

*Strong social policy provides the foundation for achieving social justice, ensuring economic security and building community capacity. Social policy not only helps build strong communities; it is also shaped by creative and collaborative community initiatives. In this series, Caledon profiles 'real leaders' in order to recognize their efforts and inspire others to make similar contributions to economic and social well-being.*

This third edition of *real leaders* profiles **Tina Conlon, Dan O'Grady** and *the little red dot club*. While Tina and Dan approach their work from different perspectives, both share the same goals: empowering individuals to take control of their lives and building communities that respond to the needs of all their members. *The little red dot club* presents an inspiring story of a group of young students who are working to promote harmony and eradicate racism. This first profile is unique in that it portrays a group of dedicated children who have made a real difference in their community.

On her birthday a few years ago, Mitra Sen, a Grade 5 teacher at an elementary school in Scarborough, received an important gift from a student. A young girl presented her with a package of bindis, the little red dots that Indian and Sri Lankan women wear on their foreheads as a sign of beauty. Mitra was



*By sharing bindis, children create a mutual understanding of cultural difference.*

happy to share her bindis with the students who were delighted and eager to wear them.

Until recess. Out in the schoolyard, their pleasure turned sour as their schoolmates ridiculed them for wearing the forehead ornaments.

“The students came back from recess visibly upset and angry. Some had removed their bindis,” Mitra recalls. “When I asked what had happened, they told me how unfairly and negatively they had been treated by other children.”

The students were determined to find a way for others to learn from their experience. Mitra is proud when she speaks of their initiative: “They began a campaign to change the attitudes of their schoolmates. They renamed the bindi ‘the cool dot.’”

practised how to respond to racist comments and spent the lunch hour educating their schoolmates about the beauty of cultural differences.’ By the end of the afternoon, more than half the students and staff were wearing ‘cool dots.’

“These kids had been learning the value of diversity all year, and when this incident arose, they realized the need to create a change in attitudes. They demonstrated spirit and cooperation and showed the other students and teachers that we don’t have to accept things the way they are. If we are creative, we can find solutions,” Mitra says.

Mitra was inspired by the creativity, resilience and determination her students had demonstrated. Convinced of the power of the ‘little red dot’ story, she took a two-year leave of absence from the Board of Education to write, direct and produce a film called *“Just A Little Red Dot.”*

Mitra admits that making the film was a tremendous challenge. Although she had worked as assistant director of Degrassi Junior High on CBC TV, this film was her first independent production and she had difficulty attracting funding. But, she says: “It was my belief in the educational value of the film and a desire not to disappoint those around me that kept me going. I knew I could do it: My heart, mind and soul were invested in it!”

Her confidence was well-founded — the film has been winning accolades since its release in June 1996 for showing how children can make a difference in the world by challenging racism and promoting respect and understanding. At its premiere, the crowd of 450 people were visibly moved by the children in the film who spoke of their experience with the project.

The film has since won the prestigious Grand Trophy for the best educational film, the Gold World Medal for multicultural education at the 39 Annual New York Festival and the Golden Book Prize from the Roshd Educational Film and

Video Festival in, Iran. Most recently, it has earned the designation ‘Best of the Fest: Most Popular Film’ at the 14 Annual International Children’s Film Festival. The film will be shown in India and Cairo in the spring.

Mitra hoped that the story of the little red dot would promote harmony, respect and understanding among school-age children. However, she did not realize it would have such a dramatic impact on the children who acted in the movie. Originally, most of the 400 children who auditioned for the film were attracted by the glamour of acting. But “Just A Little Red Dot” proved to be an engaging experience. Four of the children who appear in the film, along with Mitra, have formed *the little red dot club* to keep the message alive.

Twelve-year-old Jessica Rose is one of those children. “It totally changed my life by opening my eyes to a whole new world. I met friends from around the world. Before I got involved, I didn’t know the word ‘racism’ or that I could do anything to stop it. But since my experience with the film and the club, I am much more open. When I meet



*Jessica (left) and Mandy, members of the little red dot club, making a presentation: “There’s no greater feeling than knowing that you are helping the world to be a better place.”*

people now, I think of them as really beautiful because of who they are.”

Mandy Pipher, one of the fifth grade students in the film and a founding member of the little red dot club, recalls: "Although I had only a small role, the film had a great impact on me. The message moved me and I wanted more kids to hear about the beauty of diversity?" She says she and three others decided to start the club; they felt that "since we are kids, other kids listen to us." Club members visit schools and make classroom presentations in order to 'share the magic' of the little red dot.

"We are trying to show people how diversity can enrich their lives, help young children learn about respect and make this world a better place," Mandy explains. "If you start to teach children before they become biased, they will find bright colours and different costumes fascinating. If their first impression of something different is 'that's neat' as opposed to 'that's weird,' then they will want to learn more about it. They will be open-minded and want to welcome what other cultures have to offer?"

"There is no greater feeling than knowing that you are helping the world to be a better place," says Jessica. "Sometimes after a presentation we hear kids talking to other kids, apologizing for picking on them, saying they didn't realize how badly it would make them feel."

Club members have been part of the celebrations for the awards the film has won, and they are preparing a newsletter that will highlight positive experiences with cultural diversity. In order to promote diversity in schools, the club encourages children to decorate school hallways with posters and welcome signs in many languages and to organize events such as a Multicultural Games Day.

Mitra, meanwhile, is preparing a teachers' guide for the film. As an educator, she strongly believes in providing children with opportunities to apply skills learned in school to their everyday lives. "Being a part of this club empowers



*The little red dot club logo represents harmony and unity. Illustrated by Peter Chow*

children; it teaches them responsibility and enables them to practise many life skills."

Although Mitra attends some club meetings and offers guidance and support, she explains that the children are entirely responsible for the club's many activities. "They each contribute as their time and expertise allow," she says. And their contributions are impressive. As coordinator, 13-year-old Mandy is most involved in the day-to-day logistics of the club. She answers telephone inquiries, sends information packages, sets up appointments and makes school presentations. "It's a major commitment," Mandy says, "but it helps that my teacher and principal are very supportive. Recently, I used one of my speeches as a writing assignment."

Meanwhile, Patrick Herman is proud that his grant application to the Trillium Foundation was approved. Now he is learning how to set up a budget and administer the funds to support the work of the club. "Not only is this exciting and interesting volunteer work, it also looks great on your CV," says the junior high student.

And 13-year-old Peter Chow, the club's artistic director, is particularly excited about the

club's partnership with UNICEF to organize a jointly sponsored art contest of drawings depicting festivals from around the world. The winners' drawings will be displayed at the launch of a new UNICEF publication entitled 'Celebrations.'

Mandy is quick to point out the importance of the practical support the club has received from organizations in the community. In addition to collaborating with the Trillium Foundation and UNICEF, the Ontario Federation of Women Teachers has helped publicize the activities of the club by printing a feature article in their magazine and the Association of Women in India and Canada donated office space.

Mitra is particularly laudatory when talking about the parents of the four founding members of *the little red dot club*. She affirms: "Without their support, the children would be unable to make their very effective presentations to schools and community groups."

By way of resources, club members have developed a series of creative repartees to equip kids with the ammunition they need to combat racist statements. The club's school presentations have piqued the interest of many students who want to start their own diversity clubs and members have developed a guide to assist them in doing so.

But *the little red dot club* doesn't confine its work to children. Adults, too, are presented with the importance of understanding diversity and challenging racist attitudes.

"The usual adult response to *the little red dot club* is: If kids are doing so much, shouldn't we be doing something?" says Jessica. "They see we are just kids, yet we understand what is wrong and we are doing something about it?"

Among the club's honorary patrons are former Toronto Mayor Barbara Hall and Joan Westcott, Executive Director of the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario. In her acceptance of the invitation to become a patron, Ms. Westcott wrote: "For me, the little red dot gives a very powerful message of the change that children can promote in our society if given the opportunity, encouragement and support. Children will challenge inequalities, different treatment and discrimination. Adults would do well to reflect on the ability of children to see beyond stereotypes and to find the individual that exists in each child?"

Mitra Sen closes her film with inspirational words first uttered by Ghandi: "A *small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.*" The members of *the little red dot club* certainly can be counted among these spirits.



*Kids can make a difference. Patrick (left), Mandy and Peter work to promote diversity in schools.*

**Tina Conlon** vividly remembers her disappointment the day one of her classmates in her native Philippines didn't come to her fifth birthday party.

"I later found out that he died that day on his way to the hospital." She continues: "I remember how shocked I was; my parents always paid for medication and for a doctor to come to our house. My friend died without seeing a doctor. The illness that caused his death began with an untreated cough."

Since that time, Tina has dedicated herself to fighting for social justice — and in her view, justice includes having enough to eat. In fact, whether she is working with FoodShare, HungerWatch or the Toronto Food Policy Council to organize World Food Day or an international conference on Sustainable Urban Food Systems, Tina has a unique ability to act quickly — identify needs, alternatives and the partners to make things happen. From grassroots-level initiatives to international development projects to her present job as a Canadian Programmer at OXFAM Canada, Tina's wit, creativity and boundless energy are widely admired.

Tina's work deals mainly with issues of food security, which means she searches for ways to ensure that people have physical and economic access to enough nutritious food for an active, healthy life. Food security implies that people are not worrying about where their next meal is coming from.

Melody Roberts, a nutritionist and community developer at an inner-city health centre in Toronto, is constantly amazed by Tina's creativity. The two enjoy an easy camaraderie working together in collective kitchens, community gardens and on food security coalitions. When Melody faced what she thought was an insurmountable obstacle preventing the creation of a community garden at a shelter for battered women, she naturally turned to Tina. "When I explained that there

wasn't any land for the garden, Tina didn't hesitate for a minute. She gave me the name



*Tina Conlon (left), shown here working in a collective kitchen, believes that all members should work to improve their community.*

and phone number of a friend in the Portuguese community who imports grapes for wine-making. He was more than happy to donate giant containers for shipping grapes which we could use as planters. Our next challenge was to find volunteers to deliver the huge bins!"

Bringing people together is one of Tina's greatest skills. When a group of inner-city women were overwhelmed with produce from their collective garden, Tina brought them together with Mennonite women from rural Ontario who were delighted to teach them how to preserve.

Tina believes that all members should work to improve their community. While she realizes not everyone may be aware of this responsibility, she tries to include a range of partners—including business in every project.

One of Tina's favourite initiatives is the Mango Project. "In Guatemala, every house has a mango tree for shade, but three-quarters of the fruit was wasted because nobody knew what to do with the excess

produce.” But where some saw rotting fruit, Tina saw possibilities, this time bringing together poor Guatemalan farmers with an expatriate Guatemalan community in Toronto whose members happily would pay for a taste of their homeland. Tina realized that mango jams, jellies and relishes that were already being produced in Guatemala could be marketed in Canada. She brought together small farmers, nongovernmental agencies, national marketing co-ops and export companies to develop an alternative trading system through which Guatemalan farmers can sell their products on the Canadian market while building capacity in their own communities. The capacity-building element was crucial for Tina; she would agree to be involved in the project only if it did not undermine Canadian farmers or undercut the viability of Guatemalan farmers.

Eric Sauvé, a business school graduate who worked with Tina on the Mango Project, says Tina brought valuable assets to the initiative. “She is truly inspired. Tina is very skilled in verbalizing both the how and the why of a project. She has the ability to explain to potential partners the importance of what we want to accomplish and how it should be done.”

Eric believes Tina is inspired by her



*Where some saw rotting fruit, Tina saw possibilities. Guatemalan expatriates in Toronto soon will enjoy many forms of processed mangoes from their homeland.*

“deep empathy for people in troubled situations. She has a drive to work with others who have an emotional commitment to their work?” Tina herself simply says that “it always bothers me when people say we can’t change things. I believe we can change things — or at least try to.”

As a medical student in Manila, Tina went to the countryside to work with poor farmers. She provided first aid and gave inoculations, but quickly realized that the real problem was malnutrition. Plantation owners used all available land to grow sugar cane as a cash crop and there was a lack of indigenous food. Underpaid workers were forced to buy expensive canned foods from the company store.

An idealistic Tina and her fellow students convinced the workers to grow their own food and together they planted gardens. But before the first crop was harvested, the landlords erected fences and started to inquire about who had been involved. Some workers went into hiding; others were killed.

After fleeing the Philippines with her family, Tina arrived in Canada in the early 1970s. Initially, she perceived a very caring society and was particularly impressed with the health care system. But she remembers her surprise at the number of elderly women who were living alone in apartments. “In the Philippines, the elderly live with their families. They aren’t marginalized and left to live alone.” Tina promptly mobilized a group of fellow university students to provide support services and house cleaning for seniors. But she also noticed that many of the elderly women were afflicted with arthritis. Unable to bend down, it was impossible for them to take care of their feet. Tina was as quick to create solutions as she was to identify the problem: She recruited teams of students to visit seniors and provide pedicures.



*Community gardens allow people to come together and grow fresh produce to supplement their income. Photo courtesy of FoodShare.*

Tina recognized that the women wanted to participate in their community. “Arthritis didn’t allow them to bend down — but they could do many other things.” As seniors began to work at the soup kitchen and in other community ventures, the neighbourhood became less fragmented: “We were transforming the neighbourhood into a community.”

Tina strongly supports community economic development (CED) initiatives. She is adamant that control of these projects must remain with the community. “Whether you’re talking about community gardens, collective kitchens or food boxes, projects can succeed only if community members themselves are committed — reliance on paid workers or volunteers from outside the community is not what CED is all about.”

Tina is concerned that CED is being mis- construed in some circles. She uses the case of *Miss Vickie’s* to make her point. “Miss Vickie was a very poor farmer from Alliston at a time when nobody was buying potatoes. She developed an idea to produce potato chips, created a market for them and hired local people to prepare and package the chips.” *Miss Vickie’s* is hailed as a success because it has been bought by a transnational company for a million dollars. Tina disagrees: “The people of Alliston no longer have control of the company.

The transnational organization can buy potatoes and produce chips any where in the world. Alliston lost its assured market for the product.”

Over time, Tina became increasingly aware of a spiritual component to her work. Wanting to focus on this aspect, she joined the ministry. After training with the United Church, she was hired by a “rather traditional congregation” in an inner-city community in Guelph, Ontario.

“Tina was a bit of a surprise to us. She was the first woman clergy we had at the church, and she had a young baby she would bring to meetings,” recalls Jean Little, a member of the church and the author of 25 children’s books. “Tina has a real creative streak and boundless energy?”

Recently Tina was elected president of CUPE Local 2722, a testament to her involvement in the community.

Tina is honest in recognizing the toll that her work takes and is candid about how she deals with competing demands. “It is inherently very demanding and those of us working in the field don’t always take care of ourselves as we should?” To avoid burn out, she always involves young people in her projects. A strong believer in hands-on

learning, she says: “It is the only way to teach young people that there are different ways of looking at things?”

When Tina reflects on her lifelong involvement in social change, she believes she has been guided by simple principles. “I always thought people did decent things for each other. If there was some thing I could do to help, I did it. The key is to recognize that everyone has strengths that can be built upon.”

**Dan O’Grady** has a front row seat at the revolution — the revolution in corporate philanthropy. And he can’t think of a better place to be.

As manager of the three-year-old Community Investment Program at the Canadian Airlines Foundation, Dan understands that investing in his community is part of his responsibility as a corporate citizen. Traditionally, such investments consisted of cash donations to charities and community groups. However, the Foundation has chosen to take a different approach to philanthropy.

Though unable to provide financial support, Dan realizes that the Program has access to one important resource — airplane seats. And he puts them to good use, flying financially needy patients and their families to

recognized medical facilities; developing leadership in tourism programs in colleges and universities across the country; and providing airfare to support small businesses in exploring opportunities for expansion into international markets.

People familiar with the program say this new approach not only makes good business sense, but improves the workplace as well. George Khoury, Director of the Canadian Centre for Business in the Community at the Conference Board of Canada, says: “By all standards, the Canadian Airlines Community Investment Program is outstanding. Aligning the components of the program with the focus of Canadian’s business — community service, tourism, and international business — not only makes a lot of sense, but also means they can have a real impact. It is one of the most effective and successful Community Investment Programs in Canada.”

The voluntary sector is also supportive of Canadian’s initiatives, hailing the company as a leader in social vision and social responsibility. Colleen Kelly of the Volunteer Centre of Calgary has worked with Dan on many corporate and community ventures over the past few years.



*A strong showing of Canadian employee and retiree volunteers at the Alberta Volunteer Association Conference in 1996. (Dan, centre, wearing the cowboy hat.)*



She has watched many people at different corporations develop community investment programs; none of them, she says, did it as quickly or as smoothly as Dan. “There was no loud promotion of the benefits of the program. Dan quietly let employees, retirees and the community know that Canadian was there to help if it could. Within six months, the program was making some notable inroads.”

Colleen credits much of the success of Canadian’s program to Dan’s manner. “Dan is thoughtful and concerned about people and believes in what he does. He feels that it is his role to empower people — he encourage them to explore their own resources and grow from within.”

And Colleen believes that running a corporate philanthropy program for a company trying to achieve long-term financial viability demonstrates Dan’s inherent creativity. “Because he can’t give money, he is always thinking about how he can help.” Colleen chuckles when she recalls meeting Dan at the local drop-in centre during a record cold spell in Calgary last winter. “When he saw that the homeless didn’t have enough blankets to survive, he called the retirees’ association in Vancouver. The retirees, who collect and repair old and damaged blankets discarded by the airline, shipped 300 blankets to Calgary the same day.’

Dan’s work doesn’t only benefit the community — it also benefits Canadian. Last year, when the future outlook for Canadian was bleakest, Dan, like all other department heads, had to justify his department’s existence. He surveyed all the voluntary groups that had received free airline tickets through his program and found that, after receiving the tickets, many organizations and individuals had switched their allegiance to Canadian. Dan says that the company’s programs generated a return of three times the initial investment — and that’s a conservative estimate. Dan is justifiably proud

when he claims that this program is both altruistic and makes excellent business sense.

The Community Investment Program also benefits Canadian’s employees. Barb Schwob-Vrolijk is a full-time employee of Canadian. She also volunteers as the national coordinator of *Run for the Cure*, a five-kilometre run in 17 Canadian cities which raised more than \$2.3 million last year for breast cancer research. She is a strong supporter not only of the program but of Dan O’Grady. Barb says Dan has the vision and ability to foresee the benefit of supporting worthwhile causes.

“He recognized the financial and emotional benefits of supporting this cause right away. We have a lot of female employees and a workforce that is aging. Breast cancer is a disease that has affected many of us personally.’ Barb describes Dan as a kind and gentle man who is not quick to take credit for his work. “[As a volunteer,] I was learning as I went along and he encouraged me every step of the way. Without his guidance and support, I would have been overwhelmed.”

Airline tickets are an important part of the Investment Program, but Dan also likes to talk about another component of the program that is having a substantial impact across the country.

The Small Business International Expansion Program supports the expansion of small businesses into international markets by providing airfare and accommodation to 20 national award winners each year. True to form, Dan uses the application itself as an educational tool to promote community investment. “We take every opportunity to educate people about the importance of participating in their community and creating partnerships to develop a healthy economy. We say we are a big corporation helping out

small businesses and ask applicants what they are doing in their communities. Next year, I would like to add a question asking candidates whether they see an opportunity to create youth employment through their company?”

Dan sees his involvement in community investment as an evolution and a result of being in the right place at the right time. A long-time employee of Canadian, he was laid off during the cutbacks of the early 1990s, just as he turned 40. These two events threw him into an early mid-life crisis.

Questioning his purpose in life, he signed up for the Excellence Series, a course that helped him identify what was important to him — creativity, learning, growing, passion and nurturing relationships. He also immersed himself in a range of volunteer activities with the Calgary Interfaith Food Bank and the United Way.

When he returned to Canadian, he worked on several contracts before replacing an employee on maternity leave at the Foundation. Reflecting back on the process, he recalls: “It was a baptism by fire. Canadian was rethinking

its community relations program and I was asked to assist in the redesign and implementation of a new direction.”

Dan ascribes his belief in community investment to the values with which he grew up. “My Mom came from a farm in Manitoba where everyone watched out for and helped each other. By working together, we can do so much more?” And he believes that this program is helping many of Canadian’s 16,000 employees do more for their communities. George Khoury agrees: “Canadian Airlines has one of the best corporate foundations in the country with tangible outcomes both within the company and in the broader community.”

Dan talks about the energy and commitment the job requires, but he says he is inspired by the people with whom he works in the voluntary sector. “They work incredible hours and it seems second nature to them. If you are committed to what you do, you are rejuvenated by it.”

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*Canadian Airlines leads the parade as the official airline for **Run for the Cure** in support of the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation.*

Dan is also inspired by his secret life as an artist, which he says keeps him balanced. “I can come home at night and start working on a painting at 7:00 p.m. The next time I look at the clock, it is three in the morning. But these creative sessions never leave me tired; they energize me.”

His long-time friend Chris Esposito says: “Dan is passionate about whatever he does. He throws himself with equal enthusiasm into painting, music, collecting native Canadian art, hiking, skiing or sailing?” Chris also comments on Dan’s determination: “He can’t leave anything until he is happy with it.”

This commitment carries through to Dan’s work. George Khoury says he has participated in numerous conferences and networks with Dan. “He is seen as very committed and passionate. People admire the enthusiasm he brings to his work. He adds value to meetings and he is very well respected by his peers.”

Dan’s openness and integrity have seen him get involved in some partnerships others would have shunned, including one with a potential competitor. “It raised some real ethical dilemmas which we openly discussed. However, after realizing that we had a similar corporate culture, valuing community involvement and volunteer work, we decided the benefits outweighed the risks. Essentially, it was a commitment to a higher purpose that influenced our decision.”

It is his commitment, energy and nonjudgmental attitude that allow Dan O’Grady to make a significant contribution to communities across the country through his work at the Canadian Airlines Foundation. And he is inspiring others to do the same.



*Colleagues in action. Denise Chaulk, Community Investment Assistant in Calgary; Dan O’Grady; and Anna Witter, Coordinator of Community Investment, Toronto.*

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