

By Stephanie Gottschlich

WHEN MICHAEL DI FLORA, '72, started purchasing vacant homes in South Park in 2006 to stave off an invasion of speculative and absentee landlords in Dayton's largest historic district, he had no clue his efforts and those of other Wright State family members would help spark a physical and social transformation that would garner the neighborhood national attention.

Last spring, South Park, at 24 blocks and more than 700 structures,

won a national first-prize award for Neighborhood of the Year in the Physical Revitalization/Beautification category. The annual award from Neighborhoods USA recognizes projects initiated by a neighborhood group that focuses on parks, green spaces, housing improvement, lighting, litter control, traffic management, signs, and business district enhancement.

The award caps two years of an ongoing neighborhood transformation involving 7,000 volunteer hours, around

\$3 million in home investments, curb appeal contests, the development of an ambitious neighborhood master plan with volunteers from the American Institute of Architects, an October 2007 Rehabarama, and the launch of an annual neighborhood jazz festival.

It all started with a serendipitous meeting at Wright State in 2006, when Di Flora met South Park native Theresa Gasper while both were serving on the university's Foundation Board of Trustees. Gasper is married to 1978 WSU graduate and entrepreneur David Gasper.

Di Flora, a retired engineer, had noticed the housing in South Park slip as the predatory lending crisis first began to grip the area. So did Gasper, the fourth generation of her family to be raised in South Park who had a lifelong dream of reclaiming her neighborhood home to save it.

Their entrepreneurial approach: Buy as many homes as possible and fix them up "to raise up the whole neighborhood at once," Di Flora said.

"It makes residents feel their homes have value and bolsters their sense of

pride," Di Flora said. "As other homes sell, people begin perceiving their homes as more valuable and they take the time to make improvements. Knowing now that these homes are sought-after means people will spend the time and money investing in the neighborhood. It's no longer a lost cause."

Restoration in progress

South Park's structures date to the 1880s and early 20th century. The homes include examples of

Romanesque Revival, Second Empire, High Victorian, Italianate, Queen Anne, Federal, and Craftsman architecture. While several homes had been rehabbed by long-time South Park residents, many were falling apart, boarded up, and on the brink of demolition.

Through their separate companies—Di Flora's The Home Group, L.L.C. and Gasper's Full Circle Development, L.L.C.—the two bought 30 homes within a year, renovating 10 of them in time for the Rehabarama

THE WSU FAMILY TRANSFORMS SOUTH PARK





that showcased their improvement efforts and brought 6,000 visitors to the neighborhood. Combined, they invested \$2.9 million into turning around the vacant homes. Neither uses public funding for their efforts.

"Mike was buying everything in sight," Gasper said. Before long, the neighborhood was dotted with large signs in the yards of dilapidated homes reading "restoration in progress."

For some home purchases, Gasper and Di Flora spent months tracking down the deeds in probate court or bringing them out of foreclosure or convincing out-of-state owners to sell to them. It took two years for Gasper to buy her family home and grandmother's home, which stood side-by-side and sat vacant for five to six years and will require about \$140,000 in improvements. "There was a big hole in the roof, and when I walked in to see it for the first time, rain was pouring into the front room," she said. "The copper pipes and wiring had been stripped—I was pretty upset."

Gasper and Di Flora do a lot of the rehab work themselves, using local artisans and resources as much as possible. "We gut these homes so they're virtually maintenance free," said Di Flora, who does most of the interior work on his homes. "That's what is appealing to prospective buyers. They want the charm, but not the time-intensive maintenance."

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—THERESA GASPER

It was their initial breakneck revitalization during 2007 that spurred a wave of reinvestment and gave an energy boost to the neighborhood's existing rehabilitation culture. Their efforts were embraced by South Park's close-knit community of urban enthusiasts. "People got a buzz," Gasper said.

Thirty-six homeowners took advantage of a paint discount Di Flora arranged at a nearby Sherwin Williams and 40 participated in a curb appeal contest. All total, about 76 homeowners gave their properties a facelift in a year's time, Gasper said.

"When we started there were 100 vacant homes," said Di Flora, who walks the neighborhood frequently to keep track of changes. "I estimate 500 of the 700 homes in the neighborhood have been touched since we started doing this. It doesn't look like the same neighborhood from two years ago."

Most of the rehabbed homes maintain their historic character with the modern conveniences of living in an urban setting. Exposed brick, Craftsman woodwork, original fireplaces, and Eastlake-style carved woodwork meet LCD televisions, skylights, high-speed Internet, reclaimed wood floors, and custom staircase handrails.

Quality of life

The neighborhood's new vibrancy is an example of the kind of quality of life that attracts a creative class of workers, a demographic on which the Dayton region is pinning its hopes for an economic revitalization.

Creative class workers—engineers, artists, health care professionals, professors, and other workers with a high degree of education who think or create for a living—are attracted to socioeconomic diversity and strong, highly social neighborhoods.

Much of the neighborhood's appeal comes from a long history of socioeconomic diversity. In the early 20th century, National Cash Register Co. owner John H. Patterson wanted to fix up the area known as Slidertown, now called South Park, near his new factory on South Main Street.

LEFT and ABOVE: **South Park residents** launched an annual jazz festival, led by WSU music education graduate Shane Anderson, for showcasing local musical and artistic talent. The fall event is held in the public green space on Park Avenue Boulevard. Photos by Roberta Bowers.

Boys living in the neighborhood's shanties were breaking his factory windows with rocks, so he put them to work with beautification projects. The neighborhood developed into a pleasant community where his factory workers lived next door to NCR executives, and the company held picnics in the green space along Park Drive Boulevard, now home to the neighborhood jazz festival.

That diversity persists today. A single street can see doctors, attorneys, architects, a multitude of college professors, writers, social workers, realtors, design professionals, laborers, single working moms, and large families.

The neighborhood is also home to more than 20 Wright State families—employees, faculty, and alumni.

"It is not uncommon to find a millionaire living next to a low-income, multigenerational family here," Gasper said. "It feels incredibly real, that this is the way people are supposed to live. We share the same values, and we're all in this together. That makes a neighborhood successful."

The neighborhood is famous for its porch, patio, and deck parties, or PPD's, and on Friday nights, neighbors hang out at the South Park Tavern at the corner of Oak and Wayne streets. The tavern was opened by Wright State alum Bill Daniels, owner of The Pizza Factory, a South Park staple and a favorite gourmet pizza for locals.



Holly and Michael Di Flora (above) and **Theresa and David Gasper** (below) have spent countless hours together on South Park revitalization.

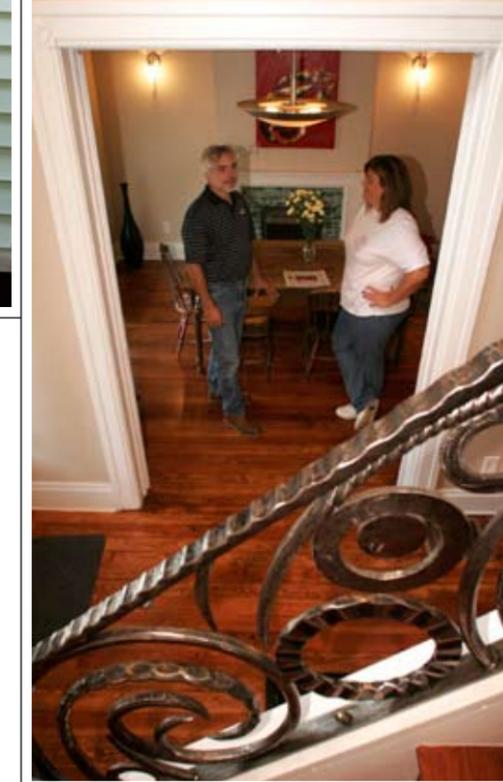
Since 2006, the couples and other South Park homeowners contributed about 7,000 volunteer hours and \$3 million towards rehabbing homes and building their community.

Photos opposite page, top left, and photos this page by Lisa Powell.





After winning the Neighborhood of the Year award in May, the neighborhood sold 15 homes almost instantly.



Michael Di Flora (left) and Theresa Gasper (right) use local talent and materials in their rehab projects, such as this custom staircase built by local metal artist and South Park resident Hamilton Dixon.
Photo by Lisa Powell

It's that kind of quality of life that attracted Christopher Rowley to Dayton from Washington, D.C., in 2007. The 41-year-old father, who conducts imagery analysis for search and rescue organizations, and his wife found the vibrant lifestyle and authenticity they wanted for their young family in South Park's close-knit community. "I'm originally from the Midwest and appreciate the quality of life here," Rowley said. "The cost of living here is great. Our house and neighborhood is

full of character and we feel lucky to have found it." As more professionals like Rowley move in and the neighborhood develops a strong community, those who "don't care about this are moving out," Di Flora said. After winning the Neighborhood of the Year award in May, the neighborhood sold 15 homes almost instantly, said Di Flora, who has seen demand for South Park housing increase along with property values.

Homes currently sell at prices ranging from \$59,000 for an urban, modern bungalow, to \$90,000 for a sweet cottage with a gingerbread porch, to \$249,000 for one of The Home Group Realty's completely rehabbed Eastlake two-story homes with custom-designed kitchens. As they sell those homes, they'll buy more. The two Wright State families—Di Flora and Gasper and their respective spouses—will continue

their collaboration to keep the momentum going. For Di Flora and his wife, Holly, a real estate agent who lists their rehabbed homes, "raising up" South Park is their legacy for their grandchildren. For Gasper, it means realizing her dream of saving her neighborhood. "The fabric was already here," she said. "Residents just needed someone to believe in them."



- ABOUT SOUTH PARK**
- Located south of downtown Dayton along Wayne Avenue, bounded by Miami Valley Hospital and the University of Dayton
 - Approximately 68 acres and 24 blocks
 - 729 residential properties
 - Between 2005 and 2007, 77 homes sold with an average sale price of \$81,857
 - Homes average 1,465 square feet; 110 years in age; 2 stories; 3 bedrooms; and 1.5 bathrooms
 - On August 23, 1984, South Park was registered on the National Register of Historic Places

WSU helping region grow a creative class

What is the creative class?

When urban theorist **Richard Florida** came to Wright State University in March 2007 as part of WSU's Presidential Lecture Series, he inspired several regional leaders with his theory that if a region isn't attracting a "creative class" of workers, its economy will wither and die.

According to Florida's economic development theories, a "high bohemian" class of artists, engineers, musicians, high-tech workers, and creative thinkers creates a critical mass of workers and quality of life that attracts cutting-edge employers. Think Portland, Oregon; Toronto, Canada; and Austin, Texas. Immediately following Florida's visit, Wright State University was at the center of a movement to grow the creative class in the Dayton region to improve the quality of life and transform its economy. A task force representing 21 area organizations was assembled by the Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education (SOCHE) to bring Florida and

his Creative Communities Leadership Project to the greater Dayton and Springfield region. Thirty-two "catalysts," or change agents, were selected from among the region's citizenry to work with Florida's company, the Creative Class Group, to put his ideas to work. The Dayton region's initiative, now called **DaytonCREATE**, is among seven creative class initiatives in cities around the United States and Australia. DaytonCREATE has developed five initiatives to revitalize the region's economic competitiveness using Florida's theories and based on the region's existing strengths:



- **The Young Creatives Summit** will bring together diverse young talent, business leaders, nonprofits, universities, and elected officials to address the flight of young talent from the region.
- **This Is Dayton** focuses on rebuilding community pride to turn residents into ambassadors promoting the area's strengths.
- **The Innovation Collaborative** will integrate the area's rich concentration of artists, engineers, and skilled workers to stimulate a stronger economy and promote job creation through innovative collaboration.

- **Dayton Creative Incubator** will bring life back to one or several vacant downtown spaces by working with building owners to allow local artists to use the spaces for creating and displaying art and exchanging ideas.
- **Film Dayton** will leverage the strength of WSU's award-winning motion pictures program to grow the area's film industry. Film Dayton was the brainchild of catalyst Debra Wilburn, WSU assistant director of career services, and is supported by Emmy-award winners Julia Reichart, professor of motion pictures/theatre arts, and Steven Bognar, a 1986 graduate of the motion pictures program. "As we work to transform the communities we serve, this is a visible link between our College of Liberal Arts and the region," Hopkins said. "The remarkable program at Wright State University, combined with the nucleus of critically acclaimed filmmakers and high-tech post-production technologies, creates an environment ripe for collaboration and job creation," said Gloria Skurski, director of education and broadcast services for ThinkTV-Greater Dayton Public Television and president of Film Dayton, during an October 2008 meeting with Ohio Governor Ted Strickland. In October, WSU's DaytaOhio and Joshi Center hosted the Innovation Collaborative's "Whole Brain Summit," which brought together left-brained engineers and right-brained artists to meet each other, network, and make plans for a 2009 Walk on Water demonstration at Riverscape in downtown Dayton. For more information: <http://daytoncreate.org>

The creative class describes 40 million workers—30 percent of the U.S. workforce—expected to be the core of economic growth in our future economy, according to Richard Florida, author of the bestselling book *Rise of the Creative Class* and one of the world's leading public intellectuals on economic competitiveness. Those workers fall into two categories: creative professionals, or the classic knowledge-based workers in health care, business and finance, the legal sector, and education; and super creatives, or scientists, engineers, techies, innovators, and researchers, as well as artists, designers, writers, and musicians. The creative class earns more than 50 percent of all wages and salaries in the United States, as much as the manufacturing and service sectors combined. It also controls nearly 70 percent—almost \$500 billion—of the discretionary income in the U.S., more than double that of the manufacturing and service sectors combined. Four components—the "four T's"—drive creative class growth and serve as the basis for the Dayton region's creative class effort: **Talent:** A community's ability to attract and retain top talent is a driving force behind any effective economic strategy. **Technology:** Technology and innovation are critical components of a community or organization's ability to drive economic growth. Universities provide important avenues for transferring research, ideas, and innovation into marketable and sustainable products. **Tolerance:** Creative workers need communities, organizations, and peers that are open to new ideas and different people. Places receptive to immigration, alternative lifestyles, and new views on social status and power structures will benefit significantly in the creative age. **Territorial Assets:** More than ever before, place matters. Territorial assets are the distinct "vibe" that makes communities unique from one another. People want to live in communities that are unique and inspiring to them. ☑