

MAKING AN IMPACT

Through HCF Grants

Bringing a Neighbourhood Together with Movies

The parent council and the Principal at Roxborough Park School were worried that parent involvement at the school was so low. All the research shows that the more involved parents are with their children's school and learning, the better the kids do. They understood the reasons parents tended to stay away – for many adults in the neighbourhood, school had not been a great experience. Others were new to Canada and struggling with language and settlement issues. What would draw them all into the school?

The group hit on the idea of a family movie night. If a current movie aimed at young children was shown, the children would want to come and they would have to bring their parents. The adults would get comfortable being in the school and lay the groundwork for future involvement.

About the same time, as they watched their kids at the local playground, a small group of parents in Jamesville got to talking about how to improve things for their children. They knew clearly all the plusses and minuses of their neighbourhood in the north end of Hamilton. People look out for each other – but crime is a problem. Neighbours are generous with their time and possessions – but both are in short supply. The rich cultural diversity is exciting and energizing – but fitting in is difficult. Nice homes and crack houses sit side by side.

The small group at the playground decided they could do something to bring their very diverse community closer together. They decided to try the community movie night idea at the Jamesville Community Centre in St. Mary's School. Their goal was to provide good entertainment at no cost to local families, attract parents to the community centre and help them see what a valuable resource it is, and strengthen the sense of optimism in the neighbourhood.

With a \$350 grant from Hamilton Community Foundation's "Growing Roots...Strengthening Neighbourhoods" Program, and help from the Neighbourhood Program Coordinator, each of the groups has fulfilled its plans: monthly movie nights have been operating since January 2007.

A current movie (for example, "Happy Feet"!) is shown in the gym, free popcorn and drinks are provided (thanks to the HCF grant), children bring blankets and pillows, and parents sit on chairs around the edge of the room. Volunteer organizers, and often the school principal, greet the parents as they arrive. At intermission, organizers talk briefly with parents about upcoming activities in the neighbourhood and the school, gently encouraging participation.

How HCF is Helping

- *HCF's Neighbourhood Program has been operating since 2002. It provides small grants in the Lansdale, Beasley, and McQuesten neighbourhoods. The program systematically helps neighbourhoods grow stronger by providing neighbourhood outreach and development, leadership development assistance and small grants for neighbourhood projects.*
- *Since it began, HCF's Neighbourhood Program has funded and supported the development of scores of projects that empower residents, improve neighbourhood life, provide activities for kids and adults, beautify the streets, increase safety, create community and foster a sense of belonging. The movie night project is just one example.*
- *The Growing Roots...Strengthening Neighbourhoods program is funded from the unrestricted Community Fund of HCF.*
- *Neighbourhoods are a critical strategy in Hamilton Community Foundation's work to improve the quality of life in this city and make Hamilton the best place to raise a child.*

The Power of Parent Involvement in Schools

- Research shows that increased parent involvement results in improved student achievement, reduced absenteeism, better behaviour and more confidence in children. (Government of Ontario, Ministry of Education)
- EQAO scores (Province-wide achievement scores) spike up in schools where parental involvement is strong.
- Teachers report higher job satisfaction in schools that work well with families. (Laskey & Moore 2003)

"The movie is projected really big on the wall, with the school's great sound system, the gym smells like popcorn, the kids are camped out with their friends on the floor," says David Derbyshire, HCF's Neighbourhood Program Coordinator. "It's a real movie experience. And it's free. Many of the families couldn't afford to go to the movies otherwise."

The idea has caught on elsewhere, too. Movie nights are also in progress now at St. Helen's School in the McQuesten neighbourhood, and at Beasley Community Centre. HCF's Neighbourhood Program is supporting them all with small grants. Sometimes, unsolicited contributions of \$1 or \$2 in the donation jar cover all the costs.

"In this neighbourhood we have all kinds of cultures and religions. The movie nights are bringing people together," says volunteer Teresa. "We knew the children would want to come, but many of the parents here are shy about coming to the school. Now, the school feels more like home." Familiar with the setting, her five-year-old is now excited about starting school at St. Mary's in the fall.

It's early days yet, but parent involvement seems to be gradually increasing in the schools. At Roxborough, where the movie nights began, for example, the number of parents on the parent council has tripled from two to six.

Who Wins with the Movie Night Program

- *Children and families enjoy free, quality entertainment in their local neighbourhood.*
- *Parents get to know each other and the school/community centre.*
- *Parents and children get more comfortable with the school setting.*
- *Children, parents and teachers all benefit with parent involvement in their school.*
- *Academic and behaviour problems decrease.*
- *Neighbourhood ties are strengthened.*
- *Residents have a sense of accomplishment and optimism for the community's future.*