



Carly Geraci/Staff Photographer

**Vikki Martin founded** and serves as executive director of the Ferguson Road Initiative, which is celebrating its 20th year and represents 37 neighborhoods that are home to about 93,000 people. She has been laser-focused on improving the area's quality of life.

## Dynamo, her nonprofit have spent years lifting up 'forgotten' area

**M**ore than two decades after Vikki Martin began fighting for the Ferguson Road corridor, just north of Interstate 30, the most fitting name for her part of town too often remains "Forgotten Far East Dallas."

The Ferguson Road Initiative, Martin's nonprofit, still has a long to-do list as it celebrates its 20th anniversary this weekend.



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But Martin and her crew have accomplished a lot of what other neighborhoods are still just talking about.

Martin's grass-roots organization represents 37 neighborhoods that are home to about 93,000 people in an area bounded by Garland Road, Interstate 635, the Mesquite city limits and Interstate 30. It is perhaps the best example in Dallas of a community coming together, taking ownership and improving quality of life.

And FRI, as it's known, exists and has succeeded because

Martin dug in and refused to ever let go.

She's always been inclusive, too. Her group represents a diverse part of the city that is home to both pockets of great wealth and pockets of deep poverty and crime. The demographic breakdown is 46 percent Hispanic, 30 percent white and 20 percent African-American.

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# ‘The life and breath’ of group, mission

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The diversity is what makes the community healthy, she said.

“We don’t say, ‘We only want these kinds of people in our community,’” Martin said.

Ask the people who work for her, with her or even against her — and they’ll say Martin is the kind of leader, catalyst, coach and inspirational force Dallas needs more of.

Real estate investor Ruel Hamilton, who lives in Forest Hills, met Martin during her earliest work. “We fought like cats and dogs because I represented the owner of an apartment complex she didn’t like. I thought she was possessed.

“What I came to learn was that she was obsessed — she just loves that neighborhood.”

FRI grew out of Martin’s concerns about poor schools and high crime in her Claremont neighborhood. She organized a town hall meeting in 1995, only to realize residents either didn’t know how to voice their concerns — or were certain no one would listen.

“City Hall knew Lakewood, Swiss Avenue, Forest Hills, Old East Dallas,” Martin recalled. “But they didn’t know parts farther east. We had no identity.”

In the years since, Martin has helped shut down problem motels and apartment complexes. She’s pressured others to clean things up. She’s reported absentee landlords and code violations.

The woman must not sleep. Somehow, Martin managed to juggle her neighborhood work alongside teaching art at Episcopal School of Dallas until she retired in 2017.

Now 65, she serves as FRI’s executive director. An accomplished painter, she divides her days and nights between Ferguson Road and an art studio located in the same house she and her husband bought when they came to Dallas in the late 1980s after they graduated



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**Thomas Quartararo** of Forney rides his skateboard at Lakeland Hills Skate Park. The park is one of the improvements made available with help from the Ferguson Road Initiative. The group’s founder, Vikki Martin, says she’s eager to face down more challenges.

Austin.

Phil Ritter, one of Dallas’ civic stalwarts and part of Martin’s kitchen cabinet, said she “exemplifies leadership and public service — and all of Dallas is better for it.”

Facts and figures about FRI’s successes are impressive — crime is down, home values are up, the White Rock Hills Branch Library was completed in 2012. But none of that tells the story the way Martin’s “good, bad and ugly” tour does.

As we drove the neighborhoods last week, she veered her car off the planned route time and again — all the while maintaining an unbroken narrative.

“I’ve got to show you this, it’s a great story,” as she pointed to a former nursing home, once vandalized repeatedly and covered in graffiti but now part of property converted into a 12-step recovery campus.

On to Highland Road, where she expects construction will bring a bike path in 2019: “We will be able to connect to trails all over the city.”

drove through the intersection of Ferguson and Highland roads. “Here we are right in the middle of a food desert. Where do these people shop?”

Her mood brightened just moments later as she showed off a \$10 million memory-care center, set to open in January. Not far from there, she was fired up again over another atrocity: “A topless bar right down from a school.”

For many years, FRI’s crime-reduction efforts were supercharged by \$2 million in federal Weed and Seed grants, aimed at reducing violent crime, drug abuse and gang activity. After Washington ended that program in 2011, local businesses, homeowners and other supporters funded the nonprofit’s work.

Martin relishes neighborhood victories like a proud parent — and she’s not deterred in the least by the worst of it.

Nor is she deterred by setbacks. Martin points to a long-promised, never-delivered community recreation center as the biggest example of City

Far East Dallas. Although the city has invested \$6.5 million in land for the center, Martin’s best efforts failed to score much funding in the 2017 bond package.

So where did Martin go from there? She worked with City Council member Mark Clayton to get ground broken next month on the park portion of the site. And she partnered with White Rock United Methodist Church to convert a closed church into a stopgap community center.

Clayton told me that Martin isn’t just persistent, she’s kind and thoughtful — even when the answer is not what she wants. He described Martin as “the life and breath of FRI.” “Most people fade in and out,” he said. “The stamina to do this for so long is impressive.”

Martin says she doesn’t plan to slow down and still wants to face down more challenges. But 20 years in, it looks to me like the organization’s biggest challenge is where it will find its next Vikki Martin.