



Transforming East Lake: Systematic Intentionality in Atlanta

The East Lake community in Atlanta faced high rates of violence and unemployment and low graduation rates. Now, more than 20 years after its decline, the neighborhood — and life for its young people — has dramatically improved.



Located on Atlanta’s eastern edge, the East Lake community was for many years considered one of the city’s glamorous neighborhoods. But by the 1960s, rising unemployment and crime marked a neighborhood in decline.

That downward trend only accelerated after the opening in 1970 of East Lake Meadows, a 650-unit public housing development, built on what had been the No. 2 course on the once prestigious East Lake Country Club. The housing project earned the infamous nickname “Little Vietnam” due to its pervasive violence, with a rampant drug trade and a crime rate in 1995 18 times the national average.¹ Ninety percent of the residents of East Lake Meadows had been crime victims themselves,² police would not even go into the project without backup.³ Residents lived in poorly maintained, squat, two-story buildings, duplexes and a high-rise for the elderly; in fact, 40 percent of the homes in the neighborhood were deemed unlivable.⁴

Meadows residents also faced grim prospects for earning a livelihood: the employment rate hovered around 13 percent in 1995.⁵ Grinding, intergenerational poverty was everywhere. Resident income averaged less than \$5,000; just four percent lived above the poverty line.⁶ Meanwhile, only five percent of the fifth-grade students at the Drew Elementary School met state math standards, and just 30 percent of students in the neighborhood graduated from high school.⁷ Liquor stores outnumbered grocery stores—when Publix opened in 2001, it became the community’s first new supermarket in 40 years.⁸

Now, says a longtime resident, a “stunning reversal has happened.” East Lake now exudes a vibrancy obvious even to the casual visitor. During the morning commute, children stroll along the sidewalk to Atlanta’s first charter school, Charles R. Drew Charter School. Parents rush to drop off their younger children at one of the community’s high-quality early care and education centers.

Seniors head to a group exercise class at the state-of-the-art East Lake Family YMCA. Throughout the day, people enjoy a round of golf on the public Charlie Yates Golf Course. Amid this hustle and bustle, residents attend to daily life as they frequent Publix or one of East Lake’s banks, gas stations or retailers, all of which have moved into the neighborhood in recent years.



In 1995, the former East Lake Meadows had all of the signs and symptoms of concentrated poverty.



In another dramatic change, The Villages of East Lake — a mixed-income community of 1,500 where residences are evenly divided between affordable and market-rate units — has replaced East Lake Meadows. Nearly 550 townhomes, villas and garden apartments surround the neighborhood's landscaped lawns, all within walking distance of the golf course, Drew Charter School, and the YMCA. The once blighted area has attracted more than \$175 million in new commercial and residential investments.⁹ Since the mid-1990s, home values have risen at a rate almost four times faster than Atlanta as a whole.¹⁰

Transformation has touched every part of the community. Seventy percent of East Lake's public housing residents today are either employed or in education or job training programs (the remaining 30 percent are elderly or disabled).¹¹ In 1995, 59 percent of public housing residents were on welfare, compared to only 5 percent today.¹² Crime overall has declined by 73 percent, and violent crime by 90 percent.¹³ The neighborhood now has a crime rate 50 percent lower than Atlanta overall.¹⁴ Children are excelling in school. Ninety-eight percent of Drew students in grades 3-8 met or exceeded state standards in the 2012-13 school year.¹⁵ And nearly 80 percent of Drew students are graduating from high school, compared to only 50 percent of Atlanta Public Schools students and 67 percent of the state's young people.¹⁶

What's the secret behind East Lake's turnaround? Can lessons from East Lake guide comprehensive efforts at neighborhood transformation in other communities? Through interviews with more than 20 key participants, reviews of historical and current documents, and an examination of existing research about neighborhood revitalization, this in-depth case study explores those questions and illuminates East Lake's story.

East Lake's remarkable experience suggests several overarching lessons:

1. **Neighborhood transformation is practicable and replicable.** While positive neighborhood transformation is far from unprecedented, across the country many locals regard as intractable the poverty, crime and other ills of certain neighborhoods. This perception, in turn, may affect the way people in the city (both within and far beyond the particular neighborhood) view emerging efforts at transformation. For those who champion such efforts, East Lake offers a dramatic and powerful affirmation that revitalization can be a worthwhile investment of resources.
2. **Neighborhood transformation must be the product of systematic intentionality.** It is not enough to plant the seeds of positive change and then watch them grow. East Lake took an approach that is the opposite of organic. All aspects of the effort there reflected a careful intentionality by the organizers, focused on specific yet interrelated results that would drive the larger transformation.
3. **Change efforts should be based on what research suggests will work.** As one aspect of their intentionality, the organizers of the East Lake effort drew upon available research to guide their theory of change and built a model based on both scholarly research and best practices from efforts in other communities. Evidence suggests that community efforts that do not rely on such models tend to fail. East Lake provides a striking example of how an effort constructed around a research-driven model can succeed.



East Lake’s experience demonstrates that even one of the nation’s most blighted neighborhoods — a place of crushing, intergenerational poverty — can become a “city on a hill” — a shining example to others of what determined groups with a well-conceived, evidence-based plan can accomplish for young people and a community.

The East Lake story is especially relevant to the work of youth-focused organizations, such as America’s Promise Alliance. Our theory of action has always centered on the belief that improving outcomes for young people with limited resources and opportunities necessitates the transformation of entire neighborhoods into environments where children can experience the Five Promises, fundamental resources all children need to succeed: caring adults in all areas of their lives, safe places, the things that make for a healthy start and healthy development, an effective education and opportunities to help others.



Students who graduated from the Charles R. Drew Middle School are excited about starting the year in the new Senior Academy high school.

Some have wondered whether systematic attempts at such neighborhood revitalizations were practicable, or even possible — and whether, if successful, they could yield the results for young people that proponents sought. The answer from East Lake is an emphatic “yes,” which should give both encouragement and guidance to those urgently seeking to change the odds for the least advantaged young people in other cities.

BACKGROUND

CCIs as a mechanism for promoting positive youth development

Efforts to transform distressed communities into places where residents lead healthy, thriving lives date back more than 100 years. They include the Settlement House movement of the early 1900s, the War on Poverty in the 1960s, and the rise of community development corporations (CDCs) in the 1980s.

In the 1990s, a new model — the one that informed the effort in East Lake — began gaining popularity: the comprehensive community initiative (CCI).^{*17} Several key attributes distinguish CCIs from previous approaches to community change:

- a collaborative, comprehensive approach, with intentional alignment across institutions and contexts (e.g. family, school, the broader community), instead of piecemeal, uncoordinated efforts;

* As one study noted, a collaborative, integrated approach is logical since “... many of these problems are complex; consequently, they go beyond the capacity, resources, or jurisdiction of any single person, program, organization, or sector to change or control” (Laskar & Weiss, 2003, p.18).



- participation by diverse partners instead of single-sector initiatives;
- a governance structure that includes a lead organization to drive the effort instead of a leaderless coalition;
- an asset-based approach that builds on existing resources and strengths rather than considering communities as deficits to be remediated;
- active engagement by residents instead of purely top-down decisions;
- a focus on geographically defined areas instead of being too broad in scope; and
- flexible, non-categorical funding from diverse sources instead of restricted funds that constrain nimble actions.¹⁸

Empirical evidence has identified all of these distinguishing factors (as well as a theory of change aligned with the effort's goals and the ongoing use of data to guide the effort) as essential to successful community transformations.¹⁹ Because CCIs foster cooperation, instead of allowing programs to operate in individual silos, and because they recognize that the work must occur within broader, structural and interrelated systems, they offer the potential to bring about transformative change.²⁰

Recently, CCIs have been adopted more widely, as illustrated by federal initiatives such as Promise Neighborhoods sponsored by the Department of Education and Choice Neighborhoods launched through the Department of Housing and Urban Development's

(HUD).²¹ Beyond these national initiatives, numerous local organizations are implementing place-based, comprehensive initiatives throughout the country.²²

This more holistic approach of CCIs is grounded in what research has revealed about human development.²³ Children develop within and across multiple “contexts,” the places where development occurs and the factors that influence that development.²⁴ Varied and overlapping contexts—such as families, schools and neighborhoods—can positively and negatively affect young people.²⁵ An extension of this “relational theory” is positive youth development (PYD).^{*} PYD applies a strengths-based perspective that seeks to harness young people's internal assets and the assets in a community to help young people lead healthy, successful lives, rather than focusing solely on ameliorating deficits.²⁶ Extensive research suggests that children are served best by the presence of a “youth system”; essentially, a young person's development is optimized when the key supports he/she needs to thrive are aligned across family, schools, and all aspects of the community — and are applied to the needs and strengths of each young person.”²⁷

Discerning the potential of CCIs as change agents

While several evaluations of CCIs around the country have shown the value of governance structures and specific strategic processes, relatively few studies have assessed substantive outcomes at the community level of such revitalization efforts. One reason for this dearth of evaluations, perhaps, is that few initiatives have radically

* While all PYD frameworks espouse a similarly asset-based approach to youth development, its theoretical underpinnings are conceptualized differently by various scholars. For example, the “Five Cs” emphasize the principles of competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring as critical to optimal youth development (J. Lerner et al., 2012; Lerner et al., 2005), and the Search Institute in Minnesota has identified 40 key internal and external developmental assets to collectively benefit young people (Damon, 2004).



reshaped entire neighborhoods in the way that the organizers of the East Lake revitalization sought to do.*

As more communities attempt to develop their own CCIs, analyzing community-level outcomes of the revitalization effort in East Lake, with a specific focus on outcomes for young people and their families, provides an especially important case study on how a CCI unfolds, how the CCI aligns efforts to embed each young person in a youth system, and the educational and economic outcomes for which the CCI is striving.

THE STORY OF EAST LAKE'S REVITALIZATION

History of the East Lake Foundation

Distinguished as the home of legendary golfer Bobby Jones, the East Lake community lost its glamour in the 1960s and '70s, when unemployment and crime began to take a heavy toll. During this turbulent time, Atlanta's public housing was swiftly declining, and the increasingly blighted state of the East Lake Meadows project set the tone for the entire neighborhood. "East Lake reflected the dysfunction of public housing," observed Shirley Franklin, who later served as Atlanta's first African-American female mayor.²⁸

In the 1990s, Tom Cousins, a developer and philanthropist who had numerous and longtime connections to the

East Lake community, committed to help revitalize the neighborhood. In 1995, he established the East Lake Foundation (ELF) through the support of his family foundation, the CF Foundation. CF also bought the East Lake Country Club, preserving its fabled history while creating a slogan — "golf with a purpose" — that reflected the foundation's aim of spurring redevelopment of the surrounding community.

Structures and processes

Recognizing the need not only to revamp East Lake's public housing but also to improve other central aspects of the community, ELF developed a model for dramatic change. Based on research and its own observations, the foundation first identified discrete yet interconnected factors that impeded the overarching goal of building a healthy community.



One of the many rewarding volunteer opportunities is reading to a child in the Charles R. Drew Charter School.

* Some efforts, however, have significantly influenced individual lives, such as the public health coalition model, Communities that Care, which has reduced substance and tobacco use and delinquent behavior among 5th – 8th graders (Hawkins et al., 2009; Kubisch et al., 2010; Trent & Chavis, 2009).



Among these barriers were concentrated poverty; a learning gap that began at birth; a lack of high-quality public schools; uneven school transitions resulting from an inadequate educational system that was not equipped to support young people as they entered elementary, middle, and high school; a lack of enrichment and support opportunities; and fragmented resources.²⁹ All of these factors combined to create formidable, persistent obstacles to success in school and beyond for the neighborhood's children.

To bring about change, ELF developed a holistic approach to revitalization (outlined below). The theory of positive youth development underlies the work, recognizing and seeking to build upon the strengths of young people and targeting multiple contexts (in East Lake's case: housing, education and health).

In addition to this critical first step, ELF created processes and a governance structure. For example, through formal memoranda of understanding, ELF sets explicit expectations of partner organizations engaged in the community revitalization effort. Through quarterly partner meetings, the foundation also created a formal mechanism for communicating regularly about current work, sharing pertinent information, and discussing any challenges they encounter.

Three pillars

ELF's approach to transformational change is built upon three pillars: (1) mixed-income housing; (2) a cradle-to-college educational pipeline; and (3) community wellness. More specifically, the foundation developed a theory of change that espoused that mixed-income housing would fuel the private market, serving to reduce

the concentration of poverty in the neighborhood. A continuum of education running from the pre-K years through grade 12 would address the multiple and intersecting educational challenges in the neighborhood. Wellness programs would help improve the health of the neighborhood's residents, which would have positive ripple effects in areas ranging from school attendance to the employability and productivity of adults. "Many other organizations don't address all three (areas)," said Daniel Shoy, Jr., East Lake Foundation's chief operating officer.³⁰ Here, "the sum of the whole is greater than its parts."³¹ Consistent with the principles that make for effective CCIs, ELF would serve as a lead organization, following a holistic approach and intentionally collaborating with key partners who oversee the various facets of the effort. Although other communities in Atlanta had similar needs, focusing on the East Lake neighborhood instead of a larger geography would help bring to bear a critical mass of resources necessary to transform a community.³²

Mixed-income housing

Because the three pillars needed for a transformation were interrelated, the East Lake Foundation built them not sequentially but simultaneously. The organizers' efforts with housing mirrored a national trend to address the seemingly intractable problems many attributed to concentrated public housing.³³ While ELF's work was informed by other initiatives, it also embraced a new concept — mixed-income housing that combined public and market-rate residential units. The model had originated in Atlanta and was being championed as a strategy throughout the city's struggling public housing developments by Renee Glover, the new executive director of the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA).³⁴ (Ultimately, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban

* East Lake Meadows was not an anomaly in Atlanta. Other public housing developments shared similar problems, leading the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in the early 90s to designate the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) — which is now recognized as one of the most effective housing authorities in the country — as one of the nation's worst (Newman, 2002).



Development would incorporate mixed-income housing into its HOPE VI initiatives to revitalize public housing). Underlying the new model was the theory that mixed-income housing would help build social capital. In other words, people who had lived in an area of concentrated poverty would benefit in a variety of ways from living alongside and interacting regularly with higher income residents with other experiences. AHA's desire to reduce the heavy concentration of public housing, which was mostly located in or near downtown, intensified after Atlanta was chosen to host the 1996 Summer Olympics.³⁵ In partnership with AHA, ELF initiated a lengthy planning process to raze East Lake Meadows and build The Villages of East Lake as a mixed-income housing development. With AHA's cooperation, residents of East Lake Meadows were relocated to temporary housing while The Villages were under construction.³⁶



The former East Lake Meadows was defined by concentrated poverty, dilapidated housing, substandard education and rampant crime.

The Villages were carefully organized: the goal was ensure that the low-income residents ELF was trying to support weren't pushed out by residents able to pay market prices. Existing residents who served on the Planning Committee received first priority for a spot in the new development, while length of residence at East Lake Meadows determined next priority. Of the original East Lake Meadows families, 26.6 percent had returned to The Villages of East Lake during the 10-year period, while 44.6 percent used housing vouchers to move to other neighborhoods, 23.7 percent moved to a traditional public housing project, and 5.1 percent relocated to another mixed-income community.³⁷

The foundation also recognized — and took steps to avert — another potential negative consequence of the mixed-income model. The presence of market-priced residences has a predictable effect of increasing property values in the entire neighborhood, which in turn can drive out low-income residents. In East Lake, home values rose at nearly four times the rate of Atlanta as a whole.³⁸ To help keep low-income residents in the broader East Lake neighborhood, the foundation has begun to purchase properties in recent years with the long-term goal of developing a greater supply of affordable housing. A decade after The Villages opened, an analysis comparing original East Lake Meadows families to a control group of other AHA-assisted families found no significant statistical difference between levels of public assistance the two groups received; this finding suggested that low-income Meadows residents were not being pushed out of the development by an infusion of new residents paying market prices for their housing.³⁹



In addition to its ongoing commitment to provide affordable housing, ELF works to break the cycle of poverty through its Resident and Community Support Program (RCSP), which offers financial literacy and career development workshops and training aimed to help low-income residents become more self-sufficient.⁴⁰ While RCSP serves all residents of The Villages, regardless of income, it makes a “special nudge” for those in subsidized housing, according to its manager Jennifer McCrary, a longtime workforce development professional.⁴¹ In its short history, the program already boasts successes, like that of a woman who recently found a new job after being unemployed for more than a year. “She stopped doing it alone,” McCrary noted, pointing out the woman’s gains from the program.⁴² In addition, RCSP strives to nurture relationships among neighbors through a variety of events, such as holiday parties, which provide a fun way for subsidized and market-rate residents alike to interact.

Pre-K – college educational continuum

The East Lake Foundation also began building a cradle-to-college educational pipeline that would be especially important in increasing the odds of success for the neighborhood’s young people. As noted earlier, before the CCI in East Lake formed, student achievement at the local elementary school had been abysmal. Following the closing of that school due to low enrollment, ELF successfully obtained the city’s first charter from the Atlanta Public School system. This was no simple feat: during a contentious process, at a time when charter schools were unknown to most, the foundation worked to ease concerns about both the unfamiliar funding strategy for the proposed charter and the school’s approach.

Armed with their charter, ELF partnered with the New York-based, for-profit charter management organization Edison Schools to open Drew Charter School in 2000 and

provide instructional services for five years.⁴³ The school took over responsibility for instruction in 2005 and has operated independently ever since. Youth from The Villages of East Lake receive first priority to attend Drew as well as ELF’s early childhood and enrichment programs. Second priority goes to residents in the greater East Lake community, and third priority to residents from other neighborhoods in Atlanta. Today, 84 percent of pre-K–ninth-grade students from The Villages attend Drew. The students reflect the neighborhood’s socioeconomic diversity, with approximately 62 percent of them receiving free and reduced-priced lunches.⁴⁴

During the 2012-13 academic year, Drew was one of 315 charters in Georgia, the majority of which are located in metro Atlanta.⁴⁵ Drew students are easily recognizable by their crisp khakis and forest green shirts. They participate in extended-day programming, which lengthens the traditional school day, and can choose to participate in expanded learning opportunities through Drew’s After School Program, offered for a modest fee.⁴⁶ “Not only do students have a place to be while their parents are at work, youth participate in a really high-quality and fun program,” said Lindsey Luckzynski, Drew’s director of strategic partnerships.⁴⁷ She noted that enrichment activities are geared toward students’ interests, such as gardening, learning Mandarin, and breakdancing.

Drew infuses a strong culture of achievement and character education into the school. Their STEAM curriculum is consistent with the trailblazing spirit of the school’s namesake, Dr. Charles R. Drew, the renowned doctor and researcher who played a seminal role in creating blood plasma processing. The STEAM curriculum integrates the arts into the STEM subjects of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The entire curriculum is grounded in building literacy and aims to foster both academic excellence and creativity.⁴⁸



Innovative, interdisciplinary projects abound. During Drew’s STEAM Discovery Day, parents and visitors can experience the curriculum in action. Students showcase their skills and talents through a number of distinctive outlets. During the popular “Nerdy Derby,” to cite one example, students zoom across the school’s outdoor track in race cars they built themselves.

Through partnerships with local universities, such as Georgia Tech, students at Drew have access to eclectic programs in music, technology, and robotics. Drew also collaborates with the Center for Teaching at The Westminster Schools, a renowned private school, to deliver professional development to its teachers.

Once the new school was established, ELF and Drew realized that too many students were entering school not ready for kindergarten. In response, the foundation enlisted early childhood education providers, such as the East Lake Sheltering Arms and the YMCA’s East Lake Early Learning Academy, to shrink the “school readiness gap” between low-income children and their peers from households with more resources. “What we’re doing with children in early years is addressing the disparity of vocabulary and critical thinking skills,” explained Comer Yates, executive director of The Atlanta Speech School, which focuses on language and literacy.⁴⁹

Partnering with The Rollins Center for Language and Learning at The Atlanta Speech School, early education teachers receive high-quality literacy training that they apply to their work with East Lake children. The Rollins Center has also been a key partner at Drew Charter School, providing high-level professional development around language, literacy and writing to teachers in all grades.

Having established a pathway from birth to middle school, the East Lake CCI moved to address the other end of the educational continuum. “Our (East Lake) kids were going off to 16 or 17 high schools,” explained Cynthia Kuhlman, director of educational achievement at the CF Foundation and chair of the Drew Charter School Board of Directors.⁵⁰ “That transition point was where we were losing them,” she added.⁵¹ ELF and Drew galvanized support from residents and the Atlanta Public Schools’ Board of Education in 2012 to extend its charter to create a high school.

The first students began the 2013-14 academic year in temporary facilities, and the new 200,000 square-foot Drew Charter School Senior Academy adjacent to Drew Charter School is slated to open summer, 2014.⁵² “Cradle to college seals all those transition points where low-income kids are extremely vulnerable and are liable to slip through the cracks,” said Kuhlman.⁵³



East Lake Foundation/Purpose Built Communities’ holistic community development model (Source: Purpose Built Communities)



Community wellness

Children’s voices shriek gleefully as they leave Drew through a main door connecting the school and the YMCA, where they participate in gym classes taught regularly by agency staff in the gym. Students play basketball, volleyball and other games, filling the large, airy building with sounds of cheers and laughter. Meanwhile, older residents circle the raised track overhead, and an energetic instructor loudly encourages adults in a group exercise class. As part of their physical education at Drew, students can learn to play golf through the East Lake chapter of The First Tee, a nationally recognized golf and life skills youth program. “Youth learn more about themselves than golf skills. [We] use golf as an engine to teach life skills,” explained Nyre Williams, the program’s executive director.⁵⁴



The East Lake Foundation has been serving junior golfers since 1995, and established one of the country’s earliest First Tee programs in 2005.

In conjunction with providing golf as a gym class at Drew, The First Tee also offers after-school and summer programs. More than 600 children participate in these programs in East Lake.

Through gardening and related programs, the foundation offers a variety of ways for East Lake residents to combine improving their health with education. ELF approached the Southeastern Horticulture Society (SHS) to create a community learning garden where residents can grow their own produce and young people can participate in fun outdoor activities. After conducting research that indicated a high rate of diabetes and obesity in East Lake, ELF expanded its partnership with the SHS to create an urban farm. The society employs youth during an annual summer program to teach them firsthand about organic farming and managing a market.

This experience is further integrated into the community through a garden at Drew, where all students are involved in activities that range from building literacy skills by reading about plants in the garden to joining a master gardening program that deepens their knowledge about gardening techniques.

In 2009, East Lake residents organized the East Lake Farmers’ Market, a seasonal market that expands residents’ access to local fruits and vegetables. Often, low-income individuals lack options for healthy foods, and when availability exists, produce is more expensive than healthier choices.⁵⁵ The farmer’s market in East Lake responded to these barriers by providing another option besides Publix for buying produce and by doubling the value of food stamps.⁵⁶ By increasing access to healthy foods, the array of wellness programs can help to improve the diet of residents, which can ameliorate overall health and reduce obesity.



While the farmers’ market received significant financial support from ELF, the plan originated with residents — and affirmed ELF’s belief that improving conditions in the neighborhood would instill in residents a greater sense of ownership and possibility, and empower them to develop initiatives on their own that would further enhance their quality of life.

Intentional alignment

Research demonstrates strong and visionary leadership is essential for engaging stakeholders, setting clear goals, devising theories of change aligned with these goals, and effectively implementing strategies.⁵⁷ As the lead organization, ELF spearheads the effort and oversees the crucial alignment of partners. “In typical urban development, the school and Y would be separate,” explained former Mayor Franklin.⁵⁸ “Here [we have] a combined Y and school. [These] relationships didn’t happen by chance; they happened because the foundation said we wanted to maximize relationships.”⁵⁹ Greg Giornelli, chief operating officer of Atlanta-based Purpose Built Communities, observes “[Our approach] takes mixed-income housing, directly connected to a cradle-to-college pipeline, and all of those directly connected to thoughtful community wellness programs ... these things do not organically spring up.”⁶⁰

The joining of Drew to the YMCA — and, more importantly, the integration and alignment of their programs and activities — exemplifies ELF’s philosophy of intentionality. “The work is so integrated and connected that it has to be coordinated and seamless, like an ecosystem all working towards a shared goal,” said ELF’s Shoy.⁶¹ The YMCA’s executive director, R.C. Pruitt, echoes that sentiment: “What makes a great collaboration are entities with similar missions.”⁶²

ELF also cultivates intentionality through mutual support among the foundation’s partners. For example, Drew is able to address the myriad needs of students who live in The Villages by working with ELF’s Resident and Community Support Program. “Because of the support services that [ELF] provides, it can position us and increase our chance to be successful with students,” said Kuhlman.⁶³ “The wrap-around services that [ELF] provides to build community, like their community garden and urban farm, help us, too, because we want to build a sense of community in the school.”⁶⁴



The Charles R. Drew Charter School was one of just 23 schools around the country who won the Grow Anywhere Tour contest. On March 15, 2013, the Burpee Food Truck brought up to 50 vegetable plants for the East Lake Community Garden, and up to 1,300 pounds of fresh produce for the community.



In addition to forging and maintaining partnerships, ELF facilitates collaboration by brokering solutions among stakeholders. For example, ELF enhanced safety and efficiency in the neighborhood by helping to coordinate security patrols among Drew Charter School, the Charlie Yates Golf Course, and The Villages. As the lead organization of the CCI, ELF is responsible for ensuring accountability among its partners. ELF accomplishes this formidable task by developing shared goals among partners. For example, the YMCA and Drew support and depend on each other, which builds accountability.

To complement its strong alignment of partners and community residents, ELF has strategically developed relationships with powerful public and private entities. It is no coincidence that its 14-member Board of Directors represents diverse sectors of the wider community.⁶⁵ The Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) partnered with ELF to redevelop East Lake Meadows. When it applied for its initial charter school, and later to expand the charter to include a high school, ELF enormously benefited from Drew's strong ties to (and ongoing respectful relationship with) the Atlanta Public Schools (APS). Don Doran, the principal at Drew, previously served as a principal in an APS school. He argues, "It really is all about relationships."⁶⁶

Drew's partnerships include not only local universities and The Westminster Schools, but also The Rollins Center for Language and Learning at The Atlanta Speech School. ELF has cultivated strategic alliances in the corporate community. The foundation possesses a longstanding relationship with The Coca-Cola Company, headquartered in Atlanta, whose sponsorship of the annual PGA TOUR Championship at the East Lake Golf Club financially benefits ELF and the First Tee of East Lake.

Community engagement and community-building
Consistent with best practices of CCIs, community engagement and community-building efforts in East Lake have stimulated positive relationships among the neighborhood's diverse partners and residents, bolstered individuals' active involvement in various community and youth development projects, and increased leadership capacity.⁶⁷ From the beginning, resident engagement was a legal requirement for the redevelopment of East Lake Meadows. Although the Atlanta Housing Authority stipulated the broadly defined mixed-income guidelines, the community was allowed to determine more specific elements, such as the ratio of public housing to market-rate units.

From 1994 to 1998, ELF regularly met with AHA and the Resident Planning Committee, a formal entity created to represent East Lake residents. According to Carol Naughton, who at the time headed AHA's development team at East Lake, residents were rightly skeptical, based on previous experience, about the housing authority's ability to provide safe and decent housing. "AHA was unable to fix a toilet, let alone drive community revitalization," she candidly remarked.⁶⁸ Building mutual trust and respect would therefore be an important first step.

According to Naughton, "keeping small and big promises" played an instrumental role in fostering trust between ELF and East Lake residents.⁶⁹ The foundation demonstrated its commitment by participating in community-wide events, such as celebrations and clean-up activities, and deliberately nurturing relationships. When Naughton suddenly needed to pick up her sick kindergartener from school, she brought him along when she accompanied a group of residents to look at properties that could serve as a blueprint for the redevelopment of East Lake Meadows. "I was seen as a working mom for the first time," she said.⁷⁰



In addition to engaging residents directly through the Planning Committee, ELF reached out to surrounding neighborhoods. For example, former Mayor Franklin raised awareness about specific aspects of the project—such as the ability of all East Lake residents, not just those in the mixed-housing development, to utilize the neighborhood’s amenities.

The four-year community engagement process culminated in the Planning Committee’s approval of the Redevelopment Cooperative Agreement, which “represented a milestone that things were moving forward,” said Naughton.⁷¹

ELF has continued to actively engage residents in a variety of ways. During its charter school application process, the foundation reached out to residents to gauge support for the new school.

This support, coupled with the support of the Atlanta Public Schools, was crucial to the eventual opening of the Drew Charter School in 2000. When ELF partnered with the Southeastern Horticulture Society, the latter worked closely with residents to help design the East Lake Community Learning Garden. SHS employed “outside-of-the-box solutions” to nurture community engagement, such as offering a variety of vegetables and herbs to residents of The Villages, who later planted them and grew, among others, tomatoes, kale, and collard greens.⁷²

A resident of East Lake since 2002, Doug Williams recounted another vivid example of how community engagement became embedded within the neighborhood’s revitalization work. Williams, formerly president of the East Lake Neighbors Community Association, worked closely with ELF to address issues affecting the neighborhood. An initial project involved resurrecting a decrepit park known more for drug dealing than for its playground. Williams reached out to both long-term and newer residents to launch a collective visioning process.

Residents conceived ideas for a new park, and their vision became reality thanks to a successful grant application. “[It became] our park, not the city’s park. We did that; it’s nice for our families,” Williams said, describing residents’ sense of ownership and empowerment stemming from their involvement.⁷³ “Instead of just doing it, [ELF] is going back to the community,” he added.⁷⁴



Kindergarten students in the Charles R. Drew Charter School.



Leveraging and learning from data

To take advantage of research that shows the benefit of using data to guide strategy, ELF is implementing an integrated system that can link data across agencies. “This system will allow us to best understand how these different interventions are strengthening each other,” explained Evan Smith, community development advisor at Purpose Built Communities, which is overseeing the implementation of the data system.⁷⁵ Partners will be able to access data across the participating organizations, allowing them to better leverage resources. For instance, if two siblings are performing at different levels academically, partners will be able to see which school each child attends, whether they participate in The First Tee and/or Drew’s after-school enrichment programs, and whether they are residents of The Villages and therefore have access to community wellness supports.

This capability also applies to adults. If any residents of The Villages lose their jobs, partners will be able to find out whether they are already involved in the Resident and Community Support Program, and, if not, can help to connect them. By tapping the power of data in this way, partners can devise and implement strategies that more fully address individuals’ specific needs.

Flexible and diverse funding

The relationships that ELF so intentionally cultivated have enabled the foundation to secure financial support and other resources from private and philanthropic funders that allocate flexible sources of support. In 2011, the foundation raised \$3.5 million.⁷⁶ Longstanding support has come from Coca-Cola, which has provided more than \$13 million, and the East Lake Golf Club.⁷⁷

[See Appendix I for a list of the foundation’s supporters.]

While ELF already possesses a strong and diverse cadre of supporters, the Foundation is steadily expanding its group of funders. “The goal is to diversify funding streams in order to become a self-sustaining organization,” said Amy Macklin, who directs the foundation’s fundraising department as vice president of resource development.⁷⁸

Building a youth system

In creating its three pillars of transformation — an educational continuum, wellness, and mixed-income housing — the East Lake Foundation and its partners also enabled the neighborhood’s young people to experience a multifaceted “youth system.” As noted earlier, because children develop across varied and overlapping contexts (family, schools, neighborhood), extensive research suggests that aligning key supports across these contexts and applying them to the needs and strengths of each young person will produce positive effects in their lives. Reducing the concentration of deep poverty through mixed-income housing, for example, can reduce poverty and build social capital from which children benefit. Enhancing wellness boosts school attendance and performance, reinforcing schools’ efforts to improve academic achievement (as do extended school hours, after-school programs, early learning opportunities and other programs available to children and youth during out-of-school time).

School success, in turn, over the long term contributes to wellness and to lifting young people out of poverty. They are all connected. East Lake’s experience has only reinforced the importance of embedding each young person within such a system. The transformation of East Lake from a neighborhood with few elements of a youth system into an area where all children have access to the advantages of such a system’s holistic and mutually reinforcing effects should be viewed as a critical factor in the improved outcomes for East Lake’s young people.



Measuring success

Recent studies have already revealed significant improvements in the greater East Lake neighborhood. An economic analysis by the University of Georgia’s Selig Center for Economic Growth found that East Lake’s revitalization generated more than \$347 million in economic output in 2007.⁷⁹ The researchers’ analysis showed that this benefit was the result of a number of factors: economic development that created jobs and raised revenue, capital expenditures in the neighborhood, anticipated economic advantages to Drew Charter School graduates, net growth in residents’ income, housing market appreciation, revenue from the PGA Tour Championship, and savings from reductions in crime.⁸⁰

Another study, focusing on similar factors in the community, found that East Lake’s revitalization produced a net benefit in social welfare services of \$30 million during a 15-year period.⁸¹ At the same time, despite these overall gains, the study indicated that both fixed-income and low-income homeowners and renters experienced net losses due to rising property values in the neighborhood.⁸²

East Lake’s educational outcomes are even more striking. Drew Elementary School ranks first among 58 elementary schools in Atlanta Public Schools; the middle school ranks third in the city.⁸³ The most recent results on Georgia’s Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) indicate that 97 percent of Drew students in grades 3 - 8 met or surpassed state standards in all subjects, while an even higher number (98.5 percent) met or exceeded expectations in math and reading.⁸⁴ The state of Georgia recognized Drew’s excellence with a \$1 million Race to the Top grant in 2012 that will enhance the school’s STEAM curriculum.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, Drew earned a top honor as the Georgia Charter School of the Year in 2012.⁸⁶ “Drew is demonstrating that you can be successful regardless of zip code, income, or race,” Doran said.⁸⁷

Such success has led to an unanticipated challenge: increased student demand for spots in the school. Drew uses a lottery system and, for the first time this year, lacked enough slots to accommodate not just the students in the Villages at East Lake but all youth in the two surrounding neighborhoods. Fortunately, the school recently received a grant from the Georgia Department of Education to disseminate best practices to other district schools. “We want to lift all the schools up,” emphasized Doran, who is hopeful that Drew’s progress can be translated to local schools that will benefit all students in East Lake.⁸⁸



The Moving Beyond the Bridge celebration is a CREW (Creating Responsible Educated and Working) Teens event honoring Charles R. Drew Charter School alumni.



CATALYZING CHANGE BEYOND EAST LAKE

East Lake's extraordinary story illustrates how approaches and lessons learned from other initiatives not only can inform comprehensive community change efforts but help them succeed. As the number of such efforts has expanded, and as awareness of an urgent need to improve outcomes for young people has grown, organizers of community coalitions have taken a keen interest in East Lake's work.

Just as ELF's leaders were intentional about following a model whose key features were validated by research and experience, they also have been intentional about bringing that model to others. In 2009, Tom Cousins, along with mutual fund manager Julian Robertson and Warren Buffett, co-founded the nonprofit consulting firm Purpose Built Communities, and former mayor Shirley Franklin, Greg Giornelli, and Carol Naughton joined the leadership team. The firm's mission is to share the lessons of East Lake and help other communities apply its model for "holistic revitalization" of troubled neighborhoods. To date, Purpose Built Communities has partnered with organizations in Birmingham; Charlotte; Indianapolis; New Orleans; Omaha; Rome, Georgia; and Spartanburg, South Carolina. It plans to expand to a total 25 communities in the years ahead.⁸⁹ Through these partnerships, the firm offers comprehensive consulting services, at no cost to the communities, based on ELF's coordinated holistic revitalization model.⁹⁰ Professional services include a community advisory team, connections to partners and support organizations, best practices, and immersion in a community of practice.⁹¹

Purpose Built's founders recognize that their model, which has worked so well for East Lake, might not represent the right approach for every community.

Based on their experience, they believe the model is poised to operate most effectively in communities that are able to implement mixed-income housing, possess strong leadership capacity, can leverage relationships with partners from diverse sectors, and are focused on a geographically-defined area. As Purpose Built Communities continues to share the East Lake model, its lessons may inform other communities that are striving to become places where young people and families alike lead healthy, thriving lives.

Dramatic neighborhood transformations do not mean that communities can expect to achieve dramatic results quickly or by following an easily replicated, cookie-cutter formula for change. Though no two neighborhoods are exactly alike, East Lake offers a compass that can point organizers in the most promising direction. Because the remarkable turnaround occurred through a process characterized by systematic intentionality — a rigorous reliance on what research and the experiences of other communities revealed as best practices — East Lake's experience suggests that other neighborhoods facing challenges that may seem intractable can experience their own long-term transformations by aligning their efforts with a set of guiding principles.

At a time when poverty rates are as high as they were in the mid-1960s, when the so-called War on Poverty began; when achievement gaps between children living in affluence and those living in poverty remain wide; when the consequences of those gaps are more extreme; and when communities find themselves still searching for ways to break the vicious circle of intergenerational poverty; the story of East Lake's resurrection and its implications should come both as welcome news and as a catalyst for concerted local action on behalf of America's young people.



Appendix 1

East Lake Foundation engages wide range of partners.

Source: Adapted from “East Lake Partners” on the East Lake Foundation website

PUBLIC SECTOR PARTNERS		PRIVATE SECTOR PARTNERS		PHILANTHROPIC		NONPROFIT	
Who	What	Who	What	Who	What	Who	What
Atlanta Housing Authority	Partnered with ELF to create The Villages of East Lake, a mixed-income housing development, in 1995	Columbia Residential, Inc.	Property manager of The Villages of East Lake	TOUR Championship by Coca-Cola	Proceeds from the TOUR Championship support ELF	East Lake Family YMCA	Connected to Drew Charter School, the YMCA provides recreational, community, and health and wellness programs, in addition to early learning education
Atlanta Public Schools	Supported ELF’s founding Atlanta’s first charter school in 2000, Charles R. Drew Charter School	East Lake Golf Club	A historic golf club where the annual PGA TOUR championship occurs. In addition to these proceeds supporting ELF, the founding sponsor companies contribute to ELF			East Lake Farmers Market	Provides healthy produce to residents, while also promoting community relationships and the local economy
Charlie Yates Golf Course	Nine-hole public golf course whose net proceeds support ELF	Publix	East Lake’s first grocery store in 40 years			East Lake Neighbors Community Association	A volunteer organization comprised of residents who advocate about issues affecting the community
Charles R. Drew Charter School	In partnership with the Atlanta Public Schools, ELF opened the city’s first charter school in 2000. Drew enrolls 1,200 pre-k – 9th grade students and provides a science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) curriculum grounded in literacy	The Coca-Cola Company	Chief sponsor of the annual TOUR Championship, which benefits ELF			Sheltering Arms Early Education and Family Center	Infant, toddler, and pre-k early education and care
						Southeastern Horticultural Society	Manages community learning garden and urban farm, engaging youth and families in various educational and recreational activities



Appendix 2

List of Key Informant Interviews

Name	Title and Organization
Katie Carisle	Professor, Georgia State University
Kate Chura	Director, Southeastern Horticulture Society
Don Doran	Principal, Charles R. Drew Charter School
Shirley Franklin	Chief Executive Officer, Purpose Built Communities
Greg Giornelli	Chief Operating Officer, Purpose Built Communities
Deborah Knight	Former Co-Director, Rollins Center for Language & Learning, Atlanta Speech School
Cynthia Kuhlman	Director of Educational Achievement, Charles R. Drew Charter School
Kate Lindholm	Resident, East Lake
Lindsey Luckzynski	Director of Strategic Partnerships, Charles R. Drew Charter School
Amy Macklin	Vice President of Resource Development, East Lake Foundation
Jennifer McCrary	Resident and Community Support Program Manager, East Lake Foundation
Carol Naughton	Senior Vice President, Purpose Built Communities
Sejal Patel	Community Development Advisor, Purpose Built Communities
RC Pruitt	Group Vice President and Executive Director, The YMCA/East Lake Family YMCA
TJ Ragan	Facilitator, Rollins Center for Language & Learning, Atlanta Speech School
Robert Ryshke	Executive Director of Center for Teaching, The Westminster Schools
Daniel Shoy, Jr.	Chief Operating Officer, East Lake Foundation
Evan Smith	Community Development Advisor, Purpose Built Communities
Donna Whiting	Associate Director for Teacher Education Partnerships, Georgia Tech
Doug Williams	Resident, East Lake
Nyre Williams	Director, The First Tee of East Lake
Comer Yates	Executive Director, Atlanta Speech School



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- ¹ East Lake Foundation Report, 2012; East Lake Foundation website, 2013.
- ² Cousins, 2013.
- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵ East Lake Foundation website, 2013.
- ⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁷ East Lake Foundation Report, 2012; East Lake Foundation website, 2013.
- ⁸ East Lake Foundation website, 2013.
- ⁹ Purpose Built Communities website, 2013.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*
- ¹¹ *ibid.*
- ¹² *ibid.*
- ¹³ *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*
- ¹⁶ East Lake Foundation website, 2013; Purpose Built Communities website, 2013.
- ¹⁷ Stagner & Duran, 1997.
- ¹⁸ Gardner et al., 2010; Greenberg et al., 2010; Kubisch et al., 2010; Stagner & Duran, 1997; Trent & Chavis, 2009; Walker et al., 2010.
- ¹⁹ Arthur et al. (2010); Drug Strategies (2001); Enfield & Owens (2009); Mancini & Marek (2004); Zakocs & Edwards (2006).
- ²⁰ Foster-Fishman et al., 2007; Kania & Kramer, 2011.
- ²¹ The Bridgespan Group, 2011; The White House Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, 2010.
- ²² The Bridgespan Group, 2011.
- ²³ Overton, 2010.
- ²⁴ Overton, 2010; Lerner et al., 2003.
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- ²⁶ Damon, 2004.
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- ²⁸ S. Franklin, personal communication, May 8, 2013.
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- ³⁰ D. Shoy, personal communication, May 8, 2013.
- ³¹ *ibid.*
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- ³³ Wilson, 1987.
- ³⁴ Saporta, 1998.
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- ³⁸ Purpose Built Communities website, 2013.
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- ⁴⁴ C. Kuhlman, personal communication, May 10, 2013.
- ⁴⁵ Georgia State Department of Education, 2012.
- ⁴⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ L. Luckzynski, personal communication, May 10, 2013.
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- ⁴⁹ C. Yates, personal communication, May 16, 2013.
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- ⁵³ C. Kuhlman, personal communication, May 10, 2013.
- ⁵⁴ N. Williams, personal communication, May 9, 2013.
- ⁵⁵ Hutch et al., 2011.
- ⁵⁶ D. Williams, personal communication, May 10, 2013.
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- ⁶⁶ D. Doran, personal communication, May 10, 2013.



⁶⁷ Kubisch et al., 2010; Trent & Chavis, 2009; Walker et al., 2010.

⁶⁸ C. Naughton, personal communication, May 9, 2010.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

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⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ Boston, 2005.

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⁸⁴ *ibid.*

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