

Olin's community strengths evident in town and beyond

In June, youth groups from Indiana and Cincinnati joined residents to clean flood debris from Olin, a town of 713 in eastern Iowa. As the mess was cleared, even these out-of-town young people knew there was something special about this community. They saw beyond the tired faces, the many homes that were lost, and countless other homes and businesses that were left to repair damages left by the flood waters.

"We received many helping hands when the two youth groups came to town for the cleanup. We also got their perspective of our town," said Roger Kistler, Olin Horizons steering committee member. "As they were leaving town, they kept saying how organized Olin was compared to other places they had been. How the community worked together so well. I think we can give Horizons credit for that – for helping many people demonstrate community leadership and know how to build partnerships across town, county and even state lines to benefit the community."



Horizons is a program directed by Iowa State University Extension with funding from the Northwest Area Foundation for communities of less than 5,000 with a poverty level of at least 10 percent. The program guides communities in the exploration and understanding of local poverty issues and establishment of goals that move the community towards prosperity for all.

The Indiana and Ohio youth were invited to Olin by the local minister, a Horizons participant – who, like others, has been demonstrating the powerful changes partnerships and working together can make. Kistler points out several visible signs of positive community change that have come about with the leadership of Horizons participants – the abandoned lot that has been transformed from a pile of gravel to a beautiful city park on the main thoroughfare, a couple of new businesses – a campground and a store, the O-Town Times, and positive thinking being turned into action by people never before actively involved.

Karen Townsend is one of those positive thinkers put in action by her Horizons participation. She went to the first Horizons community meeting, drawn by curiosity and stayed involved because, as she says, "I'd rather live here than anyplace else."

Townsend credits Horizons with her new ability to give voice and action to ideas that she has, things that can make the community better. She joined Lions and through that club has helped organize a Neighborhood Watch program that has created awareness through the school and community on issues of bullying, talking to strangers, establishing "safe" homes and simply going back to watching out for each other. She credits the Horizons network for pulling together community fund raisers for a burn victim and his family.

"One of the first Horizons projects was the O-Town News," said Townsend. "Through it we share town news – everything from birthdays or town celebrations to when the food pantry is open and how to apply for insurance for children. Everyone with an Olin address gets one and we even mail four to Iraq and several out-of-state. It has been a very positive way getting helpful information and social news out there."

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