

A black and white photograph of a man wearing a cap with 'WOOD LAKES' and a hoodie with 'B... PV' and 'WRES' on it. He is sitting at a table cluttered with craft supplies like thread and beads. In the foreground, a map is laid out on a white cloth on the floor, featuring a central point with several lines radiating outwards, and small objects placed along these lines. Two labels on the map read 'Fau Senakul'. The man is holding a small book titled 'East's a Big Bird'.

*Voyaging:  
Stories from  
the Milan  
Listening  
House*

# CONTENTS

## **1. Charting the Path**

The Mike Burn's house

## **2. Testing the Waters**

The Healthy Homes Picnic

## **3. Shifting Course**

The Milanesean Cafe

## **4. Attending the Journey**

Erik Thompson and the Micronesian Community

## **5. Travels with the Stars**

The Canoe Demo

# Charting the Path: The Mike Burns House

One of the the oldest houses in Milan was standing vacant again, on the hill close by the old high school that had evolved into a thriving community center. The owner of the house had grown up in and now lived in the house next door to it, after his retirement from a career in the Twin Cities that included looking at issues facing people living at poverty level. He had seen a progression of renters and short term owners move through the place. The house needed lots of work to be ready for new residents. Even though the owner knew that many people were looking for low-cost housing in Milan, he was uncertain that fixing up the old house was worth the investment of time and money. Could a house like this pass a building inspection, or would it be condemned and destined for tear-down?

In the summer of 2017 the newly formed Milan Listening House Team began looking for answers to perplexing and difficult questions around low-cost housing for people. The team trusted that creating a space for community members to speak their thoughts, beliefs and expectations could initiate subtle changes as well as invite folks to practice healthy changes. In their search for an old house to rent for this space, they were led to the owner of the old house. He welcomed them to create a community art exhibit in it.

Since it was summer, the team did not need electricity or heat to work in the house, but the leaking roof had caused caving plaster/insulation mess to clean up before they could begin work in it. The team decided their first step was helping the owner find a building inspector.

# Testing the Waters: The Healthy Homes Picnic

One of the primary goals of the Milan Listening House was to provide space in the community for people to speak out loud about things they usually did not have room to talk about in day to day conversation. To this end we hosted a community picnic and invited people from Milan and the surrounding area to talk about what makes a good neighbor. Part of the reason for this picnic was to sign-up families for Healthy Housing Assessments with the Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership. We also had an “ask Jorge” portion of the program, where people could get an informed opinion from an expert on common challenges in older housing.

At the meeting we served a meal of roast pork on buns with a fresh fruit salad and kimchi, along with water, coffee and lemonade. The meal was free and at the end of the night was had a drawing for a gift certificate from the local grocery store, Bergen’s.

One member of our team had an extended conversation with Anterson, a new Micronesian community member. Anterson relayed in one-on-one conversation the issues with alcoholism and opportunity on Chuuk. He explained how islanders lack opportunity for economic development and employment at home. One of the reasons many people are leaving Chuuk is because they hope to be able to make positive changes for themselves and their families.

According to Anterson people are moving here for their kids to have something in the future that they cannot have on Romanum. Anderson explained access to education is important to him. He misses home but “there is nothing” for his kids there.

Anterson also told our team member how hard it is to understand loans in the United States. He explained it is something people on Romanum never had to work with before. Most people build cinder block homes, he explained--they owe nothing once they live in their house because they pay for materials as they go. He felt more comfortable with rent to own because it made sense to him, and when he was told that loans involve a lot of paperwork he wanted to do rent to own instead.

Anterson came to the meeting that night because he sees there is a need/opportunity for a "Micronesian businessman" - someone who can be a landlord or property manager for people in the community that can help people learn the "different" ways of owning a home here in Minnesota.

In addition to the one-on-one sharing our team did with Anterson, we also facilitated a community forum. Here we asked people what they thought made someone a good neighbor and people had space to share out loud concerns and frustrations. One of the most memorable statements came from Milan's Mayor. Mayor Ron put it this way, "for so long we were preparing to die, but now we're growing and we have to change our mindset." People also lamented the lack of integration between the Micronesian community and long-time residents. They recognized a need to offer help to their neighbors.

There was mention of the balance between respecting the privacy of others and interacting well with neighbors, knowing where they need help and what they are struggling with--in our observation because the old-time residents and newcomers are having cross-cultural interactions for the first time, it is challenging and uncomfortable for long time residents to interact without feeling invasive or intrusive. This could be because acknowledging "difference" in conflict-averse communities feels like creating conflict. However, working together through cross-cultural tensions produces better relationships between neighbors than avoiding them.

At the community picnic we recorded a list of Good Neighbor statements. The picnic became an opportunity for neighbors to hear aloud about each other's concerns. One good result is that longtime resident Tom Moe connected with Anterson after hearing about Anterson's problems with basement flooding. They set up a time to meet together so Tom would be able to help Anterson get the help he needed.

The Healthy Housing Community picnic helped provide the Listening House team with a broader view of the generally held thoughts and feelings of established residents in the community. We also had time to engage with some one-on-one conversations with people from the Micronesian community. We were able to get a good feel for the atmosphere in Milan surrounding housing and issues facing residents in the community.

Priorities for many people included repairing blighted homes, having inspections so repairs could be made or buildings could be torn down, and working with a small cities grant to get funding for fixing homes and community structures. Overall, people seemed eager to work together and help one another, but needed understanding and knowledge to begin the process.

# Shifting Course: The Milanese Cafe

The Milan Listening House project plan seemed straightforward: make one-on-one appointments with residents; spend an extended amount of time listening; take this listening-knowledge back into team meetings while drafting potential initiatives for governing bodies based on community feedback.

One of our first engagement events was a pop-up photo/listening booth simultaneously occurring with Placebase Productions auditions for “This Land is Milan: The Musical.” It was here we began to gather that our plan may not be as effective as we initially assumed.

“Good luck getting so-and-so to tell you what they really think.”

“Mrs. Down-the-Street will talk to you, but she won’t want you in her house.”

“Mr. Moved-Away has some good insight, but he doesn’t live in town anymore.”

“I’ve known such-and-such since they were young, I can tell you what I think.”

The formality of our method was creating a barrier to discovering what we most desired: the sincere questions, frustrations, and hopes residents had for their community. People were sharing problems, offering solutions, or explaining why potential ideas wouldn’t work in the future. The Milan Listening House Team wanted to implement brick and mortar solutions for Milan’s housing challenges but we were not getting to the root of the issue. And we were not engaging with those often overlooked by conventional systems.

We made a decision mid-course to pivot our strategy: organizing a community picnic to facilitate dialogue on what makes a good neighbor with SWMHP Healthy Housing presentations from Jorge the building inspector and others. We asked the Milanese cafe to make their traditional bread rolls for our picnic, which we found they did not have the capacity to do yet. However, frequent visits to the cafe communicating about the picnic, the rolls, and translating documents achieved our primary goal: deep listening.

At the cafe a Micronesian elder invited Lauren over to his table. “I’d like you to meet Mario Bonito, one six master navigators in our canoe tradition. Mario has traveled the ocean without the use of modern navigating equipment. He made the journey from Hawaii to Guam using only the stars, the patterns in the waves, and the changes in the air around him.”

Lauren knew this was one of those moments the Listening House team had hoped to capture and asked if it’d be okay for her to return with her team. That afternoon in the cafe we listened to how humans navigated oceans long before modern technologies. Mario told us that “waa,” their word for canoe was the same as the word for veins and arteries in the human body. “The canoe is that which carries life”, he explained. “It is the same in English,” he said, “the word is vessel.”

Here was the beauty and wisdom that we were seeking as the Listening House team. It was a connection that transcended Chuukese and English languages. We had found a heart motivation that could drive real change: it was necessary for the Micronesian community to restore connection to their island traditions to have the heart to grapple with the challenges of their lives here. Supporting watercraft culture could connect Milan people through their shared love of boats, wood handcrafts and navigation skills.

Mario explained to us how a master navigator can read the swells on the surface of the ocean and understand the shape of the land under the water. Waves reveal unseen rocks or obstacles hidden under the surface, as well as the depth and distance of the water from land. We saw a connection to the obstacles new immigrant populations face as they settle in Milan. Those with a desire to affect real change must intuit the dynamic interplay of a complex array of environmental, cultural, and historical factors. This takes time, observation, and great humility.

This important discovery of shared values and interests between the Micronesian and Norwegian communities in Milan shifted the course of our project dramatically – and could only have happened there in the Milanese Cafe. Through this experience, we learned the importance of spending time where the community already is, rather than asking them to come to your space.

# Attending the Journey: The Story of Erik Thompson

As the Listening House team engaged with the community, one particularly powerful stakeholder emerged. This stakeholder received both credit and blame for his role in facilitating the migration of Milan's largest new-immigrant population. As a former peace corps volunteer, his relationship with Chuuk catalyzed Milan's changing demographics--shifting it from an aging homogenous population, to a diverse multi-ethnic small town. While his personal relationships with the Chuukese people brought a new population to Milan, he was unprepared (as many were) for the rapid shift that followed.

After the first Chuukese family established residence in Milan, a large-scale movement followed. The Jennie-O plant in nearby Montevideo had a continual need for workers, cost of living in rural Minnesota was relatively low, there were empty homes, and the town was a comparable size to Chuuk. On Chuuk, the island was shrinking because of rising water levels, the population was growing without easy access to jobs, education or health-care, and the United States had a compact of free association with the Federated States of Micronesia, meaning any Micronesian could freely travel and work in the U.S. Combined, these factors lead to a sizable population gain relative to Milan. This added population brought with it a myriad of social, cultural and economic challenges.

In addition to his relationships, our stakeholder also had material means to assist Milan's new residents. In the past, as homes in Milan were put on the market, he had purchased them as an investment for himself and the town. He had hopes of creating an intentional community in Milan.

As Micronesians arrived in Milan, he agreed to provide housing in exchange for maintenance. However, complex personal and cultural factors created many challenges with this informal arrangement. As time progressed, our stakeholder felt more and more trapped by circumstances outside his control, while at the same time community opinion relegated more responsibility to him.

It became clear to the Listening House team that our stakeholder had nowhere and no one with who he could discuss his circumstances. People either blamed him entirely, or offered solutions to difficulties without understanding the broader complexities. There were many negative consequences resulting from his arrangement, but also positive changes too. It was impossible to fix everything, and it felt impossible to fix anything. So we began by providing a listening space for our stakeholder in the Listening House.

The afternoon was difficult. It was clear that no one wanted or predicted any of the challenges facing Milan, yet circumstances demanded the community prepare for its current reality. Our stakeholder had never set out to become a landlord, yet here he was--with all of the responsibilities and none of the energy. Our team allowed him to speak openly about his fears, desires and hopes for change. We released the stakeholder and ourselves from jumping to conclusions or fixing any challenges that day. This moment was about taking the time to see and reflect on every factor contributing to Milan's circumstances.

As a listening team we had to trust the process and believe listening would initiate some changes by providing space for open exploration. By letting go of the need to solve or fix, or pressure our stakeholder into making changes, he could better judge what changes he first needed to make for himself. The strategy proved to be effective.

By the end of our engagement in Milan, our stakeholder had begun the process of selling his properties to an entrepreneur from Montevideo. It seemed he had begun to make necessary changes for himself, without help from us. Yet during our time with him, he had the space he needed to think out loud about transitioning out of his responsibilities.

Sadly, this story does not end with a triumph or permanent fix. Our stakeholder has encountered health issues in the midst of navigating a complex and difficult process. As an artist team with ties to the community, we continue to listen and look for opportunities to support all of Milan during this vital season.

# Travels with the Stars: The Canoe Demo

Soon after we met the Mario Bonito the Pulawat Navigator, our team asked Gabriel if he would be willing to construct a version of the star compass used by Islanders for the Listening House exhibit. Gabriel called Mario for help in placing guide stars on the mat, as Mario was still in the U.S. working on a double-hulled canoe with Dr. Vicente Diaz and his Indigenous Studies class at the the University of Minnesota. During that conversation, Lucy asked Mario if he would be willing to teach a boat building class in Milan sponsored by the Listening House. Mario and Dr. Vince graciously made time for one final demonstration and lecture the coming weekend before Mario returned home to the Pacific.

The team was able to secure lodging, a projector, create flyers, and outline an agenda for the day. We planned a two-day workshop that included Dr. Vince Diaz's presentation 'Opening the Mat' and Mario's hands-on demonstrations of canoe handling. It was late in October, but we hoped that Mario would be able to take the boat out on nearby Lac qui Parle. We had planned events around the still unheated or electrified Listening House, but the day was cold and gray, proceeding quickly to an all day rain. Although we had advertised this as open to the general public, it was mostly Micronesian folks that gathered at the Milanesean Cafe.

They spent the day listening to Vince tell stories about the accomplishments of their ancestral navigators. Bob Ryan shared that he and Vince have been visiting Milan for years to work with this island group transplanted to southwest Minnesota.

Vince voiced a masterful summary of the navigators' tradition that linked to the audience's immigration experience. (Puluwat Island is the next island directly east of Chuuk where most of Milan's new residents came from). The basis of this long and complex oral history is, "where were the guiding stars when you left your island and where were they when you arrived at the next island? To understand oneself is to understand one's relationship to the stars."

The event culminated the next day with a sail-hoisting demonstration. The team had hoped conditions would be right to get the boat on to Lac qui Parle but the weather was too windy and cold. The canoe was taken to the open space at Burns Park across from the Milan Village Arts School. Together the students worked, following Mario's instructions as they hoisted the sail. Dr. Vince demonstrated how to flip the sail mid course to give voyagers control over their speed and direction. The men worked on the boat together, shifting the mast to rig and lift it with a flock of small children rising and settling like birds around the action.

Over the weekend, a central theme emerged. It is impossible to understand where one is, if one does not first understand who one is and the place one has come from. To form a healthy identity and to comprehend the significance of home, all people in Milan need to work together to better understand the complex factors which have established Milan as it exists currently. To create sustainable change, the community must engage the social and spiritual dimensions of creating home together.