



# *Bring It, Cheboygan*

SHERRY NELSON  
REFLECTS ON THE  
LEGACY OF HER COFFEE  
GROUP TURNED  
COMMUNITY CATALYST

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Photos and Story by Phil Eich,  
Storyville Social, as part of the  
Michigan Main Street Story  
Series

At the time, half the storefronts in Cheboygan were completely empty. We were sitting in the middle of beautiful and phenomenal resources that it seemed nobody appreciated, and there was a very negative attitude in the town at the time.

So, in 2016, I got together with two friends for coffee, and we said, 'There must be something that can be done for Cheboygan.'

We decided to get together again the next week, but wanted to see if we could bring more people to join us and talk and share ideas. The next week, instead of three, there were seven.

The following week after that, there were 15.

That was the start of the group we now call 'Bring It, Cheboygan.'

Part of our growth was word of mouth, but we also went to the farmers market every Saturday. I had my T-shirt and a card table with a sign saying, 'Sign up for Bring It Cheboygan.' It wasn't that you had to do anything. You didn't have to volunteer or do anything, but we would send you a newsletter of things that are going on around town. Within that included volunteer opportunities. If you want to volunteer, swell. If you don't, you will at least be aware of what's going on.

All together I've got 500 names, phone numbers, and emails of people that I send newsletters out to - just to let

people know what's going on. Most of these people don't even live in the city, but all of these people wanted to help make things better and exchange ideas.

Then we learned about the Main Street opportunity at that point, but the city had already turned it down. The Main Street program does take work, and the city felt there weren't enough people willing to do it.

We said, 'Wait a minute, let's find out more about it.' So, we did a little research on the program. We found what it could do for our community and the great potential it could bring, and decided we had to do it.

One of the most important ways it could help was how it could bring different groups together, because that was lacking here. Even at City Council meetings, it was a very negative attitude—it was always about what we couldn't do. We wanted to bring a 'can-do' spirit to town and a positive attitude. There were so many positive things that we saw that could happen or should be happening.

As our group grew, we asked the City Council to put it on the agenda again and we showed up in large numbers to show support. We had 50 people there at the City Council meeting to show that we were already a viable volunteer base and still growing. We picked up members all the time and we were willing to go do the training and travel to learn about the Main Street program. We wanted to work together to expand the network and get things done.

We all knew that we would have to do a little pushing, operating and collaborating for the city to approve becoming a Main Street community, so that's what we did.

One of the most valuable things we did was make all the empty storefronts look full. The first year, during the 2016 holiday time, we said, 'This town looks so bad. Let's see what we can do fairly quick and dirty.'

We contacted the realtors that had all the listings up and down Main Street and worked with them to let us in the stores. Volunteers washed all the windows, then we put Christmas decor in all the storefronts. Then when January came we said 'Oops, we have to get it all out now.'

After Christmas, I ordered historical photos as large posters that were four by six feet. We hung those up in the storefronts to fill them up that way. They lasted for a long time, then one by one, somehow magically, the stores were filled by businesses and we didn't have that opportunity anymore....and that's a great thing!

I think it was then that the city recognized that we were not going to take no for an answer. We just weren't going

to be happy unless there was positive action being taken, and applying to become a Main Street program was approved.

The city approved it and put the responsibility on us as volunteers and everybody who was lobbying for it. 'Okay. It's in your court now, go do it.' So, we moved forward. We showed up wherever the Main Street trainings were and we would wear our Bring It Cheboygan T-shirts. We would show up 10 at a time to report what we had done and how we were working with the city. We showed them even the little small changes that were being made that we instituted.

It was a couple-year process from the start. We got the approval from the City Council to move forward in March of 2019 when we got designated. To become a Main Street, you need to present to the MEDC and Michigan Main Street in Lansing about the work you've done.

When we were getting our presentation together, we wanted to come up with something completely unique, something that said 'Cheboygan' all over it.

We've got great musicians in town, so John Gravlin sang a song about 'Cheboygan On My Mind' which he made up. It was to the tune of a popular song and everybody loved it.

We used a drone to film John walking down the center of Main Street as he's playing his guitar and singing the song. People walking by jumped in behind him and joined in singing. 10 people come out of the bank here, two people came off the street corner there, and by the end, there was a ton. There's a photo out there somewhere and Main Street was 15 deep and as wide as the street of people saying, 'Bring It Cheboygan,' and that was the end of our presentation to the MEDC.

That's really the spirit here in Cheboygan: you start beating the drum and everybody shows up. If we need you, they're here. If somebody is sick and needs help, the entire community shows up. If there's a house fire and a family loses everything, we pick people up and move them forward. It's the same thing with businesses.

No matter what it is for the community, people will help.

—Sherry Nelson, Founding Member of Bring It Cheboygan

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