

COMMUNITY UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ALLIANCE

Neighbourhood Change & Building Inclusive Communities from Within

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“Gentrification Dynamics and Inclusive Communities in South West Toronto”

A Report on the Volunteer Engagement Forum



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Background

During the summer of 2006, the Community Development Research Team¹ conducted a study on neighbourhood change to explore possibilities for local engagement to build more inclusive and healthy communities in South-West Toronto neighbourhoods. This summer research project, which is part of larger CURA initiative coordinated by the Centre for Urban and Community Studies of the University of Toronto and St. Christopher House², pursued three main objectives:

- Collection of qualitative data: to obtain the views, perspectives, and recommendations for action from the residents themselves.
- Pre-engagement: to invite residents to partake in discussion about what can be actively done to create healthier, more inclusive communities.
- Build community: to create a better sense of community among St. Christopher House volunteers, and to plan and organize activities oriented towards building inclusive neighbourhoods.

The first objective was pursued through the organization of focus groups with local residents. To this effect, nine focus groups were conducted between the months of May and July of 2006. Seven of them included volunteers of St. Christopher House who were living in the following neighbourhoods: Dufferin Grove, Roncesvalles, Parkdale, Little Portugal, Little Italy/Palmerston, Trinity-Bellwoods and Niagara. The remaining two focus groups included staff from St. Christopher House and other service providers who work in the area. Six main leading questions were posed to generate discussion among participants:

- What have been the most important changes in this neighbourhood in the last decade?

¹ This was an interdisciplinary team that brought together a group of graduate students. Most of them are enrolled in the Community Development Collaborative Program of the University of the Toronto. The team also included one professor from the University of Toronto and one community worker from St .Christopher House.

² The Community University Research Alliance (CURA) project is a five year research initiative entitled “Neighbourhood Change and Building Inclusive Communities from Within: A Study of Toronto West-Central Neighbourhoods” funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The main partners in this project are the Center for Urban and Community Studies of the University of Toronto and St. Christopher House.

- What have been the positive impacts of those changes? How can those positive changes be supported and sustained?
- What have been the negative impacts of those changes? What has been done so far to address them?
- How do you envision a healthy, inclusive neighbourhood?
- What can be done in the next years to maintain or create more inclusive and diverse communities?
- What actors can be identified as key players in creating more inclusive and diverse communities?

The results of these discussions were analyzed and consolidated in the report “Bringing People Together First: Gentrification Dynamics and Inclusive Communities in South West Toronto” (Snyder 2006). A complete version of this report is available at: <http://www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca/cura/index.html>

According to the three-step approach of this project, the focus groups were the starting point for engaging people. The second step towards community engagement took the form of a Volunteer Engagement Forum, which is the focus of this report.

Volunteer Engagement Forum

On October 16th 2006, a Volunteer Engagement Forum was held at St. Christopher House. All the volunteers who live in the catchment area of the CURA project³ were invited through various means (mainly email and phone) to participate in an evening session to report back on the issues raised in the focus groups and to brainstorm ideas to nurture community engagement around the issue of inclusive neighbourhoods.

The purpose of the Volunteer Engagement Forum was to provide an opportunity to share the findings of the research, ask for feedback, revisit the recommendations previously done, continue community building among volunteers and start planning citizen engagement strategies if people’s interests corresponded along those lines. With regards to this last objective – community mobilization – it was emphasized that the project was trying to get people to think about their community in a way that was not only reactive to a crisis but that also looks at issues proactively.

³ The catchment area refers to the neighbourhoods served by St. Christopher House, which are Dufferin Grove, Roncesvalles, Parkdale, Little Portugal, Little Italy/Palmerston, Trinity-Bellwoods and Niagara.

In total, twenty-five volunteers participated in the session⁴. Thirteen of them were women and twelve were men. The average age of the participants was estimated to be 35 years old. The team that organized and facilitated the Volunteer Engagement Forum included Melodie Chan, Anthony Chum, Andrew Koch, Nelson Rosales, Daniel Schugurensky, Nancy Slamet, Leigh Snyder, Gisela Vanzaghi and Jennifer Woodwill.

The first activity of the Forum was an icebreaker activity called “Human Bingo”, which required that people talk to and find out characteristics about each other. This activity proved to be useful in creating a relaxed environment in which people felt comfortable to participate in a group conversation. Following this initial activity, we did a short powerpoint presentation to review the main objectives and methods of the overall project, and to highlight the main findings and suggestions raised in the focus groups for building more inclusive communities. This presentation was followed by a lively discussion. Volunteers were asked to reflect on the report, discuss their thoughts in small groups and then share their comments and feedback. Five questions were posed to guide these discussions:

- What is your reaction to the report?
- How does your experience relate to the findings in the report?
- How is your experience different from what we just presented?
- What kind of role do you see yourself playing in your community?
- What kind of role do you see St. Christopher House playing in the community?

After participants gave their feedback, they were briefed on the progress of the larger CURA project, which provided an opportunity for volunteers to ask questions and gain a better understanding of the general direction the CURA is taking. It was noted that the larger CURA project is a five-year project that at the time of the meeting was nearing the end of its second year. It was highlighted that the research is still in progress, and that the local community has an important role to play in shaping the direction of the project during the upcoming years, and, more importantly, in influencing positive changes in the local neighbourhoods. It was also remarked that if local community groups need some research to be done in order to help them find some answers to their

⁴ Even though the event wasn't open to the general public, two community workers, who identified themselves to some of the researchers, attended and participated.

questions and to guide their activities to build healthier communities, they are always welcome to propose ideas and research questions to the CURA team.

Then, we provided them with 2 handouts. The first compiled the main ideas (in focus group participants' own words) to build inclusive communities. The second listed a great variety of local organizations dealing with different issues so that people can become involved with them if they choose to do so. We finalized the session by discussing next steps and by doing a final energizing exercise that helped everyone to feel positive about the event.

Volunteer's comments, concerns and feedback

The feedback and reactions of the volunteers towards the report clearly indicated to us that there are different positions among residents towards the issue of neighbourhood change. Some participants at the meeting were strongly against it, and some were content with the direction of changes. This contrasted with what happened in the focus groups, in which most volunteers expressed ambivalence towards this phenomenon (Snyder, 2006: 17). During the forum, however, it was clear that some volunteers see this process as a problem, and therefore have a sense of wanting to move into action or "do something", whereas others feel otherwise and question the need for mobilizing the community. In this meeting, unlike in the focus groups, there was less vocalization of mixed feelings. It is our hypothesis that this happened because the forum attracted those volunteers who have strong views on these issues and/or are actively involved in grassroots organizations. While these opposing positions may seem at first to discourage the continuation of community mobilization work, these differences were in fact expected to come up in such a diverse group of volunteers. Indeed, we argue that activities such as the one we are reporting here, or similar ones, should continue, as they create unique opportunities for people who have different outlooks about the process of gentrification to engage in respectful dialogue, to learn from each other, to find common concerns and to make connections around potential initiatives.

Examining the specific comments, concerns and feedback that volunteers provided, three main themes were identified: policy, youth involvement and the role of St. Christopher House.

Policy

Some participants were surprised that the focus groups showed a lack of emphasis on the policy dimension of gentrification and neighbourhood change, and that focus groups emphasized instead the notion of building community among themselves first. Considering the diversity of the group and the wide range “activism” that individuals can pursue, this reaction to the report may reflect the vision of the most politically minded-engaged volunteers who attended the forum. While they acknowledged the importance of strengthening community ties, they particularly emphasized the need to discuss existing policies and ways to influence and change those policies, which were considered to be determining factors in shaping the outcomes of neighbourhood change processes. As one participant to the forum stated:

“Getting neighbours to get to know each other is great, it has its place, but community building and discussions seemed to be a naive way of addressing the economic bulldozer of gentrification; unless there are policy changes, action cannot be effective”.

The importance of policy and the participation needed to influence it was also echoed by others in the room. Some participants agreed that during electoral campaigns (the forum was held a month before the Toronto municipal elections) it is particularly timely to pressure municipal candidates and ask them at public forums to express their views on gentrification dynamics. Furthermore, they identified the need they have as community residents to get involved in the political process. As one participant pointed out:

“If there were to be next steps, we would need to do more education around policy-aimed changes, awareness about how to talk to city councilors. But not everyone is politically active-minded. There are barriers to participation in terms of cultural or language issues.”

The identification of political education as a need and a means for participating did not happen without consideration of the limitations to community involvement. One of the barriers mentioned was the language differences that make communication difficult between ethno-linguistic communities (Portuguese and Italian) and English-speaking communities. This issue was contested by a Portuguese man who spoke about the difficulties that older generations have in speaking the language, and how the situation is improving in terms of inter-group connections, especially with younger generations. His view was echoed by another participant, who suggested that people try to learn to

interact in whatever way they can, and that under St. Christopher House's roof, which helps to bring people together, this is possible.

Youth involvement

During the discussion, some participants pointed out that youth generally seem to be perceived in a negative light by people in the community, and questioned the assumptions behind those perceptions. A young immigrant teenager, also a volunteer at St. Christopher House, suggested that young people lack opportunities to participate in the community. The only participant younger than 20 years old at the forum, he said that a lot of university students do not vote and are not politically involved, and that if young people are not encouraged to get involved now, they will not develop a sense of importance about being active in the community and will therefore not care in the future. The necessity of investing in a vision for youth now was underlined by the rationale that these are the citizens who will need to take responsibility in the future for the decision-making processes in the neighbourhoods. His intervention, very well articulated, was echoed by most of the group, which generally agreed that the community needs to pay greater attention to youth involvement while finding further ways to promote meaningful participation. In this sense, as this young volunteer said:

“There needs to be connection between the youth perspective and political involvement in the area. Also, there is the need to raise awareness of who is campaigning in the area. Where are the people under 20 in this room? They should have a voice as well. They shouldn't be restricted to books or internet or playing video games. If anyone is a parent, they should invite their kids too. Maybe we could have a YIMBY, a ‘Youth in my backyard’”.

The role of St. Christopher House

Volunteers are already committed to St. Christopher House and support its work without reserve. St. Chris is a place of encounter, a place for everybody, a place for discussion. Volunteers recognized St. Christopher House as a leader in the community, in the same way that they did during the focus groups. Specifically, participants see St. Christopher as a facilitator of resources such as space, where community members could come together and exchange information, learnings and possibly skills among themselves, as well as a facilitator of processes such as community engagement, capacity building, advocacy and policy influence. Furthermore, they see it as a resource for other community groups, neighbourhood organizations and citizens who can learn

from its work and exchange expertise with its staff. Particularly, they believe that St. Christopher House can do more education about policy and planning process in the form of workshops or seminar series. However, participants were well aware of the financial challenges that St. Christopher House faces due to current funding practices and mentioned the risks of “becoming too activist or too political”.

Next steps

St. Christopher House volunteers are a diverse group, concerned with the complexities of neighbourhood change and eager and willing to continuing moving forward. St. Christopher House, with support of university researchers and students, is taking a leadership role in facilitating community-building processes. Volunteer members are not only learning about the changes in the community and what it means to them and others while discussing different views. Some of them have already “done something” to start building community. One participant, for instance, shared how she felt inspired by the discussion in the focus group she attended, and how, as a result of that, she realized that she didn’t know her neighbours, and started to organize some small community initiatives to bring people together. She first organized a garage sale to get a sense of whether people were interested in building community. Then, she created an online forum, and neighbours started having potlucks, street parties, sharing items, discussing community issues, all of which increased the level of trust and solidarity. Now, after only a few months, she reported that there are 80 active members in her group! The participant enthusiastically commented:

“We do community events or youth events with a lot of parents, and this gets people to stop doing negative things and contribute to the positive momentum”.

Accounts such as this one are very inspiring for continuing community-building work. We got a sense that people are interested in continuing to be updated on issues affecting their neighbourhoods. Further, awareness was raised that St. Christopher House has resources, mainly in a coordinating function, to devote to any community-oriented initiative that may arise from this process. It was emphasized that St. Christopher House would like to be driven by the community’s interests and desires for actions. In this sense, volunteers were asked to pick the top 3 to 5 priorities for the CURA project to focus on in the next years. Also, it was agreed that it will be a priority to maintain a listserv that keeps everyone informed about community building initiatives.

With that tool for facilitating communication, efforts will be made to promote some of the following initial ideas:

- To form a committee for building inclusive communities. Two names were suggested: “Yes for Inclusive Communities” and South West Inclusive Neighbourhoods Group (SWING)
- To organize BBQs for getting to know neighbours
- To form a committee that can work towards increasing youth participation. It was suggested to use the name “Youth In My BackYard” (YIMBY)
- To focus on a positive youth campaign
- To support other local events
- To organize “Conversation Cafés” bringing together researchers and many different groups to discuss ideas and related issues with community members in plain language
- To have a discussion forum about housing policy and options
- To create a watchdog group to keep councilors accountable

Further, St. Christopher House will organize workshops for civic education for both the volunteers and the community at large, especially related to municipal elections and to immigrant and refugee issues.