



613 COM HOUSES

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HOUSE FEATURE: BANFF AVENUE

**RICH IN COMMUNITY: EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SYLVIE MANSER TALKS
COMMUNITY INFORMED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN BANFF LEDBURY**

“Yes, let’s talk about something I love to talk about – the Banff Ledbury Community.” This was Sylvie Manser’s candid segue from small talk into our house feature interview. The Banff Ledbury community is small, yet mighty and has had many successes bolstering this description over the years. The underlying source of this success is credited to the community members and their persistence, commitment and genuine care for the neighbourhood that they call home.

Community informed was the philosophy which propped up the community house in the early 1990s, starting out in 1984 as an active tenant’s association and a social enterprise business which consisted of babysitting, landscaping and cleaning services. Although no longer a tenant’s association, community led remains the approach for programming and service delivery – it is the only way to stay responsive and effective in meeting the community’s needs.

Sylvie expressed how crucial it is for not only residents to be invested in the community, but stakeholders as well – it is an investment where returns will undoubtedly surpass expectations. This is a statement that can be backed by statistical measures, but also by concrete, individual lived experiences of residents who are actively involved and giving back to the community.
(continued on page 2)

Growing up in an engaged neighbourhood has created a culture of trust, confidence, and leadership in Banff Ledbury. This culture is one which cycles back into the community, whether it be through volunteering at the food bank, organizing community events or gaining employment experience. It is not uncommon for children who attend programming at the community house to lead the same programming as youth and young adults. Through programming, the community house also provides skill development and volunteering opportunities, often what is needed to propel forward when seeking employment.

I wanted to know what kind of advice could be given to communities looking to develop supportive systems and structures at a place-based level, such as a community house or hub. Sylvie shared that the most important aspect of mobilizing a community is to ensure that residents are at the forefront, taking the lead and guiding the process. Tenant associations have often been the foundation that many community houses and hubs are built upon – formed and led by residents who believe that change can be made and are willing to invest their time in bettering their communities.

The role of a community developer is to support the path of the community and resident leaders throughout the process. Feedback and input from stakeholders is also essential to any community building process, as well as overarching system level change. When stakeholders are actively involved in initiatives, opportunities for collaboration are not overlooked.

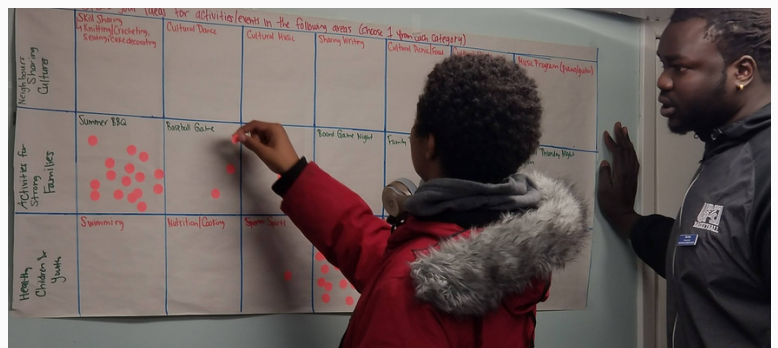
It should be noted that this type of work does not come without challenges. Resident leaders may find themselves bearing a heavy load, managing their own lives and challenges while also contributing to community initiatives. Organizations who rely on the work of resident leaders need to be conscious of these pressures and provide support and solutions through open communication and regular check-ins. Establishing meaningful connections to spearhead community organizing is important but maintaining that relationship throughout the process is crucial for sustainability.



Residents engage in prioritizing and planning at the Banff Avenue Community House



Children from the Banff Avenue Community House pose under the Welcome sign



Youth participate in prioritizing needs at the Banff Avenue Community House



Sylvie Manser stands in the open doorway of the Banff Avenue Community House

Grassroots organizations like community houses also find that they must wear many different hats in the delivery of wraparound services, shifting gears at a moment's notice. One moment you may go from a meeting with a funder, to responding to a community crisis. This lean way of operating does have a certain degree of practicality, as it permits the community house to pivot and remain flexible in times of rapid change.

What resonated most after our chat was the excitement, passion and caring for the community. There was this genuine feeling that this community of Banff Ledbury is in many ways an extended family. This is a community that gives support, promotes inclusivity, shares common experiences, enriches and encourages each other. It is also a community built through collaborative processes with the support of stakeholders that are invested in growing and maintaining a healthy community.

The late Gwendolyn Brooks said it best, "We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond" (1984).



HALLOWEEN HIGHLIGHT

A LOOK AT HALLOWEEN'S WELCOME RETURN TO LOWERTOWN AND FOSTER FARM

Despite a forecast of rain, October 31, 2021, yielded a beautiful sunny day in Ottawa. Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House had already transformed into a haunted house by early-afternoon, with volunteers and House Coordinator, Anne-Marie Vaz working diligently on the finishing touches. Fringed black plastic sheeting was used to create a winding pathway through the main floor of the community house, guiding trick-or-treaters past menacing scenes to a table full of Halloween treats.

Keeping with COVID restrictions, one family at a time would be allowed to travel through the Lowertown haunted

house – perhaps not back to normal yet, but a vast improvement from the previous year.

Anne-Marie advised that youth in the community would also be contributing to making this Halloween a memorable experience for children by dressing up and bringing the house to life during the trick-or-treating hours – something they were really looking forward to.

At the conclusion of our visit, Anne-Marie walked me outside to get a better look at the graveyard display on the front lawn of the community house. Remarkably, almost every passerby stopped to chat with Anne-Marie, commenting on the decorations or asking questions about programming – capturing the essence of this community in even these small interactions.

As mid-afternoon approached, it was time to head to the west end of Ottawa to visit the Queen of Halloween, Marie-Louise Knight, House Coordinator at Foster Farm Family House.

Although previously briefed on the complexity of Foster Farm's Halloween display, suffice it to say that any expectations were surpassed.

The entire exterior of the community house was wrapped in spooky decorations, a smoke machine and even some familiar faces from horror movies (Chucky, Bloody Mary and Linda Blair to name a few) – many seemingly alive thanks to the animatronics! (continued on page 4)



Trick-or-treaters pose outside of the Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House



Anne-Marie Vaz & Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House volunteers take a break for a photo (above)



Mary-Lou holds Chucky outside of the Foster Farm Family House



Residents explore the Foster Farm haunted walk



Staff awaiting trick-or-treaters at the Foster Farm Family House

Passing through the house into the backyard, neighbourhood children were already lined up at the back fence 'graveyard' enticing Mary-Lou to 'scare them'.

Dressed in full voodoo doll costume and face paint, Mary-Lou could not deny such a request and humored them with a few lunges, releasing some joyful screams into the air. A quick reminder followed that they would need to line up at the front of the house in order to enjoy the full outdoor haunted house tour. I don't think I have ever witnessed children follow direction so quickly, as they raced to line-up.

House staff members each manned the various scenes around the house, engaging the steady stream of children, youth and families who were making their way through the haunted house walk. The event ran from 5pm to 7pm that evening, with set up and tear down happening all in one day.

Stepping back to view the scene, it was clear that despite the limitations of the ongoing pandemic, Halloween had undoubtedly made a delightful return this year.



One of the many spooky scenes at Foster Farm



Anne-Marie Vaz works on the finishing touches of the haunted house in Lowertown



Lowertown youth dressed in costume brings the haunted house to life



BEHIND THE BUZZ WORDS

BREAKING DOWN 'BARRIER-FREE' FROM THE COMMUNITY-HOUSE LENS

Community Houses put an emphasis on equitable, barrier-free programming, but what exactly does this mean? On the surface, we might liken barrier-free to mean physically accessible.

For community house programming it encompasses a much broader meaning that addresses limitations across the board. We consider any element that may prevent or limit participation in programming and services to be a barrier. Let us take a closer look at some of the barriers we encounter in our communities.

Cost is a common barrier when trying to access programs; even those who receive subsidies may still be under too much financial strain to participate.

Providing reliable cost-free programming is crucial to our community members. It ensures that children and youth will always be eligible to register for programs at the time of delivery as well as in the future.

Location is another considerable barrier for those who are operating on a fixed income. Location is often two-prong, as the cost of travel alone may be a significant challenge, as well as the ability to leave the home if there are multiple children in the household to care for.

Community houses are place-based and imbedded in their respective communities, making program access as easy as dropping in to see a neighbour. It also eases concerns with respect to safety in travelling home after programming has ended. Families with multiple children can easily accompany a child to the community house without the stress of public

transport, organizing rides or spending additional funds on gas.

Skill level and language can often be a hurdle that may deter participation. We design our programs to be inclusive and adaptable to meet each community member where they are at. Community houses are always open to all members of the community and will work to ensure that engagement is possible.

Although we are proud of our ability to address many barriers, we do still encounter some challenges. One challenge that we often face is responding to the need for programming outside of regular business hours: specifically, over the weekends. Some of our community houses have been able to make this offering, but additional investments will be required to standardize this.

While we may not be equipped to address this need at this present time, we continue to listen and ask questions to ensure that we are maximizing equity, access and participation so that our communities will continue to grow and thrive.



COMMUNITY HOUSE HOLIDAY SUPPORTS

WORKING TOGETHER TO BRING CHEER TO THE HOLIDAY SEASON

Each December community houses organize with partners to support families during the holiday season. We wanted to provide an overview of these supports and how we work together in delivering donations and gifts to our communities.

Like many supports and services across our membership, each of our 16 community houses and family centres shape delivery of holiday support differently. Many will coordinate with organizations like Caring and Sharing, Toy Mountain as well as local churches to bring hampers and gifts to their communities. This process is initiated through registration and organized pick-up and/or delivery of orders – sometimes as many as 400 orders will arrive at a community house for distribution! Other houses will organize gift baskets, which may contain anything from food to gifts. Vouchers are also made available through Caring and Sharing.

Prior to COVID-19, many communities enjoyed holiday events and meals together. This is an aspect that has been sorely missed over the past two years, and we are all hopeful that next year we will be able to return to hosting and organizing these events.

The OCCH would like to take this opportunity to extend sincere gratitude and appreciation to our partners, stakeholders and community members who are forever dependable in making the holiday season that much more cheerful and bright.



A holiday gift bag hangs from a door in the Blair Court Community (2020)



Debra Dynes showcases their 'Safe and Warm' Boxes (2020)

THANK YOU ❤️

PARTNERSHIP & SUPPORTS SPOTLIGHT

LOCAL START-UP BUSINESS, THE GROWCER BRINGS FRESH, SUSTAINABLE PRODUCE TO LOWERTOWN

The Growcer has been a valued partner of the Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House since 2020, providing the community house with fresh, leafy greens whenever they are able to.

The partnership was initiated when the house coordinator, Anne-Marie Vaz followed-up on a tip and approached the four year old start-up about the need for accessible, fresh produce in the community.

The Growcer uses a hydroponic growing system to grow their produce. They manufacture this system and deliver to communities across Canada. Their approach of collaboration and empowerment was something that fell in line nicely with the work of community houses.

You may find out more about the The Growcer by visiting www.thegrowcer.ca



Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House receives a fresh produce delivery from Growcer



COMMUNITY HOUSE CONTACTS

WANT TO GET IN TOUCH?

Banff Avenue Community House

Phone : 613-739-5702
 Email : sylviem@banffcomhouse.ca
 Address : 2084A&B Banff Avenue, K1V 7X9
 Website : banffcommunityhouse.com

Blair Court Community House

Phone : 613-736-5058
 Email : blaircourt@rogers.com
 Address : 1566 Station Boulevard, K1G 0M1
 Website : blaircourt.ca

Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House

Phone : 613-562-2925
 Email : amvaz@crcbv.ca
 Address : 145 Beausoleil Drive, K1N 8W3

Michele Heights Community House

Phone : 613-829-4353
 Email : l.selvendren@pqchc.com
 Address : 102-2950 Penny Drive, K2B 6H6

Britannia Woods Community House

Phone : 613-820-0853
 Email : f.yusuf@britanniawoods.com
 Address : 9-115 Richie Street, K2B 6E8
 Website : britanniawoods.com

Caldwell Family Centre

Phone : 613-728-1800
 Email : director@caldwellcentre.ca
 Address : 20/22-1100 Medford Street, K1Z 8L5
 Website : caldwellfamilycentre.ca

Morrison Gardens Community House

Phone : 613-596-6229
 Email : m.clark@pqchc.com
 Address : 985A Morrison Drive, K2H 7L1

Pinecrest Terrace Community House

Phone : 613-596-6703
 Email : y.jones@pqchc.com
 Address : 2483B Iris Street, K2C 1C7

Carson's Community House

Phone : 613-745-0073 x 105
 Email : aline.abdulnour@crcrr.org
 Address : 102-710 Carson Road, K1K 2H3

Confederation Court Community House

Phone : 613-521-6807
 Email : confederationcourt@hotmail.com
 Address : 2483A Walkley Road, K1G 3H2
 Website : confederationcourt.com

Rochester Heights Community House

Phone : 613-237-6529
 Email : cflores@swchc.on.ca
 Address : 299 Rochester Street, K1R 7N3

Russell Heights Community House

Phone : 613-736-9855
 Email : housecoordinator@russellheights.ca
 Address : 1799E7D Russell Road, K1G 0N1
 Website : russellheights.ca

Debra Dynes Family House

Phone : 613-224-3824
 Email : info@debradynes.com
 Address : 85-955 Debra Avenue, K2C 0J5
 Website : debradynesfamilyhouse.com

Foster Farm Family House

Phone : 613-596-4866
 Email : m.knight@pqchc.com
 Address : 334-1085 Ramsey Crescent, K2B 7Z9

Strathcona Heights Family House

Phone : 613-233-5075
 Email : agisanza@sandyhillchc.on.ca
 Address : 221 Nelson Street, K1N 1C7

Winthrop Court Community House

Phone : 613-321-0163
 Email : d.read@pqchc.com
 Address : 38 Winthrop Private, K2B 8R5

FOR INQUIRIES & CONTRIBUTIONS, PLEASE CONTACT CARLA THÜR AT COALITION@OTTAWACOMMUNITYHOUSES.COM