

The Woodlands History

THE WOODLANDS, THE INSIDE STORY OF CREATING A BETTER HOMETOWN

The Interfaith Building Block

By Roger Galatas



Interfaith headquarters

Interfaith, a non-denominational religious organization, was established before The Woodlands opened. The facility, located on Interfaith Drive, was constructed in 1979 and continues to serve as the organization's headquarters.

Photo courtesy of The Woodlands Operating Company \ Ted Washington

Don Gebert left the job he loved and the city of Philadelphia to come to Texas and help build a brand new community called The Woodlands. A Lutheran minister, Gebert did not come as an employee of The Woodlands. He was supposed to help the company-funded Institutional Planning Committee build a social infrastructure for the new town. Specifically, he was to be the link between the committee and the religious community. Gebert loaded his wife and five children into his car, and with a moving van trailing, arrived at The Woodlands Information Center in early 1975. He was met by the head of the Institutional Planning Committee who told Gebert that in the three days since he had left Philadelphia, all of the members of the planning committee had been laid off – the result of a severe cash flow problem at The Woodlands.

First, Gebert said, he cried. Then he got busy, and stayed that way for 10 more years. What Gebert accomplished isn't just his story. But he was the catalyst of the volunteer effort that has been so important to The Woodlands. People like Gebert – and over the years they have numbered into the thousands – had a sense of what needed to be done, and they did it. Most developers of planned communities would have put in place infrastructure that would help these things get done. When Gebert arrived, The Woodlands couldn't do it because of financial constraints. Later on, The Woodlands did get much more involved in community building. But it was the pioneers like Gebert and the others who built a social infrastructure when doing so looked hopeless. It was they who did so much to make The Woodlands a success.

When Gebert arrived there were no churches. No YMCAs or YWCAs, no senior citizen groups, no child care. There were only a few people and plenty of lots for sale awaiting not-so-eager buyers.

Gebert's journey to Texas started without his knowledge. Before The Woodlands opened, George Mitchell assembled a meeting of the leaders of many of the religious bodies in the Houston area: Catholic, Jewish and Protestant. "He told them he was developing The Woodlands," said Gebert. "He also told them he knew how to do the hardware, but they needed somebody to do the software. That is, he needed somebody to plant the religious community and all the human services in this new town."

The religious leaders that day formed a corporation separate from The Woodlands called The Woodlands Religious Community Incorporated. It's now called Interfaith of The Woodlands.

On Gebert's arrival the news of financial troubles was devastating. "My kids and wife were sitting in the car, moving van behind me, and I didn't have a job, and I had given up what I thought was the best job in Philadelphia as associate director of a major charitable foundation." But he was encouraged to stay and meet Mitchell.

Gebert and Mitchell did meet for lunch, and immediately disagreed. "I had never met (Mitchell)," Gebert recalled. "And he said, 'Now the way we're going to do this is going to be copied after Columbia, Maryland.' Columbia has three religious centers in which the denominations collectively own a share of the center where they met."

“Well, I was scared to death but I had to open my mouth because I had visited Columbia and it had the lowest percentage of people attending church of any city in the United States, and I knew what the reason was. They were asked to share with other denominations things they didn’t want to share and people were trying to erase the lines between Baptists and the Lutherans and the Presbyterians, and I knew that in the ‘70s in Texas it wasn’t going to work.”

“So I said, ‘Mr. Mitchell, we can’t do it that way.’ He said, ‘What?’ I said, ‘Sir, forgive me, but here’s what we need to do. We need to get the churches in here. We need to provide incubator space (space for congregations to meet until there are enough members to support construction of a facility) for them, but we need to provide land for them to have their own church buildings, rather than putting them all in one Interfaith Center. And we need to have enticements like giving them big discounts on their land and placing their land next to schools and parks, so that they didn’t have to buy a lot of land. We could get them to commit to work together with each other long term through this organization we have, The Woodlands Religious Community Inc.’ ”

“And he (Mitchell) sat there for about two minutes without saying a word and I thought this was the end of me, I was going back to Pennsylvania. He said, ‘Let’s try it your way.’ I almost fainted out of joy. And that’s why we have this model – a totally different model from any of the other new towns in the United States. But it’s a model that we knew would work and it did work.”

Now all Gebert had to do was develop an organization on a budget of \$40,000 a year, including his salary of \$20,000. He, with help from his small army of pioneers, visited every household in the community and others as they arrived, collecting pertinent information on 3x5 cards. This eventually grew into the Interfaith resident directory, a major source of community information and advertising dollars to fund Interfaith activities. They also sent out a four-page mimeographed newsletter delivered weekly by bicycles to neighborhood residents. That became

The Villager, which is our newspaper now. Gebert and about a half dozen ladies led an effort to establish the Interfaith Child Development Center and negotiated an arrangement with the Development Company for “free space” to get it started.

With a child care center up and running along with an information services system, Gebert then turned to the primary task of Interfaith, to support the establishment of religious institutions in the community. Interfaith often provided incubator space for congregations. The first was the First Baptist Church closely followed by the Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist and Episcopal churches. Today there are more than 40 places of worship, many located adjacent to public schools and parks to accommodate shared parking arrangements.

When started, Interfaith had one employee. It now has hundreds, plus thousands of volunteers and a talented executive leadership. It’s still a non-profit corporation established to help churches develop in The Woodlands. But it is much more. Interfaith volunteers visit

new residents to provide information on how they can relate to the community. Its services to seniors range from transportation for shopping and medical visits to pairing with student writers so the seniors can record their life stories. Interfaith offers those in need financial assistance for rent, food and clothing. Its annual programs include adopt-a-school, a school supplies and backpack drive, and an adopt-a-family drive at Christmas. Its information and referral services provide up-to-date, full-time assistance for area residents, via telephone and internet.

When Gebert “retired” from Interfaith 10 years after taking the job, he was still making \$20,000 a year. He rejected all pay raises, always finding better places to put additional funds than in his own pocket.



Roger Galatas

Roger Galatas is the former president of The Woodlands Corporation and the author, with Jim Barlow, of the popular book, The Woodlands, The Inside Story of Creating a Better Hometown. For more information, please visit www.rgiwoodlands.com.

1. Don and Barbara Gebert

Don Gebert and wife Barbara worked as a team in building the Interfaith organization. Recently the Interfaith facility was named in their honor. Photo courtesy of Interfaith



2. Lord of Life Lutheran Church

Don Gebert serves as Pastor Emeritus of the Lord of Life Lutheran church, one of the early churches established in The Woodlands. Photo courtesy of Roger Galatas