I really liked reeding.
With Grandma Joyco I
has Reading to her a
Story called chickens it
was fun

Grade 1/2 Student, R.J. Scott School, May 2015.

From Age-ing to Sage-ing

sage
Seniors Association of Greater Edmonton

Shireen Mears, Project Evaluator   Shelley Sabo, Community Animator   June 2015

Overview

From Age-ing to Sage-ing (A2S) is a promising community development project that encouraged seniors to explore their 'gifts' and how they could offer them to support children living in poverty in their neighbourhood. This one-year project took place in the Beverly area of Northeast Edmonton. It was hosted by the Seniors Association of Greater Edmonton (Sage) and funded by a $25,000 federal New Horizons for Seniors Program (NHSP) grant between March 2014 and May 2015. Sage contributed $5,000. Residents and community partners contributed significant in-kind support.

The A2S project made three initial assumptions: 1) It is good for one's health to be of service; 2) The wisdom and caring of a senior can help build resilience in a child and a neighbourhood; and 3) A skilled community animator can support collective action at the neighbourhood level.

As anticipated, seniors are a powerful resource to tap into. Many have the time, patience, and life experience to help a child see their own worthiness. This project demonstrates the tremendous value of engaging seniors on their own terms. It also demonstrates a practical process to mobilize collective action in a very complex neighbourhood. It is hopeful work with tangible results.

Inspired by the book Abundant Communities: Awaking the Power of Families and Neighbourhoods by John McKnight and Peter Block, this project created space for senior citizens to discuss how to they might address child poverty in their neighbourhood. Seniors generated many ideas. New neighbourhood connections were made and project ideas supported by the community animator[1].

An independent researcher who scanned the project in its early stages stated:

"In Edmonton, intergenerational programming is most vibrant in older neighbourhoods where there are pressing social needs among seniors and youth, where there are higher degrees of poverty, where there is high risk of intergenerational and/or multicultural conflict, and where community spaces are in decline. Knowing this, there could be merit in sharing information on the benefits of intergenerational programming with city departments and community-led initiatives involved in community revitalization."[2]

This is a hopeful community development approach to support neighbours to support each other. It can surface hidden resources, ways of knowing, deep caring and a sense of belonging, which is so essential to our collective well-being.

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[1] Community animator, mobilizer and developer are used interchangeably. This position can host processes, make connections to larger systems and find resources to support self-organization in a neighbourhood.

[2] Building an Age-Friendly Edmonton the Intergenerational Way: A Discussion of Intergenerational Programming and Inventory of Intergenerational Programs in Edmonton. Environmental Scan written by Heather Lissel for the City of Edmonton Community Services Branch, Dec 2014.

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Project Introduction

A2S invited older adults 55+ to engage in meaningful, intergenerational community development projects in their neighbourhood. To some seniors, particularly the very elderly and frail, the idea that they could be a valuable neighbourhood resource was new to them. Sage chose the diverse Beverly area of Edmonton because of its high number of underserved seniors and high number of children living in poverty.

The project team hosted seniors' conversation cafes at seniors' apartment buildings and at the public library. Project ideas were discussed in church basements, coffee shops, at community events, and at area interagency and interfaith meetings. One-on-one conversations took place. Focus groups with community members and social service agencies were also hosted.

This project was developed on the premise that "Every living person has some gift or capacity of value to others. A strong community is a place that recognizes those gifts and ensures that they are given" (*Building Communities from the Inside Out,* Jody Kretzmann and John McKnight, 1993). Specifically, this project recognizes and values the gifts that seniors are able to bring to communities and sought ways to make this happen at a neighbourhood level. This project also demonstrated that seniors' assets can positively impact the child poverty agenda through intergenerational relationships between older people, schools, other agencies, and children in the community.

Through A2S, seniors explored the following activities:

- Gardening together through the Little Green Thumbs program
- Reading with children in an elementary school. A literacy specialist shared effective reading and coaching strategies with the senior readers
- Teaching children how to knit and crochet
- Deep listening – being fully present with the child
- Donating socks, winter boots, clothing and food
- Organizing the backlogged school library – this is a major on-going project
- Planning and volunteering at the year-end celebration for the school

An initiative that will support children to self-regulate is also being developed. Seniors are teaching students and staff to self-regulate through Aung Qi Gong[3] breathing patterns and visualization exercises. The principal, staff and students have used these simple exercises with great success. Students are also using Qi Gong on their own to calm themselves, focus, and to fall asleep. Some students are teaching family members. The school was already participating in a mindfulness project.

Longer-term aspirations are also evolving:

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[3]For more information on Dr. Steven Aung, go to: http://www.lieutenantgovernor.ab.ca/aoe/education/steven-aung/index.html and http://www.aung.com

- Coaching parents as they determine the choices they need to make for themselves and their family's well-being
- Supporting grandparents who are raising their grandchildren
- Community planning – seniors are helping with a community visioning process to support the new K-9 school to open in Rundle in September 2017

Community Development and Engagement Definitions

The project team chose to use the community development definition developed by the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority which states:

> "We value hope. We believe that community development and change begins with individual people and that they must have hope that things change through collective action. We believe that community development is an on-going, dynamic process of social change that can lead to sustained improvements in people's lives."[4]

There are several definitions of community development and engagement, many of the latter relating to how not-for-profit and community agencies involve their users and other people in their work. One example of an agency-led definition of community engagement is: *"The actions that agencies take to enable them to consult, involve, listen and respond to communities through ongoing relationships and dialogue. Communities participate with partners to develop solutions, shape and design policies and programs, and services."*[5] However for the purposes of A2S a more simplistic definition was required that puts the community, in this case, seniors, at the forefront and focuses instead on the process of 'how' we engage. Therefore a more useful definition of engagement for this project is: *"a strategic conversation with the "community" to facilitate learning, change, and commitment"*[6]. What A2S did was citizen-led community development – working with individual seniors living in the community.

Instead of a community-based service delivery approach which is often called community development, i.e. putting a Meals on Wheels freezer in the community hall, it engages people's head, heart and hands to create new ways to support each other informally. This approach is described in Edmonton's Abundant Communities Initiative:

"Local residents have gifts, skills, abilities and knowledge and they are willing to contribute these assets to improving their neighborhood…creating more connections among neighbors through shared activities and interests would increase relational networks, grow the neighborhood's positive sense of self and, in so doing, increase its ability to work together towards a common good. If assets were connected, and neighbors formed new groups and associations, the rise in

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[4] http://www.wrha.mb.ca/community/commdev/values.php

[5] Urban Forum and National Association of Voluntary and Community Associations (2009). *Developing your Comprehensive Community Engagement Strategy – A Practical Guide to LSPs*, United Kingdom.

[6] Metapraxis Consultancy (2009). *Community Engagement: A Process of Learning and Change, Critical Questions for a Successful Engagement Outcome*, Presentation prepared for the Central Local Health Integration Network, Markham, Ontario.

neighborliness would improve public safety and health, increase inclusion, boost the local economy and create new opportunities for neighborhood children and seniors". [7]

The A2S project created a focused conversation on what gifts seniors could offer to support children living in poverty. As a result, citizens were able to engage in tangible projects in a shorter period of time. As one senior stated, "The work provides hope and can have a ripple effect for wider engagement".

The City of Edmonton Community Sustainability Task Force in its Elevate Report (2012) includes as one of its six guiding principles to "search out focused, made-in community recommendations ensuring liveability and enhanced learning opportunities for children and their families."[8] It also identifies that mature neighbourhoods can play a significant role in the planning of infrastructure including the planning of new and vacant school sites. There is potential in Beverly to harness the skills and insight of seniors and others living in the area.

Why Beverly?

Much thought was given to selecting the geographical area for this project. It was agreed that the Beverly communities in northeast Edmonton provided a strategic place to carry out this work. Key neighbourhood indicators for this decision included:

- Relatively low income area and higher than average unemployment[9]
- Relatively higher percentage of population 65+
- Relatively percentage of migration in and out of community
- Well established social services and not-for-profits and a new Parent Link (family resource centre) identified for the area
- Opportunity to engage seniors in a new K-9 school opening in September 2017
- Higher than average percentage of children who are not ready for Kindergarten
- Culturally diverse population

In terms of children's readiness for school, the data collected by the Early Childhood Mapping Project in Alberta (ECMap)[10] shows us that children living in this area face significant disadvantage.

The table below shows the percentage of children living in Beverly[11] neighbourhoods who are developing appropriately (i.e. are ready for Kindergarten) across all five developmental domains and compares these with average scores across Edmonton Northeast and the province:

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[7] See more at: http://seekingcommunity.ca/content/abundant-community-initiative-edmonton#sthash.sGpHzh8e.dpuf

[8] Elevate, The Report of the Community Sustainability Task Force, City of Edmonton, February, 2012, pp. 10.

[9] A number of maps have been created by Mapping and Planning Support Alberta Capital Region of the local neighbourhood statistics for City of Edmonton (Social Atlas) including low income, unemployment, percentage of population aged 65+, and migration can be found at http://mapsab.ca/SocialAtlas_Edmonton.html

[10] The ECMap data was released in Spring 2014 and can be found at www.ecmap.ca

[11] The Beverly communities are most closely represented geographically by sub-community G in the Edmonton Northeast ECMap data.

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Table 1:

Developmental Domain	Beverly (Sub Community G)	Edmonton Northeast	Alberta
Physical Health and Wellbeing	54.0	65.6	75.9
Social Competence	60.1	65.6	75.2
Emotional Maturity	61.1	64.3	73.9
Language and Thinking Skills	71.2	71.5	76.8
Communications and General Knowledge	59.1	59.1	68.6

Taken as an average across all five developmental domains, only two-thirds of Kindergarten aged children (aged five to six) are ready for school in Beverly. This data is particularly concerning, especially when considering the context of child poverty for this project. According to UNICEF "Children experience poverty as an environment that is damaging to their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual development. Therefore, expanding the definition of child poverty beyond traditional conceptualizations, such as low household income or low levels of consumption, is particularly important." [12]

Project Scope

Sage applied to and received $25,000 from the Government of Canada's New Horizons for Seniors Program, contributing a further $5,000 of its own funding to this project. A2S began in March 2014 with the appointment of a creative team of experienced community developers – one to act as the main project animator (with significant experience in working with seniors), and the other to provide evaluation support to the project utilizing a developmental and collective impact approach. The evaluator was available to provide ongoing support and provide feedback from the evaluation findings to the coordinator throughout the project. An evaluation and monitoring framework was completed in April 2014 to help guide the project over its duration.

Figure 1- A2S Project Team, Shireen Mears, Project Evaluator (left) and Shelley Sabo, Project Animator (right)

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[12] UNICEF (2005a), "Defining child poverty", accessed 21 February 2005 at http://www. unicef.org/sowc05/english/ povertyissue.html.

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Figure 2 - Community Conversation Meeting held at Penny McKee Library, September 2014

Initially, the project team hosted several focused conversations with the community on how seniors could support children living in poverty in their neighbourhood. They listened for past history, current activities, and common themes. This slow and steady approach built a solid foundation upon which ideas could be nurtured and acted upon. An intentional community development approach was used by the animator. It was understood that although this project was short-term (one year), this type of approach was needed to ensure the project was apprised of any issues, existing work, and other key community activities. This early awareness and sensitivity helped ensure successful project delivery and engagement of seniors and many community partners. This approach uses the analogy of a flywheel, where although it may take a while to get going, all the 'groundwork' helps to build the momentum for the project, and hopefully keeps it going longer. The 'groundwork' comprised research and several meetings with key stakeholders in the community, including identification of senior community champions.

From the early stages of the project it became clear that many seniors would like to create meaningful connections within their community. Many stated that they didn't want to play cards or bingo, but wanted to be of service in a meaningful way. They asked "Where can we go and what can we do to make a real difference?"

These relationships and connections eventually led to natural places within the community where opportunities for seniors to volunteer and share their skills became apparent. Initially, it was not easy to get seniors involved in the project to consider how they could impact the child poverty agenda. Tackling this agenda collectively was too big a place to start. Instead, it made more sense for some of the seniors to think about how they could help just one or two children at a time. One participant said she would like to purchase a coat for a child, others were happy to make mittens to distribute to children in need. This led to discussions with a local school and host to the new Parent Link centre about involving seniors.

Senior leaders thought that one-on-one interactions with children at the local elementary school could make the biggest impact. They also had the impression that schools did not want them. Two senior leaders met with RJ Scott school principal, Pat Sachse, to explore collaboration and were delighted that the principal welcomed them with open arms. The school had a 100% turnover of teachers in the past year. There is currently no parent council due to low parental involvement in the school. The seniors also wanted to encourage teachers to stay as they may be one of the few constants in a child's life. They wanted to show the teachers that the community is there to support them to do their very important and challenging work.

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Figure 3 - Grandma Mary teaching knitting and crocheting at R.J. Scott School.

The principal and classroom teachers supporting this project have witnessed the calming presence seniors bring to the school. One school board consultant observed that the children at this school "were starving for adult attention" and remarked on the quality of one-on-one attention seniors are able to give to children. Seniors are able to listen to children in a non-judgemental and compassionate way. This quality of attention may help a child to believe in herself.

When seniors initially thought about child poverty, it was overwhelming for them. However, when they thought about how they could make a difference in the life of one child, they became hopeful. And working as a group in a school and seeing the difference they were making collectively, they become even more hopeful.

Thus, R.J. Scott School became the venue for the majority of volunteering and mentoring opportunities for seniors to connect with and have a positive impact on children, many of whom live in poverty and/or face significant disadvantage in this community. According to the school principal, there is a high Aboriginal and Somalian population and 90% of the children had experienced some kind of trauma. Seniors come to the school twice a week to support learning by sharing their skills and mentoring children, helping in the library and teaching Aung Qi Gong. Twenty seniors have regularly taken part in these bi-weekly sessions and over 80 children have directly benefitted. Volunteering/mentoring activities include a Little Green Thumbs Gardening program where children learn about growing and eating healthy food including salad making and sampling, a learn to knit/crochet table, and a reading buddy program where seniors and students can read and listen to one other. Concerned with behavioural issues, seniors are involved in delivering Qi Gong and teaching the teachers simple exercises. Fourteen seniors attended a literacy session by an EPSB consultant to learn how to support young readers. Six people are undergoing a major project to learn a new library system and catalogue hundreds of

> **"I want to use music to bring people together."**

Russ originally came to two of the first A2S community conversations held in the local library in September 2014. He is a talented entertainer and event organizer who was interested in connecting the community through music. Through A2S Russ attended and performed at the Candora Society's Winter Wonderland event at Abbottsfield Recreation Centre in December and has certainly made some connections. When we followed up with him in May 2015, we discovered that Russ is helping to organize regular jam sessions for over 80 people who want to listen to music and socialize, but who aren't interested in going to a bar. Russ is a fantastic example of the potential of seniors in our community, who with a little support are doing big things for community building.

books that have been waiting to go into circulation. They have drop in work bees every Tuesday and Friday afternoon.

In addition to its connections with the school, the project worked with the Candora Society and others to organize a physical culture session with over 60 participants. Physical culture is a creative, stimulating and safe method of exercise to music and is an excellent intergenerational community engagement activity. Three facilitators at Candora Society have been trained through this project to continue to deliver this program in the community. Discussions have also been held with the public library about providing their program room for use by seniors to self-organize themselves and use the space as they wish.

Project Monitoring and Evaluation - A Developmental Evaluation and Collective Impact Approach

Developmental evaluation can be described as a dynamic and emergent process. It applies to an "ongoing process of innovation in which both the path and destination are evolving".[13] This type of evaluation is well suited to work in highly complex situations, and when working on early stage social innovations. A2S was both highly complex (i.e. engaging and involving seniors in tackling child poverty) and a new intervention for the Beverly community. Therefore, developmental evaluation was determined to be a good fit for A2S.

Developmental evaluation can also be defined as holding two types of thinking in balance - critical thinking (evaluative process) and creative thinking (developmental process). This is done by the evaluator being positioned as part of the team that is working to conceptualize, design, and test new processes. In A2S, the evaluator worked very closely with the project coordinator/animator, walking 'alongside the project' to collect data, provide support, and evaluation feedback. The evaluator also attended and helped the community animator facilitate a number of community conversations, meeting with many project partners and community

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[13] Gamble, Jamie A. A., *A Developmental Evaluation Primer, The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, 2008, p. 15.*

champions. Developmental evaluation also allows for flexibility in project delivery and enables change to be an accepted part of the process.

Understanding the dynamics of collaboration can also be achieved through developmental evaluation which makes it well suited to be used with a collective impact evaluation process. According to Jamie Gamble, developmental evaluation can help collaborators recognize and work through differences in perception that may otherwise fragment the work and hamper ongoing developments.

"Collective Impact is a framework that can be used to tackle deeply entrenched and complex social problems. It is an innovative and structured approach to making collaboration work across government, business, philanthropy, non-profit organizations and citizens to achieve significant and lasting social change".[14]

The five key elements of collective impact were applied to the evaluation framework created for the project and are outlined below:

Figure 4 - Five Conditions of Collective Impact, John Kania and Mark Kramer, Stamford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2011.

At the outset of this project, it was thought that collective impact would be a useful approach to base the evaluation framework for this project upon. It was also thought that the Wilder Collaboration Tool would be utilized to compare the effectiveness of collaboration at the start and end of the project. It was envisioned that the project would report to a steering committee composed of a variety of collaborators or partners in the community, although a seniors-led community development process was understood to be of utmost importance.

However, it was quickly determined that the project could be purely seniors-driven without creating a formal steering group. Agencies were identified as partners to collaborate and build relationships with throughout the project. The project animator was responsible for connecting these various agencies and stakeholders through continuous communication. This persistent communication, based upon building positive relationships and focussing upon strengths, developed a culture of collaboration without the need for a separate steering group and the traditional meetings associated with such a group.

The focus of the project to start with seniors and help them to identify where they wanted to make an impact in the lives of children living in poverty changed the focus of the evaluation from measuring the collaboration aspects of collective impact (i.e. operational agreements between collaborating agencies such as common agenda and shared measurement) to the impact

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[14] http://www.collaborationforimpact.com/collective-impact/

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individuals could have within their community. It was also agreed to not complete the Wilder Collaboration Survey as it was not a good fit for this project at this time. The developmental evaluation approach enabled the project evaluation to be flexible and allowed these changes. However, although some aspects of the five conditions of collective impact were not relevant, a positive change in organizational attitudes of how project partners regard seniors within this community was assessed.

In the end collective impact evaluation was not a good fit, as this project was not about bringing together or aligning organizations to tackle an issue within the community, instead it strove to be senior-driven, listening for the gifts and talents they are willing to share as citizens in their community. **It is this process of being senior-led that makes this project different from other community development initiatives.**

In addition to the evaluation framework, a simple monitoring template was created by the evaluator at the start of the project. This spreadsheet was completed by the project coordinator and returned on a monthly basis. These monitoring reports provided a structure for regular update meetings along with a review of the original collective impact evaluation framework. By using a developmental approach, these reviews also made it possible to revise and restructure the methods used to deliver the project as it evolved.

Near the end of the project, the evaluator developed a set of evaluation questions to guide interviews and focus groups with project participants and community partners. Two focus groups were held, one focused on seniors and the other on project partners. A further telephone interview was held with a key agency partner, a face-to-face interview with two community champions (both seniors), and an interview with project management took place. In total, 16 people took part in the end of project evaluation. Further feedback was sought from school administrators and the children who participated in the project with the seniors at R.J. Scott School.

Reporting of project findings were presented to the University of Alberta's School of Public Health and to Sage staff. Plans are in place to continue to showcase learnings in order to attract sustained investment for strategically mobilizing seniors and others who want to support children living in this diverse neighbourhood. It is envisioned that overtime this model will be used in other parts of the Alberta Capital Region.

Project Activities

As mentioned above, a monitoring template was created to record project activities. This was completed each month by the project coordinator and sent to the project evaluator. This helped effectively document all of the connections, interventions, and activities – 'all the things we did' - by the project over the year. This data included who attended project activities (both volunteers and participants) and the approximate age of the participants. Names of community partners

and champions were also collected which provided an awareness of 'what else is going on' in the community, including other senior-driven activities, that could impact the project.

Recording and describing the work of this project was very useful as sometimes it is hard to define what is actually being done in community development. It is often difficult to measure the significance of all of the little conversations and connections when working to affect change in community. The reporting helped to demonstrate progress and create momentum for the community animator to continue to build connections, as even the small things were seen as valuable steps in the journey.

The project monitoring took place from April 2014 to May 2015, and continues informally as seniors continue to be involved in this project. A report for the federal funding program, *New Horizons for Seniors Program* was completed and submitted in April 2015. The chart below shows the types and frequency of information collected (interventions, connections, conversations, etc.). **It is important to note that majority of these interactions happened with one part-time community developer, a part-time project evaluator, and a budget of only $30,000 over one year.**

Community Partners

Thirty-five community partners were identified and connected with between April 2014 and May 2015. The majority of these partners (16) were from community or not-for-profit agencies.

Table 2:
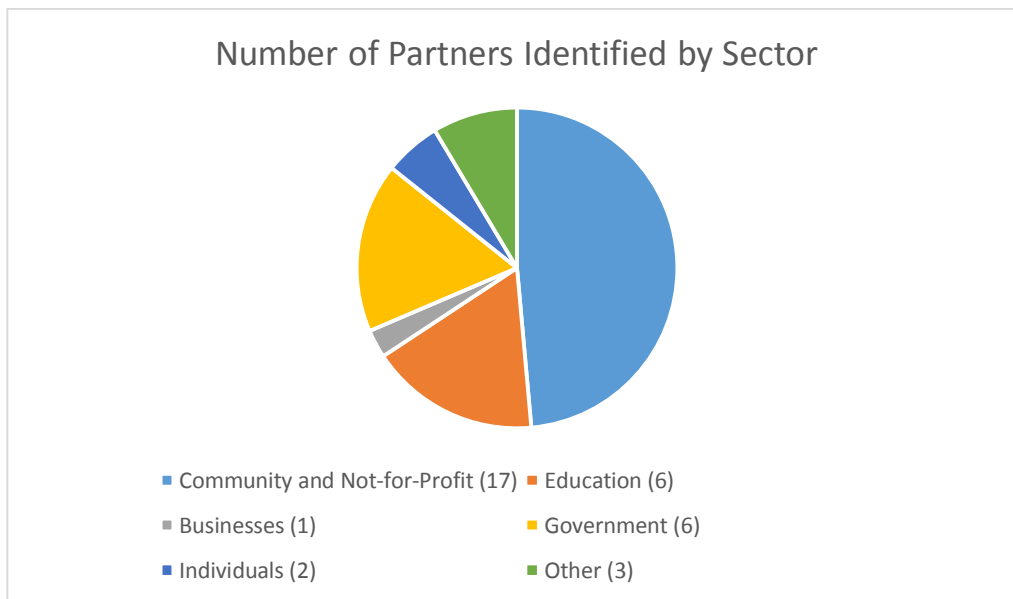
It was important to build rapport with and between these organizations, and their staff and volunteers, in order for the project to gain credibility quickly. Many community partners, notably the two community leagues, Greater Edmonton Foundation seniors housing, and Candora

Society, encouraged their program users and volunteers to come along to community conversations and find out more about the project.

Some Examples of Local Project Partners:

- Edmonton Public Schools – RJ Scott
- Parent Link – Norwood Family Resource Centre
- Edmonton Public Library - Penny McKee Branch
- Beverly Town Community Development Society
- Beverly Towne Historical Society
- Beacon Heights and Beverly Heights Community Leagues
- Candora Society
- Local Churches – Beverly United
- Greater Edmonton Foundation seniors housing in Beverly

Communication and Publicity

Communication was key to this project's success. At the outset of this project, the coordinator quickly began to identify the key stakeholders and community partners who would be important to connect with and keep abreast of how the project progressed. The local interagency group also provided an opportunity to share information about the project.

A list of contacts was created as part of the project monitoring. Contacts were emailed monthly with an update about the project. Project partners effectively shared information with their senior users about the upcoming 'conversation' meetings held by the project. This was particularly effective in attracting new seniors.

Building rapport with the local Beverly newspaper was important as the paper reaches many seniors in the community. The project submitted regular advertisements to recruit seniors and separate articles to update the community about the project. Posters were also created and placed in local shops on 118 Avenue.

The project relied upon community champions identified through interactions with community partners or who came to the project themselves after seeing it advertised locally. These community champions were able to engage their friends and neighbours to come along to find out more about the project. These methods of communication and publicity were effective in involving both older people living in senior's facilities and those living in their own homes.

What Have We Learned?

At the start of the project three hypotheses were set for what results we wanted to see achieved. These were:

- Seniors and other community members recognize themselves as resourceful contributors in our communities,
- Senior's self-perception will evolve from 'burden' and objects of care, to valuable and valued by the community
- Seniors and other participants understand the 'bigger picture'

The project team believes that the project has begun to validate these hypotheses. However, there is still more work to done to change attitudes within the community of the role seniors can play as active citizens and in how seniors see themselves. Many of these results are surprising given that the project duration was so short, and shows the amount of work and effort by the project animator.

Noma's Wisdom

Seeking out and involving senior community champions like Noma Morrissey was one of the touch points of success for this project. Some of Noma's own words about the project are shared here:

My husband Cliff and I raised 7 children in this district. They attended Rundle, Lawton, and Eastglen Schools. During their growing up years, we were fortunate to have been a part of an exceptional community league and all the children experienced ball, hockey, soccer, music and many other activities which kept their parents on their toes. As they all grew up, we lost touch with our local schools. Therefore, I was very surprised by the poverty seen in R.J. Scott School, even though I live within easy walking distance.

It has been fun volunteering and we were made very welcome. The project took several directions. The community, when approached, donated socks, boots, blankets, and many other items. Seniors signed up to volunteer to listen to children read, visit and play in the gymnasium. We were given an in-service by an EPS special consultant to help us understand how young readers are taught today. This was very helpful. Reading with the children is very fulfilling for all who take part. The children wrote that "seniors need friends too", as well as thanking seniors for the reading assistance. We all feel happy bonding with all those beautiful young people. Both seniors and children developed relationships which they will cherish. The library needed some help getting numbers on books and stamping them. Several seniors are helping getting that done. It feels good, as a senior, to be an active part of such a needed service in our community. Presently we are looking forward to be a part of the year end picnic in Rundle Park.

From Age-ing to Sageing **is genius in my mind!** Shelley is a perfect leader who enjoys combing the various energies to bring out the very best in everyone. I am excited by the fact that this project probably will be continuing into the fall. This project encourages people in the community to give me support to the school and cut down barriers. It will hopefully give the students, teachers, seniors, school and community a sense of well-being. My hope is that the students will go forward into this world accomplishing their goals and our project might help them shoot for the stars, even though it is a low income school. Seniors here like to feel they are contributing and this is happening.

Sage needs to be congratulated for this very forward thinking project. Shelley Sabo –Thank you for such terrific leadership. Pat Sachse, principal at R.J. Scott School – thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule and also for putting such a tremendous effort for our Beverly students.

The top ten most significant results are listed below:

1) This project achieved and surpassed its original funding objectives to *promote volunteerism among seniors and other generations.* The NHSP defines volunteers as those who planned, organized or delivered the project. A target of 20 senior volunteers was set and a total of **35 volunteers were involved.**

Twenty of these seniors also acted as 'mentors' (those who share their knowledge, experience and expertise) mainly in their work directly with school children at R.J. Scott.

2) The number of **beneficiaries for this project totalled nearly 330**. The most significant number of beneficiaries are those under 18 years of age. The benefit to children, especially those at R.J. Scott School is important given the initial intention of the project to harness the skills of local seniors to tackle child poverty.

3) This project has created **a successful seniors-led model** for how older people can support their local elementary school to share their gifts with children living in poverty. Dedication and persistence by seniors can make a real difference and does not need to take a lot of work. A talented community connector is required to match the skills of seniors with the needs of the children. This process/model can be replicated and shared with others wanting to harness the assets of seniors in communities.

4) There is **evidence the community is beginning to see seniors as assets**. Through the project evaluation, local community agencies and partners including the new family resource centre, local school, historical society, library branch, and community league, reported a change in perception of how they view seniors in their community. The latter has created a new board position of Seniors Liaison Director to work specifically with seniors in their area and with neighbouring community leagues. Another partner agency stated:

> *"Our mandate does not include seniors, but we do not think about it in this way anymore… [there is a] purposefulness in how we can include seniors in our community."*

Other agencies reported an increase in the number of seniors accessing their services and participating in their programs and felt that this could be partially attributed to the 'buzz' being created about *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* in the community. For example, the local librarian reported increased interaction with seniors as a result of the project. The local historical centre has also seen an increase in visits that may be in part due to awareness-raising.

5) Importantly, **seniors also reported an increased awareness of their talents** and gifts that are can benefit children living in poverty in their community. During some of the community conversations held seniors said:

> "I never thought of myself as having something to offer", "Where can I go to share what I love to do?"

> "One on one time is invaluable – I could make the difference in the life of ONE child."

"I can teach how to knit or make preserves"

"I like to read to young children – where can I go?"

"I would help at community events if someone asked me."

From these statements by seniors, it is clear that some are aware of the skills they could share, and the positive impact these may have, but do not know how or where to direct these to support children or the wider community. This project helped to connect the dots; the role of the community animator helped to identify spaces within the community where seniors could be of service.

As part of a focus group, a participant residing in a local senior's residence stated: *"Reading with children, helping with planting… I like to play with the kids at recess… It's fun and it makes me feel young!"* This also helps to confirm another initial assumption that it is good for one's health to be of service.

6) A staff member of the local seniors' residence said that the **seniors are** *"eager and ready to go each week"* to the session at the school. She stressed that other people living in the facility who are unable to attend also benefit from the project. Stories are shared each week by participants about the experiences in the school with those unable to attend.

These stories create new opportunity for conversations between residents which is positive in and of itself, but also heightens awareness of issues in the school and community (see below). These are examples of positive unintended outcomes for the project. This contributes to one of the original assumptions of this project that the care and wisdom of seniors can build resilience in children, seniors, and neighbourhoods.

7) **Seniors have increased their awareness of the challenges facing schools** and students in their community. Some said they were shocked to learn how little many children had and this awareness deepened their commitment to support them. This supports an original hypothesis that seniors and the community understand the bigger picture. This awareness can help to shed light on the issue of child poverty. Increasing awareness of the needs of local children may help to make the much larger issue of child poverty more immediate and relevant, which could in turn overtime help to encourage more people to engage in addressing this issue.

8) This project increased the capacity of the community to address child poverty issues from multi-generational perspective. This project has engaged wise, caring, and energetic seniors to work on this goal. Although we learned that 'addressing the child poverty agenda' is a daunting proposition for a one-year initiative, **this project has provided fifty school children the opportunity for weekly one-to-one contact with "grandmas" and "grandpas" (the names given to senior volunteers) living in their community.**

Although collecting the views of children was not part of the original evaluation plan for the project, the DE process allowed us to capture children's insight about their involvement with seniors. Children expressed that they enjoy their time with the seniors and look forward to them continuing to come to their school. Many children stated how 'nice' the seniors are.

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One boy commented that he learned new words and gained an understanding of the past from stories written and shared by Daniel a 91-year-old volunteer. One child acknowledged that Grandma Mary said "thank-you' when they finished reading together and another felt that Grandma Joyce liked it "*when she sounded out the words.*" Figure 4 (below) is particularly poignant as it captures one girl's thoughts about the benefit that this project may have for seniors living in the community.

Please write a few sentences describing the time you spent with the Grandma's and Grandpa's who visited our school. What did you enjoy about that time? What did you learn? Do you think it is important to get to know the senior citizens of your neighborhood?

I thought is was fun, entertaining. the stories were nice to listen to.

I think it's good to meet them. :)

Because you should get to know them so they don't feel alone and stuff.

Figure 5- Comments from a Grade 5/6 student about A2S.

9) As part of its engagement strategy, this project **successfully sought out and involved senior community champions**. Community champions are those people who are knowledgeable about local needs and are the natural advocates, leaders, and change-makers in their neighbourhoods. These individuals may be highly visible and already involved in their community, or they may have the capacity to be champions, just waiting for the right opportunity or an invitation to get involved. They are the people you need to build trust relationships and extend reach into the community. Building relationships with champions in the neighbourhood gave the project credibility, thus reinforcing the importance of identifying and working with the local assets of a community.

10) Finally, this project clearly demonstrates how **an experienced community animator can mobilize seniors to make valuable contributions to their community**. There is a continued need for skilled, confident, and experienced community connectors to create and nurture relationships,

and identify leaders in the community, host community conversation and opportunities for strategic collective action. These mobilizers are tireless communicators and advocates for social innovation, who are able to see the bigger picture of a community and how it operates. They are able to share and articulate a vision and connect with the right agencies and stakeholders who can affect and support change. Listening intuitively to local needs and encouraging the people living in the community to develop their own ideas and solutions to problems is difficult, but is a process worth trusting. There is a feeling that policy-makers and funders need to hear this message, to trust the process, and provide increased resources to create more opportunities for community-led work.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Over the past year *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* has begun learning how to mobilize older adults to share their gifts with families, and specifically children living in poverty in the community. Through this work we are starting to see seniors being recognized as neighbourhood resources, and importantly that seniors see themselves as valuable.

This project has proved that seniors-led community development work is beneficial for the senior who gives their time and talents, the children receiving one-on-one support, and the school and community. We have learned that people feel able to tackle a complex issue like child poverty, by making a difference in the life of just one child. This simple revelation came via conversations with and between seniors, supported by a compassionate community animator, and proves that positive change can start with open dialogue. There is a real opportunity to continue to build awareness by both seniors and children about the needs of one another through this type of community-led neighbourhood approach.

This is not to say that traditional agency or systems-led approaches to community development do not work, but rather that there are other innovative ways to support community engagement and mobilization. More than one approach can be used simultaneously and there is intrinsic value in incorporating an intergenerational neighbourhood approach. This resonates with Joseph 'Jay' Connor (author) who says that "we have moved beyond collaboration… to *working differently*" and urges clarity of both vision and solution.[15]

From this project, there is an opportunity to build upon a model which starts with listening to citizens and works at the neighbourhood level. The role of a community animator is needed as part of this process to identify and mobilize community champions, and identify opportunities for collective action. They will act as mobilizers and as catalysts for positive change and social innovation. This person is key to providing strategic overview of what is happening at the

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[15] http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s5h.html

neighbourhood level and to see the links among "scattered community development efforts and bring them together".[16]

We believe that a powerful community-led neighbourhood engagement prototype can be developed with continued investment in the work A2S has begun in Beverly. Longer-term funding is required to carry on work at the neighbourhood level. It is recommended that forward-looking agencies like Sage act as the 'backbone' or community support agency for continuing this work and seek further funding. This project proved just how much can be achieved with limited resources in just one year. Although the solutions and results will be different in every community, a principle-based model once created, could help to fill a gap that exists in how we currently relate to and involve seniors, and others, in our communities. This could in turn demonstrate better utilization of resources, improve civic participation, and expand leadership at the community level. Most significantly it could begin to move the needle on poverty in our communities.

The development of a prototype for neighbourhood engagement based upon A2S would enable us to change perceptions of seniors – for themselves, within the broader community, and by service providers – and could help address child poverty using a whole community approach. Investment in projects like this can help to increase community understanding of child poverty by seeking grassroots solutions. There is great potential in such a model to learn from cultural communities within neighbourhoods and from children themselves. Importantly, by creating the space in communities for conversations to take place we can help build informal and supportive relationships within neighbourhoods that contribute to the health and resilience of seniors and that of the whole community, for the benefit of all.

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[16] Al Etmanski is a thought leader at the Tamarack Institute for Community Development and on the Faculty of The Asset Based Community Development Institute. The community animator spoke with Al on the phone about creating a sense of belonging. http://aletmanski.com/about/

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Other Useful Web Resources

Community Development Principles

http://www.fourworlds.ca/what_principles.html

http://bchealthycommunities.ca/principles

What are other provinces doing to support neighbourhood development?

http://www.westbroadway.mb.ca/community-plan

http://bchealthycommunities.ca/healthy_communities

http://www.gov.mb.ca/housing/neighbourhoods/

Project for Public Placemaking/Jane Jacobs

http://www.pps.org/reference/jjacobs-2/

Developmental Evaluation

Getting to Maybe

http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s10_M4C8.html

Margaret Wheatley

http://margaretwheatley.com

Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement

http://tamarackcommunity.ca

http://www.communitiesforallages.org

Intergenerational Placemaking in Holyrood

http://www.makesomethingedmonton.ca/projects/456-intergenerational-placemaking-in-holyrood/