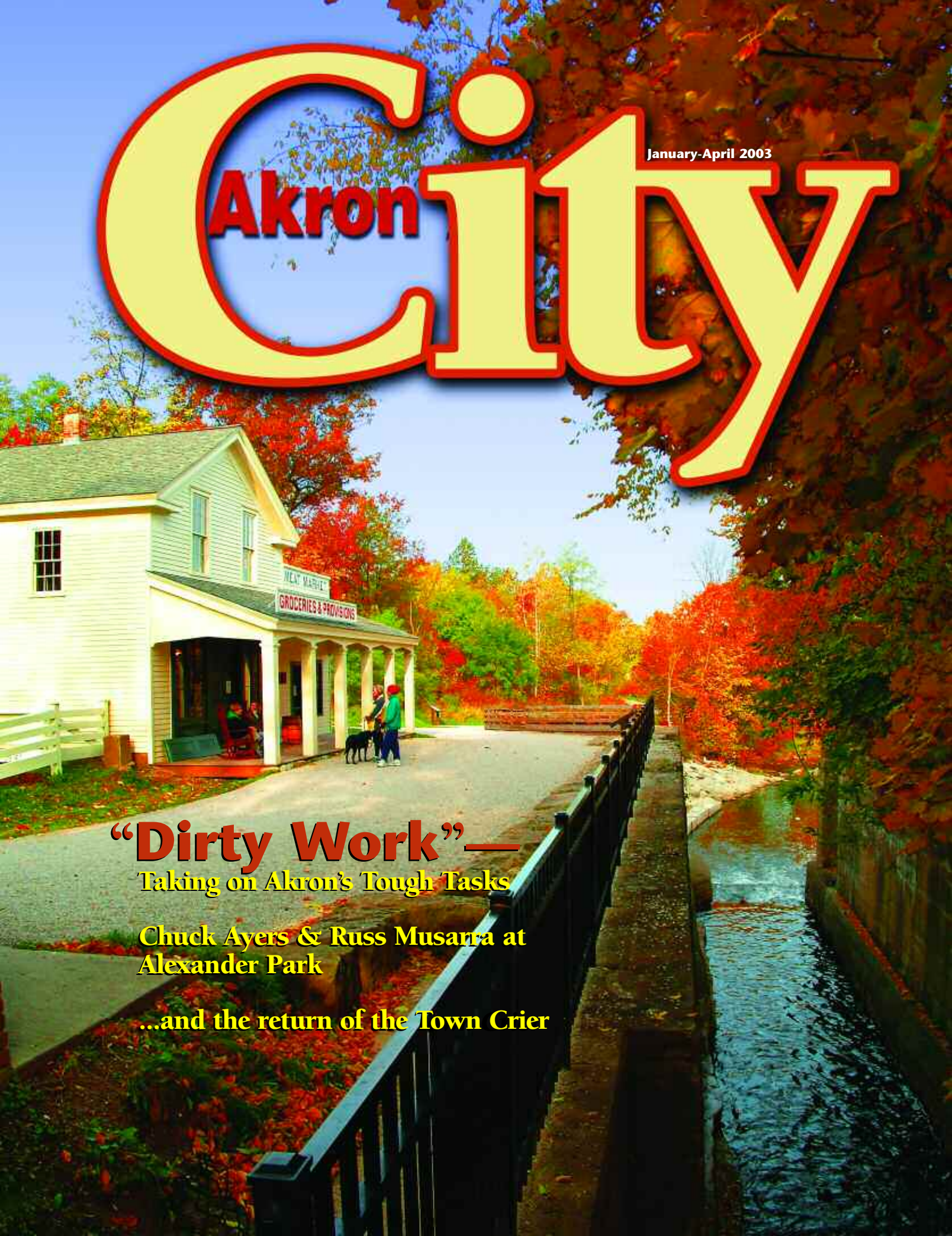
Akron City

January-April 2003



"Dirty Work"—
Taking on Akron's Tough Tasks

Chuck Ayers & Russ Musarra at Alexander Park

...and the return of the Town Crier

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From City Hall...

Welcome ...

...to *Akron City*, a magazine of current events combined with our recycling calendar. In this new format, the calendar and magazine will be published three times each year — in January, May and September.

Both the calendar's new look and the new city magazine are the result of feedback we have received from residents:

- You liked the look of the city calendar and the convenience of having the recycling information in one place.
- You enjoyed Bruce Ford's spectacular Akron photos.
- You told us how much you appreciate having up-to-date information about community events.

Akron City, the magazine, is a bonus and is being published in response to polling conducted for *Imagine Akron: 2025*. Ninety percent of 435 Akron residents we interviewed said they wanted the City to provide more information about city news and community events. This publication also gives us a chance to recognize the 2,475 employees of the City of Akron who serve the community each day (please see the "Dirty Work" feature in this issue). By publishing the calendar three times during the year, we can provide more up-to-date information about community events.

The new magazine is made possible by underwriting from Akron companies whose names are listed on the back cover. We're grateful for their financial support as well as a generous grant from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Recycling and Litter Control. We also appreciate the cooperation of Keep Akron Beautiful, which is distributing these publications.

Happy New Year to you and your family,

Donald L. Plusquellic

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Akron City is prepared three times a year by the City of Akron Communications Department. The magazine and recycling calendar is distributed by U.S. mail to all residents of Akron by Keep Akron Beautiful, a not-for-profit corporation in the state of Ohio.

Additional copies of the magazine and recycling calendar are available through the Department of Communications, Mayor's Office, 166 South High Street, Akron, OH 44308.

Our Cover Photo is Bruce Ford's shot of the towpath alongside the Mustill Store in the Elizabeth Park neighborhood, a familiar sight to the 14,000 people who participated in the Metroparks 2002 Fall Hiking Spree. The canal area is one of the emerging landmarks of the "new" Akron. Just a block from Mustill's is the Northside Train Station, which was dedicated in September, at North Howard and Ridge streets. The City of Akron invested $250,000 in providing a first-rate parking lot for the site; Keep Akron Beautiful provided the landscaping. The Akron train station is the destination for 25,000 visitors annually, delivered by the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad.

Tell us what you think by replying to *editor@ci.akron.oh.us*
Or share your thoughts with the Mayor at *mayor@ci.akron.oh.us*

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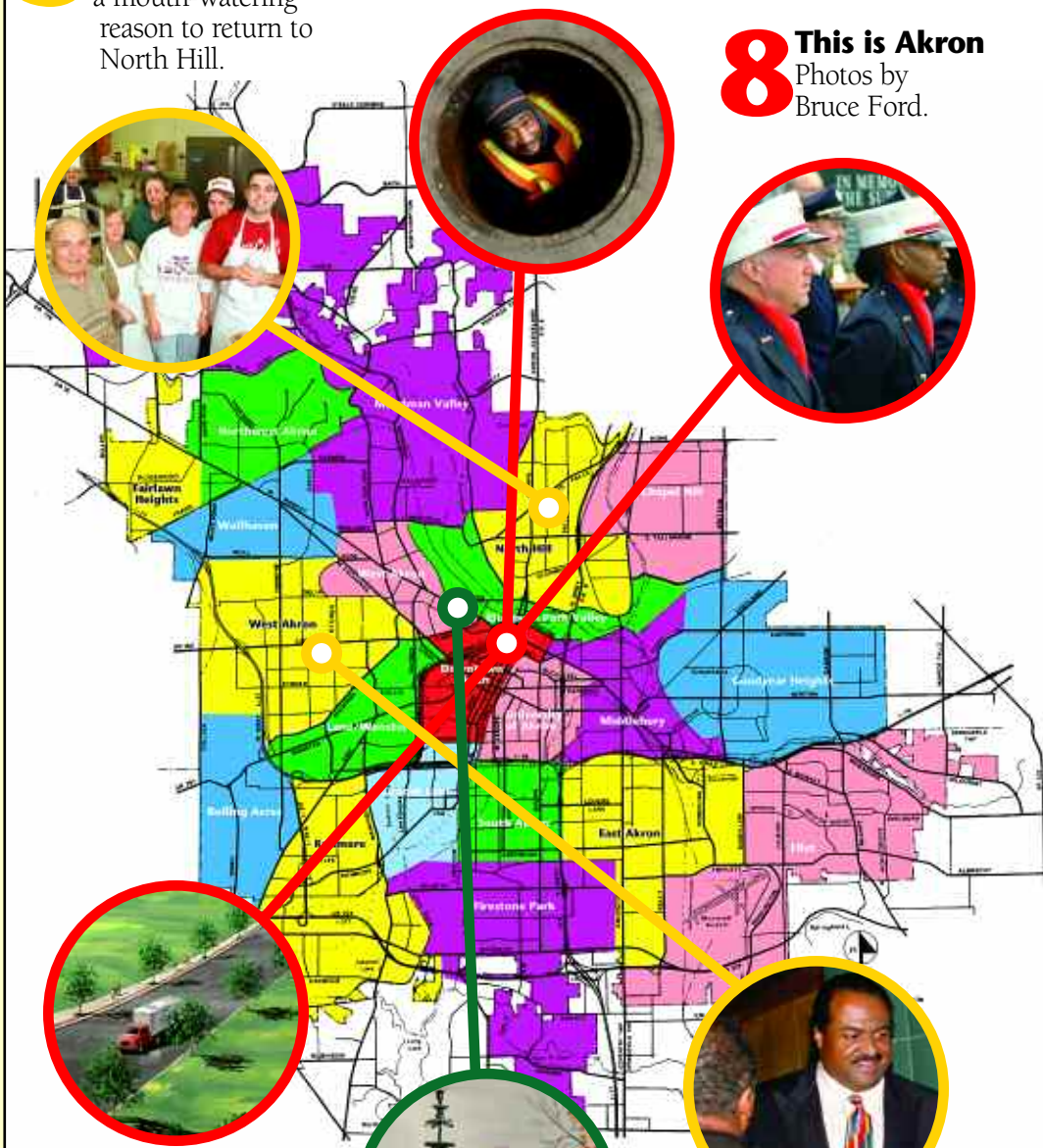

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Neighborhoods

Lane-Wooster Neighborhood Shows Effect of Community Investment

Lane-Wooster's new playground is conveniently located near the new library branch.

One of Akron's oldest neighborhoods is looking brand-new these days, thanks to an infusion of investments from the City of Akron, the Akron-Summit County Public Library, Akron Public Schools and soon, perhaps, other partners as well.

What's happening in the Lane-Wooster area of Akron demonstrates how a residential area with significant structural and social problems can be re-created as an urban treasure.

A dozen areas throughout the city have benefited from municipal housing programs over the last 10 years, but probably no single neighborhood has demonstrated such dramatic improvement as Lane-Wooster. Some would say, looking back to 1990, it's because the historic home to many of Akron's African American families had a long way to go.

Wooster Avenue bisects the neighborhood. The other half of the district's name comes from a school built in 1902 and named after former Akron Mayor and County Sheriff Samuel Lane. After the City acquired it in 1993, the school was demolished to make way for seven new single-family homes.

The Lane-Wooster renaissance probably began with the opening of Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts. In recent years, the City has invested $4 million in other area improvements — notably Lane Field, which includes two tennis courts, a roller rink, football fields, a full-size track with six lanes, a soccer field, three baseball fields (including one for high school use), parking, lighting and permanent buildings with concessions and restrooms.

"It's amazing to me," says Akron Planning Director Warren Woolford, "that the track has already energized the neighborhood. Residents are not only walking, but using the track as a meeting place with other neighbors. It's brought a real sense of community back to the neighborhood, and people feel safe to walk around."

Akron-Summit County Public Library Director Steven Hawk is proud of his newly constructed Wooster branch. "Shortly after it was finished," he says, "a young man stopped me, as I was standing outside admiring the new building, and he thanked us. He had just enrolled at the University of Akron, and with the library's opening, he finally felt that he had a place to study that he could call his own." Hawk also says that use of the new Wooster branch library has increased significantly.

Soon, a new elementary school will eliminate the need for children in the neighborhood to be bused to as many as 10 different schools. Akron Public Schools' facilities plan, now awaiting funding, places a high priority on a new building.

The City itself is renovating older homes and building new single-family dwellings in partnership with residents and community agencies. Since 1990, Akron has provided rehabilitation services to a dozen areas of the city — specifically, to owners of 4,617 homes who have received grants, loans or other incentives to stay in their residences. More than $51.5 million has been allocated from government programs to improve Akron's housing stock in the past decade.

The City has also assisted in the construction of 415 new homes throughout Akron: Blake Place, East Akron Homes, West Akron Homes, South Akron Homes, North Akron Homes and Arlington Homes; the City has partnered with Nazareth Housing and Coburn Street Housing on other projects.

In the Lane-Wooster neighborhood, the private, nonprofit Urban Neighborhood Development Corporation has already built and sold 20 single-family homes in its Millerview development, named for Akron's first African American school principal, George Miller. Four additional homes are under construction on Moeller Avenue, and 35 new homes in the Lane-Wooster area have been built through a partnership of the City of Akron, Westside Neighborhood Development Corporation and East Akron Neighborhood Development Corporation.

Third Ward Councilman Marco Sommerville, who also serves as council president, says the City is still seeking other investors, and he believes that in 2003, a major community organization may be persuaded to locate a new headquarters building in the Lane-Wooster area.

Chapel Hill: A Passion for Pet Care

A walk through Dr. Sharon Hoffman's Chapel Hill veterinary clinic reveals the close bond that she's formed with neighborhood pet owners.

The walls of Chapel Hill Animal Clinic and Dentistry are decorated with handmade silk flowers, needlepoint, collages and other gifts Hoffman has received over the years.

Saying that she particularly enjoys treating "senior" pets, Hoffman provides veterinary care to cats, dogs, rabbits, horses and sea mammals. "Just about any animal with teeth," she notes. She has been practicing in the Chapel Hill area since 1989.

Passionate about her field, Hoffman is a frequent speaker at neighborhood schools, local kennel clubs and regional charitable organizations. Her presentations cover a wide range of topics, including careers in veterinary science, pet care and pet ownership issues.

In her view, it's important for prospective pet owners to carefully consider the cost and time involved in caring for a cat, dog or other animal. "Too many people buy a pet on impulse and then realize that it's more than they bargained for," she says. "I tell people to resist the impulse to own a pet until you've done research on the cost of food, training and veterinary services."

For cat owners, especially those who allow their pets to roam outdoors, Hoffman says it's a good idea to consider insertion of a microchip. The procedure, which is performed by many veterinarians at a cost of $30 to $50, involves injecting a rice-sized device under the animal's skin. If a pet is impounded as a stray, Summit County Animal Control Officers use a scanner to detect the presence of the identification microchip. If present, it enables the officers to easily identify the pet and return it to its owner.

Partnership Grants Enrich Neighborhood Life

Forty-six different neighborhood projects throughout Akron are sharing in $220,000, distributed by the City of Akron's Department of Planning through a partnership with Akron Community Foundation.

"We're making Akron's neighborhoods better every year, one neighborhood at a time," says Jody Bacon, president of the foundation, which contributes 50 percent of the money paid into the grant fund, matched by City community development funds.

Every neighborhood has a chance to obtain grants from the fund, so long as they match the money with a neighborhood contribution.

Partnership grants by the City and Akron Community Foundation helped fund flowerscapes around the community.

Many neighborhoods provide the "match" with sweat equity — that is, the hourly labor of residents who donate their time.

By way of example, the **Firestone Park** area received three grants in 2002:

- $5,690 to the Firestone Park Citizens Council for special events, a community newsletter and its Adopt-a-Site program.
- $2,750 to the Firestone Park Garden Club for its Peace Garden on Firestone Boulevard.
- $500 to the Firestone Park PTA to replace a "rumble and roll" slide in the playground.

The **Ellet** Women's Club received $5,172 to fund both a lighted community sign and hanging flower baskets along Canton Road. The Kenmore Community Council received $6,000 to fund its annual festival.

A complete list of grants can be found at the City's website at **www.ci.akron.oh.us/News_Releases/2002/050602.html**

Dontino's: A North Hill Classic

Once populated mainly by Italian and Polish immigrants, North Hill today boasts a diverse cultural mix. The neighborhood has become home to many new residents in recent decades, yet several institutions — such as St. Martha's and St. Anthony's churches — and a few longstanding businesses are reminders of the area's heritage.

At Dontino's Restaurant, a North Hill fixture, owner Carlo Maltempi says the neighborhood was known as the Little Italy of Akron during the 1920s and '30s. "There used to be five Italian American social clubs," he notes. "Now, there's only a couple of clubs left."

Maltempi came to North Hill from Messina, Sicily, in 1953 with his parents. After earning a master's degree from Kent State University and teaching there for several years, he opened Dontino's with his father at the site of the former La Vita Garden Restaurant, a neighborhood landmark for 25 years.

Although many of North Hill's longtime residents have migrated to the suburbs, Maltempi says he has resisted occasional offers to relocate Dontino's to a more affluent area. By staying, "We give people a reason to return to their old neighborhood. They love coming back here, for the food and the camaraderie."

Dontino's is a family affair: Maltempi and his son Frank work at the restaurant full-time, but most nights, one of Maltempi's other four children is pitching in. Despite Dontino's cozy ambiance and the air of familiarity displayed by its patrons and staff, Maltempi says the restaurant is not strictly a neighborhood hangout. "We've become regional," he says. "We're seeing a lot of new faces. We're right near the expressway, so people can see our sign. And area hotels have been recommending us to their guests. It seems like North Hill is being discovered again."

Dirty

The City of Akron is fortunate to have many employees who perform essential – yet often unheralded – work in conditions that are dirty, unpleasant and sometimes precarious. In this article, we've profiled four individuals who diligently perform the "dirty work" that makes Akron a safe and vital community.

Tish Jernigan

Harvey Smith

Sidney Harrison

Don Frost

Work

By Robert Sberna

Sidney Harrison

Sewer Maintenance Worker
Public Utilities Bureau

As a member of a sewer-cleaning crew, Sidney Harrison has the unsavory task of climbing down manholes to remove muck and debris from the underground pipes that traverse Akron.

Although Harrison and his crewmates use a mechanized bucket apparatus to clear storm and sanitary lines, it's often necessary to remove waste material by hand. "We put on rubber gloves and try not to stick our hands in the muck," he says, noting that it's usually possible to avoid contact with the unspeakable. "We've learned to recognize the sound of someone flushing their toilet. There's a telltale gurgling sound, which gives us time to get out of the way."

An eight-year City employee, Harrison says he's gotten used to working around raw sewage. "You definitely need a sense of humor to do this job," he says. "It also helps that I work with good people, and it's satisfying to know that we're helping to keep the city running."

On occasions when Harrison becomes discouraged by the job's unpleasant aspects, he reminds himself that he's working in the sewers so that his two children won't have to. "I'm going to make sure that they have the opportunity to go to college," he says.

Tish Jernigan

Engineering Technician, Construction Division
Public Service Department

Tish Jernigan's job, like Sidney Harrison's, frequently takes her among the sewer pipes that carry away our storm water and waste. The 11-year City employee can be found at construction sites throughout the city, inspecting the work of contractors.

In recent months, Jernigan has clambered into 12-foot-deep trenches to inspect storm sewer installations, stood atop lofty buildings to oversee the application of a roof and monitored several concrete pours. "I'll go wherever my job takes me," says Jernigan. "Basically, I keep an eye on contractors to ensure that their work is being performed according to the City's building codes."

For example, she says, "When contractors are installing storm sewers, I'll hop in the trench to inspect the gravel bed and make sure the pipes are deep enough. Or, when we pour concrete for stairs and slabs, I have to make sure the reinforcing rods are spaced correctly. If asphalt is being applied, I need to make sure it's being rolled correctly."

> **"There's a certain amount of pride in doing this job."**

No matter the weather, Jernigan says, she enjoys being outside. "The job sites can be very muddy and dusty," she notes, "but I love being around construction."

Jernigan, who is married and has two children, says sloppy work conditions don't faze her. "I'm more concerned about working on road projects," she says. "Drivers just don't seem to slow down for construction workers. It can be frightening to be standing on a road with a 12-foot hole in front of you, a large backhoe operating right next to you and high-speed traffic several feet away."

Donald Frost

Detective, Identification Bureau
Akron Police Department

Most of us would regard the scene of a violent crime as a repellent sight. For Detective Donald Frost, a crime scene is a puzzle that offers a multitude of clues. "When I'm at a crime scene, I know there's evidence there," Frost says. "I find it very rewarding to find that evidence, whether it's blood, other bodily fluids, latent fingerprints or clothing fibers."

After serving as a patrolman for eight years, Frost joined the Identification Bureau last year. As a crime scene investigator, Frost collects, preserves and analyzes any evidence that may help solve a case.

While bloody crime scenes can be particularly grim, Frost says, those situations can provide good evidence-gathering opportunities. He explains that the pattern and angle of blood spatter on walls and other surfaces can reveal important clues about the commission of a violent crime.

At crime scenes that are very bloody or have been contaminated by chemicals or biohazards, Frost wears a moisture-proof protective garment and a face shield. "We call it a bunny suit, because it has shoe covers and gloves," he says. "We also wear a respirator at scenes that are odoriferous: for example, if there is a severely decomposing corpse in the room."

Of course, not all crimes are violent. Frost is often called on to collect evidence at robberies and break-ins. At the scene of a recent burglary, Frost's quest for evidence led him to retrace a perpetrator's path through the sub-roof of a building. "He broke through the plywood roof and crawled about 12 feet to the room that held the safe," Frost explains. "In order to glean evidence, I had to crawl along the path that he had made. I got very dirty looking for shoeprints and fingerprints."

Harvey Smith

Equipment Operator, Street Cleaning Division
Public Works Bureau

In a sense, Donald Frost and Harvey Smith share the goal of cleaning up Akron's mean streets. While Frost works at removing the criminal element from our community, Smith's job is removing dirt and debris from our street surfaces.

Smith, 42, drives a street sweeper. He works the night shift, enjoying his solitude and the city's peacefulness. It's a messy job; the machine's scrubbers kick up large clouds of dust. "In the fall, the leaves are very dirty," Smith says. "And, in the winter, I get rock salt in my shoes."

On most mornings as he drives home, Smith says, he enjoys inspecting his just-completed work. "I look at the streets I've cleaned, and I feel good," he says. "There's a certain amount of pride in doing this job."

The 22-year City employee says dirty work doesn't bother him. "I was always the kind of kid who came home from church and played football in his Sunday best," he explains. "And anyhow, my wife tells me that I clean up pretty well."

This is A

KEEP AKRON BEAUTIFUL

Take Pride in Akron, KAB Awards

Keep Akron Beautiful presented its annual "Take Pride in Akron Awards" in October. Recipients crowded into the new showroom at Dave Walter Volkswagen on West Exchange. The three-dealership campus, once the site of an abandoned gas station, was recognized for its landscaping.

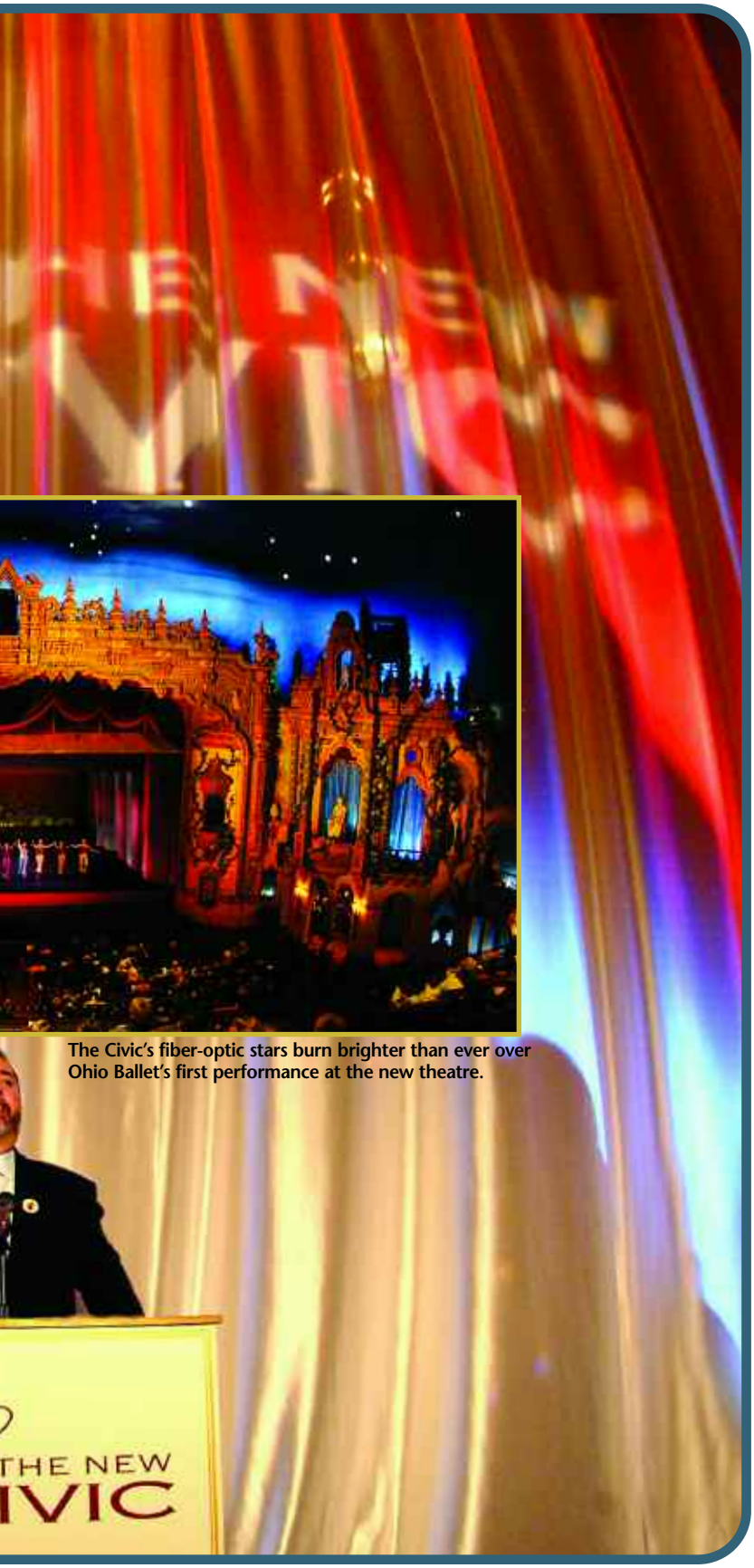
Landmark Plastics was honored for being a "green oasis" in the industrial neighborhood of Kelly Avenue. The well-manicured lawns, shrubs and trees greet visitors to the 200,000-square-foot facility, where plastic scraps are recycled into horticultural packaging products.

A third honoree was The Academy at Robinson in East Akron, where students sold engraved bricks to help fund the transformation of a brick wall. The wall was capped and decorated with 4,000 ceramic tiles, creating a colorful mural topped with 489 stars — one for each Robinson student.

$22 million in improvements at the New Civic were unveiled by director Dan Dahl at dedication ceremonies October 30.

AKRON

Photos by Bruce Ford



The Civic's fiber-optic stars burn brighter than ever over Ohio Ballet's first performance at the new theatre.

On September 11, Akron firefighters, police and several hundred guests gathered at Station 4 in South Akron to remember victims at the World Trade Center and Pentagon. The ceremony included bagpipes and the tolling of church bells.

In November, second-graders at McEbright Elementary School in Firestone Park were visited by Mayor Plusquellic and two engineers from Dupont. The students learned how to build sturdy domes from gumdrops and toothpicks, part of the United States Conference of Mayors outreach program to urban students.

News

Learning the lessons of Intervention

Members of the police department's CIT know how to make the best of bad situations.

CIT officers Sergeant David Laughlin and Roger Myers are trained to assist individuals in crisis who have been diagnosed with mental disabilities.

Several months ago, Akron police officer Roger Myers was called to a health-care clinic where a mentally disturbed man was threatening staff members. "The man was huge," recalls Myers. "And he had a history of fighting anyone who tried to restrain him."

Other police officers had arrived at the clinic before Myers. But instead of arresting the man—and risking a violent confrontation—the officers summoned Myers, who is a member of the police department's Crisis Intervention Team.

"It was a tense situation," says Myers. "But I walked right up to the man and started chatting with him. Within a few minutes, he voluntarily let us transport him to a psychiatric facility."

As a CIT officer, Myers has received training in how best to respond to situations involving individuals who exhibit symptoms of mental illness. By taking a calm, understanding approach, CIT officers are often able to defuse a situation without the use of force.

Since the Akron Police Department instituted its CIT program in 2000, about 100 officers have become certified crisis intervention officers. In addition to learning how to recognize different types of mental illness, CIT trainees are taught suicide - and crisis-intervention techniques, how to identify types and symptoms of various medications, and how to help individuals get the most appropriate care.

CIT training is administered on a periodic basis by Summit County's Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Services Board (ADM). The 40-hour training course includes simulated crisis situations and panel discussions with individuals who have mental illness.

Randy Zumbar, the ADM's executive director, explains that Akron's CIT program is modeled on a program developed by the Memphis Police Department. "After learning of the success of the Memphis program, we approached City officials and the police department about implementing a CIT here," says Zumbar. Noting that Lieutenant Mike Woody (now retired) served as the initial police liaison, Zumbar says, "The idea is to give the officers more tools to recognize mental illness and to acquaint people with the various health-care resources in the community, such as the ADM crisis center."

In the past, says Zumbar, police officers had little recourse but to arrest a person who was acting abnormally. "But in many cases, the person was behaving strangely because he or she wasn't taking their medication," says Zumbar. "Rather than arresting these people, it's often preferable to take them to a crisis center, where they can resume or begin their medication. That's better for the family, and it doesn't clog the criminal justice system."

According to Sergeant David Laughlin, who was a member of the first CIT class, "This program has helped us to bridge the gap between the police department and the mentally ill. There's been a stigma about police officers, especially by people who have mental conditions. They've been defensive and avoided us in the past. But now these people have come to realize that CIT officers are there to help them."

Myers adds that CIT training has helped officers to be more patient with people who are experiencing mental distress. "We're better able to get to the root of what's causing a problem," he says. "If a person needs to be taken to a health-care or social service agency, we can make the suggestion in a sensitive way. There can be a lot of shame in seeking help for mental illness. If we can convey compassion to these people, then we have a better chance of helping them."

Bright Lights on Broadway

One of Akron's main thoroughfares into the downtown area has reopened to traffic after being closed for 10 months.

The story of Broadway's transformation began when GOJO moved into the former BF Goodrich world headquarters on South Main Street. City planners looked at new ways to redevelop the Opportunity Park Urban Renewal area, a 40-year-old federal government initiative not far from the University of Akron. A new concept soon emerged — to create a University Technology Park.

It not only took some doing — it took a lot of undoing to reconfigure the "new" Broadway. The thoroughfare had, after all, become the principal one-way northbound avenue in the 1960s.

As the reconstruction of Opportunity Park began in 1999, Broadway was readied for its transformation. Inactive railroad tracks and a massive retaining wall east of Broadway were removed, and the site was graded for development of the new University Technology Park.

The old Broadway Bridge was demolished, and in July 2002, the City began construction of the "new" Broadway at grade level from Bartges to Selle streets. Due to poor soil conditions, the avenue needed to be built on 36 inches of crushed stone. The perfect solution was to use crushed concrete from the demolished south parking deck and bridge.

Today, Broadway not only carries an unimpeded flow of traffic into downtown Akron from the south, it also provides access to the green acres of University Technology Park. This may be the place where polymer technology created in University of Akron laboratories might also be transformed — into useful and profitable products and processes for the global plastics market.

Construction continues on Akron's newest City-owned parking deck at the corner of East Market and High streets. The $15 million state-of-the-art, 700-car garage will have walkways directly into the new Main Library building as well as connections to the restored United and Nantucket buildings on South Main Street. When open in early 2004, the deck will feature ground-level display space and a drive-up book drop-off for the library. The deck will also serve the expanded Akron Art Museum across High Street, construction of which is scheduled to be under way in 2003.

Towpath Trail Extension

Work will continue in 2003 to extend the Towpath Trail an additional 5,000 feet through the center of downtown Akron. In September, Governor Bob Taft biked the Towpath from Memorial Parkway to Mustill Store, where he presented the City with the largest single grant from the Clean Ohio Fund made to one community — a check for $500,000. The trail will follow the steepest incline along the Ohio-Erie canal's 300-mile route — the "staircase" of locks going into the central city. With another half-million dollars from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Akron will foot about half the estimated $3 million cost for the mile of trail that will link Akron directly with the Cleveland Flats.

History

New Monuments for Old Places, Old Faces

Abolitionist John Brown, Native Americans and the founding of the URW are but three of the many historical highlights of Akron's past.

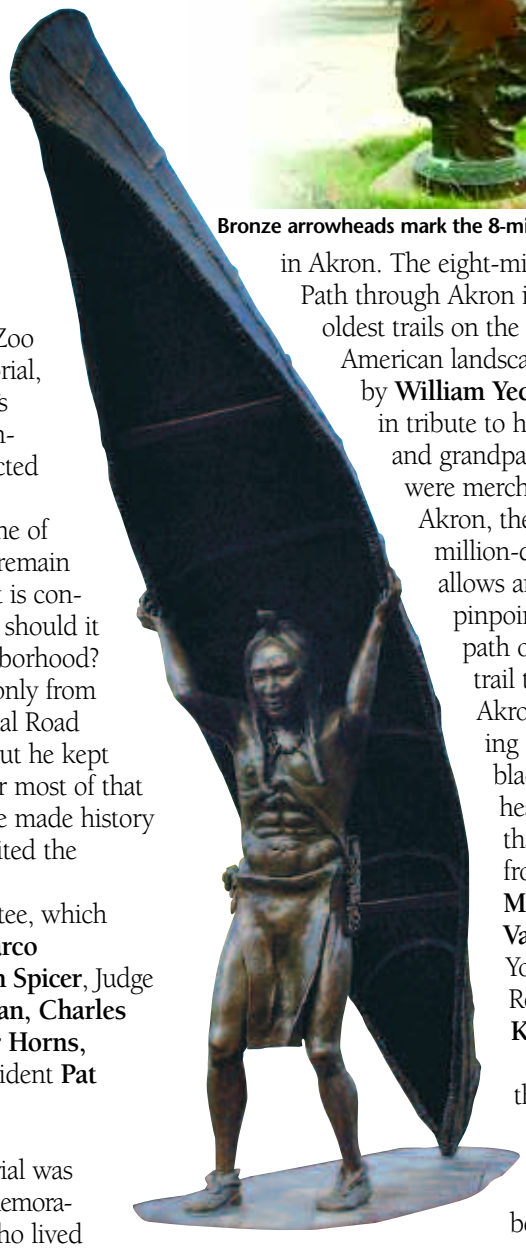
By Dave Lieberth

Akronites have strong connections to the city's past. The renovation of historic Neptune Park (detailed by Russ Musarra on the facing page) was a labor of love for City arborist and horticulturist **Bill Hahn**, who used old postcards and photos to reconstruct the 1880s fountain. Now, Bill and others are turning their attention to another Akron landmark: the memorial to John Brown that's located in Perkins Woods. The Akron Zoo recently fenced in the memorial, once the target of vandals; it's located on property now controlled by the zoo and protected from further destruction.

Should the memorial to one of America's great abolitionists remain where it is — even though it is concealed from public view? Or should it be relocated within its neighborhood? John Brown lived in Akron only from 1842 to 1844, at the Diagonal Road home that bears his name, but he kept Akron as his family home for most of that tumultuous decade before he made history as one of the sparks that ignited the Civil War.

A special mayoral committee, which includes Hahn as well as **Marco Sommerville**, Judge **William Spicer**, Judge **James Williams, Paula Moran, Charles Pierson, Billy Soule, Miller Horns, Michelle Byrd** and zoo President **Pat Simmons**, will make a recommendation by spring.

A different kind of memorial was completed this fall — a commemoration of the original people who lived in Akron. The eight-mile Portage Path through Akron is one of the oldest trails on the North American landscape. Funded by **William Yeck** of Dayton in tribute to his parents and grandparents, who were merchants in Akron, the half-million-dollar project allows anyone to pinpoint the exact path of the Indian trail through Akron by following 50 broad-blade (arrowhead) markers that extend from the **Merriman Valley** to Young's Restaurant in **Kenmore**.



Bronze arrowheads mark the 8-mile trail of the Portage Path.

At each of the trail's two terminal points — at the big bend in the Cuyahoga River to the north, and the mouth of the Tuscarawas to the south — a larger-than-life statue of a Native American portaging a canoe has been erected. The bronze statues give Akron works of public art that few cities enjoy — Indian images created by a native artist. The Akron work was sculpted by **Peter Jones**, a Seneca-Onondaga sculptor who lives on the Cattaraugus Reservation near Buffalo, New York.

The broad-blade markers are authentic replicas of a flint point found in Medina County. They are representative of tools actually used in this area as long as 9,000 years ago.

Other monuments to local history are also in the works. Remembering the founding of the United Rubber Workers Union is the goal of SummaCare Health Plan, now located at Main and Market. When its new downtown headquarters was dedicated a year ago, SummaCare President **Martin Hauser** made sure that the history of the site was well documented in the new building. The lobby features photos of the Portage Hotel as it looked when it opened in 1912. Hauser also hopes to mark the URW's founding in 1935 with a permanent monument of some kind.

One of Akron's oldest monuments — the home of its founding family — needs help. Akron Planning Director **Warren Woolford** will recommend to City Council that it approve a community development grant of $50,000 to the Summit County Historical Society for repairs to the Perkins Mansion. The society has an emergency need to repair the basement ceiling, which is collapsing under the weight of 170 years of fine living.

Alexander Park

By Russ Musarra / Illustrations by Chuck Ayers

Alexander Park today

Fountain in Neptune Park, circa 1910 postcard

West Market area as it appeared in 1999

A message scribbled on a postcard nearly 100 years ago described Akron's Alexander Park — then called Neptune Park — as "a dandy place to spend a summer evening." The writer was referring to band concerts and other events at the .43-acre triangle at West Market, North and Valley streets, which was the first parcel the City of Akron purchased exclusively for use as a park. That was in 1880, for the sum of $1,200.

Artist Chuck Ayers and I didn't know these facts when we first visited the park in 1999. Gathering impressions for a Fourth of July story in the *Akron Beacon Journal*, we were attracted by VanDevere Olds' huge — 30-by-50-foot — flag, which dominated the sky.

Our story was an installment in a monthly feature about the pleasures of walking, which started in March of 1987 and, to our amazement, continued nearly 14 years. We're picking up where we left off, in this inaugural issue of the City of Akron's magazine, and hope you'll join us for other walks in the issues to come.

Revisiting Alexander Park, Ayers and I admired its restoration, which was completed in July with the installation of the new 16-foot fountain, a replica of one that stood in the park until the late 1920s. Keep Akron Beautiful and the City of Akron, partners in the restoration, were helped by private donations, the largest of which was $15,000 from the Akron Garden Club.

The original fountain — given to the city by J. Park Alexander, the Akron businessman for whom the park is named — had carvings of the Roman god Neptune around its base. These, we learned, are to be added to the custom-built cast aluminum replica. The carvings gave the park its original name, Neptune, which was spelled out in decorative iron above the entrance when Alexander, developer of a fire-resistant brick, lived across West Market, in a 20-room brick home he built in the 1860s on a 12-acre estate he called Forest Hill.

The building housing the McDonald's offices at 400 West Market and the McDonald's restaurant next door now occupy that acreage. Ayers' illustration for the 1999 story was of the park against that background, which featured two American flags.

For this magazine feature, the artist chose to look eastward for an illustration that showcases the new fountain, the park's curved brick walkways and the car dealer's huge flag. The Stars and Stripes went well with Keep Akron Beautiful's new Liberty Garden on the park's north side. The garden's red, white and blue floral beds surround a plaque that commemorates the victims and the brave individuals of September 11, 2001, and celebrates liberty.

PROFILE: Steve Marks

Akron's Roadrunner Marathon founder Steve Marks kicks off the year-long campaign to attract 5,000 runners in October 2003. Also on hand at ceremonies at the Lockheed-Martin Air Dock: Olympic marathoner Bill Rodgers (center) and Time-Warner President Steve Fry (right).

If you've enjoyed muffins or brownies purchased from a grocery store or national restaurant chain lately, there's a good chance they were produced by Main Street Gourmet.

Located in Ascot Industrial Park, Main Street Gourmet ships ready-to-bake batter for muffins, brownies and cookies to restaurants, grocery stores, hotels and other institutions throughout the United States.

The firm is expected to generate about $15 million in revenues this year, estimates Steve Marks, who shares chief executive officer duties with Harvey Nelson. Pretty heady stuff, when you consider that Marks and Nelson built their company from scratch in 1987.

Back then, the firm was launched as an "afterthought" to support an investment in a derelict downtown building that Marks intended to renovate. Marks explains that a low-interest loan from the City of Akron helped finance the building purchase. "But to qualify for the City's loan, we were required to have a retail store on the building's first floor," says Marks. After discussing several options, the partners opened a bakery — then known as Main Street Muffin. Within six months, recalls Marks, "A local restaurateur wanted to buy our batter, so that he could bake off his own muffins."

Recognizing the growth potential in ready-to-bake batter, Marks and Nelson closed their retail operation and began marketing their products to restaurants and grocery chains.

Nowadays, the 80-employee firm occupies a 65,000-square-foot facility. "None of this would have happened if we hadn't received that loan from the City in 1987," says Marks. "As a result of that incentive, Main Street Gourmet is able to provide numerous economic benefits to the community, including income tax, property tax and employment."

An enthusiastic supporter of local charitable organizations, Marks is the driving force behind the inaugural Road Runner Akron Marathon, which will be held October 11, 2003. Some 5,000 runners — including relay teams from the U.S., Canada and Mexico — are expected to compete.

Noting that many of Akron's leading companies have agreed to serve as sponsors, Marks says, "Our goal is to create a self-sustaining annual event that benefits charities throughout the community."

City Council Approves Customer Response System

Two separate initiatives of Akron City Council promise to bring lawmakers closer to constituents in the coming year.

Council conducted four neighborhood forums in October. The forums were an opportunity not only to showcase the work of Council to the entire community, but also to acquaint all of Council's members with the needs of other wards, says Council President Marco Sommerville.

Councilman at Large Michael Williams responds to a citizen's question at the Buchtel neighborhood forum.

"We have 10 councilmen elected by wards, and sometimes they don't see the city-wide picture," Sommerville says. "No matter where people live, they have the same concerns — speeding, improving housing conditions, quality of life."

Council President Marco Sommerville discusses issues with two residents at a neighborhood forum.

In 2003, council members will have immediate information about how the City responds to citizen complaints. The new Customer Service Request system, which has been implemented in the past two months, will be fully operational this year.

For the first time, the CSR system provides a centralized database for municipal services and ties all City departments together. As a call comes in to a City department (except for police, fire and EMS), the caller will be asked a standard set of questions, developed by the personnel who must actually answer the call.

"Every single call will now be given a tracking number," says Project Manager Morgan Wayman, "so that at any time, from any City department, the exact progress on the complaint can be determined."

Every council member, the service director and mayor's office will be able to see the progress made on every complaint instantly. The system will be expanded throughout 2003 and ultimately will result in a centralized call center, says Wayman.

Mayor Don Plusquellic, Service Director Joe Kidder and other members of the mayor's cabinet recently visited Baltimore, where the CSR system has been in place and where a 3-1-1 call center takes all City complaints to one single number.

"Eventually, a 3-1-1 call center will unburden our 9-1-1 system from the more routine, non-emergency calls for help," Wayman says.

Until a centralized call center is opened in Akron, complaints about City services can be directed to the Customer Service Counter at Akron City Hall, which can be reached at 330-375-2320 or through the City's website, **www.ci.akron.oh.us**.

The Town Crier

by Russ Musarra

Ken Nichols and Russ Musarra

Imitation, it is said, is a form of flattery — the most sincere or the cheapest, depending on whose version of the adage you ascribe to. I thought of that when I was asked to write The Town Crier column for this magazine.

The late **Kenneth Nichols** didn't just write the *Akron Beacon Journal's* long-running Town Crier column. He was the Town Crier. When he died on January 1, 1987, a colleague described him as "a vacuum cleaner in sweeping up detailed information" about Akron and its people, and he shared knowledge through his writing "with wit and style, with grace and elegance."

I had the privilege of working with Mr. Nichols before he retired in 1981 at age 69, and I was impressed and inspired by his passion for Akron history, developed during a 50-year career. Our association continued, as he still had stories to write and frequently contributed them to the *Beacon* magazine when I was its copy editor. In fact, one of his stories was published posthumously.

So, as I write this inaugural piece for this new publication, I'll try to live up to the example Mr. Nichols set, and if that's considered imitation, so be it.

Akron City

Delicious details

ROGER THOMAS is still basking in the glow of learning that Piatto is *Northern Ohio Live*'s choice as the region's No. 1 restaurant, but he's not resting on his laurels. Asked if he's doing anything different since garnering the honor, Thomas quipped, "We're working a lot harder."

....."We" includes **JEFFREY O'NEIL**, Thomas' partner. Former partner **DIANE ROBINSON** now lives in New York City, where she has resumed her nursing career. Piatto opened less than three years ago at 326 South Main Street, next door to Canal Park.

The commitment to present the best authentic Italian food continues, with occasional fine-tuning of the menu, often reflecting customer tastes, said Chef Thomas, who previously worked his magic at Ken Stewart's and his own restaurant, called 1680, in the Merriman Valley.

New duties for mayor

Mayor **DON PLUSQUELLIC** came back from the annual meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors in Madison, Wisconsin, in June with some new responsibilities. He was elected chairman of the group's Advisory Council, and, come 2004, he'll be the conference president.

Dr. Keck retiring

March 31 will mark the close of an important chapter in the life of Akron. That's when **Dr. C. William Keck** steps down after 27 years as Akron's director of public health.

Reacting to Keck's retirement announcement in June, Mayor Don Plusquellic said, "Bill has been a tremendous force in the field of public health, not only in this region, but in our country."

....Dr. Keck took the helm in 1976, just five years after completing his medical residency at University Hospitals and Western Reserve University (now Case Western Reserve University) in Cleveland, where he earned his M.D. in 1965. Under his guidance, Akron has worked closely with the Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine and with other community health departments in the areas of family health, preventive health services and centralized communicable disease reporting.

....His many awards include this year's Sedgwick Memorial Medal from the American Public Health Association for distinguished public-health service.

Employees of the Year

The City of Akron has been applauding good work by its employees every month since 1988. Nearly 150 City employees have been recognized since the Mayor instituted the program.

....The Town Crier tips his hat to all Employees of the Month for 2002 and will do the same in the new year.

Congratulations to **GARY EDGAR**, honored in November;
ROSSELL "DICK" FENDER JR., October;
ROSE CAVETT, September;
JAMES CUNNINGHAM, August;
TIMOTHY SMITH, July;
PATTY TRUDICS, June;
MARY ELLEN MAZAK, May;
DENNIS RAGINS, April;
MARK WILKERSON, March;
ED LATCHAW, February; and
CINDY DONEL, January.

Akron City

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Members of the Akron Police Identification Bureau wear protective clothing at some crime scenes. At a simulated crime scene, Detective Donald Frost demonstrates the use of special light-emitting instruments that can identify blood, chemicals and other substances.

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