

Helping others help themselves

A few years ago, the Ledbury-Banff area south of Bank St. and Walkley Rd. had a reputation for drugs, gang activity and violent crime. Residents in the largely poor area lived in fear not just of their own neighbours but of the police as well.

Abid Ullah Jan is community development specialist, an activist and an author of several books on international affairs. Originally from Pakistan, he came to Canada 2002. When he joined the South East Ottawa Centre for a Healthy Community in 2005, it

was apparent to him that the city's approach to community building in that area wasn't working.

Drawing on his experience with the United Nations and other development organisations in Pakistan, Mr. Jan together with a small group of concerned Banff residents and officials from the police, the city and social service agencies, created the No Community Left Behind initiative.

Today, empowered residents of Ledbury-Banff work closely with each other, the police and a wide variety of government agencies

to address their neighbourhood's needs. A Neighbourhood Watch program is in place, programs have been created for the area's large immigrant population, youth have facilities for recreation and gang activity has died down. Surveys show residents feel safer, children are doing better in school, and people are healthier than they were before. The project is such a success that the City of Ottawa is using what it learned in Ledbury-Banff to help the neighbourhoods of Heatherington, Confederation Court and Russell Heights.

For this issue, the Muslim Link talked to Mr. Jan about a project that has changed lives.

Where did the inspiration for NCLB come from?

The inspiration came from a few shocking incidents, such as a crying woman showing me bushes visible from her kitchen window, where older youth used to take the younger youth and force them to do drugs. The younger youth were harassed and beaten and couldn't tell their parents due to fear and intimidation. I came home and literally cried as I thought of my own children in such a situation.

We formed a tenants' association in the same neighbourhood. One night we had a community meeting



PHOTO: COMMUNITY LEFT BEHIND.CA

Abid Ullah Jan accepting the United Way's 2007 Community Builder of the Year Award.

and the president of the association didn't show up. I went to knock on her door. She wouldn't open the door even for me. Speaking from inside she told me how her 15-year-old son had been harassed and how she had been threatened to stay away from the association.

In yet another neighbourhood another woman from Rwanda cried in front of 40 people at a community meeting because her car and house had been vandalized four times in one month. She said that even in Rwanda she didn't feel as unsafe.

All these shocking feelings expressed by residents were enough to make me look into various options to bring change

and give hope to those who had almost given up.

How does the project work?

We didn't begin NCLB as a project with an end date in mind. The focus was on social mobilization as a key component, along with prevention and empowerment, community policing, law enforcement and neighbourhood restoration.

To generate interest and engage residents, we used simple questions (in our surveys), such as: a) How long have you lived in the neighbourhood? b) What are some things you like about your neighbourhood? c) If you had

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A community transformed

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a magic wand, what's one thing you'd change? d) What skills could you contribute to the change? e) If others had a similar vision, would you partner with them?

A steering committee was established with representatives from Ottawa Community Housing, community houses, tenant associations, South East Ottawa Centre for a Healthy Community, Ottawa Police, Youth service agencies, Ottawa Legal Clinic, Children's Aid Society, Crime Prevention Ottawa, United Way and others.

Banff was selected for the pilot phase of the NCLB implementation. Efforts were made to restore community's trust, engage them in assessment of the social, physical, and service conditions in the neighbourhood. The results were so positive that the next year the initiative was extended to Heatherington, Russell Heights and Confederation Court neighbourhoods.

NCLB has won several awards including the United Way's 2007 Community Builder of the Year Award. Why has the project been successful?

The reasons for its success have been consistency: consistent engagement by partners; consistent interaction and working with residents (not working for residents); consistent support provided to the action plans prepared by residents on annual basis. All it took is sticking to the basics of community development, helping residents stay positive, voice concerns, contribute to solutions and engage with neighbours.

Moreover, commitment of the service agencies and their willingness to break out of the status quo and inter/intra agency silos helped us transform these neighbourhoods and restore trust and confidence of the residents.

Above all, credit goes to individual community members who took it upon themselves, embraced challenges, invested their time and personal resources and rallied their neighbours around them for a cause.

What were the challenges in implementing this project?

Social mobilization was one of the biggest challenges. It's not easy to do outreach in such neighbourhoods where people are living such isolated lives. Status quo and the old ways of working was another challenges. It took a while to bring everyone on the same page. Leveraging resources and aligning services to deal with the residents' prioritized needs was also not easy to achieve.

What difference do you see in the lives of Ledbury-Banff residents?

On individual level the woman, whose 15-year-old son was being harassed became the champion in the community engagement process. Parents who were living in denial came forward and voluntarily shared information with the Ottawa Police.

Overall, comparative assessment of the feeling of safety in these neighbourhoods is the best indicator of success, which went up from 50 to 84 per cent in three years in Banff. In a neighbourhood where people were (initially) scared of coming out to meetings at the community house, residents were (later) marching in the streets during the unveiling of the neighbourhood watch sign. A couple of years ago, no one could even think of establishing neighbourhood watch in these communities.

What impact has the project had on your life?

It provided me with an opportunity to understand the society, the culture and the institutions here in Ottawa. I am learning every single moment of my life. It makes me feel I am getting more than I can contribute.

I have been working and developing similar models elsewhere in the past as well. However, the kind of appreciation, encouragement, commitment and willingness to change and innovative ideas that I experienced here in Ottawa is beyond my ability to describe. The city-wide multi-agency collaboration that has resulted is reflective of this openness and flexibility.

My family, of course, has been the victim of my enthusiastic, up-to-18-hour long workdays. At times, I feel guilty about it but the satisfaction that I draw from giving communities hope and relief from living in fear, and (being) the kind of role model I want to be for my six little ones balance it out.

What's next for the community of Ledbury-Banff?

Almost 70 per cent of the Banff neighbourhood has been repopulated in the last year due to extensive renovation. This means the residents are facing a huge task of engaging the newcomers to the neighbourhood in the same process of assessment and joint planning. Service providers too have to provide the needed support. The good thing is that Banff today stands as a role model for other neighbourhoods in the city. Residents are aware of that and they are trying their best to keep their neighbourhood safe and thriving. ■