

A Year with the MCC: Perspective after One Year on the Board

I offer this perspective after my first year-plus on the Board of the Manchester Community Center. I volunteered for the Jingle Bell Walk, then started serving on the board in January of 2023, having become interested in volunteering for typical reasons. I'd begun to settle in after moving to Manchester the prior year. I was looking forward to meeting great people, contributing to my new community and learning about the place I now happily call home. I also take an active interest in co-creating local shared spaces and public goods that deeply enhance our day-to-day living.

As it happened, I joined the board just as it became clear that the Community Center's future was in jeopardy. The Center was served with notice that they were being put on a month-to-month lease, which began community-wide anxiety about the future of the center and land it sits on. Now, as is well-known, the MCC has been sued to leave the building it owns. Instead of working in the community to build fun programs and initiatives that meet people's needs and desires, I happened into an unexpected struggle for the Center's existence.

I confess I've found myself confused. With my incoming perspective, I see only pluses to the community having this special gathering place. The Community Center owns outright, through a treasured gift from Augustus Means some 50 years ago, an inviting building in a perfect location. I'd love to hear what it was like receiving that gift, originally a youth center, and working to see it through to full materialization. I know the kids did much of the work themselves and had big setbacks. They ran the beach concession and exuberantly, inventively, did every bit of fundraising they could to build themselves a big, beautiful structure. Then, heartbreakingly, there was a fire and they had to start over, dedicating themselves to do it all again for a rebuild. That partly salvaged and smaller rebuild is the community asset that sits there now. The building was eventually moved further back on the lot by August due to a commitment he made to the community: he said if he ever needed to use the spot the building sat on for anything else, he'd either move the building or get them another one. He honored that commitment to ensure the ongoing success of the gift he'd made. If anybody who reads this was part of that time and story, please reach out to us at the Center. It'd be wonderful to hear that valuable history from someone who was a part of it! Maybe once we understand the full history of how the kids saw the MCC through, and the resilient dedication that's been required to gift it all the way to us, it'll be clear how vital it is to appreciate and protect its legacy, material existence, and stewardship well into the future.

Access to resources is not an issue here. The town is full of prosperous people who can generously resource all MCC's material needs to whatever level they're inclined. There are citizens here of strong civic heart who are happy to serve each other for the common good. They recognize the expansive, cascading, irreplaceable benefits of such investments. A half-century cast of MCC volunteers, attendees and board members have helped create generational memories at the MCC, many for families who still live here. Devoted community members have stewarded and strengthened this gift for our local good with heart, time and money, all the necessary components for it to survive and thrive. The last 15 months or so could have been dedicated to building even more expansive, inspired initiatives, collaborations and events the community wants to see. It would be great to be able to get back to that natural course of mission and action as soon as possible. We are open and serving the community, and

will continue to do so until all is resolved, but people have uneasiness about what's coming and that's not the best expansion climate, so putting this time behind us will be a triumph.

I've now had the opportunity to attend a Board of Selectmen meeting, a town meeting, court appearances, MCC Board meetings, and other less formal gatherings on this issue and have found something interesting. When I've heard others' retellings of the same events, facts and even the basic issue, the interpretations and facts that resemble my own are often from people who use the Community Center, the ones who participate. The versions of what the issue is and various pieces of information that don't resemble my recollection or understanding are generally from people who don't choose to be a part of the Community Center's life. I think that's worth considering. My question to anyone who isn't inclined to attend events, volunteer, donate funding, or in any way participate in how the Center serves the town is this: How do you come by your views and what other agendas might they serve? Is it wise to share views that aren't informed by participation?

I sit on a board that is sticking it out in this trying time. The MCC Board remains firmly focused on its duty to protect the mission of the MCC and the Means's legacy to each town resident and other Cape Ann locals. To do anything else would mean abandoning what's it's tasked with protecting. The Board shows up and stewards the mission and material assets with an eye to past and future, tolerating uncomfortable new tensions in this intimate, seemingly tight-knit town. Even with a confusing lack of support from some key local figures and institutions citizens are expected to rely on, the Board maintains its focus. I see decent people facing potential awkwardness with neighbors and acquaintances, mainly due to misinformation of an odd sort coming from formal and informal channels of communication, in a curious climate that seems to support the idea of pitting neighbors and colleagues against each other. What has encouraged an atmosphere of animosity to develop toward caring people who have chosen to devote their time to protecting our precious community asset? Do any of our volunteers, supporters and stewards want that? Of course not. Most of us prefer both having good relations with the people we share our daily lives with and being an authentically positive presence for the good of the community. Such priorities are placing members in potentially untenable positions.

Patrick Meehan and Raquel Przesiek are volunteer Co-Presidents of the Board who have now needed to steer the MCC through an uncharted storm and are doing so with great dedication, despite increasing pressures. Kim Kaner has run the center for twenty-three years with deep dedication and love for the community. She is watching her and others' decades of stewardship and commitment be denigrated and devalued, yet she is showing up with resolve and love for what has been built. Linda Crosby recently returned to the board and was a founding board member back in the day who helped steward the moving of the building. She and her now-deceased husband David have continuously raised up the community's commitment to MCC. Due to the eviction litigation brought against the Center, we've had to cancel our yearly fundraiser, a golf tournament started by Mr. Crosby that was scheduled to be renamed for and dedicated to him at this year's event. Up to now, MCC has had to use that yearly fundraiser to raise its operating costs. It's truly a shame not to be both celebrating the Crosby's civic contributions to Manchester and raising more money for the needs of the Community Center, which are clearly much increased in this dire time. The entire community also owes a debt of gratitude to our pro bono counsel, Michael Walsh, who has been absolutely dedicated to helping Manchester retain its treasured building and location. He's a true legal scholar and servant who continues to be unflaggingly generous with his time, energy, and expertise.

No matter who else I name, the future of the MCC, regardless of legal outcomes still to unfold over at least the rest of this year, ultimately rests with each Manchester resident who reads this letter. Every time you help create or attend an MCC event or program, you make it stronger. You contribute to community with your presence, which also builds appreciation for the gift and the stewardship. The crisis of this eviction lawsuit isn't only the MCC Board's problem; it's the whole community's issue to resolve. What does the community actually want? What programming would add satisfaction, comfort and fun to your life? Does the community believe in having a community center? Does it believe it can offer public good in the days to come? If it does, this is a time to increase good will, consensus building, and innovative creation of what we want. The pandemic and other factors have slowed community feeling when we need to strengthen it. Manchester has a foundational, communal asset to help do that, in rich collaboration with other organizations similarly serving the town. We can protect the MCC, elevate it and let it promote the good relationships and support it's here to provide. Or we can let it go if we decide we don't value what we've been given.

Our needs are so well met in so many ways, which is an auspicious foundation to build on. We live somewhere with character, history and charm. In fact, the Manchester Community Center and everything that surrounds it is a magnificent communal gift of which the Center itself is an integral part. We all share a gorgeous piece of land with fewer than 6000 people. Living in a small town with resources can be unusually rewarding. A place this size can move on its preferences with agility and speed, and really work for the people as long as we continue to participate to ensure that. The community and its gathering places are whatever we want to make of them: Resilient. Connected. Supportive. We're capable of a "no one falls through the cracks" ethos because we're a great "we've got this" size. Manchester is so blessed with material abundance. We have a perfectly-sited home for the Center and lots of people who can afford to offer expertise and service of every kind to help the community thrive. We have everything we need to create the community center of our collective dreams. It can even be a model of community building that serves as a source of inspiration to others.

What will we choose? When the land is gone, it's gone. When the building Augustus Means gave us is gone, it's gone. What sorts of public goods do we feel are worth honoring, participating in, supporting, and protecting? We can collaborate this into whatever we want. The hardest part is done. We have a great space, a great history and a strong, resilient foundation. We have everything we need to maintain the spirit of this gift and juice it up to serve us even more than it already has.

Right now, the MCC needs all the help it can get from every single community member who cares. I feel we owe it to each other, to the Means and to the exhilarated kids who hammered the boards into place and worked the beach concession, some of whom might be living here now, in their seventies. We owe it to everyone who lives here to make a very thoughtful, well considered choice about what we value as a community. It's clear where I stand but that hardly matters. It's the common voice that will decide this, as it should.

In appreciation and well-grounded optimism,

Janique O'Shea

