

A Community Vision

In early 2003, artist Jean Graham shared her vision for a Wall of Welcome with a small group of neighbors in the Brentwood and Crestview neighborhoods of Austin, Texas. Jean dreamed of covering a 120-foot-long brick wall at Crestview Shopping Center along Woodrow Avenue with mosaic designs that would preserve some of the history of the two neighborhoods, established more than 50 years ago.

All of us soon were convinced that we wanted to raise money for the wall, uncertain then exactly how we would do it. A growing number of Brentwood and Crestview residents met that winter and spring, and within a few weeks plans for a multi-faceted, all-volunteer community event began to take shape. We decided to hold the first Violet Crown Festival on May 17, 2003 — just a few short months away. We also began to create a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Violet Crown Community Works, to help build and sustain community in Brentwood and Crestview through neighborhood enhancement projects and events, including the Violet Crown Festival, the mosaic Wall of Welcome, the film *A Community Mosaic*, and others.

Each of us had different ideas of what the festival could be, and our meetings were intensely collaborative, creative, and productive. As we moved forward with planning the event, the “heart of the festival” became clear to us:

- *Seeing Jean Graham’s Wall of Welcome become a reality.*
- *Celebrating the Brentwood and Crestview neighborhoods, which we see as sharing many common concerns and goals.*
- *Bringing together all elements of the community—individuals of all ages, schools, neighborhood associations, community groups, churches, and businesses.*
- *Strengthening our sense of place, by gathering and preserving our neighborhood’s history and community resources and sharing those with festivalgoers.*
- *Creating an event that, like the Wall of Welcome, would reflect the unique spirit of Brentwood and Crestview.*

Building and sustaining community here is especially important today, since fewer and fewer of the two neighborhoods’ original residents still live here. More than a half-century ago, they created the small-town sense of community within a larger urban area that continues to attract new residents. Over the past few years, our area has experienced a resurgence, property values have risen dramatically, and more changes are on the horizon. A Capital Metro rail station has opened along the

eastern edge of Crestview, bringing with it new housing and retail, and Northcross Mall, west of Crestview, is being redeveloped.

On May 17, 2003, our first community festival became a reality. We called it the Violet Crown Festival, because the name has historic ties to Austin and to this area. As early as the 1890s, Austin was described by a local writer as the “the City of the Violet Crown.” In the late 1940s and early 1950s, developers of the Brentwood neighborhood used the term “violet crown” to name a subdivision, a number of businesses, and a shopping center. Austin’s “violet crown” describes the color of the hills to the west at sunset. These hills were still visible from the two neighborhoods when the first residents moved here and began to plant trees on the open land.

By Summer 2006, after four successful annual festivals, Violet Crown Community Works was at a crossroads. We had raised more than enough money to complete the Wall of Welcome, and Jean had begun installing the wall earlier that year. The Violet Crown Festival had become an annual tradition throughout Austin and an asset for those considering moving to Brentwood and Crestview. Schools, churches, neighborhood associations, civic groups, businesses, and hundreds of residents had come together to help with the event. We wanted to ensure that the essence of these community building efforts was sustained.

During Fall 2006, with the help of students from the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas, Violet Crown Community Works conducted a neighborhood survey and compiled a festival handbook. We wanted to hear from our neighbors about what was important to them. We also wanted to share with them our experiences, so that they might be inspired to work on community building projects.

People responding to the survey overwhelmingly agreed that Jean’s work has helped sustain the strong sense of community established by early residents. People agreed that being a good neighbor is important and said they wanted to help with upcoming projects. Thanks to many of those new volunteers, another successful Violet Crown Festival — our fifth — was held on May 5, 2007.

On March 29, 2008, hundreds of neighbors celebrated the completion of the Wall of Welcome at Crestview Shopping Center. We were especially happy to see so many of the neighborhood’s original residents there. They were among the most enthusiastic and loyal visitors to the wall during the two years Jean worked on

installing it — encouraging her, helping with the work, and sharing their memories of the neighborhood. Jean documented their stories and incorporated as many of them as she could on the wall. Some of them were among the many neighborhood residents who attended Jean's tile-making workshops and created their own unique tiles to add to Jean's designs on the wall.

Since the dedication, we have continued to hold fundraising events. The Violet Crown Fall Arts Festival at Crestview Shopping Center in October 2008 provided support for the Voices of the Violet Crown community history project. The Violet Crown Thing in the Park at Brentwood Park in May 2009 helped fund landscaping and other enhancements to the Wall of Welcome. The Violet Crown Festival in May 2010 helped support the Friends of Brentwood Park. Another festival is planned for May 2011.

From the first Violet Crown Festival in May 2003, we have seen how powerful creativity can be when its roots are set deep in the community, and its branches reach out to all of our neighbors. Somehow, even with too little time, too much to do, and too few volunteers to plan it, on the morning of our first festival we were ready. After putting up displays in the Community Tent, we looked out to see if anyone at all would show up. Slowly, young families, older neighbors, and people of every age in-between began to arrive, and they kept coming all day. They looked around as if the festival was something they'd waited for all their lives but didn't know it until that moment.

The real heart of our efforts became so clear to us that day: to care for what is most precious to us here — our families, homes, friends, schools, churches, businesses, and neighbors — and to reach out and find common ground among us. I believe that whenever we are able to do both, we are doing all we can to help the Brentwood and Crestview communities continue to thrive.

Each of us is like one of the thousands of mosaic pieces on the Wall of Welcome, so unique on its own and yet so much more as part of a greater whole. When we come together with intention and contribute the gifts we each have to offer, we really can make a difference, right here.

— *Susan Burneson*

VCCW founding board member (2003-2007) and volunteer (2003-2010)

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