

Elkhart Resident Practices the Golden Rule

By MCCN Staff Writer

Darrin Snyder Belousek knows the value of loving one's neighbor. This knowledge arises from his experience with a neighborhood movement for justice in Elkhart, Indiana in 2006.

"There was a sense of, 'Why am I doing this?'" said Snyder Belousek. "It's very simple – love your neighbors. It's about banding together and wanting the same thing for our neighbors as for ourselves and working toward that."

At the same time, Snyder Belousek understands that this kind of "banding together" is not possible without the support of the church. In his one and a half year struggle for justice, Snyder Belousek felt the support of congregations such as Prairie Street Mennonite and Fellowship of Hope Mennonite Church which housed multiple prayer vigils and neighborhood meetings.

Sturgis Iron and Metal, a company based in southern Michigan, established a scrap yard in Elkhart's industrial area in the 1980's - a convenient spot located next to the railroad - in hopes that it might become the central site for shredding, processing and shipping out metal. To reach this goal, Sturgis Iron and Metal bought land that would house their "Mega Shredder." This shredder, the largest in the world, could demolish an automobile as large as a bus.

Unfortunately this piece of property adjoined that of a small, residential neighborhood and this is where the story of justice begins.

"The whole south side of town is not treated with a lot of respect by the city government," said Snyder Belousek. "It is the historic African American side of town. This [particular] neighborhood is looked on as low-income. The housing prices are near the lowest and there are lots of empty lots with old houses torn down. Many of [the residents] are older and have owned homes there for twenty to forty years and are retiring there."

Members of Sturgis Iron and Metal and a few officials from Elkhart's city government visited a similar shredding company in Chicago to view operational standards. As a result of this visit, they concluded that the Mega Shredder would not hinder overall daily life. Snyder Belousek's research showed otherwise.

According to Snyder Belousek, the Chicago company was located 1000 feet from the nearest residential home with a large buffer zone in-between. This was not the case in Elkhart as the Mega Shredder sat a mere 200 feet from the residential neighborhood. Neither Sturgis Iron and Metal nor the city government accurately calculated the impact of the company's location and, according to Snyder Belousek, this was the first of three mistakes the city made during the construction of the Mega Shredder in late 2006.

The second mistake was when officials failed to research the overall environmental impact of the Mega Shredder. A quick internet search reveals several negative factors of such a highly industrialized machine. Noise and rust dust come from handling scrap material and an odor of burning rubber and heavy diesel exhaust with a biting metallic taste are a result of residual fluids, oils and gasoline. The smell alone burns the eyes and nose and causes headaches. The first time he felt the vibrations, Snyder Belousek was taking a nap, but the very worst consequences of the Mega Shredder are explosions.

“In the first explosion, we thought the house was hit by a bus,” said Snyder Belousek. “There was a sudden thrust through the whole house. It is like the house bounces on its foundation.”

The third mistake by city officials is that they did not consult with the public. In his research of the Elkhart City Zoning Ordinance, Snyder Belousek discovered greater requirements for heavy industrial equipment such as the Mega Shredder. A series of public processes should have occurred including notification to neighboring property owners and a public hearing before the Board of Zoning Appeals. Also, specific development conditions prohibit toxic emissions and the generation of vibrations.

A neighborhood group organized in April 2006 after several angry encounters with city officials. They called themselves R.E.S.T. – Residents for Environmentalism Stand Together. Snyder Belousek volunteered to research, write and speak but later became the Vice President of the group.

This was the first time since the Civil Rights Movement that people in the south side of Elkhart received proper respect and recognition for organizing and standing for justice.

“It was neighbors defending their homes and their health,” said Snyder Belousek. “It was about integrity and quality of their neighborhood and dignity of themselves and, secondarily, it was about environmental impact.”

Snyder Belousek went on to say, “We had no power or standing in the city. There was no one with us who had any connections. We had no money to work with. We were starting from scratch. All we had was our own voice to speak truth and that’s what we did persistently and repeatedly.”

Members of R.E.S.T. showed up to council meetings, repeatedly speaking up about the situation. After three months, the city government set up a Compliance Agreement with Sturgis Iron and Metal using Elkhart’s Zoning Ordinances as a foundation. Sturgis Iron and Metal was allotted six to twelve months to eliminate dust, vibrations and explosions and moderate noise production. In the meantime, the company could continue their operations without paying fines, unless more

explosions occurred. The agreement took three months to create and, again, the public was not consulted.

“The company was allowed to operate outside the limits of the law,” said Snyder Belousek. “Because of the Compliance Agreement, residents couldn’t use noise and vibration ordinances to fight against the company even though every time they turned on the shredder, they were violating the zoning ordinance. That law was there to protect residents but we couldn’t rely on it, our rights were taken away.”

R.E.S.T. acknowledged that Sturgis Iron and Metal did make improvements, but it was not to the satisfaction of the neighboring residents. R.E.S.T. scheduled a meeting with the Mayor and petitioned that the Elkhart division of Sturgis Iron and Metal temporarily shut down until more improvements were made. They also asked the city to conduct environmental impact studies and for legal representation if necessary. Snyder Belousek regrets the latter request.

“I regretted that we threatened to sue the city for violation of our civil rights...because it created an adversarial atmosphere that made it more difficult to work constructively with the city,” said Snyder Belousek. “We wanted to find a resolution within the political process because that would be better for the city as a whole, and threatening a lawsuit did not serve that interest.

“We weren’t going to sue the city for money,” he added. “We just wanted the city to enforce the law. The problem was political – not legal. Who has power? And how do those in power respect or fail to respect those whom they represent?”

The mission of R.E.S.T. was broader than the Mega Shredder, it stretched to Elkhart’s city governance and justice for all people. Over time, the general public realized this mission and supported it.

“Over the course of one and a half years, public opinion shifted to the point where they realized the problem,” said Snyder Belousek. “It was more than just about one industrial operation. It was about how this city is going to be governed and treat their own citizens.”

This story takes a turn in 2007, election year, when Dick Moore came out of retirement to be Mayor.

“The new Mayor said he would take the company on and they did,” said Snyder Belousek. “We could back off and let the city government do the work it was supposed to do.”

Shortly afterward, in the spring of 2008, the company went bankrupt and the assets were auctioned.

Reflecting on the situation stirs up many memories and emotions for Snyder Belousek who said the intention was never to personally offend the Mayor or city council or permanently shut down Sturgis Iron and Metal.

“We were really persisting for a shift in how politics worked in the city,” he said. “We never compromised ourselves. We tried to do our thing with integrity. We were not a Christian organization but everyone involved was a Christian. That’s really what sustained us - that God was faithful and justice would be done.”

In summary, Snyder Belousek shares these wise words:

“The struggle for justice is about moving into a neighborhood and paying attention to what’s going on. [It] is really about loving your neighbors.”