

Title: Lake Forest Park—a Gold Prize Community  
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I live in Lake Forest Park—a town of about 13,000 people on the very northern edge of Seattle Washington. In June of 2006, we received a Gold Prize award from the Association of Washington Cities for Creating Community Partnerships. Our story is one that could happen any place—with the initiative and cooperation of local citizens, business owners and government.

That we are a town at all is an accident. Lake Forest Park began as a real estate development located near enough to Seattle that its developers could picture it as an idyllic place in nature for city dwellers to renew spirits jaded by city life. In 1915, Ole Hanson's Company offered Lake Forest Park –with “running trout streams, cool crystal springs, pure water, beautiful firs, cedars, dogwoods, maples...” as the answer to “the wasted legacies of Eastern cities”

Fifty five years later, shortly after we came here to live, the Commissioners of King County gave a developer the right to build a mall on a lovely piece of wetlands with a creek flowing through it, where our children loved to play. Local citizens hastened to create the town of Lake Forest Park to prevent further unwanted development, but the wetlands was ruined. The creek disappeared under the mall parking lot. Lake Forest Park was on its way to being a “wasted legacy!”

The mall was a dreary place. It never lived up to its potential--until 1998 when Ron Sher leased space in the Lake Forest Park Town Centre. He opened Third Place Books to which was attached a large commons space with a stage and five cafes. His inspiration was sociologist Ray Oldenberg's observation that humans need three places: their home, their work place, and a common public space where they can be with others. The Commons, originally conceived as an adjunct to Third Place Books, has spawned the Gold Prize creative partnership. Citizens, non-profits, other mall businesses, and local government all got together with Third Place Books to run the Commons—making The Commons a real community

place. A three-legged partnership emerged: with businesses, government and citizen groups all working together in Friends of Third Place Commons. A local businessman, owner of Great Harvest Bakery, was one of the first Chairs. The Mall owners participate in Friends of Third Place Commons and support live music on the weekend nights. The Commons has transformed the mall into the heart of town, and our suburban town into a community.

Picture a sizeable common space, under an atrium that lets in natural light. It is ringed with three locally owned cafes, next to a bookstore. People talk and eat around a motley assortment of tables: long wooden library tables, round tables, square tables. Some work at laptop computers. Two middle schoolers play chess on a floor chess board with large chess pieces. A four year old pushes his train around a small track on the table while waiting for Mom to bring food. Seniors play Mah Jong at several tables. A book club is discussing their latest book at another. Up at the stage, sound is being adjusted for a flute player, a guitarist, and a drummer who will be playing sometime during the next half hour. That's pretty typical of Third Place Commons.

Now, my family and I can walk to Third Place Commons for a staggering variety of offerings from community and near-by groups. Over the years on Friday nights at "Magic: The Gathering" a group of high school age people took over the Stadler Room at the back of the Commons. Music and performing arts have included offerings from Lake Forest Park Elementary School students, a community band, Northwest Ballet School, Shoreline Community College Jazz Ensemble, and many more local bands and performers. We've seen community partners collaborate in offerings as diverse as a Gardening Fair, a Care Conversation on Intercultural Communication; grandparent support and education; Parent/Caregiver/Child playgroups; Teen Book Club: Pizza and books; Healthcare Fairs, Transportation Fairs, LFP History Project!

For the past several years more than 900 events a year have happened at the Commons! Third Place Commons even went virtual during the pandemic, offering conversations, classes by community members, book club, a movie club, and community gatherings on topical civic issues.

From May through mid-October, we buy fresh local food at the Friends sponsored Sunday Farmers Market. AND, day and night, as the pandemic allows, people meet people at Third Place Commons for coffee, bump into

them for conversation and news, listen to an author read from a new book, or sit with their hot drink, people watching and reading a weekly newspaper!

For many years I felt my town was a suburb, with real “life” happening in Seattle. Two factors have changed my experience of Lake Forest Park. One is the existence of Third Place Commons right in the heart of our local economic and political life. The other is the spirit of “Yes!” coming from Friends of Third Place Commons. That “Yes!” is the heart of community. It invites the gift exchange that is the root meaning of the word “community”! From being a property owner in an accidental suburb of Seattle, thanks to Third Place Books and my fellow Commons members, I am now a member of the *community* of Lake Forest Park, Washington!

#### Biography:

Anne Stadler is a pioneering elder. Her 61 years of work have included co-creative community building; facilitating self-organizing leadership and organizational development; and award winning television production. She was the volunteer Founding Director of Friends of Third Place Commons. Her husband David, now deceased, was the Treasurer. Son, Aaron, is a current member of the Board of Third Place Commons.