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CIVIC VENTURES **3** **INNOVATIONS**

Photographs by Alex Harris

Essay by Rob Gurwitt

Raising a Neighborhood: Hope Meadows

INTRODUCTION BY MARC FREEDMAN

INNOVATIONS profiles the work of creative organizations that engage older Americans in new and compelling ways to revitalize their communities. The series—part of the documentary project REINVENTING AGE—is published by Civic Ventures, a nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming the aging of America into a source of individual and social renewal.

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Raising a Neighborhood: Hope Meadows

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The names of children at Hope Meadows have been changed in this publication.

We wish to thank the parents, children, and older adults of Hope Meadows, who graciously invited us into their neighborhood and provided the insight for our work. We also thank the Generations of Hope staff, especially Brenda Eheart for taking time from her busy schedule to share with us the Hope Meadows story.

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MARC FREEDMAN, founder and president of Civic Ventures, is the author of *Prime Time* and *The Kindness of Strangers*.



Youngtown, Arizona, the first retirement community in America and home of this nation's inaugural AARP chapter, found itself in the news several years ago for attempting to expel a couple accused of harboring their own grandson. The 16-year-old, fleeing an abusive stepfather, had nowhere else to turn.

When the residents, Lynne Rae and Jerry Lee Naab, applied to the city council of this age-segregated community outside Phoenix for permission to house the teenager, they were told Youngtown had no place for the young. Town officials posted a sign on the Naab's lawn — a Scarlet Letter of sorts — announcing the couple's desire to take in a child, and proceeded to fine them \$100 a day until their grandson was removed.

At about the same time, and just down the road from Youngtown, denizens of the Sun City West retirement community were busy defeating three consecutive school bond issues before electing themselves to a majority position on the school board and attempting to “de-annex” the entire Sun City development from the district.

Tales such as these, emanating from developments like Youngtown and Sun City West, have led some to conclude that the aging of America is a disaster in the making, that older adults want to separate themselves from the concerns of other generations. In fact, overall, there is little evidence that older adults vote as a block against public education or the concerns of young people. Still, there can be no doubt that segregating individuals by age weakens ties between the generations and damages the social fabric.

Yet the opposite is also true. Just as age-segregated living can pull people apart — growth in retirement community living has served as impetus for the broader gated community phenomenon — housing decisions can be used as a powerful force in creating cross-generational solidarity.

Consider Hope Meadows, a veritable “Un-Sun City,” that uses age-integrated housing and community design to foster strong social ties between old and young. As Alex Harris' images and Rob Gurwitt's commentary in the ensuing pages reveal, the older adults who have picked up and moved to this former-military-base-turned-foster-care-village find not an

escape from the younger generation and school taxes, but the opportunity to be part of a neighborhood where the slogan “It takes a village to raise a child” is a central operating principle of day-to-day life.

The story of Hope Meadows, *Raising a Neighborhood*, offers not only a vision for how we can help take care of some of the most vulnerable young people in the society — foster children who essentially have nowhere else to turn — but how we can create neighborhoods that enrich the lives of all ages.

This portrait is part of Innovations, an ongoing series by some of America's foremost photographers, writers, and radio producers designed to bring to life, and to light, the work of creative organizations with the potential to reshape what it means to grow older in this country — to help transform the aging of America into a new source of civic renewal.

—Marc Freedman

Raising a Neighborhood

Essay by Rob Gurmitt | Photographs by Alex Harris

EVERY JUNE 17, LORALEE PENA AND HER HUSBAND, AL, hold a small celebration. They drive the half hour from their home in Rantoul, Illinois, down to Urbana. They go out to dinner, then make their way over to the train station. Sitting quietly, they wait for the night train from Chicago to pull in, load and unload its passengers, and start up again on its journey to Memphis and New Orleans. Once it's out of sight, they drive home.

Loralee was two and a half months old when she arrived at that station late on the night of June 17, 1941, on an old Illinois Central train. She'd been born in the infirmary at the Illinois Eastern Hospital for the Insane, up in Kankakee; her mother, a patient there, refused to care for her. A state caseworker took the baby from the hospital, carried her down to Urbana, caught a taxi from the train station, and delivered her to the woman who would go on to raise her, a 50-year-old widow and former teacher. Loralee grew up knowing nothing about the circumstances of her birth, though she knew as soon as one could know such things that she was a foster child.

She is a large-boned, handsome woman now, with shining eyes, a soft, deep voice, and a reticence she wears like a second skin. When she smiles, it is never with her whole self; so many years later, her childhood still casts its shadow. "If I'd been told that I wasn't eligible for adoption — and I wasn't — it wouldn't have been so hurtful," she muses. Her mother, a severe manic-depressive, was in and out of institutions and could have come to claim her at any time. So she was never adopted by her foster mother, never formally made part of her family — and never reclaimed by

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her own flesh and blood. "In my mind," she says, "I was always waiting for my real family to show up. Someone once asked me when I bonded with my foster mom, and I said, 'After she died,' because that's when I knew what I had."

It is oddly poetic, then, that Loralee Pena has ended up living where she does. Hope Meadows, the subdivision to which she and Al retired, is a community focused on giving children who've been taken from their birth parents something she never had: life surrounded by family. It is an ordinary-looking place, a few blocks of late-1950s split-level ranch houses with carports, filled with people of all ages: hard-working parents and retired seniors and kids squealing around the streets on their bikes. Yet it is also extraordinary, an ambitious experiment aimed squarely at one of the most intractable and discouraging challenges American society faces.

At any one time, there are 580,000 kids across the country in foster homes or some institutional foster-care

“Having good memories to draw on as you grow older is just crucial to a child. That’s what the people here provide in droves.”

setting. Many of them will eventually return home, but far too many will not: They’ll shuttle from foster home to foster home, or be freed for adoption but never adopted, or spiral from a foster family to a group home to an institution, or simply “age out” of the system at 18 and go off to live—well, no one really knows where. These are children who are already laboring under the weight of the abuse or neglect that led the state to take them from their families; quite often, their time in the child welfare system leaves them scarred. It is a world of courts and caseworkers, of “placements” and stipends and inflexible rules; the course of their lives is determined not by what a loving adult thinks is best for them, but by the vagaries of bureaucracies, courts, institutions, stressed foster families, and the disruptions caused by their own behavior. Children need stability, predictability, love, and acceptance; these are not qualities one finds readily in the child welfare system.

At Hope Meadows, one does. The community sits on a piece of the old Chanute Air Force Base, which was closed in 1993. Today, though big swaths of the base are still abandoned, many of the hangars have filled up with light industries and the housing has been turned into market-rate developments. Indeed, unless you’re familiar with the curving streets and look-alike houses, it is hard to tell where, say, Golfview Village leaves off and Hope Meadows begins. This is deliberate. Although its 82 units are owned by a nonprofit organization—these days called Generations of Hope, though its original name was Hope For The Children—there is nothing institutional about Hope Meadows, not even a hint that, in the eyes of the state of Illinois, it is a “facility.” Because it’s not. It’s a neighborhood.

In particular, it’s a neighborhood of a dozen or so couples and single mothers who among them are raising almost 50 children, a few of them biologically their own, many of them adopted out of foster care, and the rest either on their way to being adopted or in temporary foster care. The families get \$19,000 a year, plus benefits, in exchange for one parent staying home to give their children the attention they need, though some of the single mothers also work part-time. Most have between four and six kids. The 60-odd seniors pay \$350 a month in rent—in nearby Champaign, a two-bedroom apartment can go for \$1,000—and spend six hours a week tutoring, babysitting, gardening, or simply hanging out with the kids. In the seven years Hope Meadows has existed, seniors and parents have created a community out of whole cloth, supporting one

another on the good, bad, and ordinary days of their lives, and giving some of the most endangered children in American society the sort of upbringing the child welfare system seems all but incapable of producing. “Having good memories to draw on as you grow older is just crucial to a child,” says Brenda Eheart, the woman who founded Hope Meadows. “That’s what the people here provide in droves.”



Hope Meadows

Hope Meadows is a planned community established in 1994 on a former military training base in Rantoul, Illinois, where foster and adoptive families, children, and older adults live together and care for each other. The intergenerational neighborhood provides ongoing support to families adopting those foster children who are among the most difficult to place in nurturing, permanent homes. In addition, the more than 60 older adults living in Hope Meadows volunteer time each week to help the community, particularly the children; they receive reduced rent in return.

Getting Started

The idea to build Hope Meadows grew from Brenda Eheart's five years of research on the adoptions of older children. Eheart, a sociologist at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, found that these adoptions often failed; families struggled with a child's emotional and behavioral problems but received little or no support. Many more older children never found permanent homes, moving from family to family until "aging out" of the foster-care system at 18.

Eheart imagined a diverse, supportive community for foster children and families wanting to adopt them. With the help of a small group of friends and colleagues, Eheart set out to raise money and buy land to build such a community on the Chantute Air Force Training Base, which was scheduled to close. She worked for two years, making more than 2,000 calls to the Department of Defense; no one, though, had written procedures for purchasing former military base land. Frustrated by the red tape, she worked with a friend to send a brief fax to President Clinton, explaining the gridlock. A little more than a week later, federal officials visited the base and negotiated a \$215,000 price tag for 22 acres of land and 60 buildings.

In the meantime, Eheart created a nonprofit organization called Hope for the Children (later changed to Generations of Hope), secured a \$1 million start-up grant from the state legislature, and established ties with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). The start-up grant provided needed funding for what became the first purchase of military surplus housing by a nonprofit organization. The deal included duplexes and four-plexes of 1,600 square feet each—82 housing units total. Generations of

Hope converted 12 duplexes into family homes and another three for administrative and community use; the four-plexes were renovated and made into 40 spacious apartments.

The first families moved into the Hope Meadows neighborhood in spring 1994. The first foster-care child joined a Hope family four months later.

Foster children are referred to Hope through the state DCFS. According to Eheart, Hope Meadows draws children who are most at risk of "falling through the cracks." They are typically older children and part of a sibling group, not likely to be adopted or return to their birth families or other relatives. The children often arrive at Hope Meadows with serious medical and behavioral issues and, on average, have spent more than 60 percent of their life in foster care.

Staff from Generations of Hope work with DCFS to learn as much history on a child as possible, particularly the severity of emotional, behavioral, and health problems and any available information about the child's birth family. After staff members complete the comprehensive assessment and decide to pursue placement, they determine

whether there are Hope families where the child could live—looking at age, gender, and other issues that would create the right mix of children in a household. The families then become actively involved in the decision-making process.

Parents living in Hope Meadows must meet all the state requirements for foster care and adoption. Interested parents complete an extensive application and interview process before being welcomed into the community; Generations of Hope staff look for parents with maturity and a sense of stability, and consider such factors as how large a family is already and how the family would fit with the rest of the diverse Hope community.

Hope parents pay no rent and receive a salary of \$19,000 a year plus benefits. A couple must agree to adopt four special needs foster children and have one parent stay at home with the children; single mothers are expected to adopt three children but can work outside the home, if necessary.

Eheart and her colleagues understood from the outset that these benefits were not enough to support the ongoing needs of the Hope families. Inspired after a lecture by Gray Panthers founder Maggie Kuhn about intergenerational housing, Eheart added a key component to the Hope Meadows neighborhood—adults age 55 and older living in and volunteering to help the community.

Older adults interested in living at Hope Meadows complete an application, and undergo extensive interviews and criminal background checks. Once selected, they pay only \$350 a month rent, well below market rate for the area. In exchange, each senior household agrees to volunteer at least six hours a week in the community. They offer help with everything from child care and tutoring to serving as crossing guards and running activities at the neighborhood's Intergenerational Center, which opened a year after Hope Meadows was established. In a typical month, older adult volunteers are spending many more than the required number of hours in service to the community.

Policies to meet the special needs of the seniors—in times of extended illness, for example—are still evolving, according to Eheart. If a senior has lived in the neighborhood for five years, the required number of weekly volunteer hours drops. And older adults can “loan” completed volunteer hours to residents who might be having health or other problems that prevent them from helping for a time. It is clear, Eheart says, that the older adults arrive at Hope Meadows to help the children and become incredibly attached to them; after time, too, the children begin to heal and realize the importance of the “grandparents” surrounding them.

Hope Meadows is set up for these families and older adults to remain in the neighborhood permanently. Until now, most have remained, but a few have moved out

of the community for financial, employment, or other personal reasons. Eheart says she believes a core of at least six families and most of the seniors “will live here forever.”

Staffing and Operations

Generations of Hope operates Hope Meadows with a small staff, a few of whom live in the neighborhood. In addition to Eheart, who serves as the executive director, the community is supported by an administrative assistant, a social worker, a child and family therapist, and a family facilitator who works with the parents. There also is someone who oversees the senior program and housing and grounds, and one person doing maintenance for the entire community.

Generations of Hope staff conduct ongoing program evaluations to better understand the Hope model and determine what is working or what needs improvement within the community. A key element of support for Hope children and families is access to one-on-one therapy and counseling. In addition, staff run weekly educational sessions for parents on issues such as attachment, budgeting, and parenting teenagers. Families also benefit from more than 100 activities a month run mainly by older adults at the Intergenerational Center—everything from movies and bingo to crafts and monthly birthday parties.

The older adults themselves are supported at senior coffees every other week where, for example, staff share information that help them better understand the children. Several seniors who have lived at Hope from its start also have formed an advisory committee that meets every six weeks and offers ongoing feedback to staff.

Since 1994, 90 percent of the more than 70 children referred to Hope Meadows by DCFS have left the foster-care system. Most have been adopted by Hope families, and some have returned to their birth families. Currently 32 children from the foster-care system live in 13 Hope households, which also include 14 birth or adopted children already a part of these families when they moved to the community. The Hope children now range in age from less than a year to 16, but more than two-thirds are older than 5. Seventy percent are African-American, and 18 of them have other siblings living at Hope Meadows. About half arrived at Hope with severe behavioral and emotional problems; many also were drug exposed at birth, had been sexually abused, or came with serious medical problems.

The parents at Hope Meadows range in age from 26 to 57 years old. About half are single mothers, most have biological children, and almost 60 percent are African-American. The families are supported by more than 60 older adults, most in their early to mid-60s. About half of the

older adults live in two-person households with at least one person employed, typically part-time; they average approximately 1,200 hours a month in volunteer time.

Costs and Funding

Generations of Hope operates on an annual budget of \$700,000 to support the Hope Meadows community. Approximately 60 percent of the budget covers the programs and services related to supporting the foster and adopted children and their parents. Another 22 percent supports the senior program, and the remaining 18 percent covers costs in the areas of administration, fundraising, and research and replication efforts. Two cost areas distinguish this program: Each family receives a salary and benefits as part of their agreement to adopt up to four foster children. And Generations of Hope is a rental agency as well as a child welfare organization, so there are expenses such as property taxes, and housing and grounds maintenance. Overall, the costs to support each foster-care child at Hope Meadows is well below what it would cost to support the same child in the state foster-care system.

The organization receives funding from state and private sources. Following the \$1 million start-up grant in 1993, the state of Illinois has provided annual funding directly related to the foster-care children supported by Hope Meadows. As the children have moved from the foster-care system to adoption by Hope families,

the annual state funds have, in turn, decreased. Currently, the state is contributing \$150,000 to Hope Meadows. Rent collected from the older adults covers about 22 percent of the annual budget; the remainder of the funding is drawn from private grants and donations.

Generations of Hope staff members are now trying to raise \$10 million to sustain the Hope Meadows community in Illinois.

Expansion

In 1997 Generations of Hope received a grant from the Ronald McDonald House Charities to explore replication of the model. Brenda Eheart and her staff abandoned the effort because it was “way too premature.” Still in the early stages of developing the Hope Meadows community, they were not yet ready to expand.

Now four years later, however, staff members are seriously exploring replication of the Hope Meadows model in other communities across the country. Officials from every state have expressed interest in replicating the planned community in their own state. Given interest from foundations and private donors, Eheart believes that raising money and finding appropriate land for new neighborhoods will not present a major challenge.

More of a problem, she says, is finding the individuals best equipped to run such a program, and getting the key state politicians and child welfare representatives to understand and accept the philosophy behind the Hope Meadows model: looking at both foster children and older adults as having a lot to contribute rather than the traditional view of them as needy populations that place a burden on the community. Eheart and her staff have heard many other ideas that run counter to the model—moving the families out of the neighborhood as soon as they’ve adopted their children; buying property that is not contiguous and thus doesn’t allow for a contained community; building small houses, even for potentially large families; and matching older adults with particular children rather than allowing the relationships to form on their own. They continue to search for the opportunity to build more neighborhoods like the one created in Rantoul.

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