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NON-PROFIT
CONSULTANT
JOANNA NIXON
IS HELPING THE
NEAR EASTSIDE
REALIZE ITS
AMBITION
TO BECOME
INDY'S NEXT
GREAT PLACE



WORDS BY
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If you want to understand what Joanna Nixon does for a living, just think of her as a cultural architect. Still unclear? Well, perhaps her occupation is better explained by the superpowers she brings to that work, according to Melissa Benton, a community developer officer at the John Boner Neighborhood Centers.

One day, Benton and Nixon were out on a tour of Indy's East 10th Street corridor, where they are part of a team devoted to revitalizing the neighborhood. They slid into a public parking space, got out of the car, and were immediately confronted by an angry resident who verbally assaulted them for taking his space.

They had done nothing wrong, but Nixon apologized. Two days later, the same man came to a neighborhood meeting. He spent an hour with Nixon, sharing his hopes and dreams for the neighborhood's evolution. For Nixon, it was as if nothing had happened. "She still treated him as if he was as important as everyone else," Benton says. "It was incredible to watch."

FINDING COMMON THREADS IN A DIVERSE COMMUNITY

As project manager of a \$4.3 million grant from the Lilly Endowment in 2018 to the John Boner Neighborhood Centers and its community partners, Nixon's job is to help "set the table" for East 10th Street as one of Indy's next great places for arts and culture. Getting to that involves diplomacy, deep listening, and respect for the disparate voices among the neighborhood's 30,000 residents.

It's important to the Boner Center to hear as many of those voices as possible. And while the evolution may not satisfy everyone's hopes, they want to make sure the process affirms people who contribute to the conversation. "I've been able to sit back and observe the way Joanna talks with neighbors," Benton says. "The way she is able to make each neighbor feel valued in this conversation is really exceptional."

It's all in a day's work for Nixon, a former social worker who has, in various capacities, spent the past twenty years helping Indianapolis leverage its urban assets.



Before starting her own consulting firm in 2010, Nixon was vice president of grantmaking at the Central Indiana Community Foundation, where she doled out grants to deserving artists and organizations. That experience equipped her to advise non-profit clients like the John Boner Neighborhood Centers.

Ask Nixon about her role helping the Boner Center implement the Lilly Endowment grant and she'll tell you that her job is to build on previous efforts and existing assets. "The creative assets are already here, so we don't have to move or create them," Nixon says, referring to the more than 150 artists in various disciplines who call the Eastside home. "We're taking a holistic and comprehensive approach to the work, which is coming to fruition as a result of decades of conversation on the resident and non-profit level."

As examples of previous work, she cites the \$1 million grant the National Football League gave to spur neighborhood revitalization—part of the NFL's tradition of leaving a legacy in each host city to the Super Bowl. And then there's the neighborhood's 2015 designation as a Promise Zone, a place where the federal government makes strategic investments in partnership with local leaders. That designation launched a ten-year comprehensive plan to reimagine the community, resulting in new jobs, housing, and other significant investments in the Near Eastside.

"I think Joanna couldn't do what she is doing now without that work," Benton says of the numerous partners that have elevated the neighborhood over the past decade. "I also think she's the next step in that work."

INFORMED BY TRAVEL AND A PASSION FOR ARTS AND CULTURE

Nixon is a self-described cultural tourist who loves traveling. She landed in Indianapolis when her father's job moved the family here in 1993. Educated at Indiana University, Nixon began her career as a traditional social worker, engaging people on a one-to-one basis. But she soon realized that her real interest was at the macro level, helping people and places flourish by focusing on opportunities and system change.

After living in various places as a kid and traveling as an adult, Nixon has a trained eye for cities that make arts and culture part of their DNA—not just an initiative or a program. "The spark of what exists in other places excites me about the possibilities here locally," Nixon says. "I've seen the power art, culture, and creativity have to heal, unite, beautify, and create positive changes in people and places."

Because Indy is flush with creative talent, she believes the city has an opportunity to be bold in its response to systemic challenges such as housing, quality of life, safety, and other issues. "There is so much creative energy ready to be unlocked," she says. "As opposed to thinking about artists on the periphery, we should be asking how they are truly woven into the fabric of how we solve problems and think about the future of our city."

INJECTING CREATIVE MINDS IN NEIGHBORHOOD SOLUTIONS

That's part of what Nixon hopes to do in the 10 East District. Since she began her assignment in 2018, she has spent a significant amount of time meeting with artists, residents, and civic leaders, hearing about their passions for the neighborhood. Those conversations reveal themes and provide a road map for the work she is doing now. "How do you take what you're hearing and implement people's wishes? I think this is incredibly fascinating work," she says.

Nixon admires the neighborhood's tight-knit vibe, determination, and humility, as well as the many community partners that have invested in social services and programs. Despite the economic hardships it faced after the manufacturing sector declined, "There's a resiliency and a commitment to place," she says. "People think of themselves as a family who are determined to make it a vibrant place. It's just an area that hasn't received a lot of positive attention or love."

Among Nixon's top priorities are:

- Decreasing vacant buildings by transforming them into usable spaces.
- Increasing vibrant public spaces for residents to enjoy.
- Improving opportunities for artists.
- Increasing public access to the arts.
- Reimagining the historic Rivoli Theatre as a valuable community asset.



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The final bullet—reimagining the Rivoli Theatre—is one of the trickiest parts of the equation because it must be an enduring solution that fits into a larger scheme. "It's not only about what makes sense for the neighborhood now," she says. "We need to think creatively about how it could be aligned with what's relevant in Indianapolis, what's building over the next twenty-five years, and how it serves a broader community need."

It's too early to say what the Rivoli will be, but neighborhood residents are clear about a few things. "It needs to be able to sustain itself economically so we aren't having a similar conversation down the road," Nixon says. "And it needs to be a benefit to the community, not a private entity that isn't open to the public."

One of her ideas takes shape this year through the inaugural 10 East Arts Hub Curatorial Fellowships, according to Benton. The fellowships originated through Nixon's research, which revealed that people of color are less likely to be tapped for curatorial opportunities. "We were looking for ways we could improve that statistic on the Near Eastside, as well as help with programming," Benton says.

The Hub awarded three paid fellowships to a total of five artists. Each fellowship presents ten weeks of free arts programming at least twice a week at the 10 East Arts Hub on East 10th Street. Ess McKee begins her fellowship in March. Eduardo Luna and Eve Eggleston are slated for this summer. Micah and Shamira Wilson begin their fellowship this fall.

Each \$7,500 fellowship is augmented by a \$6,000 budget to cover expenses such as marketing, materials, food, or fees to pay artists who might collaborate with them on programs. "Joanna was very intentional about making sure the fellows selected would be paid and have ample support for what they are doing," Benton says.

Nixon's talents helped the Boner Center overcome a distinct disadvantage in its bid for the 2018 Lilly Endowment grant. On the Near Eastside, there was no existing arts organization comparable to the ones that support other neighborhoods. When the grant opportunity came, the Boner Center knew it was a good fit for the neighborhood, but they needed a clear and convincing arts advocate. "Joanna, acting in that role, helped us pull together all these different threads our neighbors had been working on for the past decade and make it cohesive and whole," Benton says. >