

Profiles

IN

CONSERVATION

Making Gary a Greener, Cleaner Place

By Glenn Rosenholm

Gary, IN, is a Midwest city that has seen better days. But that does not mean that there aren't better and greener days to come, thanks in part to people like Brenda Scott-Henry.

During its industrial heyday back in the 1970s, when American auto manufacturing was in full swing, Gary was a thriving city and home to over 160,000 people. Years later, local jobs began to move overseas, and nearby auto plants closed in the transition to a more global, information-based economy. Gary was hard hit. Today, in the post-industrial era, its population is about half of what it once was, and over one-third of residents live below the poverty line.

The city's economic downturn left many older buildings vacant and abandoned, and the recent housing market crash added over 6,000 more vacant and abandoned properties. These rundown structures now pose potential safety hazards, deter the attraction of new businesses, and instill a feeling of gloom on its residents.

With fewer wage-earning citizens and less revenue coming in from its

tax base, Gary also had little money available in the wake of the downturn to solve some of its biggest problems: blight, water contamination, brownfields, and indoor and outdoor air pollution. Complicating matters, in recent years disillusioned local residents had become skeptical of government solutions that all too frequently did not pan out.



Above: Henry gives a thumbs up, seeing the 14-story dilapidated building coming down, making room for more green in Gary. (Facebook photo courtesy of the Gary Department of Green Urbanism and Stormwater).

Below: Henry hikes through one of Indiana's most diverse natural areas at Clark and Pine Nature Preserve with a group of Federal, State, and local partners. (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers photo by Elizabeth Concepcion)



Revitalizing Blighted Neighborhoods

So it was in September 2013, with no great cause for optimism, that Henry began serving as the city's Director of Green Urbanism, and Environmental Affairs and Storm Water (MS4 or Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System) Coordinator. The job ahead would not be easy, but she brought with her a career's worth of knowledge and experience on these and related issues.

Henry was no stranger to Gary or to city government. Before securing her current position she spent over a decade working with the local residents and program administrators, first as an activist on housing and public health issues, and later, as a grant writer. Her rural roots from growing up in the South also gave her an appreciation for the natural world, so much of which she brings to her present profession.

"I was born and raised on a farm. Our family had about 120 acres of land in a small town called Shelby, MS. It was in the delta area with rich soils, not too far from the Mississippi River. We used to drive on the weekends to the river. We had tree orchards—pecan, peaches, plums—and livestock. We grew our own vegetables. My grandmother would take us fishing. We were in our own little world out there. That gave me a sense of appreciation for the environment. We would take hikes and go on adventures. Tree houses, climbing trees—we used fallen trees to build a bridge over the slough to get to the country store."

Henry has had an extensive professional journey working on behalf of human rights and the environment.

"I started in the nonprofit sector as a community activist, and I did that for 11 years, from 1989 to about 2000," she said. "That's when I completed my first masters at New Hampshire College, which eventually became [Southern New Hampshire University](#). That masters was in community economic development." This learning experience of working with grassroots organizations changed her life, she said.



Henry talks to a tour group about the green infrastructure initiatives ongoing in Gary, IN. (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers photo by Elizabeth Concepcion)



Henry (fifth from the left) poses at Ivanhoe Nature Preserve with representatives from many Federal, State, and local agencies for the inaugural Gary Natural Area Tour. (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers photo by Elizabeth Concepcion)

"Then I started my own consulting business, working with nonprofits, local churches, and other faith-based organizations. Several of my contracts were with the city of Gary, and that's when I started writing grants for water quality and water quantity projects ranging from a watershed plan and water quality assessments to storm water management and green infrastructure grants."

Around 2001, she started working for the city of Gary as a contracted fair housing coordinator. Her first contract was with the Gary Human Relations Commission, and her job was to promote housing rights.

"We connected with the health department. Their push was to prevent childhood lead poisoning. We worked on a few lead-free indoor air quality projects to include mapping homes where children tested positive for lead poisoning. Then I worked for environmental affairs on storm water management, public education, and outreach. I was still the fair housing coordinator at this time. We started coordinating indoor and outdoor air quality issues. Our team eventually went into a healthy homes remediation and public education focus."



At Clark and Pine Nature Preserve Brenda listens to Emily Stork of the Indiana Department of Natural Resources describe the unique geological forces that have created the diverse dune and swale landscape in Gary on the southern shore of Lake Michigan. (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers photo by Elizabeth Concepcion)

Her vision for Gary: “I would like it to take advantage of our natural resources and incorporate a lot of green and open space. Improving those natural assets will position our city for future economic development and a diversified economy. Showing the benefits of ‘green and clean’ positions us to bring in the type of development we want for our city.”

“This is how my career advanced in water quality and pollution prevention,” she added.

The Environmental Protection Agency and the [Clean Water Act](#) mandated that municipalities with under 500,000 residents each were to put [storm water quality management plans](#) in place. After working with the team to develop those plans, they had no one to do their public education and outreach, so she did that, she said.

“We encouraged the use of rain barrels, planting trees, and community gardens with the purpose of managing rainwater where it falls and to reduce the amount of storm water runoff from entering the combined sewers, which could result in contaminants in our water.”

Overcoming Skepticism

According to Henry, one of the biggest challenges they faced initially in turning Gary around in recent years was a lack of community involvement.

“Being patient, working with citizens at their pace, building trust, and being transparent were big challenges,” she said.

“Environmental Affairs started looking at green infrastructure during the development of the Gary Green Link master plan in 2005. I use this plan to help identify areas to install green storm water best management practices, or BMPs,” she added.

Green infrastructure continues to be a major focus, which they use to revitalize the city and rebuild public trust, she added.

“We had a 14-story building that towered over city hall. We demolished the building in November 2014 after planning it and getting the finances available. Now it’s important to build the trust. We held community meetings and stayed true to our timeline. This was an ‘all-hands-on-deck’ project from the mayor down to the citizenry.”

She said the massive building demolition was one of their biggest urban renewal projects in recent years.

“After that building came down, citizens started believing in us again. Now they wanted to do that [demolition and building green infrastructure] in other neighborhoods,” she said.



Henry and the tour group discuss the unique plants of the dune and swale ecosystem within Gary’s Ivanhoe Nature Preserve. (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers photo by Elizabeth Concepcion)



A unique plant at Ivanhoe Nature Preserve, hoary puccoon (*Lithospermum canescens*). (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers photo by Elizabeth Concepcion)

Greening Gary

“In 2008 we started implementing a plan called the ‘Green Link,’ about a 30-mile multiuse trail that circles the city and connects our rivers and other waterbodies and their natural spaces, like savannah oak and dune [and] swale. It connects with our forestry areas and wetlands and city parks.”

“We did an assessment of all of these natural areas, and we are using that now to advance our green infrastructure program,” she added. “We’re using that plan to manage our abandoned buildings. Once a building is demolished, that area can be used for green infrastructure. Those storm water parks can be used for trees, rain gardens, and bioswales.”

Tree planting plays a great part in the greening of Gary, Henry said, adding that a significant amount of tree planting occurred, particularly in 2012.

“We received a grant from the [Great Lakes Restoration Initiative](#), partnering with the regional development authority and Student Conservation Association. We planted about 50 trees through a community engagement process.”



In an act of unity, organizers tilt their shovels ceremonially towards a newly planted tree. Henry is pictured second from the left. (Facebook photo courtesy of the Gary Department of Green Urbanism and Stormwater)

VACANT to VIBRANT

Project Site

Coming this Fall 2014

FOR MORE INFORMATION or VOLUNTEER Opportunities CONTACT US:



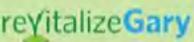
City of Gary
Green Urbanism
(219) 882-3000



CLEVELAND BOTANICAL GARDEN
Cleveland Botanical Garden (Ryan)
(216) 707-2876



This site is one of three future park spaces that will be installed in Aetna this Fall. Each site aims to benefit Aetna residents while also benefiting the environment via rain gardens collecting stormwater. Bids for installation and maintenance contractors are set to go out July 2014.

Website: v2v.mindmixer.com 

A sign soliciting volunteers highlights a “Vacant to Vibrant” project site in one of Gary’s neighborhoods. (Facebook photo courtesy of the Gary Department of Green Urbanism and Stormwater)

One of the tree planting projects was with the Benjamin Banneker Achievement Center (a kindergarten through grade eight school).

“The urban conservation team started out just wanting to plant trees, but the kids wanted to build trails, bird houses, and snow sticks for an outdoor classroom. These school children wanted to attract a certain type of bird. They also wanted to reduce the gray surface area and to increase the green surface area at their school,” she added.

Henry noted how the greening of Gary, like regaining the trust and support of citizenry, was a gradual process.

“Anywhere we found an opportunity to plant trees and change turf to prairie, we did. Tree planting and engaging citizens is paramount in moving things forward. We had a decade of ‘disinvestment.’”

“We had a lot of empty promises that hadn’t been fulfilled,” she added. “When the new mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson was elected, our goal was to build community engagement. We were able to address blight in neighborhoods by using green infrastructure. The process also allowed us to reengage community members in the decisionmaking processes of site identification, design, installation, and maintenance, and now they’re ready to do more with the city to revitalize their community.”

She said Gary has a significant amount of vacant lots today, and their biggest challenge is to manage those spaces and the trees on them. For instance, emerald ash borer has destroyed some of those trees.

“We would like to be in a better position to manage those green spaces.”

Volunteers also play a role in helping to manage the properties, she added. Some people here will volunteer to take care of three, four, or five lawns. Other people volunteer in different ways.

No Regrets

Henry has no regrets about her career choices.

“I love what I do. It’s challenging, but there’s a reward. I’m very passionate about a healthy environment for our citizens. Being a legacy city, there were a lot of environmental issues that happened as a result of industrialization. The aftermath of that caused a lot of environmental and economic issues that now make it so challenging in revitalizing communities. When you do large-scale development, you can be assured there is contamination or other environmental issues.”

She and her staff are helping to make Gary a greener and cleaner place to live, and it gives her great satisfaction to see people excited about the possibilities for the city again.

“On Arbor Day and Earth Day, we’ve been doing a Green Gary day for years. When we put those plants in the ground, people notice little small things like that. Doing the green infrastructure ties to managing storm water runoff; it’s all connected to revitalization,” she said.

“In each of our neighborhoods, we have water quality and greening goals that are included in our neighborhood plans. Green cities have a lot of quality-of-life benefits because of the connection with nature. Walking on grasses and seeing trees and beautiful plants instills a sense of healthiness. Conversely, when you have lots of gray surfaces and little green, the green seems healthier and natural.”

Henry shared her vision for a greener Gary: “I would like it to take advantage of our natural resources and incorporate a lot of green and open space. Improving those natural assets will position our city for future economic development and a diversified economy. Showing the benefits of ‘green and clean’ positions us to bring in the type of development we want for our city.”



These young ladies have worked with Green Urbanism for years as Clean Water Volunteers. Now they’re working with Gary Parks Department to increase youth volunteerism in keeping their beach shores clean. (Facebook photo courtesy of the Gary Department of Green Urbanism and Stormwater).



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11 Campus Boulevard, Suite 200

Newtown Square, PA 19073

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