

From the Lecture Hall to the Living Room

By Janet Fitzsimmons, Manager of Grassroots Knowledge Mobilization

I am always fascinated to understand how people know the things they know. I am interested in what we know because we read it or heard someone speak about it and what we know in our gut, instinctually because we have lived it or witnessed its impact. From what I can glean from my 51 years of social research, there are many kinds of knowing.

In our work at East Scarborough Storefront, we work with local residents to connect them to systems and networks that can enable them to make meaningful change in their community. On the one side of the equation, I often interact with people who have bulky CV's, a list of academic credentials and a desire to support community development that is rooted in the best of intentions. On the other side, I interact with residents who have been marginalized to some degree, who are not used to having equal voice, and who struggle to have their perspective included as decisions are made that affect their lives and the lives of their neighbours.

John McKnight says that the answer lies in asset-based community development: beginning from a place of “having” instead of a place of “needing”, and sure, that’s certainly part of it. Coupled with that however is the necessity to connect. We are meant to be connected: to allies, to systems and to each other.

At The Storefront, we practice asset-based community development, and I am acutely aware of the assets that local residents bring to the table, but the impact is really felt when those assets are meaningfully connected to influential systems and networks, when the machinery that drives social systems acknowledges those assets, either by choice or persuasion, and acts in ways that are responsive to them.

Recently in the neighbourhood in which I work, we have undergone an exploration of the impacts of poverty on the community. The City of Toronto is developing a poverty reduction strategy and began by holding a number of community consultations: this was a catalyst for the KGO community to sink their teeth into this issue and take the considerable assets that exist in their community and throw them wholeheartedly at this problem. In response to this issue, residents are involved in conversations about local procurement and community benefit agreements, how corner stores can better serve the food needs of local families, and how to ensure that food access is addressed across the community in consistent ways. Resident groups have adopted positions on affordable housing, transit access and local jobs. And they have connected, to each other, to community allies and to the systems and networks that can enhance and drive forward their message. They have worked alongside academics from the University of Toronto to articulate their aspirations for the economic growth of their community.



I am grateful to live in a city in which these conversations are not only had in lecture halls and board rooms. The residents in KGO are having these conversations in coffee shops, in fast food establishments, in parks and in living rooms. And not to detract from the important work that is done by our allies in lecture halls and board rooms, it is the lens of lived experience that will ultimately enable sustainable change to take place.

