



Keith Speaks, left, of Neighborhoods Inc., greets Steve Banks last week on a bench in East Chicago, part of a community-building effort inspired by Banks' front-yard patio in Oak Park. HEATHER CHARLES/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Oak Park neighbors' spot has East Chicago talking

Steve Banks just wanted a place to sit and watch his kids play, and he ended up helping change the world. Go figure.

A year ago, I wrote in this space about the flagstone patio that Banks, who lives across the street from me in Oak Park, had installed in his front yard.

It was to be a little sitting area from which he could keep an eye on his children as they played with the other kids in various front yards. But the wrought iron chairs Steve put out around a little table, not to mention his outgoing nature, proved so inviting that it became the heart of our block. Neighbors sat, sipped wine and brought snacks. Through what Steve dubbed the Conversation Curve, we turned into a true community.

In Hammond, Ind., Keith Speaks read that column and thought, Yes!

Speaks is the executive director of Neighborhoods Inc., a community development corporation that promotes safe and friendly neighborhoods in the Calumet region. He's always on the lookout for ways to encourage neighbors to get to know one another, and the Conversation Curve looked perfect.

"When that article appeared, to me it was like the letters were 2 inches high," Speaks said. "I said, 'I gotta talk to this Banks dude.'"

So he called the Banks dude. They talked about the Conversation Curve and whether the concept could work in a grittier area than Oak Park. Speaks asked whether there had been any problems with crime or vandalism, and whether neighbors were still coming out to sit together.

There had been no problems, Steve told him, just an ever-growing sense of community. He shared photos of our block party with Speaks on Face-

book. "Man, it looked like a festival," Speaks said.

Speaks was sold. Then he sold the idea to the Foundations of East Chicago, a philanthropy funded by Resorts East Chicago Casino and Hotel.

And then Foundations of East Chicago gave Neighborhoods Inc. a grant for the

"Please, Have a Seat!" program, which seeks to create "micro parks" in homeowners' front yards.

Thirteen benches have been put in so far; another 10 are to be put in later this summer. Neighborhoods Inc. hopes to install

as many as 200 benches throughout East Chicago.

Last Tuesday, community figures gathered for an unveiling ceremony.

"We thought it was a great idea," said Russell Taylor, executive director of Foundations of East Chicago, as several dozen people gathered in front of Ascension and Jose Tristan's home, where a bench had been installed in the shade of a maple tree.

Speaks asked Steve Banks to say a few words. "I was just a guy looking for a place to sit and watch the kids play," Steve told the crowd, which included his wife, Carrie, and two of their three children. "But when the neighbors started sitting together, we stayed out after the kids went to bed." Now, he said, several other neighbors have put benches or chairs in their front yards.

Dignitaries lauded the benches. "I think this is awesome," said Hammond City Councilwoman Kimberly

Poland. "I hope we can do something like this in Hammond."

The Rev. Stephen Gibson, whose St. Mary's Church has two benches of its own — and who grew up in Oak Park on a block where everyone sat on their front stoops or in front yards — gave a benediction. "I ask God to bless this bench as a symbol of the spirit of welcome," he said.

"It's a great day for East Chicago. It's a great day for neighborhoods," said Ardell Young, board president of Neighborhoods Inc.

Neighborhoods Inc. will track the benches' effect, Speaks said. Homeowners, who contribute \$100 to the cost, will be interviewed monthly about how often they sat on the benches, how often neighbors sat with them and how many new people they have met. Early signs are promising: Ascension Tristan, who has lived in her house for 32 years, told the gathering a neighbor had stopped by the other day and they sat on the bench and talked for half an hour.

Back in Oak Park that night, a group of us sat on the Conversation Curve and talked about the way Steve Banks' concept had borne such amazing fruit.

"They're talking about putting in 200 benches," Steve said. "But why not 200,000? Why couldn't this be done all over Chicago?"

I once might have dismissed such a thought as the cabernet sauvignon talking. But after a morning spent driving around looking at the benches dotting front yards in East Chicago, it didn't seem so crazy.

A Conversation Curve toast to you, East Chicago. Be prepared to make some friends and stay up late on a summer night talking.

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