




News




Nourishing Neighborhoods Network program seeks to cultivate holistic resilience

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Neighborhood connectors canvassed around 400 houses in their Ann Arbor neighborhood to invite folks for cider and doughnuts for the kick-off event of their Nourishing Neighborhoods pilot program. Neighbors were encouraged to bring their mugs to mingle and get to know one another to work towards building neighborhood cohesion.

Tara-Sky Woodward (MS '25) was inspired to research community climate resilience after taking a core Behavior, Education and Communication (BEC) course with School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS) Professor Raymond De Young during her undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan. As a psychology major, she originally intended to pursue community resilience research from a solely mental health perspective. However, De Young's course demonstrated how people can use what they know about human information processing to support well-being and navigate environmental challenges, such as those presented by the climate crisis. It also demonstrated the critical role of neighborhood-scale mutual aid in preparing for and responding to adverse events and reframes resilience as

“bouncing forward” to a new reality rather than just “bouncing back” to an unsustainable past. De Young teaches that bouncing forward is “adaptation in a classic psychological sense: to change our expectations and behavior into new patterns that better fit the new reality.”

As a non-traditional, first-generation student and single mother of three, Woodward felt the course resonated with much of her lived experiences and the adversities she’s faced. She also realized that her background in mental health could play an impactful role in [holistic resilience](#) building, which is approaching community resilience through a lens of integrated socio-ecological systems and the well-being of people and nature. “I learned that to cultivate holistic resilience, I needed a holistic lens. And that meant including what we understand about resilience from a mental health perspective with what we understand about resilience from a climate change perspective,” said Woodward.

Before completing her undergraduate degree, Woodward lived on a small farm in a supportive rural community. Observing the positive impact it had on her children and reflecting on the assistance she received from her community during challenging times, she was motivated to return to school to better understand community networks and how they can support others in similar circumstances. Thus, she enrolled at SEAS to pursue a Master of Science in Environment and Sustainability with a specialization in BEC. She is also pursuing a Master of Social Work.

In Summer 2023, Woodward was awarded a fellowship with the reDirect Foundation. As a reDirect fellow, she collaborated with the City of Ann Arbor’s Office of Sustainability and Innovation (OSI), working on the [A2Zero Climate Action Plan](#). Following a severe ice storm in [2023](#) that left nearly half of Washtenaw County without power, OSI recognized the need for proactive climate adaptation efforts. Bryce Frohlich (MS ’22), OSI’s community resilience specialist, initially proposed creating an asset mapping program to catalog community resources to better prepare and cope with extreme shock events like an ice storm.

Together with Frohlich and Paige Porter (MS ’21) from reDirect, Woodward partnered to develop a neighborhood-level program. The program, based on

Frohlich's idea of asset mapping combined with concepts from De Young's and other courses at SEAS, aims to foster relationships, build everyday neighborhood-scale resilience, and organize preparedness for extreme events. The team's collaborative efforts, Woodward's dedication to creating its guiding principles and framework, and De Young's mentorship culminated in the Nourishing Neighborhood Networks program, or Nourishing Neighborhoods for short.

Nourishing Neighborhoods creates a pathway for neighbors to meet face to face "at a time when society is becoming more and more socially isolated, and we're facing the negative impacts of climate change at an increasing frequency and level," said Woodward. The program provides the framework and guidance to support "neighborhood connectors," or those who live in the community and are motivated to get to know their neighbors in building relationships with other neighbors on a block or street level. Neighborhood connectors begin to cultivate relationships by facilitating neighborhood gatherings, typically over meals. As the relationships flourish, neighbors can engage in activities like resource sharing, climate resilience projects like a community garden or come up with their own project based on their local needs, Woodward explained.

Regarding asset mapping, Nourishing Neighborhoods creates a space for neighbors to come together to identify and share resources. "These resources can be physical, or what we call 'gifts.' It could be the gift of public speaking, of relationship-building, all of these things that community members have and can use to adapt to the changing world around us," explained Woodward. These relationships become essential in severe weather and shock events because oftentimes, our neighbors become our first line of aid when external help is delayed or unavailable.

Indeed, as the climate catastrophe deepens, citizens may frequently have to act unaided. It is noteworthy that the Federal Emergency Management Agency's mission now includes supporting citizens who are already on-site as first responders. "This is a dramatic change from earlier approaches to disaster response, which were centrally staffed and managed," De Young noted. "Previously, we assumed that financial resources, outside responders, centralized management, and the level of immediate damage were the key

predictors of recovery. Recently, our approach to extreme events has shifted, encompassing a new strategy that builds on the work of Dr. Daniel Aldrich, who found that ‘disaster resilience comes from internal factors: How connected are we? How much trust do we have in each other? How often do we work together?’”

Neighborhood-level, civic resilience describes this new approach. “We’ve seen this with Hurricane Harvey and Hurricane Katrina. A lot of bottom-up action took place. Folks who had a generator to keep medicine cold or someone who had a chainsaw to cut away fallen debris came together. These could all be life-saving acts of mutual aid,” said Woodward.

The holistic resilience that the Nourishing Neighborhoods program incorporates helps prepare us for these increasingly common extreme events while simultaneously building foundational resilience through social relationships and everyday behaviors, said Woodward. The program’s primary goals are to restore and strengthen our connections with our community and the local environment and to engage in collective action projects like asset mapping and resource sharing. “By taking this bottom-up, holistic approach, we hope to cultivate transformative resilience to shock events and everyday stressors while nurturing vibrant, thriving communities,” Woodward explained.

Woodward implements Nourishing Neighborhoods in her community

Initially developing the program through an urban lens, Woodward was curious to see how it would translate to her street in a small farming community. “It was inspirational and so rewarding to go through that process, but also nerve-wracking, especially because the norms are different here. Houses are much farther from the street, and people don’t knock on doors unless they’re soliciting,” said Woodward. She dropped invitations in everyone’s mailboxes, inviting neighbors to her house to gather over a main dish she prepared for the community. “I simply asked people to stop by within a given timeframe and bring a dish to pass if they wished. So many showed up, and everyone had such deep gratitude for just being invited. The event profoundly changed my understanding of the people around me and how I fit within that frame. It also demonstrates the meaningful impact of one

small action, which can give us continued motivation to engage in the long-term investment of cultivating community resilience.”

From this experience, Woodward learned the importance of thinking locally and prioritizing relationship-building in the community. “Taking the initial step and putting yourself out there to build relationships can seem intimidating at first, but the rewards you reap from that in terms of trust and relationships is worth the effort,” said Woodward. “When we’re thinking about these looming, nebulous problems, we can feel helpless. But when you think locally and go into your own community and start doing small things for change, you realize you can make an impact. Understanding that our actions matter is really important when we’re facing large problems like the climate crisis.”

The future of Nourishing Neighborhoods

After Woodward concluded her part of the program’s development, she passed the torch to the next reDirect fellow, Rachel Fink (MS ’24), a recent SEAS graduate specializing in BEC and Environmental Justice, to lead the pilot stage.

Fink put Woodward’s conceptual framework and principles into practice. She identified a pilot group by reaching out to A2Zero Ambassadors (citizens trained to help implement the city’s climate action plan) and found a family eager to get to know their neighbors. She then helped them organize their first get-together to begin relationship building. “Organizing these events requires a balance to ensure the community knows you’re not trying to push an agenda but also that they’re being invited here for a purpose. We want information on what they’re interested in or what issues they see. So how do you balance those two things and not scare people away,” explained Fink. To achieve this, Fink, Frohlich and the pilot group brought a signup sheet and board where people could use sticky notes to write down what issues they see in the community or what they’re most passionate about. As a result of this kick-starter event, the relationships built have formed into neighborhood mobilization around specific problems, such as the lack of sidewalks for children to walk on.

In the future, Woodward sees the program serving as a holistic model for climate resilience and shifting perceptions around what it means to be a community member, ultimately inspiring others to take an active role in transformative change. She also sees the program as “creating an environment where residents can come together to create a collective path forward, reducing polarization, and legitimizing the unique skills and knowledge that each member brings to the table.”

Fink envisions the program creating a host of connected networks across Ann Arbor. “Once smaller networks are established at the block or street level, network leaders can share ideas across neighborhoods, connecting people socially and in emergencies,” Fink explained. Furthermore, many small businesses and other entities are located within neighborhoods. “I imagine connecting all these resilience networks with businesses, religious sites and community organizations together to create a broader sense of community across all Ann Arbor,” Fink added.

The project has significantly influenced Fink and Woodward’s future career path. With a year left to complete her degrees, Woodward was inspired by seeing theory come to life to create real change. The project taught her the importance of regenerative relationships “with ourselves, with others, with power and with the land,” she said. “I’ll carry this lesson with me wherever the path leads, and while I’m still figuring out my next steps post-graduation, I know that I want to continue integrating theory and research into meaningful action to strengthen our communities.”

Fink learned the value of “making connections at the local level and deeply centering the interests of the community in projects.” She aims to continue working with local governments and community groups on social-based sustainability solutions in the future.