

VILLAGE MAKER AWARDS

CENTRAL COMMUNITY HOUSE
DECEMBER 2020



Central Community House
At Our House, People Are Central

CENTRAL IS COMMUNITY. COMMUNITY IS CENTRAL.

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BABA SHONGO



"WHEN IT'S ALL SAID AND DONE, WHAT DO WE HAVE TO STUDY OTHER THAN WHAT THE ARTISTS HAVE LEFT BEHIND?"

Baba Shongo was born and raised in the Near East neighborhood of Columbus, and his roots in this community run deep. His passion for Columbus and the arts shined through the tone of his voice throughout the entirety of the below interview.

Central Community House is grateful for the time and effort Baba has dedicated to our organization, and to the Columbus arts community. It is clear that Baba uses his virtues as his guide, and we are proud to award him our "Volunteer Hero" award for all of his support over the years.

When asked to talk about his history with Central Community House, Baba launched into the story of his first contact with the organization – the weekend that John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. On a day full of great tragedy, Baba was busy volunteering his time with Central. He went out into the neighborhood and painted the interiors of homes to help fix them up. He described that, "At the time, that area was considered the 'ghetto' and we needed to help those people."

His focus was on bettering the community rather than dwelling on the tragedy of the nation. Baba is the kind of person who will always look at a situation and think of how he can leave a positive mark on the people around him.

Baba then went on to describe some of his more memorable partnerships with Central Community House.

- Through the years, Baba noticed that the neighborhood he grew up in and loved was being gentrified. It felt like a parallel world. He would see new people entering the neighborhood and replacing those he grew up knowing and loving. He stated "It's a mentality thing with groups of people choosing to come in and take the things they like." This is why he collaborated with Central Community House to bring the African Village Arts Festival to the Near East. He saw this as the opportunity to show that the African community is still here. No amount of gentrification can take away their culture. This project exists so people of African descent can celebrate their existence

their culture, and their heritage. This began in 2007 and is an annual event.

- At our TRANSIT ARTS building off of Bryden Road, Baba donated an estimated \$80,000 floor for our TRANSIT ARTS program. This floor is made up of tree stumps, cut at 5/8 of an inch, then glued and nailed to the floor and coated with polyurethane.

Baba cutting wood for the project.



This project took 5 months and 5 helpers to complete. When asked why he decided to embark on this project, his answer was simple: he was on the Board and aware that it was needed, and was just grateful that he had the ability to make a contribution to the center. He describes himself as a philanthropist, and even joked about how the floor is “blessed with his blood”, as he cut his knee when trying to finish the flooring.

Laying the floor



This led us to talk about his experience with the arts, and his story is fascinating. He attended the Ohio State University, and a huge turning point in his life was when his advisor sat him down and said, “Son, would you like to drop out before we flunk you out.” A young man majoring in social work was faced with a tough decision, but he decided to drop out and join AmeriCorps as a VISTA. Through this program, he was sent to New York, where he learned community organizing on the job. He was then relocated to Boston, where he learned a lot about the gentrification of the south end of Boston. The majority of his friends in Boston were musicians, so he organized them and they started their own coffeehouse (The Black Avant-garde Coffeehouse) in the basement of a church in the south end. Jazz musicians played amidst tables with candles – a creative atmosphere for all who entered. In the spring, they even hosted a martial arts exhibition.

After he finished his time as a VISTA, Baba became a plumber – in fact, he was the tenth black plumber to join the plumbing union in Boston. Baba notes that he owes everything to his plumbing career, as it was his means to make a good living. He describes himself overall as a “fixer upper.” Although he learned a lot in Boston and loved his time living there, he felt it was not a great place to raise a family, and realized it was time to move back to the Near East neighborhood of Columbus, Ohio.

When he returned, he raised his two daughters in the community in which he was born and raised, and he continues to feel like this community has everything anyone could possibly ask for. According to Baba, “There are all kinds of talented artists that come out of Columbus, with all the resources you could ask for -- from safe transportation to some of the best libraries in the nation.” Like his life in Boston, most of his friends in Columbus have been talented artists, so he created the Urban Cultural Arts Foundation

with the William H. Thomas gallery. According to Baba, people in the area were blinded by famous names such as Picasso, and were unable to appreciate the value in the pieces that his friends were creating. This foundation brings awareness to other works of art within the African Village of Columbus. The William H. Thomas gallery was named in honor of his ex-wife's late step-father, who was a good family man that put so much work into laying the brickwork in the back, front, and basement of the house that he runs his foundation out of. While he was doing brickwork in the back, he wasn't feeling well and passed away a few days later. This gallery is to honor the great man he was, and the passion he shared with Baba to enhance the arts culture in the Near East.

When asked why the arts are so important in the Near East – for Baba, the artist has one of the most important roles in society. He stated, “When it's all said and done, what do we have to study other than what the artists have left behind? The artist has a very important role in life when it comes to recording our history and telling our stories.”

Central Community House is forever grateful to Baba Shongo. We encourage everyone to visit The William H. Thomas Art Gallery, located in the African Village of Columbus at:

1270 Bryden Road Columbus, OH 43205.

The final wood flooring at Bryden Road



HELEN OWEN



"THE WHOLE TRIP THROUGH CENTRAL IS MEMORABLE"

Ms. Helen Owen, known as “Ms. O”, has dedicated countless hours both working and volunteering for Central Community House since 1986 – and plans on continuing as soon as it is safe to do so due to COVID-19. Ms. O is the definition of a flexible team player who gives everything she can to help others. When you have the chance to speak with this incredible woman, her passion for giving time to the Columbus community shines through her bubbly voice.

Ms. O got involved with Central Community House through the afterschool program. She was a volunteer at the afterschool program at Lincoln Park, as she lived in the area and knew a lot of the kids. This volunteering led her to connect with Central. Two years later, she was hired on and began working with the afterschool program. Ms. O ultimately helped out in nearly every department! – from the afterschool program, to the community service program, where she would fill out applications for rental assistance and other emergency assistance, such as gas, funeral assistance, etc. While working with the community service program, she also would work part-time for the daycare center when they were short-handed.

Her most memorable role to many is working at the front desk as the receptionist. While working for the community service program, the receptionist at the time was sick and couldn't work, so of course Ms. O stepped up to fill the role. From then on, Ms. O worked as the first face you see as you enter Central Community House, and greeted everyone with a smile. Her love for Central runs so deep that she would use her vacation days to volunteer for the organization. Her voice beamed with pride when she stated, “You know, I retired on a Friday, and the next Monday I was back in the office volunteering. I had to stop volunteering last year when I broke my ankle and now with everything going on with COVID, I haven't been back. I can assure you I will be back as soon as it is safe for me to do so.”

Ms. O working the front desk



Ms. O helping with afterschool

Ms. O's story is incredible, and when asked what aspect of Central Community House led her to want to stay engaged after so many years, her answer was simple: the people. She loves the staff at Central and loves that through her work she is able to meet new people every single day. Ms. O is someone who thrives on being around lots of people. She also is sure to mention that our Board has always been so eager and willing to participate in everything, which makes her involvement even more rewarding. She also described that even if she doesn't get along with every member on the staff, there is always a mutual respect. People always feel comfortable sharing and having a conversation to work through any issue. Ms. O lives by the motto, "Let it go and you will be okay." She is always trying to better understand others and not be bothered by minor disagreements. Everyone could learn something from this knowledgeable Volunteer Hero.

Volunteering is such an important value to her, and for Ms. O, volunteering is about two different groups of people: the children and the seniors.

- The children: she absolutely adores working with them and talking with them, noting "Kids have so much more knowledge and adults don't know everything – we think we do, but we don't. Everyone can learn something from a child."
- The seniors: Ms. O could talk to Central seniors for hours.

She loves hearing endless stories about how they grew up and the things that happened throughout their lives. Her favorite time with the seniors was when she attended a field trip with them to tour all kinds of casinos in the south. They went to Mississippi, New Orleans, and Tennessee, and even got to see Elvis Presley's mansion and the MLK museum. She loved the fact that the entire trip was only \$350 per person, and she still holds the memories of this trip dear to her heart.

When asked what her favorite memory from her involvement with Central was, her instant response was, "The whole trip through Central is memorable. Otherwise, I wouldn't have volunteered and took my vacation days to work there." Reflecting back on her time as the receptionist at Bryden Road, she had an incredible story to share. There were members of a nearby male group home that used to come into the office every day to say "Hi!" and grab a cup of coffee. Ms. O was happy to chat with them and have a fresh pot ready. There was one man in particular that was struggling with mental illness, and she recalls one day that they actually got into a pretty big argument. He was calling her all kinds of names, so as the strong and independent woman she is, she ordered him to leave and informed the group home that he could no longer come in for coffee with the other men – he had lost the privilege that many of the men looked forward to.

Grabbing someone a cup of coffee

Later on that week, a woman came in for a FEMA application, and after they filled out the forms together, Ms. O made sure to walk this woman across the street and wait with her for the bus because she was handicapped. While she was waiting at the bus stop, the man she had the disagreement with earlier came over to her with a genuine apology for his actions. He said that he was embarrassed of the way he had acted before, and it would never happen again if she let him come back for coffee. Ms. O remembers looking at this man, who sometimes stood in socks, with one sock on, or no socks at all (never did he even have a pair of shoes on), and told him he was more than welcome to come back for coffee the next week. From then on, he came in for coffee every week and they had a beautiful friendship.

Another man who frequently came down for coffee was extremely sweet. When Ms. O had suffered injuries from a car accident, he came down to Grant Hospital to see her. She didn't realize what an impact she had on this man's life until she was back in the office and he told her, "I came down to Grant to check in on you! When I came in for coffee and they told me what had happened, I knew right away I had to check on you." She loves the way she was able to develop such meaningful connections with those who needed it the most – even if it was just over a cup of coffee. That's what is so special about Central Community House – it is truly a community full of some of the greatest people you will ever meet.

We are so grateful that Ms. O chose our organization to dedicate countless hours to, and cannot wait to have her back once COVID-19 cases decline, and it is safe to do so. She truly is a volunteer hero in our community!



THE ISABELLE RIDGWAY FOUNDATION



Central Community House is grateful to have the support of the Isabelle Ridgway Foundation for our senior programming. Their partnership has been crucial in our successful shift to our “Village Central” model, with a mission and vision that aligns so well with our own.

Here is “A Glimpse of History” from their founding Board Member and former President and CEO of the Isabelle Ridgway Care Center, Patricia Mullins:

It gives me great pleasure to speak about the life and legacy of Mrs. Isabelle Taylor-Ridgway. Although I didn’t have the privilege of a personal relationship with her, I have a glimpse of who she was through the words of others who were aware of her work and the legacy she left for all of us to admire and appreciate.

Isabelle Taylor, a native of Van Wert, Ohio was born in 1858, married John Ridgway in 1880, and to that union was born one son and four daughters. Mrs. Isabelle Ridgway moved to Columbus at the age of 22 where she lived until her death in 1955 at the age of 95.

Mrs. Ridgway is often described as a loving and conscientious woman who was concerned about those around her who were less fortunate, elderly, homeless, and in need. She recognized the need to provide a place where the senior citizens in her community could live in comfort, have privacy, companionship, and care. It appears she had this burning desire to make a difference in the life of others, and in doing so out of love and an unmitigated faith she founded the “Old Folks Home” with the help of her good friend Dollie Whittaker on September 15, 1912, some 108 years ago.

The original location for this home was 159 North 21st Street. It remained there during its incorporation on March 30, 1916. It later moved to 1240 East Long Street, then to the 71 Winner Avenue, the Old Jeffery Mansion which was at one time the home of the former mayor of Columbus and outstanding industrialist, Robert Jeffery.

Before the home was incorporated and endorsed by the State Board of Charities, Mrs. Ridgway depended on

her church, friends, neighbors, and good Samaritans to help feed, clothe, and provide services for those in her care. The home was kept open through the work of volunteers, food collected from the vendors at the street market at the end of the day on Saturdays during the summer, and money collected in penny boxes set in African American homes throughout the community. Can you imagine her struggle from day to day? History tells me times were sometimes hard and there came a time when it was determined the Jeffery Mansion was no longer appropriate housing for the residents.

Finally, in 1974, a 100 bed center was built on the corner of Hawthorne and Taylor Avenue with a \$2.8 million federal Hill-Burton grant, \$25,000 from the Columbus Foundation, and \$300,000 from the Battelle Memorial Institute Foundation.

The center was considered to be a “cornerstone” on the near eastside of Columbus until it was sold on April 30, 2015.

We celebrate the life of our founder, Mrs. Isabelle Ridgway, and her dedication to her ministry. She is remembered as a pioneer who toiled continuously to fulfill her dreams and goals. It is Mrs. Ridgway’s example of hard work, untiring dedication and the essence of heritage that has been passed on from generation to generation for more than 100 years that continues to motivate those of us who strive to continue her legacy today.

To keep Mrs. Ridgway’s memory alive and continue her hard work and sacrifice, on May 18, 2017 the Isabelle Ridgway Care Center Board of Trustees established the Isabelle Ridgway Foundation as a supporting Foundation of the Columbus Foundation. The mission of the Isabelle Ridgway Foundation is to improve the quality of life and the systems that impact African American elders in Central Ohio.

Mrs. Isabelle Ridgway



In an interview with Mark Hatcher, his voice beams with pride for the work he does on the Board of the Isabelle Ridgway Foundation, and Isabelle’s legacy clearly lives on through the work they support today. The Foundation seeks to “provide financial support for organizations that specifically help support elderly African Americans on the Near Eastside.” While their geographic focus might shift beyond the Near East, their goal remains the same -- to assist the elderly population of Central Ohio. They want to ensure that seniors in the area can “gracefully age in place.” This then led the foundation to collaborate with Central Community House.

When asked what inspired them to collaborate with and invest in Central Community House, Mark described that while they had a lot of submissions, what struck The Isabelle Ridgway Foundation was Central’s humble beginnings and the amount of great work that was being done with relatively little

resources. They realize that all nonprofits in the area need help financially in some capacity, but they saw so much potential for growth within Central Community House if only there were resources provided to help achieve their goals. It also helped that Central Community House was rooted in the community that they were looking to have an impact. This made it an easy decision for them as an organization to invest in, and grow, the work that Central was doing.

Some Smiling Faces of Central's Seniors



Thanks to The Isabelle Ridgway Foundation, Central was able to shift to our current “Village Central” model that focuses on allowing seniors to “gracefully age in place” as Mark put it. In his opinion, this shift into “Village Central” has been so impactful in the Near East because it is a response to public policy and how elderly care is administered in this country. Seniors are placed into a health facility, are there for a fixed period of time, and then return home. Working with this “Village” model provides a network where there is a dedicated Village team that is going out into the community and helping seniors live in their homes. It’s all about “meeting people where they are at.” There is no way we could’ve foreseen the pandemic, but this model also really supports seniors during this time, and having this in place before the pandemic has helped tremendously because the last place seniors should be right now is a nursing home.

We couldn’t agree more, and because of their investment, Village Central has been able to grow our impact during these unprecedented times, not an easy feat. The Isabelle Ridgway Foundation is now considering expansion to other geographies, building on Central Community House’s success.

Looking at where we should go from here, the biggest challenges that seniors are facing involve what we can do to support seniors as COVID-19 cases are increasing. We don’t know what future restrictions could be, but we need to know how we can support them through changing rules and regulations so they can navigate these changing times and still get groceries, make appointments, etc. With the promise of vaccines rolling out in 2021, it will also be important to think about how “Village Central” can be a resource for seniors to learn about vaccines and know all of the facts so they can protect themselves against COVID-19. Mark pointed out the importance of recognizing the history of the African American community. “There tends to be an apprehension in the African American community towards these types of things. Usually, our community does not want to be first because we feel like we are being tested because there is historical context for how that has happened with the Tuskegee Experiment and other things that have happened in the past.” With all of this being said, this apprehension needs to be recognized before the facts regarding the vaccine are provided. This way seniors can gather information safely from “Village Central” and make the decision that is best from them, in combination with information from their healthcare provider.

It’s conversations like these that make our collaboration with The Isabelle Ridgway Foundation so special, and we are grateful for their knowledge and support when it comes to caring for seniors in the Near East. When Mark was asked what their favorite part about collaborating with Central Community House is, he described that knowing how the work is still being

done to carry on Isabelle's legacy even though they are not operating the nursing home is the best part. Knowing that "this grant is giving [Central Community House] the resources and the bandwidth that [they] need to go out and do that work" makes this collaboration so special.

We as an organization can confidently say that our senior program would not be the same without the assistance of The Isabelle Ridgway Foundation, our 2020 Foundation Champion. Central Community House looks forward to more collaboration with this incredible organization with a mission and vision so near and dear to our hearts, and are honored to be a part of continuing on Isabelle Ridgway's legacy!

A Senior Receiving Services from
the Comfort of her Home



The Isabelle Ridgway Foundation Founding Board of Trustees



First Row (left-right): Patricia B. Mullins; Evelyn Y. Cleveland; and Sandra Moody Gresham.

Second Row (left-right): Mark Hatcher, Esq.; Christopher G. Brown, M.D.; and Timothy Grant, CPA.

Third Row (left-right): Thomas L. Weaver; and James L. Ervin Jr., Esq.

JOYCE BEATTY



"THANK GOODNESS FOR THE SERVICES THAT WE HAVE AT CENTRAL COMMUNITY HOUSE BECAUSE IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF FAMILIES."

Central Community House is proud to select Congresswoman Joyce Beatty as our 2020 Community Hero for the Village Maker Awards. We present this award based on her leadership and commitment to racial justice and equity in our community. Our Development Associate, Emily Sayre, caught up with her over Zoom to present the award, and talk about her work here in Columbus, and as our representative in Washington, DC. Click the link below to view the interview, and hear what Joyce Beatty has to say regarding the importance of Settlement Houses, and persevering as a community through the remainder of this pandemic. Thank you, Congresswoman Beatty! You make our village a better place!

[Watch the interview here.](#)