

## AKRON BEACON JOURNAL



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### WELCOME<sub>mat</sub>

## UPA – doing something great

On May 1, our monthly HomeHunter focus was on Akron. The headline in Welcome Mat read "Renewed, reenergized, resilient." I was reminded of those qualities May 10 as a guest at the 2010 University Park Alliance Awards luncheon. Held in the University of Akron Student Union Ballroom, the luncheon was a "Who's Who" of Akron, with high-level representatives from all the UPA sponsors, including UA President Luis M. Proenza, who emceed the event, and greetings from Akron Mayor Donald Plusquellic. Also at the podium was Anthony O'Leary, executive director of the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority and president of the University Park Alliance, a new nonprofit organization resulting from the merger of UPA with the University Park Development Corporation (UPDC). Announced at the luncheon, the merger leverages UPA's institutional strength with UPDC's grassroots connection with the community.

Support from high-level executives is key to the success of the UPA movement. A project of this size needs vision, administration and financial backing. O'Leary singled out the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for its \$3 million planning grant in 1991 and its \$10 million grant in 2007 for a "neighborhood that would blur the boundaries between the University of Akron and the surrounding communities."

"You have forged an extraordinary partnership here," said keynote speaker Paul S. Grogan, a Knight Foundation board member, president and CEO of the Boston Foundation, and author of *Comeback Cities*. Back in the 1970s, big cities were thought to be on their way out, he said. "Today, a very significant urban renaissance is occurring."

Akron is on its way to becoming a role model of that urban renaissance thanks to the university at its heart, an entity Grogan called "the No. 1 asset a city can have." He cited the importance of the university's role as both educator and employer. "The quality and education of the work force is the No. 1 indicator of future prosperity," he said.

"We are committed to optimizing our influence," said Proenza, who anticipates an enrollment of more than 30,000 students at UA this coming year.

In the course of the awards presentations, it quickly became evident that support from ordinary folks doing extraordinary things is just as key to the success of Akron's urban renaissance. Consider this sampling of recipients and their accomplishments:

- A student Nexus Award went to the Alpha Sigma Phi Fraternity for members' efforts in upgrading and enhancing Grace Park, site of the 5<sup>th</sup> annual UP Art Fair and Music Fest on Aug. 14. In a brief video highlighting the fraternity's accomplishment, Brian Ramunno, fraternity president, said the effort contributes to "beautifying Akron, one block at a time."
- A student Nexus Award went to UA's Associated Student Government (ASG), whose members came up with the idea of "Zipnics," neighborhood picnics that bring together UA students and UP residents. Two Zipnics were held last year. The free events attracted more than 500.
- The Mason School PB&J program won a community award for Joan Dorow, who runs the Williard Church Food Pantry in UP with her husband, Charlie Dorow. Concerned about the end-of-month food insecurity experienced by Mason School students, she organized resources and volunteers to distribute bags of food each Friday to the students most in need.
- Leandra Drumm earned a community award for conceiving and organizing the Light-UP Lantern Festival last October. The nighttime event, designed to showcase UP as a diverse urban neighborhood, featured area artists, musicians and businesses. More than 500 attended.
- LINKS Community and Family Services, a multi-service outreach program helping to revitalize and transform UP, won a community award. Founded as a nonprofit organization in

December 2008, the organization made impressive advances in 2009 under the executive direction of Rev. Yolanda Parker, with programs for single parents, seniors, youth and job seekers. LINKS assists UP residents with free tax preparation, eligibility for food stamps, cash assistance, home energy support, employment training, ministerial counseling and more.

### The future looks bright

Among the information included with the awards program was a pamphlet enumerating 11 ideas for future programs, a wish list, if you will, of the possibilities in store for UP residents. The list illustrates the continuing stream of creativity that promises to mark UP as a distinct neighborhood in its own right. Here are some of the ideas proposed in that pamphlet:

**Play and Learn Parks:** Outdoor learning games that add value to parks and open spaces. (Think brightly colored versions of hopscotch, tic-tac-toe, etc., on UP sidewalks.)

**Online tutoring:** Opportunities that connect UP students with professional educators for help with homework and other academic projects.

**UP Kindergarten Kollege:** A summer program on the UA campus to help incoming UP kindergarten students develop academic and social skills.

**Free classes at UA for UP residents:** Possibilities include noncredit courses, professional development and recertification programs, dance, music and art instruction.

**More academic scholarships for UP residents:** Two scholarships for higher education were awarded at the luncheon; one went to Thi Tran, an accomplished violinist who hopes to become a doctor, and the other went to Derrick J. Rechel, a North High School graduate, who plans to pursue a career in drafting and design. Each scholarship is worth \$4,000, renewable for four years. Additional scholarships might be merit-, ethnicity- and religious-based awards, target adult learners or specify certain majors.

**Poetry trails:** Poetry banners and poetry stamped into sections of UP sidewalks would certainly be a unique feature distinguishing UP from all other Akron neighborhoods. Individual lines of poetry could be connected via a trail, encouraging residents and visitors to explore UP by bike or on foot.

With the formation of UPA as a nonprofit entity, UP will begin its next chapter without Ken Stapleton, current executive director of UPA, who plans to return to his consulting firm in Miami, Fla., in June. As the catalyst who gave "legs" to the concept of a University Park neighborhood and wings to the idea of "doing something great," he leaves an UPlifting legacy for his successor.