

## Celebrate Hamilton

# It's a beautiful day in the neighbourhoods

BY RACHEL DE LAZZER

From Riverdale to Keith, Hamilton's neighbourhoods are coming into their own.

"Neighbourhoods have always had the capacity to move forward in positive ways," says David Derbyshire, a community development worker with Wesley Urban Ministries.

"I think what's different now is that some resources have been dedicated to assist that process."

Funds come from agencies such as the United Way, the Hamilton Future Fund and the Hamilton Community Foundation.

In 2002, HCF funded its Growing Roots ... Strengthening Neighbourhoods program, aimed at developing the ability of local citizens and high-need neighbourhoods to help themselves.

Since its creation, more than 84 grants have gone into neighbourhoods to help local groups beautify streets, create employment training for immigrant women, set up after-school programs for children and many other projects.

The foundation made a commitment in 2004 to give most of its unrestricted funds to reducing poverty as part of a four-year program. It was called Tackling Poverty Together and doled out more than \$3.4 million to projects across the city.

Derbyshire was with the HCF then, co-ordinating the Growing Roots program. He says the grants helped, but it was the "sweat equity" of the residents that really made things happen.

Growing Roots helped bring 61 projects to life during the past five years, from cleaning up a park littered with broken glass to hosting a get-to-know-your-neighbour-block party as a way to reduce crime.

The block party is still talked about in social planning circles for its success. Started in 2003 by a neighbourhood watch group



CATHIE COWARD, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

**Fresh fruit, scrambled eggs and a blob or two of ketchup are a good way to start the school day. Jamesville breakfast program volunteer Emma Portin dishes it out to St. Mary elementary school kids in the church hall at Christ's Church Cathedral, which runs the nutrition program with St. Mary staff and a host of volunteers.**

called the Martha Movers, it now draws as many as 800 people in the McQuesten neighbourhood, which is bounded by Queenston Road, the CN tracks, Parkdale Avenue and the Red Hill Valley. It's an area with no library and a heavy concentration of subsidized housing.

The Martha Movers realized crime thrives on anonymity, says Derbyshire, adding "If you don't know who belongs in your neighbourhood, you don't know who doesn't."

The year-old McQuesten Community Planning Team is made up of residents, business owners and social service agencies who meet once a month.

New this year is the McQuesten Crawl, a type of open house event in May that exposes residents to resources and programs that are

available in their neighbourhood through various agencies.

The planning team is also making plans to build a playground at one of two subsidized apartment complexes on Oriole Crescent.

Rev. Sue-Anne Ward of Christ's Church Cathedral works with the McQuesten residents and says they hope to have the playground finished within the year. The team also started a community garden project last spring.

"We're trying to develop a whole food organization like the Stop Community Food Centre program in Toronto where, instead of going to a food bank and getting your macaroni and your pasta sauce and your peanut butter, you can actually grow your own food and so you're contributing"

She says the project would also incorporate a kitchen where peo-

ple could make meals together.

Hamilton's Riverdale neighbourhood has also been making headlines recently, but not the kind that build property values.

In March 2007, police found \$11 million worth of marijuana grow-ops in three apartment buildings, the biggest marijuana bust in Hamilton history.

The area, bordered by Centennial Parkway, Barton Street and Queenston and Grays roads, is known for poor-quality housing where residents battle leaks, cockroaches and failing elevators.

But it's not a fair reputation, says Mahdavi Reddy, program coordinator with the federally funded Tenant Outreach and Education initiative. "It's very good people living in very bad living conditions," she says.

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A little more than a year ago, residents, mostly from an apartment building on Violet Drive, met to address building concerns. Although they had multiple issues, they focused on 10 and took them to the Landlord and Tenant Board.

News of the group spread quickly — the day after its first meeting, members saw paint cans in the hallway.

Reddy says she can't disclose details because of a confidentiality agreement, but there was a group application to the board and "the result was favourable."

Hallways and elevators saw fresh paint. New doors and windows appeared in some units. Air vents were fixed.

Reddy says much remains to be done but, before this, tenants saw their landlords as larger than life and believed they controlled the police and even the tenant board.

"There is a positive feeling in the neighbourhood about the ability to change things," says Reddy. "That's huge for the neighbourhood. People are really sort of feeling like, hey, we can really do something."

Residents from that group are now meeting to expand the group's focus, with plans for neighbourhood music festivals and an artists' market.

There's been celebration about the conversion of the old Robert Land School on Wentworth Street near Burlington Street, in the middle of the Keith neighbourhood, one of Hamilton's poorest. The school, which closed in 2004, became the Eva Rothwell Resource Centre in 2007, providing a 48,000-square-foot community centre for residents.

The 1914 building now functions as a meeting place, a tutoring and mentoring facility, a free store for furniture and clothes, a recreation centre, a community police office, a career centre and more.

A school with space to spare in the North End has also led to the creation of the Jamesville Community Centre. It operates in a



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## Jenna Kaulback, 8, seems to be seriously enjoying her morning repast at the Jamesville breakfast club in the North End.

space in St. Mary Elementary School on MacNab Street North and runs a homework club, floor hockey for youth, an Internet cafe, a seniors' program and more, all free.

The Jamesville Breakfast Club was also born in the past couple of years. It's a five-times-a-week meal for kids at Christ's Church Cathedral.

Jerry Crapsi, principal of St. Mary's, brought it about with help from Ward in 2006 when he saw a need to feed his students.

Ward also points to the Makers' Market at Christ's Church, which alternates Saturdays with the International Village BIA site.

"People are coming downtown on a Saturday and instead of seeing what they might have seen a couple of years ago, they're seeing a lot of excitement," she says. "It's colourful, there's food, there are people selling things, there's a sense of community ... It's very encouraging."

Immigrants are an important part of the neighbourhood, Ward said, adding she has been amazed by their willingness to get in-

involved in their community.

On the Mountain, the Concession Street neighbourhood is celebrating the success of a blossoming farmers' market that started in July in the parking lot of Sacred Heart Church. In seven weeks, it has grown from two vendors to seven — with a waiting list.

"Far beyond our wildest dreams," says Paul Wharton, Concession Street BIA chair and the one who got it going.

South Sherman, defined by Sherman Avenue North and South to Wentworth North and South, and from the base of the escarpment to the Cannon Street, is another Hamilton neighbourhood with an emerging community hub. (A hub brings organizations, businesses and citizens in a community together.)

Regular planning meetings have been taking place since early summer, says Pam Hewitson, president of the South Sherman Health Cabinet and a volunteer with the hub.

The health cabinet was formed to recruit a registered nurse for the

community to deliver health education, work with seniors, women involved with the Elizabeth Fry Society and four women's shelters and others. A major fundraising event for the project is coming up in late November.

Hewitson says the hub is already operating various programs including monthly community suppers. They are open to anyone in the community, but most of those who attend are from Micah House, a home for new refugees.

The hub has partnered with the Hamilton Steeltown Symphony, which plans to play four to five times a year in St. Giles United Church. Its first performance was last winter.

Hewitson says area churches, especially St. Giles, have had a hand in the revitalization of the neighbourhood.

In June, HCF unveiled a second round of funding to keep such projects going, called Tackling Poverty Together II: Building Strong Communities. It announced \$1.1 million in grants to tackle poverty in the city as part of a \$5-million, five-year commitment.

As part of that funding, this year 14 grants will be given to initiatives by six neighbourhood hubs.

Ward says she is seeing more of a willingness to get out and meet people. She says people have been somewhat isolated in Hamilton where she believes poverty, which may attract violence, may have contributed to that isolation.

"As a priest on staff at Christ's Church Cathedral, I can tell you that when we hold events in the evening, a lot of times people don't come and the reason they give me is that it is not safe to go into that part of town at night.

"Well, I'm not hearing that as much anymore. There is an increased level of safety and so people are coming out."

She thinks it's a combination of less crime and people knowing their neighbourhood better and therefore feeling safer in it.

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