people, and he acted on it—and they had results, for the people, and some people got envious of that. They couldn’t figure him out cuz he didn’t want it for himself.” See- Woods, James Interview with Walter Johnson, March 7th, 2019

³⁶ United States. “People, Building Neighborhoods: Final Report to the President and the Congress of the United States/the National Commission on Neighborhoods. V.2.” HathiTrust. Accessed August 6, 2021. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015007222063&view=1up&seq=117&skin=2021>. 127

Corporation. Shocklee's Corporation worked just northeast of JVL in the Mullanphy neighborhood, rehabbing homes in the neighborhood and then selling them at low cost with a low 2% interest rate backed by the FHA to first time homebuyers within Shocklee's congregation. According the *Post*, HUD's new program, 221h, first introduced by St. Louis representative Lenore K. Sullivan as part of the National Housing Act in 1968, "the program enables private nonprofit groups to get federal loans for rebuilding run down houses and selling them to low-income families."³⁷ According to Miller, the 221h program was a brilliant stroke of luck for JVL. In just under two years the JVL organization would rehabilitate almost 100 homes.³⁸ Under the program, once rehabilitated using private funding sources (in JVL's case, money raised by Depew), "inner city families are offered the opportunity to purchase homes with loans insured by the FHA. Insured loans are then made at a government subsidized interest rate of 3%."³⁹

In late spring, 1968, Thomas Depew incorporated a new tax-deductible entity, Arrowhead Foundation. The purpose of the foundation would be simple: to raise money from private donations from local and national parties and funnel it through charitable donations into projects that benefited JVL Inc. Additionally, the foundation would establish a salary for Shepard, one which Depew Jr. maintains was paid until the day that Macler passed away in 2005.⁴⁰ The salary allowed Shepard to close his upholstery business and begin working for JVL full-time. With Arrowhead operating as a bank for JVL, Shepard now had cash-on hand to begin acquiring properties for JVL's housing rehabilitation program. Purchasing began in late 1968, creating what Shepard called a "house bank," a stock of about seventy neighborhood houses in various

³⁷ "Low Income Housing Sponsors Cautioned by Mrs. Sullivan" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* September 15 1967. 6.

³⁸ Miller, Cecil, interview by the author, November, 2017.

³⁹"Carondelet Savings Makes 1st Rehabilitated Home Loan," *Neighborhood Link News*, May 1, 1968. 16.

⁴⁰ Depew, Thomas Jr., interview with Thomas Depew Jr. by the author, June 10th, 2021.

states of decay which JVL would rehabilitate on a house-by-house basis.⁴¹ In effect, JVL created for its own version of the city's land bank, the Land Reutilization Authority (LRA), except instead of holding onto properties for redevelopment by private companies, JVL would retain ownership of the houses in its bank until it could afford to rehabilitate them.

Shepard and JVL had faced and dealt with the problems of finding insurance, loans, collateral, and jobs for potential homeowners. The Brown Shoe factory was being built. Arrowhead Foundation was created. Now, there remained one more daunting task on JVL's agenda ahead of the start of the rehabilitation program; it did not yet have a source of affordable, skilled labor. Once again, Shepard began working with Schwartzentruber, this time to create within JVL a unique solution to the demand for skilled labor to help jumpstart JVL's housing program.

⁴¹ Woo, William. "How Two Groups Help the Poor Buy Homes," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 8th 1969. 62.

Chapter 10

Faith in Action

Through the partnership with Thomas Depew, Shepard had found a key ally to both finance and develop the JVL housing program, at least on paper. When built, the Brown Shoe factory would bring good jobs (collateral), and through the creation of a friendly insurance consortium JVL would now have their projects insured—both necessary ingredients for JVL to take advantage of the new FHA home ownership programs. Yet JVL still had not yet begun construction on their next package of homes. Why? They lacked a source of affordable, skilled labor. Once again, Shepard turned to Rev. Schwartzentruber and Cecil Miller, asking if they knew of a way that the Mennonite Church might offer a solution for JVL. This time, the Mennonites would come through. Typically used to rebuild in times of disaster, the Mennonite Disaster Service, seemed to uniquely fit JVL's needs in the moment. The organizers pondered if they could convince the Disaster Service that St. Louis City was itself a disaster area waiting to happen. The relief program was yet to be employed in cities impacted by urban rebellion and yet conditions were ripe in St. Louis for just such an uprising. Therefore, Shepard and Schwartzentruber wondered if the Mennonites could help quell the unrest before it even started. In this chapter I discuss one of the most unique aspects of the early JVL housing program, the application of the Mennonite Disaster Service towards jumpstarting the rehabilitation program operated by JVL. The results of this program would be multiple, including a sizeable portfolio of rehabs and multiple lives changed by the unique intercultural experience of the JVL-MDS partnership.

Beginning as early as late 1966, Rev. Schwartzentruber had sought to recruit the Mennonite Church to take a more proactive role in the affairs of JVL. Petitioning for the Church

to engage in what he had become increasingly aware of as a necessity for inner-city mission work, social action. In a letter to his supervisors at the Mennonite Board of Missions immediately following the Yeatman group's defeat of the bond issue, Schwartzentruber outlined his view on why the Church had to take a stand,

Jesus said: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church." Bethesda Church is literally fenced in and surrounded by the "gates of hell." Do we believe that the Gospel message that we preach can make a difference in our community? The "Gates of Hell" are very strong here, and very powerful. To break them we must engage in many different activities...politics...making use of power [including allying with other groups with similar interests]...being vocal in our complaints to city hall...attacking the power structure by creating another power structure...demonstrations and protests.¹

Yet Schwartzentruber saw intervention as imperative. He identified a social issue and saw it as the Church's responsibility to help remedy the situation, starting with a collaboration with JVL and Macler Shepard. Schwartzentruber felt compelled to help his community, but more broadly, felt there was much more to risk if the Church did not move to action fast. He writes,

It would also involve our spending some money. Must we not put our feet and our pocket books where our mouth is? We spend so much time saying the right things that we never get anything done, and to do something takes money. Up to now our church has been involved in focusing and identifying the problems that exist as well as planning for the future. To not become even more involved would be to retreat. Can we do this?²

According to Hubert, the response to his letter was an eerily familiar refrain from Church leadership, stressing the need to remain focused on the work of the mission, growing the congregation and 'saving souls.'³ Yet Schwartzentruber remained unfazed by his Church's

¹ Correspondence from Hubert Schwartzentruber to Simon Gingerich, December 5th, 1966. Box 1, Folder 37. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana

² Correspondence from Hubert Schwartzentruber to Simon Gingerich, December 2nd, 1966. Box 1, Folder 37. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana. 1-2

³ Schwartzentruber, Hubert. Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2019

seeming inability to grasp the stakes at hand as evidenced when Schwartzentruber went around his immediate supervisors to hire Cecil Miller in summer of 1967, demonstrating that Hubert was willing to challenge Church authority when he felt action was necessary for the greater good of his constituency, and his partnership with Macler Shepard.

In the summer of 1967 and again in 1968, violence and unrest swept across the nation, seemingly influencing Schwartzentruber's sense of immediacy in his communications with the church. While the Kerner report provided some insight into the roots of the national urban unrest, there seemed to be few direct answers to America's "urban crisis." These external events likely played a large role in precipitating the Mennonite Church's first real outreach to JVL. At this moment within the Mennonite Church Schwartzentruber was hardly alone in his feelings of frustration at the Mennonite inaction in the face of the emerging 'crisis.' In *The Gospel Herald*, one of the most widely read Mennonite periodicals, intellectuals and urban pastors wrote passionately about the need for the church to immediately invest in programs targeting root causes of the urban crisis, like jobs training, housing construction and healthcare services.

In the *Gospel Herald*, Levi Keidel attempted to paint a realistic picture of America's inner cities: "The machinery of the ghetto was structured by the combination of mass dislocations of populations and selfish economic interest. Its wheels grind on, unyieldingly. Its grist is people: men, women and children."⁴ To affect change and break the cycle of poverty in the ghetto, Norman Krause, wrote emphatically that the Mennonite Church must become an active part of the solution, and that it would have to overcome its complacency to sit on the sidelines. He writes:

The program possibilities for the servant church are only limited by the needs of the ghetto community and our own imagination. The church must become involved as a witness against the corrupt political and economic structures which help to create and

⁴ Kreidel, Levi. "The People of the Ghetto," *The Gospel Herald*, LXI, No. 26, July 16, 1968, 614

continue to aggravate the crisis. The church's willingness to silently condone injustice is nothing short of a scandal. Last, the church must be in the ghetto as a living demonstration of the new reality of the peace of God in the midst of violence and fear.⁵ By 1968, Schwartzentruber was an increasingly outspoken advocate for social justice in the church being one of the original co-founders of the Mennonite Minorities Council. His anger and frustration at the lack of movement by the church to embrace social action in the streets (especially in Yeatman), and the dearth of African American church leaders seemed to weigh most on him in by late 1967. In private correspondences with supervisor Simon Gingrich, Schwartzentruber expressed curiosity in the possibility of black leadership assuming more direct control over ministry and church administration: "Perhaps we're at a point of history that we need to turn over our congregations to the community. Maybe white people may best leave?"⁶

From the day he first joined Macler Shepard in a march to city hall, Schwartzentruber felt the Church needed to take on a more substantial role within JVL's affairs.⁷ Thus, in a very real way, the failure of his brethren to assist his friends in JVL genuinely began to damage his patience to lead the Mennonite mission in St. Louis. Church leaders, like Gingrich, continually discussed Mennonite greater involvement in JVL, but consistently failed to produce tangible results. By 1967, Schwartzentruber grew weary of inaction in JVL—in one letter, he writes, "I have some reservation to set up another meeting with community people to explore with them what we should be doing. We did so much of this already that it can have a damaging effect. We

⁵ Krause, Norman, "A Theology for Action," *The Gospel Herald*, LX, No 25, June 18 1968, 538

⁶ Correspondence from Rev. Hubert Schwartzentruber to Simon Gingrich. November 27th 1967. Box 1, Folder 34. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA

⁷ Schwartzentruber, Hubert. Interview with the author, January 23rd, 2019

have made the community believe that we are going to do something. We are at the place now where we must end the ‘good talk’ and produce.”⁸

Against the inaction of the Church to embrace JVL, Schwartzentruber expresses how impressed he was with how little Shepard needed to convince Thomas DePew of the JVL cause. Explaining to Gingerich further, Schwartzentruber writes that in the presence of visiting businessmen from Hesston, Kansas (S.H.A.R.E), Depew exclaimed that he could not approach JVL and engage in idle conversation without moving the conversation forward towards a solution. Describing this he writes, “Mr. Depew, the man that gave us some money and said that he could not come to us with a clear conscience about the needs of the area without doing something about them....”⁹ According to Schwartzentruber, Depew did something bold in that moment. Depew approached Schwartzentruber with the Hesston men in his presence and handed the pastor a check for \$5,800.¹⁰

Once more, Schwartzentruber pondered how he could help Macler and JVL using Mennonite resources, without having to beg Gingerich and others in the Church leadership to do something Schwartzentruber knew they didn’t want to do. Sometime in mid-to-late 1967, Hubert and Macler made overtures to the Mennonite Disaster Service, a Mennonite relief organization not under the direct umbrella of Hubert’s supervisors at the Missions Board. In their invitation, the JVL organizers broached the idea of bringing a new, unique Mennonite Disaster Service mission to St. Louis’s inner city to assist in housing rehabilitation.¹¹ Traditionally, the Mennonite

⁸ Correspondence from Rev. Hubert Schwartzentruber to Simon Gingerich. November 27th 1967. Box 1, Folder 34. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ The use of “sometime” is a reference made by Cecil Miller in a November 2019 interview with the author. He could not provide an exact date when this proposition was made but noted that he was present in the decision and

Disaster Service (MDS) had been used in cases where tornadoes, flood, or other natural disasters had caused traumatic physical damage to a community. While meeting with the organization's executive director, Delmar Stahly, Shepard attempted to frame the needs of JVL in terms that Stahly, a rural Mennonite, might understand: "Whenever there's a flood or a tornado anywhere, [MDS] would pick up and go there. So I told them, think of our area as a "slow tornado," something that has been going on for 30-40 years, and consider us as part of that disaster group."¹² This was a message which Stahly and his associates understood. Moreover, they saw a potential public relations benefit for the Church, should it partner with Shepard and JVL; St. Louis, unlike other cities across the country, had not taken part in the 1960s riots. Could MDS's intervention in JVL be a force for positive Mennonite witness and interracial exchange that would further prevent an explosion of violence? According to Miller, Shepard likely, welcomed such questions—they worked to his advantage in convincing Stahly that a partnership with MDS and JVL based around housing in the inner city would benefit all parties.¹³ As Depew Jr. has stated, Shepard was a natural salesman.¹⁴

As noted in letters to Swartzentruber and Miller, Stahly's only worry was that the endeavor might face recruitment problems; without a natural disaster, few MDS volunteers would be attracted to work in such an unfamiliar a setting. Moreover, Hubert was asked why the MDS should be used in lieu of finding a local contractor. He indicated that JVL simply lacked

implied he was the author of the idea to approach MDS—or likely someone within the SHARE group at that. Interview with Cecil 11-20-2019

¹² Lee, Betty. "A Phoenix Rising: JeffVanderLou." *Proud Magazine*, 1980

¹³ Miller, Cecil. Interview with the author, May 20th 2020

¹⁴Depew, Jr. Thomas. Interview with the author June 10th, 2021

the financial resources to secure such assistance, whereas MDS was a volunteer program.¹⁵

When Gingerich and Stahly met at the Handle with members of JVL including Cecil Miller, they asked the same question: “Why MDS?” According to Gingerich’s notes, Macler was emphatic: “This program of working together can be valuable both to black laborers and neighborhood people in the city, and perhaps it can also be helpful to the Mennonite volunteers who come into the city.”¹⁶

Fearing the project might result in only raising false hopes, Gingerich, Swartzentruber, and Stahly felt nervous, even cautious, about the program’s success. Hubert was especially nervous about the addition of extra white faces to the neighborhood. By contrast, however, Macler and Miller, were optimistic about the MDS program and felt the endeavor worth a try.¹⁷ After committing to a trial run in St. Louis, Stahly issued an MDS-wide memo: “We are limited in our experiences with other races, and in understanding poverty. We hope for an educational, a social, a spiritual experience on the part of the workers, and as a broadening experience for the Church as a whole.”¹⁸ Not only would a potential partnership with MDS bring to JVL skilled tradesmen like plumbers, electricians, carpenters and masons partnering with JVL residents

¹⁵ Correspondence from Rev. Hubert Swartzentruber to Simon Gingerich. May 15th, 1968. Box 1, Folder 34. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA

¹⁶ Ibid. This is also an incredible statement as it sort of builds on Stahly’s own line of thinking discussed in the previous paragraph—the MDS-JVL partnership viewed as a social experiment would benefit all parties.

¹⁷ Correspondence from Rev. Hubert Swartzentruber to Simon Gingerich. May 15th, 1968. Box 1, Folder 34. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA

¹⁸ Correspondence from Delmar Stahly, Coordinator of Mennonite Disaster Service to MDS Section, “Developments in proposal from JeffVanderLou Inc, to Mennonite Disaster Service.” May 15, 1968. Box 1, Folder 6. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA. Pg 1

would through their work, train the residents in these skills and help build JVL's organizational capacity. Shepard was thinking two steps ahead.

Yet for the Mennonites, the fear of interracial struggles remained. Stahley warned, "It is recognized that our members have attitudes common to whites that may be unacceptable in an interracial situation. Seemingly natural reactions to situations in the urban areas, and in some of the homes, might create reactions that would destroy relationships."¹⁹ He added that the short periods, usually a week with eight-hour workdays, might produce situations where, in "unstructured spare time, activities or expression of attitudes that would create tensions or cause violence" might be likely.²⁰ That said, Stahly reaffirmed MDS's commitment to see the program through. Moreover, adding to the experimental nature of the MDS commitment, Stahly noted that MDS volunteers would not work independently. Rather, they would work through black contractors, supervisors, and foremen. Stahly concluded: "The basic reason for going would be to try and learn. The appeal for men should be of a nature that would exclude those seeking information, experience, or excuse for confirming or explaining a rigid position already arrived at."²¹

There is unfortunately little archival documentation of MDS' activities undertaken in St. Louis. Save for correspondences already cited here between Schwartzentruber and Stahley, little remains that can detail specific contributions the program made, and to which properties the

¹⁹ Correspondence from Delmar Stahly, Coordinator of Mennonite Disaster Service to MDS Section, "Developments in proposal from JeffVanderLou Inc, to Mennonite Disaster Service." May 15, 1968 p. 2

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Correspondence from Delmar Stahly, Coordinator of Mennonite Disaster Service to MDS Section, "Developments in proposal from JeffVanderLou Inc, to Mennonite Disaster Service." May 15, 1968. 3 Box 1, Folder 7. Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA.

program worked on. From Miller, for example, we know that MDS crews were usually composed of six to ten men of various backgrounds including skilled trades like plumbers and electricians, to carpenters and masons.²² We know they typically slept in the homes of Bethesda Mennonite congregation members, or JVL members, such as Mrs. Spotts, whom Miller states sometimes housed up to five men from the MDS. We learn a little about their day-to-day work on JVL rehabs from James Marner, a MDS foreman who moved to St. Louis with his wife in late 1969. Marner and his wife Charlene joined Cecil and me for coffee in 2019, and afterwards, driving through the JVL neighborhood, Marner pointed out remaining characteristic modifications made by MDS crews to JVL rehabs. For example, to save on heating and cooling costs, MDS workers usually dropped the ceiling to eight feet; externally this can be seen by modifications to windows which had attractive wood trim blocking the top foot and a half of windows affected by the ceiling modifications.²³

Marner also confirmed that, as Shepard predicted, there was in fact positive intercultural camaraderie built between crews and neighborhood residents working on the rehabs. He stated that it was a wonderful opportunity that provided rehab skills training for neighborhood laborers, skills the African Americans workers sometimes had difficulty acquiring because they often lacked access to the building trades in St. Louis.²⁴ He recalled:

One day on the job I was on the sidewalk mixing the concrete, and the fellow, the neighborhood Fellow, was up on the ladder working. And a car drove by, real slowly. And I could almost picture in my mind what was going through their mind at the time. Here I am, a white guy who is used to running a construction site and I'm doing the menial work of mixing the concrete and the black guy, the guy who is usually tasked with doing the ugly stuff like mixing materials, is up on the ladder calling the shots. What a reckoning for those people in the car, and for me, it was such a positive reinforcement for

²² Miller, Cecil. Interview with the author, May 20th 2020

²³ Marner, James and Charlene, Interview with the author, March 14th 2019.

²⁴ Ibid.

what service work was all about. This isn't my neighborhood. That isn't my house being worked on. I'm just here to lend my knowledge and help out.²⁵

By the close of 1970, when the MDS program slowed and JVL contracted with a professional building company to do their rehabs (discussed in chapter 12), Schwartzentruber and Shepard could look upon the partnership with MDS as one of the most successful elements of early JVL work. Leon Strauss, president of Millstone and later Pantheon Corp, who would become JVL's first private building contractor following the MDS program's wane, described the Mennonites as essential to JVL's programmatic success, stating: "They've been the rock. Lots of tradesmen are Mennonites which helps us get workers. They're saints—they're real—like the kibbutzim in Israel in the 1940s."²⁶ Between 1968 and 1970, it is estimated by Marner that the MDS crews rehabilitated close to 50-70 properties for JVL.²⁷ The impact of the MDS work would propel JVL forward to the 1980s, demonstrating once and for all to investors and HUD that JVL could plan, rehabilitate, and prepare for occupancy former vacant properties. Moreover, through the MDS collaboration, neighborhood laborers were now proficient themselves in improving properties in areas including electricity and plumbing. This bolstered JVL's own ability to begin providing to membership services like wrap-around housing improvements.²⁸

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Housing and Community Development Amendments of 1978: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development of the Committee on Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs, House of Representatives, Ninety-fifth Congress, United States. Congress. House. Committee on Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs. Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development Jan 1978
U.S. Government Printing Office

²⁷ Marner, James and Charlene, Interview with the author, March 14th 2019.

²⁸ Miller, Cecil, Interview with the author, May 20th, 2020.

Below are two tables showing the full extent of the Mennonite Church's dollar-to-dollar investment in the JVL program, either directly (loans) or indirectly (compensation of Cecil Miller):

| Program Name | Total Investment in Dollars |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Share Inc. (Judy and Cecil Miller) | \$24,000 + \$8,000 revolving loan |
| Mennonite Mutual Aid | \$30,000 revolving loan |
| Illinois Mennonite Youth Fellowship | \$3,000 + donated labor |
| Mennonite Disaster Service | \$25,000 (8,000 man hours) |

| Program Name | Total Investment in Dollars |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Mennonite Board of Missions Subsidy | \$25,000 |
| Local Congregation (Gifts/Giving) | \$30,000 |
| Voluntary Service Staff Expense | \$14,000 |
| Federal Fund for Youth Employment | \$12,000 |
| Federal Fund for Camp Activities | \$2,000 ²⁹ |

²⁹ Report of Bethesda Mennonite Church for 1971, January 10, 1972, Box 1 Folder 17, Financial And Congregational Reports, Bethesda Mennonite Church (St. Louis, Mo.) Records, 1955-2008. III-25-08. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana

Chapter 11

Building Organizational Capacity

Building from the success of the housing redevelopment program, Shepard looked to expand JVL's programming through the 1970s. From 1969 onwards, JVL would borrow from an oft repeated phrase used by Shepard, "from the house come everything," to drive the expansion of JVL supervised programs including housing for the elderly, childcare assistance and improved access to healthcare. Though JVL explored new avenues for programming, the 1970s brought Shepard the JVL face to face with new and difficult challenges. The conclusion of the Mennonite Disaster Service program in 1971 forced JVL to once more seek out a new partner to help facilitate continued housing rehabilitation activities. Almost as soon as JVL had found such a partner—Leon Strauss and Pantheon Construction Company, federal reforms in HUD shifted the emphasis of housing programming away from home ownership and towards rental property development. Again, this challenged JVL to reimagine itself not simply as home builders but as property managers. At the same time, Shepard felt it necessary to expand JVL to encompass social services including education, elderly services and healthcare. The 1970s would see JVL blossom into something less of a organization, and more akin to a movement, as Shepard joined forces with doctors, teachers and developers to reimagine the destiny of the Yeatman neighborhood.

In 1968, Brown Shoe had announced its plan to build a new factory in the Yeatman neighborhood, spurring local universities, churches and enterprise organizations to reach out to Shepard and JVL in hopes of becoming "part of the solution." Perhaps one of the more interesting collaborations to emerge from this was the Sheridan Street medical office. Dating back 1966, the disparities in healthcare between Yeatman residents and other areas of the city

had been a chief concern for Shepard, Spotts, and others. Yeatman was one of the city's poorest neighborhoods and the conditions for life were similarly abysmal. The neighborhood's population was aging, with a large percentage over the age of sixty five, the neighborhood also suffered from high infant and mother mortality rates. Shepard argued that now this area would benefit most from a partnership with healthcare workers, even though as recently as 1960 a state-of-the-art medical clinic had been opened at the nearby intersection of Jefferson and Cass, funded in part by bond money provided from the 1955 Bond Issue.¹

Dr. Morton Binder first heard of Macler Shepard and JVL while listening to a talk by Thomas Depew, who 1968-1969 became Shepard's chief promoter when speaking before potential donors and community audiences. In this case, Binder was attending a meeting for his children's community school. Depew, he recounted, was describing the incredible experiment unfolding in Yeatman: "Tom talked to the parents of the Community School about the Yeatman area's need for jobs, education, and medical care. He showed us homes which had been rebuilt. We nosed around a little more. But Macler Shepard, board chairman of JVL, did not jump at our first hint of interest. He reeled us in slowly."² It was important to Shepard that the physicians, including Binder, understood that while the need was great, and any help would be welcomed, the depth of poverty in the area would make it impossible for the partnership to be profitable for the doctors. This was something Binder and his associates were willing to accept, telling the *Post-Dispatch* in 1968 that they just "wanted to be of some help,"³ and adding that their office would be operated as a group, where relationships between doctors and patients could be built. This represented a rejection of the clinic approach, which is more service driven and impersonal:

¹ <https://dnr.mo.gov/shpo/docs/moachp/Jefferson-Cass%20Health%20Center.pdf>

² Skinner, Olivia. "Extending Healing Hands to Slum People," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 21, 1969. 117

³ "Non Profit Doctors Office Will Open in Slum Area," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, September 26th, 1968, 3

“Their objective is to give the same quality of care to their inner city patients that they provide to those who come to their West End or St. Louis County offices.”⁴ In addition to providing low cost care, Shepard also brokered from the doctors’ group an option for their office, located at the corners of Sheridan and Leffingwell, to be rehabbed for both use as the group’s office, with the second floor reserved as living quarters to be sold by JVL. The doctors agreed, and a private benefactor paid the \$50,000 cost for JVL workers to complete a modernization and gut rehab.⁵

The partnership with the doctor’s group was a breakthrough for Shepard and. For Shepard, it provided immediate help for one of his core constituencies, senior citizens. Many older residents, according to Shepard, became confused with programs like Medicare or Medicaid, which constantly changed procedures and policies, resulting in many senior citizens forgoing medical treatment because they feared incurring additional costs they could not afford. Further isolating seniors from receiving healthcare was the problem of transportation, according to Shepard, “cab rides to and from the City Hospital Clinics cost about \$6 a round trip, and the clinic fee was \$4. Because elderly people are too feeble to go by themselves, someone would have to take off work to accompany them,” accordingly, the cost of medical care coupled with transportation discouraged many from ever seeing a physician.⁶ Thus Shepard welcomed the arrival of the clinic, helping to locate it at the center of the nine-block area which JVL had chosen to focus for its programming and housing efforts, nearby both the Handle Coffeehouse and the JVL offices at Sheridan and Leffingwell.

In a lengthy feature piece in the *Post-Dispatch*, doctors and nurses volunteering at the Sheridan office spoke of the need in the neighborhood and how their work, and the services and

⁴ Skinner, Olivia. “Extending Healing Hands to Slum People,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* September 21, 1969.

⁵ “Non-Profit Doctors Office Will Open in Slum Area,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 26th, 1968. 3.

⁶ Skinner, Olivia. “Extending Healing Hands to Slum People,” *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, September 21, 1969.

facilities they provided, made inroads towards providing much needed healthcare to the Yeatman community. The medical professionals stated that their elderly patients, many of whom who had never seen a doctor in their life, suffered from a variety of debilitating conditions, spanning from liver disease to stomach ulcers. The Sheridan group doctors treated Yeatman residents to the best of their ability, and if needed would then refer the patients to Barnes Jewish Hospital for reduced cost lifesaving treatments.⁷ Dr. Flance, who himself would later become active in community development with Baron McCormick, told the *Post*, “I want to emphasize that we’re not do-gooders. If everyone in the whole St. Louis community came down here to do his thing, what he does best, JVL would flourish and become a model for the rest of the city.”⁸

JVL’s continued work in housing rehabilitation had by the early 1970s encompassed over 120 units of housing rehabbed and sold to home buyers in the area. But the program which had facilitated this work, 221h, ended in 1971.⁹ Created in 1968 with the National Housing Act, 221h had been meant to spur non-profit development of housing for the purpose of being sold to home buyers. However, apart from limited use by local groups, including both JVL and nearby Bicentennial Redevelopment Corporation, the program was largely underutilized. HUD had begun to encourage private real estate developers and non-profits to use a different program, Section 235, which offered the same FHA backed loans but focused not on rehabilitation but new construction.¹⁰ Influencing HUD’s decision, at least as observed locally by JVL and Bicentennial, was the fact that not everyone could afford to own homes, and for JVL itself, the

⁷ Ibid. One doctor is quoted as saying “there is no shortage of good will here, just a shortage of money,” still he commented that neighborhood residents were afforded the same quality of care the doctors showed their patients at the hospital. Moreover, JeffVanderLou residents are recipients of the same prescriptions, benefiting from the samples the doctors received from manufacturers and insurers.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Miller, Cecil. Interview with the author, May 20th, 2020

¹⁰ Surprisingly, as interested as JVL was in housing development, it only built about seven properties using Section 235 by 1980.

cost of materials and bringing homes up to code had increased beyond the prices that volunteer Mennonites could supply. Checkoway points out, “Neighborhood houses that had sold for \$9,500 in 1968 cost \$17,00 two years later.”¹¹ This pushed JVL towards a new program, not Section 235 but Section 236, a HUD program which offered subsidized mortgages for the development of rental housing. JVL, by Shepard’s own admission, never sought to become a landlord, but as the price of housing increased the organization needed to keep the momentum going.¹² At the same time, JVL began to diversify its program focus, homing in on needs outside of housing, including childcare and services for those who could no longer take care of themselves.

As JVL expanded the nature of its neighborhood programming to encompass facilitating healthcare, childcare and education, the organization was signaling that it intended to not simply build a community through houses, but through the provision of social services that were largely absent outside of federal assistance programs. In the late 1970s, one observer of JVL’s programming expansion discussed this idea after speaking with JVL board members, including Shepard, about the organization’s programmatic shifts near the close of the 1960s: “Since JVL set its mission along comprehensive activity lines from the very beginning, these developments are seen as filling out of the neighborhood plan rather than as changes. The evolution therefore is one of overcoming setbacks as JVL attempted to carry out its reinvestment and survival plans for the neighborhood.”¹³ This is to say, back to its articles of incorporation JVL had always intended to build out from housing development to include social services like those to assist seniors, the

¹¹ Checkoway, Barry. *The Metropolitan Midwest: Policy Problems and Prospects for Change*. Urbana u.a.: Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1985. 251.

¹² Lee, Betty. *Phoenix Rising*.

¹³ “People, Building Neighborhoods: Final Report to the President and the Congress of the United States.” *Catalog Record: People, building neighborhoods: final report...* | HathiTrust Digital Library. Accessed August 6, 2021. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000303116>. 777.

disabled, the unemployed, and even eventually to provide affordable housing for those who could not be homeowners. What was important was that the community understood that JVL was listening. Patience was key in community building. Shepard himself speaks to this idea in *Lee, Betty. Phoenix Rising*:

Once we started moving people don't let you sleep on it. They said, Mac, you haven't done this yet. You haven't done this yet. All I'm saying, but I'm going to do it. But how long? Length of time is not the essence all the time. It is the virtue of where you want to go. I would have liked to been 21, but the time had to bring that about. So the same thing about developing housing and community. We'd like to do it. If it's coming here and give us an instant community, just like he'd come in and instantly it disappears. But today, as it grows, we grow with it. We understand what I paid for, it's worth keeping. When you have it, it's of no value. So the community becomes our responsibility.¹⁴

Shepard dealt with the impatience of his community because the community respected him and his organization. However, he continued to struggle for allies at the federal level, with HUD. Even though JVL had proven its ability to build collateral, work with private lenders and contractors to rehabilitate and sell homes to first time homebuyers through 221H, HUD again questioned JVL's readiness for rental housing development. By 1970, JVL had begun to discuss plans for a 70-unit rental development that included spacious apartments with gardens and a community center. This unit represented a major test of JVL's abilities, and HUD refused to consider without evidence that JVL could find a community partner to oversee such a project.

According to Miller, upon hearing HUD's reasoning in their rejection of JVL's proposal, Shepard immediately began to canvass his network of allies. Rev. Donald Register, lead pastor of the ecumenical Northside Team Ministry at Pruitt Igoe and former associate pastor at Berea Presbyterian Church in Laclede Town, emerged as Shepard's answer to this problem. Since 1966 Register had been, like Schwartzentruber, an acolyte of Shepard's, inspired by the organizer's

¹⁴ *Lee, Betty. Phoenix Rising.*

ability to stir his community to action with an almost religious fervor. Register had also wanted to see his church emulate the work that Schwartzenruber had done through enlisting the MDS men to help jumpstart JVL's rehabilitation program.¹⁵ Thus, in the late 1970s, Register and Shepard began work with the Lovejoy Presbytery to establish a relationship with JVL. The partnership wasn't novel however, but rather was built upon an earlier collaboration between the two, also fostered by Register in 1968, to bring in \$50,000 in low interest loans for JVL's housing program.¹⁶ Beyond a mere loan, such as that offered by the Mennonite Church, what emerged from talks between the Presbyterians and JVL was a new non-profit, the board of which was partially appointed by JVL Inc and the other half, by the Church. The purpose of this was to meet HUD's new demands for a program sponsor, the resulting group then was named JVL Housing.¹⁷ Unlike JVL Inc, which still operated both as a politically involved neighborhood organization and service delivery program, JVL Housing was created solely to facilitate the fundraising and oversight of new housing construction.

Yet as soon as Shepard managed to put one problem to rest, another, seemingly larger problem emerged. JVL lacked a qualified developer to handle a project at the scale that Shepard anticipated JVL could achieve with Section 236 financing. The project would be something new for JVL; it would involve new construction, and the scale of the project itself would require substantially more qualified engineers, architects, and skilled laborers than supplied by the existing labor pool that JVL had at its disposal. A solution came from Thomas Depew, who was friends with a developer, Leon Strauss, the Vice President of Millstone, the developer who had recently built the popular housing complex in midtown, Laclede Town. According to Thomas

¹⁵ Boshart, Wes, interview by the author, July 2018.

¹⁶ "The Rev. William Gillespie Presbyterian moderator," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Dec 6, 1968, 14, 767.

Depew Jr, who sat in on the meeting with Strauss in Laclede Town, Strauss was not overly impressed with Shepard's presentation.¹⁸ According to Depew, "Strauss was all about the money. He didn't care about the idealism that Shepard was talking about, he wanted to know was there any money to be made."¹⁹ Yet, Miller adds, despite whatever was discussed at their initial meeting, Strauss was won over when he visited JVL's neighborhood to walk around with Shepard and others in the organization; "I think he was moved by the work that had already been done, and could see that Macler wasn't a fool."²⁰

Evidence suggests that Strauss did become a true believer in Shepard's leadership and organization. In testimony before the subcommittee on Housing and Community Development in 1978, Strauss was described as praising Shepard's work, referring to JVL's "active organization led by an 'inspiring' black leader, Macler Shepard."²¹ Importantly, Strauss brought experience to the rental development project which HUD *was* impressed with, as Millstone's most noted development in St. Louis, Laclede Town, had become something of a national legend in housing and community development. Together with Strauss and the Presbyterians, Shepard and JVL once more submitted their proposal to HUD, seeking mortgage assistance to construct a 70+ unit apartment complex for neighborhood residents. The immediate result of this partnership was the Spotts Apartments, which opened in 1971 to an overflow of applications from potential tenants.²²

¹⁸ Depew, Thomas Jr., Interview by the author, June 10th, 2021.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Miller, Cecil, interview by the author, May 20th, 2020.

²¹ "Housing and Community Development Amendments of 1978." Google Books. Google, n.d.

https://books.google.com/books?id=HYZLAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA1312&lpg=PA1312&dq=millstone%2Bstrauss&source=bl&ots=Bc_Y5r53_k&sig=ACfU3U07V6xhjdJCED6qCb7p8prPMAV7kg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjL6NakqdHxAhXXAZ0JHcgrA0wQ6AF6BAGZEAM#v=onepage&q=millstone%20strauss&f=false. 1312.

²² It's important to note that in addition to funding from HUD and the Presbyterians to facilitate this new project, JVL worked directly with the St. Louis Model Cities program to negotiate a \$350,000 grant to help shore up a deficit that JVL came upon in putting together the financing for the Spotts Apartments. Though there had been limited housing development through Model Cities prior the investment into the JVL Housing project on

The new development, a 74-unit rental apartment complex at Bacon and Montgomery, was named after co-founder of JVL, Florence A. Spotts. According to Checkoway, the Spotts Apartments became something of a jewel in the expanding JVL portfolio, boasting not only units ranging from one bedroom to four, but also encompassing “a central building to house the expanding JVL offices, laundry rooms, employment facilities, day care centers and meeting rooms. These apartments became the new neighborhood center”²³; for Shepard, the community center was a significant development in the expansion of JVL’s programming and signaled that JVL had matured organizationally.²⁴

A positive consequence of Strauss’ JVL partnership was his company’s ability to deliver not simply on gut rehabs, the bulk of JVL’s housing activities through the 1970s (encompassing close to 800+ units) but, like the Spotts Apartments, new construction at scale. This was especially important for Shepard in the near term; he had envisioned JVL growing its portfolio to include apartments and services for senior citizens. From Schwartzentruber to Depew Jr.,

Montgomery Street was hailed as a success partially belonging to Model Cities, or at least this is how it was framed in the press. “Rental Complex for Model Cities” *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, Dec 18 1971, page 3

A further note to the Model Cities Program, seemingly lost in the narrative, is the question of what was the relationship of JeffVanderLou and the Model Cities program beyond 1967. The answer to this question is that as JVL began to compile outside assistance from partnerships with Thomas Depew and the Mennonite Church the need to work under federal anti-poverty program guidelines seemed less and less appealing. Miller states that until at least 1972 when he left St. Louis JVL maintained a small role on the local Model Cities board with Yeatman Corp but aside from the assistance with the Spotts Apartments and a skills center, the relationship between the two programs was very distant—JeffVanderLou simply outgrew and outpaced Model Cities.

²³ Checkoway, Barry. *The Metropolitan Midwest: Policy Problems and Prospects for Change*, 252.

²⁴ Miller, Cecil, interview by the author, April 12, 2021. A further note on the relationship between JVL and Strauss: Unmentioned by either Depew Jr. or Miller but referenced by Strauss’ comments recorded in testimony before a panel on community development was that precipitating his work in JVL was the recruitment of the National Corporation for Housing Development to help subsidize Strauss’ activities working for JeffVanderLou in the 1970s. Describing how he had to work to convince the investment fund of JVL’s quality, Strauss recounts “George Brady, the president of NCHD told me ‘no scatter site rehab. I know JeffVanderLou and I’m not going to have that shit in our portfolio.’ I said, “Come look at it, these are special people.” He sent 18 people here and they were tremendously impressed.” Lastly, Strauss was impressed with the work done by the Mennonite tradesmen in previous rehabs, so much so, that he hired MDS foreman, James Marner, to become his construction manager in JVL for the newly incorporated Pantheon Corp, Strauss’ development firm. With Strauss on board, JVL was able to move forward just in a short span of a few years (1972-1976) on rehabbing or building an additional 300 units, all of them through programs which allowed JVL to rent to neighborhood residents qualified for Section 8 vouchers.

Shepard was seen as deeply concerned with the need of the neighborhood's senior population. By 1973, he began to discuss the idea of a major project with the goal of safe, affordable, and amenity-rich senior housing. The manager of the Shepard's senior apartments states:

Mr. Shepard when he became involved in the community development, from the beginning the elderly were behind him, they backed him, they were part of the whole planning process, and not only that, he also was able to observe firsthand the kind of problems that the elderly in this neighborhood were faced with in terms of housing, in terms of their economy and their social needs.²⁵

Shepard had already worked for JVL to provide wrap-around services for elderly members of the organization by at least 1974, including a program which would be used as model for Meals on Wheels, as well as mobility services and senior recreation programming.²⁶ But as the neighborhood's population of seniors continued to age their mobility became limited; participation in JVL meetings began to suffer, as did their ability to maintain their property. With JVL already working to stabilize the neighborhood's vacant properties, the addition of this extra layer of work posed a significant problem for the group. This inspired Shepard to rethink the idea behind a senior housing program; not only would it provide living quarters for those who were struggling to care for themselves, it would be a way of recycling good housing to new prospective buyers in the neighborhood. In his own words Shepard explains

I said, yes, you own your home. You've been in it for 40 years. You've been taking care of the home. Why not let the home take care of you the rest of your life? So what we would do, we'd build a place like this, and then you could come in and live off the equity of your home, then a younger family could move in and keep that home going. So we have this thing going. That was always here, we just had never aroused it, we'd been sleeping on it and not knowing it.²⁷

²⁵ Lee, Betty. *Phoenix Rising*.

²⁶ Miller, Cecil, interview by the author, November 2018. Also, in his writing, Checkoway adds that funding for some of these services came from Model Cities and Washington University. 253.

²⁷ Lee, Betty. *Phoenix Rising*.

By tying the project to neighborhood longevity and vitality, Shepard thus depicted senior housing not as simply another housing development project, but a central programmatic function of JVL. This was now a matter of life and death for JVL. With Strauss as the building contractor and Claybour as designer, JVL completed a 100-unit senior living facility at the corner of MLK and Garrison in the late 1970s. In pursuing the development, JVL took advantage of a new HUD program meant to subsidize the construction of affordable living units for the elderly, Section 202.²⁸ Importantly, the project also served as an anchor for senior services in JVL, encompassing programs for recreation, Meals on Wheels, point-of-care medical treatment and wellness classes.²⁹ The project manager stated, “We provide supportive services and transportation for medical, shopping and some other personal businesses. The elderly have played a very important role in the development of the JVL community, and they’ve now become a core on the future growth.”³⁰

However, in observing JVL’s programmatic expansion in the 1970s there was still one more core area of emphasis which bears mentioning, services for the youth. It could be said that the catalyst for Shepard’s rise in neighborhood affairs was his leadership shown in organizing protests following the slaying of Melvin Childs in the summer of 1965. By leading a march of school children from Yeatman to City Hall in demand of an end to the murder of unarmed children by city police. In discussions with Schwartzentruber, Miller, and others, there are many examples of when Macler Shepard centered the safety and wellbeing of neighborhood children—from helping at risk teenagers find work at Brown Shoe to ensuring older youth participating in

²⁸ Checkoway, Barry. *The Metropolitan Midwest: Policy Problems and Prospects for Change*. 253 Today this property, rededicated as the Macler C. Shepard Apartments, remains one of the two remaining ‘packages’ or housing entities still operated by JeffVanderLou Inc.

²⁹ Checkoway, 252.

³⁰ *Lee, Betty. Phoenix Rising.*

rehab work alongside MDS volunteers were acquiring skills-training in addition to a paycheck. As JVL evolved into the 1970s, Macler Shepard placed no less emphasis on youth services than before. Checkoway, for example, writes of how improvements in the neighborhood achieved by JVL may have even intensified the need for additional services for children than were demanded in years prior, “completion of the new factory and apartments intensified the need (of childcare services) by putting many mothers to work and providing housing and employment for new families with young children. As the need increased,” he writes, so did demand: “the neighborhood had no licensed centers and facilities in adjacent areas were inaccessible to those who lacked transportation.”³¹ To address this need, JVL tied to the Spotts Apartments development a spinoff program using Title VII HEW grant funding to finance and support the first JVL childcare center, providing services to approximately thirty-two neighborhood children.³² Checkoway adds that, as with most JVL projects, there was more than just surface level services at stake, “The center stressed education to develop skills and promote interaction, provided meals and transportation for children, and encouraged parents to participate in curriculum development and classroom activities.”³³ Speaking of the childcare center she worked for in JVL, one instructor explained the importance of the program and how it sought to work directly with parents and schools: “JVL presently operates two day care centers in the area. We work very closely with the public and parochial schools because we have to expose our children through games and experience through exploration and creative activities. Our staff are qualified and have ongoing training, they’re from the community itself.”³⁴ In just a few short years

³¹ Checkoway, 253.

³² “People, Building Neighborhoods: Final Report to the President and the Congress of the United States.” 780.

³³ Checkoway, 254. The childcare facility again ties back to Shepard’s idea of “from the house come everything,” and in a very real sense Checkoway identifies this in his work, writing “JVL staff sought to join the home, community and classroom into a link to promote the complete development of the child with his family.”

³⁴ *Lee, Betty. Phoenix Rising.*

demand rose for more childcare facilities and JVL, working with the Mennonite Church established a second childcare operation in the basement of Bethesda Mennonite by mid-1974.³⁵

New partnerships were fostered to expand services for the community. Washington University's Jack Kirkland, for example, had been an early advocate of JVL. Dating back to the days of the Yeatman neighborhood center operated by the Urban League, but he is perhaps most known for his work with JVL in developing a detailed plan for the stabilization and growth of the MLK Business District in the neighborhood.³⁶ In 1975, *PROUD Magazine* moved into the neighborhood and began publishing the *JVL News*, a bi-monthly circular which circulated community news and editorials as well as updates on JVL Inc. agenda items.³⁷ In 1977, as Shepard's national profile grew, JVL also saw investment from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation which provided a \$148,000,000 grant to the organization to help renovate and start what would become known as the JVL Communications Center.³⁸ The Communications Center, led by Betty Lee, offered enrichment education courses for neighborhood teens. Collaborating with the school district, it gave students hands-on training in journalism, media production, and skills training to prepare enrollees for careers in media positions.³⁹

As JVL neared the close of the 1970s, Shepard could look back fondly on a tremendous amount of progress made. While the Mennonites had left by 1972, Shepard's partnership with Depew had already secured partnerships with the likes of Strauss who continued the work began by the MDS volunteers in rehabilitating housing. Moreover, by collaborating with the Presbyterians to create JVL Housing, Shepard's organization was able to expand their portfolio

³⁵ Schwartzenruber, Hubert, interview by the author on November 20th, 2019.

³⁶ Checkoway, 255.

³⁷ "People, Building Neighborhoods: Final Report to the President and the Congress of the United States." 780.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

to include new construction, including two senior housing facilities and one market rate apartments building. Partnerships with doctors, educators (both pre-k and higher education) as well as PROUD magazine allowed JVL to develop a fully fledged, holistic approach to building a self-sustaining neighborhood.

Conclusion

The Legacy of a Plain Black Man

In 1965, following Melvin Child's death, Macler Shepard put St. Louis on notice, announcing that the protest march to City Hall was "just the beginning to the way we are going to call attention to what is going on in the 19th Ward."¹ This was a promise that, by 1976, JVL and Macler Shepard had fulfilled with measurable results.

This thesis examines the first ten years of JVL's organizational growth by looking at Macler Shepard, its longtime chairman and spiritual leader. While JVL was truly the sum of its parts, those individual parts, or partners, from Thomas Depew to the Mennonite Church, would not have come together without Macler Shepard's visionary leadership. He was the quintessential indigenous leader that professional organizers like Saul Alinsky trained followers to seek out for community organizations. Yet distinct from the legacy and work of Alinsky, Shepard did not need to be "cultivated." Having only the education gained from his rural upbringing in Arkansas, his service in the war, and his training as small business owner, Macler Shepard realized his goals through a different path: participation. From serving as a block captain with the Federation of Block Units to working with CORE to establish the 19th Ward Citizens Improvement Association, Shepard modeled the role of a successful community organizer by becoming involved with the people and by inspiring others to do the same.

Shepard did not orchestrate JVL's ascendance alone. Allied with Shepard were supporters like Florence A. Spotts, who inspired Shepard with her tenacious spirit and who guided him through campaigns vital to JVL's reputation as a defender of Yeatman's best

¹ "250 Negroes in March on City Hall Assail Police Tactics." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 17, 1965.

interests, interests sometimes promoted through the use of unconventional organizing tactics. Reverend Hubert Schwartzenruber was drawn into Shepard's vision of achieving social justice through "the home," as well as through neighborhood participation. He brought the support of the Mennonite Church to JVL, as well as funding and skilled workers to support Shepard's plans.

A third key person helping Shepard was Thomas Depew, a successful businessman who recognized the Shepard's strengths and was inspired to donate thousands of dollars and many hours of fund-raising time to JVL. Depew initially wanted to see his mother's childhood home and to prove to his son that he wasn't just another "out of touch" elite. Shepard empathized and cultivated Depew, not simply to be an ATM for JVL, but to be a liaison for the organization in the wider community. DePew established Arrowhead Foundation, which by the mid-1970s had raised millions in corporate donations for JVL's programming. When Shepard told Depew that banks wanted to see proof of gainful employment Depew connected Shepard with Brown Shoe. When Shepard told Depew that the neighborhood needed healthcare, Depew inspired a group of BJC doctors to establish a free clinic in the neighborhood. The partnership of Depew and Shepard, two men who could not be more unlike, allowed JVL to expand, to professionalize, and to become a model for community collaboration.

From the 1966 Bond Issue campaign to the 1967 engagement with the city's building commissioner, with Shepard's leadership, JVL experienced a burst of political success, success largely owing to the city's unfamiliarity with JVL's non-traditional organizing style, one emanating from a neighborhood that the city had largely written off. The City sought to appease the JVL activists with the vague promise of authority through the proposed Model Cities Program (which wouldn't be funded for another three years). Yet the experience of the summer of 1967, when the HDC, in the view of JVL activists, systematically set about to diminish JVL's

clout in Yeatman, revealed that working within the system, be it with HDC or Model Cities, was likely to lead to disabling confrontations and power struggles. Thus, JVL and Macler Shepard sought to build on an organizational model that hadn't been tried in St. Louis before: an independent, resident-led neighborhood development organization.

The mere survival of JVL beyond the summer of 1967 is proof of how trusting JVL members were that Macler Shepard would find a way to persevere. Cecil Miller attests to this; there were many days and long nights just mere weeks after he arrived in St. Louis when Shepard confessed, he didn't see a way forward.² JVL lacked an architect, it lacked funding, it lacked the representation in the Yeatman neighborhood that it had enjoyed just months prior. The promised Model Cities had not arrived. Nothing pointed to JVL surviving into 1968. Yet in the fall of 1967, JVL completed its lone rehabilitation when a twelve-room house on Glasgow was converted into a two-family apartment; this was Shepard's last opportunity to prove that JVL could do the impossible, and it worked.



Completed on time using only the \$18,000 dollars raised by a canvass of the local business community, JVL's first rehab at the corner of Glasgow and Sheridan Street demonstrated that local resources; neighborhood carpenters, electricians, and roofers, could repair a former slum property and make it inhabitable once more. This success triggered JVL's

² Miller, Cecil, interview by the author, November 2018.

growth going into the 1980s; it began with Shepard sitting down with local business owners and convincing them that they too had a stake in the success and redevelopment of their community.

This was where Shepard was his strongest: convincing skeptics that what was seemingly impossible could be done, with a little faith and money. In 1973 Shepard joked with *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporter George Curry:

Every group has the same excuse, they are all looking for the one man to clean up the mess that 50 men created. They say there is a MAN out there somewhere, we just gotta keep looking. HE can solve our problems. HE can solve our troubles. HE can make everything right.' They are all looking for that MAN. I always tell them 'Hell, give me the money, and I'll be that man.'³

By the close of the 1970s, JVL had become a national model for community organizing. Under Shepard's leadership, the group which began as a protest organization in 1966 had successfully transitioned to physical redevelopment and social programing, while retaining its core commitment of resident control. It was estimated that by 1977 close to \$15,000,000 was invested into the community through capital improvements, namely housing, including over 500 units created through new construction (Spotts Apartments, Shepard Apartments) or rehabilitated homes.⁴ While programs like Model Cities and CAP suffered tremendous cutbacks in funding due to shifts in national political agendas, JVL had persevered. Shepard's gamble of organizational independence paid heavy dividends. Shepard had become something of a star himself; he received the St. Louis Award in 1975, an award he shared with Depew, and later the Rockefeller Award for Public Service in 1979. Perhaps more indicative of his work in setting an example of organizational success was his 1977 appointment to serve as commissioner to President Jimmy Carter's National Commission on Neighborhoods.

³ Curry, George. "Stature for a Plain Black Man," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 6th, 1973. 4d.

⁴ "People, Building Neighborhoods : Final Report to the President and the Congress of the United States." 781.

In the eyes of those who lived in JVL, Shepard had achieved success. A neighborhood that had lost population as well as businesses that faced an uncertain future now had a vision a future. JVL became a place where people wanted to live, people like artist Clayvon Wesley Ambrose. Clayvon lived in JVL in the midst of what one could call the neighborhood's renaissance; it attracted businesses like *Proud Magazine* and was host to practicums for Washington University students studying under former JVL volunteer- turned-professor Fred Smith. Clayvon recalls his stay in JVL; he lived above Lucky Inn at Garrison and MLK, where the smells and sounds of community outside of his 2nd story flat inspired his art:

On any given day or night, the streets were bustling with activity of people walking and driving from the Flamingo Lounge situated on the corner of Jefferson and Cass Avenue. On the weekends, people frequented the lounge to listen to the Quartette Très Bien. Families shopped at the Tomboy grocery store across the street from the neighborhood liquor store; and of course, there were the staple neighborhood confectioneries, one of which was run by Mr. Porter who allowed us to purchase food on the credit of our word in order to feed our families. On Friday and Saturday nights, I could look front my front window and see “the regulars” walking and falling up and down Cass drinking Ripple or Mad Dog 20/20 wine camouflaged in brown paper bags.⁵

There were still problems facing the neighborhood. The city had not abandoned its plans for a north-south distributor highway; Shepard and JVL continued their opposition. JVL became a leading voice in challenging urban triage, popularly known as the Team 4 plan, which identified areas like JVL as areas that would receive less community development money. Despite this, there was hope. The *JVL News* describes an abundance of community activities. The daycares, the communications center, the new homes, and the senior center all illustrated that JVL still had room to grow. When told that his work had laid the foundation of a new generation of community leaders, Shepard stated, “You don’t have to start where we started. The

⁵ Ambrose Wesley, “The Evolution of an Artist,” unpublished essay for *Informal History*. Spotts’ granddaughter was briefly married to Ambrose before divorcing him, though he remains friends with Florence A. Spotts’ lone son, Dorsey, who graciously shared his mother’s history with me over a phone conversation.

community has a base it didn't have ten years ago. I see the future lies in damming up, using the resources you have in the neighborhood. The future lies here in the community.”⁶

⁶ Lee, Betty. *Phoenix Rising*.

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