

# Belonging: Inspiring Community

*A Publication of the New Story Group of WR*

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 is a Community Learning Journey

The Belonging Conversations sponsored by the New Story Group raised a number of questions and insights that challenge conventional thinking. The conversations kept returning to community and inclusion as foundations of belonging. The New Story Group has an emerging definition of belonging that addresses these foundations.

- Belonging is about full inclusion, where you are seen, known, welcomed, accepted, included, respected, connected and valued.

It is in community where we experience this kind of authentic belonging. Paul Born, in his new book *Deepening Community*, describes “deep community” as places and spaces where relationships are meaningful and people share stories, enjoy one another by spending time together, care for one another, and work together for a better world.

The Belonging Conversations highlighted that belonging is a community learning journey because it often requires us to shift our perspective. We may have been trained as a professional to know best, and so we need to learn how to listen and engage others. We may be part of a formal organization that is highly professionalized, and we may need to learn to step back and let community lead. We may provide formal services, but we may need to understand the power of “community as a first resort” and see the potential of associational life and relationships within community.

When we re-frame how we think about community, three main outcomes often follow. First, it impacts our personal life and how we connect with others. We become more intentional about building relationships, reaching out to neighbours, and enhancing associational life wherever possible. Second, at the organizational level, we begin to stress community

as a first resort and intentionally support community to do the job that it can do best. At the system level, we design policies that enhance community and belonging, whether around inclusion, social services, green spaces, or the arts.

The idea of “community connecting” was a key theme during the Belonging Conversations. Most communities can benefit from programs and initiatives that enhance community connections, such as those described on page 3 of this Newsletter. Each of us also need to aware of when we can be informal connectors, bringing hospitality and invitation to our personal lives, our neighbourhoods, and our workplaces.

John Lord, Chair

New Story Group



“Social interaction is the most important factor for longevity: those who maintain some kind of social activity tend to live longer.” **Dr. Maria Shapiro**, physician, CTV News

“We can learn so much about the people around us – even about the people we already know – just by taking the time to have a conversation.”

**Dave Isay**, Founder of StoryCorps, amplifying the voices of the LGBTQ community.

## Great Workplaces

The latest research on workplaces shows that trust is a key factor in building a workplace culture where everyone feels they belong.

Jen Weatherow from Great Place to Work in Canada, says “Trust is the best investment your organization can make, leading to better recruitment, lower turnover, greater innovation, and higher productivity.”

Weatherow points out that the core of building a great workplace culture is relationships. Building trustworthy relationships takes time and intention.

There are several elements that enhance trust, including equity and inclusion, respect and collaboration, and hospitality and sense of community.

Aren't these familiar elements to those of us concerned with nurturing belonging? A great workplace clearly provides a genuine sense of belonging.

For information on Great Places to Work Institute, see their website at: [www.greatplacetowork.ca](http://www.greatplacetowork.ca)

## The Challenge of Loneliness

Too many people in our community are lonely or isolated. This refrain was heard over and over in the Belonging Conversations.

The challenge of loneliness is that it impacts us, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. We now know that loneliness and isolation affects our health and well-being in very negative ways. According to Statistics Canada, 20 per cent of older people in Canada report feeling lonely.

The Vancouver Foundation recently completed a survey with 4000 people, who identified loneliness, isolation, and being unconnected to community as the biggest issue they face.

Belonging and inclusion is clearly the antidote to isolation and loneliness. Yet, we know this shift for large numbers of people is challenging. It can start with all of us in small ways, with support from community organizations.

The Vancouver Foundation, for example, is giving grants of \$500 to people who will organize an event that brings people together in community. So far, a whole range of activities have been initiated.

Tackling loneliness and isolation must also involve how we design our cities. Richard Florida from University of Toronto has identified several rules for enhancing “quality of place.” These include the right density, enhancing diversity, creating lots of green spaces, building accessible transportation, and creating family friendly approaches within schools, recreation settings, and neighbourhoods.

Our Belonging Conversations identified very similar elements that need to be addressed in our community.



## Connecting Initiatives Enhance Belonging

The Belonging Lens created by the New Story Group highlights presence, participation, and relationships as key elements of belonging. In order to bring these elements alive, our communities need to provide belonging leadership. One key leadership strategy to enhance belonging is to build Connecting Initiatives.

Fortunately in Waterloo Region, we have two connecting initiatives that are proving to be very successful. The essence of a Connecting Initiative is a process and good facilitation that enables people who are isolated or lonely to begin to connect with others in community. The Step Home Program and Facile Waterloo Region are both strength based projects that build on the hopes and dreams of participants.

### Step Home

Step Home is a partnership between the House of Friendship, Region of Waterloo, and several other local agencies designed to reduce persistent homelessness. With several sites in Waterloo Region, Step Home starts from a “housing first” philosophy. Brandon Spunar, Community Engagement Worker with the Program, emphasizes the importance of valuing each person as key to this person-centred approach.

While Step Home has enabled more than 80 people to find stable housing, staff recognized early on that having a home was not enough. Outreach workers “walk with the person” for up to a year or more, assisting people to connect with the wider community. The relationship between the worker and the person has been critical to the success of this initiative. As one person said, “The worker does not treat me as a homeless person, but as a full human being.

This makes a huge difference. Jennifer Maines, Outreach Coordinator from the Working Centre, emphasizes that once people have a home, community integration is key to enabling people to thrive. Jennifer reminds us that everyone has the desire to belong and to be cared for. Step-Home is an important connecting initiative in our community, recognizing that every person has strengths and something to contribute.

**To view a STEP Home Video, see:**

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=npuDbhcVzYo&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npuDbhcVzYo&feature=youtu.be)

### Facile: Independent Facilitation Waterloo

Facile Waterloo Region was started by the New Story Group three years ago. Facile supports people with disabilities to create the life they want through responsive independent facilitation.

Similar to Step Home, facilitators develop an equal, collaborative relationship with the person. Facile is particularly effective with people who can benefit from assistance with nurturing relationships and developing networks of support, connecting to the community in ways that reflect dreams and strengths, contributing to the community through active participation, and planning for the future.

Facile has seen some remarkable outcomes with more than thirty people to date. As one family member said, “Having an independent facilitator has allowed our loved one to move beyond the ‘beds and placements’ and a shopping list of service options to creative ways of support within the community.” Susan Lott, Facile Coordinator, emphasizes, “Ultimately, independent facilitation enables people to belong in community (in families, in neighbourhoods, in networks of support, and always in relationships) and to experience an everyday life.”

For further information on Facile, see:

[www.facilewaterlooregion.ca](http://www.facilewaterlooregion.ca)



## Waterloo Region Belonging News!

### Justice Dinner 2014

Each year the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council hosts the Justice Dinner. On May 22 this year, the theme of the evening was “Smart Talks: Inspire Social Change,” and featured six local speakers. It was an inspiring evening, as speaker after speaker talked about building a strong community, whether through innovation, collaboration, or social networking. Many speakers highlighted the power and importance of belonging. Speakers included Brandon Spunar from the Connect Project, John Nuefeld from the House of Friendship, and Tricia Siemens, Housing First Advocate. An inspiring evening that clearly advances a belonging agenda in Waterloo Region!

### “I Choose Dignity” 2014

I Choose Dignity! What a great statement! And that is what over 200 people did when they joined the Extend-A-Family “I Choose Dignity” rally and marched in a sea of purple tee-shirts and balloons down King Street to Kitchener City Hall on the evening of June 19<sup>th</sup>. Led by a NASCAR pace car from Steve Scherer, community members marched to affirm that we all belong in our community, that we all bring unique gifts and contributions that enrich and enhance our lives as citizens together.

This is the second year of the rally, and once again our Regional Chair, Ken Seiling started people on their way with energizing encouragement. As marchers entered the City Hall area, there were cheers of celebration, purple mascots and signs, and a frenzy of festivity. Karen Redman (former MPP), Michael Hackbusch (House of Friendship), Allisa Scott (LGBTQ Advocate), Susan Lott, (Facile), Maria de Boer (EAF) and Mayors Carl Zehr and Brenda Halloran delivered inspiring messages affirming that “all means all”, that our communities need everyone and that we had made that statement by our action today. This was a great community event with an important message – “Choose Dignity.”

### Immigration Partnership highlights “Inclusion”

The Immigration Partnership recently hosted a Recognition Lunch and Community Action Plan Launch. Highlights of this event included reports from the key sub-committees on settle, work, and belong. Janet Howitt, member of the New Story Group and staff person for the Belong Pillar, talked about the importance of belonging for new Canadians. John Lord, chair of the New Story Group, delivered the key note address, “Inclusion: It’s Really About Change.”

To view Janet and John’s presentations and other stories from this event, see:  
[www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/immigration-partnership/community-action-plan.html](http://www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/immigration-partnership/community-action-plan.html)

### Paul Born’s new book, *Deepening Community*

Sometimes a book can shift your thinking. Such is the case with Paul Born’s new book, *Deepening Community*. With the sub-title *Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times*, this small book helps us to see the limitations of individualism and the potential of community. Paul Born is the President of Tamarack Institute in Waterloo Region and has extensive experience in community building and working with a broad range of people to engage communities in poverty reduction. The power of this book lies in its insights about deep community and in the way Paul weaves in his own story within the larger narrative of community.

*Deepening Community* can be purchased at Wordsworth Books in Waterloo.

For a review of the book by John Lord, see the **Working Centre Newsletter** at:  
[www.theworkingcentre.org/sites/default/files/June2014gwn.pdf](http://www.theworkingcentre.org/sites/default/files/June2014gwn.pdf)

