

MAKING AN IMPACT

Through HCF Grants

Creating Community: The Community HUB

About 1,500 elementary school students live within the radius of one short Hamilton block, but there is no playground. Crime is high. Poverty rates are even higher. The local elementary school is the most “at risk” of the 122 in the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board.

The Wever Community Development Committee is not overwhelmed by those facts nor by the many other symptoms of poverty in the Wever neighbourhood. They are doing something about it. The neighbourhood group, established in 2005 as the Sanford Healthy Community Development Committee, has already created free recreation programs for kids, improved children’s nutrition with a healthy snack program, and engaged families in recreation and neighbourhood development. The activity has reclaimed the local recreation centre, which families had begun to feel was not a safe place to go. It has turned the local school into a magnet for neighbourhood life.

The effort focuses on creating a community “hub” at the Cathy Wever Elementary School (which has replaced the old Sanford Avenue School, and is named in honour of late police officer Cathy Wever) and the City of Hamilton’s Norman Pinky Lewis Recreation Centre. The hub concept is well documented as a powerful tool for neighbourhood development. Most poor areas lack shared spaces. Creating a hub gives the community a place for recreation and social activities, and helps residents form social networks. In communities with a high proportion of newcomers, complex cultural diversity, substandard housing and consequent transience, where families use most of their energy just to make ends meet, the community hub can make the difference. It can turn a fractured and intimidating urban area into a safe, caring community with a proud identity.

The achievements of this group of determined volunteers – local residents, the school principal, the recreation centre coordinator, the community school nurse, firefighters, police, educators, Rotarians, entrepreneurs, faith leaders, and others – are impressive. They are changing the life chances of children and families in the neighbourhood:

- A new computer lab allows kids to access technology.
- A walk-in closet gives people clothing, shoes, and household items.
- An adult cooking program teaches nutrition on a budget.
- A lunchtime indoor soccer program keeps kids active and develops skills.
- Free after-school programs at the recreation centre give kids a safe place to congregate and develop fitness habits.
- They have received a \$45,000 Living School Award from the province for the “Bingo to Better Health” fitness program at Pinky Lewis Recreation Centre.

How HCF is Helping

- *The Goldblatt Fund of HCF responded early in 2005 with a grant of \$12,600 to support recreation programming, the purchase of portable basketball nets/balls, field trips and the school-based nutrition program.*
- *Subsequently, in meetings with Hamilton Community Foundation staff, the Wever Community Development Committee leaders identified the need for help in determining their organizational structure and plan of action to build on the momentum they had established. HCF’s Tackling Poverty Together Fund awarded a planning grant of \$15,000 in June 2006. The grant allowed the committee to work with a consultant on a planning process and structure to meet their goals.*
- *In 2007, HCF awarded \$40,000 to help engage families, and the neighbourhood as a whole, more fully in the developing neighbourhood hub. Learning from this grant will also help HCF understand the type of support needed to foster and sustain this type of work across our city.*

The outcome of these and their other programs go beyond the immediate. Kids in the recreation program have found jobs with the City recreation department. Adults have moved on to employment and higher education. Using the free programs at the recreation centre has led to more paid memberships – which, while not a goal of the program, indicates that residents now feel it is a safe place for families and no longer a hangout for gangs. Families have made membership a priority and have found creative ways to manage its cost.

At the community level, residents are developing the skills and confidence to take a more active role in local affairs. They are coming together, across barriers of language and culture, to create a community that supports their families.

The Wever group is sharing their experience and learning from other groups in the community, like the Keith neighbourhood group and the Beasley group. These networks reinforce the community development work and build ties among residents.

"If we arm our community with social skills and decision-making abilities through engagement in a range of activities, we enable the rejuvenation of a healthy, safe community in which future generations can live and thrive," says Wever Community Development Committee member, Lori Kyle, principal of Cathy Wever School.

Who Wins with a Community Hub

- *Children and families in this disadvantaged neighbourhood gain access to programs and facilities they need to develop skills and health, and to socialize*
- *The neighbourhood is strengthened as residents connect with each other*
- *The city gains a resource for social cohesion and healthy community development*