

NEIGHBOURHOODS

Making connections, one block at a time

Vancouver Foundation's grants program proves successful in creating local unity

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Every Thursday evening last summer, Jim Balakshin loaded up a cart with board games at the Gordon Neighbourhood House in Vancouver's West End and rolled it up the hill to an outdoor plaza at Davie and Bute. With the help of volunteers, he unloaded the games, spread them out on picnic tables and then watched the magic unfold. Young and old, immigrants and homegrown Canadians, and people of various sexual orientations sat down together to play Settlers of Catan, Cards Against Humanity, and other popular games. It might seem like an ordinary event but underlying it was a message: People seek connections in the big, lonely city.

With the help of a \$500 neighbourhood small grant from the Vancouver Foundation that spurred others to chip in, like the local business group, Balakshin found the glue to create unity out of diversity.

"The beauty of games is they don't require a lot of background information," said Balakshin, a community worker. "Games bring people together."

Since the Vancouver Foundation started doling out neighbourhood grants to a maximum of \$1,000 apiece in 1999, block parties, canning workshops, skills trading days, soup parties and myriad other events have been spawned from one end of the Lower Mainland to the other.

When the program was started by the largest community foundation in Canada, organizers never dreamed it would become as popular as it is today. From a few tens of thousands of dollars when it started, the program now hands out grants totalling around \$1 million a year, all of it from private donations.

Lidia Kemeny, director of

grants and community initiatives for the Vancouver Foundation, compares the program to a river that has veered off the mainstream and acquired a life of its own.

"It has such a power in the community that it has just charted its own course," she said in an interview at the foundation offices.

Since 1999, the Vancouver Foundation has invested more than \$5 million in neighbourhood small grants, expanding its horizons beyond the original communities, the Downtown Eastside, Strathcona and south Vancouver, to Surrey and beyond. It has begun to form partnerships with municipalities including New Westminster. The foundation considers the program so successful, it is considering expanding it across the province.

The largest portion of the grants, about 30 per cent of the budget, go to block parties. Organizers see these community workhorses as the first step in developing relationships.

Beyond that, the range of

activities has included mini libraries (these quaint little outdoor structures for exchanging books, art or CDs that you see scattered throughout the city), international cooking clubs, and a Halloween party that introduced immigrant seniors to pumpkin carving.

It's all about creating a sense of village in the city.

Kemeny said the foundation relies on community organizations like neighbourhood houses, through resident advisory committees, to decide who gets what money. In other foundations, these community groups merely recommend. In this case, they make the decision.

That is a key difference. Communities know what is best for themselves, said Kemeny.

The foundation resists the temptation to play big brother. Once the grant is given, recipients are trusted to do the work without interference. At the end, they only have to be willing to share what their project accomplished in neighbourhood community celebrations.

"When they find out that we at the Vancouver Foundation trust them enough to give them a grant, that is the beginning for many of them," said Kemeny.

The foundation staff can't cite a single case where a granted project has bombed, although some grants have had to be withdrawn because community organizers underestimated the work involved in organizing an event, or life intervened in a way that prevented them pulling it off.

It's difficult to track the program's legacy because the foundation often just provides seed money to get a project running. From then on, it's up to the community to keep it going. Some, like the fall Harvest Festival in



About a third of Vancouver Foundation grants help set up block parties, like the one above.

Strathcona, have flourished with little or no continued funding from the foundation.

Kemeny said the foundation does not track projects it initially funded because it doesn't have the capacity to do that. Instead of hard numbers, there are plenty of feel-good stories like this one.

Karen Reed got a neighbour-

hood small grant for \$350 to host monthly soup nights in her home near Commercial Drive.

She made several big batches of soup, threw in a few loaves of bread, a salad or two and simple desserts like cookies, squares or fruit, then invited her neighbours to her home on Parker Street between Nanaimo and Victoria.



Above: Games night took place every Thursday evening in West Vancouver last summer, bringing a wide spectrum of people together to play board games. It was organized by Jim Balakshin, top right, who received a \$500 grant to get it started. Right: Three children enjoying a block party.



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After four soup nights, she capped the social experiment with a “progressive dinner” featuring appetizers in one home, a salmon barbecue at another and dessert as the finale in her backyard. For this occasion, she hired a local banjo player at a nominal fee.

The numbers grew steadily from 17 on the first soup night to 47 on the fourth one and to 50 for the progressive dinner. People eventually pitched in with salads and desserts. Strangers met strangers, some of whom had been living next to each other for ages. A few of those strangers began hosting gatherings for neighbours in their backyards. An email list was compiled so if you had free tickets to a baseball game or you needed to borrow a wheelbarrow, there was a way to

reach other people living just a stone’s throw away. Neighbours have exchanged keys, an ultimate sign of trust.

“It’s stunning to me how really simple efforts have opened up the door for people to connect,” said Reed.

The grant, said Reed, not only provided seed money for necessities but lent legitimacy to the concept. People felt it was OK to accept the hospitality of a stranger if it came courtesy of a grant.

In today’s mobile society, many people like Reed don’t have extended family. They need to form new social networks.

Reed said there is plenty of research to suggest that post-modern homelessness and a global decline in social capital are eroding our sense of well-being.

“I think we’ve lost the art of neighbouring in our culture.” She wants to start a new counterculture, to create what she calls “a new normal.”

Sometimes, something as simple as apples and a few apple presses can do the trick.

Duncan Martin got a brainwave when he started noticing apple trees lining several east Vancouver streets. Then he remembered the good times he had as a kid borrowing an old-fashioned apple press from a neighbour and using it to crush bounty from a tree in the family’s driveway. He put two and two together and came up with the idea of the annual Vancouver apple press festival.

He and a friend built an apple press out of an old car jack. With the help of a \$500 neighbourhood small grant, the east Vancouver resident got apples at a discounted rate from Annie’s Orchard in the Aldergrove-Langley area, bought some jars, bought a second cider press, had another one donated by a home-stealers outfit and invited the public to come to an outdoor area at Van Tech secondary school for one day usually around the end of October.

Bring jars. Bring apples from your trees if you have any. But don’t worry. Both will be supplied. Mostly just bring yourself.

The event has been running for three years officially and longer unofficially. It has steadily grown with around 150 people showing up through the day last year. The whole idea is that you get free cider for lending a hand, whether it’s at the washing station or operating the cider presses.

Martin’s business is building backyard chicken coops. He is one of that growing breed of urban back-to-the-landers who is driven by a desire to produce food locally. So a fall apple press festival is right up his alley.

He loves watching the way city dwellers roll up their sleeves and get involved, especially kids who have fun cranking the cider press.

“It is such a neat machine. It is human powered. You get pretty warm using it.”

As with other neighbourhood projects, businesses and

community partners tend to climb on board with donations of apples, volunteers and help spreading the word.

In the west end, Balakshin watched one night how something as simple as a games night could spark a bright light on the gritty urban landscape.

The game players noticed an abandoned piano in a nearby alleyway.

They wheeled it over, then ran inside the nearby Blenz coffee shop to borrow a chair so that a musician from Williams Lake who happened to be visiting could put on a rousing impromptu performance.

The dice rolled, the music played.

In the words of Balakshin, “A lot of strangers became friends.”

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