

6

Sparking change for local agencies

For Mediation Services, a charitable organization that works with individuals and groups to build peaceful conflict resolution, transformative change began with Spark.

"I wouldn't call it a spark, I'd call it a jolt," laughs Lois Coleman Neufeld, Executive Director of Mediation Services. "It's so empowering to the organization. You can't underestimate the value of building capacity with non-profits."

Coleman Neufeld is talking about one of the services for non-profit organizations offered by the Canadian Community Economic Development Network in Winnipeg. Spark connects local groups, particularly those that focus on community development and community economic development, with people, resources and opportunities to help them build capacity. Over the past year, Spark has connected Mediation Services with specific expertise to help improve the organization's efficiency, effectiveness and long term stability.

Most recently, Spark matched Mediation Services with Kim Champion Taylor, Director of Human Resources at Assiniboine Credit Union, who will lend her high level HR insight as the organization restructures its compensation system.

The project required a volunteer with a specific skill set and mindset, says Geoff Ripat, Spark's Program Coordinator.

"We needed a skilled HR person who has worked with a large organization, but with a values-based approach," says Ripat.

"ACU was the natural place to go. We targeted them and put the word out. Kim's the perfect person."

Champion Taylor wasn't looking for a new volunteer commitment when Spark came calling, but she was impressed by the tailor-made request to share her skills.

"When someone can present an opportunity that's a project-based activity that aligns with all you've done in your background and experience – it's very exciting," says Champion Taylor.

She has committed to providing ten hours of hands-on help and advice to Coleman Neufeld over a two-month period. Most of Spark's matches are project-specific and time-limited, with the volunteer obligation measured in hours, rather than weeks or months, explains Ripat. Once a contract has been completed, volunteers may decide to continue on with the organization.

Bringing Mediation Services together with Champion Taylor was just one of 65 matches made by Spark last year; a total of \$230,000 worth of services was volunteered through the program.

Those services run the gamut, says Ripat.

"We have an A to Z list – accounting to zoning. Last year we were recruiting for 40 different skill sets," says Ripat. Spark's experience in volunteer recruiting has ranged from finding chefs, to database specialists, to their toughest challenge to date: finding a water engineer.

It's a valuable service for organizations that may not have the time, resources or connections to find the right person to meet unique needs.

"It's really exciting for the organization to have this expertise at our disposal. It's expertise you can't always have on your board," says Coleman Neufeld.

Ripat agrees. "We recognize that the non-profit sector is complex and often under resourced. They're doing all kinds of things that require different skills. There's no way you can have all the skills you need," he says. At the same time, he hears about professionals who are frustrated by a lack of meaningful volunteer roles.

That's a scenario to which Champion Taylor can relate.

"I've gone door-to-door canvassing and worked bingo, stuffed envelopes," she says. "I have a long history and all of that is wonderful work – that's not to minimize its importance. But this brings a different element to your volunteer portfolio."

Champion Taylor is open to other opportunities through Spark, and once her current commitment is fulfilled she'll become part of the organization's growing database of volunteers.

"We have a city filled with people with professional skills," says Ripat. "People are generally willing to help out or give back, especially when presented with an opportunity that fits with their skill set, interest, and schedule."

He is inspired by the growing momentum among volunteers and the impact Spark is having.

"The non-profit sector in Winnipeg is filled with really talented and dedicated people doing great work. Some of the most important work being done in our city is happening in the non-profit sector. To be able to help move that work forward is really important and rewarding."

Coleman Neufeld also sees the impact first hand – not only within her own organization, but throughout the community. She has referred other organizations to the program.

"The fact it's called Spark is significant," she says. "Once you light a spark, if it catches, it's going to spread. Spark has worked with Mediation Services, but already the impact is spread beyond our non-profit."

Thanks to gifts from donors of all walks of life, The Winnipeg Foundation supported the Canadian CED Network's Spark initiative with a two-year grant totalling almost \$100,000.

To learn more about Spark's services, become a volunteer, or find a volunteer for your agency, visit www.sparkwpg.ca or www.facebook.com/sparkwpg. Or, call 204.837.7275.



(Left to right) Kim Champion Taylor, Geoff Ripat, and Lois Coleman Neufeld.