

The Hamilton Spectator's Focus on Poverty

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

Challenge

In 2005, when management and staff at *The Hamilton Spectator* were considering strategic, editorial and philanthropic priorities, it didn't take long for poverty to emerge as the top challenge facing the newspaper and the community. Fully 20 percent of citizens in Hamilton live on or below the low-income cutoff. Poverty issues were pervasive in news coverage and in the *Spectator's* business overall, which led management and staff to conclude it needed to be looked at more holistically and written about in a planned way.

Former *Spectator* Editor-in-Chief Dana Robbins was a member of the board of the Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF) and took part in its "Tackling Poverty Together" discussions. When HCF and the City of Hamilton came together to form the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR) in 2005, Dana brought forward the *Spectator's* pledge to write about poverty, a commitment which gave instant profile to HRPR's efforts to initiate a community-wide understanding and discussion of poverty. The paper's decision to assign a reporter to the project who would look deeply at the issue was of enormous benefit to HRPR and all who were committed to lowering Hamilton's poverty rate.

Response

The paper's corporate management and editorial board decided to make poverty a three-year focus and launched "The Poverty Project" in October 2005. Says Howard Elliott, a

Spectator Managing Editor: “We knew there were things that needed to be said and that this decision would be good for business and the community. Ultimately, prosperity – or the lack of it – will be what defines this newspaper and what it can achieve.”

In the reality of today’s newspaper publishing industry, the *Spectator*’s hard copy stories and editorials about poverty are supported by an online archive, blogs and postings on a multimedia studio area (www.thespec.com). Besides covering the issue, the paper also made a corporate commitment to supporting poverty alleviation projects at Hess Street Elementary School. These include lunch programs, sports and reading activities. Company time was provided to allow *Spectator* staff members to volunteer at the school.

Outcomes

With one year left in The Poverty Project, Howard Elliott reflects that newspaper employees initially knew a lot about the need for the project and the process they would follow, but were unclear about where it would lead. They used their own lack of awareness of poverty’s pervasiveness as a guide to their readers’ need for information. They hoped their example as community contributors would encourage others to match concern with action, and they wanted to see whether their reporting and hands-on efforts could have a positive impact on the lives of those living in poverty.

By creating The Poverty Project, newspaper staff already have fulfilled all three of these goals – awareness raising, a cycle of giving and acting, and improvements in the lives of low-income Hamiltonians – particularly the children at Hess Street and their families. Keeping a sharp focus on the issue of poverty and maintaining reader interest have also helped *Spectator* decision-makers develop their thinking about possible directions once the project ends. Howard Elliott is interested in looking more deeply into the issues of prosperity – why certain kinds of jobs are available, employee recruitment and retention, and the City’s struggles to attract new business and industry.

The *Spectator*’s plans for The Poverty Project wrap-up will include taking a hard look back to 2005 and assessing what is different in 2008 in Hamilton – how many Hess Street-type projects have been launched and whether people’s lives have really improved as a result of the initiative. Having an honest discussion with newspaper staff and their readers will help direct future efforts. Howard has joined in the work of the multisectoral Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR) and is optimistic that it can maintain a sustainable, action-oriented approach.

Says Howard: “I now see that we need a systems-based way of looking at poverty. It’s important to keep readers feeling hopeful by celebrating successes, but we also have to develop our understanding of the economic makeup, culture and infrastructure of the community so that we can get at the deep-seated issues that affect our prosperity. Our problems are unique to our particular geography and history. We can’t copy what’s being done in other municipalities and expect it to work here.”

By engaging the community in its concern over the pervasiveness of poverty, *The Hamilton Spectator* has made the problem and its solution everyone's business. That in itself is a reason for celebration and hope.

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