

# The Gift of Getting Involved: *Creating Community* in Uptown GR with Christine Helms-Maletic

BY BRI KILROY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TWO EAGLES MARCUS

Christine Helms-Maletic and her family decided they were going to experience Korea this Christmas. No, they're not bailing from our Michigan winter festivities and escaping to the tranquility of the South Korean countryside. Their experience will come from Korean-style dishes they serve at Christmas. You see, what's traditional for Maletic is to experience less traditional paths, and each year her family chooses a different country to base Christmas dinner on. Past plates have been inspired by Jamaica, Russia, Italy, Greece, Ethiopia and more.

"It opens the floor to research because, most of the time, I don't know very much about the country I'm creating food from," Maletic said. "There's a mix of vegan, vegetarian and carnivorous friends, so we're challenged to find recipes that will accommodate everyone."

Her draw to challenges, whether it's creating a Russian dish that's also vegetarian or establishing commonality with the plethora of people she meets daily, is a dauntless trait that has unmistakably earned Maletic the position as Uptown GR's Corridor Manager. Maletic works with local business owners, community leaders, volunteers and neighborhood residents to develop the area that has been sprouting with new places to "live, work and play" for almost three decades.

"Uptown is a full-service district," Maletic said as she illustrated the cornucopia of resources available in the neighborhoods sandwiched between Fulton and Wealthy Street. "I live near Uptown and can grocery shop, get a great cup of coffee or a beer, buy a new outfit and find the perfect gift without busting out my car keys."

Thanks to Uptown GR's design and development efforts, we are home to an urban area that reflects the enchanting and longed for nostalgia that is thought to exist only in the cinematic past, where the friendly store owners recognize you and cozy window displays spark curiosity to enter a new boutique.

"I think people enjoy shopping in people-sized places rather than wandering around aimlessly in big-box stores," Maletic continued. "Repeat customers in any Uptown business can be assured that the person serving them will remember them — They have a vested interest in ensuring the customer is satisfied, so the customer's experience is probably much better than it would be at the mall or a chain store."

Flint-born Maletic moved to Grand Rapids in 1997 after spending time teaching in southern Indiana while her husband went to grad school. Settled in GR, she focused on raising her family and getting to know the



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neighborhood through volunteer work. As her daughters grew older and Maletic was able to accrue more free time, she began searching for ways to get involved with the community. In 2002, she connected with the Midtown Neighborhood Association and joined the conversation about how they could improve the neighborhood.

Maletic's passion for community and belief in the power of local businesses working together fueled her involvement in additional organizations including the

Uptown Forward Team, East Fulton Business Association Board, United Growth for Kent County and the West Michigan Environmental Action Council. Her work as a volunteer, paired with her skills in grant-writing and project management, evolved into working as a consultant and taking on the Fulton Street Farmers Market renovation in 2008.

The market's transformation from congested booths sheltered by tarps that did little to protect visitors from external elements, to the spacious pavilion that allows



Maletic has spent three decades working with area businesses, residents and volunteers to transform the area into the thriving local-shopping district it is today.

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two-way strolling up and down the array of vendors is a grand achievement for Maletic. She praises the talented and passionate people on-hand to help her when she confronted unfamiliar tasks.

“I didn’t necessarily need to know how to do something,” Maletic said. “I needed to know people who knew how to do it, and then I could learn from them.”

Maletic explained the key to community organizing is forming one-on-one relationships and working with individuals.

Understanding improvements take time (and, with a laugh, acknowledging her stubbornness as a reason she doesn’t give up easy) is essential to Maletic’s ability to maintain her momentum. She knows there are infinite ways to achieve something, and the willingness to explore those options and take the time to forge solutions has made Maletic successful in Uptown GR’s role of bringing people together.

“The thing I like most about community work is I’ll walk into a room thinking I have the answer; then, after collaboration and hearing different ideas, I emerge with a completely different concept,” Maletic said. “No one is ever going to like everything you do all the time, but they’ll respect your decision if you engage with them honestly.”

Taking time to communicate, brainstorm and connect with community members helps Maletic weave her two greatest passions together: community and family. In the way she’s passionate about bringing people together through Uptown GR events and facilitating camaraderie between local businesses, she’s passionate about indulging in family time with the people who are “the reason I’m doing what I’m doing,” she said. Maletic spends the final week of the year with her husband and two daughters; playing board games, watching movies, eating out and reading as many books as she can. As far as what she plans on cooking for her Korean-inspired Christmas dish, she has some ideas but is still researching the endless possibilities.

We, as a community, have had the privilege to witness the growth of Uptown GR as new businesses enter the neighborhood, public events showcase its inclusive and diverse environment, and the connection between business owners and community members make the aspiration to live in a small town neighborhood—where your morning coffee, grocery stores, favorite

book shop and date night spot are within walking distance— a reality. Take the month to experience Uptown and connect with the store owners, artists and people that make it the vibrant, memorable neighborhood we are beyond thankful to have in our city.

*Learn more about Uptown GR and map your next uptown adventure at [Uptowngr.com](http://Uptowngr.com).*

## More on Maletic

**How she defines Community:** Sharing your space (physical, mental or emotional) with others.

**Favorite hobbies:** Playing board games and reading.

**Favorite gift to give:** Books because “you’re not just giving people a thing; you’re giving them an experience.”

**What Uptown is currently working on:** Improving public spaces and creating places for people to come together and share experiences.

**On her wish list this year:** Really warm socks.



Maletic worked as a consultant on the Fulton Street Farmers Market renovation in 2008.