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# North Hill couple helps lead Better Block initiative in Akron

**North Hill couple working to improve Temple Square and hoping to set example**

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Before Tina and John Ughrin bought a house on Akron's North Hill eight years ago, they moved every three years, going where jobs or studies took them.

That changed when they bought their nearly century-old house on North Main Street. They had found their home.

"We don't plan on moving," Ughrin said during a recent interview in a small seating area inside Family Groceries, a Nepali store in North Hill's Temple Square, the neighborhood's downtown district.

The Ughrins, who live a few blocks from Temple Square, have become increasingly more involved in trying to improve North Hill. They have helped organize social events, started a gardening club, taken over their block watch and, most recently, embarked on their most ambitious project: transforming Temple Square. The couple is at the center of a loosely organized group of residents, business owners and community leaders who will bring the first Better Block program to Akron, Friday through Monday.

The couple took on the effort, which aims to show the potential for redeveloping a block through temporary improvements like pop-up shops and restaurants, after hearing Jason Roberts, the creator of the national Better Block movement, speak at a cycling event in Akron last summer. They were looking for a way to step up their involvement and thought, "This is it."

"It's kind of snowballed from there," Tina said, chuckling.

Jason Segedy, director of the Akron Metropolitan Area Transportation Study (AMATS), which helped select the location and organize the event, said Tina's and John's enthusiasm and talent for bringing people together sold organizers on Temple Square as the best spot. He said the Ughrins have put in "countless long hours as unpaid volunteers" on Better Block.

"You can tell, in everything they do, they are doing this for one reason: because they care about North Hill and because they care about Akron," he said. "I've never worked with anyone from any community that has worked harder on anything with more authentic passion, or less concern for being in the spotlight, than Tina and John."

Taking on the transformation of an entire block isn't out of character for Tina and John, who turned their entire backyard into a garden to grow more of their own fruits and vegetables and once went a whole summer without driving a car to cut down on their fuel consumption. This latest endeavor, though, might become their project with the farthest reach — and greatest expectations.

On a recent afternoon, the couple took a Beacon Journal reporter and photographer on a walk in Temple Square, outlining the stores, restaurants, performances and activities that will bring the block alive. At one point, John pointed out where one of two stages will sit, and Tina corrected him. That stage had been moved to another spot.

"It has been pretty fluid," John said of the planning process.

The couple has embraced North Hill's increasingly international flair, buying groceries and chatpatty, a Nepali street food, at Family Groceries, and helping to organize market tours of the neighborhood's new local businesses through the North Hill Community Leaders group.

Tina, 41, and John, 44, recently started their own company, called Smile Minded Smartworks, which performs evaluations and assessments. They plan to help with the data-collection process during Better Block that will help to gauge the event's success and whether any of the temporary improvements should be made permanent.

The couple, who walk and bike frequently, hope other Akron residents will embrace Better Block and Open Streets, a companion event this weekend whose route will include Temple Square. Both events encourage biking and walking.

"You get a feel for what's wrong when you don't get in the car," John said.

"You also see hidden assets," Tina added.

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