

WORKING TOGETHER FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Civic engagement turns learners into advocates

Before this year, Manza hadn't thought much about local issues. Now, this participant in West Neighbourhood House's adult-learning program regularly attends public meetings, contributes his thoughts to city consultations on affordable housing, and encourages fellow learners to do the same.

He's just one among hundreds who have benefitted from our yearlong effort to increase civic engagement across the House.

This fall he was part of a group of adult-learning program participants who gave their input to improve a new toolkit. It's a colourful, visual handout that explains how the city land-use planning process works and how communities can advocate for benefits like affordable housing and green space.

His advice, along with that of other learners, was used to create a final product that is accessible to audiences with varying levels of literacy and language fluency. It debuted at a fall housing forum for the Bloor-Dundas community and will be used by agencies and advocates across Toronto.

In the spring, adult learners like Manza — as well as seniors, newcomers, and other program participants — gave their input at affordable-housing



Our civic-engagement initiative has helped Manza become an affordable-housing advocate.

consultations held at the House. As a result, we sent a detailed report to the city that helped inform Toronto's new 10-year housing strategy.

Housing advocacy has become Manza's passion. He recently gave a deputation about inclusionary zoning, a proposed city policy that would require new developments to include affordable housing. It was videotaped and played at a council meeting.

"People in this city need houses," he says. "Without housing, a lot of things are more difficult."

One lasting initiative is the civic engagement group, an adult-learning class that teaches critical-thinking skills through discussions of current events and participation in the real-life political process.

Serena, the staff member who facilitates the group with volunteers, has seen a huge difference in learners in just a few months.

"The conversation has changed from, 'We're learning, but not doing anything,' to, 'We're actually getting to do something,'" she says.



West Neighbourhood House adult learners and staff at a Toronto and North York Community Council meeting with Deputy Mayor Ana Bailão.



DanceAbility, a group of West Neighbourhood House seniors, raised more than \$4,000.

SCOTIABANK TORONTO WATERFRONT MARATHON

Our most successful charity challenge ever!

At the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon fundraiser in October this year, we raised more than \$55,000 for the continuing work of the House. Thanks to so many of you, it was our most successful marathon ever.

Lambrina, the West Neighbourhood House unit director who helps organize the event, credits the success to people like Frances, who participated for the first time this year.

Frances canvassed friends and neighbours to collect donations large and small. “She tapped into her network and reached out to people who couldn’t participate in the marathon but could still get excited behind a cause,” Lambrina says.

Frances ran in honour of her mother Betty, who was a client at our Adult Day Services. She even paid a private caregiver to stay with Betty while she was at the marathon.

Betty, who passed away in November, always looked forward to her time at

the House, and because of that, Frances wanted to give back.

“My mother had so much fun and made so many good friends at the House. She always had a huge smile,” Frances says.

Congratulations to all of our walkers, runners, wheelers and supporters who gave money or cheered for the House at our marathon cheering stage — we’ll see you on the course next year as we *#RunForTheHouse!*



Frances canvassed her friends and neighbours for donations.

A MAJOR WIN FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING AT BLOOR-DUFFERIN

A group of residents in the Bloor-Dufferin area, *Build a Better Bloor Dufferin*, has worked steadily for years to make sure the redevelopment of seven acres of school lands at Bloor and Dufferin streets includes community benefits such as affordable housing, green space, community space, and an improved school.

West Neighbourhood House supported this effort. Through weeks of intensive mediation with the residents’ group, the developer and the city struck a deal. The developer will provide cash for a new land trust for affordable housing and community space — a \$9-million contribution and an \$8-million interest-free loan. Two million is reserved for acquiring community space for non-profit services and arts organizations.

There are many lessons from this experience. Residents can affect the development and planning process, but it is hard work. We were witness to the tenacity and commitment of this community group to build an inclusive neighbourhood.

— Maureen Fair,
Executive Director

THE MEETING PLACE MOURNS MEMBERS' DEATHS

A place for support and connection in times of grief

The Meeting Place, our drop-in program, provides basic needs, social support, and a welcoming, nonjudgmental space for some of the most marginalized people in our city.

Many of our members are living with poverty, homelessness or poor housing, and complex health challenges — physical or mental. Sadly, these can be life-threatening.

Staff say on average, one Meeting Place member dies every other month. However, four have passed away since November — one from illness, one from apparent cold exposure, and two from overdose.

We're not alone in this loss: deaths of people experiencing homelessness have increased in Toronto this year.

At The Meeting Place, this problem isn't about numbers: it's personal.

Grief is different for everyone, and that's especially true of people who are marginalized

Complicated feelings arise when a member dies. Too often, the cause is preventable and the person is relatively young. Despite that, the community jumps into action after a death.

Meeting Place members are often cut off from friends, family and traditional sources of news. So the custom of "In memoriam" posters arose to communicate when someone has died and to announce a memorial for them.



Members of The Meeting Place women's group meet for snacks and talk on the day of a funeral for a 29-year-old member who died from an overdose.

Even if a formal funeral is being held for the person, it may not be practical or comfortable for their friends from The Meeting Place to attend. So, the drop-in hosts a celebration of life ceremony. It might include storytelling, music, silence, and, if it's in the person's faith tradition, prayer. Sometimes it's quiet and solemn, other times boisterous. If the person was Indigenous, an elder leads the ceremony. The community as a whole has adopted the custom, common in many Indigenous groups, of the post-funeral feast.

The really hard work starts after the memorial. Grief is different for everyone, and that's especially true of people who are marginalized or have experienced trauma. It might seem like someone is not grieving very much or for very long. In reality, says Meeting Place program worker Kamran, they haven't had the space or the tools to process their emotions.

"If you're on the street ... you are constantly in survival mode," says Kamran. "Grief takes energy and resources."

Staff member Lindiwe helps members of The Meeting Place women's group process grief and loss using tools like artistic expression, group discussions and meditation.

"Not just the current death, but losses from the past," come up in these sessions, she says. "In the women's group, they can get support from peers. We open up the space for them to talk freely and listen."

Maddy, a longtime Meeting Place member, says she's lost track of how many memorials she has attended.

"I can't count them on all my toes and my fingers," she says. "It hurts."

But the community at The Meeting Place helps her cope. "We can sit together at our table and have our cup of tea and cry."



Help us change lives and change our neighbourhood — for the better!

West Neighbourhood House provides essential services in our neighbourhood and works with the community to help build a better neighbourhood, city and world for everyone to live in. Many of us take for granted the family and friends who nurture our well-being and sense of purpose. But too many people don't have supports they

can count on. That's where we come in. We provide connections and resources to work on issues like insecure housing, unemployment, low literacy and difficult life transitions such as aging. We can't do this work without our donors! Thank you for your past support. Please consider giving to our annual appeal again this year.