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Community: Common Unity

Gwen Buchanan

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STORYTELLER: Gwen Buchanan

Community activism was huge in my upbringing. It taught me the importance of being a good neighbor, a good person, and a servant. I owe my success to my past and to those who took the time to guide me. I had a calling to be a community servant. God inspired me to work in the community. I am the president of the Carillon Civic Council, a life and wellness coach and many other roles on top of being a daughter, a mother, a grandma, and Auntie Gwen. I'm carrying out the legacy of community involvement that Carillon was founded on and guiding our youth to be leaders of our future.

My parents moved to Carillon in 1965 during a transitional period after I-75 divided the Edgemont community. The transition opened

CARILLON



up the community for other black middle class working families to move up and become first time homeowners. It was a prestigious little community, and they were proud to be a part of it. Carillon Civic Council was founded as a result of a few of those first homeowners who fought the highway dividing the neighborhood. Virginia McNeal, one of founders of the Carillon Civic Council, served as the president for many years, in addition to being the president of Dayton School Board. Mrs. McNeal was a force in the community to get things done and make Carillon the neighborhood it was.

I met Mrs. McNeal when I was 5 years old; and for my whole life she expected me to be somebody and do something in the community. When someone needed something, she told me I had a job, no questions asked. If the elderly needed help cleaning out their house, she volunteered me to do it. When the association needed help passing out flyers for the meetings, better believe I was there. Mary Varnado was another childhood role model as my Blue Bird and Campfire girl leader. She is my predecessor as Carillon president ... she handed me the torch and still advises me as President Emeritus.

When I was 18, I got my taste of the fast life in the big cities from Atlanta to Oakland to San Francisco; and returned to Dayton after ten years to raise my children. In 1996, I bought

my first house in Carillon, the community that I love. I grew up on the 500 block of Harriet Street, where family still lives; and later bought a house in that very same block. I'm one of about 15 of the originals from the Carillon Edgemont neighborhood. Mrs. McNeal's son is my neighbor. It was also the house that a childhood friend use to live ... and as a child I often played in her home. **GROWING UP, I KNEW EVERYBODY. IT WAS MORE THAN A NEIGHBORHOOD; IT WAS A FAMILY. THE CHILDREN WERE EVERYONE'S CHILDREN—WHEN THEY SAY IT TAKES A VILLAGE, THEY MEAN IT.**

In my early thirties, a couple years after moving back to Carillon, I started putting Mrs. McNeal's lessons she ingrained in me into action after I graduated from the Neighborhood Leadership Institute in 1995. I was appointed to the City of Dayton Housing Appeals board as a volunteer, followed by many other volunteer opportunities. Before she died, Mrs. McNeal told me, "You know it's your time to lead this community". Although it wasn't the best time for me, it was the best time for Carillon. I've known since I was 5 years old, but she gave me the call to action. I knew what it took, I watched them to see what it looked like to have your residents engaged and to call city council and demand things that matter.

Our neighborhood make-up has changed greatly since I grew up. Yet, Carillon is still a

draw; people want to live here because it is a nice neighborhood. There appears to be less homeowners. I believe that there is a strong sense of pride in becoming a homeowner, in addition to the emotional and financial investment. There's a decline in community involvement and the pride that comes with it; more folks from different worlds and values. Many of the newcomers don't want to get to know their neighbors ... some don't keep up the properties. It's "neighbor apathy". It saddens me to see trash on the lawn and the grass is overgrown. We try to lead by example in the way we take care of our homes. We reach out and let them know the community standards and expectations.

Our group has narrowed since the original Carillon Edgemont neighborhood. Now, us "old timers" stand on the legacy of Mrs. McNeal. But some of the older ones can't keep up their homes or be as involved as they used to be. Mrs. Anthony who's 87 still watches out for everyone and gets around real good. She'll put your trashcan up for you if you're out of town. And there's Michelle who feeds you if you're sick and shut in.

THEN THERE'S ME, LIVING OUT MRS. MCNEAL'S LEGACY BY CREATING AN EXPECTATION FOR OUR YOUTH TO BE COMMUNITY-MINDED AND SERVICE-ORIENTED AS I WAS TAUGHT AND AS I HAVE TAUGHT MY CHILDREN. There are many single parents now who

don't have the support system I had. I try to reach the parents through their kids, thinking that maybe if they see their kids involved, they'll get involved. I sit outside and I talk to each and every kid I see on the street and try to engage them in conversation: what's your name, where do you go to school, what kind of grades you gettin'? I pay for good grades, I give snacks and jucys for helping out.

They call me Auntie Gwen. I'll reach out to them, let them know when I need some help, and ask 'em, "Can I put you to work?" They even ask me, "Auntie Gwen, do you have any work for us?" It's important to teach these kids to be community servants. I tell them that this is your hood, this is where you live. On trash day I need you to pull my trashcan up. If you see trash on the street, I need you to pick it up because this is your hood, and we don't want trash on the street. I'm counting on you guys. **THAT'S MY WAY OF GIVING BACK. I HOPE THEY'LL HOLD ONTO THAT AND REMEMBER WHAT AN IMPACT IT MADE IN THEIR LIVES AND HOW IT COULD BENEFIT THEIR FUTURE.**