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## Community center makes 'connections'

*By Lisa Bernard-Kuhn  
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From her third-floor office at Emanuel Community Center, Karyl Cunningham can hear the daily hum that crawls through Over-the-Rhine's streets.

Just around the block from the Race Street non-profit, the clatter of hammers, buzz saws and construction trucks bounces off aging Italianate buildings on Vine Street.

The work is a regular reminder of the multi-million-dollar transformation under way in Over-the-Rhine by the private, non-profit developer Cincinnati Center City Development Corp. So far, more than \$80 million has been invested to create the Gateway Quarter off of Vine Street - a hub of new neighborhood condos, retail storefronts and restaurants.

At nearby Emanuel, the changing landscape has inspired a refreshed mission aimed at serving as Over-the-Rhine's "community connector," Cunningham says.

By using the arts and education, the 138-year-old center is working to break down racial and economic barriers among Over-the-Rhine's long-time residents and incoming crowd of condo buyers, new business owners and visitors.

"You can put millions of dollars into brick and mortar projects, but that alone will not give you a cohesive community," Cunningham says. "At some point, all of this financial investment has to be tied together."

Emanuel's neighborhood roots and history as a learning center - it's the oldest licensed day-care provider in Ohio - helps put the organization in a unique position, says Colin Groth, a board member, neighborhood resident and government relations coordinator for the Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority/Metro.

"The center is definitely in a position to help the neighbors make those connections that are key to building a vibrant sustainable neighborhood," he says. "Emanuel wants to play that lead role."

Within the past year, the center has packed on a slew of new programs from book clubs and speakers series to salsa lessons, Jazzercise, and movies in Washington Park.

"In order for Over-the-Rhine to become a healthy, mixed-income neighborhood, there has to be interaction and relationships with all the residents," says Mary Burke-Rivers, director of the non-profit development group Over-the-Rhine Community Housing. "But someone has to play the role as a facilitator. We see Emanuel is definitely stepping up to plate."

Each Wednesday, through its Jazzercise class, the center draws attendees from across Greater Cincinnati, says Kelly Leon, the course instructor and vice president of communications at the Cincinnati

Center City Development Corp.

"It's really great when I look out at the class and see people from the neighborhood, people from downtown and people from the suburbs exercising along together," Leon says. "It doesn't matter if you're white or black, or how much money you make. It's for everyone."

In addition to opening its doors for countless community meetings, the center also hosts regular book signings with local authors and outdoor jazz concerts. Through its Community Connect speakers' series, the center recently lured award-winning Washington Post personal finance writer Michelle Singletary to town to speak to attendees at a packed Memorial Hall on Elm Street.

In coming months, the center expects to feature cooking classes with some of Cincinnati's top chefs, and programs centered on rooftop gardens, Cunningham says.

"The key is to create unique experiences that everyone can share."

## Additional Facts

Emanuel Community Center

**Mission:** Link long-time residents with newcomers

**Where:** 1308 Race St. Over-the-Rhine

**Programs:** Youth, athletics, cultural, arts

**For more info:** Call 513-241-2563 or go to [www.emanuelcenter.org](http://www.emanuelcenter.org)

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