



Backyard Lots | Kara Isabella | Advised by Jeffrey Franklin | 4/25/16

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What if I told you the best hope
to revitalizing abandoned cities
is in your backyard?

Introduction

Backstory

Growing up in Ohio, vacancy has always been an issue in my life. From going to my grandparents house in Cleveland to driving to my undergraduate university in Cincinnati, I would pass vacant and dilapidated structures one after the other. This thesis was inspired by three things. First, my past experience in seeing unused and discarded space. Second, when I first began DSI, there were two big box stores vacant in the middle of my Ohio suburb, at the same time and on the main road, seeing them vacant made me ask and question, “why isn’t there a short-term tenant using the space?”. Third, I read a buzzfeed article shortly before joining DSI, and it showcased 9 abandoned malls in America, and 4 out of the 9 are in Ohio¹. The article really hit home for me the extent and range of vacancy in Ohio. These three things jumpstarted the trajectory of my thesis.



¹ www.buzzfeed.com/mjs538/completely-surreal-pictures-of-americas-abandoned-malls?utm_term=.hwb0pR1894#.idaLDwV29W
image - mapio.net

Context and Framing

The Great Recession was the most devastating global economic crisis since the Great Depression.² The collapse of the housing market destroyed trillions of dollars in personal wealth and made many Americans far less financially secure.³ Slavic Village is a place that's been hit hard. A neighborhood in northeast, Ohio, was declared the center of the 2007 foreclosure crisis. As of July 2015, Slavic Village had 3,045 vacant properties with 1,220 vacant structures and 1,825 vacant lots. The recession led to a lack of parental supervision, which created sedentary kids.⁴ Coupled with vacant lots, kids have nowhere to go. They are without hope and are unhealthy.⁵ According to Greg, a 15 year old resident in Slavic Village,

“In this neighborhood you really don't do anything besides stay in the house. On nice days we want to go outside and have fun and not be stuck in the house.”

Currently, only one in three children are physically active every day.⁶ Eight to 18-year old adolescents spend an average of 7.5 hours a day using entertainment media, including, TV, computers, video games, cell phones and movies, and only one-third of high school students get the recommended levels of physical activity.⁷ Today, there is no place for kids to play in the neighborhood. They have limited access to parks and backyards. How do we solve this and give kids hope, health and fun? How do we reinvigorate a community buried with vacant lots?

Vacant lots are pervasive in middle America. A few months ago, like everyone else in troubled American neighborhoods, I thought vacant lots were dirty, derelict, and a detriment to helping kids because they're full of trash, chemicals, and weeds, but what I saw was an opportunity to turn them into a solution. By reframing vacant lots, they can become a place for activity, community, exercise, fun, health, and play because vacant lots can transform into accessible, available and safe locations.

2 www.russellsage.org/publications/great-recession

3 www.russellsage.org/publications/great-recession

4 www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/7651663/Children-would-rather-explore-the-world-virtually-than-travel.html

5 www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/americas-children-are-the-silent-victims-of-the-great-recession/

6 www.fitness.gov/resource-center/facts-and-statistics/

7 www.letsmove.gov/learn-facts/epidemic-childhood-obesity



Research

From personal observation and connections, I wanted to work in Ohio but had no idea what path my thesis would lead me down. In order to initially engage with my target users, I created a survey to gauge the effects of vacant buildings on my Ohio audience and interviewed 30+ people.

Through my interviews, Ken Kalynchuk, a Masters of Urban Planning and Development Candidate at Cleveland State University, mentioned, “Slavic Village is a disaster” and through a simple google search, I discovered Slavic Village was declared the center of the 2007 foreclosure crisis. Here’s what I discovered:

“If houses go to heaven, then Classen Avenue, in the Cleveland neighborhood of Slavic Village, has been the scene of a mass Rapture.”

— Salon ⁸

“...a few journalists decided to run some zip codes to see where the most foreclosures were happening. The zip code 44105 popped up at the top of the list. And with that, the great international financial crisis of the 21st century was centred in an old neighbourhood in Cleveland, Ohio – one that had been declining since the 1970s.”

— The Guardian ⁹

“For the past two years, Cleveland, Ohio has been considered the Ground Zero of the housing crisis. In 2007, there were 83,230 foreclosures filed in the city, one of the highest rates in the country. Slavic Village, part of Cuyahoga County, which registered almost 4,000 new foreclosure filings in the first quarter of 2008, has been one of the hardest hit neighborhoods in Cleveland.”

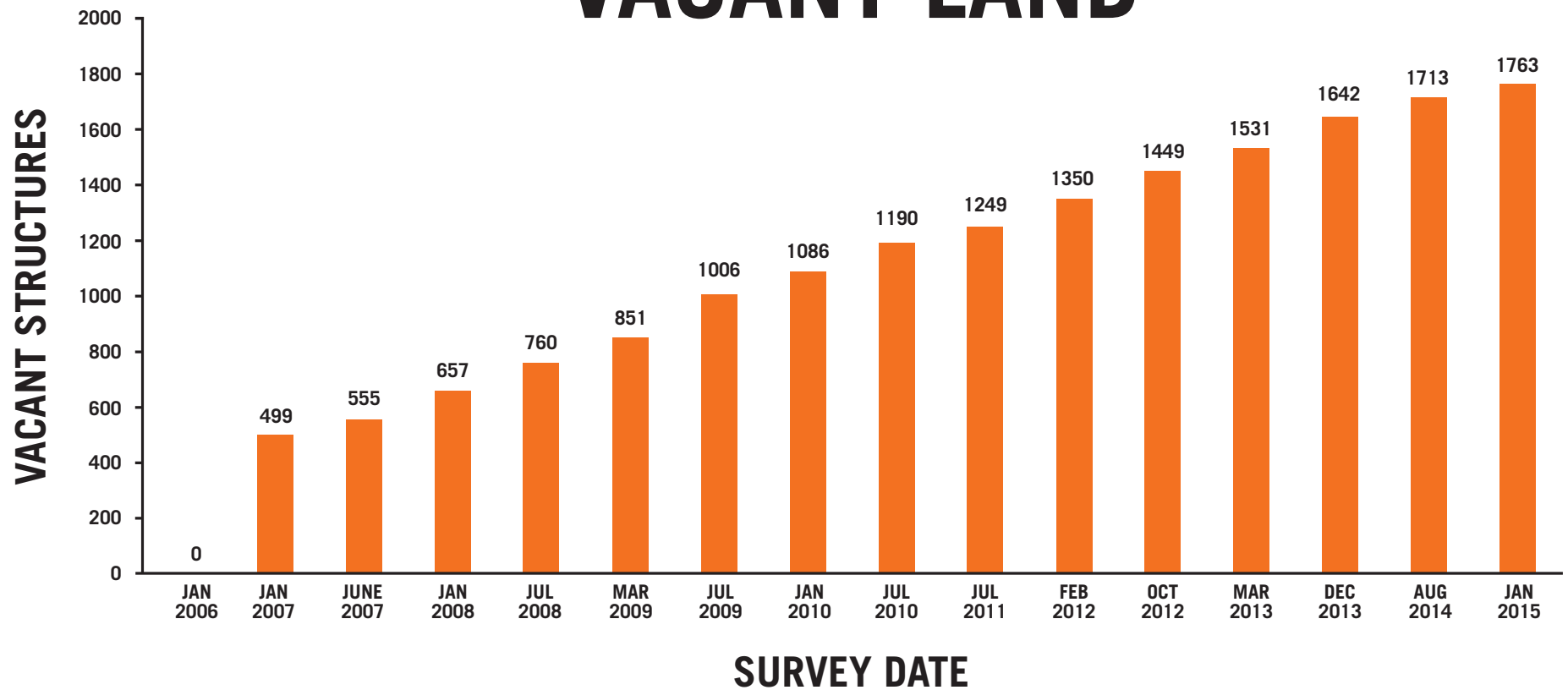
— NYU ¹⁰

⁸ www.salon.com/2013/05/12/cleveland_ground_zero_for_the_housing_bubble/

⁹ www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/jun/18/epicentre-great-recession-cleveland-slavic-village-foreclosure

¹⁰ www.journalism.nyu.edu/publishing/archives/pavement/in/trouble-in-slavic-village/print/index.html

VACANT LAND



*Chart shows the increase of vacant land in Slavic Village. Slavic Village Development started the survey in 2007 when they noticed something was going on.

Based on my interviews and research, I chose to focus on Slavic Village. To further explore, I partnered with Slavic Village Development, a non-profit community development corporation serving the neighborhood. I met with Slavic Village Development on November 2, 2015 and toured Slavic Village.

At the meeting, I learned: Slavic Village views vacant land as worthless and does not give vacant land much value at all, and the city land bank sells their lots for \$200 a piece. In addition, the neighborhood is transient, where 60% of the students who start the school year do not finish the school year in the same school, people need more opportunity for leisure/fun and Slavic Village's confidence is a 4 out of 10.

The issues in Slavic Village are decaying structures, no upkeep, housing, not enough outlets for kids, no multigenerational activities, lack of recreation, it's hard for community members to follow through with projects, no community gathering spots/hubs, neighbor trouble, robberies at night, gangs, gunshots in the area and drugs.

Through my interviews, I found out:

"They have a recreational center at Stella Walsh and I won't go because I'm scared to go, but (if I had something next door I would use it)."

— Slavic Village Resident

"Right now I would say (my students) are limited (to fun opportunities within Slavic Village) many of my students discuss they do commute to different areas in the city to participate in different items, it would be great if they had more opportunities within the area."

— Slavic Village Principal

"(A need within Slavic Village would be creating) more activities for the kids to do because there is nothing for them to do except go to the library. During the summer they used to have baseball for the kids but they done away with that. It

kept them off the street, kept them busy for the summer.”

— Slavic Village Resident

“(We) need to get the kids busy and doing something instead of following the system - crime happens when kids don’t have anything to do.”

— Slavic Village Police Officer

Through my interviews and research, the problem I decided to tackle was recreation. Why Recreation? Slavic Village has no rec center, there is limited land designated for play, kids already use vacant lots to play football, people do not feel safe to exercise at night or around vacant property, and kids cross the streets and walk around the neighborhood alone without any destination. Recreation will give kids something to do and keep them off the streets while their parents are at work and will create positive environments to keep drugs and criminals out of the area.

After meeting with Slavic Village Development and touring Slavic Village, I crafted 100 ideas involving recreation. Some of my ideas included:

1. Having easter eggs throughout the lots for people to find (geocaching).
2. High school students partnering with elementary school students to teach them how to play sports.
3. Kids use vacant lots already to play football, enhance the experience.
4. Outdoor fitness center.
5. Glow in the dark paint on the sidewalks.
6. Party/get together zones on vacant lots where anyone could rent out the space.
7. Graffiti/street art on the ground of vacant lots around the city.
8. Zen place with ground covered in wildflowers and benches to meditate.

These ideas led to my thesis direction, which is to connect multiple lots throughout the neighborhood and designate them for recreation. My focus is on a neighborhood in need of recreational spaces.

Value Proposition:

My target area is Slavic Village's Hyacinth Neighborhood. Hyacinth is ripe for development because it is secluded which results in the lack of opportunities that other locations within Slavic Village have access to.

Statement of Need:

I believe putting recreational outlets on vacant lots in Hyacinth will strengthen community, create the desired outlets, generate a safety net for recreation, and will be multigenerational fun.

To test my assumptions, I created Backyard Lots, a neighborhood revitalization program. The name incorporates a neighborhood feel, it's personal, all inclusive, and there's availability in the name to expand to other outlets for

lots besides recreation if the project takes off. My goals are to provide local recreational outlets, be a social and safe environment, assist kids, develop vacant lots, and attract new residents.

Statement of Benefit:

Backyard Lots will connect vacant lots and provide residents with convenient access to a safe designated place for exercise and fun.



Process

Prototyping

My process started with understanding the demographic of who will be using these recreational outlets, pinpointing the most popular activities in the neighborhood, and uncovering the best lot locations to activate. To learn and engage with my target users, I created a football and soccer tournament in a Slavic Village park.

The goals of the tournaments were to find ways to get residents involved, discover the best ways to advertise, the demographic of who is playing, number of attendees, ages of participants, and if the same participants play both days.



FOOTBALL TOURNAMENT

SATURDAY FEBRUARY 20

LOCATION:

Hyacinth Park (East 65th & Waterman)

START TIME:

2pm

Registration will begin at 1pm

FREE PIZZA and **PRIZES** will be available

This is a **FREE EVENT** sponsored by

**BACKYARD
LOTS**

To learn more, please visit:
facebook.com/backyardlots

SOCCER TOURNAMENT

SUNDAY FEBRUARY 21

LOCATION:

Hyacinth Park (East 65th & Waterman)

START TIME:

2pm

Registration will begin at 1pm

FREE PIZZA and **PRIZES** will be available

This is a **FREE EVENT** sponsored by

**BACKYARD
LOTS**

To learn more, please visit:
facebook.com/backyardlots

On Saturday February 20, 2016, I had a football tournament. There were eleven participants ages 1-40, both boys and girls. Three residents drove, eight walked to the event, and three parents watched. We played two games. The smaller kids played jackpot and the preteens and teens played touch football. Everyone had fun and were interested in participating in future events.

On Sunday February 21, 2016, I had a soccer tournament. There were three participants ages 10-15, all boys. One resident drove and two walked to the event, and one parent watched. Two neighbors from next door came back a second day and were waiting for me. One reason we had a low turnout was due to the cold and the two neighbors affirmed this and said it was too cold for their friends to join. After we finished soccer, the participants didn't want to stop, so we had another football game.

Everyone I encountered was excited and open to Backyard Lots. Residents were liking the Facebook page, Instagram posts, and emailing me with questions. One resident liked the idea so much that he wanted to help out in some-

way and donated jerseys.

These tournament showed me that **marketing is key to the success of Backyard Lots**. I advertised for the event on social media, in the local newspaper, posted street signs, emailed the flyers to schools, churches and the Boy and Girls Club, gave residents flyers on the day of, and Slavic Village Development shared my flyers.

Through these tournaments, I learned my **target audience is preteens and teens** and that they would play any sport as long as it got them out of the house. **Residents have access to smartphones but not footballs** and residents will not go play on a field unless it is organized in advance, either by them or an organization. **My target audience changed from multigenerational to preteens and teens**. After holding the tournaments and receiving feedback from the residents, in order to implement Backyard Lots, I need to develop a shared service for sporting equipment and a tool through social media for preteens and teens to self-organize events, and a place for parents to be involved too. This tool needs to be inclusive but also needs to incor-

porate a way to invite friends, and include a map of designated Backyard Lots to use.

I will be tapping into social media because kids in Slavic Village are fully immersed in it by age 10. During my prototypes, I asked the youth what the **most popular social media outlets are** in Slavic Village and they told me **Kik, Snapchat and Instagram**. They are the apps they use the most to communicate with their friends, and said they would use Kik to set up and stay informed around Backyard Lots events. Right now, it's "hard (for the youth) to get enough people to play" in Slavic Village, but there's always kids walking up and down the street. Kik will enable the community to connect and interact with Backyard Lots, since everyone is already on it, which will bring the youth together for recreation.

Through the success of the football and soccer tournaments, I was able to acquire my own lot with the help of Slavic Village Development. I've leased one lot for a year for \$221.55.



On March 12, 2016, I held a Kickball tournament on the lot I've leased. This tournament had over 30 likes/shares/comments on Facebook, and everyone seemed really excited but were adults. My location had good road traffic but no one showed. I realized I was not marketing where the kids are, and need to have my first few events in a more public location to get the word out. Kickball didn't succeed because of marketing time, lack of marketing (no newspaper ad), not connecting with the youth on their platforms - used Facebook but I need to use their networks (Kik, Instagram, Snapchat).

Pilot

I piloted Backyard Lots on two different lots in order to test locations (main street vs side street, corner lot vs lot surrounded by homes. First, on April 2, 2016, I held a football tournament on the lot I leased. Unfortunately, no one came to participate again and very few cars even drove by. It rained, hailed, and snowed that day, but I had two businesses show up and donate \$70 for the events, which I used the next day to buy pizza and prizes.

Second, in partnership with Sonny Day Development, a nonprofit whose focus is on the revitalization and rediscovery of Slavic Village, I held a kickball tournament on their lot Sunday April 3, 2016, and invited the neighborhood through onsite and digital marketing. **This tournament confirmed that vacant lots are the perfect resource in creating local recreational outlets in Slavic Village.** The youth who participated said they had fun and would participate again. The demographic of kids playing confirmed Backyard Lots is for preteens and teens. Five kids played (ages 10-12), and were more wealthy than my first prototype youth and owned some sporting equipment. The weather was 30-35 degrees and the kids still showed up to play. When I asked them why they didn't show up to the football event, they said the event on Saturday was too far from their homes to go.



KICKBALL

SPONSORED BY:

BACKYARD LOTS

AND

SONNY DAY DEVELOPMENT



TOURNAMENT



On April 4, 2016, I had a workshop at the Boys and Girls Club to inform the youth of Backyard Lots and get them to use the Backyard Lots Kik group. The teacher I workshoped with will be encouraging her students to self-organize with Kik in future classes. The Boys and Girls Club loved Backyard Lots and thought it was great for their kids.

Failures

Throughout the whole process, my main barrier was not physically being in my location at all times, people need more notice of my events (1 month vs 2 weeks), and the weather. Backyard Lots is weather dependent and is for the summer, not winter.



Intervention

Through these learnings, I designed a **system to transform vacant lots into safe and local recreational outlets for Slavic Village youth**. It's not easy to get kids out to a vacant lot, it sounds simple but takes a lot to get them there.

How would a resident interact with Backyard Lots and how does it work?

First, the resident is informed of the lot through digital marketing and physical signage. Backyard Lots has already certified the lot, and this ensures the lots safety.

They are then invited to participate in an organized event on the lot. This will demonstrate how to use it and provides an opportunity for them to meet their neighbors.

Next, they self-organize a sports game and will stay informed of upcoming games through a chalkboard placed on the lot and Kik, a mobile messaging application.

The resident brings the sporting equipment from the Little Free Libraries. I've partnered with the Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Cleveland and we'll be placing the sporting equipment into the preexisting Little Free Libraries throughout Slavic Village. We'll be augmenting the space with the incorporation of sporting equipment.

Then, the resident meets with their neighbors and has fun!

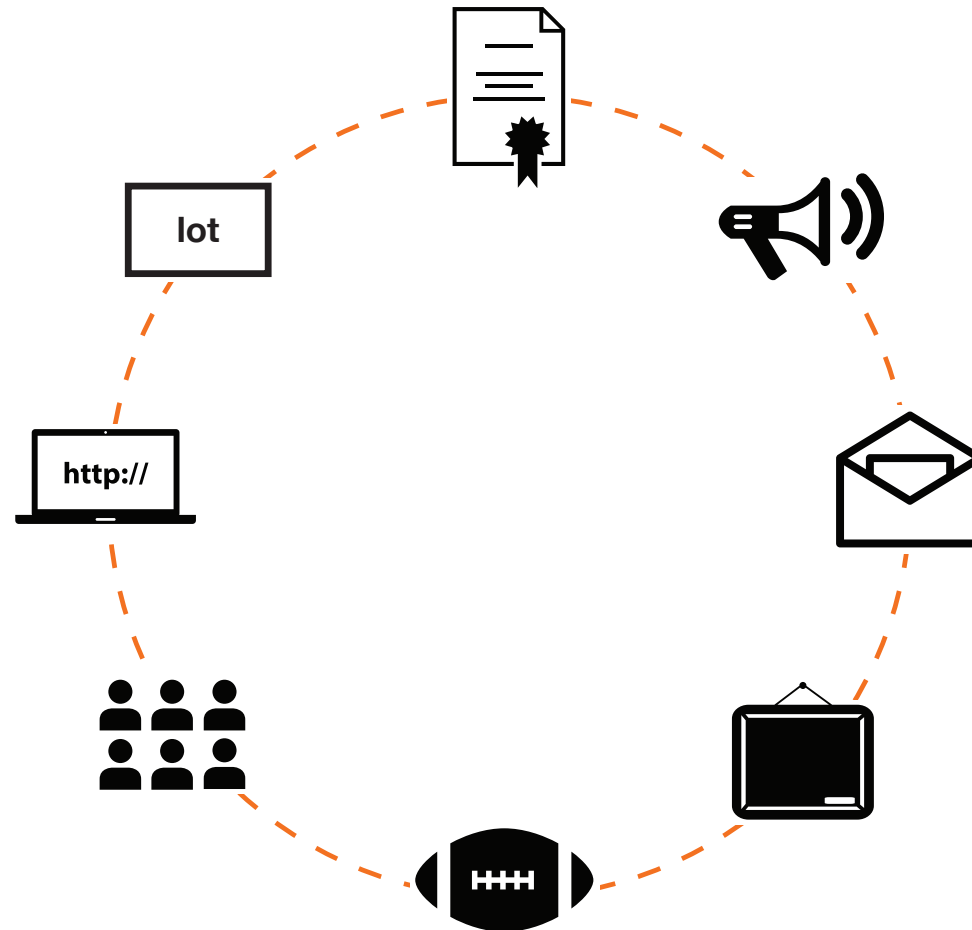
They want to do more and are directed to the Backyard Lots website. On the website, there is a toolkit and starter kit for them to create their own Backyard Lot.

Lastly, the resident transforms their own lot and registers it with Backyard Lots. This new lot is added to the ecosystem and the cycle will repeat.

Through these eight steps, Backyard Lots shows residents the benefits and potential of vacant properties.

BACKYARD LOTS

Ecosystem



Certificate by Marco Galtarossa from the Noun Project | Bullhorn by Gardenia Fair from the Noun Project | Invitation by ChangHoon Baek from the Noun Project | Chalkboard by Jon Testa from the Noun Project | Football by Edward Boatman from the Noun Project | Six people by Alfredo Hernandez from the Noun Project | Website by Wilson Joseph from the Noun Project



Currently, **Backyard Lots** has three locations in Slavic Village. I was able to acquire the lots due to the success of the tournaments. One lot I leased and the other two belong to Sonny Day Development. Just with these three lots, if 6 unique teens play on each lot a day, that is 18 teens getting exercise who wouldn't have had it previously. In a year, that is 6,570 teens. If we continue on this trajectory and acquire 3 lots every 2 months for a year, that would be 18 lots total, and if 6 unique teens play on each of those 18 lots a day, that is 108 teens getting exercise a day and in a year, that is 39,420 teens getting exercise on those 18 lots.



Learnings

In order for Backyard Lots to make any significant improvement within the neighborhood, we need to occupy more lots and become more accessible. The more people who are outside and active around the neighborhood will create a safer environment and appeal to future homeowners who will in turn move into the vacant homes. Backyard Lots gets kids outside and active. It gives them a sense of ownership to take control of their health and responsibility to create outlets for themselves. Kik and the Little Free Libraries will give everyone access.

So far the response for Backyard Lots has been great! Organizations are reaching out to partner and Backyard Lots has already partnered with Slavic Village Development, Sonny Day Development, Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Cleveland, and AWE Legends. With the help of our partners, Backyard Lots will be expanding to other neighborhoods and to indoor locations. Parents are onboard too. One of the mother's is extremely excited for Backyard Lots.

"We are always looking for things for our kids to do. What's nice about your program is that it's a lot less of a commitment, especially when your audience is youth. Sports will activate and give a good use to the vacant spaces because it doesn't require a lot of investment or maintenance, kids and people can really pop in and out as they're able to."

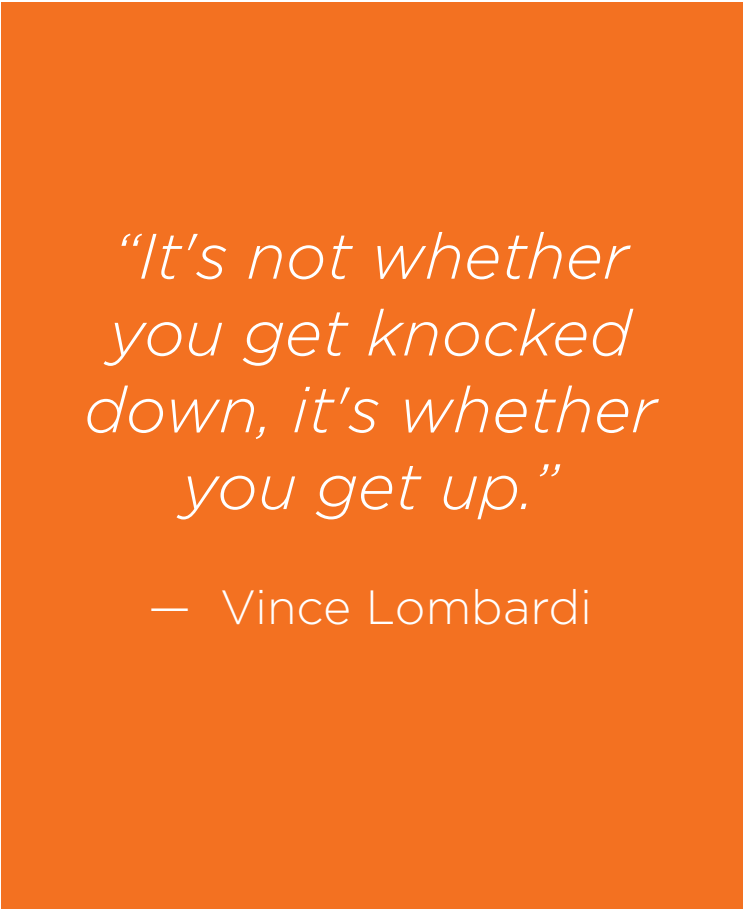
— Summer

Backyard Lots can be applied to other neighborhoods too. The reason Backyard Lots has been noticed and being supported is because it provides residents with the necessary outlets they don't currently have, but Backyard Lots is more than just recreation. In the long term, **Backyard Lots will help attract new residents by bringing in more people who want to live in Slavic Village and cultivating kids who want to stay there.** It's a way for people to love their neighborhood once again which will help transition Slavic Village into a thriving community.

Next Steps

This summer, I'll be participating in a weeklong community development retreat in Slavic Village, where I'll be sharing Backyard Lots, informing key stakeholders of the program and creating partnerships. Second, expanding to East Cleveland in partnership with AWE Legends. Third, continuing outreach to schools and existing recreational clubs in order to find organizations to routinely use Backyard Lots. Fourth, looking at the inside of buildings as recreational outlets in partnership with Sonny Day Development. Fifth, supplying the Little Free Libraries with supplies and supplying Slavic Village youth with Backyard Lots starter kits, which would include a jersey, hat, football and kickball.

Currently, I'm looking into the nonprofit model for Backyard Lots. My long term vision for the project is to generate a community through Backyard Lots who will transform vacant lots throughout the US in both urban, suburban, and rural locations with the toolkit I've developed.



*"It's not whether
you get knocked
down, it's whether
you get up."*

— Vince Lombardi

