Who are the people in your neighbourhood?
Building neighbourly connections in the inner city

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Abstract

Abundant Community Edmonton (ACE), a community-based initiative to encourage neighbourly connections, has achieved early success in numerous mature, middle-class neighbourhoods. As it begins to expand into Edmonton's inner city, however, success seems to be more elusive. Through two semi-structured group interviews, this grounded theory study explores specific challenges and opportunities faced by Abundant Community "neighbourhood connectors" in the inner city, as well as the potential of the internet and social media to aid in their efforts. In the first interview, the study examines a successful Abundant Community program in a mature, relatively prosperous Edmonton neighbourhood. In the second interview, inner-city connectors describe the difficulties they face, their strategies for dealing with them, and some positive aspects to pursuing Abundant Community in the inner city. The study finds significant differences between Abundant Community in these two contrasting settings. Population density (especially access to apartment buildings) presents a daunting barrier in the inner city, while other perceived obstacles (poverty, immigration) can actually make residents more receptive to Abundant Community. In both instances, the internet and social media are shown to provide valuable opportunities to promote the initiative.

KEYWORDS: social capital, social isolation, social cohesion, asset-based community development, inner city, poverty, transience, neighborhood turnover, immigration, Putnam, Hampton, social media, social networks, Facebook, Nextdoor.com

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the 1960s, when I was growing up in Woodcroft (a mature middle-class Edmonton neighbourhood), I could easily name most of the families who lived on my block. In an emergency (or, say, if I needed to borrow a ladder or a cup of sugar), there were any number of doors I could knock on. Today, I live in an inner-city Edmonton neighbourhood, Central McDougall, and until recently I didn't know even my next-door neighbours by name. Two or three doors down, I wouldn't have been able to recognize the residents as neighbours, never mind name them. Ironically, although we think of ourselves as more connected than any humans in history, most of us have lost any meaningful connection with the people living closest to us.

In his 1995 essay (and subsequent 2000 book) *Bowling Alone,* Robert Putnam lamented this loss and identified a chief culprit: technology (and television in particular). Since then, Putnam has represented a touchstone for many other authors and academics who fret about our apparent epidemic of social isolation and, more recently, our abandonment of "real life" in favour of (presumably less authentic) "virtual life." Meanwhile a competing school of thought, including Michigan State University's Keith Hampton, view communications technology and social media not as enemies, but as exciting new tools to help build neighbourhood connections.

Since 2013, the City of Edmonton has been gradually introducing and expanding Abundant Community Edmonton (ACE), an initiative aimed at boosting connections among neighbours. The initiative is inspired by *The Abundant Community: awakening the power of families and neighborhoods,* a 2010 book by John McKnight and Peter Block (and directly inspired by Putnam). The book envisions a network of "connectors"

in every neighbourhood, knocking on doors to discover (and tally) people's interests and abilities. The connectors then use that information to draw people together—e.g., creating walking clubs, knitting circles, wine tastings, etc. Edmonton is the first municipality to attempt any kind of systematic implementation of McKnight & Block's model.

In its first four years, ACE has expanded to involve 27 Edmonton community leagues, and has become quite well established in several of them. As the initiative spreads into inner-city neighbourhoods such as my own (Central McDougall), however, connectors are reporting specific difficulties. In areas of high density, poverty, and transience, it can prove difficult to find volunteers and to build lasting connections.

In 2016, I became one of those struggling ACE neighbourhood connectors, for Central McDougall. With this MACT capstone, I hoped to explore the particular challenges (and opportunities, if any) of attempting the Abundant Community model in the inner city. Intrigued by the work of Hampton and others, I also wondered if social media might prove an ally in my efforts. My findings could help inform my work as a neighbourhood connector, as well as the work of my colleagues in similar neighbourhoods. They might also prove useful to those interested in rebuilding neighbourhood connections elsewhere.

Because ACE is still in its early stages, particularly in the inner-city, it has not yet generated enough data to support any kind of serious quantitative inquiry. Instead, I performed an exploratory study, based on semi-structured group interviews with active neighbourhood connectors. Although I didn't have a large pool to draw from, I felt confident that I could find interviewees who would generate a rich source of qualitative data.

Likewise, in Edmonton there hasn't yet been any systematic effort to turn social media into a tool for neighbourhood-building. Instead, a few creative individuals have developed their own modest social media strategies—effectively making things up as they go along. In contrast, the platform Nextdoor.com (active in the U.S., U.K., and Netherlands) is designed specifically as a tool to take the social networking power of a site like Facebook, and translate it to the neighbourhood level. It will be fascinating to follow academic appraisals (no doubt brewing elsewhere) of such large and ambitious technology-based initiatives. That said, my interviewees had worthwhile stories to tell, even if on a much smaller scale.

My research first looked at Westmount Community League as a "success story," a neighbourhood in which ACE has generated momentum. The connectors in Westmount have been particularly active in using social media and the internet to support their efforts. I interviewed Westmount's current neighbourhood connector, and the woman who held the job previously.

I then hosted a group interview of three ACE connectors from inner-city neighbourhoods, to explore the challenges they have encountered, their strategies in meeting those challenges, and their ideas and attempts to leverage social media and the internet.

Why does it seem particularly difficult to implement Abundant Community in the inner city, and what strategies might help overcome those challenges? Are there any particular opportunities for neighbourhood connectors in the inner city, and how might those be leveraged? And what role, if any, should social media play in ACE? Although

it's too early to provide definitive answers to these questions, I hope to generate some pragmatic insights and strategies.

This research will shed a glimmer of new light into the work of Putnam, and specifically on McKnight & Block, whose book seeks to reduce the social isolation Putnam identified. What is the state of neighbourly connections in Edmonton, particularly in the inner city, and is ACE helping to improve the situation? Those familiar with the work of Hampton will also be intrigued to see current efforts in Edmonton to use existing social media platforms to foster connections at the local level.

I begin by reviewing the literature that inspired my study—writers like Putnam, who see technology as a culprit in the rise of social isolation. Putnam's concerns were bolstered by results of the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS), which seemingly showed a precipitous rise in social isolation. Putnam and the GSS are frequently cited by authors and scholars—people like McKnight & Block, and MIT's Sherry Turkle—who argue that the many screens in our lives act as barriers to our face-to-face relationships.

I go on to discuss Barry Wellman, Robert Kraut, Lee Rainie and others who, like Hampton, view online technology as an exciting opportunity to build connections—as a force that contributes to our collective "real life" rather than competing with it. I then look at studies involving the specific use of the internet and social media at the neighbourhood level, including in the inner city.

After my literature review (which is up next), I go on to describe my research methodology, present my findings, and discuss the conclusions that emerged.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Abundant Community Edmonton is a grassroots initiative to connect Edmontonians at a neighbourhood level. In participating community leagues, "neighbourhood connectors" recruit and train a network of "block connectors"— volunteers who go door-to-door to meet their closest neighbours, and to collect data on their visions for the neighbourhood and on the skills and activities they would like to share with their community. Over time, the neighbourhood connectors hope to collect enough data to begin fostering ties throughout the neighbourhood—for example, if twenty people express an interest in yoga, and one or two say they're willing to lead a yoga group, the neighbourhood connector will try to bring them all together. The initiative has already been embraced by some established, relatively affluent Edmonton neighbourhoods. More recently, it has begun to expand into more socially challenged inner-city neighbourhoods, including my own: Central McDougall.

Already, inner-city connectors are anecdotally reporting that Abundant Community Edmonton appears to be more difficult in their neighbourhoods. I intend to gather data on the specific challenges and opportunities they are encountering. At the same time, I'm curious to explore whether or not social media and other online tools might help further their efforts.

It almost feels like heresy to propose social media as a strategy to build bonds between neighbours. We live in an era when many popular thinkers—and many social scientists—fret about technology's relentless erosion of person-to-person connections. Indeed, Edmonton's Abundant Community Initiative, the underlying framework for my

research project, was specifically conceived as a response to society's collective loss of social capital.

I have come to view proponents of this mindset as members of "Team Putnam," because of their thematic (and often explicit) alignment with the concerns of Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, whose 1995 essay *Bowling Alone* (and subsequent 2000 book by the same title) memorably sounded the alarm for America's decline in social capital. The 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) provided Team Putnam with a crucial boost when it found evidence of a distressing increase of social isolation in the U.S., seemingly tied (correlation, or causation?) to the rise of the Internet.

In the other corner, we have "Team Hampton." Rutgers University communications professor Keith Hampton has built a career studying the Internet's potential for fostering social ties, including ties between neighbours. Although he shares Putnam's concern about our loss of social capital, Hampton sees technology as a potential tool for redemption, rather than as a root cause of the problem. His work has helped inspire a growing body of research that counterbalances, and at times contradicts, the hypotheses of Team Putnam.

My literature review begins with Putnam himself, moves on to the 2004 GSS, and discusses an assortment of literature that tend to view technology as an enemy to social capital. I then consider the work of Hampton and others, and their case for technology as a positive force for social capital. Finally, I wrap things up by examining some peer-reviewed studies of hyper-local social networking, and of previous efforts to leverage the internet to build community in low-income neighbourhoods.

Before embarking on my own inquiry, I hope to better understand the current state of social capital, along with its relationship with technology—and particularly what their interplay might look like in an inner-city context. If we are to boost social capital in neighbourhoods like Central McDougall, is technology an enemy, an essential ally, or something in between? Should we base our efforts around the arguments of Team Putnam or Team Hampton—or, do can we draw lessons and ideas from both?

In addition to Putnam, the GSS, and Hampton, my literature review methodology included such search terms as "social isolation," "General Social Survey/GSS," "social capital," "social ties," and "civic engagement"—specifically, where these terms overlap with "internet," "social media," "social network," "Facebook," or "online." To collect articles specific to the inner-city context, I conducted searches that included the keywords "inner-city," "poverty," or "low-income." While reading articles that were especially pertinent to my subject, I also kept an eye open for citations that would lead me to other salient sources. Of the literature included in this review, the bulk comes from peer-reviewed journals. That said, some of the most compelling and influential voices on the subject operate in the mainstream media—and so my review also includes bestselling books, newspaper articles, and even TED talks.

Robert Putnam

In 1995, with his article "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," Robert Putnam crafted an indelible symbol for the disquieting loss of interpersonal connection. American democracy, he argued, rested on a foundation of civic association—a tendency of Americans to organize themselves into formal and informal

associations—a trait that had been evident to French political thinker Alexis de

Tocqueville as far back as the 1830s (Putnam 1995, p. 65). With fewer Americans now

forming associations, the core strength of American democracy was eroding, said Putnam.

People were losing their *social capital,* which he defined as "features of social

organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and

cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 2). Something as simple as a bowling league, he

observed, has the power to connect Americans in meaningful ways—helping them build

social capital over pizza and beer. Instead, America has gradually become a nation of

people bowling alone.

Putnam speculated on a number of possible causes for the decline, before settling

on a prime suspect: technology. "There is reason to believe that deep-seated

technological trends are radically 'privatizing' or 'individualizing' our use of leisure time

and thus disrupting many opportunities for social-capital formation," he wrote. "The most

obvious and probably the most powerful instrument of this revolution is television" (p.

75).

Putnam may have failed to notice the even more powerful revolutionary

instrument lurking just around the corner—in fact, the word "Internet" appears nowhere

in his essay. To be fair, in 1995 only 14 per cent of American adults used the Internet

(Fox and Rainie, 2014). But Putnam's image took hold—a nation of individuals staring at

screens in their homes, instead of heading to the bowling alley to generate good old-

fashioned American social capital—and his concerns and arguments continue to

influence thinkers today. According to scholar.harvard.edu, Putnam's 2000 book-length

expansion of his original essay has been cited 35,251 times (and counting).

2004 General Social Survey

I'm guessing it is rare for an article in *American Sociological Review* to inspire headlines and best-selling books. In 2006, however, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears did just that with "Social isolation in America: Changes in core discussion networks over two decades."

The authors analyzed the results of the 2004 General Social Survey. The GSS, conducted regularly by the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center, gathers data to better understand emerging trends in American society. In 1985, the GSS had collected data to measure the size of Americans' "core discussion networks"—the people with whom they discuss important matters. For the 2004 GSS, McPherson et al designed their survey to match the questions and the collection methods followed by the 1985 GSS, in order to see how people's core discussion networks had changed over the intervening two decades. The results surprised even them.

> Discussion networks are smaller in 2004 than in 1985. The number of people saying there is no one with whom they discuss important matters nearly tripled. The mean network size decreases by about a third (one confidant), from 2.94 in 1985 to 2.08 in 2004. (p. 353)

McPherson and his colleagues had some misgivings about their own data—one section of their report is titled, "Could such a large social change be real?" (p. 364). After citing convergent data from other sources, however, they concluded the 2004 GSS is cause for serious sociological concern. "Whatever the reason, it appears that Americans are connected far less tightly now than they were 19 years ago. Furthermore, ties with local neighborhoods and groups have suffered at a higher rate than others" (p. 373).

Despite the wide-ranging impact of McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears' article, their conclusions generated skepticism among many in their field. In 2009, *American Sociological Review* published another article, by Claude S. Fischer, that took the journal's earlier article to task. Fischer explored in detail several anomalies that he argued render "Social isolation in America" effectively meaningless. He argues that many of the results in the 2004 GSS "make little sociological sense," calling them "not impossible, but highly implausible." For example, many 2004 respondents reported in detail about organization they belonged to, yet claimed they had zero confidants (Fischer 2009, p. 662). He also points out that the "Scholars and general readers alike should draw no inference from the 2004 GSS as to whether Americans' social networks changed substantially between 1985 and 2004; they probably did not" (p. 657).

More tellingly, Matthew Brashears, one of the 2006 article's co-authors, came to have his own second thoughts about its significance. In 2011, Brashears reexamined his team's earlier findings. Although he disagreed with Fischer's contention that the 2004 GSS data was fatally flawed (p. 332), he allowed that its implications regarding social isolation might have been overstated. Brashears' new research "finds that modern discussion networks have decreased in size, but that social isolation has not become more prevalent" (p. 331).

Nevertheless, "Social isolation in America" continues to be widely cited. Those who view technology as a driving force in the breakdown of social capital—a group I think of as "team Putnam"—regard the 2004 GSS as their trump card.

Team Putnam

For a social scientist who wrote his most influential article two decades ago, Robert Putnam retains a remarkably prominent presence in current literature.

For example, authors John McKnight and Peter Block cited Putnam prominently in their 2010 book *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods.* The book provided a rough framework for Edmonton's current Abundant Community Edmonton, a grassroots initiative to foster personal connections at the neighbourhood level.

McKnight and Block saw "Bowling Alone" as a call to action—arguing that it's time for us to literally knock on each other's doors, to take stock of the personal assets that surround us and build connections between them. Each of us already lives in an abundant community, they said—if we can only find ways to unlock that abundance. "The way to the good life is not through consumption," they wrote. "It is, instead, a path that we make by walking it with those who surround us. It is the way of a competent community recognizing its abundance" (p. 18).

To build connections, you need connectors. McKnight and Block suggested we find the connectors in our neighbourhoods, and invite them to sit down at a table—quite literally—to discuss ideas to bring local people together. "The Connectors' Table can begin to see how these gifts of the head, hands, and heart can be brought together in new relationships," they wrote. For example: "Charles knows how to juggle. Who are the neighbourhood kids that would love to learn from him?" (p. 135). Once the connectors build a neighbourhood inventory of gifts and interests, they can begin to connect those assets to the wider community.

Inspired by McKnight and Block, Edmonton community activist Howard Lawrence launched phase one of Abundant Community Edmonton (ACE) in his own neighbourhood, Highlands, in January 2013 (Hopes, 2015). Lawrence has remained the driving force behind the initiative as it expanded to other Edmonton communities, including my own, Central McDougall.

Interestingly, although it was written in 2010, *The Abundant Community* made effectively no effort to leverage the Internet's potential as a tool to connect people at the neighbourhood level—and Lawrence, following the book's lead, has focused most of his own energies towards the face-to-face approach. This (to me) glaring omission inspired my own capstone inquiry, to find out firsthand if a social media and other online tools can help further Central McDougall's Abundant Community Edmonton initiative (and similar efforts in other inner-city communities).

If Team Putnam has a current-day guru with a focus on social media, her name is Sherry Turkle. In frequent *New York Times* op-eds, and in her 2012 TED Talk *Connected, but alone* (which boasts well over three million views), this MIT specialist in technology and society worried that we have traded authentic, face-to-face communication for a (presumably less authentic) digitally mediated world of tweets, texts, and wall posts. The title of her 2011 book, *Alone Together,* has become pop-culture shorthand for the digital isolation Team Putnam believes us to be suffering as a society. Like Olds and Schwartz, Turkle buttressed her arguments with the 2004 GSS, specifically citing McPherson et al in her conclusion: "[E]ven a lot of people from a distance can turn out to be not enough people at all. We brag about how many we have 'friended' on Facebook, yet Americans say they have fewer friends than before" (p. 280).

Based purely on my own experience, I tend to be leery of anyone drawing a distinct division between online life and "IRL" (in real life)—between friends and "friends." Too many of my own personal connections spill back and forth freely between online interactions and face-to-face encounters. I perceive no artificial divide between my digital life and my so-called "real" life; the two are intertwined. Eric Stoller, a noted speaker and writer on higher education, agrees with me: "Social media have provided us with a new form of interaction that blends into our IRL spaces—in fact, IRL now includes the online community" (Stoller, 2013, p. 9).

Nevertheless, Turkle has become a prominent and influential voice in the conversation. To her credit, she doesn't fall into the unbridled technological determinism sometimes displayed by those on Team Putnam. In fact, she concluded her TED Talk by musing upon technology's potential (as yet unrealized, in her view) to reconnect us: "Now we all need to focus on the many, many ways technology can lead us back to our real lives, our own bodies, our own communities, our own politics, our own planet. They need us. Let's talk about how we can use digital technology, the technology of our dreams, to make this life the life we can love" (Turkle, 2012).

Keith Hampton.

Keith Hampton, a professor of communications currently at Rutgers University, has studied the positive effects of ICTs in local settings for over a decade. Although Hampton doesn't share Putnam's or Turkle's despair about the state of social capital, he also doesn't see technology as a godsend that replaces outmoded locally based networks with something much better.

Many academics, Hampton argues, make the mistake of overcommitting to one view or the other. Hampton and his co-authors do a very good job of summarizing the polarized nature of the debate:

One perspective values the proven role of local engagement and fears that a rise in privatism – networks that are increasingly home-centered and homophilous – could result from a shift in the locus of communication from the physical to the virtual. Another perspective embraces recent technological innovations, and questions what are believed to be antiquated notions about the importance of place. Both perspectives value social capital and recognize that diverse networks contribute to positive social outcomes. However, these perspectives clash and fail in their polarity. (Hampton, Lee, & Her, 2011, p. 1032)

Hampton's findings suggest a middle ground. ICTs, he writes, "support relationships globally and locally – 'glocalization'" (Hampton et al, 2011, p. 1046).

It's a theme that resonates throughout Hampton's work, dating back to his groundbreaking 2003 paper with Barry Wellman, "Neighboring in Netville"—even though their study predated what we think of today as social media. They looked at a new suburb of Toronto, specially wired for affordable high-speed Internet, to see what effects, if any, such connectivity had on the neighbourhood's sense of community.

"Our expectation—that community in neighborhoods will be enhanced by the Internet—is in contrast to the arguments that the Internet will weaken or transform community through isolation in the home or focusing on distant, non-corporal ties maintained online." (p. 284)

If this hypothesis represented a shot across the bow of prevailing opinion, Hampton and Wellman were undeterred. "Warnings of the Internet's impending destruction of community have rarely been encumbered by evidence," they quipped (p. 280).

In place of Facebook or Twitter, Netville was connected by *Net-L* (p. 301), an email distribution list that could be viewed as an early example of a working—if rudimentary—social media network. In their findings, Hampton and Wellman wrote specifically about Netville's implications to Putnam's earlier worries:

> The Netville experience suggests that when people can use the Internet to communicate at very low cost, neighboring can flourish on line. Wired residents embraced local contact, on and offline. Reversing the trend observed by Putnam (2000) of neighborhood noninvolvement, Netville's local computer network reduced the cost and increased the speed of grass-roots collective action. Spatial, temporal and social barriers to community organizing were overcome through the use of the Internet. Internet use did not inhibit or substitute for other forms of social contact, in-person or over the telephone. Contact led to contact through the interplay between online and offline encounters. (p. 305)

In 2007, Hampton conducted a study involving four neighbourhoods, three of which were provided with a neighbourhood website and email discussion list. "This paper argues that while the Internet may encourage communication across great distances, it may also facilitate interactions near the home" (p. 714). The study was an important stepping-stone in Hampton's exploration of the potential of using the Internet as a tool for

encouraging interactions between neighbours—and the resulting formation of weak
neighbourhood ties.

Hampton and three colleagues took a look at social isolation in 2009, in the wake
of the 2004 GSS uproar. In a study for the Pew Internet & American Life project, they
looked at the impact of the Internet and mobile phones on Americans' social networks. In
their findings, they took direct aim at McPherson et al. The report's executive summary
read like a bullet-point list of rebuttals:

We find that the extent of social isolation has hardly changed since 1985, contrary
to concerns that the prevalence of severe isolation has tripled since then.

…[C]ontrary to the considerable concern that people's use of the internet and
cell phones could be tied to the trend towards smaller networks, we find that
ownership of a mobile phone and participation in a variety of internet activities
are associated with larger and more diverse core discussion networks.   …When
we examine people's full personal network – their strong ties and weak ties –
internet use in general and use of social networking services such as Facebook in
particular are associated with having a more diverse social network. Again, this
flies against the notion that technology pulls people away from social engagement.
…Challenging the assumption that internet use encourages social contact across
vast distances, we find that many internet technologies are used as much for local
contact as they are for distant communication.   (Hampton, Goulet, Her, & Rainie,
2009, pp. 3-4)

Two years later, another Pew Research Center study, again with Hampton as lead
author, updated the 2009 findings, after exploring people's use of social networking sites

(Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Twitter) in relation to their levels of trust, tolerance, social support, and community and political engagement. If anything, the new survey further cemented Hampton's conviction that, contrary to the beliefs of Turkle and others on Team Putnam, technology is not leading to social isolation.

> Americans have more close social ties than they did two years ago. And they are less socially isolated. We found that the frequent use of Facebook is associated with having more overall close ties. … The likelihood of an American experiencing a deficit in social support, having less exposure to diverse others, not being able to consider opposing points of view, being untrusting, or otherwise being disengaged from their community and American society generally is unlikely to be a result of how they use technology, especially in comparison to common predictors. (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011, p. 42)

In a 2013 article, Hampton and co-author Richard Ling criticized previous researchers for their over-reliance on the GSS data—citing McPherson and Turkle by name. They took a fresh look at the issue of social isolation from a cross-national perspective, comparing data from three countries. Although Hampton and Ling agreed that people's core networks have declined, they suggested that the shift may be tied to an overall rise in socioeconomic status, and that it may not be an entirely bad thing:

> Decline in the size and diversity of American's core networks has been tied to the displacement of face-to-face interaction and to lower societal well-being. Comparing core networks in the United States, Norway, and Ukraine, we reject the conclusions that frequent in-person contact predicts individual well-being and

that large/diverse networks predict broader societal well-being. (Hampton & Ling

2013, p. 561)

In 2004, during his time at MIT, Hampton created i-Neighbors.com, a site similar

in design and goals to Nextdoor.com (launched six years later), a current U.S.

neighbourhood-based social media platform. Although i-Neighbors continued to operate

until July 2015, it never achieved much traction ("New MIT web site encourages

neighbourliness", 2004). In the meantime, though, i-Neighbors provided Hampton with a

massive naturalistic laboratory, and generated reams of data. In one 2010 study, he used

content analysis to compare the use of the website between affluent and disadvantaged

neighbourhoods, and was particularly encouraged by the site's power in poorer

neighbourhoods (Hampton, 2010). A year later, he followed up with another article

describing and analyzing data from i-Neighbors, providing another useful and concise

review of the website's observed success in fostering social cohesion—more numerous

ties between neighbours. "The Internet as a leveler between advantaged and

disadvantaged communities" has some particularly interesting things to say about the

value of such a website in areas of poverty and high transience (Central McDougall is

one of Alberta's poorest neighbourhoods, and most of its households have lived in the

community less than five years). "Living in close proximity to people who move

frequently and have little interest in neighboring makes it difficult for even a social

butterfly to form local ties. …Social cohesion also tends to be low in areas of

concentrated disadvantage" (Hampton, 2011, p. 206). Looking at some of the most active

communities on i-Neighbors, Hampton found, "There were few differences in the levels

of social cohesion and collective action between neighborhoods with concentrated disadvantage and more advantaged areas" (p. 208).

Meanwhile, Hampton and colleagues continued to study other information and communications technologies and their effects on people's network diversity place-related social capital. A 2011 study published in the journal *new media & society* found that "many [ICTs] indirectly contribute to diversity by supporting participation in traditional settings such as neighborhoods, voluntary groups, religious institutions, and public spaces" (Hampton, Lee & Her, 2011, p. 1032). Again, this study stands in stark contrast to the views of Putnam, Turkle and the like. The data create "a clear picture of the positive and substantive total contribution that the use of ICTs has on network diversity and, thus, the social capital that is accessible through personal networks" (p. 1044).

Having established a positive (and distinctly anti-Putnam) connection between technology and social capital, Hampton has more recently turned his gaze toward the relationship between the Internet and our very concept of community. Our society is more mobile than ever, yet digital communications have created an atmosphere of "persistent contact and pervasive awareness" analogous to what we might experience in a pre-industrial village. In other words, we're constantly in touch and aware of each other's business. Hampton argues that we have entered a period of "meta-modernity," which brings with it both constraints and opportunities (Hampton, 2015).

Others on Team Hampton

While Hampton is a pervasive voice in the conversation, he has no shortage of "teammates" when it comes to defending ICTs in the face of arguments from "Team

Putnam."

In a brisk 2005 essay—"Community: from neighborhood to network"—Barry Wellman (a former key collaborator with Hampton) discusses the shift in society's focus from place-based neighbourhoods to person-to-person online networks. He doesn't believe that neighbourhoods have become entirely irrelevant, but observes that people's idea of "community" now embraces people far and wide. He doesn't agree with Putnam and friends that technology has replaced face-to-face contact with something less authentic or valuable; rather, Wellman argues that mobile technologies reinforce person-to-person community.

Wellman also collaborated in a 2006 Pew study that, in contrast to the 2004 GSS, "calls into question fears that social relationships—and community—are fading away in America." It examines the Internet's transformation of what we think of as "community," moving towards geographically disperse social networks. At the same time, it observes, "people's networks continue to have substantial numbers of relatives and neighbors—the traditional bases of community—as well as friends and workmates" (p. i). In short, in the context of my project, the Internet doesn't interfere with people's existing community ties.

Other researchers have probed social media's role in building the strength of ties between people. In a 2014 study, Moira Burke and Robert Kraut looked at the old friends vs. "friends" debate—do people actually grow closer to their friends through social media, or do sites like Facebook displace more meaningful "IRL" relationships and replace them with superficial online ones? The study was sponsored by Facebook, so it is perhaps unsurprising that it suggested Facebook interactions strengthen ties over and above other

means of communication. (Robert Kraut happens to be one of the world's leading academics in the field of online communities, though, so his opinion carries weight.)

Another 2014 study surveyed 614 US adults to explore the relationship between people's behaviour on Facebook and gains in bridging social capital—the kind of weak ties one would hope to encourage by leveraging social media in a neighbourhood context. The findings support those of Burke & Kraut (above) in suggesting the key lies in users investing "small but meaningful effort" to actively interact with others on the site. "[T]he true benefit of social network sites may not just be the technical connections they make possible, but by creating an environment in which meaningful communicative exchanges, and the potential social capital benefits they embody, can flow" (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014, p. 868).

Finally, Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (both familiar names in this section of the literature review) collaborated on 2012's *Networked: the new social operating system*. The book discussed what they call the 'triple revolution' in human communication— social networking, the Internet, and mobile devices. In setting up their thesis, they pooh pooh technological determinists like Putnam and Turkle:

> [W]e wonder about the folks who keep moaning that the internet is killing society. They sound just like those who worried generations ago that TV or automobiles would kill sociability, or sixteenth-century fears that the printing press would lead to information overload. While *oy vey*-ism—crying 'the sky is falling' makes for good headlines—it isn't true. The evidence in our work is that none of these technologies are isolated—or isolating—systems. They are being incorporated into people's social lives much like their predecessors were. People are not

hooked on gadgets—they are hooked on each other. (p. 6)

This book provides impetus to the hypothesis that social media can play a powerful role in promoting neighbourhood connections and cohesion.

Technology and the local community

Team Hampton's optimism is further supported by articles that explore efforts to use social media and the internet to build connections between neighbours.

In *Bowling Alone,* Robert Putnam described social capital as "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (2001, p. 19). He, and his acolytes on Team Putnam, believe in the primacy of face-to-face connections in building social capital, with technology representing a distracting or even destructive influence. In *The Abundant Community,* McKnight and Block proposed an intriguing strategy to rebuild our society's lost social capital—the abundance of personal knowledge and skills that lies, often untapped, within every neighbourhood. By nurturing a network of connections, and fostering the exchange of social resources, Abundant Community hopes to create a Putnam-esque social networks on a neighbourhood scale. McKnight and Block envisioned an exclusively old-school approach, with connectors going door to door and physically bringing neighbours together. So far, Abundant Community Edmonton has been largely faithful to this vision.

As Abundant Community Edmonton spreads to more communities, however, some neighbourhood connectors have begun to leverage social media to support their efforts. They're tossing in a bit of Team Hampton into McKnight and Block's otherwise

Putnam-esque model. The findings and discussion chapters will examine a few examples of this.

Although the field is still quite new, several articles have looked at the potential to leverage online interactions to build a sense of local community.

Author John Carroll suggests that, although the relationship between communities and technology often involves trade-offs, the overall effect can be positive. "Although people never did and never will need technology to create, experience, and sustain community, technology can play a role in facilitating community" (Carroll, 2012, p. 215).

Capece and Costa (2011) analyzed a locally focused online community (dubbed "M8") in a suburb of Rome. They hypothesized that people who actively used a local network community would develop a greater sense of territorial community. Their study examined detailed questionnaires submitted by 176 anonymous M8 members, and evaluated responses for 'sense of community' following the theoretical framework of McMillan and Chavis's "Sense of community: a definition and theory" (1986). They concluded, "…an active use of the social network reinforces the sense of community and the participation of members to local problems, enhancing in this way social capital" (p. 446).

Johnson and Halegoua (2014), in their case study "Potential and challenges for social media in the neighbourhood context," examined a neighbourhood in Lawrence, Kansas that had seen its community association steering committee dwindle to a handful of remaining stalwarts. The committee created Facebook and Twitter accounts in an attempt to improve communications and increase membership, but with limited success. Johnson and Halegoua pointed out that even 'failed' efforts can have positive outcomes.

Although the neighbourhoods they examined could only attract a few users to their social media channels, "…it turns out these are exactly the kinds of people who would benefit a neighborhood organization and neighborhood network the most" (p. 68).

In their multi-neighbourhood study of Nextdoor.com, Masden, Grevet, Grinter, Gilbert, and Edwards noted the site's capacity for broadening the scope of neighbourhood engagement. Through semi-structured interviews, the team gathered strong anecdotal evidence on how people use the site—its advantages over email lists or other social media, the kinds of content posted, etc. The report did raise some concerns with "islanding"—isolating neighbourhoods from adjacent communities—and privacy (specifically, fears about posts that reveal when people will be away from their homes). Nevertheless, they were struck by Nextdoor's practicality and ease of use: "Nextdoor may present a low barrier for these transient renters to engage with the neighborhood, in contrast to other alternatives such as more formal civic groups or neighborhood associations" (2014, p. 5). Although Nextdoor represents an intriguing new online tool to foster neighbourhood ties, it has yet to expand to Canada.

Technology in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods

Chen, Dong, Ball-Rokeach, Parks, and Huang conducted a research project in a Los Angeles neighbourhood with parallels to Edmonton's Central McDougall (ethnically diverse, low level of civic engagement). First, the group conducted interviews, field trips, and focus groups to understand the way people in the neighbourhood communicated with each other and with local organizations, their levels of civic engagement, their community organizations, and their existing local news sources. Then, after a series of

"deep think" sessions with a variety of experts, they designed a hyper-local interactive

news website, which they launched in 2010, based on Kim and Ball-Rokeach's

communication infrastructure theory. They found, "…the affordances of the internet

allow hyper-local news websites to serve not only as a traditional information source but

also as a forum for ongoing discussion of local affairs and a mechanism for building and

strengthening relationships among local residents" (Chen et al, 2012, p. 932).

Gad, Ramakrishnan, Hampton, and Kavanaugh (2012) specifically examined the

implementation and effect of i-Neighbors in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods

(similar to my own). Their study focused on the 20 most active groups on i-Neighbors,

ranking them according to the total number of unique comments posted to discussion

groups over the course of one year. Surprisingly, some of the most active i-Neighbors

groups were found in poor neighbourhoods. In fact, the study found that *"social media*

afford opportunities for democratic engagement in areas of concentrated poverty, at a rate

that is as high (or higher) than more advantaged areas" (p. 170).

Similarly, Harris & Flouch (2012) looked at the use of online networks to foster

connections in four separate low-income neighbourhoods in the U.K. The organization

sponsoring the study, The Networked Neighbourhoods Group, "works with communities

and organisations using technology-based approaches to strengthen neighbourhoods and

create opportunities for the more efficient delivery of public services" (p. 2). After

consulting closely with local residents, researchers helped design and implement

resident-run neighbourhood websites.

> The basic rationale was to test whether resident-run online neighbourhood
>
> networks could be established in low income neighbourhoods and if they could be

shown to bring social benefits. The report adds weight to claims that local online

channels can be established inexpensively in low income areas, that they can be

made sustainable, and that they contribute to the quality of local social life" (p.

32).

Conclusion: my question and approach

Abundant Community Edmonton (ACE) was modelled on McKnight and Block's

2010 book, which in turn drew its inspiration directly from Putnam. The initiative has

enjoyed some early success in Edmonton while remaining largely faithful to McKnight

and Block's face-to-face approach to rebuilding social capital at the neighbourhood level.

A few neighbourhood connectors, however, have taken to social media to promote and

enhance their door-to-door efforts—a strategy that flies in the face of those who, like

Putnam and Turkle, view technology as an isolating societal force. Their approach owes

more to the theories of Hampton and others, who believe the weak-tie networks

encouraged by social media can help build community cohesion and involvement at the

neighbourhood level.

As ACE expands into Edmonton's inner-city community leagues (including my

own), neighbourhood connectors are struggling to replicate the program's earlier

successes in more stable and prosperous neighbourhoods. Studies (Gad et al, Harris &

Flouch) suggest online networks may prove particularly helpful in low-income

neighbourhoods. I intend, through my study, to explore the apparent difficulty of

conducting Abundant Community in the inner city— and the role digital communication

(especially social media) might play.

This has led me to my research question: **What particular challenges and opportunities do inner-city neighbourhood connectors face in the context of Abundant Community Edmonton? How might social media and other online tools help further their efforts?**

To address this, I collected data on the experience of neighbourhood connectors in both "typical" and inner-city community leagues, in order to better understand the particular challenges and opportunities in the latter. I also specifically examined the ways in which some of the connectors have used social media.

My next chapter examines my research design and methodology in more detail.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

In approaching my research question (stated on the previous page), I faced some clear limitations.

Abundant Community is still in its infancy. McKnight and Block's book was published in 2010. Howard Lawrence launched Edmonton's first Abundant Community pilot project in his Highlands neighbourhood in early 2013 (Hopes, 2015). Shortly afterward, with the City of Edmonton's involvement, our city became the world's first municipality to systematically support the Abundant Community model. Today, only a handful of inner-city neighbourhoods are participating in Abundant Community Edmonton, and most of those are in the relatively early stages of implementation. Meanwhile, only a few neighbourhoods have used social media to complement their Abundant Community efforts. The pool of available interview subjects was small, both in general terms and specifically for the inner city.

That said, as an emerging project, Abundant Community presents an exciting opportunity for exploratory research with a grounded theory approach. The results may not be definitive, but they can still offer useful insights for others currently involved in Abundant Community, for those who wish to pursue similar initiatives in the future, and for researchers who may tackle the subject once more data has been generated.

With Abundant Community Edmonton, ordinary neighbourhood connectors are effectively struggling to build and refine their own strategies as they go along. Thus, in some ways, they're already doing their own *ad hoc* grounded theory research. My research question looks to mine the experiences of several neighbourhood connectors,

through semi-structured interviews, in an effort to extract a few pragmatic theories about what works (and what doesn't)—building hypotheses rather than beginning with one. As grounded theory guru Antony Bryant suggests, such a study can be "judged in terms of its usefulness rather than its truthfulness" (2014, p. 36).

The "roll up your sleeves" aspect of grounded theory also appeals to me:

[A] grounded theory study should begin with some characterization of the research context and can then continue with the posing of some open-ended and wide-ranging questions. … [R]esearchers can and should plunge into their research context and start looking for data. This may be in the form of initial, open-ended interviews, but it can also be in the form of observations, texts, documents, and anything else that might be relevant. (Bryant, 2014, p. 19-20)

Design and methodology

My study was conducted using a qualitative exploratory design, with data collection methodology built around two separate, semi-structured group interviews.: one with two neighbourhood connectors in Westmount (a relatively stable and prosperous mature neighbourhood) and one with three neighbourhood connectors in Edmonton's inner city. The Westmount interview allowed me to set a baseline—a snapshot of a reasonably successful Abundant Community campaign, and one that integrated social media. The second interview allowed me to explore the specific challenges and opportunities of attempting the Abundant Community model in an inner-city setting.

The USC Libraries Research Guide's definition of exploratory design fits the parameters of my study: "An exploratory design is conducted about a research problem

when there are few or no earlier studies to refer to or rely upon to predict an outcome. The focus is on gaining insights and familiarity for later investigation or undertaken when research problems are in a preliminary stage of investigation" (University of Southern California, n.d.).

Interviews are "an economical means, in the sense of time and money, of getting access to a 'topic'" (Rapley, 2001, p. 317). With a small pool of prospective interviewees, semi-structured interviews also provide the means to extract rich data—including insights and directions that the interviewer might not expect:

> [Q]ualitative interview studies tend to be conducted with quite small numbers and with rather informal patterns of questioning where the aim is to allow the interviewee to set the pace. Usually the interviewer will have a prepared set of questions but these are used only as a guide, and departures from the guidelines are not seen as a problem (as would be the case in surveys) but are often encouraged. (Silverman, 2013, p. 204)

With respective group sizes of two and three participants, my interviews might not strictly qualify as focus groups. That said, the group setting allowed the interviewees to feed off of each other's ideas, as they might in a larger focus group. At the same time, because the groups were so small, people had ample time and opportunity to express their individual thoughts rather than settle into a kind of group consensus—turning my small sample size into a strength rather than simply a limitation:

> If the research purpose is to elicit ideas for developing a new product or new policy—for example, to produce creative ideas—smaller groups of heterogeneous

individuals are more likely to produce unique or creative ideas than larger groups. (Fern, 2011, p. 10)

Participants

Time constraints excluded the possibility of a comprehensive survey of Edmonton's neighbourhood connectors. I therefore interviewed a purposive sample of connectors most appropriate to my line of inquiry. "Purposive sampling allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested. … [P]urposive sampling demands that we think critically about the parameters of the population we are studying and choose our sample case carefully on this basis." (Silverman, 2013, p. 148)

The overall pool of prospective interviewees was very shallow, and, as their Abundant Community colleague, I had met many of them previously. I knew that Westmount had a relatively successful, well-established Abundant Community program. I had also seen their Abundant Community Westmount Facebook page, so I knew that they had been trying their hand at social media. For my inner-city group, I approached seven connectors who I knew had put in enough time and effort to be able to contribute meaningful knowledge of the job. Of those seven, four responded to say they would be happy to participate. After distributing a Doodle poll with 12 different potential interview times, I settled on a date when three of them were available. I wanted to include at least one inner-city connector who used social media—and, fortunately, one was able to participate.

In short, the sample size was small, but appropriate for qualitative inquiry and gathering rich data. I felt confident that they would all bring valuable knowledge and experience to the discussions.

The participants were all my current ACE peers, with the exception of the one former neighbourhood connector for Westmount. I did not hold a position of authority over any of them, and I made it explicitly clear that they should feel no obligation to participate. My recruitment email included a brief description of my research project and its goals, and I attached PDF copies of the information and consent forms. At the interviews, I reviewed these forms in detail before the participants signed them.

A few days after the inner-city group interview, the neighbourhood connector for Boyle Street Community League contacted me to ask that she not be identified by name. In this report and the appendix, she is identified by a pseudonym.

Setting

As mentioned earlier, Westmount represented a suitable example of a "success story" for Abundant Community. Its former and current neighbourhood connectors have achieved considerable success, both in recruiting volunteer "block connectors" to aid their efforts and in compiling data on neighbourhood residents. By examining Westmount, I could expect to gain valuable insight into "what works."

I could have considered several other mature Edmonton neighbourhoods for this role—Highlands or Glenora for example. Because I knew of the Abundant Community Westmount Facebook page, however, I expected it would provide a useful setting to consider the possible influence of social media.

My recruits for the second group interview represented three neighbourhoods that all share common inner-city challenges such as poverty, population density, immigration, and transience. Other inner-city Abundant Community neighbourhoods such as Alberta Avenue or McCauley, would have been equally suitable settings had their connectors made themselves available for the interview.

Instrument

For both group sessions, I prepared interview scripts that would guide and propel the conversation while leaving plenty of room for unexpected detours. In developing the questioning routes, I referred to the four phases outlined by Krueger & Casey (2009):

1. **Opening phase —** factual, low stakes, a chance to get people comfortable about speaking to the group

2. **Introductory** — Introduce topic of conversation

3. **Transition** — Move the conversation into the key questions

4. **Key questions** — the questions that drive the study

Although this framework was intended for more traditional focus groups, it served well in my small group interviews. Both conversations were lively and substantive—even fun—and flowed naturally into the key questions.

By employing semi-structured interviews, I was also able to take advantage of my own status as an inner-city Abundant Community neighbourhood connector—drawing upon my own perspective as I facilitated the discussions:

Compared to structured interviews, semistructured interviews can make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the

interviewee; as well, the interviewer has a greater chance of becoming visible as a

knowledge-producing participant in the process itself, rather than hiding behind a

preset interview guide. And, compared to unstructured interviews, the interviewer

has a greater say in focusing the conversation on issues that he or she deems

important in relation to the research project. (Brinkman, 2014, p. 17)

Procedures

Before beginning my data collection, I submitted a detailed application to the

University of Alberta's Research Ethics & Management Online (REMO) system and

secured approval to proceed. I had no issues or concerns in regards to ethics or ethics-

related procedures during collection; nor were any expressed by my participants. I did not

encounter any issues that might require me to change, modify, or alter my data collection

ethics application.

I conducted both group interviews at my Edmonton home, providing beverages

and fresh home baking to foster a relaxed, sociable atmosphere. The participants all

signed informed consent forms (see appendix) after I reviewed the forms in detail.

Each interview was approximately two hours long. I used a digital voice recorder

to record the sessions. Immediately afterward, I transferred the audio files to my

encrypted hard drive (with password-protected backups on Dropbox), and deleted them

from my portable voice recorder. I will retain these files for five years (i.e., until April

2022) before securely deleting them from both the hard drive and Dropbox.

Both interviews went very smoothly, with no significant challenges or difficulties.

The interview scripts provided useful frameworks for the conversations and required no

substantive changes—other than the tangents and improvisations that are expected (and encouraged) within the semi-structured interview format.

Within a few days after each interview, I prepared a written transcript (see appendix). By completing the transcripts promptly, I avoided possible errors in attribution or content (for example, when precise wording was difficult to hear).

Next, I spent time reviewing content publicly available at the communities' Facebook pages, and collected illustrative samples of the social media strategies that had been discussed in the group interviews. For each sample, I took a screen shot and recorded the post's permanent URL.

Analysis

In analyzing my interview transcripts and social media samples, I was guided by the writings of Rapley (2001) and Saldaña (2014).

As I conducted the interviews, and as I later spent time reviewing and mentally absorbing each transcript, I remained alert for any key themes and patterns as they emerged. Next, I used those themes to organize an overall framework for discussing my findings. I then returned to the transcripts to code individual comments according to theme, and to flag the comments that seemed most pertinent to my research question. After cutting-and-pasting those comments into my discussion framework, I was able to describe and reflect upon my findings, and to add illustrative social media samples where available.

Saldaña posits, "Reliability and validity are terms and constructs of the positivist quantitative paradigm that refer to the replicability and accuracy of measures." Instead,

he argues that qualitative research be evaluated according to the constructs "credibility and trustworthiness" (2014, p. 45). I addressed the issue of credibility by quoting participants directly, and by providing corollary evidence such as screen captures of social media posts. My appendix includes full transcripts of both group interviews as evidence that my findings captured and distilled the conversations in a trustworthy manner.

In analyzing my data, I had to remain mindful of my own role in generating it—both as an active participant in the conversations, and as someone with considerable experience in Abundant Community as well as social media. Bryant argues that prior expertise poses no obstacle to grounded theory, provided one remains ready to follow the data where it naturally leads—or, as he puts it, "Open mind is good; empty head is bad" (2009).

In any case, as Rapley points out, I can't help but exert some influence on the data that I collected, and on its subsequent analysis. My research explores some specific responses to my research question, rather than any conclusive, definitive answers.

Whatever analytic stance is adopted, you cannot escape from the interactional nature of interviews, that the 'data' are collaboratively produced. Whatever ideal the interviewer practices, their talk is central to the trajectory of the interviewee's talk. As such, the 'data' gained in the specific interview begin to emerge *as just one possible version,* a version that is contingent on the specific local interactional context. (Rapley, 2001, p. 318)

Summary

Although Abundant Community Edmonton is still at a relatively early stage, and even more so in downtown communities, the challenges and opportunities of the inner-city neighbourhood connector provide an intriguing opportunity for exploratory grounded theory research. The available sample size may be tiny, but semi-structured group interviews can produce pragmatic insights into what works (and what doesn't).

By beginning with the "success story" of Abundant Community in Westmount, and then moving on to interview inner-city neighbourhood connectors, I was able to extract and analyze ideas and experiences that differ between the two scenarios.

In the next chapter, I describe my findings in detail.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

Introduction

My exploratory grounded-theory study sought to identify the particular challenges and opportunities faced by inner-city connectors face in the context of Abundant Community Edmonton. At the same time, I was curious how social media and other online tools might help further their efforts. My inquiry required me to first gain an understanding of Abundant Community as it functions in a "typical" neighbourhood, and then to explore the specific experiences of neighbourhood connectors working in the inner city. To do this, I hosted two semi-structured group interview sessions—one with "typical" neighbourhood connectors, and one with connectors working in the inner city. In both cases, I sought examples (and outcomes) of connectors' efforts to leverage social media.

I have organized the presentation of my findings around those two group interviews. In the first two sections of this chapter, I begin by describing the community leagues in question—both in general, and in terms of some important demographic statistics. I then present the key insights offered by the interviewees, organized by theme and illustrated by excerpts from the transcripts. I explore the general experiences of the connectors, and then explore their use of social media.

In both cases, I began by compiling complete written transcripts from the interview sessions (these are included in the appendix). For the Westmount interview, I looked for themes to illustrate the nature and experience of Abundant Community in a typical neighbourhood: the connectors' own sense of Westmount's overall character, the

specific challenges they encountered when recruiting block connectors, the recruitment strategies they found useful, and their use of social media to enhance their efforts.

From my inner-city transcript, I focused more directly on my research question. I looked for comments that reflect challenges specific to the inner city—density, poverty, and immigration being the three broad themes that emerged. For each of these challenges, the connectors explored possible responses, as well as ways in which the perceived challenge can be looked at as an opportunity. I then looked at the use of social media— can it play an important role even in communities where many residents lack internet access?

PART ONE: Abundant Community in Westmount

A. Introduction

For the sake of context and comparison, I began by examining an implementation of Abundant Community in an archetypical mature neighbourhood—one that more or less reflects city averages for variables such as household income, mobility status (i.e., the percentage of residents who haven't moved in the past five years), ratio of owner-occupied to rental residences, and immigrant population. Before examining Abundant Community in an inner-city context, I wanted to see how it functioned in a community with fewer economic and social challenges. I selected Westmount Community League as a mini case study.

Westmount Community League received funding for its Abundant Community Initiative in the spring of 2014, and has been actively pursuing it since then. Among the 35 Edmonton community leagues currently participating in Abundant Community, Westmount was among the earliest adopters, and stands among the most established and

successful efforts so far. It also has a fairly typical demographic profile among mature neighbourhoods in Edmonton.

Initially, Westmount's project was headed by Carla, who also served (and still serves) as league president. Early in 2016, after about a year and a half as Neighbourhood Connector, Carla decided she could no longer devote adequate time to the job. At that point, the league membership director, Kristin, was hired to take over Carla's role.

During a two-hour joint interview, Carla and Kristin described their experience with Abundant Community in Westmount, including their recruitment and promotional strategies. They discussed the initiative's overall effects on the community, along with some of their personal successes and challenges as Neighbourhood Connectors. At the time of the interview, Stolte and Baker had collectively succeeded in recruiting about 40 volunteer block connectors.

B. Westmount profile

Westmount is a mature Edmonton neighbourhood located just northwest of the downtown core. It contains a balance of single-family dwellings (most of them constructed before 1950) and walk-up apartments (most of them constructed more recently) (City of Edmonton n.d.-d, p. 1).

In terms of average household income, both median and mean, Westmount ranks very slightly below the figures for the city as a whole. Still, with a median annual household income of $62,150 and a mean of $85,599, Westmount can be considered a relatively comfortable middle-class neighbourhood overall. It boasts a vibrant community league, with a hall and an active slate of programs (westmountcommunityleague.com).

Figure 1: Household income comparison, City vs. Westmount
(source: "Westmount Neighbourhood Profile", 2011 Census of Canada))
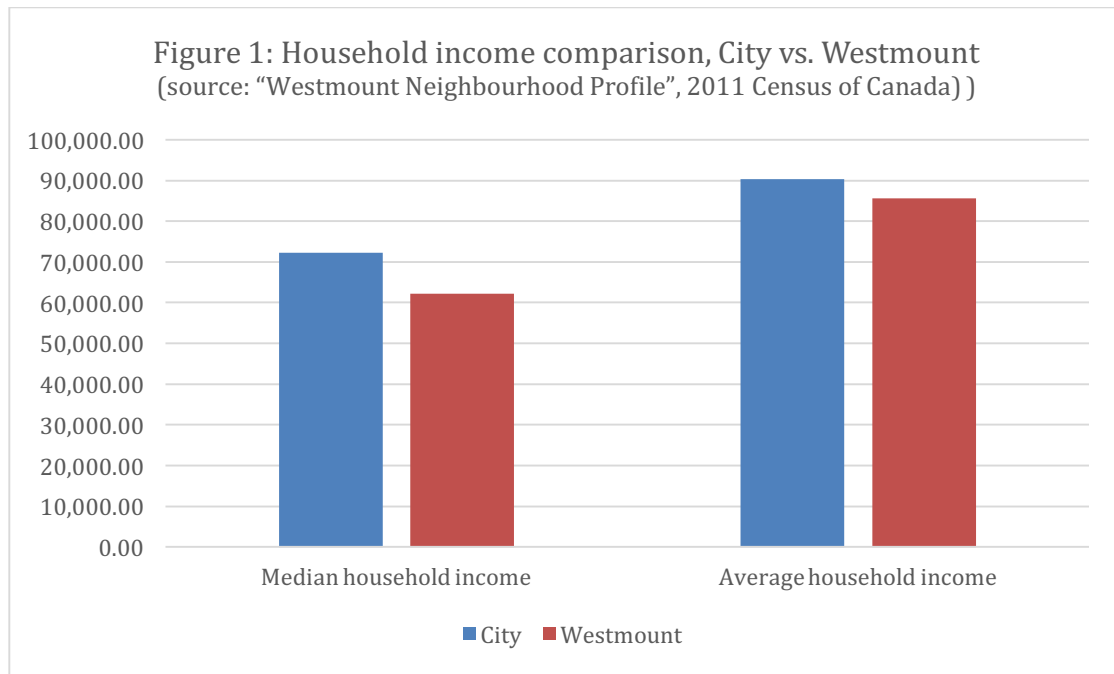
Westmount also roughly parallels city averages in other demographic measures as well. The majority of residences (57 percent) are owner-occupied. Roughly half (51 percent) of residents have not moved within the past five years, and of those who have moved into Westmount during that time, only a tiny minority (4 percent) came to Westmount from outside Canada. Single-detached houses make up 38 percent of residential units (City of Edmonton n.d.-d, p. 4).

Together with household incomes, these measures suggest a considerably more stable and prosperous environment than those of the three inner-city neighbourhoods I will examine later.

FIgure 2: Other demographic comparisons
(source: "Westmount Neighbourhood Profile", 2011 Census of Canada)
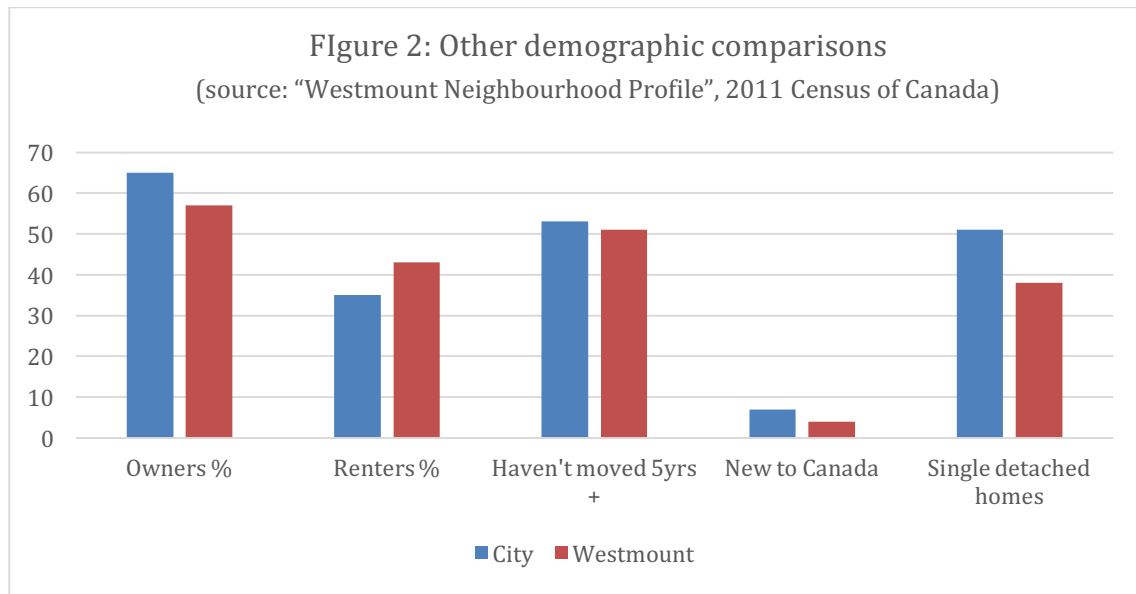
C. Interview insights

a) *Neighbourhood stability*

Both Carla and Krista commented on the relative stability of Westmount, and on

the ways in which that stability makes a project like Abundant Community more viable:

> *KRISTIN: People seem to genuinely want to live (in Westmount) for their lives. They want to buy a house there. They want to live there, and be part of the community. I think we're lucky that we have that, because it has made my job a little easier. People do want to get to know their neighbours, because they know they're going to be there for a long time.*

> *CARLA: ... I think, generally speaking, people are a little bit more invested in the community. I don't know if that's because it has traditionally been more connected, and so people feel more grounded, so they're more likely to stay? I think there's a tipping point in a neighbourhood, where that happens. Where more people are connected, and are more grounded, which then makes other people more connected and more grounded. You need a certain amount of people that are committed to the neighbourhood, and then that kind of bleeds out.*

b) *Challenges in conducting Abundant Community*

Walk-up apartments and renters

Although Carla and Kristin have made significant inroads with residents of single-detached homes, they both reported difficulty recruiting connectors in areas with more renters, particularly those living in walk-up apartment buildings.

> *KRISTIN: ... I do have some blocks that I have just not been able to find anybody on. I drop flyers, I talk to everyone who's outside when I do it, and I ask everyone I know if anyone knows anyone on those blocks. And it's just some that I'm like, okay, these might not have a connector. ...And the funny thing is, they're mostly somehow aligned with 107 Avenue. ...I think that's maybe because there's just more rentals and that kind of thing on those streets.*

> *CARLA: It's pretty tough. Like, in my block—I'm on one of those northern blocks, between 111 and 110—and, so, we have a lot of stable, like, owners. It's all owners. Except, we have a four-storey walk-up on our corner. And I have tried, and tried. I've taped signs on their doors. I've gone in and hand-delivered, and put flyers under doors. I've heard TVs going, knock on the door, they don't answer. I'm the crazy person who calls to people who're sitting on their balcony, and give them an information sheet. ...There's something uniquely different about apartment dwellers versus single-family.*

> *KRISTIN: Right now I'm focusing on the single-family homes in the neighbourhood, and kind of getting that established, and then hopefully moving from there into more of the apartment buildings.*

Getting people to fill out "conversation guides"

In addition to recruiting "block connectors" throughout Westmount,

neighbourhood connectors are expected to collect data from residents—their visions for

the neighbourhood, the activities they'd like to do (or lead with neighbours), the skills

they can share, etc. Block connectors are asked to fill out questionnaires with each

resident on their block (in Abundant Community parlance, these questionnaires are called

"conversation guides"). The neighbourhood connectors compile those responses into a

database, with the eventual goal of using it to connect people according to their gifts and

interests (e.g., 20 people are interested in yoga, and 2 people say they're willing to lead

yoga, so let's set up a yoga group!).

While many volunteers are enthused about the idea of hosting a block party, or

otherwise connecting with their neighbours, they tend to drag their feet when it comes to

filling out and collecting the conversation guides. Some find the process onerous, while

others don't see the value in the exercise.

> *CARLA: I found the buy-in was easy. People are, like, "That sounds great." In my experience, it isn't even the block party that's the problem. It's really hard to get people to fill out that conversation guide, and to have that intention about it.*
>
> *KRISTIN: [One block connector] says that her neighbours seem to feel like they're already super connected, and they don't really have an interest in being connected with the larger community. They're totally fine with that.*
>
> *KRISTIN: I have one block connector who's said, "I've tried the conversation guide with people, and they're like, meh." And then says, like, "Oh, and I'm having a block party." They're like, okay, I'll come to that. But I don't feel like filling this out for you."*
>
> *CARLA: There's a lot of people that are really good at being the go-to person on the block. Like [name]'s a good example. There's this issue on the block, and he went around and talked to everybody on the block about this issue. So, he's what I thought was the perfect guy. He's chatty, and he's always having people over. I knew he talked to all his neighbours. I went over to his house for coffee, and I sat*

down, and I went through this whole conversation guide with him, and I did it on him so he could experience it. And he hasn't done one. Like, he hasn't done any.

c) *Recruitment strategies*

Carla and Kristin are both long-term Westmount residents, and are both highly involved with the community league. As a result, they came to the Abundant Community Initiative with broad, well-established weak-tie networks in the neighbourhood. As Granovetter observed, because "membership in movements or goal-oriented organizations typically results from being recruited by friends," people with strong weak-tie relationships have a much better chance of recruiting others, and, through friends of friends, of recruiting beyond their own personal cliques (Granovetter, 1983, p. 202).

Their weak-tie networks helped Carla and Kristen successfully identify and recruit potential block connectors. Both of them began with their own existing friends and acquaintances—two separate networks that together provided many of their recruits.

> *CARLA: [I]t's been really helpful, actually, having me start it and the Kristin take over. Because her and I have a lot of different networks. So I had kind of picked all my low-hanging fruit, and realized, okay, I don't have the time and energy to door-knock. ... [W]hen Kristin took over, then all of a sudden there was a huge influx of more block connectors, because it was all her low-hanging fruit that she was able to pick at, right?*

> *KRISTIN: [M]y kids go to the local elementary school. So, I know a lot of people from there. And that's kind of where I started. I sat down with the map, when I got the job, and I thought, who do I know on each of these blocks? And then I would just ask them if they were interested. And most of them were, because they're just pretty friendly people to begin with.*

Once Kristin exhausted the list of her own friends and acquaintances, she began to expand her search to include *their* friends and acquaintances.

> *KRISTIN: My thing is to kind of do it through connections that I have, connections that other people have. Kind of like six degrees of separation, right? I honestly don't want to just knock on random doors. I don't know who I'm getting. At least, this way, I've kind of vetted them a little bit. I know that they're not out*

to rob their neighbours, or take advantage of anybody. They genuinely want to know their neighbours.

As Westmount Community League's membership director, Kristin also had a built-in advantage in building and exploiting brand-new weak ties. Whenever neighbours bought new league memberships, Kristin would naturally gain access to their contact information. When welcoming them to the community league, she would also pitch the Abundant Community Initiative—and the joys of becoming a block connector.

> *KRISTIN: It's actually been super helpful to be the membership director. Because, when people get a new membership, I get notified. I've always emailed them to just say, 'Thanks for buying a membership. Are you interested in volunteering at all?' Like, so we can put together our volunteer list. And, now, I just kind of say, 'And, have you also heard about Abundant Community?' I just think it all fits together. If they're interested in being a member of the community, then they know about it. So, it's worked out pretty well for that reason.*

d) Promoting Abundant Community through social media

Around the time Kristin became Westmount's neighbourhood connector, she took a few classes in social media through the University of Alberta's Faculty of Extension. She decided to create a Facebook page, Abundant Community Westmount (https://www.facebook.com/AbundantCommunityWestmount), in order to celebrate the initiative, to boost its profile, and to possibly attract new block connectors.

Kristin populates the page with posts about community events and Abundant Community activities, as well as links to articles related to community and connectedness.

> *KRISTIN: I try to find things that … help in inducing neighbourliness, or events in the community where you can potentially meet your neighbours. Things that try to motivate people who are already block connectors.*

Although the page has a relatively modest following (134 "likes" as of February 2017), Kristin has found that her communication reach often extends significantly farther

than the page's core followers. When a follower of the page "likes" a post, or adds a

comment, it shows up in their friends' newsfeeds as well.

> *KRISTIN: [A] lot of times I put things on there that get a huge organic reach. I mean, I've never paid for anything to promote anything. But I've put some on there that have got, like, 600 or 700 people have seen it. So that's great, so then more people know about Abundant Community, right? They see it, and they click on it. Whether or not they 'like' it, at least they know about it.*

Figure 3: Sample Facebook post
https://www.facebook.com/AbundantCommunityWestmount/posts/691773490992387:0

When Kristin and her block connectors plan a specific event for Abundant

Community, Facebook provides an easy (and cost-free) method to reflect the event pack

to the participants, and to spread awareness to the wider community. In May 2016, for

example, the group organized a "Front Yard Party," a Saturday afternoon when people

would set up activities on their lawns and welcome any neighbours who might wander by.

> *KRISTIN: ...I went and took pictures of people who were participating. We had some block connectors who had cinnamon buns and homemade mead at their house. So we walked over there, and I even witnessed neighbours meeting their neighbours for the first time, even though they've lived across the street from each other for, like five years. They were like, 'This is crazy!' And [names] were like, 'Just come into our yard. We're just having a party in the front yard.' And people were like, 'Cool, okay, I'll come over.'*

F**igure 4:** Sample Facebook post
https://www.facebook.com/AbundantCommunityWestmount/posts/579083155594755

In April 2016, inspired in part by Abundant Community, Westmount Community

League created "Great Neighbour Day." Through the sponsorship of a neighbourhood

florist, people were able to order bouquets of tulips and have them delivered

anonymously to a neighbour's door. Then, on the appointed day, Carla, Kristin, and a

group of block connectors personally delivered the bouquets to the lucky neighbours.

> *KRISTIN: ...I go up with my big bucket of flowers, and I'm like, "I'm from the Westmount Community League!"*
>
> *CARLA: "Somebody thinks you're a great neighbour!" And everybody was, like, "Really? Wow!" And there were, I think, a hundred bunches that were sold—for first year. We're going to do it again. I bought, I think, like four of them.*

Figure 5: Sample Facebook post
https://www.facebook.com/AbundantCommunityWestmount/posts/579083155594755

In its first year or two of operation, the Abundant Community Westmount page

already appears to support the claims of scholars like Keith Hampton, Moira Burke, and

Robert Kraut—who view social media not as a cause of social isolation, but as a tool to help build social ties, and to deepen the ties that already exist (Hampton et al, 2011; Burke & Kraut, 2015).

Although Carla no longer serves as Westmount's neighbourhood connector, she continues to follow the Abundant Community Westmount Facebook page. After interacting with neighbours on Facebook—reading their posts, and seeing their "likes"— her relationships with them have gradually become more profound: acquaintances have become friends. In Carla's experience, the face-to-face connections created by Abundant Community, the sort of social capital "Team Putnam" champions, are deepened by the technologically mediated interactions celebrated by "Team Hampton." The weak ties have turned into something stronger. Bridging ties have evolved into bonding ties—and, as Hampton predicted, this further amplifies the local civic benefits: "[C]ontact with core ties using new media supports local civil and civic behaviors" (Hampton, 2011, p. 1).

> CARLA: [A]nd when I see them again, then I, like, I have a deeper understanding—I do have a deeper understanding—of who they are. And you can connect at that level, right? But that wouldn't happen if I didn't know them already. I think that's where Facebook and Abundant Community is really great, because it allows those kind of superficial 'knowings' of people to get deeper.

e) Common Good database

Although both Carla and Kristin expressed frustration for the difficult task of completing and collecting Abundant Community "conversation guides" from neighbours, they are encouraged by the steady growth of the resulting body of data.

In Edmonton, neighbourhood connectors enter the information from each form into an online database for the community (the platform, dubbed "CommonGood," was

designed by two early Abundant Community enthusiasts in Edmonton). Once the

database is populated, connectors can use the platform to generate charts, and to share

them on social media and on community league websites. The charts reflect, at a glance,

people's interests, skills, and visions for the neighbourhood. Although Kristin has not yet

progressed to the point of creating yoga groups, etc., she regularly posts snapshots of the

data to the Abundant Community Westmount page.

Figure 6: CommonGood chart shared to Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/AbundantCommunityWestmount/posts/691773490992387:0
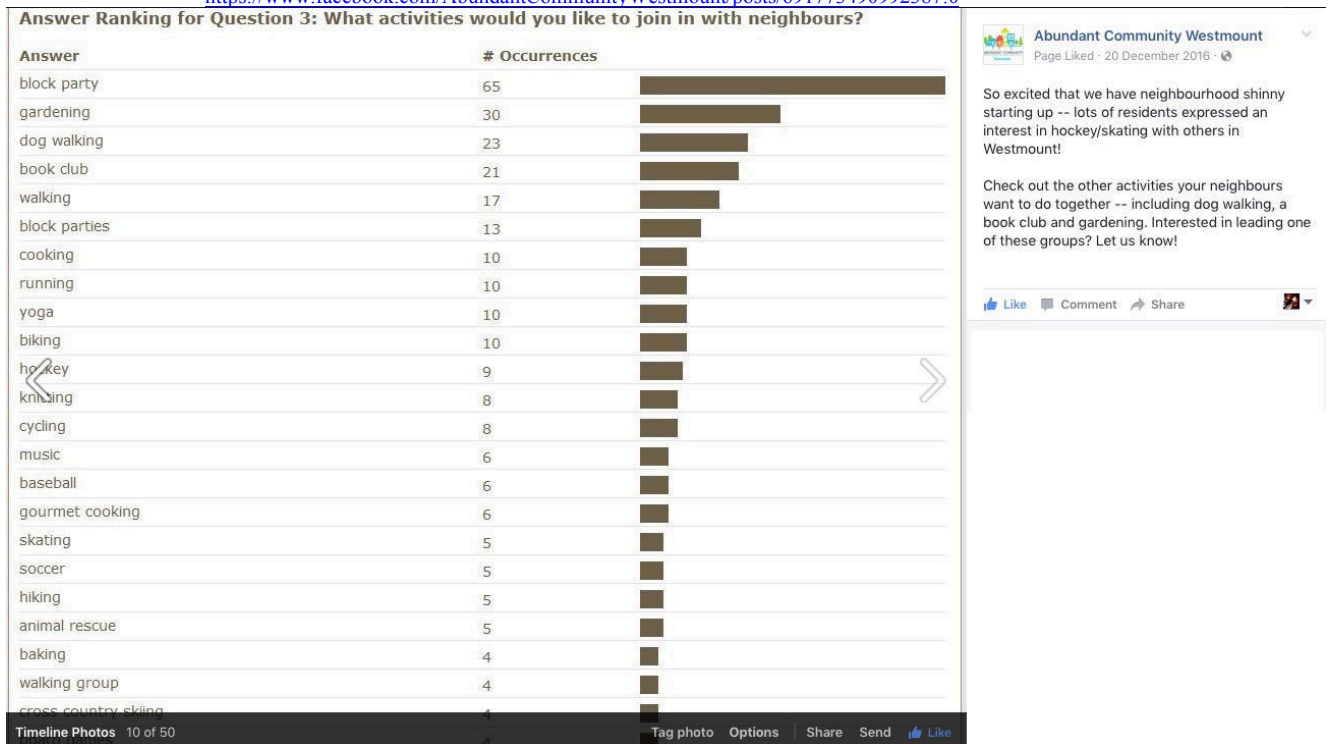
f) *Overall effect of Abundant Community in Westmount*

The tangible results—the yoga groups, etc.—may not have yet crystallized, but

both Carla and Kristin insist that the Abundant Community Initiative has changed the

way they view their own neighbourhood.

> *CARLA: [T]he fact that we have 40 people who have committed to talking to*
> *everybody on their block, and being that person on their block? To me, my own*

perception of my neighbourhood is like, wow. I can really depend on them. I feel cared for in my neighbourhood, just because of those numbers, right?

Kristin believes the initiative has helped create connections that wouldn't otherwise have existed. Abundant Community has given people both a reason and a framework for meeting their neighbours—many of whom have lived near them for years.

> *KRISTIN: Now I can take this [conversation form] over and, like, I'm the block connector and we're going to get to know each other. And it's just like a good little way to go over and have it be an icebreaker. I've had some really shy people overcome their misgivings about the whole thing, because they do have the authority behind it.*

Abundant Community has also fostered an environment where neighbours can depend on one another, and rely on each other in times of need. During the 2016 wildfires in Fort McMurray, Carla found herself cooking extra food for her neighbour, a single man who was working long hours for the relief efforts. "I don't know if that would have happened without this Abundant Community." She also described neighbours banding together to address vandalism without involving the police.

> *CARLA: [T]here was one incident where there was a youth who was throwing eggs at this particular house. They solved it in-house—like, they solved it within the block. Which is pretty powerful.*

D. Westmount summary

In a relatively prosperous, stable, mature neighbourhood like Westmount, the Abundant Community Initiative appears to have found fertile ground. Both interviewees describe Westmount as a place where people tend to settle down. And, as long-time residents actively involved with their community league, both Carla and Kristin were able to draw on large weak-tie networks among their neighbours, giving them a jump-start in their effort to recruit block connectors.

Both Carla and Kristin specifically reported having difficulty implementing Abundant Community among renters, especially those living in walk-up apartments. They also found neighbours, in general, to be reluctant about filling out and collecting conversation guides.

Social media has provided a powerful tool for spreading awareness of Abundant Community, and for reinforcing and publicizing the efforts of the block connectors. Carla and Krista both believe it has also helped strengthen the bonds between neighbours. Rather than interfering with face-to-face relationships, or acting as a substitute to "real life" interactions, the Abundant Community Westmount Facebook page appears to seamlessly complement efforts at building neighbourly connections.

PART TWO: Abundant Community in an inner-city context

A. Introduction

After examining the successful implementation of Abundant Community in a typical mature neighbourhood, I explored early efforts to apply the model to Edmonton's inner-city neighbourhoods. What additional challenges (and opportunities) might neighbourhood connectors encounter in areas with greater economic and social challenges? And, might social media have a role to play in the success of Abundant Community, as it has in Westmount?

I interviewed neighbourhood connectors from three inner-city neighbourhoods: Boyle Street Community League, Central McDougall Community League, and Oliver Community League.

"Alicia" (not her real name) returned to her hometown of Edmonton in 2016 after completing a degree in Environmental Sustainability and Society (ESS) and Sociology at Dalhousie University in Halifax. Eager to apply her learning, she approached Howard Lawrence (the driving force behind Abundant Community in Edmonton) and sat in on a few of his monthly informal meetings with neighbourhood connectors. Before long, Howard asked Alicia if she would be willing to "pinch hit" in a couple of neighbourhoods—taking over for previous neighbourhood connectors who hadn't made significant progress. Alicia has since begun recruiting block connectors in Bannerman, a middle-class suburban neighbourhood in northeast Edmonton, and in Boyle Street, a struggling inner-city neighbourhood. (Although Alicia provided informed consent for the interview, she subsequently asked to not be directly identified in the results.)

Jason has lived in Central McDougall for a number of years, and was involved in early conversations to bring Abundant Community to the neighbourhood. He is a married father in his forties, serves as a Baptist pastor, and owns a condo in a walk-up building. Around the time Abundant Community was gearing up in Central McDougall (spring 2016), Jason found himself out of work and decided to apply for the job of neighbourhood connector. His territory covers the eastern half of the neighbourhood (I am neighbourhood connector for the western half).

Angelika is a young student renting a unit in a walk-up apartment building near the geographic centre of Oliver Community League. As a summer student, she took a job as event planner for the league. The league's neighbourhood connector, who was wrapping up in his portion of the neighbourhood, recommended Angelika to take over the position and expand Abundant Community to her area within Oliver. Angelika concentrates on a mini-neighbourhood she has dubbed "Oliver Park."

During a two-hour group interview, the trio discussed their struggles and successes, as well as the strategies they have employed to help build neighbourly connections in the context of the inner city. Because their experiences differ greatly from those of Carla and Kristin in Westmount, the format and scope of the conversation did diverge significantly from the earlier interview, although the two overlapped in many areas.

B. Neighbourhood profiles

Boyle Street (immediately east of the downtown core) and Central McDougall (immediately north of the downtown core) are two of Edmonton's most impoverished neighbourhoods, with mean and medium household incomes well below the city average.

Oliver, despite having a few pockets of affluence, also has relatively low household

incomes (City of Edmonton n.d.-a; n.d.-b; n.d.-c). The sub-neighbourhood Angelika calls

"Oliver Park" is a densely populated area dominated by modest walk-up apartment

buildings, in marked contrast to structures like "The Pearl," a luxury condominium

skyscraper in Oliver's southwest corner.

Figure 7: Household income comparison, City vs. neighbourhoods
(source: "Edmonton Neighbourhood Profiles", 2011 Census of Canada)
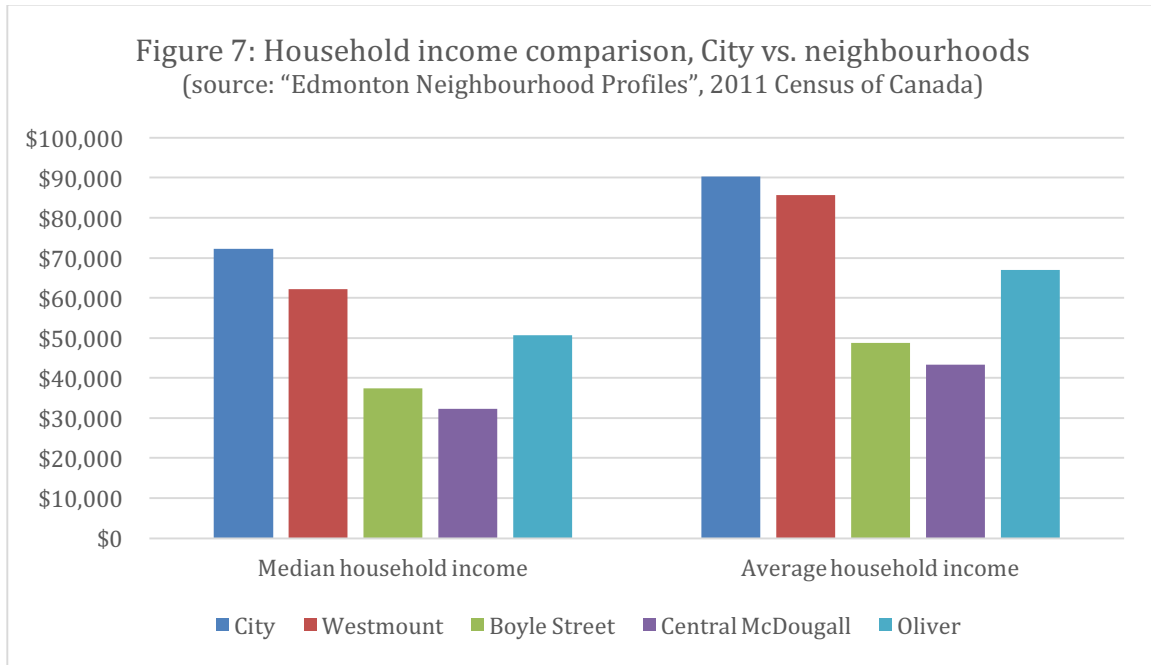
The three inner-city neighbourhoods also differ significantly from Westmount and

the city as a whole in other demographic measures. In all three neighbourhoods, the

majority of residences are renter-occupied. A small minority—one third or less—of

residents have lived in the neighbourhoods for at least five years, and a comparatively

high proportion of residents moved to the neighbourhoods from outside Canada. In those

three measures—ownership vs. rental, mobility, and immigration—Central McDougall is

farthest from city-wide norms, Oliver is somewhat closer, and Boyle Street lies

somewhere in between.

The three inner-city neighbourhoods and city-wide averages diverge most markedly from city-wide norms in the proportion of residences that are single-detached homes. Only a tiny percentage of Boyle Street and Central McDougall residents live in single-detached homes, while the proportion in Oliver—55 out of 11,595—is so minuscule it rounds down to zero percent.

Figure 8: Other demographic comparisons
(source: "Edmonton Neighbourhood Profiles", 2011 Census of Canada)
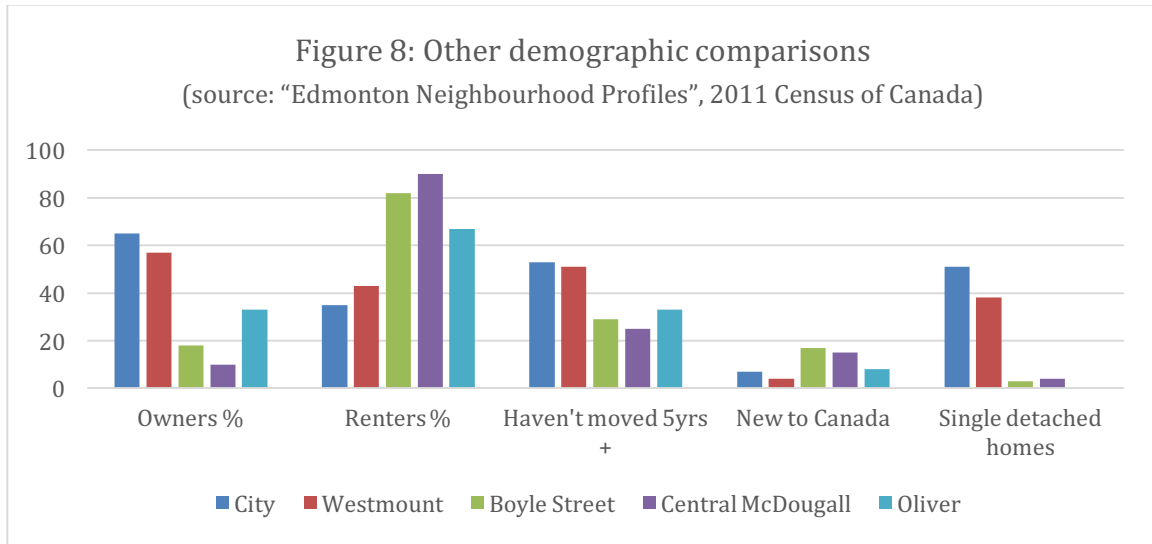
So, in short, the three inner-city neighbourhoods collectively have lower average household incomes, larger proportions of renters vs. owners, more transient populations, a higher proportion of immigrants, and a much lower number of single-detached houses. Presumably, given the areas' higher density, poverty, transience, and immigration levels, we can expect to see significant differences in the experiences of the inner-city neighbourhood connectors. What specific challenges (and opportunities) come with working in the inner city, and how do they address them? And what role might communication technologies play?

C. Interview insights

a) Initial reflections about the job

We began the conversation by discussing the positive aspects of living in an inner-city neighbourhood. In order to build a sense of neighbourliness, of community abundance, one presumably should approach the job with an upbeat attitude. What, I wondered, do these connectors like best about their communities?

Jason and Angelika pointed to the diversity that surrounds them, and which contributes to a vibrant atmosphere one might not encounter in a mature neighbourhood like Westmount.

> *ANGELIKA: ...I really like how diverse my neighbourhood is. We have The Pearl [luxury condominium skyscraper], and we have low-income housing, and we have everything in between. Lots of different backgrounds and cultures.*

> *JASON: ...[T]here are significant populations from several minority populations around the world—mini locations of community collectiveness. There's Somalian corners, and Ethiopian corners, and First Nations corners in our neighbourhood—where people of various cultural groups congregate.*

Alicia agreed, and added that the economic diversity of Boyle Street excited her as well. Whereas people from other parts of the city might be frightened or horrified by the level of poverty in the inner city, Alicia chooses to view it as an opportunity.

> *ALICIA: You can visibly see that there are homeless and transient people just living there. [A lot of people] really overlook it. That's one thing that I like: I want to uncover that untapped potential.*

We discussed the phenomenon of knocking on the doors of complete strangers, in an era where it's not socially expected, and is usually unwelcome. Do they find it difficult? Has it gotten any easier with practice?

> *ANGELIKA: Personally, for me, no. The first door I chose to knock on was in my building. I am actually the building connector for my building. I knocked on the door that had a 'Go Away!' mat. It was clearly a joke, but I was, like, okay, if I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it. And I was terrified. And I still get that kind of sense*

of dread. You just never know what's going to pop up behind the door. And, being in Oliver, you see some strange stuff. [laughs]

ALICIA: ...[W]hen I first went door-knocking on my own, I felt like I was super awkward. Trying to explain something that I know so much about—all these details—in a really concise, and short, and punchy manner that somebody else will grasp right away, was pretty challenging. It progressively gets so much easier. You kind of get this spiel going in your head. You almost give the same thing every time. You know it works with certain people. I don't know. Every time I go out, the first two houses, I'm a little stumbly. But you do get a kind of rhythm going.

Jason, in contrast, finds the task much easier, and even enjoyable.

JASON: I like knocking on doors, so that doesn't bother me much. I don't mind at all. I like the challenge of somebody coming gruff, and trying to win them over with that first 30 seconds—convincing them by what you say in the first few sentences, and not slam the door in your face. That's fun for me.

Knocking on strangers' doors can be particularly daunting in areas with higher

crime levels. When people are literally wary of their neighbours, it can be hard to

convince prospective building connectors to knock on doors.

ANGELIKA: Oh, yes. I've never had a building connector go out on their own. I'm always there with them, just because of that comfort level. They're scared to talk to their neighbours. They just don't know what to expect. And they don't know, necessarily, where the crime's coming from in their building. Yeah, it's a challenge. I like challenge, though.

...I generally explain to them that knowing your neighbours can actually make the community safer. You don't need to be afraid if someone knocks on your door. I'm not coming to murder you, or steal your things. But, yeah, there's generally a feeling of wariness around people, especially in buildings with high crime rates, or prostitutes, or drugs. Getting into those buildings, and building up trust is sometimes a challenge as well.

b) *Density—walk-ups versus single detached*

Gaining access to buildings

In Westmount, Carla and Kristin viewed walk-up apartments as almost a lost

cause, focusing their efforts instead on single-detached houses. In the inner city, where

detached houses are few and far between, neighbourhood connectors don't have that

option. Instead, they must struggle, persist, and get creative to reach the people tucked

away behind those locked building vestibules.

Gaining access to the building represents a daunting first challenge. In the inner

city, building managers and residents are conditioned to not open the door to outsiders.

> *ANGELIKA: Getting into buildings is challenging for me. It's the biggest hurdle for a neighbourhood connector in high density. If you don't know anyone in the building, a lot of management companies aren't very receptive, or they don't get back to you. So, was and continues to be the biggest hurdle that I overcome, and that I'm working on. Because, in a suburban neighbourhood, you just walk up the driveway and knock the door. But [with a walk-up] you actually need someone there to let you into the building. So you already need to have a connection there, whether it's the management company or someone that lives in the building. I've tried hovering outside, and that sometimes works. Sometimes it doesn't.*

> *ALICIA: Getting access to the building is absolutely number one. And since I'm sort of in the beginning-ish stages of Boyle now, that's where I'm at. Contacting all these building managers, and trying to work these networks to see if I can find anyone on the inside, right? It's such a struggle.*

Angelika has managed to make one significant breakthrough in this area.

Boardwalk, a management company with many buildings in the city centre, appears

ready to take an active role in promoting Abundant Community in Oliver.

> *ANGELIKA: The majority of building management companies, I have had terrible luck with. Boardwalk has been been great. ...[T]hey actually contacted me. They're willing to pay for a big movie party. They want to set up a screen, and have a big block party in a park across the street from one of their buildings. ...They saw the value of having something like this in a building with a high crime rate, or with people that don't feel connected. They're the one exception to the rule. I wish more companies would be like that.*

Another challenge lies in opening people's minds to the idea of connecting with

others in their building. The neighbourhood connectors have found that—paradoxically—

most apartment dwellers seem particularly isolated from their neighbours, despite their

proximity.

ANGELIKA: ...[Y]ou do get the occasional person that's like, 'Why are you knocking on my door? This is why I live in an apartment, is to not have this happen.' But, generally, sometimes people are thrilled. They'll invite you in for food. I do find there are some people that are craving the connection, but they just don't know how to get it.

ALICIA: It's just so weird—you're going into a culture where no one talks to each other, in a building, all stacked on top of one another. It's just really new, and people are scared of you.

The connectors have developed different strategies to overcome this obstacle.

Angelika, for instance has switched her style of knocking. At the suggestion of Abundant

Community veteran Howard Lawrence, she uses what she calls the friendly knock—

"shave-and-a-haircut, two bits!"

Jason disarms people by asking them right away for their thoughts about Central

McDougall, rather than opening with a spiel about the benefits of Abundant Community.

JASON: I actually switched to just saying, 'Can you help me?' And I actually wait for a response. Usually, it comes as, 'Well, I don't know. What do you want?' "Well, actually, something that you're fully prepared and fully able to give. You've probably given this week; you just didn't give it to me. I want your opinion about the neighbourhood.'

Interestingly, both Angelika and Alicia pointed out advantages of recruiting

connectors in walk-up apartments, as opposed to door-to-door with single-detached

houses.

ALICIA: Winter! It's nice to be inside buildings.

ANGELIKA: I went to a neighbourhood connector meeting, and everyone's like, oh yeah, things slow down in the winter. I don't have that problem. Everyone's in their apartments in the winter. It's actually the best time to be a neighbourhood connector, as far as I'm concerned. ... That, and you can be efficient, too. Knock an entire 80-suite building in a few hours.

Lack of existing weak-tie networks

Unlike Carla and Kristin in Westmount, the inner-city connectors have no existing

weak-tie networks to draw upon in order to recruit volunteers. With no built-in pool of

candidates, Alicia, Angelika, and Jason must devise alternative strategies for identifying

and contacting neighbours who might be willing (and able) to serve as block connectors.

One obvious possibility is to draw upon the community league board and

membership. In joining and/or volunteering with their community leagues, people have

already demonstrated a certain level of interest and involvement with their

neighbourhood. Membership lists and contact information could provide at least a

starting point for block connector recruitment. At the same time, however, it is only

that—a starting point. Community league members account for only a small proportion

of residents overall, particularly in the inner-city. For example, Central McDougall

Community League currently has 94 members (I am on the board and have access to the

list) whereas, according to the 2011 census, the neighbourhood has a population of 4,970

(City of Edmonton, n.d.-b).

Alicia hasn't yet been granted access to Boyle Street Community League's

membership, but she has found herself leaning on the league board to help compensate

for her status as a newcomer and relative outsider.

> *ALICIA: [She has been largely unsuccessful at getting into buildings] I think the only other thing I've been attempting to do is use the community league board—to try and tap into their network. They've been in the community a lot longer than I have, right? I'm just this newcomer coming in, and plopping myself down, and trying to figure out the lay of the land. That alone is a different challenge.*

Oliver's community league board has allowed Angelika full access to the

membership list and information forms. When people fill out league memberships, the

back of the form includes places to list volunteer interests, activity interests, and general

comments—similar to the data collected in Abundant Community conversation guides.

Angelika uses the forms as an informal icebreaker.

> *ANGELIKA: [W]hen people sign up for their memberships, we actually have some of the questions on the back. And, if they don't fill out the back of the membership, then I'll actually call them, and be like, 'I notice that you didn't fill out the membership.' And, hopefully, get a connection that way. Just very indirect.*

Recruiting at community events

One solution, if you don't know many people, is to get out and meet people.

Angelika makes a point of attending community league events, with the theory that the

people who show up are likely to have an interest in community involvement.

> *ANGELIKA: I go to almost every community league event. I always have my neighbourhood connector badge, and I have found a lot of connections to get into buildings that way. Because, generally, the people that are attending the community league events would be the type of people … I'd say, you don't even have to be a building connector, you can just let me into your building when I need to. They're usually very open to that.*

> *ALICIA: At some point, events are also going to be used as my strategy going forward. Next weekend I'm going to one, and I'm going to go with all of my Abundant Community supplies and try and recruit people there—at least gauge people's interest. Try and tag onto community league-sponsored events.*

In Central McDougall, the neighbourhood connectors arranged funding and

hosted their own "Community Connect" event, with live music and free food. They

printed posters and put them up in every walk-up apartment building in the

neighbourhood, and promoted the event by email, and on Facebook and Twitter. At the

event, volunteers were on hand to sell community league memberships, and to help

people fill out Abundant Community conversation guides.

> *JASON: [W]e brought some people together, and met some community connectors. I absolutely agree, if people will come to a community event, these are people who already get it. …They just haven't put their name on an official form yet, but they're already signed up as neighbourhood connection/building connector kind of people. By showing up there, you know they're on your side. Then, it's just a matter of figuring out who they are and how to get hold of them after the event, so you can have more conversations about that, and turn them from just a contact to a person that's actually helping fulfill the goal of the Abundant Community Initiative.*

Figure 9: Facebook photo gallery from Community Connect event
https://www.facebook.com/pg/Centralmacdougallcommunityleague/photos/?tab=album&album_id=619314934914917

c) *Connecting with immigrants*

Language barrier

During the Westmount interview, the subject of a language barrier never came up.

Only four percent of Westmount residents have arrived in the community from outside

Canada during the past five years (City of Edmonton, n.d.-d).

In contrast, many residents of Boyle Street, Central McDougall, and Oliver are recent immigrants from non-English-speaking countries. For neighbourhood connectors at the doorstep, this poses an obvious challenge.

> *ANGELIKA: We have a lot of immigrants in our neighbourhood. … It's hard to convey the context, especially if there's language barriers there—which there is. So, I've been lucky enough to find a few building connectors that are bilingual, or trilingual, or multilingual.*

> *JASON: I…[S]ometimes, multiple people in the same building will open the door, and they don't speak English. Their grandkids, who will be home in three hours and are eight, speak English for the family. Or, the dad, who will be home from work at 11 pm, but he'll be gone again at 5 am. Try to connect with that guy! Or, talk through the kids. There are some real challenges there.*

Unless neighbourhood connectors are lucky enough (like Angelika) to occasionally find and recruit multilingual connectors, there are no simple solutions for this challenge. Angelika has thought about translating some of the Abundant Community materials, but does not see this as practicable. Google Translate (or equivalent) could potentially help at the doorstep, although the connectors haven't yet thought to try it.

> *ANGELIKA: I've thought about translating the materials into different languages. But I just don't know if that would even work. The language barrier is such a huge thing. And to not have it with you … like, which language do you carry with you in your little bag as you're knocking on people's doors? I have no idea what to do there. But, I've thought about translating.*

> *JASON: The trouble with Central McDougall in that regard is, at John A. McDougall School there are 38 languages spoken in the homes of students. And it's not a very big school population. Thirty-eight languages. There's just no tangible way to do it. And there are obviously some that are much more heavily represented than others, but the likelihood that, on any given day, you're going to be able to guarantee that this one's going to be useful … even if you carried the eight most commonly spoken, you would miss as many people as you hit, or more. And, if you don't speak those languages, depending on how open they are to standing there and pantomiming with you, how do you know which one to even reach for and show them? And, just because they speak the language doesn't mean they necessarily read it, either. So, there's a lot of extra barriers.*

Immigrants "get it"

Although the language barrier can be daunting, the inner-city connectors agreed that there are also advantages to working with recent immigrants. If today's North Americans have lost their social capital, as Team Putnam suggest, people in developing countries have largely avoided that fate. Immigrants to Canada are often surprised to learn that, in this country, people simply don't know their neighbours. As such, they intuitively grasp (and support) the goals of Abundant Community.

> *ALICIA: Sometimes, once you get into the conversation with immigrants, they 'get it.' [In their home country], everyone knew everyone.*

> *JASON: On top of that, this was already mentioned, but both people from other countries who are recent to Canada, and people with real and tangible socioeconomic needs—both those communities rapidly seem to 'get it.' They get the advantages in a hurry. You don't have to sell them on anything. I don't know for certain, because I've never done it, but I can imagine in wealthier, suburban kind of neighbourhoods, you'd have people going, 'Yeah, I don't need any of that. I don't have any crime or safety issues. I don't care about what my neighbour thinks about anything. I don't want to meet them, and I don't need to. I'm busy, and I'm fine. I don't need any of that support, and I don't want it.' I don't know if that's actually true, but that would be my fear in those neighbourhoods. We don't run into that. People that I talk to, they get it in a hurry. 'Oh, yeah, I desperately need that.' I don't always feel like they can achieve it, but they certainly understand it. You don't have to sell them on the need. The product sells itself.*

> *ALICIA: I would add to that. When I was in Bannerman, which is suburban, one house that I knocked, it had one of those doorbell cameras. So, when you ring the doorbell, it notifies the person. They spoke to me through the camera! They wouldn't come to the door. They see no need for this Abundant Community thing. It's just totally unnecessary in their minds. They're in their little insular home. They're good. They don't care about what's going on in the outside world. They don't even care enough to come to the door and meet me face to face. So, I would agree with you on that.*

Diversity as an opportunity

In addition to "getting" Abundant Community, recent immigrants could also represent opportunities for neighbourhood connectors. Angelika offered some creative

suggestions for getting immigrants to connect with each other, and with the community

as a whole.

> *ANGELIKA: [A] lot of the immigrants want to learn English. So, we actually offer an English language learners' club at the community league, and it's usually pretty well attended. And so, when you knock on someone's door, and they're having trouble with the language barrier, you can say, 'Would you like to learn English?'*
>
> *We're also thinking of starting a cooking club, too. There's a lot of diversity of food. ... We have a very small kitchen, so that's one of the things that's holding us back. But, a lot of people are very excited to share their cuisine or their language with other people.*
>
> *...And, we had one lady who was begging us to teach her how to do a Canadian Thanksgiving. She never cooked a turkey. So, something like that would be great as well.*

d) Poverty

Poverty in the inner city translates into other challenges for neighbourhood

connectors—increased density, crime and safety issues, higher numbers of renters (and

increased turnover rates)—but the interviewees did not see poverty in itself as a barrier.

In fact, they suggested that poorer neighbourhoods might stand to gain the most from an

initiative like Abundant Community.

> *ALICIA: A lot of people in Boyle Street don't have internet, or they don't have a cell phone, or anything. So, you're forced to use the place that you live as your network. It's much more place-based, I think, as opposed to areas where there is internet, and all that virtual connectivity.*
>
> *That could be a benefit. Abundant Community is technically supposed to be a place-based initiative, so I think it could be fostered in that sense, in places where there are populations that are limited in that sense.*
>
> *JASON: If you remove the internet, you remove the smart phone, you remove the car—and, suddenly, what's in your neighbourhood becomes extremely important. And, whether or not you feel safe walking down the street, when you need to walk down the street to get milk, or to go catch the train to get to work. Then, suddenly those things are important….*

That said, despite Alicia's sense of the untapped potential in Boyle Street's homeless population, she has yet to formulate any potential strategy to integrate them with the program.

> *ALICIA: Boyle Street has a ton of people who just move around to different places, or they're living in shelters. How do you account for those people? That has been in the back of my mind, as a challenge.*

e) Promoting Abundant Community through social media

Central McDougall Community League has made a significant start promoting Abundant Community through its Facebook page and Twitter account (see Fig. 9 for one example). Alicia in Boyle Street is intrigued by the idea of a social media campaign, but hasn't tried anything yet.

In Oliver, however, Angelika has leveraged social media as a major part of her toolkit. She began with a campaign called "Faces of Oliver," styled after "Faces of Edmonton" (http://facesofedmonton.com). She would photograph people in the street, ask them for their stories, and then post the result to the league Facebook page. Later, she began to use Facebook as a platform for building awareness of Abundant Community in Oliver, and launched a page (https://www.facebook.com/abundantoliver) to post articles and publicize events.

Angelika enjoyed her greatest Facebook breakthrough in October 2016. A neighbour approached her, saying how great it would be if neighbourhood kids could trick-or-treat locally on Halloween—going from building to building, instead of having to leave the neighbourhood to trick-or-treat elsewhere. Angelika decided to actively recruit buildings in her "Oliver Park" area to participate. Social media helped turn the idea into something of a viral sensation, complete with a Google Map of participating buildings.

ANGELIKA: [W]hen the Halloween thing came up this year, we decided to promote it not only with physical posters, but also on social media. And that's where we got a lot more buildings. We actually had to expand the area we were targeting. And that's also where someone just randomly decided to make a Google Map. … A lot of people hadn't even heard about us, but they saw it on their Facebook feeds and then started participating. So that was really cool.

Figure 10: Initial Halloween Facebook post sparks interest
https://www.facebook.com/abundantoliver/posts/1217415908314950:0

Abundant Community Oliver
17 October 2016

A group of neighbours in Oliver are coming together to try and initiate a trick-or-treating event on Monday, October 31st. The area for trick or treating would extend from 114 St to 124 St. Due to the high number of apartments and condos, many children in Oliver don't get the opportunity to trick-or-treat; we're hoping to change that.

We're looking for people willing to set up trick or treat stations at the front doors of their building on October 31st. Tenants/residents wishing to participate would donate candy to the person who would hand out candy at the main doors of their building.

If you're interested in handing out candy please contact Angelika at abundantoliverpark@gmail.com.

Like   Comment   Share

You, Kirsten Goa and 55 others

24 shares	9 comments

Lianne McTavish We should be having a QH H party in the lobby that night.
Like · Reply · 2 · 18 October 2016 at 14:53

  Abundant Community Oliver Wonderful! Would you be open to trick-or-treaters coming to your door, and for us to put your building on our walking map?
  -Angelika
  Like · Reply · 1 · 18 October 2016 at 18:44 · Edited

  Abundant Community Oliver If you'd like more details, feel free to message our page or email abundantoliverpark@gmail.com
  Like · Reply · 18 October 2016 at 23:07

Brenda McNicol great idea!
Like · Reply · 1 · 18 October 2016 at 22:25

  Abundant Community Oliver Thanks! A resident had an idea to bring trick-or-treating to our high-density neighbourhood and we're running with it!
  Like · Reply · 20 October 2016 at 12:55

Wendy Eygenraam Bos Rachel Bos
Like · Reply · 19 October 2016 at 07:24

Andrea Lyon Boehm Are you looking for just north of Jasper Ave?
Like · Reply · 19 October 2016 at 13:05
  View previous replies

  Abundant Community Oliver If you'd like, we can put you on the map and you can see how many trick or treaters you get, we just aren't sure how many might venture outside of the area. If you're willing to experiment, please feel free to let me know! -Angelika
  Like · Reply · 20 October 2016 at 13:09
  View more replies

Bere Nice I live on the Victoria Promenade building 117st 100 ave. Im interested on this activity, also i have 2 boys 7 and 4 years old, and i would like that they participate also
Like · Reply · 1 · 25 October 2016 at 11:03 · Edited

Laura Laramee I'm SO down with this and will definitely be emailing. I'd happily stand at the door to our condo building on 101ave and 115st to hand out candy to the kids. I've always had to take my kids out of the area to trick or treat and wish this existed years ago!
Like · Reply · 1 · 25 October 2016 at 18:42

  Abundant Community Oliver Thank you so much! We got your email and I'll be responding shortly!
  -Angelika
  Like · Reply · 25 October 2016 at 19:28

Marilyn Gray Is this happening? We'd love to take the kids trick or treating locally!
Like · Reply · 1 · 28 October 2016 at 20:40

  Abundant Community Oliver Yup! We'll be posting a list of the buildings participating tomorrow
  Like · Reply · 2 · 29 October 2016 at 17:43

Kara Fenske Looking to see if there is confirming that we have some places lined up! We live in Oliver and have a little witch ready to trick or treat on Monday!
Like · Reply · 29 October 2016 at 16:59

  Abundant Community Oliver There's a growing list! We'll be posting it tomorrow. Over 20 buildings participating so far
  Like · Reply · 1 · 29 October 2016 at 17:20

  Kara Fenske Abundant Community Oliver fabulous!
  Like · Reply · 29 October 2016 at 18:47

  Write a reply...

Renée Shevalier I live in Rideau Towers, on 119 st., and would definitely be interested in handing out treats.
Like · Reply · 2 · 29 October 2016 at 18:55

  Abundant Community Oliver Excellent Renee! We'll put you on the map!
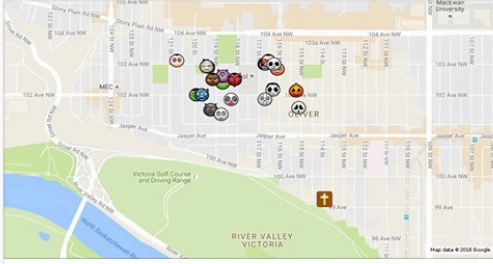 Like · Reply · 30 October 2016 at 15:33

  Renée Shevalier I've purchased the treats already!
  Like · Reply · 1 · 30 October 2016 at 15:33

Figure 11: Halloween Google map
https://www.facebook.com/abundantoliver/posts/1230188977037643

Figure 12: Halloween photo gallery
https://www.facebook.com/pg/abundantoliver/photos/?tab=album&album_id=1231122400277634

f) Parting words

As the session neared its end, I asked the neighbourhood connectors if they could share any anecdotes that reflected tangible results from their Abundant Community efforts so far. None of the three had yet managed to gather enough data to make the Common Good database useful (as Westmount has begun to), but they could tell stories that reflected increased neighbourliness in their communities.

> *ANGELIKA: I have seen buildings, after we've gone knocking, decide to do pot lucks in the middle of the hallway. They actually brought out blankets, and pillows, and put all of the food on the laundry-room washer and dryer, and just decided to invite all their neighbours to eat a meal in the hallway. And we had just jogged their idea for that. And then, again, the trick or treating thing would be the big one.*

> *JASON: ...We're doing [a potluck] the first Saturday in March.*

> *ANGELIKA: You're doing one? Cool. Do you have a common space in your building?*

> *JASON: Not really. There's a just barely large enough area for a table and a few chairs in the front lobby, and we're going to set it up there.*

Angelika added an anecdote that reflected Abundant Community's potential to make Oliver a safer place. If you know your neighbours, you are more likely to notice the presence of someone who doesn't belong—and, when that happens, you can seek nearby help.

> *ANGELIKA: There was a lady that knew two of her neighbours through Abundant Community. She was the floor connector—we break it down into floors sometimes in big buildings. She saw someone that she didn't recognize—she knew all of her neighbours—lurking in the parkade around one person's car. So, she was able to knock on the other two neighbours' doors, and bring down some beefy muscle. When they asked the person what they were doing, the person left. So, she might have prevented a car break-in, which is the biggest problem in Oliver.*

Finally, I asked the connectors to provide advice to any future neighbourhood connectors in the inner city, based on their own experiences.

ANGELIKA: Make it your own. You have to get creative, and every neighbourhood is different. ... I can't just walk into buildings, so I had to go online. Kind of building the plane as you fly it. Don't be afraid to get creative, and try new things, and ways of reaching out. Don't feel like you have to stick to the template they give you. Make it your own.

ALICIA: And, don't get discouraged, too. ... I remember, when I was out walking one day, I literally walked around for two hours trying to get into buildings. Didn't make contact with one person. It's like a desert out there. And it's so discouraging. You just have to go home and regroup, and try again, and try creative methods, like [Angelika] said. But, yes, don't get discouraged. That's a very big thing. If you're out there being a neighbourhood connector, and knock on doors and can't even get into buildings, that's pretty upsetting.

JASON: The other thing I'd add to that is, make sure you do something. It is easy in this role to go, okay, I've got the role, I've got the title ... but that doesn't mean anything. You have to do something. Go knock on some doors. At least try. Because you can say, 'Oh, well, I probably can't get into those buildings anyway'—well, now for sure you're not going to get in. Go knock on the door. And if you don't get in, then try number two. Take down the manager's phone number from the front door, at least, and go home with that. And, that night, when you've kind of recovered, and had your hot cocoa or whatever you need to get over the fact that you couldn't even get in—then, phone the manager and see if you can get in the next day with the manager. And, if they won't meet you, see if they can recommend somebody in the building who you can talk to. Get them to forward an email for you. Whatever it takes, but just keep pushing and pushing until you overcome that hurdle. And then the next, and then the next. It's part of the job, to get discouraged, but you've just got to do something. It's easy to have a week go by and realize, oh, I didn't do any neighbourhood connecting this whole week.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

Introduction

Until recently, Abundant Community Edmonton has been implemented largely in typical residential neighbourhoods. Now, as community leagues in the inner city begin to expand the program to their own neighbourhoods, they are discovering that the existing model can prove an uneasy fit.

What particular challenges and opportunities do inner-city neighbourhood connectors face in the context of Abundant Community Edmonton? How might social media and other online tools help further their efforts?

In this chapter, I discuss the similarities and differences in the experiences described in the two interview sessions, in order to understand the specific challenges and opportunities of Abundant Community in an inner-city context. I also examine the creative roles social media has played in Abundant Community so far—and whether they can meaningfully boost connectors' face-to-face efforts, even in inner-city neighbourhoods. Finally, how do these findings reflect existing literature in this field? Is Team Putnam correct in viewing technology as a key culprit in the degradation of social capital, or is Team Hampton correct in viewing technologically mediated communication as a transformational tool for building connections at a neighbourhood level?

In the archetypical Abundant Community neighbourhood I examined, Westmount, the neighbourhood connectors attributed their success to factors that simply do not exist in the inner city. They talked about the neighbourhood's stability, its status as a place where people settle down. In contrast, the three inner-city neighbourhoods in my study have much higher levels of renters, and of resident turnover. Carla and Kristin, both of

them long-time residents and active members of their community league, already had

extensive ties to neighbours, providing them with an initial pool of potential block

connectors. In the inner city, connectors were beginning the task with—at best—

community league membership lists accounting for only a minuscule percentage of

residents. In Westmount, virtually everyone speaks English, whereas many inner-city

immigrants have barely begun to learn the language.

Tellingly, the blocks where the Westmount connectors had the least success—

walk-up apartments occupied largely by renters—are the very areas that most resemble

Boyle Street, Central McDougall, and Oliver. In fact, Carla and Kristin had all but given

up on finding volunteer connectors in walk-up apartments. In other words, inner city

connectors will need to find ways to succeed where others have failed.

Limitations of the study

As I mentioned in the design and methodology chapter, the single most obvious

limitation of this study lies in its scope. In examining Abundant Community, I am

tackling a subject based on a book published less than seven years ago, a project launched

in Edmonton about four years ago, and an effort that expanded to the inner city within the

past two years. Of that already tiny pool of available interviewees, an even smaller subset

has used social media as part of their efforts.

While I believe my findings to be both illuminating and practical, future

researchers may be able to explore the topic more comprehensively once the Abundant

Community Initiative becomes more established and widespread.

My study has also undoubtedly been affected by my status as an insider. As

someone who is actively working as an inner-city neighbourhood connector, and who is

hungry for fresh inspiration, I had a personal stake in my findings. At the same time, as

an avid user of social media both personally and professionally, I may have an overly

optimistic view of its potential to enhance this particular initiative. That said, I did my

best to approach the interviews and subsequent analysis as dispassionately as possible, to

allow the conversation to flow naturally and to avoid steering it towards any

preconceived conclusions. By reviewing the unedited transcripts (see appendix), readers

can judge for themselves whether I succeeded.

Challenges

For the inner-city connectors, gaining physical access to apartment buildings

represents the single biggest hurdle to finding and recruiting volunteer connectors.

Property management companies (with the exception of Boardwalk) have been

unresponsive or unreceptive to please for assistance, and individual building managers

are frequently reluctant to let strangers (even community league representatives) through

the front door.

Even when inner-city connectors do get into buildings, they find it difficult to

make progress. Many apartment dwellers are reluctant to connect with their neighbours—

and, in some cases, are actively afraid of them. And, often, connectors and residents

literally don't even speak the same language.

Although the connectors have not found a solution for the language barrier, they

have begun to develop a workaround to meet some of the people who live in walk-up

apartments. Instead of trying (and failing) to get into buildings, neighbourhood

connectors are finding other places to make new contacts. They meet and recruit

neighbours at community events, where attendees are predisposed to the concept of

community building. In the case of Central McDougall, neighbourhood connectors hosted their own community event to promote Abundant Community and to find prospective new volunteers. Instead of going out and knocking on doors, neighbourhood connectors are finding ways of having neighbours come to them.

Neighbourhood turnover will prove an ongoing challenge for Abundant Community in the inner city. When people move out of the neighbourhood, any local connections leave with them. As Abundant Community gains a foothold, the hope is that more people will choose to stay and settle in the inner city.

If neighbourhood connectors hope to overcome these challenges, they must approach their job with patience, perseverance, and resiliency.

Opportunities

I was surprised to discover that the neighbourhood connectors have taken what some might see as challenges of the inner city, and turned them into opportunities for advancing Abundant Community.

Despite the challenge posed by the language barrier, the cultural diversity of the inner-city provides opportunities for building connections within the Abundant Community model. Neighbours can be brought together for classes in English as a second language, as is already happening in Oliver. Likewise, as the database grows, recent refugees could be connected with one another for emotional support and practical advice. Groups like these connect residents with their community league, and they help build community cohesion by bringing different cultures together in one room. Likewise, cultural diversity can help enrich other community activities—for example, ethnic performances at community events, or classes in international cuisine.

At the same time, a culturally diverse neighbourhood might provide more fertile ground for neighbourhood connections. In much of the developing world, neighbours know each other and rely on one another. However, as "Team Putnam" points out, many people in North America have become isolated from their neighbours. Immigrants to Edmonton may find themselves craving the kind of neighbourliness that Abundant Community promotes.

Poverty, ironically, may represent more an opportunity than a challenge. With fewer available resources, and fewer opportunities to form geographically distant ties, people in the inner city must rely more heavily on the people and resources in the neighbourhood around them. This could help spark their interest in an asset-based community development initiative like Abundant Community, and encourage their involvement over the longer term.

Social media

The Abundant Community Initiative, by design, relies primarily upon face-to-face interaction to reverse that trend. Meanwhile, social media and mobile devices may indeed have played a role in the gradual breakdown of neighbourliness in recent decades. That said, despite the worries of people like Robert Putnam and Sherry Turkle, technology needn't be considered an automatic enemy of place-based social capital, a corrosive force turning us into a world of lonesome bowlers.

On the contrary, Kristin in Westmount and Angelika in Oliver have demonstrated that technology can actually provide a powerful tool in promoting neighbourliness. Like Keith Hampton's projects, such as Netville and i-Neighbors, Kristin's and Angelika's Facebook pages leverage the internet to foster "in real life" connections. They distribute

links to promote the values of Abundant Community, and to inspire their volunteer

connectors. They create and amplify events, like Oliver's trick-or treating and

Westmount's Great Neighbour Day, that broaden awareness of the program and attract

legions of potential new volunteers. They post photos to celebrate their achievements and

to validate the efforts of their local connectors.

As Abundant Community Edmonton continues to expand into new community

leagues—including those in the inner city—neighbourhood connectors should strongly

consider making social media part of their efforts.

Team Putnam meets Team Hampton

Diminished social capital, as described by Robert Putnam and others, is certainly

reflected in the four neighbourhoods studied here. In the relative affluence and stability of

Westmount, people sheepishly admit that they have never met their neighbours.

Meanwhile, immigrants to the inner-city neighbourhoods are astonished to discover that,

here in Canada, people don't know each other or rely upon each other as they do "back

home."

In that context, a face-to-face strategy like Abundant Community can be

transformational. In Westmount, neighbours banded together to address a case of local

vandalism. In Central McDougall, residents of a walk-up apartment convened in a

common area for a pot-luck supper. In Oliver, a woman summoned backup when she

spots a suspicious person in the parking lot. In each case, Abundant Community

represented the catalyst for a tangible increase in social capital.

In short, some of Putnam's arguments have clear merit in the context of this study.

In today's neighbourhoods (at least here in Canada), we don't enjoy the same levels of

social capital we had decades ago. People are reluctant to knock on each other's doors, never mind connect socially. When we find a tool to help reverse this trend, such as Abundant Community, even a modest increase in social capital can feel exhilarating.

That said, technology need not be the villain, as Putnam suggests (and as others like Turkle argue even more forcefully). Hampton and his colleagues view communications technology, and social media in particular, as powerful allies in the quest to foster social capital at the local level.

The four community leagues studied here illustrate that, with a bit of creative effort, communications technology can work hand-in-hand with an initiative like Abundant Community.

In more affluent neighbourhoods like Westmount, social media can promote and celebrate face-to-face activities such as "Front Yard Party" or "Great Neighbour Day." By exchanging "likes" and comments, people like Carla find themselves forming closer bonding ties with neighbours who might otherwise be nothing more than nodding acquaintances.

Social media may not represent such a natural fit in inner-city community leagues, where lower-income households lack digital literacy and access to technology, or where recent immigrants speak a multitude of different languages (but not English). However, even in the inner city, social media can generate crucial breakthroughs. In Oliver, a simple idea like trick-or-treating blossomed into a viral community event, with buildings signing up without ever having heard of Abundant Community, and volunteers spontaneously creating Google maps for people to download. Because of this potential to attract new recruits and even new avenues for engagement, social media may prove even

more important in the inner city. Angelika was able to attract interest from buildings she had previously been unable to access. In other words, the technology might not reach everyone in the neighbourhood, but it can literally open doors to Abundant Community.

Abundant Community social media efforts have been most effective when they encourage residents to participate in neighbourly activities. You can buy a bouquet for a cherished neighbour, show up at a women's shinny session at the community rink, or set up snacks in your front yard on a summer afternoon—community involvement needn't be overly complicated or demanding. A social media campaign can get complete strangers excited about the idea of setting up a table in their apartment lobby to give out candy to the local kids on Halloween. Online interactions can translate into delightful, community-minded, face-to-face connections.

In other words, both Team Putnam and Team Hampton are correct—at least partially—in the context of this study. By the simple (if daunting) act of knocking on their neighbours' doors, the Abundant Community neighbourhood connectors have taken a meaningful first step toward rebuilding our city's lost social capital. At the same time, through the creative use of social media, they have stumbled upon a valuable complement to those efforts.

The study left me with fresh inspiration and practical ideas to continue my own work as a neighbourhood connector in Central McDougall. I will now discuss some of these in my concluding chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

With my study, I sought to explore the specific challenges and opportunities of implementing Abundant Community in an inner-city context. How does a neighbourhood connector's task differ in the inner city, as opposed to in a more stable, affluent neighbourhood? Also, how might social media contribute to the job of building inner-city neighbourhood connections? In this chapter, I will summarize some of my key findings, and pinpoint some practical suggestions. I will then place my findings in contents, and identify possible directions for future research.

Challenges

The difficulty in gaining physical access to apartment buildings was identified as the single greatest challenge facing inner-city connectors, and also posed a problem in other neighbourhoods that include apartments. In addition to reaching out to building managers and management companies, connectors can meet and recruit potential volunteers at community events. They may even consider organizing and hosting their own event for this purpose.

Inner-city connectors are more likely to encounter language barriers—a challenge with no simple solution.

Neighbourhood turnover presents an ongoing challenge; with so many residents moving, connectors may find themselves losing volunteers as quickly as they find them. Over time, as the neighbourhoods become more connected, people may become more likely to stay.

In facing all these challenges, a connector's best tools are patience, perseverance, creativity, and resiliency.

Opportunities

While the language barrier poses a challenge, the accompanying cultural diversity provides opportunities to neighbourhood connectors: for example, English as a second language clubs and classes, refugee support, and sharing of cultural performances and cuisine. Many recent immigrants are also more open to the idea of connecting with neighbours, as they did in their home countries.

Poverty, interestingly, was seen largely as an opportunity. People in the inner city have fewer resources, and rely more heavily on the people and resources in their own neighbourhood. Abundant Community represents a vehicle for bringing people together, and for identifying and sharing the skills and resources they have.

Social media

Based on the evidence in Westmount, Oliver, and Central McDougall, social media can provide a powerful tool for Abundant Community, helping neighbourhood connectors promote and celebrate events, reinforce the efforts of their volunteer connectors, and build awareness in the wider community (thereby broadening the pool of volunteers). This proves true even in the inner city.

The value of Facebook as a promotional tool seems intuitive in a relatively prosperous neighbourhood like Westmount, where most people are likely to have internet access. By using the Abundant Community Westmount page to illustrate and celebrate activities, the neighbourhood connector reinforces the efforts of her volunteers while also spreading awareness of the initiative to the wider community.

That said, social media might prove particularly valuable in the inner city, despite the fact many residents lack internet access. In Oliver, where the connector had been

frustrated in her attempts to access apartment buildings, the Halloween trick-or-treat project was able to engage and involve people she wouldn't have otherwise reached. A locked lobby door is no barrier to Facebook. The success of this ingenious idea should inspire similar efforts in other inner-city neighbourhoods, as well as in high-density, lower-income pockets in mature neighbourhoods like Westmount.

The loyal opposition

My interviewees may see social media as a valuable tool in fostering neighbourliness, but the opposing viewpoint still commands its share of the wider conversation. In popular culture and academia, many consider it a foregone conclusion that social media have eroded our appreciation (and perhaps even our capability) for face-to-face interaction. A current online advertising campaign by Loblaw's President's Choice, called #EatTogether, explicitly portrays cell phones as a divisive influence among neighbours, and urges us all to reconnect by sitting down together to share a meal (President's Choice, 2016). Sherry Turkle likewise remains steadfast in her view that virtual interaction has perilously eroded our (presumably more authentic) real-life connections:

> The Internet is giving us new ways of getting together, forming alliances. But I think we are at a point of inflection. While we were infatuated with the virtual, we dropped the ball on where we actually live. We need to balance how compelling the virtual is with the realities that we live in our bodies and on this planet. It is so easy for us to look the other way. Are we going to get out there and make our real communities what they should be? (Fischetti, 2014)

Implications

My findings (and my own experiences) have led me to a middle ground between the polarized views of Putnam and Hampton.

In some ways, the study reinforces the ideas of Putnam (and of McKnight & Block, who developed the Abundant Community approach). Interviewees described examples of the value and joy of rebuilding face-to-face connections at the neighbourhood level. In my own case, I am delighted to now be able to greet many of my own neighbours by name, rather than simply silently passing them on the sidewalk. Technology may indeed play a role in our dwindling social capital; as we become ever more connected over long distances, we appear to have neglected neighbourly connections in our own backyards.

At the same time, my findings corroborate the views of Hampton and others, who argue that social media and the internet represent an opportunity for rebuilding social capital at the neighbourhood level. Like some of my interviewees, I find myself forming stronger social bonds to neighbours through our interactions on Facebook. My findings also reinforce existing research that suggests online tools can help foster neighbourhood connections, even in areas of concentrated poverty.

Edmonton is the first city to actively implement the Abundant Community model. By exploring ACE at a real-life, personal level, I hope my work will inform future efforts in other cities. (At the very least, it should influence my own efforts, and those of my Edmonton peers.)

I believe my findings will prove particularly interesting to those working to build social connections in inner-city communities. ACE, though still in its infancy, has been

developed as a "one size fits all" initiative. The assumption seems to be that what works in (mainstream) Westmount, Highlands, or North Glenora will also work in (inner-city) Central McDougall, Boyle Street, or Oliver. Harsh reality has proven otherwise; the first few neighbourhood connectors who have plied their talents in the inner city find the job considerably more daunting. With these group interviews, I have begun to explore some of the key differences that make inner-city connecting so challenging—as well as some perceived problems that may actually have their beneficial side. Through the example of Oliver's trick-or-treating project, I have also shown that social media can prove particularly useful to promote and expand Abundant Community in the inner city, and in high-density pockets elsewhere.

Still, this exploratory study barely dips its toe into what promises to become a compelling new field of study. Assuming Abundant Community and similar initiatives continue to gain traction, researchers should explore the richer and deeper pool of data that will emerge over time. Will Abundant Community generate tangible and measurable improvements in neighbours' connection to each other?

And, assuming Nextdoor.com eventually expands to Canada, its influence (including in the inner city) will provide excellent opportunities for further inquiry—say, by evaluating its effect on social capital compared to (or combined with) face-to-face initiatives like Abundant Community.

Putnam was on to something—our existence becomes measurably poorer when we no longer interact with our neighbours. That said, if technology has indeed played a role in our loss of social capital, we should be open to the ways in which it can help us rebuild it.

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APPENDICES

A. Interview with Westmount neighbourhood connectors

June 29, 2016, 7:30–9:00 p.m.
10926 108 Street NW, Edmonton, AB

Host/facilitator: Scott Rollans

Neighbourhood connectors: Carla Stolte
                                    Kristin Baker

SCOTT: Let's start at the beginning. Tell me how you got involved—the origin story of your adventure with Abundant Community.

> CARLA: For Westmount, we had a visioning session in … 2013? The first one we had, we just had kind of a get-together. We invited all the residents to the hall. We had round tables, and we had invited a bunch of different kind of community-oriented people to talk about what's going on. And Howard [Lawrence] was one of them. They were looking for pilot neighbourhoods for Abundant Community. So, he came, and I was like, Okay, sign me up! I want this.

> I think that was 2013. I think he had just finished his first year, and then he thought it kind of worked for him. So it may have been 14, but I think it was 13 when I first heard about it.

> So, it was through him that I heard about it. And then I pitched it to the community league. Actually, I didn't pitch it; I kind of said, 'We're doing this. Oh, and by the way, I want to be the Neighbourhood Connector too. Not that that's awkward.'

SCOTT: Did you have to resign? Did they do a special resolution or something?

> CARLA: Well, they asked me to leave the room, and they voted on it.

> … (unrelated tangent)

> KRISTIN: We don't have those rules. Because I'm the Membership Director for the community league.

> CARLA: Yeah, it's not in the bylaws.

> KRISTIN: It's actually been super helpful to be the membership director. Because, when people get a new membership, I get notified. I've always emailed them to just say, 'Thanks for buying a membership. Are you interested in volunteering at

all?' Like, so we can put together our volunteer list. And, now, I just kind of say, 'And, have you also heard about Abundant Community?' I just think it all fits together. If they're interested in being a member of the community, then they know about it. So it's worked out pretty well for that reason. But I don't take it any further than that. I just present the information. I'm not pressing it on anybody.

CARLA: So the community league signed up for it. I started doing it, but then I ended up not having enough time. It's a pretty big time commitment. And life changed for me. So, then, Kristin took it over—I think it was December or January?

KRISTIN: We met about it in December. You knew you were going to be starting work, and you were like, I gotta take something off of my plate.

SCOTT: So, how many months would you have been…

CARLA: I was in for a season.

KRISTIN: You were kind of doing it before we even got the official go-ahead. You were putting things together.

CARLA: So, we got the grant, I think, in May. I was kind of out doing it before, but that's when I started. So, it was that May.

KRISTIN: May through December.

SCOTT: So, you were the membership person on the community league. Is that a board position?

KRISTIN: It is. But I had to submit a resume, and that kind of thing. I may have been the only one who applied. But there was a little hiring committee of three people off the board, and they called me and told me I was the successful applicant.

CARLA: You got the job!

SCOTT: Congratulations … or, whatever…

(laughter)

KRISTIN: I've really enjoyed, though. I've met a lot of really nice people that I would never have met otherwise. I would have just had no occasion to meet them, or cross paths with them. So, it's been really good.

SCOTT: So, you would have taken over the beginning of 2016?

KRISTIN: I think I got hired officially at the end of January. So, then I kind of hit the ground running and went for it.

CARLA: So, I must have done it for a year and a half, then.

KRISTIN: You were doing it before. So then you officially started in May 2015 when we got the funding.

SCOTT: So your full season was 2015.

CARLA: Yeah. And it's been really helpful, actually, having me start it and the Kristin take over. Because her and I have a lot of different networks. So I had kind of picked all my low-hanging fruit, and realized, okay, I don't have the time and energy to door-knock. I did a little bit of that, but I didn't have time to a ton of that. So, when Kristin took over, then all of a sudden there was a huge influx of more block connectors, because it was all *her* low-hanging fruit that she was able to pick at, right?

KRISTIN: Now it has become slightly more difficult, because I do have some blocks that I have just not been able to find anybody on. I drop flyers, I talk to everyone who's outside when I do it, and I ask everyone I know if anyone knows anyone on those blocks. And it's just some that I'm like, okay, these might not have a connector.

SCOTT: It might be a little black hole…

KRISTIN: And the funny thing is, they're mostly somehow aligned with 107 Avenue. They're bordering that, somehow, and I think that's maybe because there's just more rentals and that kind of thing on those streets. I'm just guessing. But it's been the street that I've had a little more difficulty with. Just plugging away.

…

SCOTT: We have a lot of rentals, and a lot of transient people. Even my next-door neighbours, they're in a house, but they're a bunch of students sharing the house. 'I don't know how long I'll be here.'

KRISTIN: I think Westmount's a little bit different in that. People seem to genuinely want to live there for their lives. They want to buy a house there. They want to live there, and be part of the community. I think we're lucky that we have that, because it has made my job a little easier. People do want to get to know their neighbours, because they know they're going to be there for a long time.

CARLA: And there's pockets in Westmount. Like, just behind me, there are a lot of rentals down there. Like a higher percentage than the rest of Westmount. But I think it's probably less than [Central McDougall]. But I think, generally speaking, people are a little bit more invested in the community. I don't know if that's

because it has traditionally been more connected, and so people feel more grounded, so they're more likely to stay? I think there's a tipping point in a neighbourhood, where that happens. Where more people are connected, and are more grounded, which then makes other people more connected and more grounded. You need a certain amount of people that are committed to the neighbourhood, and then that kind of bleeds out.

SCOTT: I've often found it interesting, the fact that we're two community leagues over, but … any parents here, their kids played soccer for Westmount, because that was where there was organization, and a hall. Our hall burnt down in the 1990s. …. It's the poorest community league, in terms of annual household income. Lower than McCauley, lower than Boyle Street. It's pretty much at the bottom of Alberta. The first time I saw the statistics I thought, wow, we're doing great. We're like the rich people on the block.

We actually have four derelict houses on this block—which you don't really notice when you drive up this nice tree-lined street.

> KRISTIN: But you notice when you go walking, don't you? I've noticed that too: Whoah, does anyone even live here?

SCOTT: So, obviously, Westmount has progressed pretty well. You say you have some frustrations with little pockets that you can't seem to crack. So, what's sort of the scale of things right now? Like, how many block connectors do you have?

> KRISTIN: We have about forty. There's been a couple that have come and gone, but it has kind of remained at about forty for the last couple of months. I'm still kind of working away to see … some block connectors I have are talking to people that they know, who maybe might be interested. It takes a long time, though, to get those connections made and get those people kind of interested.

> CARLA: I found the buy-in was easy. People are, like, that sounds great. In my experience, it isn't even the block party that's the problem. It's really hard to get people to fill out that conversation guide, and to have that intention about it. Although, some people are nervous about it. I've had a few people who are, like, well, I'll do the conversation guide. I'll have conversations, but I don't want to have a block party. I'm not that kind of person. And I said, 'Well, maybe if you do the conversations, you'll find somebody who *is* that, and then you can do that together, or support them as much as you can. But, I've found that people are okay with being that person on the block. The challenge is getting those conversation guides done.

> KRISTIN: I had a block connector email me, and she said she has talked to a bunch of her neighbours, and they're all super lovely and really friendly, and they think it's a great thing. But, yeah, she's having a lot of trouble getting them to fill out the conversation guide. She says she thinks it's mostly because they already feel like they're super connected. It's over in Groat Estates … what's it called … it's around there. She says that her neighbours seem to feel like they're already

super connected, and they don't really have an interest in being connected with the larger community. They're totally fine with that. So I said, 'Well, maybe if you can get them to fill it out and at least give me their vision for the neighbourhood, that can help us for the greater good. And they don't necessarily have to be involved with other people. Or, they can expressly put down in the conversation guide, I'm only interested in doing these activities with people on my block. So I would still get the information, but I don't include them in emails where I'm trying to set up groups, and things like that.

…

SCOTT: In terms of recruiting block connectors, you talked about the low-hanging fruit. So, you used mostly your existing neighbourhood networks? So, you phoned people, emailed people, or how did you…

CARLA: That's how I did it initially. I just called people that I thought would be interested, on different blocks, that I knew. And then I did do some knocking— like, I went door-to-door and talked with them for a few minutes. Howard and I did that a little bit at the beginning. And we would make a judgement call—Yeah, this person would be a very bad block connector. (laughter) Thanks for your time! And then we just went on to the next stop. You know, you just kind of get a sense; yeah, this person would be good, or no, this person wouldn't be great. You just kind of have to make a judgement call.

But, yeah, a large majority of the people that I contacted were just people that I knew. And I think it was the same for you, right?

KRISTIN: Yeah, my kids go to the local elementary school. So, I know a lot of people from there. And that's kind of where I started. I sat down with the map, when I got the job, and I thought, who do I know on each of these blocks? And then I would just ask them if they were interested. And most of them were, because they're just pretty friendly people to begin with. And a lot of them are really interested in knowing their neighbours. It's a pretty natural fit for some of them. Some of them had to step out of their comfort zone a little bit, but I think it's been really good for them, and they've actually really enjoyed it. So, it's been good.

And, other than that, like the blocks I don't have people on, like I said before, I've put in a couple of rounds of flyers that just say, this block doesn't have a connector. It lists all the ways they can find out more information. Putting up flyers everywhere, and notices in School Zone, and things like that.

CARLA: And you set up an Abundant Community Facebook page. And that was kind of big, because it's connected with the community league. I find that really … you can post things on there, and a lot of people are liking it.

KRISTIN: Yeah, there's like a hundred people that "like" it, but a lot of times I put things on there that get a huge organic reach. I mean, I've never paid for

anything to promote anything. But I've put some on there that have got, like, 600 or 700 people have seen it. So that's great, so then more people know about Abundant Community, right? They see it, and they click on it. Whether or not they 'like' it, at least they know about it.

SCOTT: So what sort of strategy do you use to decide what you're going to stick on the page?

KRISTIN: I try to find things that have things that help in inducing neighbourliness, or events in the community where you can potentially meet your neighbours. Things that try to motivate people who are already block connectors. You know, when we go to Howard's house, he shows videos once in a while, and I always go and put them on my Facebook page.

SCOTT: Was it you that posted the 'Company' video that we watched at the..

KRISTIN: The comedian? Yeah, I put that up, too. I thought that was pretty funny.

(note: https://youtu.be/0Swzvm-gXHg)

CARLA: When he was diving behind the couch? I've seen that one before.

KRISTIN: Yeah, just stuff like that. And then, we had a day in the neighbourhood a little while ago, called the 'Hundred in One Day,' and we had Westmount outside hours. I just went around and took pictures of everyone who was participating, and I put them up on the Facebook page. That got a lot of attention as well. I think it just really shows that people were doing stuff. People like to see pictures of people that they know. Some of the other connectors did things at their homes, like had lemonade stands. People would submit their pictures.

And when I have block connector meetings, I take pictures of the wine and the food I'm going to put out, or Howard takes a picture of everybody who's there. It just makes it looks like, hey, this could be fun. Like, if you're scrolling through it, you might be, like, well, maybe I could do that.

20:00

SCOTT: So, has it drawn any new people, then?

KRISTIN: I got one person who found us through that. (Names) saw something about it, and they went on and said, 'Oh, we know Howard. Oh, okay…" And now they're block connectors. So, it's at least worked once. But, generally, I just want people to be aware of it. Whether or not you're a block connector, maybe you can be a little bit more neighbourly, you know?

CARLA: It's more about raising the awareness, I think, in the neighbourhood, about neighbourliness. That's a huge part of Abundant Community, I think.

> KRISTIN: Like, I want people to fill the conversation guides out for the purposes of the grant. But, I feel like, if they have people over to their house to have wine on their porch, that's just as important. Then you're getting to know people.

SCOTT: You see someone on the sidewalk, and you can say, 'Hi, Dennis. Hi Lesley.'

> KRISTIN: That's exactly right. Like when we go out on Halloween with our kids, I know everybody who's walking up and down the block. And I love it.

SCOTT: When I was growing up, that was just taken for granted.

> KRISTIN: But it's not anymore.

SCOTT: Totally not. And universal, too. I tell people, can you name five families on the block where you grow up? And almost everybody can. Can you name five families on the block where you live now, and *nobody* can—except for the freaks like Howard. (laughter)

> CARLA: There was this one house that I had never been able to connect. Finally, I was like, I'm going to try again and whatever; he probably won't be home. And he was there. I was like, Aaaah, hi! And he was like, 'Yeah, I grew up in the country, and I knew everybody. It was like a small town. And then I moved to Spruce Grove, and I knew everybody on my block. And I don't really know that many people on this block.' Ah, I can help you!

> KRISTIN: You are in luck!

> CARLA: This will be a defining moment in your life in Westmount! But, yeah, there's that whole… it's just an understanding of trying to make that a real thing. I think Facebook is a great tool, because it raises awareness of what that actually means, and how we do that now. Because how we did that then was different than how we do that now.

SCOTT: I'm really interested in your Facebook page, and the fact that it is spreading out beyond… Howard was talking about the concept of 'ambient neighbourliness,' where it's not necessarily a block party, but it's a general vibe. So, you think that has definitely been contributing to that in Westmount?

> KRISTIN: I think so. Even for me it's good, because it keeps me up on my toes— looking for things about being neighbourly, and just kind of getting more information to keep myself up to date about what other neighbourhoods are doing.

SCOTT: So, that's a fringe benefit. You have to put something up…

> KRISTIN: So I'm kind of doing research, and like, 'Oh, that would be a good one. People will probably like that.' The most popular ones have definitely been pictures of people that live in the neighbourhood. Like the thing when we did the flowers, the 'Great Neighbour Day,' people loved that picture.

SCOTT: What was that?

KRISTIN: It was to raise money for the community hall, some renovations. It was a thing called Great Neighbour Day. And you could buy a bunch of tulips from a local flower shop—Studio Bloom is owned by one of the block connectors who lives in the neighbourhood. So, like, double whammy—because we're supporting her, and she's giving back some of the funds to us for the community league. You could buy some tulips for your neighbour. And then a lot of block connectors—it was mostly block connectors, it just happened to be—got together and handed them out one day. We all went out one day with a bucket of flowers and handed them out to people whose neighbours had bought them flowers.

SCOTT: Kind of like a secret Valentine…

KRISTIN: Well, kind of, yeah. Because you didn't know who they were from. You just knew it was from a neighbour. And people were just, like, *so* happy to get some flowers.

CARLA: And it felt so good delivering them.

KRISTIN: Although, when I went up, it was like, I feel like they think I'm trying to sell flowers, when I go up with my big bucket of flowers, and I'm like, 'I'm from the Westmount Community League!'

CARLA: Somebody thinks you're a great neighbour! And everybody was, like, *really? Wow.* And there were, I think, a hundred bunches that were sold—for first year. We're going to do it again. I bought, I think, like four of them.

SCOTT: How did you promote that?

KRISTIN: Through Facebook, and through the Westmount Community League Facebook page…

CARLA: And we hand-delivered flyers as well. And then (name), the owner of the shop, she made up tags and she organized it, basically. But she said it wasn't that much work for her.

There's another example of using the assets in the community, right? And, as a business owner, she's able to buy flowers from Holland, wholesale. Well, that's a huge asset. That's something that we can't do as individuals. Bringing those local businesses in is a really cool way of promoting Abundant Community. Because that was the other piece of it, right? Really encouraging that neighbourliness. Instead of being a good neighbour, thanking somebody else for being a good neighbour.

KRISTIN: So I think we'll probably do it again next year. And also the outside hours again too. I wouldn't say there was a ton of participation, but the people who were out there were really going out it. There were people with hot dogs, and

popcorn stands and stuff. And then people were saying, maybe next year we should have a little sign outside that says 'We're participating in Outside Hours—come over!' Some people didn't know what it was, or felt a little weird coming up to their house and getting stuff for free, or whatever.

So, just some things that I think were great ideas, that we can just expand on. Like, first-year growing pains…

SCOTT: I think the front-yard thing is quite genius. My brother and I make wine every fall. We crush grapes that we get from the Italian Centre. We always do it in the back yard, and then one year we did it in our front yard. It was a really nice day, and everybody who walked down the sidewalk stopped. What's going on? I thought, wow, I'm sitting in my front yard, and people are just stopping and talking to me.

KRISTIN: Like I said, I went and took pictures of people who were participating. We had some block connectors who had cinnamon buns and homemade mead at their house. So we walked over there, and I even witnessed neighbours meeting their neighbours for the first time, even though they've lived across the street from each other for, like five years. They were like, 'This is crazy!' And [names] were like, 'Just come into our yard. We're just having a party in the front yard.' And people were like, 'Cool, okay, I'll come over.'

Someone was parking their car across the street from my neighbours, and they were like, 'Come on over!' And I was like, this is what it's for.

SCOTT: I find it really interesting the interplay between the Facebook and the … Because there's so much talk about the divide between 'real life' and 'online life.' I was reading an article about the 'IRL fetish,' they call it. Like your experience online is not real life. And, Howard's always talking about Putnam—the 'Bowling Alone' guy. And his big thing is, technology is dividing us. It's interesting to see something that, in popular culture, is sort of frowned upon—oh, you have 'friends' on Facebook. But the fact that this is something that's happening on Facebook, and it's completely woven into what's happening face-to-face.

KRISTIN: I mean, the people who do 'like' us are generally block connectors and people who live in the neighbourhood. I recognize most of the names of the people that 'like' us.

CARLA: I think it works so well because people recognize other people. They like the faces, because they already have that relationship. I think Facebook is a really powerful tool for people who already know each other. Even I've experienced that, right? Like I know some people, but see what they post on Facebook, and I see what they 'like' on Facebook. When I know them, it's like, wow, those people, I could really connect with them. And when I see them again, then I like I have a deeper understanding—I *do* have a deeper understanding—of who they are. And you can connect at that level, right? But that wouldn't happen if I didn't know them already. I think that's where Facebook and Abundant

Community is really great, because it allows those kind of superficial 'knowings' of people to get deeper. Sometimes it's more positive, and sometimes it's less positive. (laughter)

…

SCOTT: So, do you find people making connections among themselves on Facebook?

KRISTIN: I don't know on Facebook, so much. When I have the block connector gatherings, I think people really like those, because they've met people that are also doing it. It's just nice to meet other people in the neighbourhood who are also kind of community minded, that you might not have met before.

So, I wouldn't say that, as far as I know, people aren't meeting each other through the Facebook page. My goal is to create awareness, right? And interest in the whole program and the neighbourhood.

SCOTT: Do people engage with the stuff on Facebook?

KRISTIN: I get lots of 'likes' on things. People don't usually comment on stuff. I find that's just how it is, even when I post my stuff personally. They don't comment, they just like it. To like, type something? Aw, man, everybody's going to see if I type something.

CARLA: Next time you post something, I will will write something.

KRISTIN: Thank you. (laughter)

SCOTT: Let's talk a little bit, too, about the conversation form that you did. So, what was your thinking when you created the Google Form? Were you hoping that it would generate tons of data, or were you just dangling it out as a hook? Were you hoping it would do your whole job for you?

[simultaneous chatter]

CARLA: I think part of why we set that up was because that was initially the IT platform that we were going to use in the long term. So, it was a way for the block connectors to enter their own data into the system, because I didn't want to do that as the neighbourhood connector. So, I set it up anyways for the block connectors. And I said, well, why not just open it up to everybody? You can just fill it out. You can direct people to it if you want to. Now it's a little bit different, because we're not using that platform anymore. We're not using Google Docs. But I know that Glenora does use that, and they actually do get quite a bit…

KRISTIN: Yeah, they do get some people filling it out. She said, if you take the time to fill it out online, then you're probably someone who might want to be a block connector. So she's found a few people like that.

SCOTT: Sort of a fringe benefit.

KRISTIN: I don't think we've had anyone fill out our online form.

CARLA: I never promoted it.

KRISTIN: And I didn't really either. We just put it up to see. It wasn't exactly how I was planning to get block connectors, but we thought we might as well throw it up there. Who knows—it might generate some interest, right?

CARLA: For us, now, it doesn't really make sense. Because then you'd just have to transfer all the data from the Google Sheet, you'd have to put it into Common Good.

KRISTIN: That's been a really good, intuitive database for someone like me. Tim took me through it. He's very quiet, right, but he's an excellent teacher. I met with him for a couple of hours and I was, like, OK, I think I've got it. He's very thorough.

I haven't had a lot of conversation guides to enter into it yet, but I'm hoping those are going to come pretty soon. (laughs)

SCOTT: Now, do you do all the data entry yourself?

KRISTIN: I do, and that was just because I didn't want to have to go through the whole extra step of putting one more thing on the block connectors. I just thought, okay, some of them are already stressed about doing this in the first place. I didn't want to be like, 'And then there's this wonderful database for your conversation guide.' The few I've gotten, I've put in myself. That's fine, and then that way I know I'm following…

CARLA: You know what you've put in—if you write 'biking'…

SCOTT: You're not going to write "cycling."

CARLA: So that was why we started the Google Form. I still think it could be a useful tool to direct people to. Because some people like doing things online.

KRISTIN: Someone was joking about that last night, when we gave her a piece of paper. She was like, 'A piece of paper? I love this!' (laughs). So, on this day, your block connector will come back and retrieve this from you. Like it's 1950.

SCOTT: Well, and that's the whole goal of the program.

KRISTIN: Yeah, that's right.

SCOTT: We'll have Welcome Wagons by the time we're through. Welcome neighbour, here's a casserole!

KRISTIN: Last night, we didn't stand and fill out the whole thing with the neighbours. When you give it to them, and you say, okay, there are these things on it, they're like, "Umm, I don't know what my vision for the neighbourhood is." We're like, "We don't want to put you on the spot. Just think about it for a little while, fill it in as best you can, and Carla will come back and get it in a couple of days." Then they're like, "Okay, yeah, I'll think about this." I think it does put people on the spot to say, "Here's this form we have to fill out."

SCOTT: Sometimes they have very specific ideas.

KRISTIN: And sometimes they don't. Like, I talked to some people last night that were like, "Umm, I don't think … I don't know … I read mystery novels?" I'm like, "Well, someone else might like that too. You could do a book share." And they're like, "Oh, okay." So they start thinking about things like that.

SCOTT: You were talking about 107 Avenue, that area being a little … So, you would say you notice different vibes around there?

KRISTIN: Just on my map, I mean, you can see there's a gaping hole over there. I have gotten one person in that area through my flyers. She's more like in the middle of the block, between 106 and 107 (Avenues).

But I'll stop and talk to everybody. And everyone's like, "Oh, that sounds like a great idea." But then, nothing. Flyers everywhere, nothing. And I don't really know what else to do, right?

SCOTT: And do you have any sense of why it's tough there?

KRISTIN: No, I haven't. No one's been like, "Forget it." But you do get the sense that there's a lot of rentals. There's a lot of apartment buildings on the corners of those…

SCOTT: Three-storey walk-ups…

KRISTIN: Yeah.

CARLA: 111 has that too. I think those are, like, kind of the second phase.

KRISTIN: The block connectors that I have now, they're like, 'Am I supposed to do this apartment on the corner?' And I'm like, if you're comfortable with it, and you can get in there, great—go for it. But that's not my focus right now. Right now I'm focusing on the single-family homes in the neighbourhood, and kind of getting that established, and then hopefully moving from there into more of the apartment buildings. And maybe get more of the businesses involved in promoting it. Having people in the neighbourhood shop local a little bit more, and that sort of thing. But that's down the road.

CARLA: It's pretty tough. Like, in my block—I'm on one of those northern blocks, between 111 and 110—and, so, we have a lot of stable, like, owners. It's all owners. Except, we have a four-storey walk-up on our corner. And I have tried, and tried. I've taped signs on their doors. I've gone in and hand-delivered, and put flyers under doors. I've heard TVs going, knock on the door, they don't answer. I'm the crazy person who calls to people who're sitting on their balcony, and give them an information sheet. And it's just, I don't know. There's something that's uniquely different about walk-ups. And I think Oliver too has had that experience. There's something uniquely different about apartment dwellers versus single-family.

40:00

KRISTIN: Yeah, because I live between the same Avenues as Carla, but just a few blocks away. The apartments on the corners of my street are super transient. Like, there's always an apartment's worth of stuff by the dumpster every 15 days. Someone's always moving out.

CARLA: And are they rentals?

KRISTIN: Oh, yeah.

CARLA: You see, ours are owned. They're owned condos.

KRISTIN: That's crazy. But then, (name) lives on a street where she has the walk-up where everyone puts little flowers out on their balcony and stuff. It's super cute. And she knows an older lady that lives there, and the lady is like, 'Oh, yeah, I'll help you do it in my block.' So, I guess some of them are different. You just never know.

CARLA: There is something, though, that's more challenging. That would be an interesting Master's degree, to do that.

SCOTT: That's part of it. My neighbourhood's almost 92 per cent rental.

CARLA: Wow! 92?

SCOTT: And over 50 per cent single-person households.

KRISTIN: Wow.

SCOTT: The City has great statistics available. There are a lot of 'holy crap' stats in my neighbourhood.

CARLA: But think about how much opportunity there is, to connect people.

SCOTT: That's my hope, too. Just on my own block, I found people much more positive than I expected. I was hoping you guys had cracked the code.

> KRISTIN: No, I have not cracked it. I'm kind of like, what do I…

> CARLA: But I do think, you know, like you had mentioned that Howard had talked about ambient neighbouring? And I said before, there's that tipping point, right? I think there is that neighbourly piece too, that there's a tipping point in that. I think people kind of want to be part of that, and they walk by. There've been a couple times where we've had some block parties in our neighbourhood. Sometimes they're smaller, and sometimes they're bigger. But, there are always these two women—I know their names, and they walk by. They walk their dog. She always has earphones on, so she can completely not have to talk to anybody. But my kids will stop and want to pet her dog, right? And she'll feel compelled to talk. So, I invite them to the block party, and she's like, 'Yeah, that's a great idea, but it's just not my thing.' But I think, at a certain point, they just see it so often that they want to be part of that. At least, that's my hope. I don't know.

SCOTT: Yeah, and maybe even if they don't want to be part of it, just knowing that it's there if they want it. They're welcome to stop by. Because, yeah, there are some people, I know, that aren't going to be super keen on getting to know their neighbours.

> KRISTIN: I have one block connector who's said, "I've tried the conversation guide with people, and they're like, meh." And then says, like, "Oh, and I'm having a block party." They're like, okay, I'll come to that. But I don't feel like filling this out for you.

> CARLA: And there's a guy on my block who, every year, or six months, I come around with my little block party invite, and he's like, "Oh yeah, the same one as six months ago. I'm not coming, but I'll sign whatever you want me to to make it happen." He doesn't want to participate, but he'll sign to close the street off, or whatever.

> KRISTIN: I don't understand that, but it's not my personality.

> CARLA: And I don't know that there's a secret code for walk-ups.

SCOTT: Well, when I find it, I'll tell everyone.

So, what was the main motivation behind getting started on the Facebook page? Were you looking at it as a promotional tool?

> KRISTIN: It wasn't necessarily for recruitment, because I knew I was going to have to talk to people I knew, and that kind of thing. A lot of people aren't going to, like, "Yeah, I'm going to do it!" You kind of have to talk to someone who can convince to do it, I think. (laughs). It was more to get the awareness out. When Carla was doing it, I think there wasn't much in the way of social media. There were maybe some emails, and that kind of thing. But nothing that was formal, right? So I thought, okay. Also, it's kind of an interest of mine to just do that. I was taking some classes and that kind of thing in social media, and I thought, well, this is perfect. I can use this as a way to learn things as well.

SCOTT: Where were you taking classes?

> KRISTIN: At the university. Just some extension classes in social media. Yeah, it was more just to promote it and just make people more aware of it. Because people didn't know about it. I think it's helped that way, for sure.

SCOTT: And some people think, oh, a hundred followers—what's the point? But, a hundred followers means you do something and even if a hundred people see it, that's pretty…

> KRISTIN: If they comment, or share it, it can go huge. I do some social media for a couple of businesses—you know, have maybe a couple hundred likes. But that's not my main goal. Once you get them interested, and commenting and sharing, then all their friends see it. It just goes from there. There's a big ripple effect.

SCOTT: The thing I posted yesterday, from knocking on doors. Strangers have been sharing it—I made it public. People have seen it in other friends' feeds. I have no idea who these people are, and they're liking my post.

> KRISTIN: I'm going to go look for it, Scott, and put on my page.

> CARLA: Yeah!

> …

> KRISTIN: We have a business in our neighbourhood called Salgado Fenwick, and she just did these awesome t-shirts for the Westmount Heritage Area. And she wants to donate some of the money that she's made from it to the community league for the renos, or whatever. She's like local, and she took it upon herself to do this. It has pictures of older houses from Westmount on it. It's a cool little store—all the hipsters go there.

> CARLA: We should see if she can design something.

> KRISTIN: That's what I said before. We should get (name) to make our Hello Neighbour t-shirts.

> …

SCOTT: So, what sort of things sort of take off on the Facebook page?

> KRISTIN: Like I said, a lot of the time, pictures of people in the neighbourhood, because people love to see people they know. … There was also one, there was an article in the Edmonton Journal about the neighbourhood that mentioned Abundant Community Westmount. It wasn't completely factually correct, but that did really well as well. People like to see things that are happening in their neighbourhood. Stuff like that. Most of the people ones have done pretty well.

CARLA: Have we ever tried advertising the online survey?

KRISTIN: Well, I could, but I don't think the one that we have up there is exactly the same as the conversation guide. So, I don't know if that would really help us. But it might be like (Glenora) does it, and use it as a tool to find block connectors.

CARLA: I wonder if that would work, though?

KRISTIN: Maybe. My thing is to kind of do it through connections that I have, connections that other people have. Kind of like six degrees of separation, right? I honestly don't want to just knock on random doors. I don't know who I'm getting. At least, this way, I've kind of vetted them a little bit. I know that they're not out to rob their neighbours, or take advantage of anybody. They genuinely want to know their neighbours. When you do it just strangers, I mean, you just never know, right?

CARLA: But then you don't know what you get with your friends…

KRISTIN: I know, yeah. I've had a few people who've said they're going to do it, and then not really.

CARLA: I think that, though, comes down to expectations around the role of block connector, right? There's a lot of people that are really good at being the go-to person on the block. Like (name)'s a good example. There's this issue on the block, and he went around and talked to everybody on the block about this issue. So he's what I thought was the perfect guy. He's chatty, and he's always having people over. I knew he talked to all his neighbours. I went over to his house for coffee, and I sat down, and I went through this whole conversation guide with him, and I did it on him so he could experience it. And he hasn't done one. Like, he hasn't done any. He has come to a couple of meetings at my house, but he'd come with his coffee, and berries, and he'd walk down the street—he lives five houses from mine on a different block. But it's just really interesting. I just don't think it's important to him?

KRISTIN: Do you know else I think might be the case? People that you recruited before I came along, they don't know me. They know you. And they feel like they're personally indebted to you somehow to do it? I feel like, the people that I've gotten, they're going to see me every day at school. They're going to be embarrassed if they don't do their stuff. So, they've been doing it, even if it makes them uncomfortable. They're like, "I'm doing my connecting! I'm really going to do it." But then, some people I don't know haven't come to any meetings, they don't phone me back. Because they don't know me. I think it's like a personal thing. (name) who never came to a meeting, (name) who almost quit but I got her to come back from the edge. (laughs) And then, the whole issue with (name).

CARLA: Well, he died. So, that's an okay excuse.

KRISTIN: But I also think, maybe, because you started it, people were like, 'Oh, I have tons of time.' And then it's, wait, you want your guides now? Whereas the people I've done, it's only been a few months. I said I need these by July 31. So they know that's the requirement. I don't know. Maybe it's just the length of it has been… It hasn't been enough time, based on the grant time.

But I do like to know who I'm getting as a block connector. It's people I've gotten from flyers, I've gone to their house, and I've met them, and I've determined they're, like, normal people. I tell my husband where I'm going—I'm going to this person's house. I don't know them. (laughs). No, everybody's been really lovely. But if someone contacts me through those kinds of things, they're probably a community-minded person anyway, right?

CARLA: And I think, as a female, you kind of have to be a bit more careful.

KRISTIN: But it's been women, mostly. That's another thing I've found: it's been mostly women. I have a few male connectors who are awesome, but it's mostly females. That's another interesting dynamic.

SCOTT: You were both obviously very involved with the community league before. Has this changed your own perceptions of the community league?

KRISTIN: You know, it has a little bit. When I go to Howard's and I hear about other people having trouble with their community, and getting them to buy in, I'm like, oh, we never had that problem. Carla was in from the beginning. There's been no issue. Everyone's super supportive, and they can see the benefit of it. You have to go make reports, and stuff? And try to convince people that this is a good thing? I just mention it once in a while that we have so many connectors, and it's going well, and people are like, all right, great.

I think our community league is just so welcoming of the whole initiative. It boggles my mind that other communities aren't. So it has changed my views for the positive.

SCOTT: I live in a better neighbourhood than the other ones. (laughter)

KRISTIN: I think it's the mindset of people that are on the league already. There's no infighting or things like that. Everyone's pretty chill and friendly. I think that it used to be different than it is now.

CARLA: I think, for me, I really appreciated just seeing, I think different people have stepped up than would have if we had kept with the traditional community league board model. It's allowed a lot of people to come forward and be the person on the block. It gives them a lot of, I don't know, like I find even myself, I feel a lot more responsibility about the people on my block. And my level of care for the people on my block has increased.

And it's hard for me to differentiate between my role as president, and my role as block and neighbourhood connector. But often I'm like, "I feel proud of people in this neighbourhood." People just step up. They sign up. People wouldn't do this unless they genuinely cared for their neighbours and their neighbourhood. And the fact that we have 40 people who have committed to talking to everybody on their block, and being that person on their block? To me, my own perception of my neighbourhood is like, wow. I can really depend on them. I feel cared for in my neighbourhood, just because of those numbers, right?

SCOTT: It isn't so much the 'gift matrix,' the sort of underpinnings of Abundant Community. It's more just knowing people? When I first read The Abundant Community, I thought, oh, okay, like, 'Uncle John likes to juggle. Maybe some kids on the block would like to learn to juggle.' Ummm. (laughter)

CARLA: And I think that's a tension. When I'm looking at my research, there's that tension between that care and getting the conversation guides done and getting people connected outside the block. Howard talks about the block becoming an association in itself. And I think it's stronger than an association. I think it's actually people really who really care for each other in a really meaningful way.

SCOTT: What sort of evidence do you see of that?

CARLA: Well, like when I talk to a bunch of block connectors in my study, and this is my own experience too, there's just … People really want to take care of each other. When they hear of somebody who's …

My own example is my next-door neighbour (Name) was working 24/7 for the Fort Mac recruitment centres. He was there, so I would make sure that—because he started the late shift, he did like the midnight shift—so I would always make sure I had extra meals for him. So he could come over, and he would eat with us when he had a chance, or I would bring meals over. Those kind of things? I don't know if that would have happened without this Abundant Community. It may have.

60:00

But I think, because of the intentionality of it, I've heard that people just feel more responsible, and they want to take care of these people, because they're living right next to them.

Or when there's a crime issue, the people will gather together, and because they already have that connection they'll figure out what's going on, and rather than it being a punitive thing, calling the cops right away, they'll try and figure out if they can help whoever's doing the crime.

Like, there was one incident where there was a youth who was throwing eggs at this particular house. They solved it in-house—like, they solved it within the block. Which is pretty powerful.

SCOTT: And revolutionary. It's something that has completely disappeared.

KRISTIN: I've found that a few people that I've asked to be block connectors are like, okay, I think this is a great way to meet the people that I'm embarrassed that I don't know that live across from me, that have lived there for five years. Now I can take this over and, like, I'm the block connector and we're going to get to know each other. And it's just like a good little way to go over and have it be an icebreaker. I've had some really shy people overcome their misgivings about the whole thing, because they do have the authority behind it.

…

SCOTT: Have there been other neighbourhood connectors that you've interacted with online?

KRISTIN: Like, (Glenora's neighbourhood connector) and I take things off each other's pages and share them, and stuff. It's another way I can get more neighbourly information out. Other than that…

CARLA: Other than the neighbourhood connector Saturday mornings. (President of Bonnie Doon), him and I would connect, but that was at a president level than it was as a block connector, because (name) is the neighbourhood connector there.

…

CARLA: When I started, I think Howard was the biggest support. Then, it ended up being that the other neighbourhood connectors were the biggest support.

…

KRISTIN: I'm not trying to use (FB) as my only tool. It's a piece of it. Because I do go out and hand-deliver flyers, and talk to people who are out.

CARLA: I agree. It's a fabulous tool. I know that there are online communities that are really powerful, that aren't face-to-face, that you would never be able to have. Like, I'm just thinking of when I was trying to get pregnant, and I couldn't get pregnant, then I had this really strong, powerful online community. It helped take away some of the shame around that. Because you can't talk about that with people: "Oh, I'm trying to get pregnant and I can't." It's just not a conversation starter, right? But you find an online community where you don't even have to have that conversation. You just kind of understand, right?

But this, because we're talking about connecting being the key thing, there has to be a face-to-face component initially, I think. Or, it has to come very quickly after

the initial online connection has started. But it's definitely a tool that can create deeper connection.

…

KRISTIN: Even the people that have been e-introduced to me, or whatever, they'll just fade away if I can't meet with them immediately. I'll be like, "Okay, we can meet. I can totally come over whenever." And it's kind of like, "Oh, we're going to meet now?" And that weeds some people out immediately. I'm kind of like that. I jump on it. If you're interested, we're going to do it now, because if I let it go you're going to find some way to not do it. But, everyone who I have met, and gone over to the house, they'll do it. They see the value in it. Once they meet someone who's doing it, and can put a name to the face, then they'll do it. But, yeah, I've had a few people be super interested, and then just, like, stop emailing me back.

CARLA: And if they're hesitant to meet you face to face, how are they going to meet everybody on their block?

Inner-city neighbourhood connectors group interview

February 12, 2017, 2:00-4:00 p.m.
10926 108 Street NW, Edmonton, AB

Host/facilitator: Scott Rollans

Neighbourhood connectors: Angelika Matson (Oliver)
                                              "Alicia" [pseudonym] (Boyle Street)
                                              Jason Shine (Central McDougall)

NOTE: For the purposes of this transcription, the neighbourhood connector for Boyle Street will be identified as 'Alicia.'

SCOTT: Let's go around the circle. Tell us your name, your neighbourhood, and one thing you particularly like about living there.

> ANGELIKA: I'm Angelika Matson. I'm the Neighbourhood Connector for Oliver. And I really like how diverse my neighbourhood is. We have The Pearl [luxury condominium skyscraper], and we have low-income housing, and we have everything in between. Lots of different backgrounds and cultures.

> JASON: My name's Jason. I'm in Central McDougall. One of the things that I like about my neighbourhood, the first thing that comes to mind, is also the diversity. There aren't just residents representing a lot of cultures, but there are significant populations from several minority populations around the world—mini locations of community collectiveness. There's Somalian corners, and Ethiopian corners, and First Nations corners in our neighbourhood—where people of various cultural groups congregate. And, I love being able to walk to all the downtown stuff.

SCOTT: So, 'Alicia,' are you connecting in a neighbourhood where you live?

> ALICIA: I'm not. Actually, I live in Newton, which doesn't have Abundant Community yet. In the interim, they have had me acting as a kind of pinch-hitter in neighbourhoods who have had difficulty securing a neighbourhood connector. I've previously worked in Bannerman, and now I've been put in Boyle Street. I'm getting my foot in there, currently. I'll just echo both of you—diversity, absolutely number one. I also feel like there's untapped potential in Boyle Street. I think a lot of people overlook that area, because there's lots of social services in that area. You can visibly see that there are homeless and transient people just living there. They really overlook it. That's one thing that I like: I want to uncover that untapped potential.

SCOTT: In terms of Bannerman, people think of that area as kind of affluent. But Bannerman has a real mix as well, doesn't it?

> ALICIA: Bannerman is in the northeast end of town. It's sort of lower-middle-class in terms of income. A lot of people work in oil there. It's a pretty typical neighbourhood, but it is very suburban. There's not a lot of high-density. There are a couple of pockets of walk-ups, but for the most part it's single-family detached—which is very different from Boyle Street!

SCOTT: Let's talk about our earliest experiences with Abundant Community. How did you first get involved?

> ANGELIKA: I was recruited by an outgoing Neighbourhood Connector. So, I was actually Abundant Community 2.0 in Oliver. The outgoing neighbourhood connector saw my involvement with the community league, and he thought I would be good for the job, because I really like people. I'm really chatty and outgoing. I kind of took the reins from him. Because Oliver is so big—we have the densest population in Alberta—we kind of split our neighbourhood into little groups. So, generally it's supposed to be 1,000 people that you target. He had his own little neighbourhood called 'Kitchener Park' inside Oliver—so, like a little micro-neighbourhood. And after I took over for him, I assimilated Kitchener Park into my own little neighbourhood called Oliver Park—just a little radius. We're hoping to expand it, and connect all the little mini-neighbourhoods together.

SCOTT: And what sort of things were you doing with the community league?

> ANGELIKA: I was actually an event planner, as a summer student—sort of planning all their community events. They got a federal government grant, and hired a summer student. We run a lot of events in Oliver, so they needed someone to look after that. That's how I initially got involved.

SCOTT: And, Jason, how did you become involved?

> JASON: I was involved in some of the early conversation about Abundant Community coming to the neighbourhood, with some of the people that spearheaded that—Kristy, Derek, and others on the community league board. So, as that turned into an actual thing that they applied for, and an actual grant, I decided to apply for the job. It also helped that the work I had been doing with students at the university campuses—the funding for that expired, a little bit surprisingly, after six years. So, I needed a job. That helped motivate me to submit an application. [laughs]

SCOTT: So, 'Alicia,' you came into the circle before you were doing any kind of neighbourhood connecting.

> ALICIA: I was actually away in Halifax, at university, when I found out about Abundant Community. So, while I was away, my focus was still Edmonton. I knew that once I was done with this school thing, I really wanted to be on the

ground and applying all the stuff I've learned in an Edmonton setting. So, I found out about Abundant Community, and when I finally got back home, I was like, 'Oh, I need to get involved somehow.' Within the first couple of weeks of being home—it was really weird and serendipitous—my partner actually knew somebody who was invited to one of Howard's Sunday brunches. I just showed up there, and I was, like, oh my God, this is Abundant Community. This is where it all starts. So, I just literally snuck in there, and it just took off from there. I think, from an academic point of view, I was very, very interested and wanted to do research on it, and figure it out. That's why I didn't really step into the role of a neighbourhood connector right away. And, also, my neighbourhood didn't have Abundant Community, so it wasn't really available to me. But, just being around Howard and everyone else, they saw that I was committed before I even had the role. That's why they threw me into this pinch-hitter role.

SCOTT: How did you feel the first time you knocked on a neighbour's door? Has it gotten any easier?

> ANGELIKA: Personally, for me, no. The first door I chose to knock on was in my building. I am actually the building connector for my building. I knocked on the door that had a 'Go Away!' mat. It was clearly a joke, but I was, like, okay, if I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it. And I was terrified. And I still get that kind of sense of dread. You just never know what's going to pop up behind the door. And, being in Oliver, you see some strange stuff. [laughs] And you never know how receptive people are going to be. Usually, when you're knocking in apartments, people are hesitant to open their doors. They think it's like a noise complaint, or they've never had that happen before. So, I'm always aware of that as I'm knocking. But, of course, I do it anyway. And me and Howard worked on my knock, so it's actually a little friendlier sounding. So it's like, [shave and a haircut, two bits]

> But, the dread is still there. And then, once I'm into it, it's actually super fun. But it is nerve-wracking.

> The money is motivating—I'm not gonna lie—to go out and get past that.

> JASON: I like knocking on doors, so that doesn't bother me much. I don't mind at all. I like the challenge of somebody coming gruff, and trying to win them over with that first 30 seconds—convincing them by what you say in the first few sentences, and not slam the door in your face. That's fun for me. I'm very much an extrovert. I have almost zero introvert in me anywhere. I don't dread it; I don't fear it. But I sometimes—depending on who opens the door—I worry for them. Sometimes I'm concerned for them. This person looks very scared; I hope they're going to be okay. But I don't usually worry for myself.

> ALICIA: I guess the first door I knocked on was in Bannerman. And, it was with Howard, so it was fine! [laughs] He led the way. But, when I first went door-knocking on my own, I felt like I was super awkward. Trying to explain something that I know so much about—all these details—in a really concise, and

short, and punchy manner that somebody else will grasp right away, was pretty challenging. It progressively gets so much easier. You kind of get this spiel going in your head. You almost give the same thing every time. You know it works with certain people. I don't know. Every time I go out, the first two houses, I'm a little stumbly. But you do get a kind of rhythm going.

SCOTT: And, when people do open the door, are they receptive?

ANGELIKA: I had to change my approach. We have a lot of immigrants in our neighbourhood. So, a lot of times, I'd knock on the door and I'd say, 'Hi, the community league elected me to be a neighbourhood connector,' and they didn't even know what a community league was. It is a challenge. And, sometimes people think you're a business. It's hard to convey the context, especially if there's language barriers there—which there is. So, I've been lucky enough to find a few building connectors that are bilingual, or trilingual, or multilingual. That helps a little bit, but it was a little bit of practice. And sometimes there's a little bit of resistance there. Also, you do get the occasional person that's like, 'Why are you knocking on my door? This is why I live in an apartment, is to not have this happen.' But, generally, sometimes people are thrilled. They'll invite you in for food. I do find there are some people that are craving the connection, but they just don't know how to get it. There's a wide range, I guess.

ALICIA: I found that, especially in Bannerman, you did feel this underlying sense that they want you to come in—they want to talk to you, even though, like, 'I don't know you. I don't know what you want to talk about, but come in.' You definitely get that from some houses. It's kind of like this bipolar thing. You get those people, but you also get the people who just automatically assume you're selling something. 'Yep, sorry, not interested.' You're mid-sentence, and they just shut the door. Okay. But, for the most part, I think people are… I don't know if receptive is the right word. They're not rude, but I don't know if they're open-minded enough, and understand it enough, to really engage with you. I think that's the vast majority that I come across.

SCOTT: What do you think makes people surprised and hesitant?

ALICIA: Not understanding it, is a big one. Sometimes, once you get into the conversation with immigrants, they get it. Their home, everyone knew everyone. I always say, like, 'Here in Canada, the government believes in that. But, people just do it naturally.' Sort of trying to break down that cultural barrier. But, yeah, just not understanding is the big one. People think you're trying to sell something. It's just so weird—you're going into a culture where no one talks to each other, in a building, all stacked on top of one another. It's just really new, and people are scared of you.

SCOTT: I always find it funny, too. The way things are *now* is new. When I was growing up, everyone knew everybody on their block. I could still name a lot of the families on the block where I grew up. I can name the people on my block now, because I've

knocked on their doors. But, before I went, there were people two doors down who have been there for eight or nine years, and their face was unfamiliar to me.

> JASON: I open with something different. I tried several scripts. I had very similar experiences to you [Alicia] when I tried the, 'Hi, I'm from the community league,' or 'Hi, I'm here representing the neighbourhood,' or, 'Hi, I'm here looking for volunteers.' Some people, because of language facility, would give you a glazed look. Other people just wouldn't know what any of that meant, and they're just waiting for, what do I have to sign or buy? Or, what are you trying to give me? And so, I actually switched to just saying, 'Can you help me?' And I actually wait for a response. Usually, it comes as, 'Well, I don't know. What do you want?' "Well, actually, something that you're fully prepared and fully able to give. You've probably given this week; you just didn't give it to me. I want your opinion about the neighbourhood.'

> I used to be in sales. I don't write anything down, because I have a near-photographic memory, but you do absolutely have to have a script. I don't think just saying what you feel like saying. For me, that's dangerous. If I just start talking off the cuff, it's the story about the guy that almost hit somebody in the crosswalk back there, or whatever. Literally, whatever I just saw is the first thing on my mind. So, if I just start speaking, being an extreme extrovert, I'll start talking about the bird I saw. It's completely pointless and useless. You've gotta stick to the script. And that's my script, how I get the door open. And it usually works.

SCOTT: Do you think a project like Abundant Community faces specific challenges in inner-city neighbourhoods? What are some examples of those challenges?

> ANGELIKA: Getting into buildings is challenging for me. It's the biggest hurdle for a neighbourhood connector in high density. If you don't know anyone in the building, a lot of management companies aren't very receptive, or they don't get back to you. So, was and continues to be the biggest hurdle that I overcome, and that I'm working on. Because, in a suburban neighbourhood, you just walk up the driveway and knock the door. But you actually need someone there to let you into the building. So you already need to have a connection there, whether it's the management company or someone that lives in the building. I've tried hovering outside, and that sometimes works. Sometimes it doesn't.

> Another thing is safety. I'm a female neighbourhood connector, and sometimes I feel a little bit scared. I have had strange men invite me into their apartments. Sometimes it's like, okay I don't know… But, also, just from the neighbour's point of view, safety is a big thing. So, once I generally explain to them that knowing your neighbours can actually make the community safer. You don't need to be afraid if someone knocks on your door. I'm not coming to murder you, or steal your things. But, yeah, there's generally a feeling of wariness around people, especially in buildings with high crime rates, or prostitutes, or drugs. Getting into those buildings, and building up trust is sometimes a challenge as well.

SCOTT: Do you find people are afraid of their neighbours?

> ANGELIKA: Oh, yes. I've never had a building connector go out on their own. I'm always there with them, just because of that comfort level. They're scared to talk to their neighbours. They just don't know what to expect. And they don't know, necessarily, where the crime's coming from in their building. Yeah, it's a challenge. I like challenge, though.

> ALICIA: Getting access to the building is absolutely number one. And since I'm sort of in the beginning-ish stages of Boyle now, that's where I'm at. Contacting all these building managers, and trying to work these networks to see if I can find anyone on the inside, right? It's such a struggle. If no one replied to you, then I'm back to Howard—do you know anybody? And just trying to find some loophole to get me started. Once you're in the building, it's like, okay [unintelligible]. But, that's number one.

> I would also just add, the transient population is a challenge. We have so many people that just don't have homes. They're part of the community. Boyle Street has a ton of people who just move around to different places, or they're living in shelters. How do you account for those people? That has been in the back of my mind, as a challenge. And that whole list that [Angelika] gave? I'm totally on board.

SCOTT: Do you want to be my shelter connector? Go and knock on different mats.

> JASON: I would echo those things. The additional challenge that we face in Central McDougall beyond those issues is, sometimes, multiple people in the same building will open the door, and they don't speak English. Their grandkids, who will be home in three hours and are eight, speak English for the family. Or, the dad, who will be home from work at 11 pm, but he'll be gone again at 5 am. Try to connect with that guy! Or, talk through the kids. There are some real challenges there.

> I can order food in about 34 languages, because I don't miss a lot of meals. But that doesn't help you much in a regular conversation.

SCOTT: Can you think of any potential advantages of working in the inner city, when it comes to Abundant Community?

> ALICIA: Winter! It's nice to be inside buildings.

> ANGELIKA: I went to a neighbourhood connector meeting, and everyone's like, oh yeah, things slow down in the winter. I don't have that problem. Everyone's in their apartments in the winter. It's actually the best time to be a neighbourhood connector, as far as I'm concerned. I guess that would be the big advantage.

> That, and you can be efficient, too. Knock an entire 80-suite building in a few hours.

JASON: On top of that, this was already mentioned, but both people from other countries who are recent to Canada, and people with real and tangible socioeconomic needs—both those communities rapidly seem to 'get it.' They get the advantages in a hurry. You don't have to sell them on anything. I don't know for certain, because I've never done it, but I can imagine in wealthier, suburban kind of neighbourhoods, you'd have people going, yeah, I don't need any of that. I don't have any crime or safety issues. I don't care about what my neighbour thinks about anything. I don't want to meet them, and I don't need to. I'm busy, and I'm fine. I don't need any of that support, and I don't want it. I don't know if that's actually true, but that would be my fear in those neighbourhoods. We don't run into that. People that I talk to, they get it in a hurry. Oh, yeah, I desperately need that. I don't always feel like they can achieve it, but they certainly understand it. You don't have to sell them on the need. The product sells itself.

ALICIA: I would add to that. When I was in Bannerman, which is suburban, one house that I knocked, it had one of those doorbell cameras. So, when you ring the doorbell, it notifies the person. They spoke to me through the camera! They wouldn't come to the door. They see no need for this Abundant Community thing. It's just totally unnecessary in their minds. They're in their little insular home. They're good. They don't care about what's going on in the outside world. They don't even care enough to come to the door and meet me face to face. So, I would agree with you on that.

SCOTT: I get the sense that a lot of people in more comfortable situations are happy with their network of distant friends. They feel connected already. It's like, I don't want to know my next-door neighbour, thank you very much. I've got enough friends in my life.

ALICIA: On that topic, that's a luxury, that they can connect with people online, or on the telephone, or whatever. A lot of people in Boyle Street don't have internet, or they don't have a cell phone, or anything. So, you're forced to use the place that you live as your network. It's much more place-based, I think, as opposed to areas where there is internet, and all that virtual connectivity.

That could be a benefit. Abundant Community is technically supposed to be a place-based initiative, so I think it could be fostered in that sense, in places where there are populations that are limited in that sense.

JASON: If you think about it, the more of those supports that we come to count on as we live our lives, that are removed, the more likely you are to be focused on the local network for support. If you remove the internet, you remove the smart phone, you remove the car—and, suddenly, what's in your neighbourhood becomes extremely important. And, whether or not you feel safe walking down the street, when you *need* to walk down the street to get milk, or to go catch the train to get to work. Then, suddenly those things are important, instead of, 'Oh, well, I guess that would be nice, but I don't really care, because I have an SUV, and if somebody really tried to stone me I could run them over. [laughs]

SCOTT: What sort of strategies have you been using to conquer some of those difficulties. For instance, getting into buildings. You talk about hanging around outside. Has that actually ever worked for you?

ANGELIKA: It worked once, and that's it.

I have been using a lot of social media, to be honest. Our community league has a very active online presence, which is a good thing. We do have higher incomes, so we do have a lot of people with computers and things like that. Using social media, and creating events, has really, really helped. Using the website—we actually put a version of the conversation guide on the website. Also, when people sign up, we want to make sure our memberships are accessible to everyone. So, when people sign up for their memberships, we actually have some of the questions on the back. And, if they don't fill out the back of the membership, then I'll actually call them, and be like, 'I notice that you didn't fill out the membership.' And, hopefully, get a connection that way. Just very indirect.

And, also, I go to almost every community league event. I always have my neighbourhood connector badge, and I have found a lot of connections to get into buildings that way. Because, generally, the people that are attending the community league events would be the type of people … I'd say, you don't even have to be a building connector, you can just let me into your building when I need to. They're usually very open to that.

SCOTT: And when you get into the building, then you say, are you sure you don't want to be a building connector?

ANGELIKA: Exactly. Then I try to sell them on it. But yeah, a lot of the indirect methods have been really helpful.

SCOTT: Jason, I understand you hosted an event.

JASON: We don't have many community league events. We just had to make our own.

We brought in a band, and some food, and just kind of invited people to a local community-like building. It burned down in 1990-something, and has never been rebuilt. The city has a building here, and we were able to access grants and funds to rent it. And, so we brought some people together, and met some community connectors. I absolutely agree, if people will come to a community event, these are people who already get it. They've already purchased the product. They don't just see the need for it, they've already signed up. They just haven't put their name on an official form yet, but they're already signed up as neighbourhood connection/building connector kind of people. By showing up there, you know they're on your side. Then, it's just a matter of figuring out who they are and how to get hold of them after the event, so you can have more conversations about that, and turn them from just a contact to a person that's actually helping fulfill the goal of the Abundant Community Initiative.

SCOTT: Alicia, you say you've been contacting building managers? Has that worked?

> ALICIA: It's not been successful. [laughs] I think the only other thing I've been attempting to do is use the community league board—to try and tap into their network. They've been in the community a lot longer than I have, right? I'm just this newcomer coming in, and plopping myself down, and trying to figure out the lay of the land. That alone is a different challenge.
>
> I'm trying to get people who have been in the community, know the community, for a long time. And try to mooch off of them, and their connections. At some point, events are also going to be used as my strategy going forward. Next weekend I'm going to one, and I'm going to go with all of my Abundant Community supplies and try and recruit people there—at least gauge people's interest. Try and tag onto community league-sponsored events.

SCOTT: And do they help you out in terms of contacting members? Do they give access to their lists?

> ALICIA: Nope. Not at this point. That might be a good avenue to explore, if they let me have it. I know, like confidentiality, I don't know if they'd let me.
>
> ANGELIKA: It was an idea that we're still floating by our board next week.
>
> And, on your point of contacting building management. The majority of building management companies, I have had terrible luck with. Boardwalk has been been great. We kind of went through a hiatus, as were dealing with some grant stuff in our neighbourhood. And, so, they actually contacted me. They're willing to pay for a big movie party. They want to set up a screen, and have a big block party in a park across the street from one of their buildings. We kind of lost contact for a while, and they actually actively reached out to me. They saw the value of having something like this in a building with a high crime rate, or with people that don't feel connected. They're the one exception to the rule. I wish more companies would be like that.

SCOTT: Have people found any ways to tap into ethnic communities?

> ANGELIKA: We have some ideas floating around. That's the thing—we have lots of ideas, but have a harder time making them happen. But, a lot of the immigrants want to learn English. So, we actually offer an English language learners' club at the community league, and it's usually pretty well attended. And so, when you knock on someone's door, and they're having trouble with the language barrier, you can say, 'Would you like to learn English?'
>
> We're also thinking of starting a cooking club, too. There's a lot of diversity of food. The languages and the food seem to help. And a lot of people are willing to try new things when it comes to language and food—not necessarily going to a block party. We have a very small kitchen, so that's one of the things that's

holding us back. But, a lot of people are very excited to share their cuisine or their language with other people.

SCOTT: I could see something like having a Somalian night, where you have someone giving a Somalian cooking demonstration, and everybody else is invited to come and watch.

ANGELIKA: And, we had one lady who was begging us to teach her how to do a Canadian Thanksgiving. She never cooked a turkey. So, something like that would be great as well.

One thing we did do that was very successful was do trick or treating in Oliver. There was one neighbour who approached me—'I just want to start trick or treating in Oliver. Nobody ever goes trick or treating in buildings.' So, we did a lot of poster promotion around the neighbourhood. We had a lot of people who had never trick or treated before. So, she would explain to the parents over the phone about what trick or treating was. And then, on the poster we also said if you're interested in participating as a building, contact me. And so, we actually created a little Google Map with all the different houses pinpointed. Someone volunteered to create that. And then we had about 40 or 50 kids last year going to the different buildings on the map. That was really great in getting people out and about, and I have a lot of contacts in buildings that are very community league-oriented now. That was helpful as well.

The big events, and the groups, seems to be one of the biggest things for getting connections.

SCOTT: In terms of the overall vision of Abundant Community, are there any aspects that aren't really relevant to the inner city, or don't really work in the inner city?

ALICIA: The terms—'block connector? Asset-based community development? What is that?

JASON: Jargon doesn't communicate well anywhere. But that's the purpose of the word jargon. But, specifically, some of the terms—block connector—my forms say building connector. A bunch of the stuff doesn't make a lot of sense in our neighbourhood, in terms of labels. The program itself—at least, I haven't experienced anything that's a significant barrier or obstacle, or just a piece that doesn't connect? But the terms absolutely needed to be contextualized.

SCOTT: Do you use the internet in your work as a neighbourhood connector? Some examples might be email lists, website, social media? You already talked about your Halloween project.

ANGELIKA: I set up a Facebook page. Originally, I put it up to do something like 'Faces of Edmonton,' but in Oliver. The photography group that came out. We just went up to people in the street and asked them their stories, and then we did a kind of 'meet your neighbours' on Facebook type of thing. That was really

successful. But then I just decided to use Facebook as a platform to advertise the initiative, share articles, and maybe help people wrap their heads around it a little more.

So, when the Halloween thing came up this year, we decided to promote it not only with physical posters, but also on social media. And that's where we got a lot more buildings. We actually had to expand the area we were targeting. And that's also where someone just randomly decided to make a Google Map. And now, a lot of the neighbours found out through Facebook. The cool thing about Facebook is that you're able to target it by locale. You can actually target the area. So, I targeted Oliver, and all the people who saw the thing were just in Oliver. A lot of people hadn't even heard about us, but they saw it on their Facebook feeds and then started participating. So that was really cool.

And then, also, when I first got involved with the community league, I went to Google and I Googled what a community league was. Putting the conversation guide on the website, and just saying this is just a good way to get connected with your neighbours, has actually been really help. We've gotten a few building connectors that way as well.

SCOTT: You do you find if someone actually opens up a form online…

ANGELIKA: They're actually seeking it, and just don't know where to start. A lot of people, at least in my neighbourhood, turn to online as their first resource.

JASON: What's your Facebook, like is it…

ANGELIKA: Abundant Community Oliver. And I sign all my posts, 'Angelika, Oliver Neighbourhood Connector,' just to try to make it a little bit more personal. I'd have a really hard time turning it over to the community league or some organization. It's more a platform for me to reach out to people.

JASON: And is it a page, or a group?

ANGELIKA: It's a page.

SCOTT: So, when you did Faces of Oliver, did you just go out looking for people who were out and about?

ANGELIKA: Yup. We went to all the different parks, and we found a lot of people. And then, if you take someone's picture, they're going to go to your Facebook page to see the picture. So we got a lot of people that way.

SCOTT: And documenting events. Do you have photos from the Halloween?

ANGELIKA: Yup. We have lots of photos. And it's cool seeing the comments. There were neighbours thanking each other. One neighbour said, 'Oh, it was so great to have kids in our building; we haven't had kids in our building for years.' And another neighbour was saying, 'My kid has never been trick or treating

before. This is great. He says he wants to go trick or treating every day.' And so they had that interaction online, whereas they might not have had it before. It was cool to be able to share that kind of stuff. I don't have social media waivers or anything like that. I just ask when I'm taking the pictures. I don't know if that's a legality thing, but it would be way too formal if I made people sign a waiver.

SCOTT: I think that's the way it's been working so far. I don't think a lot of the stuff that's been happening would be approved by FOIP, or whatever.

Alicia, it's still early in Boyle Street. Do you have a sense that people are online at all?

ALICIA: Absolutely. There's a huge portion that are online. But, there's also that portion that has no connection at all. Sometimes it's the same people that are in and out of shelters. That population is there. How do we improve, and deal with them? But, like you said, there's a huge portion that is. I just haven't tapped into any of those online platforms yet. Hearing [Angelika] speak about it, I'm like, good idea! I think that Facebook Oliver thing—that would be really beneficial in Boyle Street.

SCOTT: Central McDougall's social media network is still pretty confined—we've got about 75-80 people on each. At the same time, that's 70 or 80 people that will actually see something.

Does anybody have ideas or strategies they haven't tried yet that they're interested in trying?

ANGELIKA: I've thought about translating the materials into different languages. But I just don't know if that would even work. The language barrier is such a huge thing. And to not have it with you .. like, which language do you carry with you in your little bag as you're knocking on people's doors? I have no idea what to do there. But, I've thought about translating.

JASON: The trouble with Central McDougall in that regard is, at John A. McDougall School there are 38 languages spoken in the homes of students. And it's not a very big school population. Thirty-eight languages. There's just no tangible way to do it. And there are obviously some that are much more heavily represented than others, but the likelihood that, on any given day, you're going to be able to guarantee that this one's going to be useful … even if you carried the eight most commonly spoken, you would miss as many people as you hit, or more. And, if you don't speak those languages, depending on how open they are to standing there and pantomiming with you, how do you know which one to even reach for and show them? And, just because they speak the language doesn't mean they necessarily read it, either. So, there's a lot of extra barriers.

SCOTT: Literacy is something we haven't really touched on. There was one person at the Central McDougall event, where I handed them the form and they said they needed my help filling it out. We went through it question by question. Not everybody in our

neighbourhood can read or write; certainly not everybody can read and write English, even if they speak it.

So, all things considered, do people feel they're making a positive impact on their neighbourhood? And what sort of evidence have you seen of that so far?

> ANGELIKA: I have some people's stories, I guess. That's the way I measure impact—by stories—and that's what's making my grant process difficult. We have lots of great stories and anecdotes, but we don't necessarily have all the data.
>
> I have seen buildings, after we've gone knocking, decide to do pot lucks in the middle of the hallway. They actually brought out blankets, and pillows, and put all of the food on the laundry-room washer and dryer, and just decided to invite all their neighbours to eat a meal in the hallway. And we had just jogged their idea for that. And then, again, the trick or treating thing would be the big one.
>
> There was also one time when we actually had an impact on crime. There was a lady that knew two of her neighbours through Abundant Community. She was the floor connector—we break it down into floors sometimes in big buildings. She saw someone that she didn't recognize—she knew all of her neighbours—lurking in the parkade around one person's car. So, she was able to knock on the other two neighbours' doors, and bring down some beefy muscle. When they asked the person what they were doing, the person left. So, she might have prevented a car break-in, which is the biggest problem in Oliver. So, just stuff like that.
>
> There's also a lot of untapped potential, too. I have someone that volunteers, who said he'd be able to help immigrants build up their credit. He works for a bank. But, I have yet to be able to connect him with anyone who might need that. So, there's a lot of untapped potential there, and I can see it, and that's what's motivating me. But, I'd love to get more stories like that. It's a very slow process, very slow.

SCOTT: It's sort of designed from the funder's perspective—get the cheque, and a year later you submit your report.

> ANGELIKA: I'm doing this as a volunteer now; I'm no longer getting paid. Because it actually took us that long, and we still are only connected in three buildings right now. But it's still worth it, I think. I'd like to get paid again, and we're exploring that. But, at the same time, I don't want to give up on this, because I do see the3 untapped potential, and I do have conversation guides with people that could really help other people out. It's just, I don't have enough buildings yet to reach that critical mass, where I can start connecting people the way the initiative intended. I'm doing it through events, and groups, and things like that, but to actually connect one neighbour in need with another neighbour that can help them—it hasn't actually happened yet, because I haven't met enough of them or been able to get into their buildings. So, yeah.

D. SCOTT: Have you seen the President's Choice video? [#EatTogether campaign — https://youtu.be/vDuA9OPyp6I] The idea that people are actually doing it. It would be great to get them to take some pictures!

JASON: We'll take pictures. We're doing one the first Saturday in March.

ANGELIKA: You're doing one? Cool. Do you have a common space in your building?

JASON: Not really. There's a just barely large-enough area for a table and a few chairs in the front lobby, and we're going to set it up there.

SCOTT: Keep me posted.

So, to wrap up, what would be your biggest piece of advice for somebody who was starting off as a connector in an inner-city context?

ANGELIKA: Make it your own. You have to get creative, and every neighbourhood is different. I would have never even thought about people not having access to phones or internet. But, I can't just walk into buildings, so I had to go online. Kind of building the plane as you fly it. Don't be afraid to get creative, and try new things, and ways of reaching out. Don't feel like you have to stick to the template they give you. Make it your own.

ALICIA: And, don't get discouraged, too. If you jump into it thinking it's going to be, 'Okay, step by step.' It lays it out month by month, right? And it takes, like, triple the time, or more. I remember, when I was out walking one day, I literally walked around for two hours trying to get into buildings. Didn't make contact with one person. It's like a desert out there. And it's so discouraging. You just have to go home and regroup, and try again, and try creative methods, like you said. But, yes, don't get discouraged. That's a very big thing. If you're out there being a neighbourhood connector, and knock on doors and can't even get into buildings, that's pretty upsetting.

SCOTT: Which is probably how you ended up as a pinch-hitter.

ALICIA: Yeah. [laughs]

JASON: The other thing I'd add to that is, make sure you do *something*. It is easy in this role to go, okay, I've got the role, I've got the title … but that doesn't mean anything. You have to do something. Go knock on some doors. At least try. Because you can say, 'Oh, well, I probably can't get into those buildings anyway'—well, now for sure you're not going to get in. Go knock on the door. And if you don't get in, then try number two. Take down the manager's phone number from the front door, at least, and go home with that. And, that night, when you've kind of recovered, and had your hot cocoa or whatever you need to get over the fact that you couldn't even get in—then, phone the manager and see if

you can get in the next day with the manager. And, if they won't meet you, see if they can recommend somebody in the building who you can talk to. Get them to forward an email for you. Whatever it takes, but just keep pushing and pushing until you overcome that hurdle. And then the next, and then the next. It's part of the job, to get discouraged, but you've just got to do something. It's easy to have a week go by and realize, oh, I didn't do any neighbourhood connecting this whole week.

ANGELIKA: One time I pretended to be a renter. [laughter] I was just like, oh yeah, I'm interested in this building. I didn't say why. And then, yeah, so do you know the building manager's contact info? It didn't work, but I tried.

SCOTT: So, to sum up some of the key pointSCOTT:

- Do something.
- Don't get discouraged.
- Make it up as you go.
- Getting into buildings is a hard thing—I think we've all agreed on that. [laughter]

Thank you for your time, and your insight.

ANGELIKA: Let's all stay in contact with each other. I learned a lot from you.

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM (Westmount)

"Who are the people in your neighbourhood?"
Interview for a research project

Researcher:
Scott Rollans
phone: 780-421-1045
email: scott@rollans.com

Supervisor:
Dr. Gordon Gow
phone: 780-492-6111
email: ggow@ualberta.ca

Background

I'm inviting you to be interviewed about Westmount's Abundant Community Edmonton (ACE) project, as part of my research study. If you have any reluctance or misgivings, please feel free to say no. I'm hoping to gather information and ideas that will help future and current neighbourhood connectors do their jobs better. My study might also prove useful to people working in other cities to build connections among neighbours.

Purpose of the study:

My research project explores the challenges and opportunities of running Abundant Community in an inner-city context. I am particularly interested in the ways inner-city neighbourhood and block connectors use online tools (including social media) to enhance their face-to-face efforts. I'm looking at Westmount as a example of a successful ACE project in a relatively stable neighbourhood.

The interview will be part of my final research project for my Master of Arts in Communication and Technology (MACT) at the University of Alberta. I am also currently a neighbourhood connector for ACE in Central McDougall. This study should help inner-city neighbourhood connectors work more effectively and efficiently.

Study procedures:

I will interview Westmount's current and previous neighbourhood connectors about the ongoing story of ACE in Westmount. For approximately two hours, we will have a conversation about the experiences, ideas, and strategies the two of you have encountered while pursuing ACE in your neighbourhood. We will also spend some time discussing the role (if any) communication technology (e.g., internet, social media) has played in your efforts. I will host the interview at my house in Central McDougall, at 10926 108 St.

Benefits:

I hope you will enjoy the opportunity to describe and reflect upon ACE Westmount. Although you won't be paid to participate, I intend to compensate you with coffee, tea, and fresh-baked goodies. Of course, I also hope the data gathered from our interview will benefit current and future ACE initiatives throughout our city—as well as similar efforts elsewhere.

Risks:

I don't foresee any risks, discomforts, or inconveniences arising from this interview. If you have any concerns, please raise them at any time.

Confidentiality:

Because you are both well known within Westmount for your work with ACE, I cannot promise anonymity. However, if you inadvertently disclose any identifying details about third parties (e.g., the individuals in your neighbourhood), these will not appear in the final report and any written transcripts.

If you prefer, you have the option to not be directly identified in the results.

I will record the interview (audio only). Immediately afterward, I will transfer the audio file to my computer hard drive (which is encrypted and password protected) and delete it from the voice recorder. I will also have an encrypted backup, plus a second password-protected backup online—both accessible only to me.

Your contact information will not appear anywhere in the transcripts or report.

Voluntary participation:

By signing this consent form, you agree that you are freely and voluntarily participating in my research.

Freedom to withdraw:

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, with no consequences to you, up to and including seven days from the date of the interview.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

You may also direct any questions to the researcher (Scott Rollans, hrollans@ualberta.ca, 780-421-1045) or supervisor (Dr. Gordon Gow, ggow@ualberta.ca, 780-492-6111).

<u>Participant Informed Consent</u>

I acknowledge that the research procedures have been adequately described, and that all questions have been answered to my satisfaction. In addition, I know that I may contact the researcher and supervisor designated on this form if I have further questions either now or in the future. I have been assured that personal records relating to this study will be kept anonymous. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and will not be asked to provide a reason. I am aware that the session will be audibly recorded.

Please sign below.

I consent to participate in an interview.

Date: _____

_____   _____
(name—please print)   signature

I consent to being identified in the results. (please initial):_____

_____   _____
(Interviewer's name—please print) signature

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM (Inner city)

"Who are the people in your neighbourhood?"
Focus group for a research project

Researcher: **Supervisor:**
Scott Rollans   Dr. Gordon Gow
phone: 780-421-1045   phone: 780-492-6111
email: scott@rollans.com   email: ggow@ualberta.ca

Background

I'm asking you to volunteer for a focus group, as part of my research study. If you have any reluctance or misgivings, please feel free to say no. I'm inviting neighbourhood connectors from several inner-city Edmonton neighbourhoods to have a shared conversation about their experiences with Abundant Community Edmonton (ACE). I'm hoping to gather information and ideas that will help future and current neighbourhood connectors (including you) do their jobs better. My study might also prove useful to people working in other cities to build connections among neighbours.

Purpose of the study:

My research project explores the challenges and opportunities of running Abundant Community in neighbourhoods of higher density and lower-than-average income levels. I am particularly interested in the ways inner-city neighbourhood and block connectors use online tools (including social media) to enhance their face-to-face efforts.

The focus group will be part of my final research project for my Master of Arts in Communication and Technology (MACT) at the University of Alberta. I am also, like you, an inner-city neighbourhood connector for Abundant Community Edmonton. This study should help all of us work more effectively and efficiently.

Study procedures:

You will participate in a focus group with other inner-city ACE neighbourhood connectors. For approximately two hours, we will have a conversation about our experiences, ideas, and strategies while tackling this job in our own neighbourhoods. We will also spend some time discussing the role (if any) communication technology (e.g., internet, social media) has played in our efforts. I will guide the conversation as facilitator (I am also a Neighbourhood Connector in Central McDougall). I will host the focus group at my house in Central McDougall, at 10926 108 St.

Benefits:

I'm confident all participants will come away from the focus group with new insights and inspiration, and a greater sense of common purpose with your colleagues in similar neighbourhoods. Although you won't be paid to participate, I intend to compensate you with coffee, tea, and fresh-baked goodies. Of course, I also hope the data gathered from our focus group will benefit current and future ACE initiatives throughout our city—as well as similar efforts elsewhere.

Risks:

I don't foresee any physical risks, discomforts, or inconveniences arising from this focus group. If you have any concerns, please raise them at any time.

Confidentiality:

Because we are all well known within our neighbourhoods for our work with ACE, I cannot promise anonymity. However, if you inadvertently disclose any identifying details about third parties (e.g., the individuals in your neighbourhood), these will not appear in the final report and any written transcripts.

If you prefer, you have the option to not be directly identified in the results.

I will record our focus group (audio only). Immediately following the focus group, I will transfer the audio file to my computer hard drive (which is encrypted and password protected) and delete it from the voice recorder. I will also have an encrypted backup, plus a second password-protected backup online—both accessible only to me.

Voluntary participation:

By signing this consent form, you agree that you are freely and voluntarily participating in my research.

Freedom to withdraw:

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, with no adverse consequences. You will not be able to withdraw your data (i.e., audio-recorded comments) once the focus group has begun.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

You may also direct any questions to the researcher (Scott Rollans, hrollans@ualberta.ca, 780-421-1045) or supervisor (Dr. Gordon Gow, ggow@ualberta.ca, 780-492-6111).

<u>Participant Informed Consent</u>

I acknowledge that the research procedures have been adequately described, and that all questions have been answered to my satisfaction. In addition, I know that I may contact the researcher and supervisor designated on this form if I have further questions either now or in the future. I have been assured that personal records relating to this study will be kept anonymous. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and will not be asked to provide a reason. I am aware that the session will be audibly recorded.

Please sign below.

Date: _____

_____   _____
(name—please print)   signature

I consent to being identified in the results. (please initial):_____

_____   _____
(Interviewer's name—please print) signature