

Section: NEIGHBORS

Edition: BRADENTON

Page: 13

Column:Next door - Meet Your Neighbor

Memo:Tim W. McCann, Bradenton city government reporter, can be reached at 745-7080, ext. 2620, or at twmccann@bradentonherald.com

BRINGING 'COMMUNITY' BACK

Tim W. McCann, Herald Staff Writer

Cynthia Newell said she does not want to be judged based on who she is, but on what she has done for other people.

While it appears she does enough for her community, **Newell** always asks herself "So what?"

She'll say to herself, "I went to Harvard. So what?" Or, "I founded the Neighborhood Leadership Initiative. So what?"

"If you can't answer the 'So what?,' why keep wasting your time?" she asked. "You have to keep pushing forward."

Newell said her primary focus right now is enhancing the well being of her community.

"We're wearing thin at the social fabric of our society," she said. "I find that troubling. That's what motivates me to do what I do."

She lives in the 1500 block of 14th Street East with her mother. She said her block in east Bradenton resembles what a community is: Neighbors look out for each other, they talk to one another in passing, and know who should or should not be parked outside another neighbor's house.

There was a time when all of east Bradenton resembled a real community, but the neighborhood has been divided by industry, she said. She pointed out the Tropicana plant, which virtually surrounds her neighborhood, and utility poles and low-hanging wires in her and her neighbors' yards.

And when many children attending Manatee Elementary School are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches, that should serve as a wake-up call to the community, **Newell** said.

"East Bradenton is a distressed community," she said. "And I use the term distressed, not poor."

Newell believes a government cannot save a distressed community by investing in physical structures. Instead, it needs to invest in social capitals. One longtime goal of hers has been to build a new library branch in east Bradenton, one that would enhance literacy and enrich the neighborhood's culture.

She said a library is one of the greatest capacity-building institution of social networks, second only to schools. And the library would serve as a cultural hub for east Bradenton.

Some city officials seem to support a library in east Bradenton. Mayor Wayne Poston said last month he would like to see a library wired with computer services as opposed to a traditional library. **Newell** agrees.

"It's crucial to raise a generation of children who are political minded, techno astute and with effective communication skills if we are going to live in a community in a global society," she said.

Newell expects the library to cost about \$2.5 million. She said there are four sites under consideration.

One is a parcel bounded by Ninth Street East, Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue and Sixth Avenue; another is at 15th Street East and Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue; and there are two locations on Manatee Avenue.

She believes the library would serve as a gateway to the neighborhood at Martin Luther King Jr.

Boulevard, but acknowledged that that location is heavy with trucks entering and exiting Tropicana.

On the positive side, that location would serve as a central location for people living in the new Hope 6 revitalization area in the Rogers Garden, Singletary and Washington neighborhoods, the new Central Community Redevelopment Area, the Old Manatee neighborhood and the East Bradenton Park neighborhood.

"It could represent a widely diverse group . . . as they move into this area, which is on the up from all the

revitalization projects," she said.

Born in Bradenton in July 1951, **Newell** grew up in east Bradenton and graduated from Southeast High School. She graduated from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government in 1990 with a master's degree in public administration and a concentration in public policy and human development issues.

In 1992, she won the Kellogg National Fellowship award. The program, no longer active, provided \$40,000 for 50 people across the country who have demonstrated a commitment to serving humanity. With the money, the recipient has three years to travel anywhere in the world and is encouraged to spend time with other cultures, learn a foreign language and "develop a learning plan that will enhance where you are that will make you a better person," she said.

"They want you to immerse yourself into another culture," **Newell** said.

From 1992 to 1995, she traveled to Rome, the Caribbean and parts of North, South and Central America where people of African heritage have settled. She said she experienced colonialism in Africa, where prices for everyday items have skyrocketed, countries where slavery is still practiced and communities in the United States where some American citizens do not vote out of fear.

Prior to all these experiences, if someone had asked her who she considered as leaders in her life, she would have given a long list of names.

Now, her list of "leaders" list is shorter.

Newell considers her mother a leader and gives her credit for placing her in the social network that gave her the ability to realize her potential.

She considers her great-grandmother and grandmother leaders, too. Her great-grandmother was illiterate and toiled in Alabama's cotton fields for 50 cents a week, but she taught how to love everyone, **Newell** said.

"Most of my education didn't come from books," she said. "My education came from the trenches."

PHOTO/TIFFANY TOMPKINS/THE HERALD: **Cynthia Newell** discusses plans for the Community Faith in Action program with program director Cherie Johnson and volunteer Joseph Johnson at the Rogers United Methodist Church.<PHOTO/TIFFANY TOMPKINS/The Herald: Hugs and smiles are common at the East Bradenton Recreation Center where Chavon Williams, 15, and **Cynthia Newell** are helping plan a Kwanza celebration.<PHOTO/TIFFANY TOMPKINS/The Herald: Volunteer Kelli Murray, left, **Cynthia Newell** and Deondrick Douglas, recreational coordinator for the East Bradenton Recreational Center, share a laugh during **Newell**'s visit.