Leadership comes naturally to Geraldolyn Harris. A native of Denver, Colorado, Harris spearheaded the revitalization of that city's oldest park after becoming frustrated by the lack of safe and accessible places for her grandchildren and their friends to play. Starting in 2013, Harris built a broad-based partnership to transform Mestizo-Curtis Park from a forgotten plot of grass to a thriving community asset, complete with a $300,000 community-designed playground and a new plan that includes $1 million worth of new investments in lighting, trails, exercise equipment, a community garden, and programming. The experience piqued Harris' interest in the role of walking in healthy communities. In 2016, it was time for a new project in a new town, and Harris turned to the Walking College to help her find success.

From Advocate to Walking College Fellow

At the same time she entered the Walking College program, Harris went through a major life change: she moved to Mount Pleasant, Illinois, to join her husband. There, she discovered several new barriers to overcome.

"The move was huge for me—leaving the park project and my community," recalls Harris. "When I came out to the northwest suburbs [of Chicago], the first thing I noticed is that it is built for cars. The public transportation system doesn't seem to take into account how pedestrians are accessing bus and train stops and stations. Even in the area we live in, they've been doing construction for about 4 or 5 years, and the construction does not take pedestrians into consideration whatsoever. There are very busy streets and the crosswalks are often in the middle of a four-way intersection."

In addition to finding herself in a whole new environment not conducive to walking, Harris also noticed a very different attitude toward physical movement among members of her faith-based community. Harris had been deeply involved with the Center for African-American Health in Denver, formerly the Black Church Initiative, which focuses on health and wellness programming for churches and church congregations. She had taught Zumba classes for the organization and for The Salvation Army, and helped several congregations make changes in their eating habits and get moving with various walking activities and programs.

From Walking College to Walkable Communities – for All

For her Walking College community project, Harris initially envisioned building a faith-based walking program, inspiring people to walk together in many different congregations. "However, moving from Denver to the northwest suburbs of Chicago, I found a very different attitude toward walking," she says. "Whereas Denver is very progressive, here, it's all about driving."

Harris wasn’t about to give up. One day, she received an email titled, “15 Easy Ways to Get Your Congregation Moving.” She forwarded the email to her pastor, and the next day at a meeting about the church’s new community garden, supervised by Harris and her husband, her pastor gushed thanks, telling her how his own physician had just advised him to take on the task of activating his congregation.
"He said, 'It has been on my mind and on my heart, but I didn't know how to take the steps toward it,'" Harris recalls. Since then, they have calculated how many laps around the church property equal a mile, and now Harris is working on creating a tool for members and the community to use the church grounds for walking activities.

Says Harris, "This is very exciting for me. The tool and the accompanying activities, along with the new garden are part of my vision for changing sacred places into healthy public spaces. It was pretty phenomenal," Harris says. "It was truly God's timing that I received and forwarded that email to our pastor and started that conversation."

**Beyond the Classroom**

With all of her community organizing and leadership history, Harris brought a great deal of knowledge and experience to the Walking College, but she gained a great deal, as well.

"Being a person of color, and a maturing person," says the 60-year-old Harris, "I was looking for a network. The Walking College offered that. I knew I would have people to encourage me – people who were having similar experiences."

She also learned some new skills. "When I did the [Mestizo-Curtis Park] project, I did a lot of that partnering and building collaborations just instinctually," Harris notes. "But it was nice when I came to the Walking College to learn different perspectives and figure out what I did right or what I could have done differently."

The Walking College mentors, she says, made important connections between mental and emotional health and walking, emphasizing the importance of building community, nurturing neighboring behavior and building neighbor-to-neighbor connections, "which is more easily done when walking because you have a chance to meet and greet people," she says.

Through readings and conversations with Walking College mentors and peers, Harris started making new connections between behavior and the built environment. "I'm really noticing curbs and things like that, noticing where there are no connections with sidewalks, and how difficult it is when you're in an area where walking is not easy to do because of the built environment."

Harris' best advice for creating local change is to leverage existing assets and engage directly with stakeholders. "You have to talk with the people," she says. "As people who work within communities, we tend to want to create the event or opportunity and invite people to it, but that is not what you do. You need to go to the events and opportunities that are already happening" and figure out how to align with them.

After she graduated from the Walking College, this lifelong leader was invited to return as a mentor. The timing was ideal.

"I'm starting to have some physical difficulties, which is making me more aware of my environment and things I can do," she says. "With anything I take on, I can't take it on to the level I took on the [Mestizo-Curtis Park project]. I just don't have that capacity anymore. So, being asked to be a mentor has allowed me to continue to learn and make an impact through others."

For Harris, taking good care of herself means taking good care of her community, too, which now includes incoming classes of Walking College students. "I am so grateful to the Walking College for the skills I learned, the network I built and the tremendous opportunity to be able to empower others," she says. "To me, that is the greatest gift, when you are put in a place where you can help empower others to make change."

For more on the America Walks Walking College, visit: [http://americawalks.org/walkingcollege/](http://americawalks.org/walkingcollege/)