

## Interview with Bonnie Neumeier

Bonnie Neumeier speaking at the Drop Inn Center 30th Anniversary of the Peoples Move, January 2008. Photo taken by Brewster Rhoads.



- Bonnie Neumeier is a long-time resident and community
- activist in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. Co-
- founder of several grassroots organizations addressing
- issues of poverty and
- oppression, she works incessantly to develop resources that
- support
- healthy activism and leadership capacity in justice work. As
- an
- active participant in the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement since
- its
- founding in 1970, she has worked to make affordable housing a
- top priority and a basic human right for all. In the following
- interview, Neumeier reflects on her activism, along with her
- experiences as a community educator working with college
- students.

**C**hristopher Wilkey: Can you discuss your early years in community activism? What brought you to the neighborhood and what led you to want to become a community activist?

Bonnie Neumeier: I know that when I first came to Cincinnati I probably didn't call myself a community activist. I was born and raised in a small [Ohio] northwestern town, fifth daughter of 20

children. Even in our small town there were haves and have-nots, so my parents always taught me to look out for the underdog and when I was looking for a school to go to I happened to choose Cincinnati. It was the furthest place I had lived from home. My freshman year of college was turbulent. It was the year that MLK was shot, the Vietnam war was going on, and a lot of issues that I didn't feel I was well prepared to handle, and from my past and background I think I became really curious and cared about what was going on.

An upper classman asked if I wanted to go to Eastern Kentucky. I had never been to Kentucky and that is where I really saw, for the first time, rural poverty that impacted me a great deal. We worked with Brothers of Charity down in David, Kentucky. I saw families living in shacks, children without proper clothing, and I was disturbed by this. A lot of them had been working in the mines and were suffering from black lung, not getting all of their benefits, just raw poverty. [I saw where] they were living and where the mine owners were living and the disparity between the two was just stark! I came back and started to ask questions in my economics class and didn't get a lot of good answers. But I was very interested in wanting to make a difference so I went back, about two weekends out of every month that I was at college, and got really interested in what happened to mountain people when they came to the city.

That is when I discovered Over-the-Rhine. It was here in Cincinnati so I started to do volunteer work in the neighborhood, and all my 4 years of college I started to do a lot of reading and writing on Appalachian culture. I came to my major in social science and requested that I do my placement here in Over-the-Rhine. I ended up doing home visits which I loved because it got me out into the community, meeting people, seeing issues that the community was faced with here, and just learning as much and I

could. They offered me the director of the Contact Center [a social service agency].

I had never read about organizing people to work, but I learned that from [other activists in the community]. This neighborhood was going through a major change and a lot of federal dollars were coming in as a result of the civil rights movement and a lot of the housing was being renovated; we called it the project rehab days, and a lot of people were sitting out on the street while their building was being fixed. I then learned about the Voices Community Newspaper (VCN). It use to be like a mimeograph sheet where people would talk about community meetings and recipes to share, but what the housing activists were wanting to do was advertise the address where people had been relocated to so they could be aware that we could help them with benefits. It was in that era where I was taught that you needed to give service to the people before becoming any part of a concrete organizing effort because you have to build trust with the people, put in your time, get to know them, so in the early years I did a lot of support work.

Eventually I became the coordinator of the VCN, and I was reading a lot of stuff on liberation theology. My eyes and mind were being challenged, and a lot of what I thought about the world was being shook up. I was learning about how power works, and at that point I was questioning everything that I was brought up with. It was in that era that we were trying to develop a poor people's movement. What we had in common, both black and white, were issues of oppression because of the amount of money they had in their pockets, and I think that I really connected with that because of my own working class background; my parents struggled to makes ends meet, they raised a big family, and it wasn't until I got here that I got challenged to look at my issues of white privilege, my oppression as a woman, and as a working class woman, and this all happened through working on the streets.

Eventually I had to resign from the Contact Center because I was rocking waves. I was out all night helping to move people. I wanted to be out in the streets helping people. I understood my position of power as a director and [had a problem with] asking people to go to city hall about issues we were organizing around. I was asking my neighbors to go do it for free while I got paid, and so [after I quit as director of the Contact Center] I got involved with odd jobs to keep myself busy.

Housing, from the beginning of my time here, was a key organizing cause, because if you didn't have the people here, then what was the sense of fighting for anything else? A lot of people had a lack of affordable housing and substandard conditions. We were organizing rent strikes. Our movement was instrumental in creating the first tenant/landlord law here in the city because we were learning a lot about tenants and things like that. It was here in this neighborhood that I was taught that you have to be concerned about symptoms of oppression, but that you needed to also walk with that foot of justice. [I was learning that if] we come together collectively and organize around an issue that impacted us, we could make a change.

And it was that one important ingredient [to have those most impacted by the injustices to speak out on their own behalf]. [Those most] effected by the system would be best to talk to city hall. Or homeless people on the street, they would go down and have things to say to city hall to speak on their own behalf. The tenants that we were housing had the right to have a voice. Parents who were living here and losing their schools, they have a right to speak out. So I was learning about all of that, and I was learning that education was very important but not everyone we were working with had that educational background. They had a lived experience and that gave them the credentials to speak about what was happening to them. I learned that it isn't just people with a

degree behind their name. It was about experience, and over the years I have learned so much from older African American women, black and white folks with little income but [who] had a keen knowledge about what was happening to them. [They understood how they] were oppressed, and with some encouragement and being brought together, they were not suffering from oppression in isolation, [which] helped them to feel that it was not their fault.

I don't remember what year we coined the Over the Rhine People's Movement, but it was that poor people's movement thing that we realized we were doing. We were creating this wheel that was the hub for fighting for basic human rights, and people who lived in the community that were from the Deep South or the Appalachian Mountains had the right not to be shoved out because someone else thought that land was valuable. Through these organizing efforts grew these grassroots organizations in the community. So that is how I grew and got involved and saw what can happen when people stand up for their rights. There was very little money and what we have been able to do with low budgets is amazing. I now call myself an activist, and I was trained here from the people in the community and not any academic book.

People in the community showed me that even with great odds they can still have a fighting spirit or hope, and through that effort we can lobby city council, do petitions, talk to people who have landlords, and that is where I learned about protest. There are times in an effort, after you have tried everything else, and if they finally say no, then sometimes you have to use your body, put your body on the line for what you believe in. So we started doing human service work at the same time we were organizing and that is how I see the two as linked. I grew up being impacted by that and so glad that I walked with, paraded with, laughed with, sang with, the spirit that is here. I think that is something that the city over looks sometimes. They don't see the asset that is here and will walk over

people, make them invisible. There is a thing about being a victim of poverty, but I have seen people decide that they are going to turn that around and be actors in their own history. It's not just sitting and moping about the cards you have been dealt. It's about standing up and people wanting to work hard for what they believe in. That we have a voice and that is the asset that we have.

C. Wilkey: You talk a lot about the history and your experiences. How do you see things now in the neighborhood? What are the issues? What needs to be accomplished?

B. Neumeier: Well, it has changed from when I first came because [back then] there were a lot more people and everyone here were on a fixed income. I feel that by declaring it a historic district, we knew back then that a change by way of gentrification would occur, and anyone knows across the country that when an area near the downtown becomes a historic area that things will change. Sometimes it does feel that the gentrification feels like we are being occupied or taken over. I think it is because of our efforts that we still have an amount of community control over housing. In the early years we knew this was going to happen so we bought our property in the different sections so that you wouldn't have your pockets of poverty and pockets of rich. People say that it should be a mixed community, and there are advantages to living with diversity, but it takes a certain kind of person to live with difference and not have that attitude like we are just going to take control.

I do think we have to be careful not to be silenced or afraid to challenge those who have money and power. We knew that someday this avalanche of gentrification would be here and that what we were trying to do was have a piece of that pie. Early buying of the property was not to just board up the homes to keep people out, but to board them up so that we could have money for

the time in which we could renovate them to ensure affordable housing. This is tough to have a loss of population, and have seen the avalanche, that scares people. Times have changed. You can challenge city hall back in the 70s and 80s and not be thrown into jail. We use to bring cardboard signs. You can't do that anymore. I remember being at city hall and not liking something, so I stood up on my chair. Now you do that and you are escorted out. I think we have lost, through more authoritarianism and elitism, that we don't have public spaces to put our views out without the powers at be saying to get those people out of the way; it has become a lot rougher. Some of the city council people back then I thought were not for the poor, but look at the people now...[back then] they were at least moveable. You could count the votes and lobby them and get them on your side because they saw the determination and you could reason with them, not now because of the forces of power that are against the neighborhood. I don't think they know how to work with difference or to maintain equitable difference. That is why we are important. If there is going to be equitable difference in this neighborhood, they need to start valuing the presence of the people's organizations that kept this neighborhood alive. There would not be housing out there had it not been for us going to city hall and saying to not tear things down.

- C. Wilkey: Could you talk a little bit about the Miami University Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine and their Residency Program, a university-community partnership that provides, among other things, college students with the opportunity to live, work, and take coursework in the neighborhood for a semester?
- B. Neumeier: I think that the Residency Program grew out of our movement's work in the community. We believed in speaking out in what we believed in, and they reached out to us to share about our stories and our struggles. How people got consciousness

raised by our work, so we have always entertained civic groups, churches, schools, and stuff like that. After all those years of success and engaging college campuses, they now think about sending students to Over-the-Rhine. Some places will send them to Central America, Africa, Asia, and we were saying hey right in your backyard there is a really good experience that students can have that is not so far way. We know that they can gain things by going to other countries, but what we have experienced here can be a challenge too. So what happens is in the fall semester, primarily the students are architecture students, students come for an orientation weekend and stay in housing provided by Over-the-Rhine Community Housing and then they take 3 different classes. They study here at the center and the architect students engage in a design/build project. The other students that are from other disciplines, I am responsible for placing them in other community organizations where they can do community service.

The whole thing about this is that we would only do it if the neighborhood could benefit from this; this is not only about what students can learn or help us with, but what we can gain as well. I do think that there have been some exciting things occurring. I like it because I know I was a college student when I became enlightened, and I kind of wish someone had nurtured or mentored me on the things I had to do. I remember my experience and how mind and eye opening it was, how much I learned, how rich and expressive and rich my life had become because of my attitude and social analysis of the world. I believe if we can pass that on, they can take that and become more sensitive to neighborhoods that are oppressed, if they are in positions of power in the future that [they] can change the world by their activism when they leave here. Some have chosen to stay here. Obviously some do leave because we can't employ everyone here, but hopefully they take this where ever they go and I see that it is a ripple effect. Our movement



towards engaging students and having them help benefits our work here. We all win in the end.

- C. Wilkey: What are the most important educational goals when working with college students in Over-the-Rhine? What do you want them to get out of the experience?
- B. Neumeier: One of the students from last semester took the summer course, stayed on and just left this week, and I was amazed by her. She was from an area close to mine in northwest Ohio, and we always start out with story telling. When you have to interact with a culture different than your own, and seeing that student grow from where she came to where she is at now as a justice seeker, this happened through having a mentor along the way, being challenged about race and class. She had never had that before. All the students have this experience, but I know that all the things she learned will benefit her wherever she lands. She was an architect major, but by being involved with Over-the-Rhine she saw how architecture impacts a neighborhood. She lived here with us, and that is the part about the Residency Program that is special; you are walking the streets with us, you have to see the world through the neighborhood's eyes, and what you see is going to be very different. Building those relationships is really cool. I believe that everyone grows from where they came. You don't see it in everyone, but I think there is a willingness to be challenged and accept change, and I have heard more students say that this experience changed their lives. They have an opportunity to look at the world differently, and that's pretty cool. It's neat to see people out there raising awareness, and it also gives our own people in the neighborhood the opportunity to share their struggles. A lot of times we tell people about the things that go on here and people don't believe us.

C. Wilkey: What kind of teaching strategies do you use to create empathy in the students towards the residents? What role does empathy actually play?

B. Neumeier: I encourage a lot of journal writing and reflection. I have a writing session each week, and I will ask them to pay attention to what I call “Abiding Images”. They can be a song, graffiti on the wall, an image, a sound, and they take that and write and go deeper with that. I also encourage them to engage with the people, i.e. . . . out in the park, sitting on the stoop, just engaging people in conversation. Also, whatever is happening on the ground, we will invite students to go with us, like going to city hall, and it is there when they hear the people plead for the little benefits that they want, people can connect more emotionally. They are experiencing it along with us, they feel the anger of the people, they know how many times we have to go and say the same things and seeing that we don’t get anything back. There is one thing that is common so far in the four years this has been going on. About a month into it they become totally frustrated with it. They question how people can be treated this way. It is total disbelief that the world is really this unfair. You’re supposed to just go to city hall, tell them the truth and then you get what you want. So there is a deep frustration, but they can see the hard work and they can get into it then too right along side of us, because it is about being beside one another, not on top or doing it for others. They witness the frustration, and it takes a while for students to find out how to put their just anger into action. I think the work of the students, their skills and energy, they enhance our work, and then they earn something with us and then fall in love with us. That helps for people to not see us as the statistics anymore, or the poor people. They actually will have an educational conversation with some struggling with addiction or homelessness and as real, live people who are visible. The relationship building, seeing the world through our eyes, is what really brings it to life.

C. Wilkey: You mentioned writing. Could you talk about that a little more?

B. Neumeier: I love poetry and the whole idea of prompts; I give prompts. I'll bring a poem and take a line out of that poem, and I ask students to fast write and have them relate it to their experience, so they are always writing about what they are seeing and doing, how they are feeling. I think that sometimes the role as an educator is to set the environment where they can be encouraged to express themselves, and if they have that safety, anything can come out of it. I put them in a circle, I might use candles, we might do a chime, but they do fast write so that they are not editing themselves, and it allows them to just write. Even with the videos we have done, they listen to them and I will say to jot down some thing that you hear in that video, then I'll come back and we will do a fast write using that prompt. I'm using writing more with groups to help process their experience. Some take the guidance, some not, but I think women really understand about journaling. Men tend to just say that it is not their thing, and I think that is a big loss because if you have a journal, you can go back to that first page and read that initial responses and then see where you have evolved, and even if you don't have that, you can at least record your growth. I have students from previous years tell me how glad they are that they have this, even though when they first start they may say that we don't have time or data to do this, but we encourage them to do it. It doesn't have to be a long paper. It can be just your thoughts on the week, what are your highlights, what was disturbing about it, what did you see different or the same from your own life, what images when you lay down at night, what comes to mind, did someone call you a name, these are all crucial.

- C. Wilkey: What is the connection between your local community work, and that which would be labeled as the work of a social movement?
- B. Neumeier: I think that what goes on in Over-the-Rhine is a microcosm of what is going on in the world. It is very important, no matter where you are at, to be able to ask those critical questions about power; whose agenda is being served, who has the power to do what, who is benefiting, who sets the standards of behavior. Right now there are areas of this country and abroad where you have to ask who is allowed on what lands. I have always seen this neighborhood as a land struggle and depending on who has the power to own it say what can go on here. The people at the very bottom get shoved off land, and that is happening in Central America, Israel, and the Middle East. I often talk to students about the sense that poor people are getting the biggest portion of federal dollars, where do they get that idea? There is such a minute piece of money that comes from the government. You can learn that a lot of things that happen globally is going on here, unemployment, loss of jobs to foreign countries. I guess I started making the connection with imperialism and the use of power by seeing it in the local struggle, but if we make connections we see it isn't about blaming the poor for there problems. You have to have a broader view, and if you don't it just leads to despair faster. Over-the-Rhine is dealing with issues that have global impact. I think that we have to do better about linking up social struggles across the country. We are communities of resistance, challenging the mainstream value systems that pit poor against the rich, people of color against white, making divisions, and we need to change that. Part of working with the students is raising awareness, and I feel we need young people to get out there. What we are doing is a poor people's movement and that is going to grow because of the economy; the middle-class are the ones who are going to be suffering.

- C. Wilkey: So with students, it is about creating awareness, that this is a time where they can find out where they stand.
- B. Neumeier: Yes, but they struggle. They feel like once they have their eyes opened, they can never shut them again and forget about what they saw. They have had to think and wrestle through a lot of stuff about themselves and their backgrounds. I have to tell them that there is a place for them. You can be rich, or middle class, or poor and still contribute to the work that we have going here. The people in our neighborhood are smart, though they may not have the resources, all of the things we have done with limited budget, not living beyond our means. I see people come in day-in and day-out going to city council and asking the same question every week. There is a sense that maybe you only have one voice and that you have to keep using it. By using this I think we can [gain]the solidarity of the students. They are the future.

