



meet a member

Ryan Roeder Helps Build a Beacon of Hope

Lynne Robinson

The west side neighborhood streets of South Bend, Indiana, whisper a sadly familiar story. Industries that fueled the once bustling, vibrant community changed and moved on, leaving the most

vulnerable residents behind to struggle with the poverty and crime that filled the void. A symbolic manifestation of this decline, to many who lived there, was the closing of the Beacon Bowl. In its heyday, the Beacon Bowl's 54 bowling

lanes, numerous party rooms, and ample meeting space served as the west side's epicenter for family gatherings and community celebrations. Like the neighborhood it served, the facility eventually fell into disrepair until it was finally shuttered and abandoned in 2007.

That is where Ryan Roeder and, as he describes, "a small group of folks who were passionate about the west side of

South Bend, because, it seemed, no one else was passionate or optimistic about it," enter the story—and changed the course of it, just a little bit.

Roeder is an associate professor at the University of Notre Dame, Department of Aerospace and Mechanical Engineering, Bioengineering Graduate Program, with research interests broadly spanning biomaterials. He is also an extremely active TMS member, earning such distinctions as the 2007 Early Career Faculty Fellow Award for his leadership and service. ("I have been invested in the growth of the Biomaterials Committee and related programming activities in TMS for years," he notes.) And, he is a devoted husband and father of two small children. In the slivers of free time that he has available, Roeder serves the west side community of South Bend as a leader and volunteer with the Riverside Community Church, a tiny, independent congregation with a mission "to bring hope to the community."

It was his work with the Riverside church that caused Roeder's path to intersect with the Beacon's in 2011. He was assisting with the exploration of a permanent home for the Riverside congregation—which had been meeting in rented space for some time—and the Beacon had made it to the church's list of possibilities. Even at a significantly reduced asking price, however, it "was still far more than we could reasonably afford," said Roeder. A week after Roeder and other leaders in the church decided to pass on the sale, a local businessman not affiliated with the congregation contacted them and offered to purchase the Beacon for them. "Since the building was a gift, we felt a strong sense that it wasn't really ours," said Roeder. "We wanted to make it available to the community again."

Roeder said that a significant challenge in bringing the Beacon back was to be patient so that the project could be



Ryan Roeder (center) has been engaged in nearly every aspect of bringing the Beacon back to life in the west side of South Bend. "I've certainly been involved in big decisions and planning, but I've also been involved in demolition, plumbing, and playing games with kids," he said.



Reclaiming the Beacon was no easy task, with volunteers, including Roeder and Notre Dame students (above), logging countless hours in demolition and renovation.

developed responsibly and sustainably. “Instead of taking out a loan to cover nearly a half million dollars in renovation costs, we engaged the community to raise 100% of the cost of renovation,” said Roeder. “As a result, the Beacon is truly a partnership. About 50% of the funds were raised from people in the church and 50% were raised from local foundations, businesses, non-profits, and the city government.” The Beacon Community Resource Center was also established as a separate nonprofit organization, guided by an advisory team representing local schools, community organizations, and residents to ensure that neighborhood needs are identified and local stakeholders have input. Roeder has been vice president of the Beacon board of directors since its inception.

Once the funding was secured, a small army of volunteers launched the daunting process of transforming the dilapidated bowling alley into useable community space. Roeder recalled recruiting a team of Notre Dame students and members of his laboratory to work on the first room slated for renovation. “We converted an old greasy spoon cafe into office space,” he said. “Meaningful relationships and memories were forged by removing 50 years of accumulated grease, discovering an abandoned raccoon’s nest (and the elements within it) above the ceiling tiles, and applying all of our knowledge of fracture mechanics to remove aged, but incredibly affixed floor tiles.”

By 2015, approximately 20,000 square feet of multi-use space had been reclaimed from the ruins of the Beacon Bowl, and the Beacon Community Resource Center officially opened its doors that fall. A half dozen partnering organizations now call the Beacon their home, offering resources, friendship, and hope to the surrounding neighborhood. Members of the local police force, for instance, teach young people boxing and mentor life skills as an alternative to spending time on the streets. A roller derby league provides women with both an athletic and community service outlet. A literacy program helps low-income parents prepare for high school equivalency exams. And, community residents with intellectual disabilities find understanding and support through a faith-based service organization. As for the Riverside

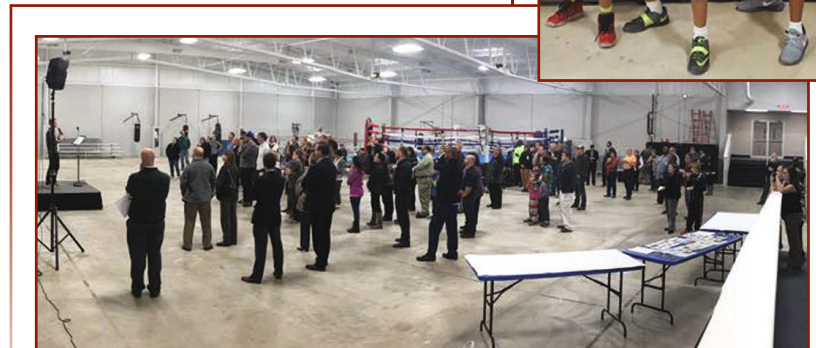


Community Church, the congregation meets at the Beacon every Sunday morning, right next to the boxing ring.

Roeder says that while much of the Beacon still needs to be remodeled, the most important building projects in the coming years are those focused on strengthening relationships with the community. “We’re looking forward to cementing a number of new and growing partnerships with community organizations,” he said. “Ultimately, we want to see transformation in the lives of people living on the west side of South Bend.”

For his part, Roeder plans to be in the thick of that transformation, whether contributing to decisions on the Beacon board of directors or fixing the plumbing in one of the bowling alley’s old bathrooms. “I’ve had people ask how I could possibly have time to be involved in projects like this with the demands of my profession,” he said. “My realization has been that it has provided a corrective balance (maybe even an antidote) to the pursuit of self-interests (maybe even narcissism), which is possible (maybe even likely) in any professional career.”

Once a community landmark, the Beacon Bowl had been gutted of the bowling lanes that had made it famous and stood empty for years.



(Bottom photo): The Beacon Community Resource Center officially opened in the fall of 2015, offering community organizations a home base for providing services to the surrounding neighborhood. (Top photo): Programs include youth boxing lessons and mentoring offered by the local police.