New to the neighborhood: Worship and community in East Austin

by Jesse James DeConto in the November 28, 2012 issue

REACHING OUT: In addition to sponsoring art shows, Space 12, a community center run by Vox Veniae church in Austin, Texas, hosts concerts and swing dances and offers space to nonprofit agencies addressing social issues in the community. COURTESY JESSE JAMES DECONTO

In 2006, Vox Veniae ("voice of grace") was a nondenominational church plant growing out of the Austin Chinese Church's ministry to Asian students at the University of Texas. These were the stereotypical children of "tiger mothers"—Asian moms who raise their kids to be smart, educated, ambitious and self-starting overachievers. But the church's members felt that they were isolated from other people; they wanted to break down barriers that restricted them to worshiping and doing service only among other Asians or only among the privileged collegiate crowd around UT's campus.

One day lead pastor Gideon Tsang was riding his bike through a rough area of East Austin and passed Chester's, a bring-your-own-beer nightclub that had been shut down a month earlier after a police officer shot and killed a neighborhood man

outside. Tsang thought this building might be the place to stretch his church's boundaries. Its members would be the minority in this neighborhood of blacks and Mexican Americans, and they could serve the community by cleaning up a spot known for drug dealing, prostitution and other crime. And so they did. They swept up the condoms and heroin needles, tore up the moldy carpet, evicted the roaches and crickets and removed layers of drywall that had been added over the years when neighbors complained about the nightclub's noise.

Vox Veniae's leaders envisioned the 3,500-square-foot building as a place for Sunday worship and a lot more. They began to plan for a community center, Space 12 (on East 12th Street), that could house their church and serve neighbors during the week. They were smart, they were motivated and they had ideas, knowledge and high-tech skills. Several were public school teachers in East Austin, and the church had been sending volunteer tutors into East Austin for years. "We had a lot of college students," Tsang says. "For people involved in education, it just seemed like a natural fit."

After a year of renovation, Vox Veniae opened the space to the community, but its members waited another year before moving in as a church. During that time, they listened, asked questions and tried to figure out what was already being done and how they could help. Could they offer mentoring to ex-offenders in the neighborhood and give them a hand up in starting over? Why not open a coffee shop to give neighbors a place to gather? They proceeded with caution. They didn't want to be a bunch of know-it-alls coming to fix problems in "the 'hood." They wanted their presence to reflect not only the creative vibe associated with Austin's South by Southwest festival (SXSW) and its techie start-up culture, but also the traditional, working-class black and Chicano cultures of the East Side.

"We have learned that these working-class cultures are as much a part of Austin as what we thought of as the right-brained, creative city," Tsang said. "Throughout history, there's a lot of damage when Western church folk impose their own culture onto their gospel message. We wanted the neighborhood people to feel like it was their gospel, their church."

By the time Space 12 opened, more than a dozen Vox Veniae households had relocated to East Austin and were willing to engage residents of a neighborhood scarred by poverty and crime. Some members left the church, disagreeing with its new direction, and those who stayed realized that gaining acceptance from the

community and improving their neighbors' lives was going to be more of a long-term commitment than they'd realized.

Even with its patient approach to mission, Vox Veniae members were seen by some residents of the neighborhood as overeager do-gooders. Skylar Bonilla, 28, a fourth-generation East Side Chicano, learned about Vox through Fireseed, an intentional community that the church members in East Austin had set up before they opened Space 12. Fireseed had been hosting weekly conversations about faith around a backyard campfire, and members invited Bonilla to a workshop where Vox Veniae showed a documentary about East Austin.

"They didn't capture the whole essence of what it means to be East Side," Bonilla says. "They understood that there was a problem and it had to do with poverty and education, but they failed to say what good things were there already. The neighborhood sounded more like a charity case."

Instead of dismissing the church, however, Bonilla, a cradle Catholic, saw a lot that appealed to him. He decided to stick around and eventually joined the church. "They seem to value what I say," he says. "I saw value in their motivations to want to help. I appreciated their concern for people."

Last year Vox Veniae joined the Evangelical Covenant Church, a denomination of Swedish immigrants that was dying in the 1980s before it decided to focus on church planting for new immigrants and other niche populations.

"We relate well to that narrative," says Tsang. "We felt like it was healthy for us to be connected to something bigger for accountability, for leadership, for a reminder that we are just a small piece of the body of Christ. When we go to national meetings, it's not always comfortable, but I think that the discomfort is a healthy thing for us."

This increases the challenge in one important way: Vox Veniae is now trying to stay connected to a denomination, to its own identity and to neighbors who challenge that identity.

"Vox isn't an easy connect to the surrounding Latino/black community," says Tsang. "But it feels more honest to make friends with neighbors. If they come, it'll take a lot of grace on their part because it's not an easy fit. That's happening, but it's slow. New people tend to be neighbors of people who attend here. I don't know if that's

the right answer, but we're OK with that. We're not going anywhere."

With input from people like Bonilla, Space 12 became something different from what Vox Veniae had first imagined. In fact, today the church and the building are two distinct entities, and the church pays rent to a separate nonprofit that runs Space 12. When the local neighborhood association saw little need for a coffee shop that would draw customers from other parts of Austin, the church abandoned that plan.

"The coffee house didn't seem as conducive for making grassroots connections," Tsang said.

As for mentoring, the church leaders discovered that Goodwill Industries, famous for its thrift stores, already had a mentorship program for people coming out of prison. So instead of creating its own programs, Space 12 became known for relating to tenants who have roots in East Austin.

Someone walking in to Space 12 wouldn't know that a church operates here. It looks more like an activist center for the '60s counterculture, with its bare concrete floors, crude wooden shelving, painted cement-block walls and Chester's original wooden bar, but it's been updated with modern flourishes like hundreds of bare light bulbs running along the rafters and multiple TV screens for movies or worship lyrics.

Among the Space 12 tenants is Mosaic, a Southern Baptist congregation that meets on Sunday nights. Vox member Meg Mattingly said the openhearted hospitality attracts her not just to Space 12 but also to Vox Veniae. She likes to attend "skill-share events" in which women might teach knitting or other crafts. "There's so much going on in this space," said Mattingly.

Vox thought about using hip-hop music or some other strategy to attract neighbors, but this didn't happen in worship. Instead, Monday night is for hip-hop. That's when The Cipher takes over Space 12, giving urban youth a place for creating rap music. Cipher cofounder Shannon Sandrea, a mental health counselor with years of experience in local schools, said her organization's previous partnership with a larger nonprofit was too constricting. Space 12 has allowed her students the artistic freedom they need.

"The nonprofit group took a chance on The Cipher," said Sandrea. "They really wanted to understand it and to understand how this was helpful to the youth. We didn't want to do it through any other nonprofit. We wanted the young people to

have ownership of it. Vox Veniae really wants that too. It’s a real partnership.”

In another effort, Space 12 hosts Allies Against Slavery, a grassroots group working to stop human trafficking. The group speaks for those from poor, often immigrant populations who are forced into labor or prostitution because they don’t have the legal status or social connections to fight back.

Another tenant, the Inside Books Project, has been lending books by mail to Texas prisoners since 1998. The IBP library now takes up one quadrant of Space 12.

“A lot of people in the neighborhood have a relationship with or know someone who’s incarcerated,” said Vox community pastor Weylin Lee.

These efforts reach out to those who were in the neighborhood before Vox Veniae arrived. But Vox Veniae’s activities and ministries don’t serve only those neighbors. In some ways, the church brought hipster Austin with it: there are weekly yoga sessions, art openings, film screenings, rock shows and monthly swing dances that draw people from all over the city. During worship, you might find one of Austin’s talented musicians skillfully picking an acoustic guitar while the congregation sings a Sufjan Stevens tune—this is classic Vox Veniae, in a new location. These events also help to keep rent low for the neighborhood nonprofits.

Tsang’s sermons cater to his downwardly mobile, well-schooled congregation of about 150. Preaching on tithing last summer, for example, Tsang built his sermon around cultural references. He calculated the value of the gold, silver, bronze and iron in 1 Chronicles 29, cited a scientific study on Austin’s favorite animal—the Mexican free-tailed bat—and name-dropped his favorite film, Werner Herzog’s indie documentary, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*.

“At five years old, Cain declares himself a vegan, grows dreadlocks and stops showering,” said Tsang, making an insider joke. “Abel offers his smoked brisket up to God.”

When Vox started, it was almost entirely Asian American. Now Asian Americans make up only about one-third of the congregation; other members are mostly young white students and professionals. Connecting to the neighborhood has happened in reverse: while a handful of East Austin natives like Bonilla have joined the church, even more outside churchpeople have moved into the neighborhood—about 30 of them in the last three years.

“Most of them lived in the suburbs, and they made a decision to move here,” said Lee. “Essentially, we’re running two start-ups.”

At Vox, neighborhood needs and the congregation’s own gifts come together in unexpected ways. Beaten Track Studios, a creative social-entrepreneurship project, began when a Vox member purchased two houses to rent to an intentional community called 297. Part of the members’ rent went toward a mission project: buying and refurbishing a camper for a homeless man with one condition on keeping the camper: he had to stay clean. But the man relapsed into addiction, and Vox asked him to leave (members have stayed in contact with him). Vox sold the camper for $10 to singer-songwriter Griffin Kelp, who opened Austin’s first mobile recording studio in the Space 12 parking lot. Kelp is helping neighborhood musicians record their music and plans to take the camper to Austin’s many live music venues to record bands’ shows. This sort of thing would not have happened without Vox’s resources.

“We want to be an incubator for people to express their faith in creative ways,” Tsang said.

Sandrea, with her years of experience in East Austin, said Vox members are conscious of being perceived as outsiders and sensitive to how they might exacerbate, even unintentionally, unwanted situations in the neighborhood. Tsang said that was the reason for rejecting the idea for a coffee shop. Vox members understand the problems of gentrification.

With nine city elementary schools facing closure under budget constraints last year—six in East Austin and three within two miles of the church—missions pastor Sam Lee convened Save Austin Schools to encourage wealthier parents from West Austin to come and talk with the threatened school communities on the East Side. This was a natural step, as it was Vox Veniae’s relationship with local schools that first led the church to East Austin five years ago. Tsang’s family was one of the first to move to the neighborhood, and his son was the first Asian student in the 50-year history of Ortega Elementary School.

While church members work to pursue justice in the neighborhood, they’re under no delusions about actually attaining it. Tsang points out that Jesus himself didn’t eliminate poverty or crime in Palestine, nor did Mother Teresa in India. “I think we should try to make change, but in the end I need it more than the people I’m trying

to help, and hopefully, along the way I'm being helpful and not creating more injustice. If you look at the course of church history, it seems like it's more of a participation in suffering, both because we as Christians need it and because we can bring justice at a micro-level. We're not going to plan one weekend program and see magic happen. We need to love our neighbors well, and it takes a long time."

Bonilla is a prime example. He started going to Vox because he lived a block from one of three Fireseed houses. But then he got arrested while driving a "dope-fiend rental"—a stolen car he had "borrowed" from an addict in exchange for cocaine that Bonilla was dealing. He spent almost a year in prison. Two months after his release in the spring of 2009, Bonilla was baptized at Vox.

"When I was in prison, I got support from my friends at the church," he explained. "When I got out, nobody ever judged me for anything that I did."

One issue that Vox Veniae still struggles with is its expression of the gospel message. This church with both nondenominational roots and a new denominational affiliation must figure out whether it needs to be more explicit about the gospel in the church's community activism.

"That's our primary place here: the telling of God's story," Tsang said. "We're here to help people love God."

Vox Veniae members are exploring the issue by engaging in dialogue and searching for answers in scripture, church tradition and global expressions of the faith.

"It concerns us," Tsang said. "I don't think we've done it well. Our community knows what we don't want to do but not what we want to do."