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Heart and Soul, delivered on October 20, 2003

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NEIGHBORHOODS

This high moment of publication by the Humanities Council of Heart & Soul: The Story of Grand Rapids Neighborhoods, carries with it the poignancy brought about by the death of one of its principal authors, Andy Schreir. The passing of this young man at 25 years of age takes from us too soon a person committed to the improvement of cities through opportunities for their least privileged citizens. One speculates that had he lived he would have made a positive difference. Saddened as we are, there is an uplifting element in what he achieved. Few who are taken so early in their lives leave such a distinguished legacy, the publication of a significant work. And the work is significant for all of us who love Grand Rapids. This second volume following the one on religious institutions, explaining a segment of Grand Rapids history, helps us know where we came from and who we are – two essential steps on the way to determining what we will be. The more knowledge we have of our past, the better prepared we will be to enrich our future.

In this book the authors are in search of the heart and soul of the city, and look to the history of the neighborhoods to identify it. For it is where people live (eating, playing, interacting with neighbors, expressing opinions, and exercising political rights) that we observe who they are and what they believe. Neighborhoods have a geography, sometimes clearly defined, sometimes less so, but they identify mostly from shared characteristics of the people who inhabit them. Some last relatively unchanged, as we see
in areas of Grand Rapids’ west side; others last no more than a generation or two. In American society, ethnic background is one of the most common ingredients of a defined neighborhood. Religious preference often coupled with ethnicity is another one. Economic factors play a role. More in the past than the present, neighborhoods formed near factories or professional-commercial centers where people worked so the residents of a neighborhood shared a common employment interest.

Though neighborhoods inevitably change, it gives me more pleasure as I drive through Creston and Cheshire Village several times a week to know because of this book the origin of those places. I feel satisfaction that the names continue; therefore, a neighborhood keeps its identity by keeping its name though time like an ever-rolling stream brings to it an ever-changing cast of players. Growing affluence can change a neighborhood landscape. Particularly in families where sons and daughters are more economically successful than their parents, they tend to move on to places where others like themselves congregate in larger, new houses. Real estate development on new tracts of land is, as we know, a huge business in our nation and as American as apple pie.

An old and apparently stable neighborhood becomes anxious when a house or two or three is sold or rented to families who do not fit the cultural or ethnic image the people of the neighborhood have for themselves. I believe an adjustment is made successfully more often when residents are reasonably well educated and affluent. Though there is change, the altered neighborhood remains intact. Where that is not the case, the neighborhood is likely to be transformed within a decade, and though it may be a neighborhood, it will not maintain any of its former characteristics.
The failure of a manufacturer, the ease of transportation, the rehabilitation of old
dependent or independent are frequent and transforming forces causing shifts in the places where
people live in our city and in our suburbs. They often threaten existing neighborhoods
and do not necessarily replace what they undermine with another kind of place that binds
people in a sense of community and neighborliness. There is no point bemoaning changes
because of their inevitability. There is a point in managing change to see that our city
provides homes, jobs, and services worthy of the American dream of life, liberty, and the
pursuit of happiness. We will continue to find the heart and soul of Grand Rapids in the
homes of the city and the relationships the people living in them have with one another.
We can assume that some neighborhoods will remain stable, while others will recreate
themselves.

My first involvement with a Grand Rapids neighborhood came after 1945 when
our family moved to Holland. Most of my Grand Rapids friendships were made in church
groups and at church camps sponsored by the Reformed Church. I played ball with and
dated girls from a geographic area bordered by the Calvin campus on the east, Burton on
the south, Madison on the west and Cherry on the north. Nearly all the names and most of
the churches were Dutch. I remember when Christian High, now the Social Services
building, was built on Franklin which had to be at the time the heart of a large Dutch
neighborhood. I left the area in 1953 with the neighborhood intact. When I returned to
live in East Grand Rapids in 1969, sixteen years later, the area was totally transformed.
That is how rapidly a complete change can take place in ethnic and religious
characteristics.
As we analyze Grand Rapids today, there is a factor of influence that was not so strong in the mid 20th century. Outside the city limits, in more places than East Grand Rapids, live thousands of people whose origins are in the city. They think of themselves as people of Grand Rapids and always identify themselves as such when traveling. The majority are affluent and have been lured to other places, often by larger parcels of land where dwellings built to their specifications are possible. The wealthiest of this group have invested heavily in the city and Grand Rapids would be far less desirable without that investment.

Fifteen years ago I addressed a conference of public administration professors and sociologists in Cleveland, Ohio, making two points. First, that smaller urban regions such as Grand Rapids and west Michigan, Charlotte, North Carolina, Omaha, Nebraska, and Des Moines, Iowa, had the opportunity for offering the best quality of life, combining advantages of urban living without the insolvable problems of the megalopolis. Second, that the core city of these regions had to be kept attractive and economically viable. I continue to hold these views. The Grand Rapidians living outside the limits of the city have demonstrated how important they are to achieving this second point.

What elements must be in place for Grand Rapids to succeed in the first part of the 21st century? Our mayor-elect has been calling them to our attention, and in closing I will elaborate. First, the city must be seen as an integral part of a region, one defined, I think, by the West Michigan Strategic Alliance participants. The whole region needs to contribute what it can to the success of the city, and in turn an attractive core city projects a favorable image for the whole region. That favorable image works to the economic
advantage of all in the area, and to the pride citizens take in the place where they live. That pride carries with it an elemental positive force.

Second, the city should increasingly devise plans to encourage people to remain in and return to dwellings within its boundaries. We need the vibrancy of life in the core.

Third, there should be within the city and county structure officials and agencies that care for the poor as well as mentally ill. In doing that successfully, a city can take pride without being overwhelmed by problems that develop with inattention. Some private and semi-public organizations are making unusual progress in this area. I think we should assess where we are now and where we want to be ten years hence. The more understanding and cooperation amongst the city, the county, and the private sector to plan and initiate, the more successful the city and regions will be.

Fourth, the education of children and youth at a high level of quality is required for more than a trained workforce. People with children will stay away from a city that does not provide it. Here, I believe, we face our toughest test. My view is that the present way K-12 education is delivered, often successfully in the suburbs, will not suffice for the cities. There are always vested interests in the ways things are done. Detroit’s turndown of public charter schools by a donor is an example. No foolproof formula exists for success, but other countries with large cities do better by their children’s education than we do. We can learn and experiment.

Fifth, if you seek to keep and recruit people to live in the city, there must be jobs for them. Mayor-elect Heartwell has made jobs in the city a priority for his administration. This requires an assessment of what areas of employment best fit the
human and educational resources we have. Efforts in this arena will require bringing
together assistance from the state of Michigan, the Federal Government, and the investors
of west Michigan. Also, ordinances and agency rules need review to see whether or not
some of them impede investment and employment.

Sixth, ease of transportation within the city and in the region distinguish a
place, and earn for it throughout the country a reputation as a community in the vanguard.
Major decisions about mass transportation, city streets, and regional highways are in our
future. Making the right ones may be the most important factor in determining what
Grand Rapids will be by mid 21st century.

When I think about the Grand Rapids I first knew, when I think about the
city we moved to nearly 35 years ago and compare it to Grand Rapids today, I can say
ours is a city on the way to life, not decline. Some problems are worse, the drug culture
for instance, but cultural activities have improved, regional concern for the quality of life
has heightened, higher education, health institutions, and research are more advanced. I
could go on

Twenty-five years from now there will be people living in Grand Rapids.
Maybe the Humanities Council will be publishing its 6th or 7th book on an aspect of our
city’s history. When that book comes out, I hope it will be in a happy time for Grand
Rapids. I hope Grand Rapids will be a “crown jewel” in a thriving west Michigan. I hope
our time will be understood as a period contributing to the strengthening of the city. I
don’t know what neighborhoods will look like then, but I hope most Grand Rapidians
will be good neighbors. And, I hope, when the historians of that time examine the heart
and soul of the city they will find them both sound and healthy