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INSTITUTE OF  
SOCIAL POLICY

## **community stories**

September 2007

ISBN #1-55382-248-X

### ***Hamilton's "One Book, One City: Tackling Poverty Through the Arts" Project***

#### ***Inspiring change***

The City of Hamilton and the Hamilton Community Foundation have been instrumental in drawing together a partnership for change. Beginning in 2005, they tapped into widespread community concern over Hamilton's 20 percent poverty rate and established the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR). Since its creation, many have embraced the notion of working collaboratively to eradicate poverty in their city. The Roundtable's goal of "Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child" has resonated with the media, community and government organizations, and with people living on low incomes.

HRPR members understand that to effect a change in attitudes towards poverty, people must have a common framework around which they can talk about the experience of living on low income. Two key community players met this need by combining their expertise and offering Hamiltonians a unique reading and arts experience.

In 2004, the Hamilton Public Library launched a city-wide reading project called "One

Book, One City" (OBOC). At the time, it was only the third such undertaking in Canada and attracted a great deal of media and reader interest. In mid-2006, library representatives began planning a second round of OBOC, but this work coincided with an invitation from the Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF) to get involved with its "Tackling Poverty Together" initiative. As part of this work, HCF convened sessions with arts groups; three projects were subsequently developed and funded by the Foundation, including an opportunity to link reading with artistic expression. Says Daphne Wood, Manager, Communications and Community Development with Hamilton Public Library: "We were intrigued by how well the arts meshed with the library's work to promote literacy and help new Canadians get settled. A combined project would focus on a common experience and a common issue, but with art as the language of expression, we would be liberated from the constraints of language. Our ideas could fly free."

Hamilton Public Library and Arts Hamilton, with funding from the Hamilton Community Foundation and support from *The Hamilton Spectator* and a local family foundation, launched a new initiative – "One Book, One City: Tackling Poverty Through the Arts" (OBOC-TPTTA).

Organizers selected *Looking for X*, a story for young adults written by Deborah Ellis, which describes life through the eyes of an 11-year-old girl growing up in Toronto's low-income Regent Park neighbourhood. From November 2006 to May 2007, schools and arts and community organizations encouraged Hamiltonians to read and respond to the story. The initiative culminated with a month-long arts showcase called "One Book, One City: Arts Speak About Poverty." A calendar of events provided nearly 50 opportunities for local residents to present their responses to the book through film, readings, cultural and culinary exhibitions, discussion forums and visual arts presentations. Organizers estimate that 7,800 residents participated in arts and reading activities during the project run.

### ***Getting started and building momentum***

Hamilton Public Library took charge of the project set-up which included making the book selection, compiling supplemental reading lists for all age groups, promoting the project through its 85 book clubs and community partnerships, and bringing author Deborah Ellis to town for the November launch. The day included a two-hour, project-focused radio broadcast. A panel discussion featuring representatives from the arts community, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, the Chief Librarian and Deborah Ellis was followed by a call-in portion where listeners could share their experiences with the issue of poverty.

Arts Hamilton encouraged readers to move from private reading and reflection to artistic expression. They put out a call for project submissions in the early winter, secured additional grants and funds, built relationships among a wide variety of individuals and groups, and made preparations for May's showcase events.

*The Hamilton Spectator*, as part of its editorial decision to focus on poverty from 2005-08, published several stories about the OBOC-TPTTA project and printed a special advertising section to promote the May celebrations. Local television and radio station coverage was extensive and the project website was visited by several thousand people. The Hamilton Community Foundation provided funding to cover the bulk of project operations and used its networks to spread the word about the project. These and other efforts to promote OBOC-TPTTA were all aimed at inviting Hamiltonians to enter into a conversation about poverty.

My friends are special. X is certainly special. I never know when she'll turn up. I don't know where she goes when she's not with me. I don't even know her real name. I call her X because X sounds mysterious, and my friend is mysterious. She won't tell me her real name, or anything about her life. She's afraid of the secret police. "Which secret police?" I asked her once. "All of them," she replied, which is an awful lot to be frightened of.

Deborah Ellis



### ***Reaching out***

Arts Hamilton hired Rod Charles to coordinate its OBOC-TPTTA efforts. Together with Executive Director of Arts Hamilton Paul de Courcy, Rod reached out to as many individuals and community organizations as possible. In particular, they wanted to engage youth, people with disabilities, the homeless and lone parents – all groups more likely to experience poverty. These were also groups that were highlighted in *Looking for X*.

Says Rod: “Because I was new to Hamilton and didn’t know many people in the community, I went directly to ask for people’s participation. I walked into Portuguese and Chinese community meeting spaces without an invitation only to realize that I needed a proper introduction. As the initiative unfolded, I learned to be more flexible and that I could take more risks. I discovered that if one way of approaching a particular group didn’t work, another would present itself. The best example of this were the children whose schools decided to respond to the book. Many would go home and initiate conversations with family members, some of whom belonged to cultural organizations that had declined involvement. One way or another, the messages about poverty were communicated.”



*Chief Librarian Ken Roberts (left) joins Mayor Fred Eisenberger and Arts Hamilton Executive Director Paul de Courcy at the Dr. J. Edgar Davey School. A young student unveiled the book at the November 28, 2006 launch event.*

Organizers learned that not every plan succeeds, and that seemingly small ideas can assume a life of their own. Efforts to secure a large presentation space for motivational speaker and former National Basketball Association prospect Johnnie Williams were unsuccessful. Instead, he spoke with 1,250 students at four schools over a three-day period. Meeting with students in their school environments allowed them to be more comfortable when asking questions. A low-key information event organized on behalf of Autism Ontario attracted more than 22 children and several parents, and the media came out in large numbers. The autism society was very pleased with the response and the children loved the painting activity that had been organized for them.

A ‘may as well try’ e-mail sent to Ontario Lieutenant Governor James K. Bartleman in late April sparked his interest and he spoke with 500 school children on May 28. He talked about his own experiences of dealing with depression and poverty, and about being bullied when he was a child. Students were with him on stage asking prepared questions, and the respect and honesty with which he responded were both moving and memorable.

Rod Charles’ open approach garnered many unexpected supporters. Homeless clients at the Urban Core Community Health Centre were initially skeptical that a literacy project would have any impact on their lives. Many felt that the media and those in power cared little for people in their circumstances. Rod asked them to write down whatever they wanted politicians to know about who they were and City Counsellor Brian McHattie came to listen to what they had to say. Says Rod: “It was a wonderful moment where the project went from reading to action and where people who believed that no one cared about them found that not to be true.” Though it is uncertain what outcomes will result from the meeting with Counsellor

McHattie, it was the type of interaction that Rod and other partners sought to stimulate throughout the One Book, One City campaign.

Says Paul de Courcy: “We tried to connect with as many artists and groups that are affected by poverty as possible. Now that relationships have been initiated, it will be important to continue a dialogue. Throughout this project, we saw people begin to realize that developing poverty awareness and initiating action are everyone’s responsibility.”

### ***Respecting the artist***

OBOC-TPTTA organizers paid homage to the role of the arts in society, but many artists are

poor themselves and cannot afford to devote a lot of time or money to uncommissioned works. The project established a \$10,000 Vision Fund which allowed anyone in Hamilton to submit invoices for materials costs of up to \$200. But such an amount was too low to cover professional artistic costs. It was also inadequate for securing rehearsal and performance space for dramatic presentations. Says Rod: “If Hamilton decides to repeat this project, it will be helpful to restructure the Vision Fund to allow sufficient resources for renting performance spaces and contracting professional artists. For example, a competition could be held that would allow a graffiti-covered wall to become the canvas for a professional mural – that way, artists are paid their due and the community receives a piece of public art.”

### ***A leader in every way – The Honourable James. K. Bartleman***

The Honourable James. K. Bartleman was sworn in as Ontario’s Lieutenant Governor on March 7, 2002. He established three key priorities for his five-year term: eliminating the stigma of mental illness, fighting racism and discrimination, and encouraging Aboriginal young people. In 2004, he launched the first Lieutenant Governor’s Book Drive and collected 1.2 million used books for First Nations schools and Native Friendship Centres throughout Ontario. A second Book Drive in 2007 gleaned 900,000 books for Aboriginal children in Ontario, Quebec and Nunavut. In 2005, he twinned more than 300 native and non-native school communities in Ontario and Nunavut, and established summer reading camps in five First Nations communities in Ontario’s far north. This initiative was expanded to 36 camps in 28 fly-in communities in 2006 and Bartleman secured five years of funding for the project. Also in 2006, he launched Club Amick, a reading club for 5,000 native children in Ontario’s north, and he plans to expand the club to serve children enrolled in all band-run schools north of the French River.

The author of four autobiographical books, Mr. Bartleman has donated his royalties to support scholarships for native youth, a lecture series on citizenship and his Aboriginal literacy initiatives. He spent more than 35 years in Canada’s foreign service and was Diplomatic Advisor to the Prime Minister from 1994 to 1998. Born in Orillia in 1939, Bartleman grew up in the Muskoka town of Port Carling and is a member of the Mnjikaning First Nation. His term of office ends in September 2007. For more information, visit [www.lt.gov.on.ca](http://www.lt.gov.on.ca)



Each city has its own unique artistic community and projects like One Book, One City: Tackling Poverty Through the Arts can be used to showcase that culture. Best-selling author Lawrence Hill lives in Burlington – now part of the Hamilton Census Metropolitan Area. As part of the May arts showcase, he was invited to do a reading from *The Book of Negroes* and his telling of a little-known event in black history generated a great deal of interest. People stayed to talk and many new community connections were made.

Says Rod: “As the project went along, we had a sense of the community waking up to its own artistic possibilities. Breaking the isolation of either poverty or the habits of work and home is fundamental to building a caring community. As funders, it is important that Hamilton Community Foundation members maintain strong connections with the arts sector in order to provide appropriate support for future arts initiatives. There’s a raw energy in the young artists here that could potentially transform One Book, One City: Tackling Poverty Through the Arts into a Hamilton landmark.”

### *Next chapter*

The story of One Book, One City: Tackling Poverty Through the Arts concluded with a public unveiling on May 28 of a mural by Hamilton artist Russel Smith. Mayor Fred Eisenberger, Lieutenant Governor Bartleman and 500 school children attended. Says Paul de Courcy: “The story of what happens next is yet to be written. Arts Hamilton, Hamilton Public Library, the *Hamilton Spectator* and the Hamilton Community Foundation are all participants in the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. Our work to address the City’s 20 percent poverty rate continues.”

### *Harnessing literacy and the arts – lessons for other communities*

1. *Establish a diverse organizing committee with membership from the local library, community and arts groups and business leaders.*
2. *Build in sufficient lead time before the official launch date – three months is optimal.*
3. *The project and website launches should occur on the same day.*
4. *There is strength in numbers – leverage existing partnerships.*
5. *Get the media involved, both as a partner and as a participant.*
6. *Tap into the community’s unique artistic culture.*
7. *Be bold about asking famous people to help out.*
8. *Reaching immigrant communities takes time – try to include everyone.*
9. *Organizations have their own internal challenges – if some cannot participate the first time around, try them again later.*
10. *Try to tailor funding to the requirements of particular art forms or be selective about the types of artistic expression that the program can best target. Rehearsal and performance spaces for musicians and actors can be hard to come by and expensive, so make special arrangements for this type of involvement.*
11. *Remember that you can’t be all things to all people.*

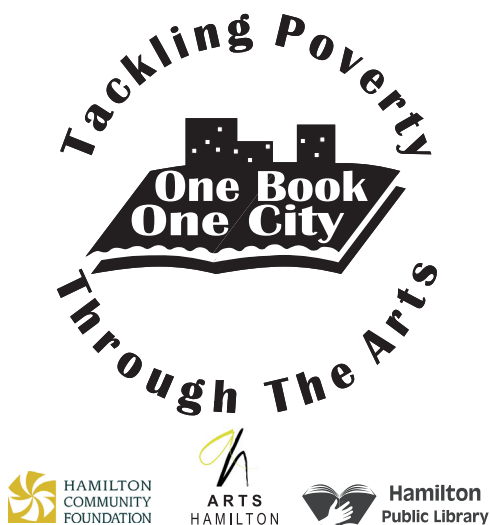
*Looking for X* could be a slogan for members of HRPR as they try to better understand the roots of poverty and the as yet unclear x-factors which will have the greatest impact on its reduction. One Book, One City: Tackling Poverty Through the Arts allowed a wide cross-section of Hamiltonians to grapple with the issue of how to collectively engage hearts, change attitudes and address the complex issue of poverty. Martha Young, an elderly Hamilton woman whose childhood was marked by deprivation contributed two needlecraft projects to the initiative. One was a discourse on the nature of tears and another offered hope and advice: “All the flowers of tomorrow are in the seeds of today.” Hamilton’s

reading and arts initiative sowed many seeds and the hope is to create a Hamilton where poverty is relegated to the past.

*Anne Makhoul*

#### References

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