

Co-op residents come together to change community



(Left) Charles Darrow Co-Op residents Mariamna Arbid, Chloe Lake, and Isabel Talma wait for the fun to start Thursday evening in a celebration of the neighbourhood's investment from the United Way. Funding from the United Way has gone towards creating programs and initiatives for (right) turning the Co-Op's teens into the leaders of tomorrow. (Centre) The evening culminated in a series of fun activities focusing on leadership and teamwork lead by Dynamix. Auroran photos by David Falconer

By Brock Weir

Communities are built on the strengths of its people, and this is something recognized by the residents of Aurora's Charles Darrow Co-Op as they seek to revitalize their neighbourhood and build the leaders of tomorrow.

To talk to younger and some of the more seasoned residents of the Co-op, the neighbourhood which is located on Wellington Street West, just north of Murray Drive, seems to have a reputation which precedes it. But it is one which they hope to change. The community has recently teamed up with the United Way as part of its Strength Investments program to give the Co-op the resources it needs to build a better future.

"Over the last few years we have gone out to neighbourhoods and what becomes very interesting is people actually care and want to solve problems on their own," said Daniele Zanotti, CEO of the United Way of York Region on the budding relationship between the Co-op and the organization. "We introduced this investment which was not about needs and deficiencies, but spoke to what are the strengths in your community and what are the skills you can bring here."

What fascinated United Way was that the people of Charles Darrow and the Community Development in Action Program, an arm of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), which has been active in the neighbourhood, came and outlined their

strengths but said they did not have the resources to bring it all together.

"Leaders in the community said, 'We think we have got a project and we think we can build on skills internally to develop after school programs, a community garden,' and that is the difference in all our other projects," said Mr. Zanotti. "We put out a call and people sent us needs and problems that they are going to fix. In this case, residents said they had a solution."

Their solution has been a series of engagement and leadership programs that have brought kids of all ages out of the homes and into community areas to interact with one another, and even utilize the skills of older residents, such as artists and legal professionals, to learn and grow with an eye to the future.

"They did not see a community in a deficit," said Mr. Zanotti. "They saw it as a community asset base and that is always the United Way approach."

The partnership between the Charles Darrow Co-Op and the United Way - as well as Dynamix, a teambuilding company focused on turning out productive and responsible citizens through fun-based activities - was celebrated at a community event on Thursday night.

The event was a way for residents, particularly the younger folk, to put their new teambuilding skills in action and even build new relationships going forward. Kids, teen leaders (residents over the age of 13) and parents had fun with an epic Rock, Paper, Scissors tournament and a game which

could only be described as a multi-team, larger-than-life version of Memory which was kept going solely through communication among teammates, they shared their stories of what these programs mean to them.

"You have friends that can trust you and you can talk about your problems," said Isabel Talma.

Added Mariamna Arbid: "All of us practically have the same problems - our parents are split up so we learn about new things, talk about how we feel and combine them. We feel warm with each other because we talk about our feelings."

These programs, however, hinge on the teen leaders, the leaders of tomorrow, and they too are very enthusiastic about the program.

"We learn skills like leadership and have different resources and reaching out," said Joe Loist. "We figure out our skills and build them and it helps people get to know each other and feel more comfortable."

If we get comfortable with lots of people and all of our neighbours and the people surrounding us, when we go to university we will be able to make friends faster and be good leaders for everything. I didn't know what it was

[when it first started out] and I came here and it wasn't so bad. It's a good learning thing."

Joe's neighbour, Tanner Collins, agrees.

"What I have enjoyed is with my friends trying to work together and collaborate. I was so-so at first and missed out, but the first time coming was great. We just did fun things and meet new people."

Shirley Woods, a community development worker from the CMHA who has been with the Co-op since last year, has seen this growth first-hand. She said she has seen teens who were either shy, or deemed "trouble makers" by some parts of the community blossom and even make connections to younger kids through the program. Kids have found people from their own school living in the neighbourhood unbeknownst to them as they never interacted in the neighbourhood, and kids who had been spending their energies in what could have been deemed antisocial ways have found a new outlet.

"When I think about Charles Darrow it is a community of committed, caring families who have come together to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of their neighbourhood and share ideas on how to increase participa-

tion, reduce isolation, engage youth and peer leaders and develop more positive relationships," she said.

The programs at Charles Darrow are still in full swing and are not just limited to youth.

This is really the tip of the iceberg in their plans and in the coming months programs will focus on engaging resident seniors and youth together in an "elders" program, based on the Aboriginal concept.

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