

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY: COMMUNITY BELONGING IN MISSISSAUGA

A Report from the
Community Knowledge Forum
November 10, 2015



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Overview of the Foundation

The Community Foundation of Mississauga is part of one of the fastest growing charitable movements in Canada. The Foundation is a registered charitable public foundation that was launched in spring 2001. Since that time, it has grown rapidly and has over \$20 million in endowed assets and cumulative grants of over \$7 million. Community foundations across Canada share three fundamental roles:

One: Endowment building/personalized service. The Foundation builds endowed and other funds to provide lasting support for local priorities. It makes giving easy and effective, accepting a wide variety of gifts and providing donors with a number of charitable options. Donors can contribute cash, stocks, property and other assets. Donors may establish a fund in their name or in the name of a loved one. In most cases, a gift qualifies for maximum tax advantage under federal law.

Two: Local grantmaking expertise. The Foundation's staff and volunteers have an in-depth understanding of the issues, opportunities, and resources that shape our community. It evaluates all aspects of community well-being – including social services, education, the environment, health care, youth, seniors and the arts and then makes grants to support the broadest range of community needs. It can help donors learn more about local organizations and programs that make a difference in areas they care about most.

Three: Community leadership. Because community foundations support all kinds of charities, it is well positioned to bring people and organizations together, convening diverse voices to address local issues and opportunities. The Foundation's business is building community.

Capturing Community Knowledge

Bridging the needs of the community with philanthropy is at the heart of the Community Foundation of Mississauga. This includes building a base of knowledge about the issues affecting the community, bringing together the people who live and work in the city to hear what they have to say, connecting organizations serving the community, sharing information, identifying gaps and opportunities and considering innovative ideas that can be part of the solution to addressing community needs. Collaborating is one of the ways a community foundation stays connected to the purpose we serve. It helps keep vital knowledge and communication flowing.

Trends and Statistics

Why pursue “community belonging in Mississauga” as a topic for a community knowledge forum?

During the 2014 CBC Massey lectures, Adrienne Clarkson said this about belonging: *“I am what I am because of what others have been in the past and what I am now in the present will be a part of me in the future. This sense of connectedness, this symbiosis of all humanity, is the very essence of what we can be for each other and how we belong to each other.”* Belonging is an essential human experience. It’s a human need, included on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. We all need to feel like we belong.

Beginning in 2011, the Vancouver Foundation engaged in a groundbreaking survey of local residents. The survey found that the greatest concern in the greater Vancouver area was social isolation. Neighbourhood connections were cordial, but weak. Many people were retreating from community life. While belonging may be an essential human need, we sometimes struggle to meet that need.

In our recent Mississauga’s Vital Signs 2015 report, 65.9% of Peel residents in 2014 reported a strong or somewhat strong sense of community belonging, a slight increase from 2003. The Community Leadership Committee of the Community Foundation of Mississauga began to imagine what a conversation about community belonging could mean for Mississauga.

While acknowledging from the start that there are many facets to community belonging, let us begin with framing community belonging as connection, the connection we feel, or do not feel, to various groups of which we are a part. According to a national Vital Signs report authored by the Community Foundations of Canada, these groups may include family, neighbourhood, ethno-cultural heritage, organization, workplace, school, place, province, or country. Belonging is different than engagement. But they are related, in that our sense of belonging may inspire us to take action. Conversely, the actions we take may make us feel more connected to our communities.

Now, is a 65.9% rating for a strong or somewhat strong sense of belonging a negative outcome? It is comparable to the rates of Toronto, the province of Ontario and Canada as a whole. However, Nova Scotia, Regina and Saskatoon and parts of Vancouver all had higher rates, with Newfoundland and Labrador leading at 77% (Statistics Canada, 2015). In other words, we are not alone in experiencing community belonging at the level that we do, but the examples of other communities suggest that growth is possible.

Why does this matter? Community belonging holds our communities together. According to the national Vital Signs report, when we experience belonging to those around us, we utilize networks to obtain employment, learn better, feel safer, volunteer more, donate more, are engaged increasingly in public life and life has purpose. Belonging is key to mental and physical health alongside diet and exercise. It also fosters resiliency during stress and emergency. Belonging contributes to happiness: “People who are socially engaged and visit with friends throughout the week are happier as they age,” as reported by the Vancouver Foundation. Clearly, belonging matters, and it matters a lot!

Sharing Knowledge and Expertise

The forum presenters reflected the diversity of organizations committed to community belonging. Each spoke from a specific perspective related to their experiences with different segments of Mississauga.

Presentations were made by Carine Strong, Executive Director, Volunteer MBC, who spoke to the benefits of volunteering. Janet Johnson, General Manager, Mississauga Burnhamthorpe YMCA, and Katherine Aleya, Vice President, Philanthropy, at YMCA of Greater Toronto offered reflections on the community impact of their programs at the Mississauga Burnhamthorpe YMCA. Marian Kutarna, Manager, Arts & History Department, from Mississauga Library System shared how the library is creatively connecting people to one another.

Gurpreet Malhotra, Executive Director at India Rainbow Community Services of Peel discussed the shift from tolerance to inclusion in our discourse about community. Ashley Lyons, Executive Director at Safe City Mississauga linked crime prevention to belonging and security. Stephanie Crocker, Executive Director at Ecosource, addressed how belonging is fostered in a suburban context through environmental initiatives.

Following the forum, a small number of interviews were conducted with community members representing a cross-section of stakeholders in Mississauga's community belonging :

Jennifer Cowie Bonne, Manager, Community and Neighbourhood Development,
City of Mississauga

Stephanie Crocker, Executive Director, Ecosource

Marian Kutarna, Manager, Arts and History Department, Mississauga Library System

Dana Robbins, Vice President & Group Publisher, Metroland South

Afroza Uddin-Graho, Mississauga teacher, Peel District School Board

Constable Caroline Smith, Community Liason Officer, 11th Division, Peel Regional Police

Dorothy Tomiuk from Port Credit Neighbourhood Association

The Community Foundation of Mississauga is grateful for the generous contributions of all participants, from both the forum and the interviews.

Key Findings

Influences

What influences one's sense of belonging? First, unsurprisingly, it's our relationships, the people with whom we share our lives. The national Vital Signs report named the number of family members with whom we are close, regardless of geographic proximity, and friends living nearby as contributors to community belonging. Interesting to note that is the intimacy of the relationship with family and not the distance of their location that contributes to connectedness. Along with family and friends, 74% of Canadians believe that knowing their neighbours is an important part of their day-to-day lives. Belonging increases with doing favours for one's neighbours and spending time in each other's homes.

Most significant for Mississauga, another factor that impacts belonging is diversity. According to Mississauga's Vital Signs 2015, over half of Mississauga is comprised of visible minorities.

Belonging can take hold through connection to one's ethno-cultural community. "Diversity can make it possible to find your community," says Mississauga teacher Afroza Uddin-Graho. Belonging and affirmation of diversity can also be linked to welcoming of newcomers. The national Vital Signs report found that 70% of Canadians agree that welcoming newcomers of diverse ethnic backgrounds is a desirable part of being Canadian. Conversely, experiences of racism and other kinds of discrimination can negatively affect belonging. Obviously, this is key for Mississauga as over half of its residents were born outside of Canada.

Empathy is another factor. Dana Robbins of Metroland Media frequently considers this in his work of sharing the stories of Mississauga: "Do our different identities, communities and stories make possible connections with others beyond our own groups? For example, can an affluent community understand the challenges of a low-income neighbourhood? But, that is exactly what is needed." The sharing of experiences between peoples can grow a capacity for empathy, connection, and community belonging.

Dorothy Tomiuk names history as another influence for belonging in Mississauga. The sixth most populous city in Canada grew from founding villages, such as Cooksville, Dixie, Lakeview, Meadowvale Village and Streetsville. The names of these older communities are enshrined around the ceiling of the Council Chamber. Often, when people in Mississauga asked "Where do you live?," for some, the response is perhaps less likely to be Mississauga, and more like Clarkson, Erindale, Malton or Port Credit. In Mississauga, belonging can be localized.

A number of presenters at the forum and people interviewed spoke about the important role Mississauga's green spaces play in fostering belonging. Mississauga's 480 parks draw people outdoors, and often places for getting together over a soccer game or a picnic. Dorothy Tomiuk notes the "physical attraction" one can hold towards a place, especially its natural elements.

Finally, life transitions may change the communities to which we belong. This kind of change and any accompanying anxiety hold deep influence over the ways community belonging is experienced in Mississauga. As in other Canadian cities, young graduates, newcomers, and low-income persons wonder about their prospects of securing employment in Mississauga with a sustainable wage, together with affordable housing in this community. Parents of young children worry about the high cost of childcare. Those about to retire second guess whether their savings will be enough, along with how retirement might change their experience of community.

Strategies for Connecting Locally

Stephanie Crocker of Ecosource wasn't sure where she would belong as a young person until she discovered a group interested in the environment at her university. It was a "positive first point of contact," that led to a series of experiences that kept her coming back. This becomes a common thread amongst those invested in community belonging. Attention is given to connecting with others on a human scale, and the energy and resources are dedicated to establishing an authentic and positive interaction. Constable Caroline Smith in her work as a Community Liaison Officer in Mississauga describes her role as "making the time to connect, slowing down, and listening deeply to others." Marian Kutarna from the Mississauga Library spoke about her work as "helping people forge connections over shared interest... relationships that are a foundation for trust."

Charities and organizations offered a number of strategies for fostering the kind of interactions that contribute to belonging. YMCA demonstrated the necessity for accessible public spaces, through the number of its facilities and the hours they are open, and perhaps most importantly, making community members feel welcome and invited to participate. Similarly, one City of Mississauga staff person gave example of lobby design in recreation centres, with attention given to comfortable seating. Whereas at one point the focus would have been on loitering deterrence, now the aim is connecting people to one another.

In response to the isolating quality of suburban life, Ecosource offers a diverse range of programs for participants to connect, through community gardens, recreational programming, youth groups, or cooking programs for older adults. 84% of participants in Ecosource's Community Gardens program found greater attachment to community.

Ashley Lyons from Safe City Mississauga spoke about implementing engagement strategies that recognizes residents as primary stakeholders in their communities. "We need the entire community to be active participants," says Lyons. Esel Panlaqui described the work of Afghan Women's Organization in the neighbourhood of Cooksville in parallel ways: "we create resident groups to oversee projects, and then Afghan Women's Organization facilitates. We support them by providing capacity training."

Carine Strong from Volunteer MBC highlighted volunteering as a way to cultivate belonging, with its opportunities for networking, making new contacts and expanding one's social circle. Volunteer MBC's annual survey indicated 75.4% felt volunteering gave them a stronger connection to their community. Seniors who volunteer experienced a decrease in feeling isolated.

Regardless of strategy, Dana Robbins cautions that strategies for community belonging should be concrete. “The most powerful motivator for boomers and millennials is the desire to make a difference. We need to provide easy mechanisms for engagement. We lose people when we make problems unsolvable,” says Robbins. According to Dorothy Tomiuk, belonging is most likely to thrive when “community wide celebrations or events allow for the unique quality or contribution of individuals or local villages or neighbourhoods.” In other words, let people be themselves.

Barriers

So, if community belonging is desirable, and community leaders know what it takes to nurture and strengthen it, what prevents it from taking hold?

A number of people spoke about a culture of busy-ness, how the demands of family and one’s personal life, work, commuting all make it harder to participate on a community level. For those living in poverty or precariously employed, the focus is on personal and family survival, not community belonging. According to the national Vital Signs report, 38% of Canadians don’t feel like they have a stake in their local community. How many people in Mississauga might feel this way... that what happens in community isn’t relevant to them?

The Vancouver Foundation has identified loneliness as a barrier to community belonging in its community: “Lonely people have fewer friends and their loneliness can lead them to lose the few ties they have left.” This has broad social implications. “When people feel lonely, they are also more likely to feel unwelcome in their neighbourhood and skeptical about community trust.” Loneliness can significantly dampen community participation.

In Mississauga, the division between municipal and regional levels of government was named as a possible barrier. Also, despite Mississauga’s diversity, “insular pockets of sameness” contribute to a lack of awareness around different life experiences, whether religious, cultural, ethnic, or socio-economic. Mississauga is challenged to overcome “the separateness of its communities.” For example, connecting residents within condo towers can be a challenge due to lack of public space for gathering, and insufficient ways of sharing information.

Conclusions

What concrete steps might we pursue to grow a sense of community belonging in Mississauga?

- Act locally. As a starting point, begin with the people in one's life already, learn your neighbours' names, consider doing something nice for them. These small actions may seem insignificant, but they go a long way in creating a sense of connection in a community. Jennifer Cowie Bonne at the City of Mississauga suggests, "Sometimes we think of engagement too narrowly, like it has to be this grand initiative. But it can be small, like a greeting or engaging others on social media." Find something that you can do, and do it!
- Reach out beyond your group. According to the Vancouver Foundation, "only about one in four people attended an ethnic or cultural event put on by an ethnic or cultural group different than their own." This holds powerful resonance for us in Mississauga, as Mississauga's diversity holds incredible opportunity for connection and learning across groups. Consider attending events like Carassauga or the Bollywood Monster Mashup.
- Support community events through your participation or volunteering.
- Contribute to charities invested in fostering community belonging in Mississauga. Riverwood Conservancy, Evergreen, and Ecosource all offer opportunities for connecting with others around concern for the environment, to say nothing of mentoring with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Peel, or taking a painting class at Visual Arts Mississauga.

It is our hope that this report will affirm our individual and collective efforts to strengthen community belonging in Mississauga. Community belonging in Mississauga is strong, but it could be strengthened through your support. We'd love to hear from you!

Sources

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