

Belonging: Inspiring Community

A Publication of the New Story Group of WR

Participants in the Belonging Conversations identified a number of personal and collective actions they will take to nurture a community of belonging.

The New Story Group is committed to partnering with people and organizations in Waterloo Region to seed and support change that will enhance belonging.

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Belonging Conversations Inspire Thoughtful Possibilities and Actions

In the fall of 2013, the New Story Group sponsored the Belonging Conversations. These two days in October and November have inspired a range of thoughtful possibilities and actions.

While 95% of participants noted personal actions they would take, 67% of participants indicated they would be taking action in their organizations. In this Newsletter, we highlight the themes and actions that participants want to see acted on in our community.

The following themes and possibilities came out of the Belonging Conversations.

Citizens who are engaged in their neighbourhoods and the wider community:

- Value and encourage citizen engagement in all areas of civic life.
- Remind people that citizenship is more than 'voting' – it is about Belonging.
- Provide welcoming vehicles for people to be engaged in their neighbourhoods.

- Model inclusion for all and become an age-friendly, diverse community.
- Sustain communities of belonging through leadership and innovation.

People who are connected to a web of networks of caring people:

- Get away from "us and them".
- Say hello to people on the street.
- Depend less on institutions and connect more with each other.
- Develop more neighbour to neighbour connections and support.
- Build support networks with people who are isolated and lonely.

Neighbourhoods build sense of place and intentionally identify and nurture the gifts of all.

- Find leaders in every area/street – support them with tools for connecting.

- Have more community schools - neighbourhood uses, gym, etc.
- Encourage leaders to use the Belonging Lens to enhance social inclusion.
- Support neighborhood associations to nurture people's strengths and gifts.
- Encourage neighbourhood pot lucks.

City design and green spaces make it easy for people to meet, talk, and walk.

- Create more green spaces with benches, especially related to emerging high density areas.
- Develop more spaces that are accessible, inclusive, welcoming, affordable (free for everyone).
- Build more community gardens where people share plots.
- Make the LRT free for people with low income or on pensions.

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Being Intentional – A Key to Action on Belonging

'Being intentional' means we are thoughtful about decisions we make and actions we take. To be intentional about "building a community of belonging" begins with deciding it is important to focus on belonging. Once we do that, we begin to notice possibilities where it can be nurtured. During the Belonging Conversations, participants shared many examples of 'being intentional.'

- Intentionally talking with neighbours and exploring common interests
- Intentionally starting a dinner club with people who love to cook
- Intentionally starting a support network or circle with someone who needs support to be part of community life
- Intentionally asking managers in a service organization to use the belonging lens

Imagine a whole community intentionally acting on the principles inherent in belonging. Presence, participation, relationships...the possibilities are endless!

John Lord

Thoughtful Possibilities and Actions *(continued)*

Arts, creativity, and celebration are accessible to all and a natural part of our community culture.

- Create more Open Door Policies and access for people who do not have a wage.
- Encourage mural art in the community.
- Have more Art Festivals, including neighbourhood-based events.
- Partner with local cafes to encourage music and participation.
- Encourage people and neighbourhoods to claim and design their space.
- Encourage more creativity in areas of human services and government.

Connecting initiatives are readily available for anyone who is lonely or isolated.

- Build on existing innovations – Facile and Step-Home – and expand these for new populations.
- Share knowledge about how to connect people who are isolated or lonely.

- Base connecting work on strengths-based approaches and what we know about facilitation and network development.

Community organizations have more open doors and open minds for inclusion and belonging.

- Community organizations develop policies with a Belonging Lens.
- Create tools and approaches to assist organizations to move toward belonging and inclusion.
- Remove barriers to inclusion – segregated programs, financial barriers.
- Service systems and governments work from a Belonging Lens and their policies and programs reflect this commitment.
- Develop Participatory Budgeting + Citizen Deliberative Councils.
- Municipal governments fund people and neighbourhoods who want to organize creative activities that enhance belonging.

- Create bridging opportunities and spaces where people can connect.
- Create initiatives where vulnerable citizens are included.
- Model social inclusion and hospitality in all services, approaches, etc.

Affordable housing and support are available for all who require it.

- Develop more regional, strategic approach to supportive housing.
- Embrace concept and practice of Housing First.

We are an accessible, barrier-free community.

- Embrace the AODA and ensure that its standards are applied across the community.



1000 Conversations Enhance Understanding of Community

Tamarack, a Waterloo based centre committed to community engagement, has been sponsoring 1000 Conversations.

Recently, on a cold Saturday morning in February, Tamarack staff shared some of the themes and lessons from their work in Waterloo Region and across Canada. Derek Alton

talked about holding conversations with youth, older adults, church groups, and neighbourhood associations.

One insight that relates to belonging is the changing nature of community. Many younger people do not see community as a place, but rather as a connection. 'Sharing common experiences' is seen by many as a

key element of community and belonging.

Tamarack's research shows that while most people want more 'sense of community' in their lives, many people say that they do not have the time or the energy to make it happen. This is clearly a challenge as we move ahead with belonging.

Community is...

There are many ways to understand community. Because community is such a key part of belonging, it is helpful to consider the diverse nature of community.

- **Neighbourhood as community** – this may be one block on a street, a ten story apartment building, or a six block area. This geographical definition of community is central for many people who want to feel a sense of belonging. We know that neighbourhood connections can reduce loneliness and isolation.
- **Personal networks as community** – most people have multiple networks, and these are often the heart of our sense of community. We can use our networks to discover possibilities for expressing our gifts and expanding our connections. Invitation is often the way we connect people in our networks.
- **Common interest groups as community** – community associations refer to the common interest groups that exist in all communities. Our community has thousands of such groups and we know that for any gift or interest, there is likely to be a common interest group. Engagement in such groups is often the way we move from presence to participation to meaningful relationships and sense of belonging.
- **Third places as community** – third places are public spaces where people gather to enjoy the company of others. Cafés, libraries, shopping malls, and pubs are some of these places. When third places offer hospitality and a welcoming atmosphere, they can nurture a sense of belonging.

"Giving connects two people, the giver and the receiver, and this connection gives birth to a new sense of belonging"

Deepak Chopra



Belonging versus Fitting In

Researching her latest book, Brené Brown carried out formal interviews with 1,280 people. Brown explained that, "One of the most powerful experiences I had was asking middle-school children the difference between belonging and fitting in. They said, fitting in is when you want to be part of something and belonging is when people want you just as you are. I get to be me if I belong and I have to be like you to fit in."

Belonging Stories

The New Story group has been gathering stories about belonging. Many of these are now posted on the Tamarack website. Go to:

<http://seekingcommunity.ca/blogs/new-story-group/exploring-belonging>

Stories are powerful because they carry meaning for us. Stories have shape and insights which can inspire or encourage us to pause and think. A good story can make us wonder and begin to use our imagination to explore possibilities for our own story.

Summary of a New Story Group conversation, Fall 2013

Inclusion is belonging. It means being missed when you are not there.

