



> **CHECK IT OUT** Far left: The McGregor Library in happier times, when it was still open. Above and right: Boarded-up windows on the 1926 treasure and a beat-up sign provide a depressing sight.

An Open Book

Highland Park's long-closed but venerable McGregor Library is scheduled to reopen in phases // By Aleene Jinn Hang

The McGregor Library, one of metro Detroit's most architecturally significant buildings, has been shuttered for six years, its ornate bronze doors concealed behind plywood as a bleak and prominent symbol of urban decay.

But a group of activists is working to resuscitate the Woodward Avenue landmark.

"Reopening the McGregor Library is Highland Park's signature project," says

Yvette L. Robinson, the city's director of community and economic development. In 2006, Highland Park was among eight impoverished Michigan communities designated to share funds allocated by Gov. Jennifer Granholm's Cities of Promise initiative.

With support from the state, a newly launched finance committee, private organizations, and the leadership of Art Blackwell, current Emergency Funding Financial manager, Highland Park is working toward a phased reopening of the library, beginning with the main floor in 2009. "We

have started on the exterior," Robinson says. That work will include a new fence; the roof has already been replaced.

Care is being taken to respect the site, which was built on land donated to the city in 1918 by Tracy and Katherine McGregor, a wealthy and influential couple (her father was lumber baron David Whitney). New York architects Edward Tilton and Alfred Githens designed the classical Roman-style structure with input from the Detroit firm of Marcus Burrowes and Frank Eurich. The granite and gray limestone building was completed in 1926.

The future vitality of The McGregor, which is listed on the Michigan Registry of Historic Places, will likely depend on being more than a beautiful repository of books. Robinson says it will function as a "community and cultural center" available for use by Highland Parkers and others living nearby.

Perhaps when visitors once again pass through the entrance, with its unusual coffered niche between two impressive fluted Ionic columns, they'll be inspired to use The McGregor as it was originally intended — for reading. As one of the entryway inscriptions reads, "Books are doors to wide new ways."

// When Clint Eastwood came to town this summer to shoot his latest movie, fans crowded

local sidewalks, clamoring for a glimpse of the four-time Academy Award winner.

Caroline Vang was inspired to take a different approach, however. She saw Eastwood's presence here as an opportunity to cook a Hmong meal for the crew of the

film, which has a Hmong theme.

The movie, *Gran Torino*, tells the story of an unlikely friendship between a Korean War vet and a Hmong teenager.

Vang's offer to cook was rewarded with a bit part showcasing food made by Bangkok96, her family's Dearborn

restaurant. Bangkok96 has a Thai menu, but, Vang says, "We offer special Hmong dishes that friends and family know to ask for."

Those special foods will appear in a scene depicting a house party shot in Highland Park. The Vangs were asked to provide food that the

film's Hmong characters would bring to the party. For the shoot, Bangkok96 prepared several traditional dishes, including dumplings and larb (lettuce wraps), and large baskets of carved fruit.

Vang says her mother has been a chef at Bangkok96 since the

restaurant was founded in 1996.

Several months ago, her mother went to San Francisco for training in traditional fruit carving. Now she's delighted to show her skills for Eastwood, Vang says. "All she hopes for in return is to have her picture taken with him." — Susan Howes