Learning Changes

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It may be safe to say that poverty has been a part of societal construct from the time human beings transitioned from communal societies to the hierarchical societies in which we now live. In very many cases the hierarchical construct of society has resulted in the creation of the "haves and have-nots". Those in our society who are among the have-nots are often categorized as being poor. Addressing poverty has been the topic of numerous studies and conversations.

In June 2013 the Alliance for a Poverty-Free Toronto (formerly the Toronto Working Group on Poverty) drafted a poverty elimination strategy for the city of Toronto. While anti-poverty issues have often been a topic of discussion in Toronto, a contemporary strategy focused on Toronto is a new addition to that discussion. The Alliance for a Poverty-Free Toronto (APT) members are a mix of folks working in the community social service sector, individuals with lived experience of poverty, and concerned Torontonians. APT's membership is broad based and reflective of Toronto's multiple identities. This allows for many different voices to be heard in the strategy document.

The strategy, Toward a Poverty Elimination Strategy for the City of Toronto; is pragmatically divided into 2 parts. The authors Winston Tinglin and Beth Wilson describe the document's content as follows:

"Part 1 provides an overview of poverty in Toronto, drawing on related research to out-

Easier Said than Done: Collaborative data analysis

It made such good sense. Once we had taken the big step of having residents take the lead in conducting interviews, it made sense that the next steps of building a community-university partnership should follow the same pattern. On that logic, we gathered the initial results of more than 400 interviews and engaged residents directly in making sense from the data. Here are some impressions of that experience, from people who lived it.

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the Income Security, Race and Health Project, led my Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services z

EMbracing divErsity in data analysis
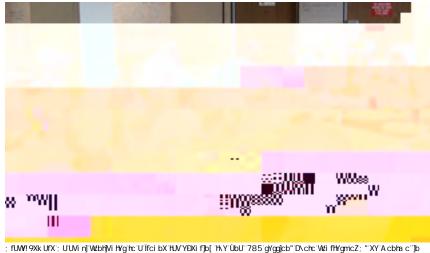
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Over the years I have had the privilege to work with a wide range of individuals and groups in research projects. Often attempts are made to engage community-based researchers to ensure participation and inclusion in research. Through local level hiring and training, community-based researchers can make a significant contribution in developing and testing questionnaires, conducting interviews, collecting and compiling data. At that point, the process of data analysis begins, and if it is conducted entirely by professional researchers it can sometimes overlook local nuances or experiential knowledge. The APCOL project went extra miles to engage community based researchers and partners from that point, in analyzing data sets collected from Toronto neighbourhoods to understand poverty.

I was one of the participants in the collaborative data analysis (CDA), in which all APCOL

researchers and partners were challenged to see poverty through the eyes of others. I was pleasantly surprised to see how APCOL researchers reflected Toronto's diverse population as we connected data with the reality on the ground. In our joint sessions we all took a set of data to explore what makes sense from the numbers, what are the surprises, where the discrepancies are and why people get involved in their community. We then compared one data set with another and shared each other's understanding of the data.

Through this process I realized why people are more involved in food banks when their primary need may be affordable housing or good jobs. That is because food programs at the neighbourhood level are opening their doors to people to volunteer, so that residents feel they are contributing practically to help those in need. I was surprised to find people tackling poverty through addressing food security, even though they defined poverty more in purely financial terms. At a systemic

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level people do not have engagement opportunities to address unemployment, lack of affordable housing and accessible social programs that can help eliminate or reduce poverty. They act where they feel they can make a difference. Surely all of us concerned about social justice can learn from this about

Steeles-L'Amoreaux in the northeast part of the city. Here six trained Chinese-speaking researchers recruited 58 residents to respond to a questionnaire.

To make sense of the massive amount of data that was collected, a process of Collaborative Data Analysis (CDA) was organized. It directly involved the community researchers in looking at the results of more than 450 interviews. People from eight communities worked from March to May in 2012 to shape their own questions and to compare the data from their own neighbourhoods with data from across the city.

As an active participant, the following is my learning about the Steeles-L'Amoreaux community.

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Steeles-L'Amoreaux community is an immigrant gathering area. The web site of the City of Toronto shows that in 2006 about 66% population are immigrants from outside Canada, with 47% arriving after 1990. Chinese speakers make up 30% of the residents. As for age, 61.7% population is from 20 to 64. As for education, 52.5% of those over 20 years old have finished college or other post-secondary education. It is from this group of Toronto residents that our 58 interviewees were drawn.

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Of the 58 surveys conducted in Steeles-L'Amoreaux neighbourhood, 42 respondents were female and 16 male. 54 respondents described themselves as Chinese and 52 can

currently, or used to be, involved in anti-poverty activities/campaigns, their first focus was related to Health/Nutrition/Food Security issues, and secondly to Access to Jobs and Living Wages. They became involved in community centres and apartment buildings. They were mostly invited in by a friend and played a passive role as a member in multiple campaigns. The main motivations for the participants were: "I want to make change", "I want to learn skills" and "I have been personally affected". They also think that the only way to make change is by organizing collectively.

Experiences of organizing

The reason why people chose to stay in the activity included: developing

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when you look at a
map of Toronto
a few of its features
jump out

the shoreline of the
lake
as it curves and
undulates
from southwest to
northeast across the
bottom edge

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the hard solid line of Steeles Avenue
a manmade barrier that separates
an expanded historic York
from a region of the same name

the circles and loops of
Spadina Circle, Queen's Park
the Donway and the Peanut
within military grid precision
of township surveyors who
worked in a bygone era

the twists of rivers significant
to our history – Rouge in the east
Don in the centre and Humber
in the west etching their indelible
marks on the topography

but there are many features you can't
see on first inspection

you cannot see the street people

hands out hoping for a
hand up
as hands halt progress
and force a life
of hand to mouth

the filled buses on
Finch West
ferry the fierce on buses
along
a congested corridor

battling stress, time and hardship
to etch an existence into asphalt
that leaves a lasting indentation

or the children in housing complexes
living off the avails of poverty
victims of a socioecomic crime spree for
which the perpetrators remain at large

and the garbage that floats up
to clog beaches at base of bluffs
litter that bespeaks the pollution
forcing residents to observe
instead of enjoying against skin
water meant to be fresh

we all feed on perceptions
from a wide assortment of angles
and hold up mirrors to our inadequacies
as a civic unit and
despair at much of what we see

but we must understand an aerial

imprinted onto blank paper
shares not the richness of what lies beneath

we can't see the peacemakers
building sustenance of mind, body and soul
who provide inspiration for
everyone young and old
who come to learn of their efforts

nor are the activists visible
who march and shout but also
labour within the system to
force new interpretations
of the words that guide our society

a map cannot show you
the youth who band together in
common cause across old divides
to disintegrate solitudes and
create a 21st century unity
for all the kids of the T-Dot

it cannot let you hear the music
or view the creation of the artists
who forge new identities within
out communal identity and
provide strength through diversity

my city
this city
your city
our city

this place of humanity
that grew on this land like planted seed

my streets
these streets
your streets
our streets

are only lines upon a page
but have etched into each of our hearts

take pride in this place
embrace the challenge of our lives
within our shared geographic space
and share whatever it provides

we have been part of a grand experiment
and the results are coming in
the science used as social method
lights us up from deep within

never cease to step boldly forward
never stop pushing for change
always innovate and create
seek out new partners in your range
link together to find solutions
that elude those isolated
work relentlessly to gain success
til broad improvements are created

when you look at a map of Toronto
the lay of the city is what jumps out
but the people in between the lines
define what we're all about.

Greg Franson debuted his Ritallin persona at
an Ottawa spoken word event in summer 2003.
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SystEMs thinking and Social ChangE: SPotlight on MichaEl ShaPcott

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DM: You've been active in community issues in Toronto for a long time. How is your thinking different today from when you started?

MS: Now I try to see issues as part of a system, rather than separately. The lived reality of all of our lives is that everything is connected to everything else. When we get out of bed in the morning, and go to the fridge and get out food for our breakfast, there are all sorts of connections back to the farm. There are also issues around income, because you have to be able to purchase the food. So you know, we all live our lives understanding that there are all sorts of complex connections. But when it comes to social policy, we've tended to try and silo and isolate things and say that it's, you know, all about one factor like housing, or all about one factor like income.

DM: How has this systems approach evolved in the Wellesley Institute?

MS: We are building from the several decades of work that's been done in the environmental field in systems thinking around the understanding that in the physical world, everything is ultimately connected to everything else. And when you intervene in one part of the system, it has an impact in often unexpected ways in other parts of the system. That kind of thinking also needs to be brought into social and economic policy. In a complex system like an urban area like Toronto, we are also using some of the models that have been developed in w   M   ed

poor health, the highest number of accidents. And what we wanted to do is understand what's behind this set of relationships, what are the links. Think of accidents related to falling – does the correlation mean that poor people are more clumsy than rich people? Well, probably not. The real explanation is around housing. If their housing is more poorly maintained, they may not have proper hand rails, they may not have proper anti-slip things on the stairs, their health may already be compromised anyway and so they may be more fragile and frail and that makes them more prone to tripping hazards and things. When we start to think about an urban area as a system, as opposed to a series of discrete issues where you make discrete interventions, it allows us to understand much better the interventions that will actually address health and equity in much more powerful ways.

DM: Have you tried co-production around issues of health?

MS: We were one of the seed funders for a study a few years ago on people living with HIV-AIDS, to look at the impact of housing, of horrible housing, on their health status. Similar studies like this had been done in many parts of the United States and Canada, Vancouver and Chicago and San Francisco and so on. All the studies are consistent in saying that people who are health-compromised, living with HIV-AIDS, for instance, and homeless, experience a high degree of respiratory and other common sort of ailments which force them into the emergency wards. So they spend a lot of time in a hospital, which is, of course, a very expensive place, from a government perspective, to deliver health care. Of course it would be better that they be healthier in the first place. When people are well

housed, they still have HIV-AIDS and they still require all the anti- and retro-virals and all the complicated regime of treatment. But they're not constantly getting the colds and the pneumonia and all that stuff and spending half their time in emergency wards. We were able to quantify all that. But working with people who are living with HIV-AIDS, we wanted to dig deeper into what kind of housing works for them, what are the supports and services.

DM: What has come out of that?

MS: One advantage we had was the chance to actually build such housing. The Wellesley Institute is the legacy institution of the old Wellesley Hospital. We had ownership of the site once the hospital was shut down by the Harris government. One initiative we always had wanted to put on the site was housing for people with HIV-AIDS. Partly that's a nod back to the old Wellesley Hospital which had, through its urban initiative, had a very dynamic health practice with people living with AIDS. We had also, through the course of our work, identified that there was a huge need for supportive housing for seniors, frail elderly seniors.

Our original idea had been an eight- or a ten-story residential building on the old Wellesley site, with half of it for people with HIV-AIDS and the other half for seniors. We would segregate them by floors because the notion was that maybe seniors didn't want to share facilities with people living with AIDS and vice versa. However, luckily, before we actually made the mistake of creating a segregated building, we actually got people together and asked them "What kind of home would you want to live in? Do you want to sort of have your neighbour like yourself?

Etc., etc." And what we actually found overwhelmingly was people said "We don't care about that kind of artificial distinction. This is housing for people that have special support needs over and above just four walls and a roof." So everyone got all mixed up together. Now it's a wonderfully dynamic building where people are supporting each other and a real community has emerged there in which people do take care of each other physically and emotionally. A network has been created. The necessary knowledge was co-produced.

DM: In social research, there's sometimes a time pressure, a push for quick results, so that people say we can't afford co-production of knowledge because it is too slow. How do you handle that?

MS: We make no apologies, we're in this for the long haul. In urban health, we have created a forty-year horizon. We gather a very detailed social, health, and economic data. And then the model does whatever it does, and then we're allowed to kind of peer forward for forty years, and we can do things like address the impact of increasing investment in affordable housing on the prevalence of diabetes three or four decades away. When I think back to my days in journalism, I remember that the political policy window tends to be very short term. It's the next budget or the maybe the next election and that's it. Sometimes it's not even that long. And yet in the real world, we know that the complex mixture of issues and solutions which ultimately help us to build both individual health and population health are really long-term enterprises. We need to have better tools to allow us to look at the long term issues as well as the short-term.

DM: But doesn't that delay the needed action?

MS: When I first started doing community organizing in the east of downtown Toronto, with homeless adults, I was still in law school. We used to have a weekly dinner, a community dinner, at a drop-in centre. People came because they wanted the food. But the sort of quid pro quo was we wanted them to stay and talk about what was going on in their lives. Inevitably, we'd get into a fierce discussion about how, in those days, the landlord-tenant laws were skewed against low income tenants. A lot of tenants were being evicted on a fairly rapid basis by predatory landlords and ending up being homeless. So we wanted to engage in a law reform exercise to address this particular law.

But then somebody would put up their hand and say "Why are you talking about a six-month or a year-long law reform process when I don't have a place to sleep tonight? I want somebody to tell me where I'm going to sleep tonight." And of course, you can't just simply say to that person "Thank you brother. Come back in a year and we'll have the law changed and we'll tell you where you're going to sleep". So you always have to have something that addresses where people are at that particular moment. You can't say to that person "Shut up. We're into some strategy here and you're interfering with our ability to change the world in a way that will make life better for tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people across the province." You have to stop and problem solve about where that person can pick up the phone and find an empty bed in a homeless shelter that night. Balancing the immediate with the long term, that's always an issue for us. **z**

filling holes: Confronting g

campaigning. I will explore what occurs after the research phase is over, to see who continues the dialogue. To further bridge the gap between academy and people, those people motivated by the project will need to ensure that methods are developed

What have we found out so far in our project? We now have results of case studies, of extended interviews, of survey questionnaires… a heap of data to help map the informal learning processes in which people engage as they become active in their communities.

In recent months, our efforts have focused on making sense of all this information. Along the way, we are surfacing the primary importance of relationships. People are saying that they first attended a community meeting "because a friend brought me". People are saying that they remain involved because of the issues but also because the climate is receptive and not conflictual. People are saying that they withd   m   e   the!

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Keynote Speakers

• **Uzma Shakir**
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• **Nina Wilson**
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Panel of Communtiy Activists
• **Nigel Bariffe**
• **Jennifer Huang**
• **Antoine Genest Gregoire**

**REGISTER online at http://pushbackmoveforward.eventbrite.ca
or call Social Planning Toronto 416.351.0095 ext. 251
Cost: $30 before October 1, $40 after October 1**

KEEPing in touch

Members of the APCOL project are committed to communicating with groups and individuals interested in issues and campaigns involving Nutrition and Food Security, Housing, School Completion, and Jobs/Living Wages. If you would like to be part of this exchange of information please email us at info@apcol.ca and we will add you to our electronic listserv.

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