

NEWS

Building neighbourhoods from playground up

Benton Leong may work in the software industry by day, but his real soft spot is for his Lakeshore East neighbourhood and his community. Benton was attracted to Waterloo's tech community 28 years ago, relocating here from his native San Francisco. But while the tech community drew him here, it's the strong sense of community that keeps him here.

I met Benton for breakfast at Angie's to talk about the terrific community-building work going on within Waterloo's neighbourhoods. Here's a summary of our chat:

Jan: One of United Way's five Regional Priorities aims to ensure that our neighbourhoods are inclusive and thriving. As a result, I'm always watching for examples of such. I'd like to hear more about your "neighbourhood building" story.

Benton: The project we're most proud of is the Heasley Park Playground "build" in 2007. Our intent was to build a playground, but in the end, we built a neighbourhood. The project was a great success, bringing together community members, local businesses, firefighters, the Canadian Army, and municipal staff. But just as important are the continued relationships and neighbourhood cohesiveness that came as a result.

Jan: I've heard you speak about this project, and you've emphasized the importance of neighbourhoods taking charge

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and getting "hands-on" to bring about positive change. It's a great idea in theory--how did you make it happen?

Benton: Heasley Park was a great example of what the local community can do when they put their minds to it. This wasn't your typical playground build. Historically, a build like this would be completely managed by the municipality. We were very fortunate that Mark Dykstra, then the head of Parks, came to us to propose a different approach. He told us that the City could offer \$25,000, but that if the neighbours and neighbouring businesses could get involved, we could go beyond just a playground structure and make this project even bigger and better. We took his challenge and managed to raise \$35,000 of additional funding as well as close to 150 volunteers.

Jan: Why do you think the project was so successful?

Benton: I think one key aspect was the diversity of Lakeshore East. We have a great mix of residential and business and we have a range of cultural and economic backgrounds. It's not a homogeneous neighbourhood and we looked at this as a plus. Everyone brought something different in terms of skills and contributions.

We had games, live music and various events and displays. Waterloo Public Library hosted a reading library, with local politicians reading to children. Even local massage therapist students donated their time to help out. Neighbours brought potluck dishes that represented their local heritage.

We saw this not just as a playground build, but as a wonderful opportunity to celebrate our differences. The things that make us different actually brought us closer. That's great for neighbours, but also to demonstrate to the kids in our community.

Jan: There's a real link there to another of United Way's community priorities, which is helping ensure that our Region's children and youth reach their potential. There are countless studies about the importance of

neighbourhood to child development and self esteem.

The Vanier Institute in Ottawa suggests that behaviour problems are more frequent among children living in neighbourhoods with low cohesion, among other factors. Their research tells us that neighbourhood cohesion is an important factor over and above maternal emotional distress, social support, and poor health.

Benton: Definitely. This project really engaged the kids in creating positive change that they could relate to. It also showed them how much their neighbours care about them and how important they are to our community. But beyond the project, we make other efforts to take care of our own, so to speak. Thanks to the strong relationships within our community, for example, a local teacher contacted the neighbourhood associations to help a child in our area who had been diagnosed with cancer. Within hours, we had a BBQ planned. We rallied quickly to raise funds to help the parents offset the costs of fighting cancer and with the trips to the doctors.

Jan: We're always looking to see long-term outcomes. Can your neighbourhood network survive as the neighbourhoods and players change?

Benton: Absolutely. The Waterloo Community Council is one way we're ensuring long-term sustainability. This umbrella organization of neighbourhood associations ensured understanding and co-operation between neighbourhoods. There's a constant nurturing of open communication between neighbourhoods, the City, the Region and other interested organizations and businesses. That helps with idea-sharing, resource-sharing and neighbourhood growth and development. This is bigger than any one person, though every person certainly matters.

Jan: Can your Heasley project be replicated?

Benton: We're actually replicating it this summer in the University Downs area at Bridge and University. The planning is underway now for an event in June. Again, it's a grassroots project, so we'd welcome any individual or organization that wants to get on board to help. Our ultimate goal is to see this kind of community-building going on all through the Waterloo Region.

Note: I'm 'taking reservations' for this column. If you'd like to meet me for breakfast and a discussion, please drop me a note at jvarner@uwaykw.org.

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Waterloo Region Immigrant Employment Network

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Call Peter McFadden, Executive Director
at: 519-749-6033



Having trouble finding skilled and professional talent:

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One solution - Work with the internationally trained professional talent pool to address your workforce needs.

The Waterloo Region Immigrant Employment Network (WRIEN) has developed a number of supports to assist employers with attracting, hiring, integrating and retaining internationally trained professionals.

- ▶ Immigrant Employment Resource Guide for employers
- ▶ Seminars to learn about attracting and keeping internationally trained skilled and professional talent
- ▶ Recruiting and networking opportunities – a chance to meet and talk with internationally educated/trained talent