

***A True Urban Centre:  
Collaborative Community Problem-Solving  
and The Dufferin Mall***

***introduction***

This paper describes how the management of the Dufferin Mall, an inner-city shopping centre in Toronto, has collaborated with educators, municipal government, police, private business, artists, students, social service organizations and local citizens to respond to community concerns about youth alienation and the escalation of youth violence. Our management team believes that the better the quality of life in a neighbourhood, the better the business environment. We are building more successful businesses by building more successful communities.

In the spirit of reciprocity, we believe that business must give back to the community that supports it. Our management practice interweaves business and social functions. Guided by an investigative spirit, we formulate policies that strive to make

*The Caledon Institute has launched "community stories" to enable individuals involved in capacity-building initiatives to reflect upon and write about their work. This series provides a vehicle for community leaders to tell their stories in their own words.*

the mall a true urban centre reflective of the needs of the surrounding community. We define our management responsibilities to include dealing with the issues facing our community: drugs, youth alienation, personal safety, loneliness and isolation of the elderly.

***the community***

Our community, located in the west end of Toronto, has always been economically healthy because of its business diversity. However, its strength has been tested over the last few years by changing economic and social conditions. Many jobs, for example, were lost with the flight of secondary manufacturing from the Bloor Junction and more jobs in the clerical sector were lost due to corporate downsizing in the city's downtown office core. Other major losses occurred in the construction industry which began to experience a significant decline in employment in 1990. The situation has worsened over the past decade.

The two major and interconnected community problems in Dufferin's neighbourhood are street drugs and youth alienation. There are six secondary schools within a 10-minute walking radius of the mall;

it serves as a gathering place for up to 3,000 kids a day. Community concern around youth issues was heightened when we experienced two armed robberies, an attempted rape and a murder in the mall during the first two weeks of October 1991. It was a traumatic situation and we had to do something to change conditions significantly.

We had two distinct alternatives. We could adopt a fortress-like mentality prohibiting youth from loitering in the mall or we could seek intelligent solutions to address shoppers' complaints of youth intimidation and merchants' perceptions that "all kids are bad and four kids equal a gang." We opted for this latter alternative; a quasi-police force was deemed neither appropriate nor effective as it would not provide suitable solutions.

### ***intelligent solutions***

Over the past four years, the mall management has created different work initiatives and resources to combine the community's economic development needs with the more direct employment needs of Dufferin Mall merchants. We are continually seeking to develop, maintain and enhance reciprocal relationships.

Our point of view is unique in that we see the mall as a community resource centre. Our goal is to act as a catalyst in bringing together different community interests to develop a sense of ownership around the mall. We accept responsibility for community problems, then take them on as business problems. We have been able to create low-cost or no-cost programs, reduce financial exposure, enhance creativity and ensure grass-roots, hands-on community participation.

Our initiatives are designed to solve business problems by accessing the talents and expertise of other sectors of society and forming appropriate alliances. We bring our own personal values to these alliances and inject them into our everyday business dealings. We implement our solutions regardless of their conventional or radical nature because we believe in taking risks. If the solutions succeed, we

continue. If they fail, we learn; there is no penalty for failure.

We try to operate as a horizontal organization. Employees are responsible for their area of expertise and are respected and trusted for their knowledge and commitment. We do not believe in meetings, minutes and reports. We believe in doing. If one of us has a good idea, it is put into practice immediately - the meeting comes later to assess results. Sufficient desire and commitment are the only prerequisites. We have no preconceived ideas and take nothing for granted.

As prudent business people, we look to those who have the specific problem-solving skills and the expertise we lack. We form partnerships, provide the resources we can and then give our partners the autonomy they need to do their jobs. To determine the nature of the problems in the community and to ascertain how Dufferin Mall could act as a positive force for change, management met with neighbourhood school principals. The development of a Teachers' Advisory Council, a Students' Advisory Council and a community-based Youth Advisory Council was supported by the mall management in recognition of the need to work collaboratively with people who had knowledge and experience with youth problems and community concerns.

### ***the development of a true urban centre***

Our first step was to view security as an evolutionary process. It is not an isolated service but rather an interconnected part of the mall functions, mall patrons and outside agencies. Security policies must be multilateral and should combine information and ideas from a variety of sources in order for us to ascertain problems and develop appropriate solutions.

We liaise with the 14th Division of the Metropolitan Toronto Police on a regular basis to keep them informed of our security policies and to seek their advice. Having patrolled the area, police officers of this Division have a wealth of experience to share. It was important that we understand police

attitudes and concepts of security so as not to devise policies at odds with theirs.

Our next step was to involve neighbouring schools by interviewing principals, teachers and students. We formed both a Teachers' and a Students' Advisory Council to exchange ideas, giving them a special interest in the mall.

We also had the task of figuring out how to take back control of our own building. The food court, for example, was laid out with seating in long, connected rows so that 30 or 40 kids were able to take over a single section. We decided to lay out the seating in a different configuration by breaking it into groups of four. This action was a simple, non-confrontational way of saying: "This is our turf, not yours and if you want to be here, you're here on our terms." The change was effective.

We then realized that we needed to redefine our own traditional definitions of space. Acting on the advice of our Seniors' Advisory Council, we took a section of the centre that had little traffic and created an area where seniors could gather. Tables were moved into the area and ten decks of cards were purchased and handed out to seniors. The presence of their 'watchful eyes' helped reduce theft from adjacent stores. Moreover, it provided a space for seniors to engage in a social activity while watching the mall's 'passing parade.'

Another unique partnership evolved between the Dufferin Mall and Wallace Emerson Community Centre of the City of Toronto, Department of Parks and Recreation. On the advice of the community-based Youth Advisory Council, we hired a youth worker to liaise with the young people who frequented the mall. His role was to educate mall management regarding youth, effect significant attitudinal change among youth and demonstrate lifestyle alternatives to drugs, theft and crime in general.

The two organizations decided to share equally the cost and the hours of the youth worker. This sharing illustrates how business can pay for public expertise on community issues. The youth worker provides confidential assistance and support for the youth at the mall and encourages them to use the edu-

cational and social service resources available at Dufferin Mall and in the community. During the summer months, the youth worker coordinates mall-sponsored sports activities for which the mall contributes trophies and equipment. During the school year, he also coordinates an after-school program at a nearby elementary school.

Partnership activities have resulted in a wide range of programs directed primarily at youth: social services including counselling, advocacy and information/referral; creative activities like a youth theatre program; and meaningful educational opportunities such as co-operative education programs and a retail certificate program. These initiatives are described below.

### *an holistic approach*

As the mall management, we form partnerships with those who have the expertise we lack and who share our sense of adventure and impatience. As we spent more time with community members from different backgrounds and disciplines, we began to see how business can contribute to the education and social needs of youth. A synergy can be created between formal education, business, sports and the arts to give students an holistic approach to life.

#### *i. The Dufferin Learning Centre*

We treat the mall as a community resource by lending it to educational institutions to try new concepts, advertise programs and bring education to the public. Our in-mall education centre focusses on the needs of three different populations: students-at-risk, drop-outs and adult learners.

The Learning Centre opened its doors in 1992. It evolved from a series of meetings with the Teachers' and Students' Advisory Councils. Three initial programs evolved from these meetings. First, West Toronto Collegiate established a co-op program with mall merchants and a satellite campus to offer academic courses that focus on marketing. This program is targeted at students at risk of leaving school.

Next, Brockton High School relocated its Re-entry Program for students aged 18 and over from the school to the Learning Centre. In addition, the Adult Basic Education Unit of the Toronto Board of Education uses the centre to offer literacy classes in the evenings.

During the summer months, Frontier College uses the Dufferin Learning Centre to run a reading program in which older students read to younger children. In partnership with the mall, Frontier College offers a literacy program to teach basic English and math skills to retailers. This work is done through one-on-one tutoring that occurs in the workplace.

Mall management made a cost-free commitment to provide space for these programs for five years. However, construction and plumbing work had to be carried out before the centre could open. We contracted Brockton High School and Central Technical School to do the required work. Dufferin Mall contributed the materials and the students provided the labour and expertise, gaining valuable experience in the process.

The Learning Centre, because of its origins, created a sense of ownership on the part of youth and demonstrated a new way for business and education to work together to serve youth more effectively. We were able to bring together municipal government, education and business in this successful collaborative initiative.

### ***ii. The Back Alley Retail Certificate Program***

Piloted in 1994, this program was initiated by a merchant in the Dufferin Mall. Steve Back, the owner and managing director of Back Alley Streetwear, approached the Dufferin Mall Youth Services (DMYS, described below) with the idea of developing a retail training program to help young people gain work experience. DMYS and participating mall retailers jointly designed a program that combined social service support and hands-on training. The participating merchants were The Body Shop, HMV, Glamour Shots, Music World, Limite, Reitmans, Foot Locker and Back Alley Streetwear.

Nine young people participated in this initial six-week summer program. They worked voluntarily for eight hours a week, rotating through eight different retailers in the mall to learn about the various aspects of retailing: stock and inventory, display and customer service. The training also included information sessions on job search techniques, résumé writing, employer-employee relations and other job-related issues. Participants reported that the training enabled them to gain valuable experience, job references and increased self-confidence. One of the participants was immediately offered employment by a participating retailer and the others felt hopeful about future job prospects in the retail industry. The program currently operates three times a year and has a waiting list of more than 90 applicants.

### ***iii. co-operative education***

The administration and operations departments of the Dufferin Mall serve as learning sites for students from local colleges and high schools. In March 1995, a student from West Toronto Collegiate worked with the mall's Marketing Director in the administration office, two students from St. Mary's Secondary School worked with the mall's security team and two students from Brockton High School assisted the mall's maintenance and recycling groups. In addition, up to 20 students have learning placements with mall merchants throughout the school year. Co-operative education job placements are not wage-earning positions. Students receive course credits for this work and are often offered part-time summer or peak-period employment by mall merchants.

### ***iv. Dufferin Mall Youth Services***

The Dufferin Mall Youth Services program focusses on youth and family issues and is designed to make services accessible. DMYS offers culturally sensitive storefront counselling and community support services to youth aged 12 to 24 years and their families. This program was conceived and established as a joint community-mall youth service to meet youth's needs and to provide a meaningful link between youth and their community.

In 1992, a group of community organizations and social service agencies discussed how to pool their resources to provide more youth services in the west end of Toronto. Individually, their potential was limited. West End Inter-Agency Network was created to combine the resources of 12 agencies: Abrigo, Catholic Children's Aid Society, Central Toronto Youth Services, Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples, City of York Child and Family Centre, Harambee Centre of Canada, Humewood House, Metro Toronto Children's Aid Society, Oolagen Community Services, Pape Adolescent Resource Centre, Turning Point Youth Services and Youthlink.

Due to the already established presence of youth and the supportive message from management, the Network approached us with the idea of setting up a one-stop social services centre for youth. We agreed and donated rent-free storefront space for the development of Dufferin Mall Youth Services. Open daily from 10:00 am to 6:00 pm, DMYS includes: individual and family counselling, advocacy, information and referral, job training opportunities, community outreach and special programs. From 1994 to 1996, there were more than 450 requests for service from youth and their families.

Virtually all of the centre's costs are funded through the donation of services and resources from the participating agencies. The staffing of DMYS is creative: Turning Point Youth Services provides a full-time coordinator and other agencies contribute social workers on a rotational basis. DMYS also has a large group of volunteers, many of whom are retired or unemployed professionals. The variety of participating agencies ensures that staff can provide culturally sensitive services in the appropriate language. Through a range of councils and networks, the youth of the community are actively involved in the planning and development of these services.

#### *v. links with the faith communities*

We sent letters to 65 area ministers and priests regarding youth alienation. We wanted to know how religious leaders were handling the subject, and offered to contribute to some of the local initiatives already under way.

A west end soccer league based out of the High Park Baptist Church was created by expanding the existing St. Sebastian's League. There is no league membership fee because we do not believe that kids should have to pay to belong. The City of Toronto Department of Parks and Recreation contributed coach and referee clinics and equipment for each game. They assisted with playing fields and opened the door to using the Toronto Board of Education's facilities.

We sponsored teams and arranged for a major west end tournament, the first Annual Dufferin Challenge. The games were played at the Board of Education's Brockton Stadium with refreshments supplied by the mall and McDonald's. The organization, coordination and supervision were carried out by Parks and Recreation. We provided trophies and medals and HVM contributed tapes, CDs and soccer videos. Best of all, the kids were happy because they were able to keep their team shirts.

The St. Sebastian's Children's Breakfast Club is an outreach program of the Archdiocese of Toronto which provides breakfast and recreational activities for 100 students on a daily basis. This service is particularly significant because it represents a four-way partnership: business (Dufferin Mall), municipal government (the Parks and Recreation Department), religious institutions (the Roman Catholic Church) and education (University of Toronto, Pauline Public School and St. Sebastian's Separate School). Some of these players are collaborating on a joint initiative for the first time.

Over the last two years, Dufferin Mall has donated 500 books to the breakfast club's library. Mall management has contributed to the partnership by bringing in the Department of Occupational Therapy from the University of Toronto to enhance morning activities.

#### *vi. Dufferin Youth Theatre*

Arts are the lifeblood of any community. They reflect the way we see ourselves and provide a way for society to continually rediscover itself. Performing arts enable young people to cultivate friend-

ships, develop a positive self-image and increase their self-esteem. With an enhanced sense of self-worth, young people are motivated to succeed in other areas of their lives. They develop their ability to express themselves and convey their thoughts and ideas. Youth who are involved in their community tend to make better choices than violence, crime and drugs.

Dufferin Youth Theatre is a drama group sponsored by the mall management to encourage youth self-expression through weekly hands-on workshops offered by professional theatre people. This partnership involves Way to Go, a community creative arts program; Factory Theatre, a small local theatre; and the Dufferin Mall. In addition to weekly workshops, the youth develop mentoring relationships with professional actors, designers, playwrights, directors and technicians at Factory Theatre. Opportunities are also provided to visit live artistic performances at the Canadian Stage, Factory Theatre, National Ballet, Theatre Direct and Young People's Theatre.

A related program, Seniors Meeting Youth Through Theatre, is designed to link youth with both active and isolated seniors. Seniors and youth perform together in cross-generational venues to emphasize the role of seniors in families and communities. This program draws on seniors to be advisors, participants and evaluators. As a result, they develop and refine their leadership skills.

### ***neighbourhood ownership***

The street drug trade in the Bloor/Lansdowne area of Toronto has adversely affected the legitimate street businesses of our local economy. This situation represented a downward spiral whereby the drug trade had driven away prospective customers. Consequently, many of the retailers and building owners were forced to close their shops. Vacancies increased, traffic decreased and so did the quality of retailer.

We participated in developing a broad-based solution that would involve as many aspects of community life as possible. The goal was to provide both a solid foundation for continued community involve-

ment and to give residents a stake in the well-being of their own neighbourhood - to engender a feeling of 'neighbourhood ownership' that would return control of the community to the residents.

Dufferin Mall worked with other community stakeholders to create an economic recovery program. This program was proposed to provide a focus for positive action. It consisted of a retail plan, a community leasing strategy, an advertising/promotion campaign and a traffic-building campaign. An integral component of this program has been to establish highly visible and constructive projects that provide jobs for youth either directly or through the Toronto Board of Education Co-op Program. These projects provide employment for youth and give them a stake in the community.

Our approach has been to help alleviate youth problems by involving other sectors of society. We collaborate with a diverse range of players: the police, the arts, religious institutions, municipal government, the educational system, the environment, social service agencies, sports teams, neighbourhood residents, retailers and other businesses. We strive to develop partnerships that maximize each sector's contribution and create long-term solutions.

We believe that business must be involved in the community in which it operates - business and community cannot be separated into distinct solitudes. In our view, business is an untapped community resource and we are constantly seeking to determine how it can be used in non-traditional ways to maximize potential and provide social benefits. We especially believe that business and education working together can build better communities.

### ***conclusion***

Shopping malls are an anomaly - public space but private property. The public comes with one view of the facility, a view which may not be the same as that held by the owner. When the two perceptions differ, goals diverge and tension results. But when the two are the same, goals converge and tension dissipates. Initially, we thought we operated a

traditional shopping centre with high traffic. We realized very quickly that we actually have a town centre which, incidentally, has a lot of stores.

This realization prompted a significant change in our thinking and led us down a different management path - a path with a scope of infinite proportions and a promise of great discoveries. From creating and initially funding the area's community newspaper to pioneering a community-wide recycling program, Dufferin has developed into a true urban centre.

We give people from the community the resources they need to run programs they find valuable. Our philosophy is simple - the better the quality of life of the community, the better the business environment. If drugs and youth alienation are destroying a community, they will destroy businesses as well. It is therefore incumbent on business to try to improve the economic and social well-being of the community.

The quality of life in our community has improved and so has the environment for business: Mall traffic has increased from 7.4 million in 1991 to 8.4 million in 1996, new merchants have moved into the mall and overall profits have risen. At Dufferin Mall, we strive to maximize business and community potential to provide both social and commercial benefits.

*David Hall*

*David Hall is the Manager of Operations and Development of the Dufferin Mall.*

### **Endnote**

1. The following participants reflect the collaborative nature of our management program: Turning Point Youth Services; Oolagen Community Services; Youthlink; City of York Child and Family Centre; Abrigo; Harambee; Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples; Humewood House Association; South Asian Women's Centre; Pape Adolescent Resource Centre; Central Toronto Youth Services; Catholic Children's Aid Society; Metro Children's Aid Society; College Montrose Children's Place; the Creche Child and Family Centre; the Toronto Board of Education; West Toronto Collegiate; Brockton High School; Bloor Collegiate; the Ursula Franklin Academy; the Adult Basic Education Unit; St. Joseph's Hospital; Doctors' Hospital; the City of Toronto Department of Parks and Recreation; the City of Toronto Department of Public Health; the City of Toronto Department of Public Works and the Environment; Frontier College; the Bloor/Lansdowne Committee Against Drugs; the Mayor's Committee on Drugs; University of Toronto Department of Occupational Therapy; York University School of Environmental Studies; Ryerson Polytechnical University School of Urban Planning; the Community Business Resource Centre; Bloordale Business Improvement Area (BIA); Parkdale BIA; St. Clair Gardens BIA; Young People's Theatre; Factory Theatre Lab; the Canadian Stage Company; the National Ballet Company; Theatre Direct; the Canadian Opera Company; the Canadian dell'Arte Mime Troupe; Danny Grossman Dance Company; Mirvish Productions; Royal Alexandra Theatre; the Elgin Theatre; Ontario Puppetry Association; Stiletto Theatre Company; the Stratford Festival; the Tarragon Theatre; and Theatre Passe Muraille. The working partners are College Montrose Children's Place; the Creche Child and Family Centre; Catholic Children's Aid Society; Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto; Dufferin Mall; Humewood House; Doctor's Hospital; Dufferin Mall Youth Services; and City of Toronto Public Health.

Copyright © 1997 by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

1600 Scott Street, Suite 620  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
K1Y 4N7  
Ph: (613) 729-3340 Fx: (613) 729-3896  
e-mail: [caledon@cyberplus.ca](mailto:caledon@cyberplus.ca)  
website: <http://www.cyberplus.ca/~caledon/>

Social Partnerships Project  
Ph: (613) 729-8778 Fx: (613) 729-3896  
e-mail: [partners@cyberplus.ca](mailto:partners@cyberplus.ca)  
website: <http://www.cyberplus.ca/~partners/>

The publication and distribution of this paper was made possible through the generous support of the Employability and Social Partnerships Division of Human Resources Development Canada.

Caledon Institute of Social Policy publications are available from:

Renouf Publishing Company Limited  
5369 Canotek Road  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1J 9J3  
Ph: (613) 745-2665  
Fx: (613) 745-7660

and from Renouf stores at:

71 1/2 Sparks Street, Ottawa Ph: (613) 238-8985  
12 Adelaide St. West, Toronto Ph: (416) 363-3171