



community stories

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North Central in Regina: Keeping the Focus Where It Belongs

Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) was launched in February 2005. Originally conceived as a two-year project, its first phase finished on March 31, 2006. This is the second of a series of stories on each of the five local sites. While the first set of stories provided a wide-angle view of each community at the outset of the initiative – its geography, demographics, needs and assets – these updates focus more on resident perceptions of the work unfolding in their neighbourhoods. They are snapshots of an evolving process which seek to capture both progress and the inevitable strains of communities in the midst of change.

Culture clash

North Central, the neighbourhood selected for ANC in Regina, offers a clear picture of a key challenge presented by community development work: how to know which cooks to have in the kitchen and how to pick the best recipe for community success. Since 2003, North Central has been the site chosen for assistance by a multi-partner, government-directed community revitalization process – the Regina Inner-City Community Partnership or RICCP.

When ANC was launched in February 2005, its goal was to complement the work already undertaken by RICCP by getting residents engaged in imagining and creating the type of neighbourhood in which they wished to live. RICCP's operation reflected a top-down perspective of how change is made, while ANC understood that its mandate was to work from the ground up.



Meanwhile, members of the North Central Community Association (NCCA) were caught in the middle of these two conflicting change processes. Both RICPP members and staff at the United Way of Regina (the ANC convening agency) were working to the best of their abilities and energies to bring about positive change. But the friction created as a result of the different approaches was leaving the neighbourhood residents out of the process. In the short term, the community association and United Way pushed ahead with projects that would build community spirit and help residents focus on a hopeful vision for the future.

New ideas take hold

Brenda Mercer has been a member of the North Central Community Association (NCCA) for four years and chaired the organization for almost a year. She is also a North Central representative on the Regina Inner-City Community Partnership. Though that organization intended to graft ANC's work onto its own, Brenda first became aware of ANC when United Way of Regina CEO Vic Huard and newly hired community facilitator Marg Friesen came to visit the NCCA and explained what the program offered. Says Brenda: "It was an exciting project from the very first time I heard about it because it offered people something new – a way for them to become empowered. It looked community-driven, and the more I learned about it and what it could do, the more motivated I got."

ANC did not have an official, high-profile launch, so when Marg Friesen began distributing project literature hand-to-hand in North Central in July, the project had a low profile. "Part of my role with ANC," says Marg, "was to create a relationship with specific individuals, neigh-

bourhood organizations, school divisions and human service providers in North Central. United Way saw the NCCA as an important springboard into the community. There were already lots of players active in the neighbourhood – including a new Service Canada office – so I had to work slowly and carefully to build trust. ANC's design made sense to me because it's about using solid community relationships as the basis for community development."

Over the summer and early fall, Marg, Brenda, other NCCA members and neighbours met and talked about the strong community pride in North Central. They wanted to do something that would counteract the negative media attention that continues to spotlight their part of the city. Marg's background working with school children told her that youth would be the best people to highlight the neighbourhood's sources of strength and pride.

Brenda learned more about international approaches to community development when she went to an ANC policy forum in Ottawa, and she became even more certain that ANC was the key to making positive change in North Central. She spoke to her association board and they, too, began to appreciate that the program was offering the tools and ideas they needed to make things happen for themselves.

The nitty gritty

The friction created among RICCP, ANC and the United Way was occurring at a level far removed from North Central residents' lives. Most were unaware of the RICCP or its operations and even less aware of ANC. A growing number of people did understand, however, that North Central needed to find ways to see itself and

promote itself as the complex, rich and vibrant community that it is – despite some significant and highly publicized problems.

The lack of understanding among members of RICCP, ANC and United Way began to surface after the first ANC consultation day in November. At that event, representatives from agencies active in North Central and residents came to discuss the grassroots community consultation process. Marg Friesen had been given the responsibility of conducting an evaluation of the RICCP's progress and, for many in attendance, it was their first exposure to that organization. New connections were made and good questions were raised about progress and process. "There was a real note of optimism," says Tracey Mann, United Ways of Regina's Director of Community Impact and Investments. "People were willing to set aside individual agendas for the common good." About 53 people attended the event – a large turnout for this type of meeting in North Central.

Brenda was most pleased that 11 Aboriginal youth decided to attend. Aged 18 to 29, they were involved in a local employment enhancement program. By the end of the day, they had developed a vision of that they could do to create change in North Central. Says Brenda: "Youth – particularly First Nations youth – get few chances to voice their opinions. By the middle of the day-long session, they were really pumped."

Unfortunately, the questions asked at the consultation day brought to a head the differences in approach and process being used by ANC and the Regina Inner-City Community Partnership. Says Vic Huard, CEO of the United Way of Regina: "Members of the RICCP who attended the consultation felt that many of the questions and comments raised did not fairly reflect the

partnership's process and intent. There was a growing concern that the ANC initiative had set itself up 'in competition' with the RICCP. Further, there was a sense that members of the community had formed a perception about which process was more effective."

In mid-January, ten weeks before the end of ANC's 14-month run, members of the three organizations met for a frank exchange of views; it was unclear whether ANC's work in North Central would continue. The honesty of that session prepared the ground for a positive meeting in early March where everyone came with the attitude that they really wanted to make things work. They mapped out the next steps – beginning with a facilitated discussion among the RICCP, the United Way of Regina and the North Central Community Association – with the goal of laying out the priorities and goals of each organization, and how and where each group could support the other. The intention was to build a mechanism that would allow everyone – including the residents of North Central – to be part of the process of change.

Says Tracey Mann: "It's clear to everyone that we were not working together, but that we were committed to learning the lessons we need to learn to move forward. Whatever the outcome of the ANC project in North Central, the United Way of Regina will maintain its presence in the neighbourhood, and the next sessions will clarify everyone's roles and responsibilities."

Morris Eagles was one of the founders of Regina's Welfare Rights Centre. Since 1973, he has played a central role in shaping an organization that provides housing and welfare advocacy, house-finding services and trusteeship to help people manage their financial affairs. A North Central resident for 33 years, he also is a member of an RICCP housing sub-committee. Though

cautiously optimistic about the outcome of the March meeting, he decided to adopt a wait-and-see approach. “Many North Central residents have felt that the RICCP has been trying to dictate the types of solutions and services in response to the issues and needs that exist in the neighbourhood, while we feel that issues must be addressed from the residents’ point of view. We need a much more substantial community consultation process to ensure that residents have input in defining and determining the issues and the resolutions to those issues. Hopefully, all parties are in a position to see things more constructively and objectively.”

Keeping the community engaged

Meantime, the ANC project pool funds – totalling \$80,000 for each of the five sites – was being put to good use for projects in North Central that had taken shape over the summer and fall.

Three projects that are helping North Central residents to create a new vision for themselves focus on the arts. First, the National Film Board (NFB) – one of ANC’s national partners – hired two young Regina film makers to document two community arts projects, described below.

Common Weal, a community arts organization working in collaboration with the school board, inner-city schools and the NFB, asked elementary school students to express their hopes and dreams for North Central.

Using many different mediums – paint, sculpture, dance and words – they assembled their expressions over a two-week period for a performance in mid-March. The project used the talents of five professional artists, five emerging artists (including graffiti artists and First Nations elders) and the children at six schools. A total of 900

children – 150 from each school – brought their works and performances to the Regina Performing Arts Centre, a North Central landmark. Says Marg: “This project engaged historically disenfranchised people and made them feel comfortable and included. It provided a safe place for people to focus on the positive – community pride – and mitigate the old stigmas.”

A third project, directed by Vancouver’s Headlines Theatre for Living, a community theatre company, offers a workshop program called “Theatre for the Living.”¹ Its purpose is to stimulate dialogue around social issues – in the case of North Central, around poverty and its impact on the individuals and the community. Also referred to as “legislative theatre,” the intent of the process is to feed messages into different levels of government policy. It acts as a recruitment process to engage policy-makers and politicians. In North Central, several residents are being paid an honorarium to participate and develop a play. Performances are designed to engage the audience and they continue to evolve with each presentation.

The most significant developments come after the performances. Residents plan to form a committee and continue to dialogue with municipal, provincial and federal representatives. Says Marg: “One resident has already volunteered to work with the government representatives. Engagement like this can have a profound impact on individuals and entire communities. The passion and desire to be part of changing current social situations and policies can be very empowering.” The NFB will film performances and conduct key interviews before and after the process to see what shifts occur in people’s perspectives.

Another facet of the filming process will be to provide footage in which emerging, ‘natural’ community leaders can be identified. Filmmaker

Tessa Desnomie is intrigued that the process may also influence action. Says Tessa: “We’ll be following the natural leaders through the performance and political action phases and, by our very presence, may push people to follow through on projects they volunteered to help with.”

With the first phase of the ANC project nearing completion, all involved can see how much work must still be done to draw more people into a better understanding of community engagement. “Even the small wins are exciting,” says Marg. “More residents are coming into contact with the people and supports that exist in North Central and are asking themselves why they didn’t have a community-based process before. Whatever the outcome for ANC, the United Way of Regina has seen the value of the ANC work that took hold in North Central and is keen to start a similar process in the adjoining neighbourhood, known as ‘the Core.’”

“Marg has been a real inspiration for our association’s work,” says Brenda. “She is really able to see the community challenges at the local level while supporting us and bringing us new hope and new ideas.”

Morris Eagles offers one more note of caution, however. Says Morris: “A second attempt is being made to restructure and implement a base tax system on properties. If adopted, this system will result in tax increases in poorer areas like North Central, and lower taxes in wealthier parts of the city. The net result will not be more revenue for the city – it will simply have shifted the tax burden. Higher tax rates in North Central will discourage people from buying homes in the neighbourhood and opens the door for more rental properties.”

Morris continues: “We have made so many gains here in the last two years, but we really need a strong, united community to safeguard what we have achieved. There’s so much that can be done in and for North Central, but we have to have everyone at the same table, clearly defining their roles and responsibilities in the most feasible, constructive way possible.”

Unlike the other four ANC neighbourhoods, Regina’s North Central has already undergone the early phases of neighbourhood development. It offers the lessons of engagement, conflict and the reconciling of disparate cultures and visions that can become the engine of positive change in a community.

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul coordinates the ‘community stories’ series for the Caledon Institute.

Endnote:

1. The Headlines Theatre Company was founded in 1981 by a group of politically active artists in Vancouver. Since then, it has produced many hundreds of projects and has become a world leader in community-specific, issue-oriented theatre, winning numerous awards. For more information, visit: <http://www.headlinestheatre.com/intro.htm>

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