



standards of excellence *aspiring to excellence*

# United Way of Thunder Bay

## The Story

This is the story of how the United Way of Thunder Bay (UWTB) transformed itself from a traditional, conservative organization into one that actively participates in creating positive social change. It is the story of how UWTB's involvement in successive collaborations resulted in a new understanding of how to leverage opportunities, resources, and assets through partnerships and collaborations. It is the story of how the often tough, practical experiences gleaned from the Action for Neighbourhood Change program, and before that, 211, laid the foundation for what is a major shift in the way this United Way works in the community.

When UWTB staff and volunteers first began exploring collaborative work, they had no way of knowing that they were embarking on a way of working that could be catalytic in creating positive changes in community conditions as well as in their own organization. It was a huge undertaking, with far-reaching implications they might not have been prepared for.

### United Way of Thunder Bay

The United Way of Thunder Bay was formed in 1964 from the Fort William and Port Arthur Chambers of Commerce in concert with the Port Arthur and District Trades and Labour Council and two community chests. In its first year of operation, UWTB raised \$159,000. Forty-five years later, in 2009, the annual campaign raised more than \$2.4 million and an additional \$499,000 for initiatives.

Joanne Kembel, the executive director, leads a permanent staff team of 10 plus 3 project staff dedicated to Youthscape, an initiative primarily funded through the McConnell Foundation. The board of directors comprises 30 members.

This, then, is a story of a journey – one that will continue for years to come – and lessons learned along the way. It is told with the hope that it will help others who are undertaking similar journeys.

## The Journey

Thunder Bay is a growing city of some 110,000 residents in northwestern Ontario. It's the second largest city in Northern Ontario. Primary community issues include substantial income gaps among citizens and low high school completion rates among aboriginal students.

For 40 years UWTB was much like any other United Way – it raised resources and allocated them to member agencies. Then, in 2003, staff began talks with the Lakehead Social Planning Council, the City of Thunder Bay, and TBayTel about the possibility of bringing 211 to the city.

### Dialing 211

Those talks eventually resulted in each of UWTB and three other United Ways in the region committing 2 percent of campaign results to a fund that would pay for data collection for a 211 system. This in turn led to the federal and provincial governments

### What is 211?

211 is a phone number available to residents 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Live operators provide free, confidential, multilingual access to information about the full range of community, social, health, and government services. Operators are certified information specialists who assess each caller's needs and link callers to the best available services and programs.

each contributing \$400,000 in 2006 for the development of 211 across northwestern Ontario. UWTB managed the project.

UWTB executive director Joanne Kembel believes it was the work on 211 that allowed her organization to develop a new kind of relationship – with both the city and the telephone company – based on much more than raising money for the annual campaign. Kembel and her staff began to understand that, with the right mix of people, they could leverage money and other resources in support of an idea that would benefit people across the community. It was these relationships that formed the basis of the work that was to follow.

## **Taking a risk on ANC**

Early in 2005, with some reluctance and scepticism, UWTB agreed to join Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC), a complex, collaborative neighbourhood-renewal initiative undertaken in five Canadian cities between 2005 and 2007. It was designed to help residents build their capacity to lead and effect positive change in their own neighbourhood. The initiative was led at the local level by United Ways.

While UWTB had begun to develop new relationships through the work on 211, ANC represented a completely new way of working: doing community development work with residents of a specific neighbourhood. Joanne recalls how uncomfortable the board was with the idea of participating in ANC. But she believed this would be a unique opportunity for both her organization and the participating neighbourhood to explore bringing about changes in community conditions. She knew that UWTB had strengths to build on: expanding relationships, a strong presence in the community, an interest in new ways of working, and a strong and thoughtful, if reluctant, board. She also knew it was a risk.

The United Way of Thunder Bay centred its ANC work in a diverse neighbourhood of some 5,000 residents, many of them aboriginal. Simpson-Ogden (later renamed Evergreen United Neighbourhood by residents) is the second-oldest residential neighbourhood in Thunder Bay. It became an important example of how much progress can be made with

a targeted investment, a resident-centred approach, and strong leadership.

At the outset, UWTB was not sure it had the capacity and commitment to do this work well. The results, however, soon demonstrated that the effort was worthwhile and sparked a desire to sustain it.

ANC officially ended in March 2007, but the work in Simpson-Ogden continues. UWTB committed 2 percent of its campaign to neighbourhood work, the City released \$75,000, and the Ontario Trillium Foundation \$74,000. Since then, UWTB has continued to staff an office in the neighbourhood, which in April of this year will be integrated into the main UW office.

## **The legacy of ANC**

Establishing a second United Way office in the neighbourhood brought mixed blessings. It was a wonderful way for people to see that the United Way was serious about its commitment to the community; for UWTB, though, it was a challenge to ensure that the small staff in the neighbourhood office and the staff at the main office understood and supported each other's work.

The ANC experience left a rich legacy that continues to inform the work of UWTB. Central to its success was the belief that residents have assets and strengths that can be used on behalf of, and to the benefit of, the neighbourhood. The shift from a deficit- or needs-based approach to one that builds on strengths is not easy to make or to maintain, and ANC had to pay particular attention to ensure that its approach was not inadvertently undermined.

## **Shkoday Abinojiwak Obimidedon: An unexpected outcome**

Although the Simpson-Ogden office will be moving out of the neighbourhood, the United Way has ensured that development work will continue under the direction of Evergreen: A United Neighbourhood (EUN). Evergreen grew out of the ANC neighbourhood advisory committee.

In 2009 Evergreen identified a need to welcome aboriginal people who lived in or were moving to the

neighbourhood. Evergreen and UWTB developed a working relationship with an aboriginal charitable organization, Shkoday Abinojiiwak, that led in October 2009 to Shkoday's taking on the administrator role for the UW funding of Evergreen work.

This relationship between Shkoday, Evergreen, and the United Way is a direct result of the ANC collaboration. Through ANC, Joanne Kembel met Annie LeSage, an aboriginal leader who became her friend, guide, and teacher. Annie sat on an ANC committee, then on a board committee, and finally on the board. She introduced UWTB to others committed to working with aboriginal people. In Joanne's words, "she educated all of us." As one community member put it, the key to developing relationships is knowing the importance of "talking with us, not to us," something UWTB learned through its work in Simpson-Ogden.

## **An unlikely partnership: The 2008 Quality of Life Report**

The United Way of Thunder Bay continued to develop its collaborative skills. It became involved with the Thunder Bay Community Foundation in creating the 2008 Quality of Life Report. To those outside the United Way or Community Foundation movements, such a partnership to produce a report on the quality of life of the citizens of Thunder Bay might seem very straightforward. But in fact it was a rare example of a formal partnership between a United Way and a Community Foundation.

This partnership grew and flourished for several reasons. With the successes of 211 and ANC, UWTB had proven that it could undertake work of this scope and deliver on commitments. "The City," said Joanne, "had confidence in us."

## **The Lessons**

**T**hrough its experience with ANC, the United Way of Thunder Bay has learned that community development work does not have start and end dates. ANC may have ended, but the work of creating a resilient neighbourhood had just begun. Though its

direct involvement lessened, Joanne tells us, UWTB was determined that the neighbourhood would have the capacity to continue what was started with ANC. "United Way can't just say, Well that was a nice learning project, and simply move on. It's just not good enough; people expect more of us."

## **Working with community residents**

Staff learned that it is important to take the time to build trust and relationships so that when problems, conflicts, or issues arise they can be openly discussed. They learned that to change attitudes or behaviours they had to take on advocacy roles and that tensions can arise through advocacy work. The ANC experience also helped them understand how to deal with the risks associated with uncharted community-building work. They learned how to discuss, assess, and then mitigate those risks. They also learned that unexpected things happen as you become deeply involved in the community.

It takes time for the community, the board, and committees to really understand the work. Measuring success in collaborative community work, is really hard work, says Joanne, as it means tracking the work over a very long period of time, which requires a shift in the way United Ways view success. For example, it took almost four years to develop a definition of community building that made sense to the community itself.

ANC demonstrated to the residents that the United Way was serious about working with them to identify strengths, issues, and solutions. In turn, UWTB learned to see the residents – not itself – as the centre of the project. In helping residents develop skills, UWTB helped the neighbourhood group become a functioning and effective neighbourhood association.

## **Working collaboratively**

Joanne remarked that United Ways need to understand that partnerships have the potential to fundamentally change a great deal. A collaboration alters how the organization thinks about risk: what kind of staff and volunteers are needed; how to raise resources; how to approach planning; how to measure

the effect of a long-term commitment of time and money. She also notes that the scope of potential partners has dramatically expanded. UWTB can now find partners for social change across all sectors of the community, from community organizations to institutions, universities, and government.

In short, a commitment to working collaboratively means a shift in how an organization thinks and works.

## A caution or two

Joanne Kembel cautions against entering into partnerships simply because the money is available. “The fit,” she stresses, “must be right.

“Volunteers are a core element of any United Way, and critical to successful community collaborations,” says Joanne. “United Ways must be as good at finding volunteers with the skills to help achieve the organization’s community-impact mission as they have been in securing volunteers for allocations and fundraising.”

## Looking Ahead

By taking advantage of opportunities, the United Way of Thunder Bay has spent the last six years concentrating its creative energy on building and developing collaborative relationships. While it was perhaps not clear in the beginning, this work can now be viewed as the foundation upon which UWTB will continue to build a community-impact organization. UWTB is now ready to concentrate on redefining its relationship with funded agencies, something that will also take time and skill.

## Changing the model: Redefining relationships with agencies

The relationship has in many ways already begun to change, as an unexpected result of the Quality of Life Report. In 2008 the funded agencies met with UWTB and determined that their traditional bi-monthly meetings with the United Way had little

impact. They agreed that they needed to change their focus and the way they, including the United Way, worked together.

The result is an agency-led Quality of Life network. The process to define the mission of this network, how it will work, and what it will do has taken a year of discussion. It was the changes in the way UWTB worked in the community that prompted agency leadership to examine what kind of relationship they themselves had with the United Way. Joanne Kembel is well aware of the tensions change can bring, and she knows it will be critical to work with agencies to seek common ground and common interests.

## Going with optimism

The United Way of Thunder Bay must now focus on communicating what it is doing and telling the community what it is trying to achieve.

“We have learned much,” says Joanne, “that will help us in the work that lies ahead.” UWTB has had to navigate through places it had never been before. It encountered many bumpy spots, had a few false starts, got lost a few times, had to retrace steps and start again, and, in the end, found many successes. All of this has led to confidence and great optimism for the future.

## More for the Curious

### ANC

<http://www.anccommunity.ca/AboutANC.html>

Two previous ANC stories about Simpson-Ogden can be found on the Caledon Institute and ANC websites: Action for Neighbourhood Change in Thunder Bay (October 2005); Thunder Bay’s Simpson-Ogden Neighbourhood: Gifts in Unexpected Places (April 2006).

### 2008 Our Quality of Life Report, Thunder Bay

[http://www.unitedway-tbay.on.ca/files/2008QualityofLifeReport\\_000.pdf](http://www.unitedway-tbay.on.ca/files/2008QualityofLifeReport_000.pdf)