

# Northside Rising: Early efforts sow seeds for City's largest ever community revitalization

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## How community leaders, early intervention strategies, and outside investment coalesced to create the Northside Initiative



*Note: Later this year, the Northside Development Group will mark its 10th year since it was founded to be a land bank to guide development and protect the community's interests on the Northside. The NDG partnered with the Northside Voyageurs, Northside residents and the City of Spartanburg to launch the Northside Initiative, the most comprehensive neighborhood revitalization effort in the city's history. To mark this moment, the City will be sharing a series of stories and podcasts about the Northside Initiative over the coming weeks.*

**By Will Rothschild**

A quick drive through the Northside today reveals a neighborhood in the full bloom of a transformation. The Dr. T.K. Gregg Community Center, a new \$12 million facility with an indoor swimming pool, stands sentinel on Howard Street, a road that a decade ago was the epicenter of the city's illegal drug trade. Just a few hundred feet to the north, the Franklin School sits on a corner lot across the street from Victoria Gardens, one of the city's largest subsidized housing complexes. Providing best-in-class early childhood education, the Franklin School's innovative mix of funding allows priority spaces for the children of the low-income families who live in Victoria Gardens and elsewhere in the Northside.

A block to the south is Harvest Park, a healthy food hub that houses the Hub City Farmers Market, a culinary training program for formerly incarcerated individuals, a café, and a community garden. Next door, nearing completion, is 500 Northside Station, a 90-unit multi-family apartment building that will begin leasing later this year. Across the street, the first phase of another multi-family development — the 130-unit Northside Townhomes — is taking shape. That project is adjacent to the first phase of Northside Station, a three-story multi-use building, which houses offices for three non-profits along with upper-level apartments filled mostly with students from Wofford College and the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine.

The development hasn't been limited to Howard Street. A block to the west, Brawley Street is now home to nearly 20 new townhomes. A senior housing project is nearing completion on Magnolia Street, a 190-

unit affordable housing development is under construction on Wofford Street, and a handful of other projects have either just broken ground or are on the drawing board.

But all the activity and new buildings along the short stretch of Howard Street between College and Franklin streets is enough to make even the most casual passersby aware that something big is happening in the Northside community. Indeed, after more than \$200 million in new development and infrastructure improvements, the neighborhood looks far different than it did when the Northside Initiative launched a decade ago and while there are many brushstrokes yet to come, the picture of a new Northside is coming into view: a community that is striving to live up to its promise to be a “community of choice.” A neighborhood where longtime residents still feel at home and can afford to stay, even as new housing and amenities attract hundreds of newcomers.

Some of the developments and projects seen today almost didn’t happen and many took longer to come to fruition than anyone thought when they were first planned. Some ideas were broached and shelved. Surprise financial gifts, lengthy legal fights and complex real estate transactions have served as major inflection points.

While the City, the Northside Development Group and local media outlets have chronicled much of the Northside Initiative over the years, many pieces of the full story haven’t received as much attention — notably, the story prior to the opening of VCOM in 2011 on the site of the old Spartan Mill isn’t well-known.

Today, we look back at the genesis of the Northside Initiative, its early years, and some of the people who have shaped the work to this point.

## Longstanding challenges in an historic neighborhood

The decision by the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine to locate its Carolinas campus in the Northside of Spartanburg in may have kick-started the Northside Initiative, but it was not the start of the City’s efforts to address long-standing challenges in the community.

Those challenges were exacerbated by the financial crisis and mortgage collapse of 2008, which hit the Northside hard — the Northside saw the highest rates of foreclosures of any city neighborhood in the aftermath of that crisis. A community that was already dealing with high rates of unemployment, crime and teen pregnancy, now faced a wave of foreclosures, plummeting property values, and hundreds of boarded-up homes.

It wasn't always that way. For decades, Spartan Mills had anchored the Northside. The largest mill in the state when it opened in 1890, the textile giant employed hundreds of people and was still the center of life in the neighborhood well into the 1970s. Throughout the post-war years, the Northside had been home to a combination of owner-occupied mill housing, rental homes and Oakview Apartments, a large public housing complex that had been built to house veterans returning from World War II.

Many of the white families who worked at Spartan Mills lived in the mill village immediately adjacent to the factory, while Black families lived throughout the Northside. Cleveland Heights, the neighborhood that rings Cleveland Park, was home to dozens of Black professionals, including lawyers, nurses and teachers.

Debbie Moore was born and raised in the Northside during the 1950s and 60s. And while the Northside Moore grew up in was home to a racially diverse population, Jim Crow laws and segregation still ruled the day. Black people were largely shut out of employment at the mill, relegated to just a handful of the lowest-paying jobs. Though the all-white Fremont School on Magnolia Street was within walking distance of her house, Moore was forced to ride the bus to the all-Black Cumming Street School near the Wofford College campus, where her mother was a teacher.

At the same time, the Northside was unique compared to other city neighborhoods in those days. Moore remembers white and Black children, after attending segregated schools during the day, would play together in the neighborhood after school. Moore's aunt was a hairdresser who operated a salon out of her Northside home — most of her customers, Moore said, were white women from the neighborhood.

"You could feel racial tension at times, but in our neighborhood and at my home ... my relationships were different," said Moore, who became the first Black woman to work as a news reporter for WSPA in the mid-1970s after graduating from Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte. "I didn't really feel racial prejudice until I got older."

## White flight and the loss of a cherished park

After fighting the Justice Department for years, Spartanburg School District 7 adopted a plan to desegregate in 1972. A full 18 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled that "separate but equal" was unconstitutional, the era of legalized segregation in city schools came to an end.

What followed for the Northside was a mass exodus of white families. Rather than send their children to school with Black children, most white families who could afford to do so moved to other school districts and neighborhoods that were almost entirely white.

Around the same time, the Northside Apartments, a large public housing complex, was built on the site of a softball field that had long functioned as a neighborhood park. The project concentrated more poverty in the Northside, which was already home to the federally subsidized Oakview Apartments.

For Northside residents, losing the field was a major blow, Moore said. Occupying a large parcel of land across from the J.W. Woodward Funeral Home and bounded by Howard, Pearl and Vernon streets, children had played there for generations. It was surrounded by plum trees and blackberry bushes, which provided enough fruit not only for Northside families, but according to Moore so much that children would pick the fruit during summer mornings and then spend the rest of the day going door-to-door in other city neighborhoods selling their bounty.

The decision to take away one of the community's only recreational amenities, a healthy greenspace and source of food was especially painful — and eroded trust for years to come — because of the indifference with which Northside residents were treated. City and housing authority officials made one of the most consequential development decisions in the history of the neighborhood largely behind closed doors, disregarding a petition by Northside residents that opposed the development.

“The things that occurred in the past, the City didn't ask us anything, they just did it,” Moore said. “We had a petition to keep out Victoria Gardens because we felt like it would be too crowded. And then they took our field away. I mean, it was just a field, but it was where everyone played. And they stuck Victoria Gardens there with all those families and those children with nowhere to play.

“That was when things really started to change in the neighborhood, in the early 70s. Things started to get really bad. That's when I remember you started to see the prostitution and drug dealers everywhere. ... I wish my mother had never lived to see all that stuff.”

## As the mill declines, crime rises

Over the course of the 1980s and 90s, a pair of larger forces — one connected to the national economy and one to a national drug epidemic — took root in the Northside.

Mirroring the plight of the domestic textile industry as a whole, the fortunes of Spartan Mills steadily declined. With every round of layoffs, the once-proud mill provided less and less stability to the neighborhood — every job lost was one more family facing an uncertain future.

Meanwhile, crime was rampant as the crack cocaine epidemic ravaged the neighborhood. Longtime Spartanburg police officers remember open drug dealing on street corners throughout the Northside in the 1980s and 90s. Moore said the gang members who controlled the drug trade utilized police scanners

and walkie-talkies to monitor law enforcement movements. Howard Street became synonymous with prostitution and “liquor houses” dotted the neighborhood.

As crime increased and the mill continued to cut its workforce, more and more longtime residents left the Northside. And as their homes were acquired by long-distance investors and absentee landlords, or left vacant altogether, hundreds of formerly well-maintained homes fell into disrepair, property values fell, and the Northside became ever more transient.

When Spartan Mills shuttered for good in 2001, the Northside was the City’s most challenged neighborhood.

## The death of Ernest Rice Sr. and efforts to Stop The Violence

By that time, an organization called Stop The Violence had been working in the Northside for several years. Founded with a grant from a national anti-violence coalition, Stop The Violence was formed in the wake of one of the City’s most notorious homicides: the 1994 drive-by shooting of Ernest Rice Sr. in the parking lot of First Baptist Church following a youth basketball game he had just coached.

A lifelong Northside resident, Rice for years had been one of his community’s most outspoken and respected advocates, speaking frequently at City Council meetings of the need for more attention and investment in the Northside. He also put significant time and energy into working with young people and trying to steer teens away from the gangs who were the primary source of the crime and violence in the Northside.

Rice was not the intended target, but the spillover of gang violence from the Northside into the heart of Downtown Spartanburg — not to mention the tragic death of one of Spartanburg’s most visible and vocal community leaders — represented a turning point in the City’s history. The incident drew the collective attention of the larger Spartanburg community in a way that the daily injustices and crime on the Northside had not.

Moore called Rice a fallen hero. “He was wonderful with his leadership abilities. His death really shook us,” she said.

In the aftermath of Rice’s death, a broad range of civic, religious and business leaders began meeting to discuss what could be done to stem the tide of violence and gang activity. With the Spartanburg County Foundation playing a leading role, this group conceptualized the Stop The Violence organization, then applied for and won the grant monies needed to support its work.

“I knew who Ernest Rice was, but didn’t know him personally. But I remember very clearly how his death impacted everyone,” said Tony Thomas, who grew up in Pauline before moving into the Northside in the early 1990s. “The neighborhood at that time was really rough. There were a lot of houses that were boarded-up, transients and homeless people were living in them, sleeping in them, using them for nefarious activities. ... It was pretty dangerous. There was a lot of gang activity — the Red Haitian gang and the ones who called themselves the Bloods after that California gang.”

Stop The Violence used what was in the late 1990s a novel approach in Spartanburg. Instead of parachuting into the community and immediately trying to offer solutions or implement new programs, the organization moved slowly. It hired two community organizers, whose priority was to meet with neighborhood residents, listen to their concerns, and build relationships and establish trust.

Curt McPhail was one of two organizers hired to work with Stop The Violence, which focused on the Northside and Una communities. Through dozens of meetings and conversations in the early years of Stop The Violence’s work, McPhail remembers learning not only about what residents saw as the biggest problems but also about what strategies they thought would be most effective in building a stronger, safer neighborhood.

“A lot of what we did was helping to organize neighborhood associations and just listening to people,” McPhail said. “Literally sitting on people’s front porches. A lot of the work revolved around working with neighborhood associations, and listening to the community and helping them articulate their goals. In the Northside, there was a lot of focus on reducing crime and creating positive youth activities. Both the Northside and Una were interested in neighborhood cleanups, and there were significant drug issues in both communities that residents wanted to see addressed.”

Thomas, who had become active with the Northside neighborhood association, met McPhail during this time. Thomas remembers the various efforts rippling through the neighborhood as positive though “disjointed” first steps. Communication was a problem and apathy among residents remained high, Thomas said.

## ‘Necessary work’

While Stop The Violence was embedding itself in the neighborhood, the City was committing more law enforcement resources in the Northside, with a particular focus on combating the drug dealers who had operated with near impunity for years. Bicycle officers were assigned to the neighborhood, and their presence on the streets and sidewalks helped curb some of the most visible drug and prostitution activity.

The police department also opened a sub-station in one of the units at Oakview, which had become the biggest hub of criminal activity in the neighborhood.

The City also began to leverage state and federal funds to invest in new housing, eventually rehabilitating several blocks adjacent to the Northside Apartments. In an area of the Northside known as “The Hole” where Rice had lived his entire life, the City developed a new owner-occupied subdivision and named it the Ernest Rice Estates. Meanwhile, the Spartanburg Housing Authority renovated the Northside Apartments and renamed them Victoria Gardens, in honor of Ms. Victoria, another longtime Northside resident.

But while the focus on crime prevention and new housing helped stabilize pockets of the Northside, it did little to puncture the cycle of intergenerational poverty that plagued the community. Crime and teen pregnancy rates remained high. Test scores at Cleveland Elementary School were among the lowest in the state. Business investment was non-existent. Hope, especially in Oakview Apartments, was in short supply.

And then the financial and housing crisis of 2008 hit, washing over the Northside in a tsunami of foreclosures, further decimating property values while leaving in its wake dozens of additional abandoned properties.

“I don’t think all the work that was being done in those years was as comprehensive as the approach that has been taken for the Northside Initiative,” said McPhail, who worked for Stop The Violence for six years and later became a project manager for the Northside Development Group. “It wasn’t as holistic or super collaborative. On the flip side, I would categorize it as completely necessary. All these partners, from Stop the Violence to the housing authority to Spartanburg School District 7 to the Mary Black Foundation, were all getting their knowledge and relationships built on the community level, which later helped the Northside Initiative.

“So even though a lot of the work prior to that was kind of in fits and starts, it was very necessary.

This was the landscape on Spartanburg’s Northside when a medical college based in Blacksburg, Virginia made the decision to locate its Carolinas campus on the site of the old Spartan Mill. Few knew it at the time, but that investment by the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine would become a catalyst that would galvanize a community revitalization effort unlike any seen in Spartanburg’s history.

*Note: This part 1 of a series of articles and podcasts taking a look at the redevelopment of Spartanburg's Northside community a decade after the founding of the Northside Development Group. Look for part 2 of our series next week!*

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