

Belonging: Inspiring Community

Newsletter of the New Story Group of WR

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The themes that emerged from this Dream Phase can be thought of as *foundational ideas for building a community of belonging*.

Inside our Newsletter:

Research Shows...	2
Possibilities	2
NSG Future Role	3
Stories	3
More Stories	4
Funder /Sponsors	4

The Power of Dreams: Hopes for a Community of Belonging

During the second Conversation of ***Building a Community of Belonging*** on November 25, 2013, participants spent time talking about their dreams of a community where everyone belonged. In small groups, people then created a graphic of their inclusive community. These illustrations characterized people's hopes for a community of belonging, where acceptance, respect, and openness are part of everyday life. In this inclusive community, there is a strong sense of inter-dependence, shared leadership, and a commitment to caring for one another. No one is left behind.

Several other themes emerged from this Dream phase of our design work – we can think of these themes as *foundational ideas for building a community of belonging*.

- Citizens are engaged in their neighbourhoods and the wider community
- People are connected to a web of networks of caring people
- City design and green spaces make it easy for people to meet, talk, and walk
- Community organizations have more open doors and open minds for inclusion
- Connecting initiatives are readily available
- for anyone who is lonely or isolated
- Neighbourhoods intentionally identify and nurture the gifts of all
- Arts, creativity, and celebration are accessible to all and a natural part of our community culture
- Affordable housing and support are available for all who require it
- We are an accessible, barrier-free community
- Service systems and governments work from a Belonging Lens and their policies and programs reflect this commitment.

Action Plan Data: November 25, 2013

At the end of this two day event, ***Building a Community of Belonging***, people were asked to respond to the following, "I was able to identify **action steps** for my: self; neighbourhood; organization/association; and/or community". Participants could respond to more than one type.

Below are results for identified action plans, by category, in the order presented to participants:

- Self** 95%
- Neighbourhood** 55%
- Organization/ Association** 67%
- Community** 55%

Participant Comments:

One participant shared their appreciation of "the brainstorming that produced an action plan."

Another said, "How similar many people's action plans are!"



Too Many People are Lonely and Isolated: Research Shows Need for a Focus on Belonging



Recent research is showing that too many people in our communities are lonely and isolated. Social scientists have identified loneliness as a significant social issue that needs attention. In a recent survey in Vancouver, social isolation was listed as the most pressing concern, while several US studies have shown that loneliness has increased dramatically in the last thirty years.

With 27 per cent of Canadians now living by themselves, and many citizens saying they feel disconnected from their communities, the Belonging Conversations are timely and important for our mental health and well-being. Research shows that isolation and loneliness also impacts our physical health, with older adults being particularly susceptible to this problem.

Waterloo Region is not the

only place that is concerned about making “belonging” a priority. Vancouver, Seattle, and Hamilton have all taken various initiatives to expand the ways that people can more easily connect with their neighbourhoods and the wider community.

The New Story Group will continue to provide leadership in collaboration with others concerned with reducing loneliness and enhancing belonging.

Toward the Future: Declarations of Possibility



Dream Poster from November 25, 2013

In the New Year, the New Story Group will be sharing more of these commitments as well as more stories of belonging.

After developing a clear dream and directional statements for the future, participants spent time aligning possible actions and strategies with the dream. Out of these conversations came “declarations of possibility.” These declarations were both personal and collective, and reflected participants’ intentions to move the belonging conversation to action.

What follows are some of the declarations of possibility.

Action Plans for Self

The majority of participants identified personal actions using *intentional* language:

- Invite
- Connect/Reconnect
- Challenge
- Build
- Smile/Eye Contact
- Model (Behaviour)
- Listen

Action Planning in Organizations

- Create an Inclusion Model
- Create opportunities to open conversation and collaborations
- Challenge the norm to look for even more ways to build community
- Partner with those I met to keep the conversation going
- Slow down; make more time for conversation

“Belonging is reciprocal and requires courage and commitment.”

Participant Comment, November 25, 2013



Keep the Conversations Going... New Story Group Will Continue to Play Leadership Role with Belonging

Belonging Conversation participants were asked to identify ideas on what the New Story Group can do to help “keep the conversation going...” Here are the results:

Potential Supports, Innovations, Design Elements	Response
Develop questions to accompany the ‘Belonging Lens’ so that organizations/associations/neighbourhoods can use it to assess their belonging capacity (i.e., by reviewing guidelines, policies, processes, etc.)	74%
Provide presentations on Belonging and Inclusion.	69%
Hold another Community-Wide Conversation.	64%
Deliver a regular Newsletter on Belonging.	62%

Additional Suggestions:

- Develop a Steering Committee or Task Force on belonging.
- Find a way for people doing “action” to work together.
- Provide resources to educate other agencies on the information shared to get the ideas in people’s minds.
- Broad consultation with folks at the grass roots and those on the margins—go to them!
- Develop and implement a curriculum on belonging in the schools.

Personal Stories of Belonging

Belonging is being intentional, creating welcoming and hospitable spaces.

We heard this from someone who moved to a new community and was instantly invited out to neighbours’ homes for suppers and evening visits. Often someone would get out the guitar and there would be a sing along or people would share stories about local lore. She reflects on this

experience when trying to be more intentional about creating social networks in her neighbourhood. Today she sees belonging being intentionally fostered through Porch Parties, neighbourhood walking groups, moms’ groups and other such associations.

Belonging is taking an interest in one another, taking time to learn about each other and showing appreciation.

We heard this from someone with a developmental disability who feels welcomed when he arrives at work each day. He cherishes how co-workers take an interest in him and ask him about his life. He also feels regularly appreciated for the work he does which makes him love his work even more. Each time people show him that they are happy to see him it increases his sense of belonging.



I am leaving this event on November 25th, feeling that belonging is:

“possible - there are so many people on the same page, wanting the same belonging community.”

“worth fighting for and totally achievable, if not all at once, in small pieces towards a larger whole.”

What stood out for me today was,

“The idea that small, simple actions on a personal level are meaningful”;

“The desire of people to vision a caring community where everyone belongs”.

Participant Comments,
November 25, 2013





Featured YouTube Video from November 25, 2013: *Support to End Persistent Homelessness*

“Organizations can work to not only see needs within the community but [also] opportunities and resources.”

Participant Action Plan
November 25, 2013

Organizational Stories of Belonging

Belonging is creating a non-judgemental space that is welcoming & accommodating.

We heard this principle in a story about a new mother’s experience with the K-W Early Years Centre. She described this as a place where she can go to ask questions and seek advice without being rushed out the door. Staff know her and her children by name and they often recommend programs they feel will benefit her

children. Because the Centre has many of the conveniences of home, she can bring a lunch, spend the day, connect with other moms, and feel like she is surrounded by a supportive family.

We also heard this in a story from a staff member working at the YMCA. He caught a teenager sneaking into the Y without a membership. After one of these incidences the teen was in need of a ride home. The

staff member gave him a ride and heard about how the teen was sneaking in because he could not afford the membership. After asking the teen to come in with his mother, the staff member describes the “privilege’ he felt when he signed the entire family up for subsidized membership. Rather than sneaking in, the teen now walks through the front door with his head held high.

Funder and Co-Sponsors of Building a Community of Belonging: It Starts With Conversation



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