

Introduction of Susan Morehouse at the 19th Ward Community Assn. Awards Banquet

I am honored to introduce our 2009 Citizen of the Year, Susan Morehouse. Susan is a native of Irondequoit and a graduate of Irondequoit High School and Nazareth College. Susan is a harpist, and plays in area hospitals and for weddings and community celebrations, and also has six harp students. She has made two recordings, the first in 2003 and the second in 2008.

Now, how did Susan choose our neighborhood? It might be more accurate to say that this neighborhood chose Susan and her husband, Dr. William Morehouse. In the spring of 1976 Susan was student teaching at School 44, and, as a recently married couple, Bill and Susan began actively looking for a city community where Bill, at that time working as an employee physician at Kodak, could open an office that would serve an underserved population. Susan says, "We were praying and driving around all the neighborhoods in the city. We drove by our corner, of Wellington and Aldine, and at the time there were two or three boarded-up houses very close by." There was no "For Sale" sign on it: in fact, it was almost hidden in an overgrowth of tall bushes, and the windows were covered with heavy shades. However, Susan and Bill "sensed that there was something special about this neighborhood and this spot." They were attracted to the house, but it was not on the market. They asked their realtor to check on it and found that it had just been sold and was waiting for bank approval. The realtor left her number, but it certainly looked like the sale was a "done deal". Then a glitch developed, the house was on the market again, and they bought it. "We felt like the neighborhood needed us, and the house needed us." Susan adds that "We were young and full of energy." The three elderly ladies who lived there, unfortunately in terror of the neighborhood, moved to a trailer in Florida and didn't even have to clean out the house. Susan says "it just felt like the right thing." Within a year, Bill opened his practice on Arnett Boulevard, just two blocks away from their home.

From the very beginning, Susan's investment of time and energy in her community has always been substantial and has always been a result of putting her strong faith in action. While raising her family – Sarah born 1977, Nathan born 1978, Johanna born 1981 and Joel born 1983 – Susan has been involved in a myriad of activities focused on the neighborhood. She led summer Bible clubs and helped distribute bikes to neighborhood kids, was on the house tour three times [1982, 1990 and 2007], and was an active helper in her husband's office.

In the last 4 years Susan's leadership role in neighborhood activities has become more visible. Every time we drive by the corner of Arnett and Wellington and see a well-tended garden with a pathway and benches, we are enjoying the results of her leadership and inspiration of a team of neighbors. When we walk into the Arnett Library and see a refurbished foyer and a beautifully painted door, we are the beneficiaries of her patience, tenacity, and organizational skill. When the many children and families enjoy hotdogs and clowns and visiting fire engines at the annual Arnett Block Party in August, we are all reaping the rewards of her ability to inspire others to work for the common good of our community.

It was in the summer of 2005 that Susan called together a group of neighbors and formed the Arnett Boulevard Block Club. She started the block club in response to an on-going, and worsening, problem of drug sales and drug use on Arnett Boulevard, particularly around the blocks between Wellington and Rugby, and particularly in the vacant lot at the corner of Wellington and Arnett. While still remaining concerned with stopping drug activity, the block club quickly moved on to work on positive changes in this small area of our neighborhood. One of the first activities was filling 40 bags of trash from the lot, then getting top soil and mulch and finding donations and volunteers to cover each step of the transformation from a trash filled eyesore to a community asset. Susan is an expert in tracking down people and organizations who can contribute to the betterment of our city.

This recognition tonight marks a way station of Susan's contributions to our neighborhood and to our common life together here. She is not through: she will continue to inspire, organize and lead us. One source of her inspiration is found in a prayer by the martyred Roman Catholic Archbishop, Oscar Romero. I have copies to hand out to everyone at the end of the dinner, but here are three sentences to take away right now:

“We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.”

We live in a very special neighborhood, and this event recognizes Susan Morehouse as being a very special person, the 19th Ward Community Association 2009 Citizen of the Year.

Mitzie Collins, June 20, 2009



Mitzie, JB (J. Bediaku Afoh Manin, 19th WCA President), and Susan

Remarks given in receipt of the Citizen of the Year Award

Thank you for this honor. I'm deeply humbled. I have a few thoughts to share with you about a healthy community, which is what we're all striving toward. We haven't arrived there yet, but we're all working toward that goal.

A healthy community is like a safety net for trapeze artists in the circus. There are many strands woven together, and each strand works with the others to create a safety net. Strands like Deb Leary, our librarian, who provides a warm welcome to the kids and adults in our neighborhood. She knows their names and something about each one. Strands like Carleen Wilenius who, while out gardening, speaks to the kids on their way to school or on their way home. She knows their names. Neighbors like many of you who give kids and adults a sense of belonging and connectedness, a feeling of being known. Neighbors who help create a positive history of happy memories, like Square Fair, Block Parties, and Martin Luther King Luminary Evenings. Upright businesses that model hard work and honesty, like Cutaia's and Meneze's and Hunt's. They are always glad to see you and know your name. Solid churches in the area form more strong strands, providing a family for kids outside of their own homes.

Children growing up in an environment like that have lives that are less disjointed and scattered and have a sense of wholeness and integrity. They are better able to weather the storms and turn aside from destructive lifestyles. Kids who are known and belong are less likely to turn to gangs for a sense of identity.

We each do a small piece; provide one strand in that net. But together we make a difference. It's amazing how resilient kids can be. They will often find alternate ways to meet their needs when home is unable to provide. Chris, a neighbor child, was born to a 13-year-old mother and raised by his grandparents. His grandparents were kind and loving people but had health problems that kept them from being able to meet all of Chris' needs. Chris had no siblings and spent a lot of time in our home. He needed us to be family for him. He became like another son in our home. He went to city schools and graduated with honors from Wilson, then went on to the U of R and graduated. He's now married with a son and is a Marine serving our country. Chris stops by occasionally when he's in town, and it always gives me fresh hope.

It is easy to become discouraged. The evil of drugs, sales and addiction, and the sad lives they create especially for children can seem like an insurmountable foe. Winston Churchill said when facing a different enemy, "Never, never, never give up." And a Bible verse carrying a similar message says, "Don't grow weary in well doing, for in due season you'll reap if you don't faint."

I would like to say "thanks" to a number of people. I have done none of this alone. First and foremost, my husband who helps me with my many projects, especially when I get in over my head. Thank you to my Dad who helped with the library bulletin boards. And my children who are always willing to share of their talents to help, whether it's face painting or audio at the block party or graphic design skills. The Arnett Block Association team is a small but wiry group. Special thanks to Eula Jackson, Rora Rice and Steve and Jen Owen, and Bob and Mary Dan Cooper, along with many others. I'm also grateful to the police officers, Kristin Runyon, Vinnie Agnone and Josh Travezo who meet with us once a month. Finally, I'm grateful to the Lord who daily gives me strength and energy, a love for my neighbors, creative ideas and, when I feel like quitting, renewed hope.

Susan Morehouse