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REeCHO

PARK HISTORY TODAY

Collect. Preserve. Share.

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EDITOR’S NOTE - In our 2019 book, *Places in the Park*, we focused on the physical places of Park history, not having the time or resources to document the many key people. We posited:

In classical Roman belief, the genius loci was the pervading, guardian spirit of a place...The mostly accidental political subdivision named St. Louis Park, Minnesota, has been shaped into a great place to live by its people, guardian spirits all. Park people have always supported their less-fortunate neighbors.

We named STEP, the St. Louis Park Emergency Program, as our first shining example of Park people power. Now in its 50th year, we take pride and pleasure in profiling this unique and historic organization, serving the Park since 1975.

STEP BACK TO 1975

Gerald Ford was President, due to the August 1974 resignation of Richard Nixon amidst the Watergate scandal. The economic effects of the 1973 – ‘74 Arab oil embargo sent unemployment rates from 4.9 percent in 1973 to 9.0 percent in 1975.

Wendell Anderson was Minnesota’s governor, still basking in the glow of his August 1973 Time magazine cover touting the “Minnesota Miracle.”

St. Louis Park Mayor Frank Fleetham resigned then un-resigned. Rose-Mary (Griak) Utne, the first woman elected to the City Council, was in the middle of her eight years of service.

And on July 25, 1975, STEP, the St. Louis Park Emergency Program was incorporated with the state as a 501(c)3 non-profit. Sue Nelson was the first director and first volunteer. As reported in the *St. Louis Park Sun*, Nelson said that STEP’s primary goal was, “the communal effort to meet immediate needs...four nitty-gritty, hard-to-reach needs that other

agencies are not meeting.” Those four were transportation for seniors, food shelf, special friend/telephone reassurance, and home care/home chores.



Phyllis McQuaid, left, the Park’s Mayor from 1979 to 1982, and Marie Hartmann, right, founder of the St. Louis Park Historical Society in 1971, at a STEP event. Marie was an early STEP board member. Below, STEP’s home on West Lake Street has been designed to support its mission, and as a bonus is located on historic Lake Street, a relic of T.B. Walker’s transformative industrial vision for the Park.



RELIGIOUS SUPPORT

In a 1975 letter to the editors of the SLP *Sun*, STEP board chair George Shoffner corrected an earlier article claiming that the City of St. Louis Park had originated STEP; pointing out that it had been hatched by ten Park churches, synagogues and community organizations. A STEP newsletter from 1987 lists 28 “religious sponsors,” as follows:

Adath Jeshurun Congregation; Aldersgate Church; Ascension Lutheran Church; B’nai Emet Synagogue; Beth El Synagogue; First Church of Christ, Scientist; First Lutheran Church; First Unitarian Society; Holy Family Catholic Church; Keneseth Israel Synagogue; Knollwood Church of Christ; Lutheran Church of the Reformation; Most Holy Trinity; Mpls. Chapter of Hadassah; Park Assemblies of God; Peace Presbyterian Church; Prince of Peace Lutheran Church; SLP Evangelical Free Church; St. John the Baptist Church; St. George’s Episcopal Church; St. Luke’s Lutheran Church; Temple Israel; Timothy Lutheran Church; Third Church of Christ, Scientist; Union Congregational Church; Westwood Lutheran Church; Wooddale Lutheran Church; Woodland Hills Bible Church.

The Spring 2021 issue of the *ReEcho* profiled existing religious organizations then housed in the Park; about half those on the 1987 list no longer existed or had been merged, renamed, or moved. Current STEP Executive Director Derek Reise noted that religious organizations supporting STEP remain, but support has eroded along with the nationwide decline in U.S. religious participation. According to the Pew Research Center, the number of religious “nones,” describing themselves as atheists, agnostics or “nothing in particular” in the U.S. almost doubled from 16% to 31% between 2007 and 2022.

LEADERSHIP

As first Executive Director **Sue Nelson** told SLP *Sun* reporter R.T. Rybak in December 1978, the early years were a struggle. She had gotten involved through her own church – St. George’s Episcopal – even though she resided in Minnetonka. Nelson had been Minnesota’s director of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) before becoming the first STEP Exec. “I agreed to help out for a few months while the project got started,” she laughed.

The Executive Director position began as a volunteer position, eventually paid. The School Board’s conversion of the 1925 Brookside School building to a Community Education Center in 1975 fortuitously provided a home and rent-free existence.

Although Nelson felt that STEP had finally established itself as part of the Park community early on, a federal CETA grant funding STEP’s only paid workers was soon ended, leaving Nelson as the only paid employee and the organization \$20,000 short of its budget. We believe she resigned around 1986; St. George’s Church records show she passed in 2007. Sue’s successor brought STEP through the next baker’s dozen years of its existence.

Debbie Okerlund [1986 to 1999] did not overlap with Nelson; the Executive Director position was vacant when she was hired in 1986. Debbie brought organizational structure to STEP plus a bedrock commitment to the Social Workers’ Code of Ethics, first adopted by the NASW in 1960. She recalled that volunteers were accustomed to unstructured processes of distribution of food and clothing. As the need increased, Debbie focused on working to establish more organization and coordination with “heart, hope, structure, and order.”

Debbie recalled the revolution in office procedure that came with the purchase of an early McIntosh computer to help coordinate the ride-share program just as she joined STEP. She told of the 1994 physical upgrades at Brookside that brought the building up to code before the Minneapolis Public Schools became a major tenant, moving STEP’s operations from the south end of the building to the north.

In 1999, Okerlund took a short break to assess her overall life direction and decided that her small children required more attention than she was able to give them while properly performing her job. She resigned at the end of 1999.

Kris Bolstad, [2000 to 2003], during his three years as Exec, continued to build the organization, implementing a Simple IRA option with a match so that STEP staff could have retirement accounts. He worked to increase funding for the transportation program and added a dedicated social worker for residents who resided at the Meadowbrook housing complex. In an extended *Sun-Sailor* article marking his departure for a job in Wisconsin, Bolstad cited statistics for the year 2002:

Providing food assistance to 2,165 different St. Louis Park children, seniors and adults, a 15 percent increase from 2001 and a 31 percent increase from 2000...helped 777 different households cope with hunger and inadequate nutrition...most relied on STEP for many months because of extended unemployment or persistent poverty.

Mike “Mac” McCawley [2003 to 2004] succeeded Bolstad, who resigned in June 2003. McCawley had spent the previous 24 years in Brainerd as a director of children and family services for an organization serving five counties. At Bolstad’s retirement party on July 31, McCawley got a note saying that the School Board wanted to close the building Tuesday nights to save on maintenance costs. Kris said that was unacceptable, but it was no longer his fight.

Seven weeks later, on September 18, 2003, the *Sun-Sailor* reported that the school board voted to sell the Brookside Community Center building after its prime tenant, the Minneapolis School District, opted out of its lease. The board cited nearly \$3 million in deferred maintenance needs as another factor. It was probably not what Mac had signed up for. A new Executive Director assumed her duties in July 2004.

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

There are signs of spring in St. Louis Park as I write this. While snow is still on the ground, we know it will be gone in a few days as temperatures keep rising. Birds, and other forest friends, are active at the feeders. Bikes with training wheels and strollers rule the sidewalks. Daylight savings is doing as advertised every evening. And while politics roil and the world reacts to everything from wildfires to egg prices, the coming of spring is a calming reminder that some things, fortunately, never change.

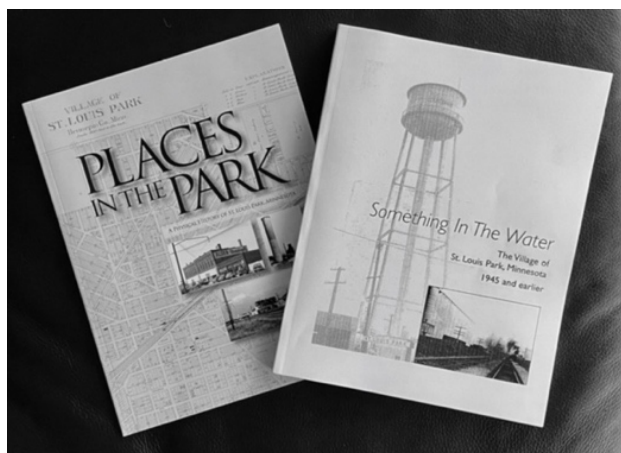
As evidence, enjoy this memory of nearly 100 years ago, which is from our book *Something In The Water*, and was written by John Yngve in 2001 about his memories of life during the 1930s in St. Louis Park:

The spring was wonderful for eating. By that time we would be tired of the old potatoes and the eyes, the soggy carrots, the lack of fresh vegetables. Then the sudden rush to eat all the remaining frozen pork, chickens, ducks, and pheasants, as spring was coming and so was the thaw. We waited for the first fresh vegetables. The wonderful flavor of the first little new potatoes is unforgettable. Then came the onions, carrots, radishes, peas, and beans – and summer had arrived.

This spring at the Historical Society we will be finalizing plans for community events, assessing our membership count (please renew if you haven't already!), adding records to the new archival system *Collective Access*, and greeting visitors on Saturday afternoons. If you are doing some spring cleaning, keep us in mind for pictures, records, and memorabilia from St. Louis Park.

Happy Spring,

Ted



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Founded in 1971, the St. Louis Park historical Society collects, preserves, and shares the history of St. Louis Park. The *ReEcho: Park History Today*, is an official publication of the Society.

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<< continued from page 2<<

Jackie Olafson [2004 to 2015] The *Sun-Sailor* reported on July 29, 2004, that, "After 28 years as vice president of childcare and child abuse prevention services at Children's Home Society, St. Paul, [Jackie] Olafson said she was ready for a change and sought the position at STEP after reading a want-ad."

Olafson told us her first task was to understand the organization she was about to lead. Moving out of Brookside after 29 rent-free years by October, before the holiday rush was secondary, but became a high priority.

Luckily, the City of St. Louis Park offered space in a vacant warehouse it owned at 5925 Hwy 7. STEP moved there in January 2005, but the building had no private office space, was too large, and it cost too much to heat the mostly vacant space.

The next temporary space solution moved STEP to an industrial park building at 2239 Edgewood Ave. S. in March 2009, but rent there was \$6,500/month and was a drain on STEP's mission. The search for a permanent home continued.

Meanwhile, Jackie had to guide STEP through the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, the nation's largest financial setback since the Great Depression. The popping of America's housing and finance bubble nearly destroyed the world economy and, as usual, the poorest Americans bore the brunt. According to Wikipedia:

Assessments of the crisis's impact in the U.S. vary, but suggest that some 8.7 million jobs were lost, causing unemployment to rise from 5 percent in 2007 to a high of 10 percent in October 2009. The percentage of citizens living in poverty rose from 12.5 percent in 2007 to 15.1 percent in 2010.

The world economic debacle had dried up bank lending and rattled local real estate markets, but Park businessmen had stepped up to help. Local real estate investor Curt Rahman and fellow STEP board member Dick Parsons helped identify likely properties and home-grown Citizens Bank provided financing for the move to 6812 West Lake. The building's location on a bus line supported STEP's mission.

All-in-all, Jackie had to muster STEP's volunteers to physically move its operations three times in five years, and the volunteers eagerly did the job, cleaning, painting, fixing, and schlepping for the hundreds of hours required. And, although Jackie retired a decade ago, she still volunteers each week.

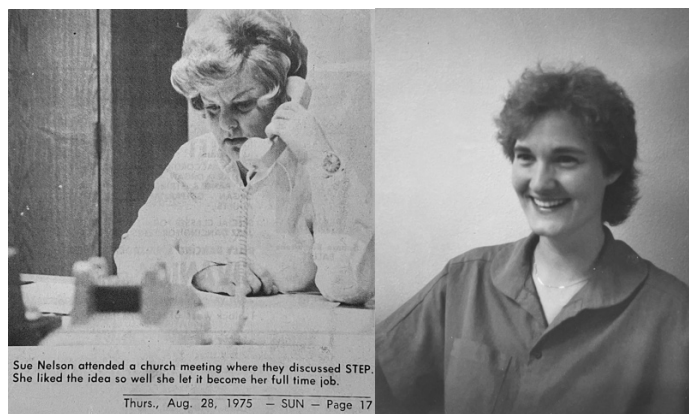
Derek Reise [2015 to present] is the sixth and current Executive Director of STEP, having served for 10 years. He allowed us to peruse the still-unorganized STEP archive to assemble this report. While professional social workers are still front and center at STEP, his background is in the management of advocacy, arts, and direct service non-profits.

Derek has been kept busy making 6812 West Lake work better for all involved. STEP purchased the building in 2010 from Diversified Construction, a St. Louis Park-based commercial contractor that had renovated it for sale during the winter of 2009-2010. According to Reise:

The building met most, but not all, of the needs...STEP still relied on community partners to host events, toy and school supply distributions, board meetings, and volunteer trainings offsite.

By 2015, the warehouse and offices were being used at capacity. A small remodeling project created a couple additional small offices, but there were still employees who had office workspaces in the warehouse or in the breakroom. In STEP's 2017 Strategic Plan, the Board identified obtaining additional space as a priority. In January 2020, the Board ramped up the effort to find a new space. STEP was at risk of losing its leased parking lot at that time, which would have required it to move completely.

Throughout 2020, STEP worked with a commercial realtor for 15,000-20,000 SF space centrally located in St. Louis Park. In December 2021, STEP came to an agreement to purchase the parking lot and entered discussions with the owner of the adjoining building (6800 & 6804 W Lake) to purchase...STEP closed on the sale in June 2022.



STEP Directors since inception from top left: Sue Nelson, Debbie Okerlund, Kris Bolstad, Mac McCawley, Jackie Olafson and Derek Reise.

STEP'S HOME, SWEET HOME

Debbie Okerlund reminded us that STEP was never about the building that housed it. But a building is merely a tool used to help fulfil an organization's mission. It can hinder or help, and if smartly designed, can enhance.

Updating the building and expanding it to fully accommodate operational needs was the challenge for architect Carl Robertson, Park resident, SLP Planning Commission member for 19 years, and president of Sjoquist Architects in Minneapolis. He took up that challenge in 2020 just as the COVID-19 pandemic scrambled construction industry supply lines and blew-up costs. Carl had spent his early professional years practicing architecture in Madagascar, a place where too much money was never a problem, and simple, pragmatic solutions ruled. He was well-suited to make STEP's dollars stretch as far as possible.

The adjacent building at 6800-6804 West Lake had been leased out and termination of the leases had to be negotiated. In May 2023, STEP selected Anderson Companies as contractor to renovate for STEP's specific needs; the project was completed in February 2024. Again, per Reise:

The building purchase was financed through a commercial mortgage with Citizens Independent Bank. The renovation was initially funded with a \$1,000,000 construction loan from the St. Louis Park Economic Development Authority. At the same time, STEP began a \$2.7 million capital campaign to fund the building improvements, as well as program expansion and future capital needs. To date, about 2/3 of the campaign's goal has been secured.

The renovation and expansion project required the knitting together of two one-story, post WWII buildings with varying floor and roof elevations and roof structures, plus an irregular gap between them that was three inches wide at the front of the properties and seventeen inches at the rear.



The project to combine the two properties included a rooftop solar photovoltaic array, an energy-saving approach promoted by the City for the past decade. Architect Carl Robertson considered the added array "a no-brainer" and something he

routinely recommends for all his clients. Reise didn't need much convincing, and is happy to report:

The electric savings from the solar panels is almost \$1,000 a month over the panels' minimum 25 year lifespan. That's when you factor in the upfront costs over the 25 years. That would translate to about 1100 pounds of purchased food per month or 13,200 lbs of food a year or the equivalent of 14,520 meals.

According to Emily Ziring, the Park's Sustainability Manager, who noted the city has eight solar incentive programs on offer to its residents:

STEP received a 15% reimbursement for their solar panel project through the City of St. Louis Park's Climate Champions solar bonus program in 2023. The 40-kilowatt solar array was installed on the newly renovated space next to the original STEP building, which received solar panels in 2017...These energy efficiency upgrades (which also qualified for partial Climate Champions reimbursement) are projected to decrease the building's annual greenhouse gas emissions by 17% annually.



An expandable conference/community room supports larger gatherings, and the "Clothes Closet" is more like clothing boutique.

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The “food shelf” is modern grocery store, with spaces to properly handle kosher and halal foods, and is fitted with state-of-the-art refrigeration equipment. At Brookside, food was stacked in an old locker room. Executive Director Reise and new Development Director Jacqueline “Jacks” Michaud-Freidson show off a starter basket with all the essentials for clients’ newborns.

THE ESCALATING NEED

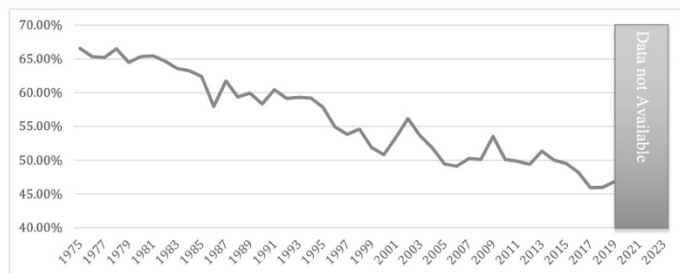
Blogger Charles Hugh Smith argued in a recent Substack post:

There is only one true measure of prosperity...what matters is: how much can you buy with an hour's wage? Fact: in 1977, it took 2.25 days of work (18 hours) to pay the monthly rent on my studio apartment in the most expensive city in the U.S., Honolulu. In virtually any other city or town, the rent would have been less. I was 23 years old, working as a non-union apprentice carpenter for a small contractor. The pay was a bit above average, but by no means fabulous. I wasn't working at Goldman Sachs. The rent was fair market; it wasn't some special deal offered by a relative. Since this was a cheap apartment, let's round that up to 3 days of work to pay the monthly rent. OK, so how many young wage earners today can pay the rent for their own apartment with 3 days' pay?

Indeed, a typical one-bedroom apartment at Hoigaard Village with an indoor parking space currently lists at about \$1,735/month. Three days’ pay to cover monthly rent and parking would require an income of \$580/day, \$72.50/hour, or \$150,000/year. Today’s median annual individual wage for Hennepin County, (among the richest counties in Minnesota), is about \$86,000, or \$41.35/hour, roughly in line with Smith’s observations. Many Park residents experience a \$41/hour wage only in their dreams.

The cost of health insurance is up twentyfold from 1975 through 2020 but Americans pay twice as much as the rest of the civilized world while getting grossly substandard care in return. Not to mention being denied by an algorithm the insurance coverage they paid for. And job loss often means loss of health insurance, a double-whammy that hits the poorest members of society hardest.

Figure 2. The Decline in the share of Income Going to the Bottom 90 Percent of Workers



SOURCE: World Inequality Database

A chart from a February 2025 working paper by the Rand Corporation, “Measuring the Income Gap from 1975 to 2023.”

AAA, headquartered in the Park, estimates the annual cost of new car ownership in 2024 Minnesota at \$11,350, or \$950/month, about three days’ pay at \$41.35/hour.

A college education (up eighteen-fold) has wildly outpaced normal inflation over the past 50 years as well. And we haven’t even discussed food. As reported in the *Minnesota Reformer* in January:

Minnesotans are struggling with the stubbornly high cost of living seen here and around the world, post-pandemic. The cost of groceries, housing, energy and other necessities remain 20-30% higher than they were just five years ago. While the budget forecast offered glimpses of hope, with wages rising and inflation cooling, hundreds of thousands of Minnesotans and their families are living paycheck-to-paycheck as a result.

This, in turn, has contributed to what will soon be three consecutive years of record demand for emergency food assistance in Minnesota. Minnesotans struggling to make ends meet visited food shelves more than 7.5 million times in 2023; we expect final 2024 numbers will be even higher...This growth in demand is unsustainable. And while it remains to be seen what the next Congress will do, policies being considered at the federal level — including tariffs and cuts to SNAP — could make matters worse, turning a crisis into a catastrophe.

Last September, the *Star Tribune* assessed the current state of play, post-COVID:

More Minnesota nonprofits are facing financial crises than any year since 2020 as many continue to weather rising expenses amid stagnant or declining donations. Nearly 80% of nonprofits in a new statewide survey reported that they have less than 12 months before they face financial distress... In 2021 and 2022, about half of nonprofits said they had less than a year before they'd be struggling financially...The new data, released by the statewide association Thursday, shows the slow recovery of Minnesota's nonprofit sector from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Events move fast these days, and the indiscriminate and chaotic budget slashing in Washington, DC, is guaranteed to negatively affect hunger in America. Fifty years ago, the “E” in STEP stood for “Emergency.” Lately that’s a full-time thing.

STEP TODAY

In the face of multiple economic crises over the past five decades, plus declining wealth and income levels for the bottom 90 percent of families in the U.S., STEP’s task might be compared to that old saw, “shoveling sand against the tide.”

Not that Reise or any volunteer would ever put it that way. They show up for work every day with smiles on their faces, grace in their hearts, and a dedication to treating every human being they encounter with the dignity they deserve. When asked what his biggest wish would be, Reise said “consistent revenues.”

Food assistance tops the list of current services provided at STEP, consuming around two-thirds of its annual budget. STEP’S array of social services has evolved from the 1975 “nitty-gritties:” transportation for seniors, food shelf, special friend/telephone reassurance, and home care/home chores.

STEP’s “Clothes Closet” became an early addition to services provided and today is a key element in providing dignity to those seeking help. A grant from MNDOT kicked off

transportation services in 1977 but was not sustained, and providing seniors transport is a much smaller part of services offered. Home chores are no longer provided, in part due to liability issues and shortage of volunteers.

We had a chance to chat with two of STEP’s earliest professional social workers, Debbie Okerlund who served as Executive Director from 1986 to 1999, and Julie Lapointe who started work in 1994 and “retired” in 2022. Julie has continued to fill in at STEP whenever asked. She stayed on staff through the 2022 fiscal year to manage the large and unexpected influx of grant monies post-COVID, over \$800,000. Debbie later resumed a successful professional career as a trainer of leaders, through her firm, Lead with Agility, LLC. The forty-plus years of their collective service embodies the STEP ethic.



Julie, left, and Debbie, right. In recent years, holiday activities have provided community support opportunities, the Canadian-Pacific Holiday Train has proven to be a real crowd-pleaser.

Debbie and Julie both point to the importance of professional social workers over the years, subscribing to a written code of ethics. But codes are merely words, and words need to be lived, something Julie did before she even read the words. In a short video tribute on the STEP website to her years of service, Julie told of starting on her path at age ten, organizing birthday parties for elderly Park residents who had no immediate family members left to care for them.

Executive Director Reise provided the latest metrics on STEP’s services for the 2023-2024 fiscal year:

4,103 unduplicated individuals were served this fiscal year with food, rent assistance, transportation, winter clothing, school supplies, holiday food and toys, birthday gifts, baby items and social work counseling services. 1412 unduplicated households were served. STEP serves about 8% of people (50,010 residents) living in the St. Louis Park community. Number of new households served: 597; Number of new individuals served: 1490.



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VOLUNTEERS LOOKBACK

Volunteers are the lifeblood of most non-profit organizations and STEP is no different. Reise notes that volunteers in the past year have contributed time equivalent to eight full-time employees, significantly leveraging the efforts of STEP's ten FTE paid staff. Citizens Independent Bank always took care to make sure the volunteers were fed, watered, and appreciated.

Selma Taxis, a member of Peace Presbyterian Church who passed in 1979 at the tender age of 66, has been informally credited with providing the spark that launched STEP. In an August 8, 1979, remembrance, *SLP Sun* columnist Karen Reeves noted that Selma had lost an eye to cancer in 1976 and had worked for years as a psychiatric nurse through her own debilitating arthritis, volunteering to help many along the way. Reeves quoted Sue Nelson's eulogy: "...the ST in STEP doesn't just stand for St. Louis Park, but for Selma Taxis...STEP is a living memorial for Selma."



While STEP's archive is full of the faces of the thousands of local residents who have joyfully volunteered over the years, most photos are undated and the people unidentified. Here are a few, Selma Taxis on the left, and some of the youngest contributors at right.