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Headwaters Rising: The power of proximity, belonging and the spaces between us

That nosy neighbour or gossiping granny might just be your friendly neighbourhood superhero. It's easy to get annoyed with people who comment on every misstep of bin placement, yard maintenance, or perceived transgression of a bylaw. Yet those vigilant residents may actually be an important stitch in the netting of community safety.

In The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs argued that public safety is maintained primarily through an intricate, informal network of natural street surveillance ? what she famously termed ?eyes on the street? (Jacobs, 1961). When we define safety as going beyond catching bad behaviour to protecting people, watching out for those in need, and improving the neighbourhood, we see the building blocks of a resilient community.

Formal programs like the Community Watch program offered by the Dufferin Detachment of the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) operationalize this concept by training and equipping residents to distinguish activity that warrants police attention. These initiatives strengthen neighbourhood networks, encouraging residents to work together to deter opportunistic crime through presence and communication.

Beyond crime prevention, the local grapevine reveals not only what people are doing but how people are doing. Neighbours who are always ?on watch? may also be the first to notice if a vulnerable person living alone hasn't been seen in a while, or if a busy single parent needs help mowing the lawn or fixing a fence. They also know who in the neighbourhood has carpentry skills or a teenager able to help. This informal network provides a layer of protection that acts as both a human security system and starch in the social fabric.

So much attention goes to global issues, othering, and threats consumed on the internet that it is easy to miss how vital local people and places are to our daily lives. Physical proximity matters. Community building happens in ?third spaces,? places other than home and work or school ? arenas, libraries, cafes, community centres, faith centres, and parks. It also happens in the quiet spaces between us. Simple chats across the garden hedge or at the grocery store nurture a sense of belonging, reminding us that we are part of a local mosaic.

It is easier to find compassion for someone you have a conversation or connection with (Joanne who needs a place to stay) than an abstract group or label (the unhoused).

While building a sense of belonging creates a supportive neighbourhood environment, in parallel, we also need to build a decision-making environment that ensures that services and programs are tailored to local needs and shaped by local voices.

HCIA is deeply committed to resident engagement and active inclusion. We facilitate groups of local people from Dufferin County and Caledon, with various lived experiences, to develop and amplify a collective voice that influences services and systems of care. When individuals marginalized by poverty, homelessness, trauma, health or caregiving challenges have a platform where their voice matters, it transforms their relationship with the community, building hope, motivation, and pride. Peer support creates a cushion of empathy that empowers individuals to step out of survival mode. Linking these perspectives into decision-making processes creates effective and lasting improvements.

Here, in their own words, are some of the impacts that the work of our groups has had on the people involved:

· ?During <group> meetings every member had a chance to share their opinion... over time it became easier and easier for me to share and to feel like what I had to say was of value... My confidence grew. Building that confidence within the group made it easier for me to talk to people outside of the group as well.?

· ?Being part of <group> has transformed my life. It's a safe space where my voice is heard and valued... <group> provides support and encouragement and has lifted me out of my feelings of isolation and despair. I have gained not only allies in my struggle but

lifelong friends.?

· ?Peer support has been incredibly important in my healing... I now live in housing after years on the list and it is the other people in the building who look after each other. I cannot stress enough the value in peer support.?

· ?I love being on this <committee>. It is the highlight of my committee experience.

There is immense power in a connected community where people feel seen, valued, and understood rather than invisible or isolated. It is living the ?nothing about us without us? credo, knowing where to go for help, and having confidence that neighbours have your back.

This shared foundation of collective attention, mutual care, and meaningful inclusion moves us beyond basic survival toward genuine thriving. True safety is felt. It is believing that the first instinct of those around you is to help, not harm, and that when someone is struggling, they deserve support rather than suspicion. Conversations lead to connection, connection leads to safety, and safety leads to belonging.

Paths to Action

· Listen First: Expand your comfort zone this month. Attend a local community forum, participate in a cultural event, or drop into a council meeting to listen to the lived experiences and priorities of your neighbours.

· The Proximity Challenge: Take a small step to narrow the distance on your street. Introduce yourself to two neighbours you haven't spoken with yet, or attend a local community meal in your town.

Sit with this question this month: Where in your daily routine and in your community's shared spaces can you pull up a chair and listen to a story you haven't heard before?

Headwaters Rising is a monthly Community Voice column from Headwaters Communities In Action (HCIA). This month's column was contributed (with help) by Jennifer Payne. Learn more about HCIA at hcia.ca.