

## ***Hamilton's Mohawk College Builds its Community Partnerships***

*Caledon's 'community snapshots' present brief overviews of promising new initiatives founded by Vibrant Communities and other community-focused organizations.*

### ***Challenge***

Robert Land Elementary School was a north Hamilton landmark. Situated in the historic Keith neighbourhood where heavy industry neighbours jostle with bayside gentrification projects, residents are among Hamilton's poorest. Rental properties – some well kept, others not – make up a large percentage of available housing. Rents are high and few community services exist, but the neighbourhood is proud of its history and character.

When the Robert Land school closed in 2004, former resident and community organizer Don MacVicar and members of the Robert Land Community Association dreamed about buying the property and making it available as community space. They were building on the efforts of the Keith Neighbourhood Renewal Committee, a group of residents who also envisioned a neighbourhood that reached out to families. By 2006, they had incorporated their association and bought the 56,000 square foot building for \$360,000. With funds from the Hamilton Community Foundation, individual donors and the Ontario Trillium Foundation, upgrades were made to the facility, but Don MacVicar wanted more.

A story in *The Hamilton Spectator* expressed Don's wish that all Keith neighbourhood children have the skills and abilities they would need to one day "breathe McMaster [University] air." Mohawk College's Manager of Media Relations, Internal Communications and Community Projects Jay Robb read the article and wondered why they couldn't also breathe Mohawk air.

## *Strategy*

The Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction (HRPR) – initiated by the City of Hamilton and the Hamilton Community Foundation – had already involved Mohawk in many of its committee discussions, so when Jay suggested to college administrators in the spring of 2006 that they get more involved in the Robert Land work, the time was right for considering how to best use existing college resources to serve community interests. The college was the first in Ontario to institute an active citizenship course for all of its full-time students. The link to Robert Land and HRPR would provide real life experience in living out the college’s vision: inspiring learning, leadership and citizenship.

College President and Hamilton Community Foundation board member MaryLynn West-Moynes encouraged Jay to talk with as many Mohawk staff and students as possible. With 10,000 full-time and 42,000 continuing education students, 1,100 staff, 70,000 alumni and many cooperative placements, class and special projects already operating, the possibilities for involvement seemed endless. Rather than create a new process for the work, Jay’s strategy was to include Robert Land in everything the college was already doing. Beginning in the fall of 2006, this approach was put into effect and allowed to grow organically. It avoided the “talk about it for a year before we do anything” pitfall and the accompanying tendency to inflate expectations. Jay kept thinking of the thin line teenaged girls walk between their futures as young mothers or college graduates and he knew that there was no time to waste.

## *Outcomes*

Over the next eight months, Mohawk students established an after-school Hoops and Homework Club, helped run a mothers’ support group, developed arts and drama activities, produced a healthy eating cookbook for parents with young children and organized a Halloween haunted house and party for 300 children. They operated a Santa’s workshop (where children were encouraged to make crafts for their families and friends and their photos were taken by a Mohawk photography graduate, framed and delivered to teary-eyed parents), renovated former classrooms, drafted detailed floor plans and architectural drawings, and ran a March Break Camp and an Easter celebration. College students were enthusiastic and developed close relationships with neighbourhood children and their families. Several were inspired to pursue community development as a career and their efforts attracted other partners to the work. The college created and now hosts a Robert Land website.

Despite the wonderful projects, Mohawk staff knew that they would not necessarily be enough to keep children in school and moving on to postsecondary education opportunities. With support from the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, the college invited 90 people to a Social Innovation Café in April 2007 which resulted in the “Drive for 85 in 5.” The Ministry of Education and Training had set a goal for 85 percent graduation rates province-wide, but café participants added the five-year timeline to help get private, public and nonprofit community partners focused on the role each could play in keeping children engaged in learning. Café discussions also generated interest in

“Pathways to Education”® – a tutoring, mentoring and advocacy program created by the Regent Park Community Health Centre in Toronto (<http://www.pathwaystoeducation.ca/home.html>). Pathways offered a solution to many of the issues raised by café participants – financial aid, study skills, positive role models and family support. If its application is successful, the North Hamilton Community Health Centre will act as host for the program beginning in 2008 for a catchment area that includes Robert Land.

Regent Park’s success with Pathways has included the development of strong ties with postsecondary institutions. Mohawk College is interested in encouraging similar partnerships with Hamilton and area universities and colleges. Building on another good idea from McMaster University, Jay Robb is preparing to create Mohawk Active Citizenship Teams (Mohawk ACTS) where teams of students would be offered volunteer opportunities with selected, child-focused community organizations. An anticipated benefit will be the cross-pollination of ideas and energy from one organization to another as students move from placement to placement. Students will have the chance to develop leadership, communication and teamwork skills and network with potential employers.

Jay Robb and MaryLynn West-Moynes credit students and staff at Mohawk for coming up with answers to the question of how they could collectively engage hands, heads and hearts. Self-directed students were offered placements that afforded great learning, leadership and citizenship opportunities. Says Jay: “If this is what students are capable of doing while they’re in school, we can’t wait to see what they’ll do in communities when they’re in positions of power and influence.”

As the work at Mohawk and Robert Land begins to reach into areas like Pathways to Education, it demonstrates the breadth and richness of opportunities made possible by a well-connected community process. MaryLynn’s role as a Hamilton Community Foundation board member helped to align activities at the college with the foundation and, later, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. The relationships among representatives of HRPR, Mohawk College, HCF, Robert Land Neighbourhood Association and residents of the Keith neighbourhood will ensure the continued interweaving of connections and creativity that are needed to design effective community solutions.

*Anne Makhoul*

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1390 Prince of Wales Drive, Suite 401, Ottawa, ON K2C 3N6 CANADA  
Phone: (613) 729-3340 Fax: (613) 729-3896  
E-mail: [caledon@caledoninst.org](mailto:caledon@caledoninst.org) Website: [www.caledoninst.org](http://www.caledoninst.org)