

PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

Brandon Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation (BNRC)

www.bnrc.ca

BRANDON CULTURAL AWARENESS NETWORK (BCAN)

Neighbourhood Renewal Corporations take on the mission of working with residents to pursue community renewal. This comes to life with locally-designed, long-term plans to achieve this mission through a range of activities usually including housing, gardening, employment, safety, social inclusion, and much more. One part of building relationships in an increasingly diverse neighbourhood like BNRC's targeted area is celebrating, learning about, and connecting across cultures.

Getting Started

Brandon Cultural Awareness Network (BCAN) began as the Brandon Race Relations Network as an effort to build social inclusion and cohesion in the community. What is unique in Brandon's context is that while some 'cultural awareness' groups begin in reaction to a specific incident or moment of tension between different cultural groups, this group developed from a preventative perspective. BCAN emerged out of recognition that the demographic of Brandon was changing quickly with increased immigration and that to avoid cul-

tural conflict specific, intentional work should be done with all groups of people to prevent this from happening. As is evident from the name change, there was an ongoing discussion about the terminology of 'race relations' versus 'cultural awareness'. Like many groups or coalitions working on a specific issue that includes diverse individuals and perspectives, this process of self-definition is important and should be undertaken carefully, with an emphasis on finding a satisfactory consensus.

Eventually, BCAN settled into their place as a cultural awareness network of interested groups and individuals who work towards creating dialogue between settled and newcomer groups as well as the broader Brandon community. To achieve this, they host a number of educational and celebratory events throughout the year. There is a core group of members in the Network, including the City of Brandon and BNRC, but also many others who participate for specific events or programs. This less formal membership structure has been effective as it is more inclusive and flexible, and has led to creative programming and partnerships that

may not have been feasible otherwise.

From Celebrating Difference to Teaching Human Rights

BCAN works to raise cultural awareness through fun and learning. They have learned that for this work to be effective, they need to approach it through a combination of fun and festive events as well as creating educational opportunities to build awareness of racial discrimination and human rights abuses. This combined approach has led to innovative partnerships and initiatives including events to mark Multicultural Day, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the International Women's Food and Craft Market, and the International Day of Dance.

The International Women's Market began as a way to promote personal, day-to-day interactions between people from various cultural backgrounds around a common unifier – food! This marketplace model allows for cultural sharing and learning, but also stimulates community building and relationships, the innovative use urban space, and generates the obvious economic benefit for the sellers.

Beyond the fun and food, cultural awareness can also lead to involvement in some very serious activities. While BNRC is unlikely to take an official political position on certain issues, through their participation in BCAN, they were able to support the annual Sisters-in-Spirit March that is organ-

ized by family members and concerned citizens to draw attention to the plight of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. Events and actions like these are often very important opportunities for communities to explore the reasons discrimination and racism exist in Canada and gain awareness about their tragic consequences with the hope of changing the conditions that lead to such incidents.

BCAN - with the assistance of BNRC - has found the concept of human rights to be an effective way to engage the community and spread the message of cultural awareness. They

have done this through both 'lunch and learn' events that are open to the public, as well as by developing an innovative human rights based curriculum for local schools. Titled "What Would You Do?," this teaching tool takes grade 7 students through a 'human rights pathway' where they are confronted with different scenarios. The students must then make decisions about how to deal with the human-rights issues, and are then led to information about an initiative to promote human rights, or a set of real statistics that teach about human-rights abuses internationally. This model was developed by four core members of BCAN (the City of Brandon, BNRC, Westman Immigrant Services and the Marquis Project) who were able to secure funding for a staff person to develop a detailed teacher's manual and accompanying resources for this successful teaching tool. It is a tool that they can now share with other communities, spreading the impacts of this coalition even further. If you'd like more information

Check out this clip of a day-long flash mob by the Brandon School of Dance. This unique partnership was created by BCAN for the International Day of Dance.
http://youtu.be/hebl6rPh_eo

about the “What Would You Do?” human rights pathway, get in touch with Ryan Graves at BNRC.

Cultivating Diverse Communities

BCAN’s work has a big goal, with big ideals. BNRC recommends that organizations trying to start cultural awareness initiatives must be clear about their goals and what they hope to achieve. It is also necessary to acknowledge that cultural awareness programs must be local, specific and dependent on the partners, community diversity, external sources and personal motivation of those involved. And as already highlighted, the BNRC also suggests that organizations seek opportunities to engage their communities through fun, celebration-based events that can help to build awareness while at the same time tackling larger issues of discrimination at a personal and societal level that can become barriers to building stronger, healthier, and more inclusive communities.

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