

## *Community Houses in Ottawa: Making Connections that Matter*

### *Introduction*

In the late 1960s, Ottawa's Community Housing Corporation began donating one or two townhouse units as mini-community centres in its rent-to-income housing developments. Recognizing the transportation, mobility, income and language constraints faced by many tenants, Community Houses were established to provide a convenient location for services and programs. Tenant associations planned and organized activities, and resident volunteers directed and managed the work. As time passed, partnerships were fostered with community organizations to ensure program consistency and sustainability.

Each of the 15 Community Houses are governed by a board of directors or supported by a local community health centre. A Community House Coalition assumes responsibility for applying for operational funding from a variety of sources. Houses offer programming which is tailored to the needs of the communities they serve. The majority of houses operate before and after school programming, outreach to at-risk children and youth, summer camps, homework clubs, healthy snacks, community kitchens, food banks, computer access rooms, English as a second language (ESL) training and drop-ins for adults and youth.

One of the Community Houses' key operating principles has been to build leadership capacity by reserving at least 50 percent of board of directors' seats for residents. Though townhouse units are fairly small and limit the number of people who can sign up for a particular activity, space and resources are used to their maximum.

Grassroots and low budget, Community Houses provide a necessary space in which to grow the kinds of supportive relationships upon which community is built. Their neighbourhood scale ensures that residents' faces are familiar to one another, creating protective ties and

encouraging participation. Adults, youth and children who volunteer to help or who participate in activities often become directly involved in program design and operation – making these Community Houses into community homes. In 2007-08, Community House programs and services were accessed 695,266 times.

Most of Ottawa’s Community Houses have only one full-time paid staff person; these positions are funded by the City. House Directors are supported by part-time workers, but pay rates are low and the work is emotionally and physically demanding. Low wages and short hours make it difficult to attract and retain part-time workers. Staff turnover is a constant problem and houses vary widely in their ability to secure additional funding when shortfalls occur.

### *A day in the life*

Britannia Woods Community House serves a west end neighbourhood of 800 people, 59 percent of whom are under the age of 18. Its programs include a pre-school learning program, after-school educational and recreational activities, youth leadership training, drop-ins, youth basketball, homework club and summer camps. Other programs and services include ESL and sewing classes, food bank, community kitchen, safety committee, computer/Internet access, and information and referral. Three days a week, a Lunch Club provides school-age children with a healthy bagged lunch to take to school.

Beth Gibeault began working part time at the house as a child and youth worker in 2000 and has been its Director since 2005. Her skills in staff management, fundraising and leadership are basic requirements for the job, and her commitment and enthusiasm for the work are unflagging. Over the last two years, she has seen her core children and youth recreational program funding shrink from \$28,000 to \$10,000. Though \$5,000 from *Centraide/United Way* Ottawa helps cover the homework portion of the house’s after-school programming, there is not enough money to fund current levels of service.

Beth, her staff, board of directors and volunteers are now planning a major fundraising campaign to raise \$15,000. Says Beth: “We have 18 community sponsors who contribute everything from bathroom tissue to website development. We are really grateful for their support, but without more funds, we won’t be able to operate our children and youth recreational programs. We consider these vital to the neighbourhood’s healthy functioning and future. In the last year alone, we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of children and youth who come to us for recreational activities. Our parents are so relieved to have a safe place for their children to visit, and the kids are eager to be involved.”

Mohamed Sofa moved to Ottawa from Somalia at the age of 15 in 1996 and his family settled in the Britannia Woods community. Says Mohamed: “The Community House was a place of connection for me. I was able to take part in programs that would not have been available to me otherwise. I became a youth staff member, learned valuable skills and made connections with

many different people. After years of encouragement from Community House staff, I joined the board of directors. I wanted to give back to a place that had given me so much.”

Mohamed continues: “Community Houses provide gateways to learning opportunities and are places of connection for residents. They offer safe spaces for children and youth to congregate and are true community hubs. In Britannia Woods in particular, we are in serious need of need of additional space and resources if we are to serve our young people properly.”

Britannia Woods Community House operates Monday to Friday, alternating between a 7:00 am and 9:00 am opening and an 8:30 pm and 9:00 pm closing. A Sunday afternoon drop-in is the only available weekend programming, due to financial constraints and the City’s requirement that qualified staff be on site at all times.



*The Royal Richie Drummers is a group of children and youth living in the Britannia Woods community. Funding from Centraide/United Way Ottawa and the National Capital YM-YWCA helped purchase lessons and drums, and the group now performs throughout the region raising money for their Community House’s children and youth programming.*

## *The future is uncertain*

In addition to her work in Britannia Woods, Beth Gibeault chairs the Coalition of Community Houses. Determining which National Capital community and social planning tables she should join is a complex task, given the many facets of community life the houses support. Some of the tables are sector specific and do not reflect the holistic planning goals of the Community Houses. The tables' daytime meeting schedules force Beth to choose between attending discussions and closing her facility. Should she act as a Community House advocate or continue to serve her primary function and ensure that the house remains open for the 150 or so residents who use it on a daily basis?

Beth appreciates the efforts now under way to build cross-sectoral partnerships, streamline funding and eliminate service duplication. She has worked to bring health care services directly into her community, and believes that Community Houses provide ideal locations in which to operate rotating health and social service clinics.

Whether Community Houses can find a funding home with an organization that promotes recreation, crime prevention, housing, child care, public health, poverty reduction – or all of the above – may determine if they can continue to exist. Shoestring budgets and the goodwill of small staffs and committed volunteers are fragile responses to the growing needs of people living on limited incomes. Recent concerns over youth crime in Ottawa have many organizations calling for exactly the response provided by Community Houses: a positive youth development approach. Community Houses' pro-social activity is geared to community need and emphasizes resident empowerment.

Says Beth: “We are positioned to do this work well. We have built good relationships with our youth and their parents. Some of our participants have been banned from youth recreation facilities for breaking the rules or demonstrating anti-social behaviour. Others have been suspended or expelled from school. Community Houses serve these at-risk youth every day. We act as mentors and teach them how to interact positively with others. We give them job training and volunteer opportunities – skills that no one has had the time to teach them.”

Beth continues: “With many of our parents working long hours and shift work, we've become the after-school milk and cookies place. From the moment our doors open, children are asking how they can be involved and how they can help to make their community safer and happier. Parents offer support and provide direction for our children's programming. Residents hand out food in our food bank. We have the most civically-engaged youth in Ottawa – they volunteer to sweep floors, pick up garbage and help with our pre-school programs. Here at Britannia Woods, we're providing the grassroots-inspired activities our parents, youth and children need. What we and our fellow Community House operators seek are the resources to continue the work.”

Sometimes, a programming model may appear outdated or its voice may be too muted to be heard at larger planning tables. Community Houses have quietly served Ottawa for nearly 50 years, and their contributions to the well-being of some of the City's most stressed communities have been enormous. Maybe it's time for the mouse to roar.

*Beth Gibeault and Anne Makhoul*

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