



Well House
601 Cass Ave. SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503
Phone: (616) 245-3910
www.wellhousegr.org

The Well House Story

Depressed and unable to hold a job, Well House founder Marian Clements found refuge with a Quaker community. Inspired by their constant positive attitudes, Marian lifted herself out of her negative situation, and in 1977, determined to stand on her own feet as well as help others in a similar situation, Marian purchased an 1879-era home near the intersection of Cass and Pleasant Street in Grand Rapids, MI. The cost? \$350.00. She called it Well House.

The inspiration for the name Well House, was [Wallhouse](#) located in Torpichen, Scotland. Wallhouse belonged to Marian's great, great grandmother, and for more than three hundred years, offered 'protection and refuge.' In keeping with the mission of the original Well House, Marian opened her home to others in need of comfort and protection.

An Urban Homesteader

Marian's style of living emphasized living gently on the earth and with each other, so she built her home around this concept, demonstrated by her refusal to have electricity in her home. Gradually, her influence in the community lead to a change in the city housing code allowing a single-family home owner to live without electrical power. Marian repaired her home using recycled materials, and heated it with a wood furnace. She showered in her greenhouse, and composted under the sink, recycling water to water the greenhouse garden, kept goats for milk and cheese, and maintained a garden growing alongside the house. She purchased an adjacent lot for \$1.00 and planted fruit trees, and used a 55-gallon metal drum to create a sawdust commode, in which the sawdust organically decomposed waste in an environmentally friendly way. What's more she did all this on an SSI stipend.

Marian's lifestyle eventually ran into problems. In 1982, she was required upgrade plumbing by replacing the sawdust commode with cement brick containers, and install a gray water system and an overflow line from the system to the city's storm-water system. Marian had forty-five days to comply or spend that same amount of time in jail. She did not comply within the forty-five days and ended up spending five days in jail. Stating her case, Marian's lawyer said, "She has demonstrated that enforcement for enforcement's sake of rules and regulations which seek apparent conformity for conformity's sake perhaps is an inappropriate standard."

The Community Expands

In 1991, the Well House community expanded with the purchase of a second house, and in 1992, the city of Grand Rapids donated a third home—in an unusual manner. The home was scheduled for demolition, but Marian requested that the money allocated for its demolition be used to move it to the Well House campus, where it was renovated using funds from area supporters.

In 1994, Marian received the [Jefferson Award for Public Service](#), garnering her national recognition for her long-term dedication to help others. Unfortunately, in 1996, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, which she fought for a year, entering the hospital only one day prior to her passing. Marian Clements literally helped others up until the day she died.



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The Mission Continues

Marian's friends, Grand Rapids' activists Judi Buchman, richa, and many others continued the Well House mission for more than a decade until 2012, when Tami VandenBerg became Executive Director.

Present Day

5,000 men, women and children from all walks of life have called the Well House community home; some for a couple of months, others for several years. Now, the maximum capacity of Well House is 17 guests. Urban gardens dot the landscape, growing 25% of the food consumed by residents. Facilities include a communal kitchen and laundry.

Future Plans

Long-term plans are to create a large-scale urban farm that will span at least six to eight city lots, and growing a wider variety of food for residents to share with neighbors, and to be sold to area farm-to-table restaurants. Immediate crops include mushrooms and garlic, with others planned according to demand.

Lastly, the Well House campus includes a 20' x 20' multipurpose facility (believed to have once been a carriage house), which contains a pottery studio in need of renovation. Plans are to create an art studio that will enable residents to create ceramics, as well as other artwork for sale.