

# How a couple turned an old 'meth house' in Mars Hill into a neighborhood arts center

[Domenica Bongiovanni](#) Updated 7:12 p.m. ET July 19, 2018

John and Lisa Schmitz found their dream building for an arts center in 2015. It was a known place to buy meth. Trash was stacked to the ceiling. And the neighbors were suspicious of *their* motives.

"Who in the world aspires to move from Speedway, a very nice neighborhood, to come to Mars Hill?" Crime Watch captain Tina Graham said.

The Schmitzes bought the place at 2811 Mars Hill St. when it was up for auction on foreclosure. On the afternoon of the sale, John texted Lisa.

" 'He says, 'Some idiot just bought that building,' " Lisa said. "I said, 'Was that some idiot you?' And he said yes.

"I'm like, 'Oh my, we are doing this.'"

Three years later, the Schmitzes' [Mars Hill Arts Center](#), which has its [grand opening Aug. 3](#), shines as a major example of grassroots community revival that's happening in the southwest Indianapolis neighborhood. To the rest of the city, the neighborhood has long been defined by its origins — an industrial, working-class geographical outlier.

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But Mars Hill wants to capitalize on its attributes — namely, its proximity to Kentucky Avenue and I-65 and the character of its homes and businesses, Indianapolis City-County Council member Jared Evans said. The setup could lend itself to more businesses, especially if more pedestrian-friendly paths are created, he said.

"If we're shooting for the stars and hoping just to grab the moon, we would say we want to be another Irvington, Fountain Square, God forbid Broad Ripple," said Allen Bridwell, the president of the neighborhood association, called SWAN.



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## Not a 'very pleasant introduction'

When Lisa, 54, and John, 56, married almost four years ago, they brought out each other's creative sides. She grew up in Arkadelphia, Ark., making magazine-cutting collages on wood and then later founded "Where Pigs Fly and Such," a floral design and consulting company. John, a mason contractor, grew up on Indianapolis' south side and became an accomplished potter and wood-worker.

*What if we started an arts center in a neighborhood that needs the opportunity,* they thought.

The building they found was just a stone's throw from where Lisa worked for more than a decade at NAPA Balkamp when it was located off South Holt Road on the southwest side.

"We like to serve people, especially people that are in need," said Lisa, who attributes the building's fruition to answered prayer. "And so we just kept talking about how cool this would be to do later in life, but then we figured out how to do this sooner rather than later."



When John and Lisa Schmitz bought this building in Mars Hill, it was stacked with trash and required a major renovation. *(Photo: Photo: Courtesy of Lisa and John Schmitz)*

The building, a hardware store at one time, posed massive challenges. Along with the piles of trash, squatters had taken up residence. The walls needed to be torn down and rebuilt. The roof needed major fixes, and the floor had to be ripped out and redone. Workers filled several Dumpsters donated by Ray's Trash Service.

With patterned chair covers, heavy-duty pottery equipment and walls lined with three-dimensional clay paintings by Indianapolis artist [Jack Praed](#), the building now looks completely different. John estimates they've spent about \$225,000, including the cost of the building.

The Schmitzes, who were newcomers to Mars Hill, also had to earn the trust of the residents. Neighborhood leaders were concerned the couple wasn't obtaining the proper zoning permits, which could affect the taxes paid back

into the community, Bridwell said.

"It wasn't a very pleasant introduction," he said.

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Before the Schmitzes bought the building, it was a known spot to buy meth, said Renee Rodriguez, a member of SWAN who helps run the neighborhood's Crime Watch. She worried the couple was there to scam people.

The Schmitzes also had bought a 100-year-old house to renovate and live in just blocks from the arts center. They have been living in the basement since August. They initially hadn't planned on leaving Speedway but felt like they needed to live in the community.

As time passed, out of the arts center's construction ashes came new bathrooms and meeting room — attributes Rodriguez said she was tickled to see. The neighborhood leaders and Schmitzes continued to talk. Lisa researched the area's history and realized she knew who some residents were through former co-workers and NAPA's volunteer efforts. As they began to learn more about one another, they worked out their differences and moved forward.

"During this year, we're working together and honestly, John and Lisa are probably the best thing that's happened to the community since forever, since getting storm drains installed," Bridwell said.



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Hand upholstered chairs provide a splash of color at the Mars Hill Art Center, 2811 Mars Hill St., in the Mars Hill neighborhood of Indianapolis on Thursday, July 12, 2018. *(Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)*

Outsiders have tried to come into the neighborhood before, claiming they want to save Mars Hill.

"We have never said that once, ever. It's like, 'We're just going to be here. If you want to come on in, come on in,'" John said.

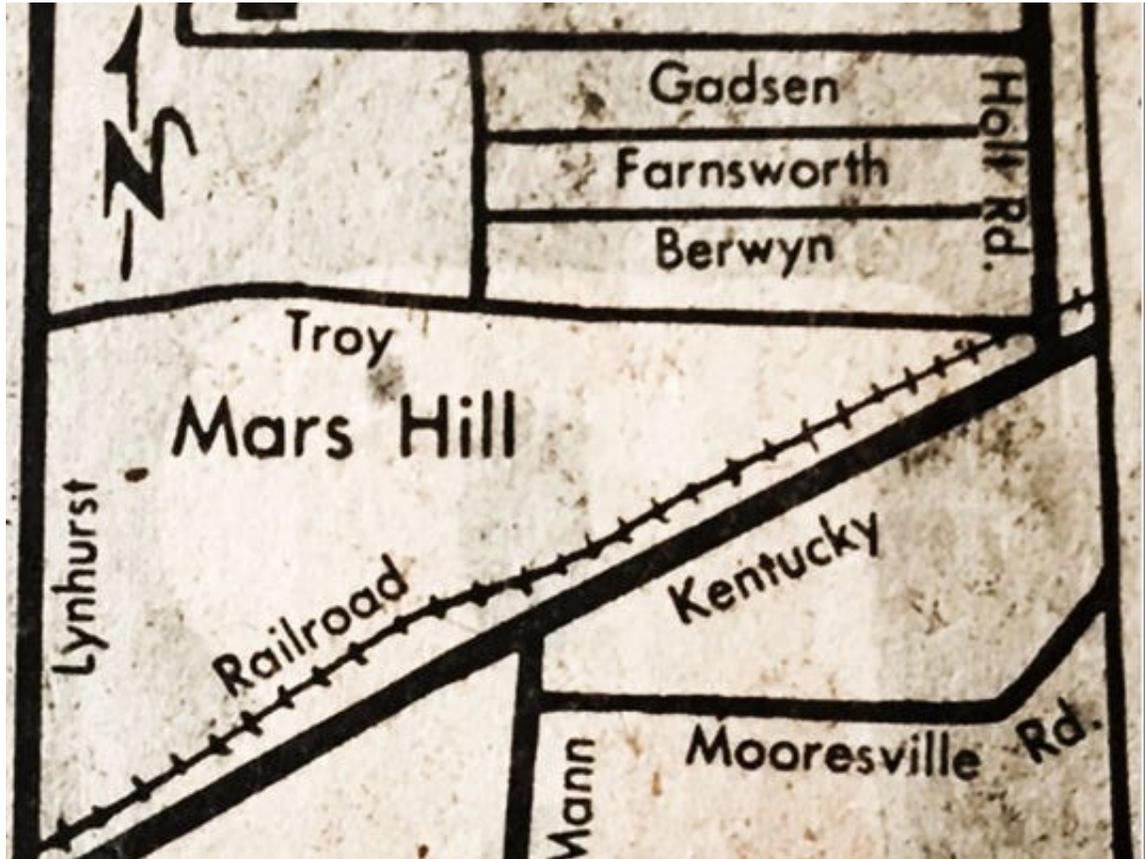
SWAN now holds its monthly meetings in the arts center's community room.

## **Broken promises in the history of Mars Hill**

Residents' hesitation to embrace new building owners in Mars Hill is well founded. Its history is riddled with broken promises.

In 1911, a group of businessmen, called the Greater Indianapolis Industrial Association, founded Mars Hill with the plan to build a manufacturing community that would lure industry and rival Gary. Land for homes and retail shops was platted close by the employers' sites so that everything workers needed was in walking distance.

The association expected to sell \$400 lots to raise enough money to bring in factories and pay for city utilities, but not enough people bought them. A February 1962 "Indianapolis Times" article stated that the original plans designated space for a town square and park, but a government never took shape and the empty lot was instead filled with homes.



A map shows the layout of the Mars Hill neighborhood from a vintage newspaper at the Central Library. (Photo: Courtesy of Lisa and John Schmitz)

Enough jobs arrived, however, to convince many families to move there. Many came from the Appalachian region, and other immigrants from

Germany, Italy and Eastern Europe settled there as well, according to the website of longtime community center, Community Caring and Sharing.

Mars Hill saw home-building booms during the World Wars because of the increased need for industry, according to newspaper archives. A movie theater, hotel and local drugstore were among the businesses within walking distance, said Graham, whose grandfather built a house in the neighborhood in the 1930s.

Building codes didn't exist early on, so residents constructed what they could afford on their lots. Without Indianapolis tax dollars, Mars Hill suffered from pockmarked gravel and dirt streets, no street lights, drainage issues and flooding because the county didn't have the funds or enough workers to fix it. When city and county governments consolidated under Unigov in 1970, the neighborhood's problems became the city's.



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The Mars Hill Art Center, 2811 Mars Hill St., in the Mars Hill neighborhood of Indianapolis on Thursday, July 12, 2018. *(Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)*

Newspaper archives show the back-and-forth arguments, over the decades, between Mars Hill and city and county officials in regard to who was responsible for street, sewer and other similar improvements.

## **Crime and poverty linger, but kindness flourishes**

Today, rows of mostly one-story, one- or two-family homes line Mars Hill's grid of streets, their backs facing gravel alleys. Some residences have decorative shutters and potted flowers on the front porch.

Other abandoned homes have plywood covering their doors and windows.



Before pictures show what the building looked like before and during its transformation into the Mars Hill Arts Center. *(Photo: Courtesy of Lisa and John Schmitz)*

The latest available census data (2010) on [IndyVitals.org](http://IndyVitals.org) lists a population

of 14,402 for the Mars Hill neighborhood area. The [online data visualization tool](#) defines it as larger than the actual neighborhood — in the southwest corner of I-70 and I-465, with Raymond and Minnesota streets as northern-most points and the White River as the eastern border.

The area ranks 78th lowest out of the 99 Indianapolis communities measured for quality of life statistics, with \$32,300 as the median income in 2016. Thirty-four percent of the population is in poverty, which is 20 percent higher than the Indianapolis metro area, according to 2015 statistics. The unemployment rate is 14.4 percent, as compared to 6.9 percent for the metro area. More job training, residents said, is needed, especially after Olin Brass and Rexnord Corp. left.

Indy Vitals also assigned the Mars Hill area a car-dependent score, which means that almost all errands for residents require a vehicle. For those in Mars Hill who don't have cars, Rodriguez said crossing Kentucky Avenue on foot to shop at Kroger is dangerous.

New churches and businesses have been able to afford to start up in the neighborhood and make promises to the community, Bridwell said. But many — especially churches — have left the area once they outgrow their buildings, he said. Promises to help residents fix up their homes or to start a clothing bank leave along with them.

"Our community relies on walkability, so when these congregations grow past that building, and the people in the neighborhood who were attending that, they stay, they don't follow that church," Bridwell said.

Outsiders can find it difficult to live in Mars Hill without insider knowledge, Bridwell said. Many longtime residents, for example, leave their car doors unlocked because thieves often assume something of value is in a locked car and break the window to look around.



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A craft room is lit by the afternoon sun at the Mars Hill Art Center, 2811 Mars Hill St., in the Mars Hill neighborhood of Indianapolis on Thursday, July 12, 2018. *(Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)*

The challenges also have encouraged generosity among the residents. Outside the Mars Hill Free Methodist Church sits a free food pantry. A nearby community garden has fresh vegetables and fruit. Palmer Trucks donated space for a new pocket park, and founder Eldon Palmer [gifted Community Caring and Sharing its building almost 20 years ago.](#)

"The thing I always think about is how many times I had a car break down and someone from the neighborhood to help me push it home," Rodriguez said.

## Center will offer art classes and education

As the arts center began to take shape, Evans, the city councilman, helped residents form the Southwest Association of Neighbors in January 2017. The four-person group — which serves Mars Hill and the greater area between Kentucky Avenue, West Raymond Street and South Lynhurst Drive — would like to become a community development corporation that can apply for grant money and more resources. Evans said he would like to see fewer liquor stores and smoke shops and more restaurants, retail and watering holes where neighbors can convene.



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Artwork by Jack Praed hangs on the wall at the Mars Hill Art Center, 2811 Mars Hill St., in the Mars Hill neighborhood of Indianapolis on Thursday, July 12, 2018. *(Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)*

"I think Mars Hill has immense potential," he said.

But for now, the members focus on helping neighbors with small home-care

tasks and making improvements to the area's aesthetics. SWAN organizes clean-up efforts throughout the neighborhood. Volunteers recently painted over vulgar graffiti on a bridge.

Bridwell would like residents to repurpose odds and ends they've collected in their yards and garages. For example, he turned an old chain link gate into a colorful piece of art attached to a planter in his daughter's yard.

"I think that we can be a folk-art community," Bridwell said.

The Mars Hill Arts Center could feed that vision. Plans are to offer classes. Amy Craig, who lives near the Schmitzes, is looking forward to the pottery and floral design courses. She said she will enroll her 7-month-old son in a woodworking class once he is old enough.

"There is definitely a lot of positive talk going on around the neighborhood and how excited everyone is to have something creative to do. And how refreshing it is for our youth to be offered positive and healthy influence in the community," Craig wrote in an email.

Rodriguez and Graham see the arts center as a draw for people to visit Mars Hill and eat at local favorites such as Mels Drive In Restaurant or Pasquale's Pizza & Pasta.



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A ceramics room features a slab roller, throwing wheel, and kiln at the Mars Hill Art Center, 2811 Mars Hill St., in the Mars Hill neighborhood of Indianapolis on Thursday, July 12, 2018. *(Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)*

The classes also could help adults without a college education gain skills they can use to find jobs. Lisa said the activities will be tailored to the neighborhood's needs. The Schmitzes are looking into grants and fundraising to help make classes free or low-cost.

"Now we have to deliver," John said. "We have to have these. Now, it's just really: Let the arts center be the arts center."

## If you go

**Mars Hill Arts Center grand opening:** 5 to 8 p.m. Aug. 3 at 2811 Mars Hill St.

**National Night Out:** The Mars Hill neighborhood is partnering with the police and fire departments to host a free night of games, a blood drive and what it dubs the "World's Longest Sub Sandwich." 6 to 8 p.m. Aug. 7 at Stout Field Park and Splash Pad, 3820 W. Bradbury.

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