

“Around the Block”: A Citizen-Generated Community Newspaper in Saint John

Challenge

Close-knit relationships are the bedrock of a healthy community. But when people are pressed for time, coffee and conversation are often neglected. Residents across Saint John, New Brunswick, are exploring a new way of reaching out to one another. Through the regular publication of a community newspaper called *Around the Block*, they are sharing important stories and community information. Because one of the paper’s goals is to have no two articles written by the same person, it is also becoming an entry into writing and publishing for an expanding pool of contributors.

Strategy

Around the Block was launched in October 2008 and funded by Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) and the City of Saint John. It was modelled after a community newspaper in St. John’s, Newfoundland in which a professional journalist tells good news stories about several high-poverty neighbourhoods. In *Around the Block*, a coordinator locates resident writers and assembles a production schedule for publication every two months. Five of the paper’s 12 pages focus on Saint John’s five priority neighbourhoods – parts of Saint John where residents, VCSJ and other community groups are working to create opportunities for people living in poverty. Two pages focus on the interests of youth. The remaining pages include a cover and general interest sections.

Around the Block coordinator Juanita Black is a resident of Crescent Valley, one of the five priority neighbourhoods. Says Juanita: “I was both nervous and eager to take on the paper’s coordinator role, and it’s given me the chance to grow personally and professionally. I really wanted to help others develop as writers and photographers, and to learn about page design.”

Juanita's connection to *Around the Block* has provided a comfortable entry for would-be contributors from her neighbourhood. In the paper's first three issues, 120 separate contributors provided story copy and 85 pictures were taken by residents.

The newspaper is web-published to the [Vibrant Communities](#), [School District 8](#) and [Human Development Council Saint John](#) websites. Paper copies are available free of charge. Some 1,000 are distributed to community stores and 5,000 copies are hand delivered, primarily in the five priority neighbourhoods. Each neighbourhood association is given \$100 per issue as a delivery honorarium.

Staff at a provincially-funded Community Access Centre acted as mentors during preparations for *Around the Block's* inaugural issue in October 2008. Since then, local partners including access centre and Human Development Council employees have provided suggestions for layout and design.

Outcomes

The interest and excitement generated by *Around the Block's* first three editions continues. The paper was originally without a name; Juanita used the first issue to launch a 'name this paper' contest and 61 names were submitted. Issue two printed the editorial team's five favourite suggestions and asked readers to call or e-mail their top choice, as well as name five things they liked about their neighbourhoods.

Says VCSJ Coordinator Wendy MacDermott: "We want people to focus on celebrating what's good and fun about where they live and the paper reflects that tone. After the first issue, we had offers of volunteer help from a retired teacher and a journalist and we were pleased to welcome them as proofreaders. Now in our sixth month, the paper has established a community events bulletin board and contact information columns for services like food banks and shelters."

The five priority neighbourhoods each have two representatives that make up an operating committee; a total of 15 to 20 people vet the information that is released to the wider community. Every contributor's material is included and the volume of entries has been so plentiful that the paper went from eight to 12 pages after its first edition. The upcoming April edition will have a print run of 7,000, up from 6,000.

Says Juanita: "*Around the Block* brings residents of the priority neighbourhoods together on a common project, breaks down the isolation of living in poverty and keeps everyone better informed. We are helping people build their skills while they are learning a new way to relate to their friends and neighbours."

In early March, St. Thomas University journalism instructor Mark Leger presented a workshop on creating a story line which 12 people attended. In mid-April he will present a second workshop on interviewing. The New Brunswick College of Craft and Design in Fredericton brought 10 photojournalism students to Saint John for a workshop on March 20. Twenty-one participants got tips on camera use and photo composition. At the end of the session, instructor Peter Gross matched

his students with a representative of each of the five priority neighbourhoods to take pictures of their part of Saint John. The photo library they created will be used in future editions of *Around the Block*.

Publishing the newspaper costs about \$30,000 for one year. This amount includes Juanita's part-time salary, printing expenses, desktop publishing software and delivery honoraria. The newspaper committee began selling advertisement spaces to help defray costs. "Realistically, ad revenues will pay \$1,000 of the printing costs for each issue," says Juanita.

The City of Saint John created a \$150,000 Neighbourhood Stimulation grant program in the spring of 2008. When City councillors were presented with the first issue of *Around the Block*, they were impressed by the paper's quality. The City awarded the paper a grant of \$16,000 to help pay part-time staff salaries for the first year.

Professional journalists at the Saint John *Telegraph Journal* took an immediate interest in *Around the Block* and its readers. When the first issue was distributed on Saturday, October 18, the *Telegraph Journal* alerted the community. VCSJ's efforts to build relationships with *Telegraph* staff in order to build better, more consistent media coverage about poverty reduction initiatives have recently met with greater success.

And relationships? Juanita has seen first-hand the pleasure and pride people take when they read stories about themselves and their work. A long-time friend was overjoyed to see an article and photographs prepared by members of her South End community detailing her work at Inner City Youth Ministries. Says Juanita: "Saying thank you is an important part of *Around the Block*. Our paper and our community could not run without the support of volunteers and partners. Cheering people on lets them know we appreciate what they do."

Anne Makhoul

[Segment from *Around the Block*, February 2009 edition]



Wendell Dryden looks on as Crescent Valley Neighbourhood children borrow books from the Bookwagon. The Bookwagon Program runs on (most) Saturdays in Crescent Valley year round. Contact Cheryl @ 333-2601 for more information.

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