

On Chicago's South Side, revitalization aims for 'culture of health'

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Chicago residents participate in a yoga class started by the Endealeo Institute.
Photo: Melvin Thompson

Washington Heights, a historic neighborhood on Chicago's far South Side, faces the modern-day challenge of boosting health, education and economic opportunities for its residents.

At the forefront of this revitalization effort is The Endeleo Institute, and its success stories are multiplying.

"Endeleo" is a Swahili term for progress and growth. The nonprofit aims to create a culture of health and rejuvenate the neighborhood's 2-mile West 95th Street corridor by partnering with health organizations, institutions, local government and businesses to push community improvement projects forward.

On one end of that corridor is the Carter G. Woodson Regional Library. Endeleo recently helped spearhead its restoration and worked to make it a hub for health information, creating a state-of-the-art space for all ages to congregate.

"Dementia and Alzheimer's were running rampant in our community," said Melvin Thompson, executive director of Endeleo, the community development arm of Trinity United Church of Christ.

Washington Heights' population is predominantly African American, a group about twice as likely to have Alzheimer's disease and other dementias compared with their white counterparts. Brain health is connected to heart health, Thompson said, and Endeleo works to promote cardiovascular wellness, too.

The library, home to the largest African American history and literature collection in the Midwest, was refurbished with \$9 million in government funding. It reopened in 2018 and is "dementia-friendly," meaning it is inclusive for patrons who have dementia. Staff members are trained to provide assistance and resources to those exhibiting signs

of dementia.

Subtle touches in the building's design make it dementia-friendly, too. Clocks are digital. Furniture is easily recognizable. The 65,000-square-foot library hosts educational sessions on legal and financial concerns for people with dementia and their caregivers.

"There's a hunger for education and awareness about this," Thompson said. "The library is that safe, welcoming, non-judgmental, trusting place where people go."

Endeleo encourages community participation as it organizes college and career readiness programs for teens and young adults; a farmers market to provide access to fruits and vegetables; kidney disease education efforts; and real estate projects to establish affordable housing and vibrant businesses. It also battles problems like food and pharmacy "deserts" that can block access to good nutrition and medication.

Roxanne Whitehead attends Endeleo's community events and volunteers her time spreading the word to others about its initiatives.

"Everybody's welcome. That's what kind of drew me to it," she said.

Whitehead takes part in Endeleo-organized meetings for how to encourage useful development on and around the 95th Street corridor. She wants to see dilapidated buildings turned into new businesses like grocery stores or other retail outlets and said the goal is "to make the community safer for each and every one."

She likes that Endeleo informs residents about Alzheimer's, diabetes and access to health services.

"They address all of those issues head-on," she said. "It's very beneficial

to the community. It's key to the community right now."

Partnering with Endeleo are groups such as Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, the Alzheimer's Association, the American Heart Association and local medical centers, clinics, colleges and banks.

The institute is establishing storefronts offering [health information](#) and will install a blood pressure measurement kiosk inside Trinity United Church of Christ. Under the leadership of Rev. Otis Moss III, the church encourages its congregation to explore beyond traditional favorite fried foods and try dishes like baked fish and vegetables.

"Things are different when they come from the pulpit. It's just more powerful," Thompson said. "It has made a difference, and we're seeing people more active."

Endeleo is currently working to renovate a vacant building near the church to establish Café Du Bois, the neighborhood's first coffee shop and social gathering space. It will be named after W.E.B. Du Bois, the first African American to graduate with a doctorate degree from Harvard University. Not surprisingly, it will feature a healthy menu.

"We're trying to create a health-conscious corridor," Thompson said. "Our corridor is really alive now."

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