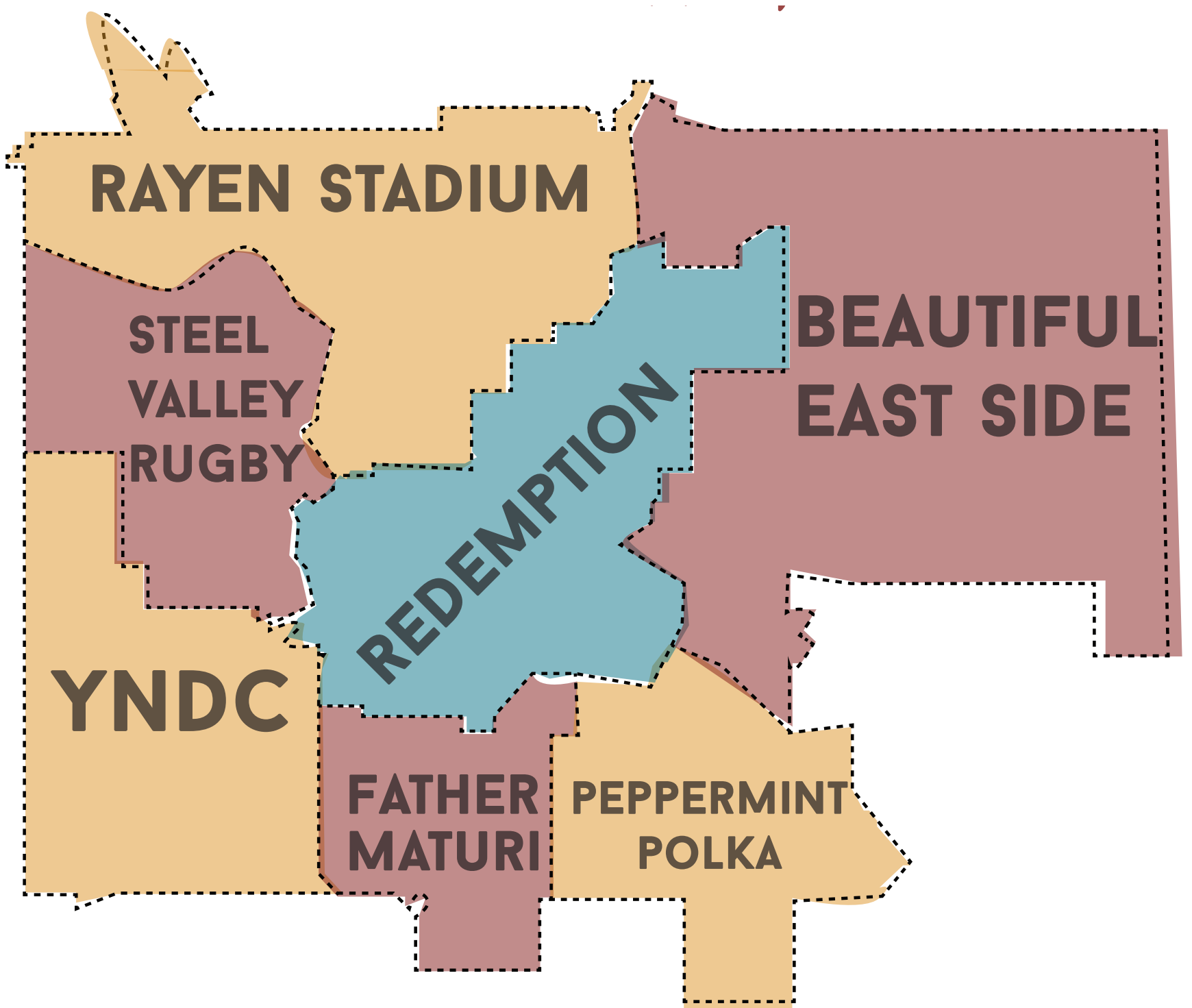


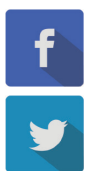
# SEVEN STORIES



# SEVEN WARDS



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## LETTER—FROM THE—EDITORS

# We're Doing Something Different

We've decided to try telling stories that take place across the entire city.

The average student at Youngstown State University regularly drives to campus and maybe goes downtown on the weekend, and that may be the extent of their Youngstown experience. Some students don't leave the university nest.

We do the same thing in our coverage. We're a university paper, so we focus on university issues. Sometimes we make it downtown, but we rarely stray further than that.

In this issue, we're telling seven stories, one from each of Youngstown's seven wards. Youngstown is divided into wards for management purposes based on population. Each ward gets its own councilman, and the councilman represents the needs of their constituents.

Keep in mind that this is

not a definitive portrait of Youngstown. It's a brief snapshot of a changing city. The seven stories we chose are not necessarily the seven most important things happening in the seven wards. They may not be the most deserving; they may not be the most dramatic. But these are the stories that caught our attention, and these are the stories we're excited to share.

We wanted to examine the city's past, its current situation and its future. Did you know there's an old polka recording studio in the 7th Ward? The 6th Ward is home to a crime-fighting priest. Have you dared to venture into the 2nd Ward? You should, it might surprise you.

The Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation — located in the 5th Ward — transformed a block for a day to paint a picture of

one neighborhood's potential future. In the 3rd Ward, a historic field was rescued from disrepair while rugby players in the 4th Ward prepare to save a field of their own. One woman — a four-year resident of the 1st Ward's prison — is on a journey to take control of her life and re-enter society.

Youngstown isn't in its prime. Just as there are problems to be fixed in every ward, there are also victories to be celebrated citywide. City workers, organization volunteers and private citizens are pushing back against the creep of blight.

What we're trying to accomplish with this edition is to draw the population's eye outward, so that they can view the entire city for what it is, one that's working off the clock to redeem its name.

Jack Labusch, 2029 Youll Street, Niles, OH 44446; Ph: (330) 544-3318

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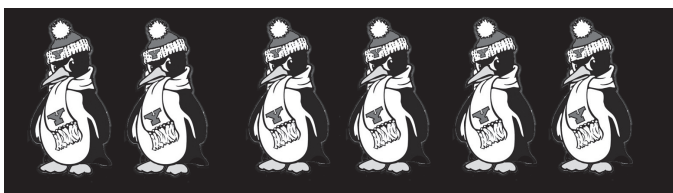


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# Breaking Free: Finding Employment After Incarceration



PHOTO BY ALYSSA PAWLUK/THE JAMBAR

Robin Finger, YSU alumna, attends Saturday's CQE clinic in hopes of gaining her license after serving a four-year prison sentence.

**ALYSSA PAWLUK**  
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Robin Finger is one of many people throughout the Mahoning Valley striving to find employment after emerging from the penal system.

"I struggled a lot, you know, in finding employment. I know I'm well educated, and I'm rounded," Finger said. "I can develop programs and even help support students and their education because I believe education is important, and it's the key. I've handled caseloads, and I can't even get a mere case management position."

She was imprisoned in Cleveland for four years beginning in 2005 and has been trying to find employment since her release. She graduated from Youngstown State University summa cum laude in May with a bachelor's degree in social work.

"I've worked hard to turn my life around. I know that it takes a lot of hard work for me to get ahead," she said. "Now I would like to get a job, and

it's harder than most for me because of my past."

Senate Bill 337 was signed into law on Sept. 29, 2012, creating a Certification of Qualification for Employment to help those with felonies or misdemeanors obtain employment.

Since then, several civil groups throughout communities in the state have been holding clinics to help those sign up to receive the certificates and explain its process to those who need it.

The city's Community Initiative to Reduce Violence, the Home for Good Re-Entry Resource Referral Program and United Returning Citizens, Inc. — all based downtown — have been holding monthly clinics in the Mahoning Valley since the spring of 2014 with collaboration from other groups in Ohio.

Finger attended a clinic held last Saturday at the Rockford Village Community Center. She said she's pursuing a CQE to improve her chances of finding a job.

"There's no real way that you can pay your debt to society with the time. To me that was creating the debt," Finger

said. "That's the only solution that I can find as to why I'm not forgiven."

Raymond Hartsough, a YSU alumnus, currently attends Akron Law School and works with CIRV, URC and Homes for Good to ensure the clinics are successful. He said employers don't often hire those with a criminal past because they view it as a risk.

"If you're an employer, your job is to maximize assets and minimize liabilities. If you're hiring someone with a criminal record, that's a huge liability. That's one of the reasons people just don't get jobs," Hartsough said. "An employer isn't just willing to take that kind of a responsibility on."

Lola Simmons, executive director of Home for Good, said the agency holds these clinics the last Saturday of every month.

"We are trying to make it so that it hits home with people, and they can share the information. And it's easier to know that they can go there and try to get these things done," she said. "We engage with the Akron Law School. Because it was so successful

in Summit County, that's why we needed to expand it."

Currently, Ohio is the only state that offers a program providing returning citizens with certifications that help them obtain employment.

"If it's successful in the state of Ohio, it can expand to other states in the union," Simmons said. "We're just trying to expand the program here, so people will have a source and a resource."

Hartsough said there has been a decrease in crime and unemployment as a result of the Akron clinics, and it positively affects those who are signing up for the clinics.

"Ultimately what we're trying to do here is build a stronger community," Hartsough said. "In the Youngstown area, we have a lot higher unemployment rate and a lot higher crime rate, so we can have more of an impact with these clinics. If we can really get these clinics to take off, we can put more people back to work, we can get more people in a position where they can take care of themselves and their families, which ultimately leads to a stronger community."

The CQEs go alongside the criminal record. Employers can still see the record, but they will no longer be found liable for negligent hiring.

"If someone was going to do something criminal while they were on the job, then the employer would be exonerated from that negligent hiring or negligent liability standard," Hartsough said.

Employers can also receive a temporary Workforce Opportunity Tax Credit.

To qualify for the CQE, applicants must have finished their entire sentence — including probation — at least six months ago if their offense was a misdemeanor, or 12 months ago if it was a felony. Once earned, it stays with them as long as they remain lawful.

"The CQE is something where once you receive it, you don't get rid of it unless you commit another crime," Hartsough said. "If you do commit another crime and you're convicted of the crime, then you will lose your CQE."

Hartsough said the CQEs lift collateral sanctions of those with criminal records and give people the opportunity to stand before licensing boards.

Finger said she hopes to get licensed as a social worker. She took on duties as a student note-taker and a tutor during her time at YSU.

"There's always a way to give back if that's what you truly set out to do," Finger said. "I just feel that when I watch other people succeed, that's what makes me feel good, that I was a part of that process. When I give back it makes me feel good, and I forget about my struggles."

She said she doesn't regret her past, but she's ready to move on.

"My experience, I wouldn't change it for nothing in the world," Finger said. "Sometimes you gotta go through some things to get to where you need to be."

Finger encourages those who are reintegrating into society to prepare themselves for what is to come and to never give up trying.

"Those who aspire to do better with their lives, they run into these dilemmas, and the only thing that I can say is that it takes hard work and you just have to be willing to do it. You got to have the patience and the tolerance, the understanding and acceptance of your situation," Finger said. "Do I get depressed? Yeah. Am I down a lot? Yes, I am. But, I still try and put my best foot forward, the reason being because I do have people who believe in me. Is it hard work? Yes. Roll up your sleeves and strap up your boots because we're going to trudge a long destiny."

# The Youngstown of Youngstown



Brownlee's Lawnmower Service, located on the corner of Jacobs and McGuffey Road, has been in business since 1998. Despite being located in the heart of the East Side and surrounded by largely abandoned neighborhoods, the shop continues to thrive.

**GRAIG GRAZIOSI**  
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"It's Camel," an old man spat. The Royal Oaks regular shifted in his chair to face another patron who had committed the East Side sin of mispronouncing the small city's name. "It's called Camel. Campbell is a f---ing soup."

Wild tufts of gray hair bordered his narrow, weathered face, and his sharp, aggressive tone kept him somewhat isolated even while flanked by patrons. Despite this, he still greeted each person seated at the bar and asked where they'd been, regardless of whether or not he'd ever met them. He was the embodiment of the East Side; tough, worn and a lot nicer than one might expect.

Youngstown's East Side — primarily composed of the city's 2nd Ward — has a reputation as a lawless, abandoned and forgotten region of the city. Essentially, it's Youngstown's Youngstown.

This reputation is only partially deserved. While the 2nd Ward does have its issues — it has the highest rate of property abandonment in the city, infrastructure problems and as of 2010, 16 percent of the Ward's population was prisoners — it is also the largest of the wards and home to an array of fiercely independent business owners and citizens fighting to make the neighborhoods livable.

Drivers traveling through the 2nd Ward from downtown can expect to see typical urban zones eventually give way to deteriorating streets devoid of residents and homes. Beyond these abandoned zones — such as Sharon Line, essentially a ghost neighborhood that was zoned but never realized due to Youngstown losing the steel industry — lush, forested areas hide small neighborhoods and surprising landmarks, such as

McKelvey Lake, which looks like it was plucked out of New Springfield and dropped in the middle of the city.

The city and organizations like the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation and the Northeast Homeowners and Concerned Citizens group have been working to improve the Ward — initially through residential code enforcement, blight razing and spot beautification projects — and have plans in the works for substantial infrastructure repair.

However, considering the size of the Ward, it will take some time — YNDC's latest plans for the Ward project out to 2020 — before many of the revitalization plans are realized.

In the meantime, East Side entrepreneurs must not only battle the ever-present struggles of small business ownership but also fight the Ward's stigma to attract customers. Many of the businesses that survive in the East Side have done so by digging in and establishing themselves as neighborhood institutions.

David Mastrey's City Limits restaurant — situated just outside the gates of the Four Seasons flea market on McCartney Road — is always full, patronized by locals, city council members, lawyers and Jim Tressel, Youngstown State University's president. They rarely advertise.

"We operate pretty much off word of mouth ... I hardly ever advertise. I don't need to, I don't have enough room," Mastrey said. "Last night I sold 140-150 pounds of fish, during Lent you can double that."

The restaurant is a greasy spoon diner, with an interior that's small when compared to a corporate diner such as Denny's, but the recently expanded dining room is large enough to be comfortably cozy. Mastrey attributes his success to the quality of his product

and the wide variety of customers offering up recommendations for his establishment.

"People vouching for quality is what gets you customers here," Mastrey said. "We get all walks of life in here. I truthfully don't know why, but it happens. A lot of people are friends of my parents, and my father's been gone for 35 years. It's all grown out of friends of friends that keep coming back."

Similar to City Limits, Brownlee's Lawnmower Service — operating since 1998 — has thrived on the word of mouth from local customers. Though run from a brown, cement block warehouse full of lawn mowers and small engine parts, but lacking any sort of storefront or customer seating area, the parking lot of Brownlee's is rarely empty.

Keith Brownlee is the owner's son and a repairman at the shop. In between pulls of a lawn mower's starter rope, Brownlee shared what he believed was the core of his family's success.

"I'll tell you what, the main thing is to treat people fair and do good business. That's how my dad [Brownlee's owner] made his reputation. He treats [customers] good and fair regardless of who they are and where they come from and you know stand behind your work," Brownlee said. "That'll keep you going — be fair and stand behind your work. He's always had a good rapport with people and he's an honest guy."

While Mastrey has managed to keep his restaurant profitable for 15 years and Brownlee's has been in operation since 1998, both operators are aware of the stigma attached to the 2nd Ward.

"I used to have a car show here, and I couldn't get 50 cars to come here because the owners were afraid their cars would get stolen," Mastrey said. "We could have a 2,000 car show here, no

problem, but it just couldn't get off the ground. People are goofy, they hear East Side and they start to shudder."

Despite the city's plans for revitalization, Mastrey — a 35-year resident of the East Side — feels that the 2nd Ward has largely been ignored by the city and high profile businesses.

"I think really what happens here is they neglect this side of town. Everything happens everywhere else until something bad happens, then there's attention," Mastrey said. "Why couldn't we get a racino here? That flea market's got 100-some acres. I don't think they want to do anything with this side of town. I think they like it like this."

Brownlee noted that the city's aggressive code enforcement policies are a point of frustration for East Side residents.

"You know, I like the freedom of being out here, but at the same time, the city could use to come over to [McGuffey Heights] a little more. Prime example: if you ride down the street you'll see a lot of dead houses, a lot of them owned by the city or whatever. They won't cut the grass. But if you don't cut your grass, they'll come and fine you," Brownlee said. "They got to be more involved in taking care of their stuff and making sure what they have is good. They're on us about our stuff a lot but they don't do the same."

While both Mastrey and Brownlee have years of observation behind their criticisms, the city does have projects and plans through YNDC and the NEHOCC that are helping to improve conditions on the 2nd Ward. This does not negate their desire to see more city intervention, but instead highlights the enormity of the task facing organizations invested in revitalization of the East Side.

Ian Beniston, executive di-

rector of the YNDC, is responsible for the group's day-to-day operations and ensuring YNDC hits their goals. When questioned about whether or not the city was truly negligent in its engagement with the 2nd Ward, Beniston provided a list of past, current and proposed projects set in the East Side.

"We've been working probably for the longest in the Lincoln Knolls neighborhood, repairing housing, a number of occupied properties and doing more currently. We've renovated housing and recently sold a renovated home to a new homeowner," Beniston said. "We've got an action team and a fully-developed neighborhood action plan in place in that neighborhood, and we've helped them raise funds for neighborhood improvement projects."

Lincoln Knolls — home to the Lincoln Knolls plaza and Four Seasons flea market — is already a commerce center frequented by many 2nd Ward residents. Continuing to focus on commercial centers, YNDC's newest plan targets the neighborhoods surrounding McGuffey Road.

"We just wrapped up developing the greater McGuffey corridor action plan. We've been doing a lot of basic neighborhood clean ups, a lot of boarding up abandoned houses like we do all over the city. We've also been working with the Northeast Homeowners and the councilman [T.J. Rodgers] to revamp Jacobs Road, and that'll include a whole new look for the landscape and the medians as well as neighborhood signage," Beniston said. "We've also put together a micro plan for the Martin Luther King elementary school which ... we'll be using to apply for grant funds, which we'll use to upgrade infrastructure including sidewalks and other basic neighborhood infrastructure. So, I'd say we're doing the same if not more work on the East Side, and we plan on growing our influence there."

The city is reaching out, and in time, the 2nd Ward may see the same transformation that's happening downtown and in the Idora neighborhood. As the work is being done in the meantime, it will fall to local businesses to continue to hold the line and fight the East Side stigma — a reality Keith Brownlee recognizes.

"We can do what we can do over here ... We got a responsibility too to keep things nice out here, so it's gotta be work on both ends," Brownlee said.

As for Mastrey at City Limits, he has no plans on shutting down anytime soon, regardless of how long it takes for an East Side transformation.

"There's only a few people who put businesses over here, but our people deserve it," Mastrey said. "I don't plan on going anywhere, I'll die here."



This sign sits at the corner of McGuffey Road and Albert Street. Despite the challenges facing the 2nd Ward, citizen groups continue to work toward a renewal in the region.



Dave Mastrey, the owner of City Limits restaurant on McCartney Road, stands proudly in a room he recently added to his diner. He has lived on the East Side for 35 years.

# Rayen Stadium Brought Back to Former Glory:

## YSU's Connection to the Newly Restored Stadium

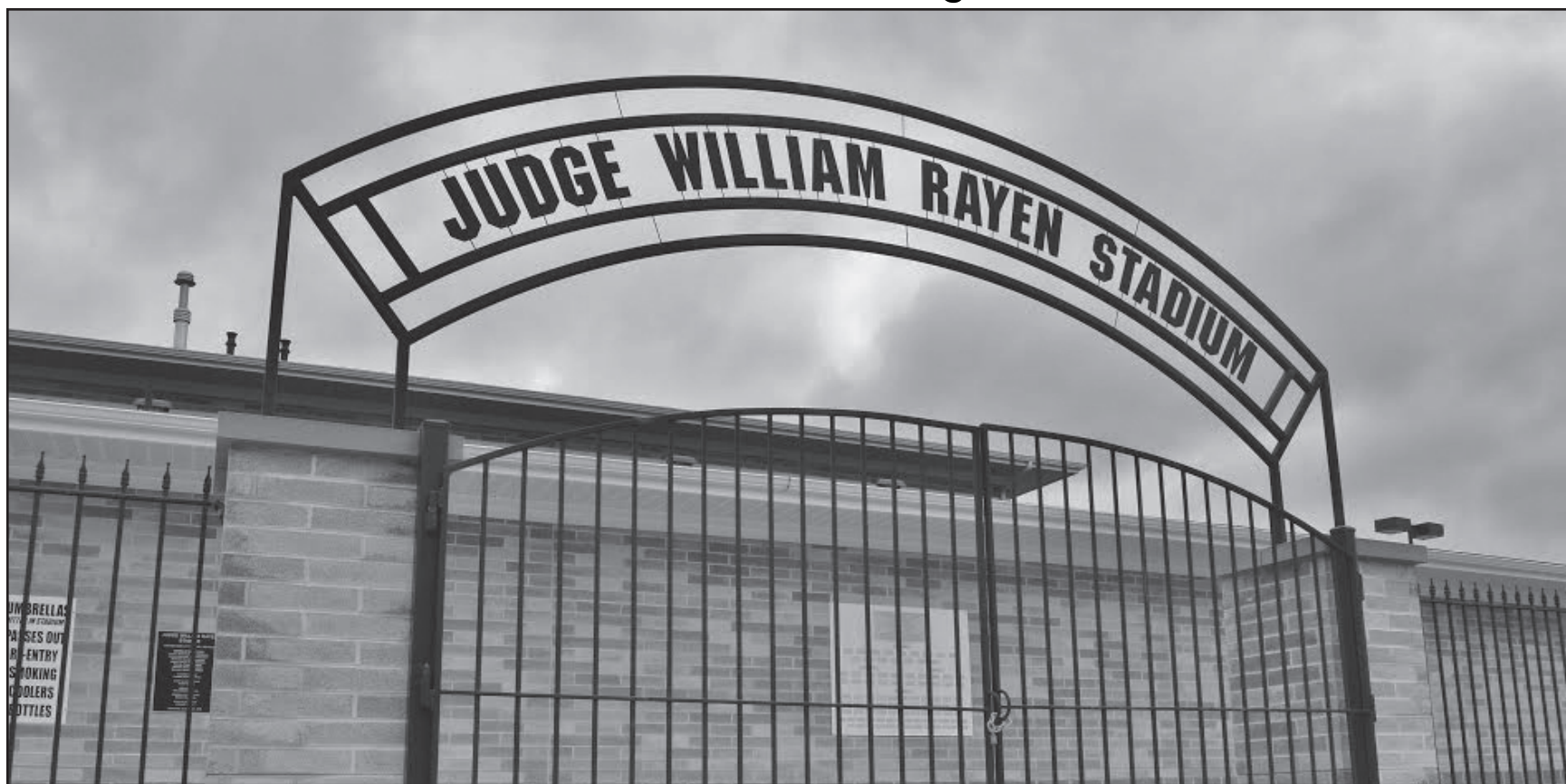


PHOTO BY SCOTT WILLIAMS/THE JAMBAR.

Jack Antonucci Field, formerly Rayen Stadium, is the only remnant of the Rayen High School campus. The field was located next to the high school. Rayen High School was permanently closed. The school was located on Benita Avenue from 1922-2007.

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It doesn't take long to realize Youngstown's football roots run deep. Sitting in the heart of the Mahoning Valley, on the north side of the city, is Rayen Stadium — once the mecca of Youngstown football.

Built in 1924, Rayen Stadium was the home for almost all high school football teams in the city during the first half of the 20th century. Jim Tressel, Youngstown State University's president, remembers when YSU football's home was Rayen Stadium.

"YSU used to play at the stadium. Before we had Stambaugh Stadium, we used to play our games at Rayen," Tressel said. "It's had a tremendous history for both high school and college football."

History was made at Rayen Stadium over the years. State champions were crowned; future college and professional players took center stage. Even the infamous penalty flag made its debut in the stadium at Youngstown College [previous name of YSU], home game against Oklahoma City University on Oct. 17, 1941.

The YSU football team played at Rayen Stadium from 1938-69 and later from 1974-77. Former NFL players like Al Campana, Craig Cotton and Ralph Goldston graced the field during the '50s

and '60s. YSU's current field, Stambaugh Stadium, was built in 1982, and the Penguins ceased playing on the North Side.

Eventually high school football programs gravitated toward the allure of Stambaugh Stadium in downtown Youngstown, and high schools stopped playing football games consistently at Rayen following the 1993 season.

After decades of games, the historic facility was left vacant after a final game between Rayen and Akron East High School in 2005.

"They [Youngstown high school football teams] played at YSU a little bit, but that was a little bit big for them, and it was a little bit too expensive for the size of the crowds," Tressel said. "They were playing games on the road all of the time. I felt that in order to create that community spirit, that school spirit and the spirit for the teams, here we had this historic stadium that was very capable of being renovated, that had lots of history, and it could turn into a place where the neighborhoods could walk to the games and would be a great thing for the community."

Tressel was one of many advocates for the reuse of the stadium. Tressel and Lewis Macklin were named the co-chairs of the Rayen Project, a community-wide effort to restore the stadium before the 2012 season.

"I was approached by one of

the athletic directors of one of the city schools," Tressel said. "Maybe around 2008 or so, and they came to the conclusion that Stambaugh Stadium was a little too large and expensive for them, and they wanted to see if they could renovate one of their existing facilities, and I told them that I would be more than happy to help."

After some back-and-forth discussions with the city of Youngstown, Rayen Stadium was eventually renovated and renamed Jack Antonucci Field. Antonucci was a former Rayen football player who was selected to the all-city team in the 1930s.

Edward Matey, the Youngstown City Schools athletic director, said the restorations to the field and seating provided a complete makeover. Approximately \$3.2 million was spent on the repairs.

Tressel said simply having a home stadium for high school athletics can have a major impact on not only the football team, but the community as a whole.

"I think it's real important, and not just for high school football, but the band needs some place to practice, the youth leagues can have somewhere to practice. I know Ursuline [High School] has used it for [junior varsity] games because it is close by," Tressel said.

Tressel said he thought it was important for the spirit of the

community and the North Side.

"I think it's important that a third grader, when they're walking to school and they walk by that stadium, dreaming about marching in the band on that field, playing football on that field, or soccer," Tressel said. "Someday it would be fun for that field to have artificial turf so it could get even more use."

After sitting unused for seven years and falling into disrepair, the stadium reopened in September 2012, and hosts the East High School football team — a combination of Youngstown high school football teams formed when the city decided to consolidate the athletic programs in the Youngstown City School District.

P.J. Mays, head coach of the East High School football team and former YSU All-American running back, said current players on the East roster are too young to understand the relevance of their home stadium.

"Our kids actually don't grasp the fact of what Rayen Stadium actually means. To them it's just our home stadium," Mays said. "For them, as far as the historical stadium, they really don't understand the meaning of Rayen field, and why they decided to renovate Rayen Stadium as opposed to any of the other venues they could have used in the city. Our guys really don't understand that. They just feel lucky that they have a place close to home that is theirs."

Mays and his coaching staff try to educate the team on the Rayen Stadium and the historical significance of football in Youngstown.

"Anytime we possibly can, we try to incorporate the people of the past or anyone that's still around that has a story to tell about Youngstown's great past as far as Rayen Stadium or Youngstown College," he said. "We definitely try to bring those people in to educate our kids on what they have, or what previous generations did not have."

Mays said the fans and players are happy with the restoration of the field, and even though the previous generation never had an opportunity to call Rayen Stadium their home, the current players and coaches are trying to bring a winning tradition back to their former football mecca.

"One of the things that we preached at the end of [last] year was we need to create a home field advantage at Rayen Stadium. That's our home. That's kind of the approach that we try to take with our guys starting this year," Mays said. "When we're at home, it's our place, and we play our best football at home and make it a place where other people don't want to come and play us. They're trying to get that sense about themselves. Where the East High Panthers play, at Rayen Stadium, and when you go there you are in for a great battle."



PHOTO BY SCOTT WILLIAMS/THE JAMBAR.

The lighting and seating for Rayen Stadium was upgraded between 2008-12. Stadium seats were located on each side of the field, but after reopening, the seating in the stadium is only located on the south side of the facility.

# Taking the Field: Rugby Team Renovates West Side Park



PHOTO BY SCOTT WILLIAMS/THE JAMBAR.

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edu

Borts Field has been forgotten.

It sits in the 4th Ward, home to old square-shaped houses with small lawns and unassuming mailboxes dotting the driveways. Old storefronts — some boarded up and some still clinging to life with peeling paint and iron bars over their windows — line the adjoining streets.

Originally built in the 1930s for Youngstown baseball teams, the infield and playgrounds are weathered and overcome by weeds. What was once a vibrant public pool is now filled in, with the decorative arches and windows of the adjoining brick pool house layered in graffiti.

According to Youngstown State University's Center for Urban Research and Studies, only eight people visited Borts Field in the entire year of 2013. Compare that to Wick Park, with 895 visitors.

But this year, Borts Field is getting a second chance.

The Youngstown Steel Valley Rugby Club began talks with the

City Council almost six months ago about finding a field. Borts Field not only has a good location for the team, but it is also one of the most neglected parks in the area, making it a prime location for a project like this.

In City Councilman Mike Ray's attempts to revitalize his Ward, one of the areas he's focused on is the city parks.

"We knew that Steel Valley Rugby used local parks in the area for their games, and we thought it would be a good partnership to help them fix up and use the field," Ray said. "We have plenty of park properties in the area and we want to make sure they're going to be used."

Bill Burton, secretary for the club, is handling the partnership between the club and the city. He's a native of the 4th Ward and wants to restore the park to its former status.

"We want to try and make it a place where not only can we play rugby games and expose the whole area to rugby, but we want the park to be used as it should be. We want to make it something that the neighborhood can use again," Burton said.

The club is relying on its own members and skills to start the process.

"It's a very diverse group. We have college kids, we have professionals," Burton said. "Everyone is pitching in to try and help in whatever way they can with whatever skill set they have."

The club is trying to complete the project by next spring, so the entire facility will be ready for the coming summer.

"Before the snow flies, we'll have everything leveled out and removed, and parts of the field reseeded where it needs to be [reseeded]," Burton said. "At least by spring we'll be able to use it."

One of the teammates volunteering his skills is George West, a senior engineering student at YSU. Using AutoCAD, West is drafting the field's layout for the rugby team.

"As of right now it's just me [designing the field], and I don't have my professional engineering license, so I can't officially design anything," West said. "But I want to try and get the plans so we can draw it up and not be wandering around out there in the dark like we're trying to build it in a cave."

West will use blueprints of the original layout from the 1930s to draft the new fields, so he will know which areas will be easier to redo and which ones should be avoided. The layout for the future

field will be more complex because there will be multiple rugby fields installed by the club.

"We're going to have one permanent field with permanent [rugby] posts set up, and we'll have one field with removable posts, so that way if a soccer team wants to use it they just have to schedule around us," Burton said. "We're planning on having youth rugby also and flag football leagues, but any way that the public wants to use the facilities, we're all about it. We want the whole community to be a part of that park just like it used to be."

With the city granting permission to the team, and with Burton and West providing the vision forward, the only difficulty facing the club now is obtaining funding.

"At least we'll know where the field can go, and what can fit, that way we can show the city something and say, 'This is what we're looking at and this is what we'll do,' and they'll say, 'Hey this is fantastic! Here's all the money!' That's what we're hoping for at least," West said.

Burton is optimistic about the future partnership.

"We've been working with Councilman Ray to try and find a way that we can try and remodel and rehabilitate that old pool

house to use as locker room facilities and a media room for the rugby team and as a building for the community," he said. "We're going to look at the cost of the building and things like that, and the club will definitely help with grant money and money that the city wants to kick in so that hopefully we can save that structure."

But for the entire Steel Valley Rugby Club, it's about more than just getting money for a field.

"We're a small crew right now, trying to bring rugby to the area. That's our big goal. We're starting a high school-age team, which will play other high school teams, and that'll give us a farm team to build from," West said. "We want to get more people involved. It's a great sport, it's a lot of fun and the camaraderie with rugby is really great."

They're hoping rugby is just what Borts Field needs to once again become the center of the community.

"There's not a lot of bad that can happen," West said. "We're taking an area that's not used at all . . . We're getting all this stuff coming into that area, and people hanging out there and cookouts and stuff, and our plan is to have this set up and be a community field again."



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE STEEL VALLEY RUGBY TEAM

# YNDC: Demonstrating What's Possible



PHOTO BY JUSTIN WIER / THE JAMBAR.

A woman at the Mahoning Avenue Better Block event chawks her vision for a revitalized Garden District Neighborhood.

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Mahoning Avenue is alive.

Crowds line sidewalks adorned with benches and greenery. Children skateboard along freshly painted bike lanes. People gather around pop-up shops and file in and out of abandoned storefronts, repurposed as art galleries. The sounds of a string quartet and a few guitarists reverberate down the street.

It represents a vision of the past, when Mahoning Avenue was a vital commercial corridor, and a brief glimpse into a brighter future.

"That's the core concept of Better Block — a demonstration of what's possible," Ian Beniston, executive director of Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation, said.

YNDC organized Saturday's Mahoning Avenue Better Block and has two more on its slate this fall. Better Blocks are grassroots events intent on helping citizens recognize the potential of vibrant, walkable and mixed-use neighborhood centers.

"If longer term efforts were to take hold, this is what's possible," Beniston said.

He said part of Better Blocks is just getting people out on the street and showing that if you can create a critical mass, good things will happen.

Last year, YNDC started a farmer's market in the Idora neighborhood. Beniston said it provides the neighborhood with healthy food access, but it also gets people engaging with the community in a productive way.

"It's almost like what's happening downtown," Beniston said. "People are attracted there just because there are people out on the street going from place to place, and you see that in other cities too."

## GETTING STARTED

YNDC's offices occupy an old farmhouse on Canfield Road in

the Idora neighborhood — just off Glenwood Avenue and a short walk from Lanterman's Mill. Greenhouses surrounding the offices comprise Iron Roots Urban Farm. The iconic Revitalize van sits out front urging passersby to stand up and fight blight.

Beniston has worked for YNDC since its formation in 2009, first as its deputy director and now, for just over a year, as executive director.

Their work began in Idora. Beniston said they noticed that people were buying houses on the west side of Mill Creek Park as soon as they went on sale, but that wasn't happening on the east side along Glenwood. So YNDC went to work with the goal of stabilizing the housing stock, focused on acquiring and rehabilitating some vacant homes, demolishing others and boarding up the rest.

"What we're doing here isn't something that's groundbreaking," Beniston said. "It's not something that's not been done here and in other places."

The difference between what YNDC is doing and previous stabilization efforts is the scale of their work.

"Historically, the city's boarded up a couple dozen homes per year. We've boarded up 600 in the past 12 months. Same thing with the grass cutting," Beniston said. "It's basic stuff."

Now YNDC operates in all seven wards of the city. They've demolished more than 150 homes in partnership with the city and the Mahoning County Land Bank. They've rehabbed more than 200 blighted houses and boarded up more than 750 more. They've repurposed more than 300 vacant lots and cleaned up and cut grass at more than 3,000 others.

They've developed several neighborhood action plans with neighborhood action teams in place to assist with implementation. They've targeted neighborhoods like Brownlee Woods, Crandall Park and the Garden District — where last weekend's Better Block was held.

Beniston said they employ a

series of 10 metrics to identify constrained or transitional neighborhoods, things like tax delinquency and crime rates.

"In simple terms, those are tipping point neighborhoods, where if there's not some intervention — and intervention that's effective — those neighborhoods are going to become distressed," Beniston said. "If we're going to fix 50 houses, why not focus on a couple streets that would be most beneficial to these neighborhoods."

The focused efforts lead to tangible results. If you drive through the Idora neighborhood today, it looks significantly different than it did five years ago.

## DEFENDING YNDC

One could claim that boarding up houses and mowing lawns is primarily cosmetic, but there is research that shows these strategies are effective.

"You can start cold calling economic development directors in the Midwest," Beniston said. "The first thing that they're going to tell you is you're never going to get any investment in your city if it looks bad. So you need to clean it up."

Youngstown Mayor John McNally said YNDC has been instrumental in the city's beautification efforts.

"They are really the main force in helping to improve quality-of-life issues in the city of Youngstown," McNally said. "The city dollars and city staff cannot do everything. We need additional resources, and YNDC, quite frankly, has become that additional resource."

They also address the perception that the city is unsafe. This needs to be overcome in order for people to feel comfortable buying houses and establishing businesses here.

"For a lot of people, if they drive down the street and there's five houses with no doors or windows on them, or there's a commercial building that's crumbling and falling over. Whether that community is safe or not, that alone creates a perception that it's not," Beniston said.

Beniston said the city can attract jobs through economic development, but if people continue to move out of the city, those employment gains will be offset.

"We need to retain the people that are here — particularly people that are working — because if they don't work in the city, and then they move out of the city, they are no longer paying city income tax," Beniston said.

Their work hasn't created thousands of jobs, but it has decreased vacancy rates in targeted neighborhoods, increased home ownership and stabilized property values.

They've also engaged the community. Last year alone, 1,000 residents and volunteers participated in neighborhood improvement projects. This year they're expecting to increase that number by 50 percent.

## GOING COMMERCIAL

The natural progression of YNDC's efforts to stabilize the neighborhood housing stock is the development of commercial corridors, which provide neighborhood residents with amenities and jobs.

"Often times, no matter how stable or marketable the actual interior residential streets are, if the commercial corridor's not something that's desirable, it's very difficult to maintain stability within the surrounding neighborhood," Beniston said.

Beniston said the lion's share of their work is still residential, but they're carrying out the same process of planning and removing blight along corridors — they've

already removed dozens of buildings along Glenwood and they're continuing to remove more. They're also obtaining infrastructure grants and assembling land.

One of the challenges Youngstown faces as it looks toward revitalizing its commercial corridors is that the built environment isn't as strong as it is in cities like Pittsburgh and Cleveland. Along Glenwood Avenue, there are swaths of vacant land between houses and commercial buildings.

"We don't have density which means we don't have walkability," Beniston said. "So it's a whole 'nother challenge."

The city has more commercial space than could be occupied given its current population, so finding alternative uses is a challenge as well.

"Some of it's just going to be grass or perhaps spaces that can be temporarily activated, but not all the time," Beniston said. "But in the interim, they can be maintained and look decent."

They've focused the Better Blocks on areas that have some degree of density. He said that if there are four or five contiguous buildings that can be occupied, it creates a nucleus for future growth along that corridor.

The Better Block events function as a first step in the process of revitalizing corridors — temporarily activating the spaces — but it's a long-term goal.

"It's been decades in the making of disinvestment, buildings falling into disrepair, businesses leaving," Beniston said. "The process of trying to get things back to a point where the blight is removed, the spaces in between

The campus of the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation on Canfield Road in the Idora neighborhood.



PHOTO BY JUSTIN WIER / THE JAMBAR.

# South Side Saint



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DOMINICAN FRIARS.

Maturi began "Operation Redemption," an organization focused on removing vacant and abandoned houses on the South Side to reduce crime.

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Father Gregory Maturi, "the crime fighting priest" who has been the leader of St. Dominic Parish since November 2009, makes his final rounds in Youngstown as he prepares to return to the Dominican Order on the East Coast.

Maturi led his final mass last Monday at the church that was home to "many joys and many sorrows, with many more good days than there were bad days." It is customary for Dominican Priors — including Maturi — to hold temporary positions in a variety of churches.

The six years Maturi led the church began with heart-breaking loss. In January 2010, Angeline Fimognari was shot and killed in the parking lot of St. Dominic's. September of the same year, parishioners Thomas and Jacqueline Repchic were shot a few blocks from their South Side home. Jacqueline lost her right leg in the drive-by shooting and Thomas lost his life.

The murders of the two church members devastated the parish. The incidents trig-

gered conviction in Maturi, and he said he immediately knew he had to take action to prevent similar actions from happening again.

"Operation Redemption" is St. Dominic's response to the tragedies. The organization is a collaboration between the church, state and local officials that attempts to rehabilitate and revitalize the South Side. Vacant homes and properties were purchased by the church and turned into green spaces. Homes were demolished, trash was removed and the spaces turned into areas where — instead of being breeding grounds for drug activity and violence — families could safely gather.

Victoria Allen, president of ICU Block Watch, is Maturi's "partner in crime" in creating a better South Side. In addition to removing the abandoned houses, St. Dominic's partners with other local churches and organizations to lead the Valley's youth away from life decisions that could lead them to lives of crime.

As urban blight is often seen as a contributing factor to rises in criminal activity, Allen believes the projects go hand in hand.

"Using donations and working with a contracting

company, Maturi was able to work under the radar so that we could avoid the red tape that the city sometimes has to go through. Those houses were beyond repair. They haven't had water or electricity for years. I'd rather see an empty green lot than a house with all the windows broken out, trash everywhere," Allen said. "Father has maintained the lots so that the grass is never high and so that there isn't trash.

It went from looking like a bad area to a more rural area that's actually used. The kids get to use the green space for a playing area and the churches use the space for the annual Easter egg hunt now. We try to keep the kids of downtown off of the streets by showing them how much fun they can have without getting involved in bad activities and getting rid of the areas that feed them."

A group of over 20 houses were torn down as a part of "Operation Redemption." Maturi explained that by demolishing the boarded up houses and nurturing the most at-risk children, the church and its partners filled a void that had long been open.

"What we have begun here — cleaning up the neighborhood and reaching out to kids and family, building up the

community and giving the young people good experiences and helping them make good friends and love law enforcement — we fill a void that hasn't been filled," Maturi said. "We don't have a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter, although those are very important. We aren't trying to duplicate efforts that are already underway. We are trying to fill a void that hasn't been touched yet in the South Side, or that is, but needs more efforts. We want to reach out to young kids, ages four to 14, and their families and give them hope that this place can be good."

Cherry Robinson also gives her time to assist with the program, especially when her daughter, Victoria Allen, is at work. Robinson said she became involved with the organization when her daughter requested her help with activities. Robinson accepted, and since then she said that the program has grown in size.

"Every time we do something with the kids, it forges the opportunity to see the impact we've been making on the community. Every event, someone says something that makes you glad that you've given your time to help them," Robinson said. "Knowing that we gave kids the opportunity

to do something that they have never done through the organization is an empowering feeling. They can have fun without being in danger."

While Maturi's time with St. Dominic's has come to an end, he believes that through this organization "God's work will continue to get done, with or without" him to lead it.

"My job as a Catholic priest is to give hope," Maturi said. "I'm not in the business to solve people's problems. People are generally good and generally resourceful, but they need hope.

"When we started this project years ago, we were battling naysayers who were saying, 'Why are you wasting your time and resources? This is the South Side, this is bad and will always be that way.' But I knew with prayer and with the help of the church and the community, things could be different here, and look how it has turned out. Everything we have done here is the Lord's work.

"I'll be sad to leave all the friends I've made and all the good people I've met, but the Lord will take care of them, as he always does."



PHOTO BY SCOTT WILLIAMS/THE JAMBAR.

Maturi has been leading St. Dominic's Parish since November 2009. The "crime fighting priest" held his last mass Monday.



# Sweet Sounds on the South Side



PHOTO BY BILLY LUDT/THE JAMBAR.

Gary Rhamy, owner-proprietor of Peppermint Productions, sits in-studio and tweaks a track from the board in the control room. Rhamy came to Youngstown after college, opened Peppermint Productions and has been here ever since.

## BILLY LUDT

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Gary Rhamy walks down the hallway on the second floor of his recording studio. Records are stacked on boxes and artist signed photos reach from the wall molding to the ceiling, from start to end.

Owner and operator Gary Rhamy and Del Sinchak, two time Grammy nominated polka artist, have been with Peppermint Productions since the beginning. Peppermint Productions is at 803 E. Indianola Ave., Youngstown.

Peppermint Productions was established in the summer of 1971. Rhamy and Norm Taylor, his former business partner, acquired space on the bottom floor of a doctor's office and converted it into a recording space.

The building was previously Channel 45's television studio. After Channel 45 folded, a doctor owned the building. After that, Rhamy purchased the building.

Rhamy laughed when asked about the origins of Peppermint Productions' name. He explained that Taylor's wife participated in transcendental meditation, in the same vein of the late mystic, Edgar Cayce.

Taylor asked his wife about the name, and she told him that she would ask her Indian guide for assistance.

"So, after the meditation, she came back and said, 'Well guys, it's got to be a name that has two

letters together,' like peppermint has," Rhamy said. "She said it had to be productions, too. Not recording studio."

"I didn't know that," Sinchak said.

"We stuck with it," Rhamy said.

After a year of working together, Taylor left Peppermint Productions.

Rhamy pulled out a flier advertising their recording company. From the center of the page up is a picture of Peppermint Productions' original interior design — circles and semi-circles working along the walls and into a shag rug of red, blue, orange and yellow; the drummer's box, also covered in shag, bore the phrase, "Cool Aid."

There isn't much shag left in the studio, save for a semi-circle couch, but that is now covered in equipment — several guitars and a mandolin with no strings.

Rhamy worked in radio as a student at Ohio University. He graduated from OU with a degree in broadcasting, but he always wanted to be involved with recording. Rhamy ended up in Youngstown after graduation.

"I could see, man, there was a lot of talent in this town," he said. "And there always is, there always has been. I thought this would be a great place to be in recording."

All of this was happening while the U.S. was involved with the Vietnam conflict. When Rhamy's deferment ran out he was drafted and sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky, but not before meeting

Sinchak.

Rhamy worked for Bill Warner, the owner of WAM [Words and Music] Records, at the time, before being drafted.

Sinchak worked with Rhamy since the late 1960s. He was the original owner of WAM Recording in Youngstown. Sinchak's career as a musician has spanned six decades, and he has played everything from polka to rock and country.

"Polka's always been a very good part of our business," Rhamy said. "Without that, we probably never would have survived. And, of course, the whole thing has changed dramatically in the past few years too."

Sinchak's first band played polka. But the emergence of rock music swayed them to switch genres, thus Del Saint and the Devils was born. The group put out a couple 45s through Chess Records and backed The Edsels on their hit single, "Rama Lama Ding Dong."

After his stint with rock, Sinchak returned to polka. The Del Sinchak Band was nominated twice for "Best Polka Album" at the Grammys.

"Gary put polkas on the map," Sinchak said. "We have groups literally from all over the country that come here to record."

"That was one of the things that really helped us with really setting the benchmark in the polka industry like we did," Rhamy said.

Hanging on the wall, back behind stacks of recording equipment, hangs a golden record,

framed in glass.

"That was for this," Rhamy said.

He held up a light blue record sleeve. On it is an artist's rendition of a woman in exercise gear striking an aerobic pose and the title, "Carol Hensel's Exercise & Dance Program."

"It's a 'dancercise' album," he said. "We did it back in 1979. I forget about all of these until somebody asks me about them."

"Carol Hensel's Exercise & Dance Program" was one of the first dancercise albums ever recorded, well before Jane Fonda ever thought to do it.

An unlikely title from a recording studio whose life blood is mostly polka albums, but the dancercise record went on to go platinum in the United States, Canada and Australia. Peppermint also put out dancercise records with local lightweight boxing champion Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini titled, "Knockout Bodies."

Peppermint worked with most of the bands playing in the area in the first couple decades of its existence. Bands like Youngstown's infamous power rockers Left End and the power pop group Blue Ash.

Rhamy and Sinchak approach polka the same way they approached every other kind of music. One to two hours are spent on each instrument, ensuring that its sound is up-to-par before recording.

"We do a lot of polkas, there's no doubt about it," Rhamy said. "But we also do a lot of other stuff too. Usually, the stuff we deal

with is acoustic-oriented."

While Peppermint Productions — like any recording studio — works with a variety of bands, they stand apart from modern studios by catering to artists who prefer vintage equipment and choose to record as a band rather than in parts.

Peppermint works with an inventory of vintage equipment, and the studio is large enough to fit a full band. Their immense stock of functioning vintage gear even piqued the interest of singer-songwriter Lenny Kravitz. All of their amplifiers are tube, and their Telefunken microphones are from the '60s and would run for about \$14,000 today. In their control room sits large a 3-inch tape recorder that sold for \$35,000 in the '70s.

"A lot of people look for that whole sound," Rhamy said. "If some of the guitars get into a drum mic, that's OK. That's the way we hear it. We don't focus in when we go to a concert. You hear the whole thing. The atmosphere of the room allows us to do that ... We've been one that's always felt it's good to have everybody playing together because you're reacting to each other, you're inspired by one another. It's the band."

"Don't believe anything you hear these days," Rhamy said. "There's nothing like having all the musicians in there, all playing at the same time. I'm kind of a traditionalist that way. There's nothing like real. What do you think, Del?"

"Yep."



PHOTO BY SCOTT WILLIAMS/THE JAMBAR.

Peppermint Productions has operated in the south side of Youngstown since 1971. They host an array of vintage equipment sought after by musicians who aim to make their albums sound live.

# North Side *Farmers Market*



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