



## community stories

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### *ANC in Spryfield, Halifax Celebrates Two Years of Action and Renewal*

*Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) was a two-year action research project which ran from February 2005 to March 2007. It operated in five cities – Surrey, Regina, Thunder Bay, Toronto and Halifax.<sup>1</sup>*

*This paper is the third in a series of community stories which chronicle the path of ANC in the five sites. Series one introduced each neighbourhood and the process by which it was selected for participation. The second provided a mid-process snapshot of involvement and activity. The third summarizes the work accomplished over two years, including project staff and resident perceptions of ANC and its impact on the neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup>*

#### *Year one in Spryfield*

Because no one was certain what a resident engagement project would look like when ANC was announced in February 2005, members of the Halifax sponsoring agency, United Way of Halifax Region (UWHR), believed that neighbourhood residents would likely be more satisfied with the process if they chose to come on board, rather than if they were selected for participation. UWHR shortlisted seven neighbourhoods they felt might benefit from funding and an opportunity to work at their own pace. Neighbourhood representatives were invited to come in and discuss the project. Board members at the William Spry Community Centre in Spryfield were willing to take a chance on the project and committed their neighbourhood's participation.

Only six months into ANC, UWHR decided to guarantee funding for the project's planned two-year run. This decision was taken to ensure



that uncertainties about the federal government partners' commitment to ANC's second year not jeopardize the relationship work already under way in Spryfield. The decision was made easier by the fact that even before ANC's arrival, UWHR had been looking for a program vehicle by which it could encourage resident-led neighbourhood revitalization.

A third decision to hire Spryfield residents as ANC project staff sped up the process of identifying the neighbourhood's emerging leaders, assets and challenges. Marjorie Willison, a 30-year resident and community activist, also served on the board of the William Spry Community Centre. Her work with ANC helped ensure good communication with the board as well as the numerous other organizations with which she is involved. Christina Carter lives in Spryfield's Greystone complex – a public housing project whose inhabitants often feel disenfranchised by their wealthier neighbours. Besides acting as the ANC office administrator, Christina played a vital role in building and maintaining bridges between Spryfield's 'have' and 'have not' residents. Two additional ANC team members who have lived in Spryfield at various times, Peter Greechan and Carole Chisholm, provided mediation and administrative expertise, respectively.

These three UWHR decisions – giving neighbourhoods the option to participate, making a financial commitment to the project and hiring locally – demonstrated respect for residents and trust that the process would ultimately prove successful. These two guiding values would stand the project in good stead.

Near the end of its first year of operation, ANC's federal government funding partners allocated \$80,000 to each of the five sites. These Action Grants were released in February 2006 and had to be spent by fiscal year end on March 31.

Though the short time line meant that project proposals had to be drawn up quickly, Spryfield residents were up to the challenge. Eight projects were approved – two to help green the Greystone public housing complex, two to promote local business, a research project to investigate establishing a child- and youth-centred services hub in Spryfield, an environmental monitoring project to protect a local river, a Spryfield residents' association website, and a youth arts program to be operated by the local Boys and Girls Club.

“These were all projects the community had long wanted to do, but lacked the funds to launch,” says Reg Horner, Executive Director of the Spryfield and District Business Commission.

Also during the project's first year, ANC staff worked with residents to forge a Spryfield-focused committee that would have the capacity to continue the revitalization work begun by ANC after March 2007. The Spryfield Community Action Coalition (SCAC) now collaborates with the Captain William Spry Community Centre Board of Directors, though each organization has its own particular focus. (Early into year two, the Spry Centre board was renamed the Chebucto Community Development Association.)

### ***Legacy document provides a catalyst for change***

In April 2006, the beginning of ANC's second year in Spryfield, project and United Way of Halifax Region staff released a 72-page legacy document entitled *We are Spryfield*. This publication was designed to act as a public record of demographic, economic, social and environmental information as well as the collective experience and wisdom of the neighbourhood. The profile created a lot of discussion among municipal staff, UWHR, project staff and local politicians.

Over the summer months, UWHR Senior Director of Community Resources Peter Mortimer and ANC Halifax Project Manager Paul Shakotko worked to strengthen relationships. UWHR itself was unprepared for the publicity generated by its foray into neighbourhood renewal. Corporate communications to this point had focused on annual campaigns and program announcements. Little did anyone know that the response to the legacy document would provide a rich opportunity for confronting many community and organizational issues that had long simmered below the surface. The positive outcomes have included the adoption of a long-term UWHR neighbourhood strategy, the development of many important interagency and government relationships, and the increased commitment and participation of Spryfield residents in neighbourhood renewal efforts.

Darlene McLean, Manager of the Spryfield Boys and Girls Club, began her position in Spryfield two years ago, but has lived and worked in the neighbourhood at different periods throughout her life. She makes it a personal mission to refute negative stereotypes of the neighbourhood whenever an opportunity presents itself. Says Darlene: “Whatever you look for, you’re going to find. Since ANC’s arrival, Spryfield has had a lot of good press coverage that’s helped counteract the bad. In particular, the round tables that helped form the Spryfield Community Action Coalition, the river cleanup and the Greystone community gardens are all generating interest. People are more aware that a lot is happening in the neighbourhood. This is a strong community with resources and very supportive people.”

### ***Responding positively to challenges***

Ryan Veltmeyer has been employed as a youth engagement officer for seven months at the

local branch of the public library, which is located within the William Spry Community Centre. Libraries everywhere are grappling with positive ways of directing the energy of children and youth who may spend several hours each day accessing computer and Internet resources. Ryan’s job is to interact with young people, gradually building trust and linking them with activities and programs. He also explains the rules of library etiquette. Proactively building relationships instead of punishing inappropriate behaviour has already made Spryfield library a safer and more enjoyable place. Ryan grew up in Halifax and was well acquainted with Spryfield’s reputation as an exciting, if somewhat dangerous, neighbourhood.

“Late at night my friends and I would come here to play basketball which, in Spryfield, is a full contact sport. There was and is a culture here that says it’s normal to be rough – whether in play or in more serious situations. People are very proud of Spryfield and youth are willing to defend what they see as the neighbourhood’s honour. That kind of energy is good, but it needs to be channelled into more effective responses.”

An outbreak of violence occurred in Spryfield in early March 2007 and media coverage cast Spryfield in a poor light. Says realtor and resident Dave Sampson: “There are some families in this neighbourhood whose members have been involved in criminal activities for more than 50 years. Until this incident, most people were unwilling to come forward and speak out against violence. Because of ANC and the types of positive relationships it is encouraging in Spryfield, we are perhaps at a moment where residents will band together and stand against this type of activity.” Like the response to the legacy document, this incident may well result in a healthy outcome.

Says Ryan Veltmeyer: “There were a lot of community issues at play in this one episode. Spryfield’s population has a lot of older adults, but there is a lack of young adults who can provide positive role models. Parents who are struggling financially have little time for their kids, and the ones who get caught up in violence make everyone feel a little unsafe. Children and youth are links in a larger criminal food chain and they reflect deep-seated problems. There is an incredible sense of community in Spryfield that can translate into positive actions. People here are not likely to take bad news without making noise. If you push them and create opportunities to meet, they will come out and express their views – often in colourful language.”

Getting people involved is particularly important at this point in time. Halifax is growing quickly and Spryfield has an abundance of properties ripe for development. There is a sense in the neighbourhood that if residents will not act to protect the area’s physical environment, developers will act for them. Says Dave Sampson: “Halifax’s rapid growth means that a lot of things will happen in a short time. If things are done correctly in Spryfield, this neighbourhood will live up to its tremendous physical, environmental and social potential. If our councillors and other officials can protect us from poor community development decisions in the next five years, we stand a chance to really prosper.”

### ***Year two Action Grants***

Resident feedback given to the ANC team in Spryfield indicated that the second round of Action Grants had an even greater impact than the first. There was a deeper appreciation of the fact that resident-led projects could not have happened without outside funding. As in the first year,

applicants were provided with project criteria against which their proposals would be evaluated. Preference was given to submissions that demonstrated innovation, community involvement and neighbourhood revitalization. Following is a brief description of the work done.

#### *Urban Farm Museum: Gardening with Seniors*

This project encouraged local seniors to be physically active, learn new skills, and grow and eat healthy local foods. Project organizers developed partnerships with local seniors organizations from which participants were drawn. Modifications were made at the farm, including the creation of wheelchair- and walker-accessible pathways.

#### *J.L. Ilsley High School: Tennis, Basketball, Hockey Court*

Community volunteers paved, painted and repaired an old tennis court and converted the space into a multi-use area for the residents of Spryfield. The project furnished young and old residents with a place to play sports, free of charge.

#### *St. Paul’s Family Resource Centre: Collective Kitchen and Cooking Skills*

The Collective Kitchen has created a comfortable social environment in which food bank users can learn valuable skills, such as the planning and preparing of healthy family meals. A cookbook featuring recipes used in the program was printed and given to participants.

#### *Boys and Girls Club of Spryfield: Learn to Play Music*

Learn to Play Music hosted workshops for children on various musical styles and gave them lessons in how to play guitar, piano and percussion instruments. A musical celebration in late March provided students with an opportunity to share their newfound talents.

*Spryfield Community Action Coalition (SCAC) and the Chebucto Community Development Association: Mural Development and Graffiti Removal*

This project took a creative approach to addressing the impact of graffiti on the Spryfield community. Participants established a pool of funds that could be accessed by businesses wishing to remove graffiti from their properties. SCAC members then worked with the business community to identify a location for a community mural. SCAC also purchased mural supplies and sponsored workshops by artists to mentor and channel artistic talent.

*J.L. Ilsley High School: Let's Dance!*

Let's Dance gave an opportunity for youth from five local schools to learn a variety of contemporary dance forms. The Art Space – a building beside J.L. Ilsley High School – was fitted with acoustic tiling and other upgrades to provide a proper area to “dance to the music.”

*Norma MacLean and Halifax Regional Municipality: Step Up to Leadership*

Step Up to Leadership is a 12-step training program for up to 15 students who want to learn how to be community leaders. Training includes how to communicate effectively, understanding diversity, how to help others, how to make committees and boards more effective, and how to lead in the community.

*Indigo Service Learning Network and Women's Community Economic Development Network: Employment Programs for Young Women*

The Indigo Service Learning Project helped connect young women with educational and employment opportunities in Spryfield. Staff from Indigo and HeartWood – a provincial nonprofit organization that offers youth development programming – worked with participants to

develop skills related to convening, organizing and planning. Several service-learning projects were initiated and conducted in association with former Indigo participants, who served as mentors. Community partnerships were developed to create long-term relationships among young women and the Spryfield employment community.

*Spryfield Lions Club: After School Programs and Sports Centre*

Spryfield Lions Club converted 8,500 square feet of its facility into an indoor recreation centre. The club now uses the space for programs which promote a healthy lifestyle to people of all ages and incomes. Partner organizations will continue to oversee many of the activities, including a tots' play time, Seniors Drop-In, after-school study and after-school sports.

*Ryan Veltmeyer and the Spryfield Public Library: Youth Radio*

This project trained 15 young people in the skills they needed to produce broadcast-quality radio programs. A six-part series that described what it is like to be young in Spryfield aired on participating community and public radio stations.

***Long-term impact of ANC's work in Spryfield***

*resident reviews*

Twelve residents were invited to attend a reflection session about ANC's impact on their community. All 12 had supportive things to report. Says ANC Halifax Project Manager Paul Shakotko: “Participants felt that ANC's resident-based approach had brought a new energy to the community which they believed would continue past the project's end. They also said that they had learned a lot about their community through ANC's 26-month duration.”

Says Boys and Girls Club Manager Darlene McLean: “Greystone residents have expressed that for the first time, they can point to projects – like the establishment of the community gardens – and see the good that has resulted. People need to create hope for themselves by getting involved in generating ideas and seeing them put into action. The Action Grants brought community members closer together to talk about things they wanted and to use partnerships in new ways. As residents become more visible in the neighbourhood by working together, relationships deepen. The seeds are planted now and in five or six years, we’ll see what grows. More and more, I hear people saying positive things about Spryfield.”

### *United Way plans*

From United Way of Halifax Region’s perspective, ANC’s work in Spryfield underlined the importance of having an organization that would promote and direct the work of neighbourhood revitalization, making sure to continually build stronger ties with Halifax Regional Municipality. Spryfield’s legacy document forced a discussion of long-ignored social issues and demonstrated the strengths and possibilities inherent in ANC’s resident-focused approach.

UWHR has committed itself to continuing to work with neighbourhoods for the next several years. This decision will make it easier to build partnerships among key players – e.g., HRM and the local police force. Says Paul Shakotko: “ANC was considered an interesting pilot project, but as such, did not provide a compelling reason for potential partners to get involved. We can now confidently build those relationships with the region’s decision-makers. ANC’s approach kept residents at the centre of our efforts, and we are ready to work with organizations that can remove resident-identified policy and program barriers.”

UWHR hosted a symposium on March 21, 2007, called “Why Neighbourhoods Matter,” which was attended by 71 organizations members, and middle and senior management representatives from three orders of government. Presenters from the US and Canada helped build the case for a Halifax neighbourhood strategy, providing both inspiration and humour. Says Paul: This is the direction in which we see our organization moving – building and solidifying connections that will support neighbourhood work.”

### *new and revitalized community structures*

ANC’s work accelerated changes in the structure of the 22-year-old Captain William Spry Community Centre Board of Directors. As a leadership step, the centre’s board members renamed themselves the Chebucto Community Development Association and developed a new charter.

As a result of lessons learned through ANC, UWHR has established several mechanisms for responding to community concerns. UWHR and the Greater Halifax Partnership – a collection of business movers and shakers – established a three-way partnership with the Spryfield and Area Business Commission to craft a common strategy for attracting new businesses to Spryfield. Each group contributed \$5,000 to articulate the strategy – a small but significant milestone. This partnership, combined with social and environmental projects now under way in Spryfield, demonstrates that the relationships being built by UWHR have the power to support and extend resident-led work in ways which will have a long-term impact.

A second group established by UWHR is the Resource Advisory Committee (RAC), of which the Spryfield’s local councillor is now the co-chair. Other RAC members include representatives from business, the school board, the Spryfield and District Business Commission, a

UWHR board member and the local MLA. The committee's sole mission is to be prepared to remove policy and program barriers identified by Spryfield residents. To date, development and child care concerns are on the table.

Spryfield lost 81 subsidized child care spaces in 2004 when a provincial government decision to reassign subsidized spaces as portable spaces coincided with the closure of a Spryfield child care centre. ANC action grants in 2006 helped pay for a feasibility study for a Spryfield Family and Children Multi-Service Centre. Members of the YWCA Halifax and Spryfield child care advocates who collaborated on the study have emerged as a force for change – releasing a 20-year child care plan which was well received and supported by the province's two opposition party leaders.

Says Paul Shakotko: "The child care issue was a watershed moment where residents rose above restrictive public policies and decided to make their voices heard." The Chebucto Community Development Association recently drafted its first letter to Michelle Raymond, the MLA who is a member of RAC. She subsequently called the committee together for a meeting to discuss child care issues. The next six months will tell whether the RAC will be an effective mechanism for removing barriers and allowing resident-led action to proceed.

### *Shifting gears to sustainability*

Action for Neighbourhood Change gave residents a framework for neighbourhood revitalization and UWHR is preparing to gradually diminish its role in Spryfield. Says Paul: "Spryfield now has two resident-focused organizations which are engaged in an active partnership with UWHR. The CCDA wants to connect with the various

communities surrounding Spryfield and act as a collective agent for revitalization, and the Spryfield Community Action Coalition which emerged directly from ANC will support projects within Spryfield itself. Over the next year, UWHR will fund the hiring of one staff person for CCDA, an administrative support person for SCAC and allocate a third round of Action Grants – mainly to support youth-oriented initiatives. For the past year-and-a-half, UWHR has been mainly responsible for coordinating the neighbourhood work, but residents are gradually assuming a larger role."

Now at the end of the ANC's first two years, Dave Sampson feels that Spryfield is far better prepared for the challenges that lie ahead. Says Dave: "We're really grateful to the United Way of Halifax Region. They got all the right groups talking and have helped build mutually supportive relationships at levels residents were unable to access by themselves."

Down at the library, Ryan Veltmeyer's successful bid to launch a radio skills program for youth also gave him a chance to work with Spryfield's decision makers. Says Ryan: "Spryfield is cooperating at so many levels and is an incredible model for community development and revitalization. I expected to hit many barriers in my work, but people were keen to help me get things done. I've had the chance to join in and be a player, learning with people who are willing to take risks. This is not a conservative community, and the growing sense that residents have the power to make things happen is very exciting."

Thirteen-year-old Cavell Holland-Borden was one of the youth who participated in Ryan's radio project. The youngest of nine children, Cavell has already worked as a DJ and host of an Internet-based game. He dreams of a career in music or acting and joined Ryan's project as a way

to make youth voices heard. Says Cavell: “Older people don’t listen to younger people. I wanted to find a way to tell them that even though Spryfield has a bad reputation, things are not that bad. I’m comfortable here – this is my home.”

*Anne Makhoul*

### **Endnotes**

1. The purpose of ANC was to work at a neighbourhood level, providing funds and partnership opportunities to help residents effect positive change. ANC also presented a structure for building collaboration across five key federal government sponsors, United Way of Canada-*Centraide Canada*, five local United Way agencies, Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the National Film Board. The lessons learned by the national partners are captured in *Final Reflections from the Action for Neighbourhood Change Research Project* [Gorman 2007].

2. Two previous ANC stories about Spryfield can be found on the Caledon Institute and ANC websites:

*Spryfield Chooses Halifax ANC* (October 2005).

*A Return to ANC in Spryfield: Fresh Ideas Spring into Action* (April 2006).

### **Reference**

Gorman, C. (2007). *Final Reflections from the Action for Neighbourhood Change Research Project*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy, May.

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