



“MY CONNECTION IS TO MEET PEOPLE, TO SIT DOWN AND TALK TO THEM SO I CAN TRY TO HELP THEM.”

ODELL JENKINS

When Odell Jenkins walks through the Martin Luther King Jr. Senior Center saying hi to friends, stopping for a game of Wii bowling, or when he walks through MLK Park surrounding the center, watching the kids play in the park or splash pad, he feels a sense of pride in what the community came together to create.

To him, the park and senior center developments were not wants but rather community needs. The seniors needed a comfortable place to gather, with more than 30 people showing up for a free lunch each day. The children needed a safe place to play sports and have fun.

He started the effort, pulling together city and county officials and pushing them to provide funding and leadership to make these changes happen. Yet, he describes himself as just one of several residents who banded together.

“We have a very, very diverse neighborhood, one of the most diverse in the city, and we try to get all these people on the same page,” Odell said. “My thing is that we don’t meet strangers, we meet people.”

The connections Odell has helped build to make projects like these happen have changed the attitudes of other community members. Shirley Boden, who manages the park for the city, describes herself as the “neighborhood mom.” In summers, she sits on a picnic bench monitoring the splash pad. She brings drinks and snacks, knowing many kids in the neighborhood go hungry. “I tell people these children are our future so please don’t just ignore them,” she said.

She describes Odell as the person to talk to if you have a problem. “He’s synonymous with community,” Shirley said. “He cares about the children in the neighborhood. He cares about the adults in the neighborhood. He’s an all-around person who cares.”

Odell describes his style of making connections as throwing out ideas and asking for suggestions. Everyone gets a vote. His style of community organizing grew out of serving as chief steward for the union when he worked at the packing plant and as a custodian for Des Moines Public Schools.

He has lived in the MLK Jr. Park neighborhood for nearly 50 years. He and his wife used to offer housing for teenagers who needed a place to stay. These children – more than 25 of them – still look to Odell as a role model today.

The relationships he built with many of the neighborhood’s teenagers in the past have led him to his next community project, identifying opportunities for teenagers today to learn technical skills after school.

“I blame us for not taking time to figure out something for these kids to do that is supervised,” Odell said. “To me, I don’t think there are bad kids. I think there are kids who are really misunderstood and they’re trying to connect with us.”