



community stories

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ANC in Scarborough Village Sets a Good Example for Toronto Neighbourhoods

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.¹

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.²

One site becomes five (and ultimately 13)

ANC in Toronto began operations in Scarborough Village in the summer of 2005. Though not perhaps a neighbourhood that would immediately spring to mind for participation in a revitalization project, Scarborough Village embodies the new face of poverty in Toronto. Built originally as part of a car-friendly bedroom community, the neighbourhood is now a mixture of single homes, busy roadways, strip malls and dense highrise apartments that house many new immigrants. Under-serviced and lacking access to spaces for community gathering or sports activities, its youth population is vulnerable to the lure of drugs and gangs.

United Way of Greater Toronto (UWGT) began working toward a neighbourhood strategy in the early 2000s. Say UWGT Research Director Susan MacDonnell: “We saw ANC in Scarborough Village as a pilot project. The learning it



generated would inform efforts in 13 other neighbourhoods identified by UWGT's collaboration with the City of Toronto on the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force. By July 2006, we were already convinced that the ANC model would work well in our City, and we introduced the initiative in four other Toronto neighbourhoods – Eglinton east, Lamoureux-Steeles in Scarborough, Lawrence Heights in North York and Mount Dennis in west Toronto.”

UWGT community consultations dating back to 2003 made it clear that Torontonians felt the need for a catalyst organization that could coordinate agencies and activities across their neighbourhoods. Says Susan: “If ANC hadn't been created, we would have had to launch a similar initiative. ANC allowed us to try out a new direction.” UWGT is using a recently formulated resource development plan to fundraise for its neighbourhood strategy and is receiving substantial financial support from donors for neighbourhood work, including a \$1 million gift from one individual. Susan continues: “We found that the quick wins achieved through ANC's two sets of \$80,000 Action Grants helped build project staff and resident morale, and we have provided each additional neighbourhood with a similar \$100,000 ‘Quick Start Fund.’ All of this money will come from donations above and beyond our regular campaign.”

The role of community animators in building relationships

United Way of Greater Toronto made an early decision to hire Public Interest – a community development firm – as its ANC site management group in Scarborough Village. Sean Meagher, Tony Boston and Lily Grewal brought experience gained from Scarborough community consultations in 2003 and 2004 and neighbourhood

engagement work in various parts of Toronto. This included leading the community engagement for the Regent Park redevelopment/revitalization project starting in 2002.

As Tony, Lily and Sean began talking with as many Scarborough Village residents as they could in individual conversations and in small and large group meetings, they listened for the names of people who could play the role of community animator – residents that had established connections, trust and networks within a particular cultural, age or linguistic group. Such individuals had worked effectively in Regent Park as community animators. In Scarborough Village, animators would act as ANC ambassadors and gather important insights into the needs and issues of residents. In turn, they offered residents an opportunity to participate in defining and acting on a positive change process in their own neighbourhood. With a population of 13,725 of which 8,372 were born outside of Canada, community animators would serve as a bridge to ANC, bringing people to the initiative who might otherwise have been overlooked.

Nine individuals were hired as part-time community animators – two each that spoke Tamil, Urdu and Bengali, one youth and two Afro-Caribbean residents. Other than the youth animator, most were middle-aged, worked part- or full-time, had families and had built community networks through their connections with the school system and other neighbourhood activities. All participated in training that gave them a thorough grounding in the process of neighbourhood revitalization. They learned about ANC's goals, mandate and method of operation and were provided with reading materials in their home languages. They shared key lessons with their communities and returned with residents' opinions and questions. This information became a crucial foundation for shaping ANC's work in Scarborough Village.

Animator input led directly to the addition of more heritage language classes in the neighbourhood. Local schools already were running Tamil classes in two sites, and a third school was added. This facility and three new Urdu classes were established as a result of community animators getting 100 parents to add their names to a list which then was used by the school board's language program coordinator to initiate a language needs survey. Many of the families who ultimately signed up their children for language classes had had no contact with ANC or other local initiatives. It gave them real evidence that the school system could be responsive to their needs. As result of successes in Scarborough Village, Tamil residents in other parts of the city began collecting names for heritage language classes in their neighbourhoods.

A less successful effort was made to add classes in Dari and Farsi – languages spoken in Afghanistan. Though both languages were offered in a spring session in 2006, they were not renewed in September. ANC staff are uncertain why this happened and recognized it as a signal that their connection with this neighbourhood group was not as strong as they would have liked. Says Sean Meagher: “Because of our short, two-year time frame, we were not able to devote as many resources to the development of our community animator group as we would have liked. Even with program restrictions, however, this is definitely an undertaking that we would encourage others to consider when working in diverse neighbourhoods.”

Animators also were responsible for identifying a group of Pakistani women who were interested in speaking with municipal representatives to address numerous safety and maintenance problems in Scarborough Village. After receiving training in effective communication

and the lines of authority in municipal government, this group met with their elected City councillor on two occasions. A safety audit became a means of pursuing action on an alleyway that provides pedestrian access to public transit. Says committee member and community animator Nayla Rahman: “Our work with the councillor helped clarify who owned the property and gave us the means of improving it.”

Urdu-speaking women who became involved in this initiative have subsequently used Action Grant funds to organize a South Asian Women's Group. Nayla – who also speaks Bengali – became involved in founding a similar body for Bengali speakers. ANC has actively promoted such cross-linkages among language and other associations. As people build trusting relationships, it reaffirms their sense that they can work together for the betterment of the neighbourhood. In the long term, the existence of the new social clubs may prove to be an effective mechanism for engaging elected and appointed municipal officials and expressing community needs and wishes.

Action Grant impacts

Says ANC team member Lily Grewal: “The year one grant process was hasty by comparison to the second, but community forums in June, October and November of 2005 had identified a number of major areas of concern for residents. Year one projects focused mainly on the purchase of recreational items, including cricket equipment, a dry pad to convert an arena into an indoor sports surface in the summer, barbecues and benches, a play structure, and five laptop computers and a printer. Residents secured a municipal grant to establish a perennial garden near the new play structure.”

Small items have huge impacts. Nayla Rahman has three children and lives in a highrise. Says Nayla: “Having good equipment in a centrally located park and getting the cricket program launched have given so much to our children. The garden, too, has provided many adults with a chance to dig our hands in the earth. I remember one of my good friends and neighbours crying tears of joy as she worked the soil. Apartment dwellers miss the chance to garden and there are many of us in Scarborough Village.”

A celebration to mark the completion of the play structure and garden drew about 1,000 residents. A low-key affair, it nevertheless created a high water mark of neighbourhood pride and enjoyment, and inspired members of Scarborough Village’s emerging youth groups to plan for a repeat event the following year.

ANC’s year two Action Grants offered members of the Scarborough Village Neighbourhood Association (SVNA) – forged at the end of the project’s first year – an opportunity to develop guidelines for project proposals that built on association and ANC priorities. These included safety, employment, youth, immigration settlement and the building up the SVNA. Grant applications had to include in their implementation the active participation of six residents. Twenty-five submissions were reviewed by a committee composed of three SVNA members (who had neither applied nor signed off any applications) and three service providers – one each from WestHill Community Services, Toronto Public Health and the United Way of Greater of Toronto.

Sixteen projects were selected in December 2006. Six focused on material purchases: three helped buy supplies for food security programs in local schools; two funded equipment purchases for youth; a sixth purchased play items which could be borrowed by children and their families.

Program development projects drew several grants, including two for homework and tutoring programs, the creation of the South Asian Women’s and Bengali Social clubs, and a monthly neighbourhood cleanup activity involving youth and others. Grants for events included funds for a second community celebration and a motivational assembly for youth. ACORN – a community organization which aims to win power for low- and moderate-income families – established a leadership school to build awareness of tenant rights and create links with similarly-focused organizations. A Tamil Community Empowerment Project offered recreation and cooking classes to encourage richer relationships among grandparents, children and grandchildren, and set up a parent drop-in for those whose children attend Tamil heritage language classes at one of the local elementary schools.

Other year two successes

ANC staff provided assistance with four key projects in year two. They encouraged youth involvement and activity, achieved greater understanding around the need to establish a community services hub in Scarborough Village, worked with local business owners, and helped refocus the Scarborough Village Neighbourhood Association.

youth

A partnership was spawned with the City Parks and Recreation department by the year one Action Grant which purchased an indoor arena pad for summer sports. Parks and Recreation hired a half-time youth worker to establish recreational drop-in programs. They were joined by an employee from YOUTHLINK (a UWGT-funded youth services organization) who coordinated

local programs, including theatre workshops and a two-week Toronto Raptors basketball camp. Both individuals were interested in developing a youth council, which tied in well with ANC's desire to hear youth voices in the neighbourhood association. YOUTHLINK hired two more staff, and the four youth workers have been greatly helped by a resident volunteer and community animator, Jacek Otreba.

A Scarborough Village Youth Council was created and continues to meet weekly. Members are coordinating activities which reach far beyond recreational activities. Tutoring programs, leadership development workshops, a possible recording studio project and plans for the summer neighbourhood celebration are all being coordinated through the Youth Council and City and YOUTHLINK staff. The neighbourhood recreation centre is geared mainly to seniors – many of whom live outside Scarborough Village – but a long-established youth lounge has been refurbished with year two Action Grant funds and provides space for meetings and activities.

Jacek Otreba has been involved in every facet of the neighbourhood's youth outreach work, including his responsibilities as a community animator, neighbourhood association member, his work on Action Grant projects and the planning of this summer's music and arts celebration.

Says Jacek: "My experiences with ANC have given me the volunteer and community involvement I was looking for. It wasn't just ANC's presence that started me on this path – I've witnessed a lot of friends going through really hard times with addictions, violent crime, pregnancy and dropping out of school. A lot of these things are still going on below the surface, but the ANC, YOUTHLINK, and Parks and Recreation projects have been a positive change that counterbalance the negative influences. The

work we're doing is providing a positive foundation, but I'm concerned that the reductions in project funding next year will make it hard to keep volunteers interested and youth involved."

Jacek remains hopeful that the festival will be a success and set a tradition that others will continue. He has applied to the Canada World Youth program – an organization which places people aged 17 to 24 into an international educational initiative where they learn about community development in cross-cultural settings. If selected, Jacek plans to bring his learning and experiences back to Scarborough Village.

agency hub

ANC staff member Lily Grewal is very happy to see youth initiatives take hold, but space constraints continue to restrict program offerings and resident participation. This is particularly true of efforts to continue bringing support organizations into the neighbourhood on a rotation basis – an approach which has proven popular with service providers and residents. In addition to creating an opportunity to build bridges among organizations, coming into Scarborough Village has allowed service providers to connect directly with residents and work to tailor old approaches and develop new ones.

Says Lily: "Creating an agency table was particularly important in Scarborough Village where no pre-existing community association or lead agency was active in coordinating services and identifying gaps. At the end of March 2007, West Hill Community Health Centre will assume the role of ANC project coordinator, and Mayleen Singhroy has been hired as the ANC staff person for Scarborough Village. Residents asked UWGT to maintain the strip mall ANC office location rather than moving it to West Hill because of its

visibility and two-year history in the neighbourhood. United Way agreed and we are now waiting to hear the results of a Trillium grant application that will allow for the establishment of a services hub in the same mall. Scarborough Village Neighbourhood Association (SVNA), ANC and West Hill will act as an advisory group to the hub's operations and we are hoping that funds from Trillium will also be sufficient to hire someone to coordinate agency involvement."

Lisa King, a Community Health Officer from Toronto Public Health, has been a member of the agency table since early in ANC's arrival in Scarborough Village. She refers to the 'virtual hub' created by ANC staff who were very flexible in freeing up the small office space they possessed for visiting agency representatives. Says Lisa: "All of the agencies that work in this neighbourhood love the people here, and there's an incredible cooperative spirit at work among service providers that I believe is unique to this neighbourhood. When people don't have a lot, they truly understand the need to share. Scarborough Village has helped us to evolve an approach where even large agencies are willing to lend a hand to small, emerging ones which can meet language and cultural needs that the larger organizations cannot."

The plan is to combine the hub and ANC office into one location. The larger space will also provide more opportunities for residents to meet. Says Nayla Rahman: "Space really matters. I remember that when I arrived in Canada, it was hard to find the services I needed. Having the hub nearby will be a great help, especially for people from war-torn countries who are often afraid to come out of their homes. They need a little push, and there are so many things they need help with, especially employment and housing. The winter weather is so hard for people from tropical climates, and without meeting places, the cold months are long and difficult." Nayla is

currently supply teaching, and her background in social work and education make her an ideal community volunteer. Besides working as an ANC community animator and SVNA board member, she chairs the school councils at Bliss Carmen Senior Public School and Mason Road Elementary. The principals at these schools have been excellent resource people and ANC supporters.

local businesses

Strip malls are a dominant visual element of Scarborough Village's streetscape. Mall owner and developer Melinda Rooke welcomed ANC with open arms; the project office is located in a mall she owns and she has been busy trying to engage other neighbourhood businesses in economic development efforts. Says Melinda: "Most of the businesses in Scarborough Village are small, family-run enterprises where the owner may also be his only staff member. They are struggling to make ends meet, so the project's early plans to launch economic development projects were perhaps not a promising avenue."

Suthakaran Rathasingam manages a Tim Hortons franchise located in the parking lot which serves Melinda's mall and the ANC office. He has supported ANC-led neighbourhood events and assigned members of his staff to carry out cleanup activities, but agrees that small business owners have neither the time nor the energy to volunteer in revitalization work. Say Suthakaran: "As a manager, I have been able to participate in ANC projects like the cleanup and safety audit work, and cleanup days have an obvious positive impact on the appearance of my outlet. At the same time, I was hesitant about encouraging business owners to start projects which I myself might not be able to complete, given my own plans to develop my career. However, I hope to take the lessons of community-building with me and

establish a neighbourhood association in Markham, where I have recently purchased a home. There, we have no library, community centre or recreational facilities which can be used as a community hub. Brand new neighbourhoods might look attractive, but without services, facilities, neighbourhood association structures and healthy relationships, they also will run into the kind of trouble that is experienced in Scarborough Village.”

neighbourhood association

The Scarborough Village Neighbourhood Association underwent a revitalization after a fairly quiet summer in 2006. Members agreed to rotate the chair and secretary positions to ensure that no voices dominated and that decisions were truly collective. The ANC staff team helped guide the eight-member coordinating committee through a process of matching its many ideas with the realities of times, resources and energy. SVNA now operates with three-month plans which help make work manageable and achievable, and members have settled into an effective routine.

Endings and beginnings

Residents who attended a wrap-up reflection session about their experiences with ANC were unanimous in their appreciation of the dedication shown by the Scarborough Village project team. Mr. Ashfaque Siddiqui got involved in ANC during its first days and remained a committed volunteer and SVNA member throughout the project run. Says Mr. Siddiqui: “ANC has done ten times more than I thought was possible – it has been fantastic. Public Interest was so good at helping us with the pieces we needed, and our involvement and ideas helped them to help us – we were two parts of the same whole. It will be

difficult to lose Tony, Sean and Lily. Even people who are not directly involved in ANC know their faces and associate the project with them. Mayleen will have to begin all that relationship-building work again.”

Lisa King from Toronto Public Health is pleased that hub plans are moving ahead, but echoes Mr. Siddiqui’s concern that the level of ANC service provided through the project’s first two years in Scarborough Village cannot be maintained. Says Lisa: “The other four Toronto ANC sites were only ever accustomed to having one staff person on site, but Scarborough Village has flown far and fast with the support of three very committed individuals. Mayleen is already showing a high level energy and ability, but it is unrealistic to expect one person to do the work of three.”

Lisa continues: “Two years isn’t long enough to develop and support the capacity that’s been built. There is anxiety in the neighbourhood about key people leaving but there’s also a fair amount of confidence that residents will be able to continue doing what they’re doing – with Mayleen’s support. If the Trillium hub plans come through, that will help offset concerns, but funders should understand that the increased capacity that now exists in Scarborough Village as a result of a high level of early staff support does not guarantee continued progress. All that aside, it’s been an absolute pleasure to work with ANC, Public Interest and the residents. It’s a neighbourhood where people are committed to making change.”

Melinda Rooke is already looking forward to many new initiatives. The increasing levels of resident participation and mutual respect that are products of ANC’s resident-centred approach have shown her the possibilities inherent in the work of revitalization. Says Melinda: “I have seen incredible growth in people throughout this project

and there is a respectfulness with which meetings are directed and work carried out. People are better able to listen to each voice. I feel I can offer my experiences as a developer to several new initiatives. For example, it's time to reach out to home owners in the neighbourhood and get them involved in property values issues. Happily, as apartment residents become able to afford their own homes, they become the means by which to involve other home owners. We've also been given wonderful support by our local MP, John McKay – we plan to take up his generous offer to pay postage for whatever program materials we wish to send out, and we also plan to link more effectively with our local churches and other faith communities. We're ready to continue the work.”

In a neighbourhood where people speak 26 languages, ANC Scarborough Village has placed respect and relationships at its centre, and the community has reaped significant rewards in the projects, programs, facilities and close ties that have been created.

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 Scarborough Village can be found on the Caledon Institute and ANC websites:

ANC Begins in Scarborough Village (October 2005).

ANC in Toronto: Scarborough Village Grows in a Positive Direction (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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