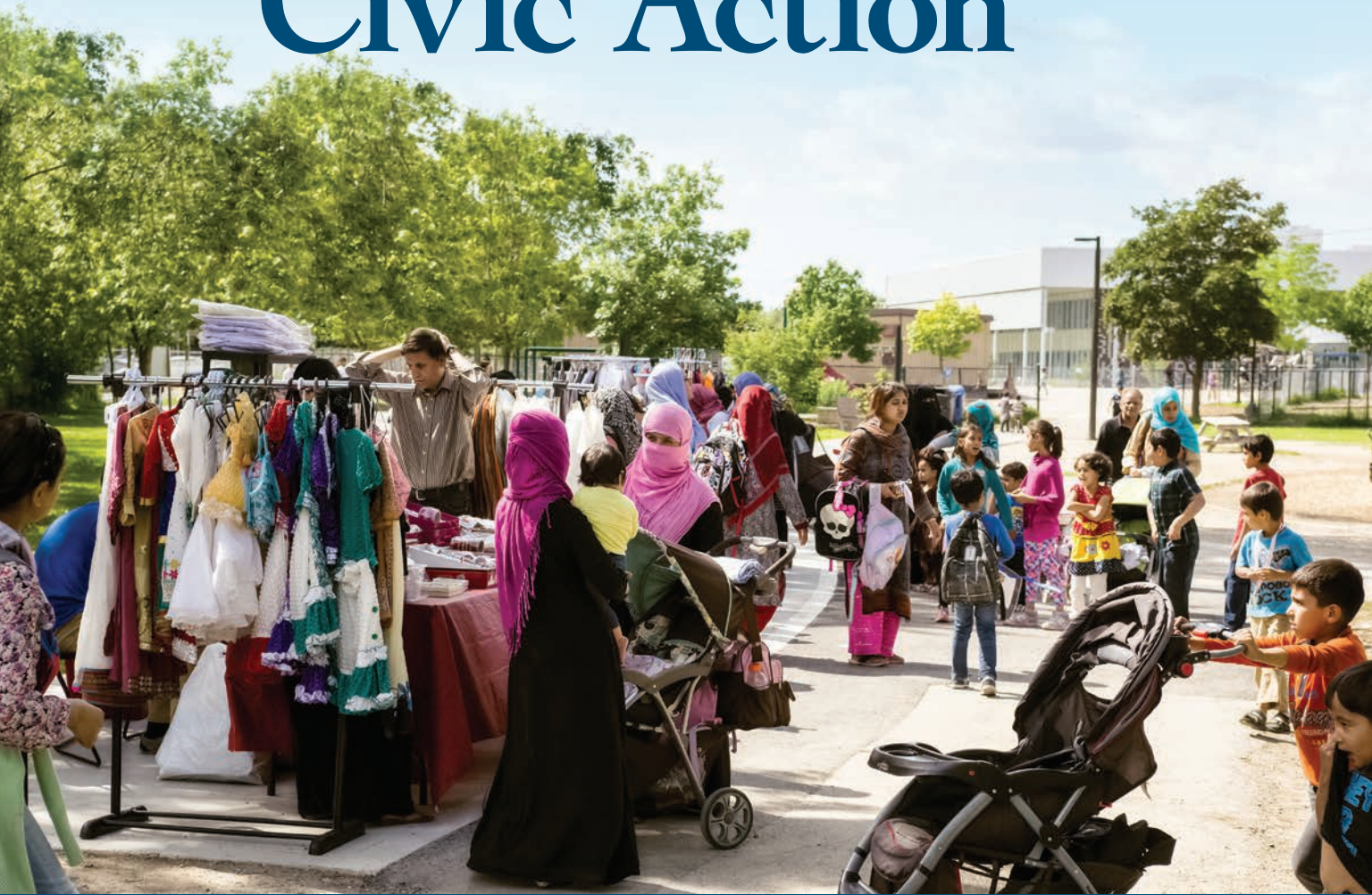


The Power of Civic Action



How the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee revitalized their park and created an engine of grassroots economic activity

This publication has been made possible through the support of The George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation.

The mission of The George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation is to enhance the effectiveness of people and organizations working together to help Canadians imagine and build a just, healthy, and creative society.

For a couple of years now we have wanted to share the experience of our work. This publication has been created to do just that. We hope our story will inspire others to think about how they can work together to improve their neighbourhoods. Working with the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee I've learned that profound positive change can happen when people with passion and dedication come together with the goal of improving the lives of their community.

Our work is an example of positive civic impact. On behalf of the Women's Committee I would like to thank everyone who has believed in us and helped us along the way. I also want to thank the Metcalf Foundation for their coaching and support and for helping us realize the value of our work and the important contribution we are making towards improving the lives and livelihoods of women and our community.

– Sabina Ali, *Chair of the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee*

METCALF
FOUNDATION





After and before: a snapshot of revitalization

On a sunny spring afternoon a group of women stream into a tiny park. Under a canopy of trees, they set up vendors' tables displaying traditional Middle Eastern and South Asian clothing and jewelry, create mini food stalls for selling savory snacks, and fire up a tandoor oven from which charcoal smoke wafts into the air. Over the next few hours families flock to this pop-up town square to bargain with vendors, buy hot naan and samosas, and socialize while their children play on swings and climbing equipment and run through a splash pad. At a quick glance, much of this busy, festive bazaar looks like it could be in Lahore or Kabul. But the setting is actually R.V. Burgess Park, which is tucked amidst a cluster of highrises that comprise one of Toronto's most dense city neighbourhoods — the multicultural Thorncliffe Park.

Scant years ago, this one-and-a-half hectare park was an unloved,

dilapidated eyesore, bereft of playground equipment and strewn with garbage, the grass trodden to dirt pathways. Then a small group of women, who would come to call themselves the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee, took matters into their own hands to help transform the neglected R.V. Burgess Park into a vibrant community meeting place with a weekly summer bazaar, food market, and plenty of fun activities for children.

Along the way and somewhat by happy accident, members of the Women's Committee created an engine of economic, environmental, and social activity. Not only did they nurture micro-entrepreneurship through the bazaar, they improved the quality of green space in the park, increased accessibility to recreational opportunities, and strengthened their community through local celebrations

and grassroots programming. The result? Hundreds of women involved in their programs and using the park over the years have become empowered to create positive change for themselves and their community.

The park's transformation has caught the attention of urban thinkers, government leaders, foundations, and media. As an example of its far-reaching impact, a Dutch trade mission recently came to see, first-hand, how this ad hoc group of women are revitalizing their neighbourhood. In 2013, R.V. Burgess Park was the first outside the United States to be recognized as a Frontline Park by the Washington, D.C.-based City Parks Alliance. The designation

is awarded for creative revitalization of an urban green space that brings people together across social, economic, and racial divides. In 2014, Women's Committee chair Sabina Ali was awarded Toronto's prestigious Jane Jacobs Prize, which recognizes leaders in civic engagement.

More than a few bearing witness to these impressive achievements say the Women's Committee possesses "a secret sauce." This short chronicle will consider the ingredients that went into the Committee's unique and robust recipe for community development, including perseverance, a willingness to forge partnerships, and an immense commitment to volunteering.



R.V. Burgess Park
before its revitalization.
Photo: Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee





Members of the Women's Committee,
from left: Asiya Sohail, Sabina Ali, and
Zakia Rahime.

Social connection becomes community power

The story of the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee begins in the summer of 2008, with 15 to 20 women regularly gathering around a park bench and forging a deep connection across language, culture, and religion. A core of four leaders would emerge: **Zakia Rahime** from Afghanistan; **Asiya Sohail** from Pakistan; **Amy Sutherland**, who had moved from nearby Leaside to give her children the opportunity of growing up in a multicultural neighbourhood; and the most recent newcomer, **Sabina Ali**, from India. Ali was eager to meet her new neighbours. "How do you start a conversation with strangers?" she recalls. "We all shared a concern as we stared at the garbage in our only park. We began with, 'oh, this is not good.'"

That sentiment was soon directed at the lack of grass, broken lighting and water fountains, and missing playground equipment. Also, the Jenner Jean-Marie Community Centre was closed for seemingly endless renovations, which deprived children of the library, gym, and meeting rooms for

arts and crafts. Also "not good" was the social isolation the newcomers felt living in crowded highrises with limited public gathering places.

The planned community, some 34 apartment towers built in a horseshoe configuration around R.V. Burgess Park, had been constructed in the 1960s on a near island of land that was cut off from



the rest of Toronto by the Don Valley Parkway and ravine system. It was intended for 12,000 people, young singles and couples with cars to traverse bridges into the city. By 2008, the aging buildings had morphed into an “arrival city” of some 34,000, predominately South Asian families with young children. Some apartments housed multiple families struggling to gain an economic foothold. Few in this low-income neighbourhood had cars to connect to the rest of the city, and Thorncliffe had no town square or commercial main street where residents could meet and socialize. At its heart was the tiny R.V. Burgess Park, but that heart was barely beating.

Soon the women’s “not good” refrain turned to “what can we do?” They began

brainstorming ways to improve the park, which quickly became linked to their need to make friends and improve the community for their children. “We asked, how can we help the community?” says Rahime. “Mothers are under stress. Their children need a place to play. This park is our backyard.”

Developing that sense of ownership is a critical spark to revitalization, according to Dave Harvey, Executive Director of Park People, an independent charity that supports better parks in Toronto. “Our mantra is that when communities get involved, parks get better.” But he points out that creating a grassroots organization to shepherd change is challenging in a community of new Canadians. “We take for granted that people can raise money and make things happen, but this is difficult in low-income, marginalized neighbourhoods.”

The women had little money, no political clout, and no business connections. But like many women newcomers, they were educated and had professional positions before moving to Canada. They had individual strengths in planning and organizing, and knew how to harness their collective power to get things done. Sutherland, a long-time Toronto resident who worked in the non-profit sector, proved



to be a critical link as she was familiar with how to advocate for civic change. As recent immigrants, many of the other women could not even vote, yet they bolstered confidence in each other to begin navigating the civic and political systems.

They approached then local city councillor John Parker who relayed their concerns to the City of Toronto's Department of Parks, Forestry and Recreation. Parks staff readily agreed the park was run down, tucked away as it was from street view and in a neighbourhood that had not stood up for it — that is, until now. City staff and the councillor began meeting with the women in their "office" — the park. They worked to develop a wish list for renewal that included improvements to the park and the community centre. Together, they surveyed local residents about what they wanted. As more entered the conversation the park began taking on greater meaning as a critical community hub for the neighbourhood.

The women, says Parker, were diplomatic and keen to be good allies, making it easy for the city to understand their ideas and want to help. "It wasn't long before we came up with a formal agenda." The agenda included fixing infrastructure,

installing playground equipment, and planting grass, gardens, and trees.

We really wanted to make the park a common backyard for children who are living an apartment life in Canada. We also wanted to break down barriers between language, employment, and culture...

The women also reached out to the Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office, a community agency responsible for delivering social services such as employment and language training. The executive director at the time, Jehad Aliweiwi, says the women understood the community's problems and brought a strategic clarity to rehabilitating the park that was linked to community development.

As Ali explains, "We really wanted to make the park a common backyard for children who are living an apartment life in Canada. We also wanted to break down barriers between language, employment, and culture and provide access to the natural world so that people could come together in a common space and feel included, make friends, share information and stories, and have fun."



Bridging ambition and social capital

The members of the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee knew that to realize their vision they needed to strengthen their ability to advocate on behalf of the park. They would need to forge connections, learn from others, and build meaningful partnerships.

Parks are not typically on the radar of an employment and social services agency, but the Women's Committee was able to show the Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office how revitalizing the park could strengthen the community and local economy. In turn, the Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office incubated the fledgling group by providing office space, telephones, and strategic advice.

The Women's Committee initiated "a friendship between parks" with Dufferin Grove Park several miles to the west and learned how residents there had created a thriving park with a farmers market, pizza oven, arts in the park performances, and a host of citizen gardening projects. They found an ally in Jutta Mason, who had won

a Jane Jacobs Prize for her work revitalizing Dufferin Grove. They also connected with Park People who championed their park animation activities, helping them secure funding from the Weston Family Parks Challenge and the TD Bank's Friends of the Environment Foundation. These partnerships helped them to create a children's garden in the park that draws classes from the nearby school; establish community vegetable gardens in lawns around highrises; clean up garbage that had been dumped in the nearby Don Valley ravine; and run guided walks in the ravine, introducing the community to the many existing trails. They started women's fitness and sewing classes in the Jenner Jean-Marie Community Centre. And as an example of their get-things-done approach, the Women's Committee launched its own arts in the park program, with members bringing art supplies from home until they secured funding to hire animators for children's magic shows, art classes, and storytelling circles. It is inspirations such

as these that have led the Toronto Arts Council to launch an official Arts in the Parks program, in 2015, to bring arts to parks across the city.

Soon the idea percolated up: why not work together and bring this economic activity outside? Run a weekly Friday bazaar in the park?

“They’re really good at building allies,” says FoodShare’s Angela ElzingaCheng, who would eventually join the Women’s Committee’s steering committee. “They use their external networks to learn and help them get things done. They bring creativity, imagination, and a willingness to do almost anything.”

A guiding theme that united the plethora of activities was this: make the park more attractive to children, and their mothers will follow. As Ali points out, the neighbourhood is full of children: “Roughly 34 percent of the population are children under the age of 14. We have the only all-kindergarten school in Canada. In many of our cultures, women are primarily

responsible for childrearing. So we asked ourselves, how can we empower women while recognizing their responsibilities and the constraints on their time?” The Women’s Committee believed that if it could provide opportunities for women to participate in the community, it would help them integrate into their new homeland. “It’s important women come out and have time for themselves to build self esteem and friendships.”

As more women started congregating in the park and sharing their stories, they wanted to know how they could get involved. The Women’s Committee, in turn, discovered that many women were highly entrepreneurial. They ran small informal businesses in their apartments to supplement the family income yet, like the Women’s Committee, they needed support to strengthen their micro-businesses. Soon the idea percolated up: why not work together and bring this economic activity outside? Run a weekly Friday bazaar in the park?

That’s when the Women’s Committee ran into its first major roadblock. “Groups like the Women’s Committee



Informal no more

force us to step back and look at how we do things,” says Brenda Patterson, then General Manager of the city’s Department of Parks, Forestry and Recreation. She says that “parks” and “recreation” had recently amalgamated into one division but a cultural change had yet to occur. Parks staff knew how to care for trees and lawns but had no training in community engagement. Recreation staff with those skills tended to work in community centres, not parks. Luckily a parks manager for the area, Roger Macklin, was keen to help the Women’s Committee animate R.V. Burgess Park and took the Committee’s ideas to the city. Patterson, an early champion, listened.

But approving a bazaar proved challenging. The city had no rules for allowing pop-up markets in parks. “We had to find a way for the Women’s Committee to have commercial activity,” says Patterson. “But how do we do this without ending up with flea markets or a big box store having discount sales in parks? One of my frustrations was there was no framework

for decision-making that applied across the city in a way that was fair to all groups.”

The Women’s Committee had concerns of its own to address. It did not want the bazaar to encroach on the limited green space and children’s play area. Nor did it want the bazaar to have such a significant level of commercial activity that the park would become unwelcoming to low-income families.

The Women’s Committee, comprised of volunteers, wanted the cost of permits waived. That would eventually happen in 2014, when the city designated Thorncliffe Park as a Neighbourhood Improvement Area. But initially, Patterson says, they could not waive permit fees. “We couldn’t just say we’re not going to collect these fees unless Council decided to put this money into the budget. And permits are necessary for insurance and to make sure someone will be responsible and there to clean up after an event. These issues can be quite challenging.”

While Parks struggled with policy issues, the City of Toronto’s unions

representing both inside and outside workers went on strike, shutting access to the city's bureaus during the summer of 2009. Amy Sutherland turned to parks friend Jutta Mason, who encouraged the Women's Committee to take advantage of striking bylaw officers. With no one available to issue permits, it was a perfect opportunity to proceed. "We told the women, this is your moment to jump," says Jutta. "You can keep meeting for 10 years to talk about this bazaar, until everyone is exhausted and gives up. Or you can take this opportunity to show what's in your imagination."

The Women's Committee took the leap. During the strike of 2009, the Committee hosted nine Friday night bazaars. Five vendors took part in the inaugural one. Highrise residents looking down saw a town market springing up in their park and ventured down to investigate. "It was an immediate success," says Ali.

In 2010, with the strike over, the Women's Committee had proof it could address the city's concerns of ensuring it could run a bazaar that was local, small in scale, and community-led. The previous summer's informal bazaars had effectively served as a pilot. The women were able to

pinpoint problems and develop strategies to address them, such as limiting the number of vendors and ensuring vendors are selling merchandise that is appropriate to the community-based nature of the event. Says Ali, "It takes time to create something new. The city staff knew us, understood our vision, and recognized that we were responsible, so they were willing to give us a chance."



Thorncliffe Fresh Food Market



Respecting the rules and gaining respect

Members of the Women's Committee threw themselves into action to meet the city's permit process. Ali, who coordinates the market, quickly learned to follow a guiding principle of don't fight; get permission. "I want this market to be running for years so we need to build it in a way that abides by the city's rules."

But there were complexities at every turn. The city required a special-events permit for the 4 pm to 9 pm bazaar, which Ali had to apply for each year. The application process has become easier, but meeting the city's extensive demands those first years required perseverance. Each vendor's name had to be on the permits so Ali set up a vendor registration system and charged vendors a small fee to help cover costs. While other parks host farmers' markets to sell local produce and meats, the Women's Committee partnered with FoodShare to set up a Good Food Market, which enabled it to sell more culturally appropriate produce such as melons and mangoes at wholesale prices affordable to the low-income neighbourhood.

Toronto Public Health required a separate permit to ensure that all prepared food sold at the market was made in a certified kitchen; that every single ingredient be sent to them in advance for approval; and that food prep, transportation, and handling be overseen by someone with a food-handler's certificate. Ali complied by training to get her certificate and working with Toronto Public Health's Food Strategy team, first to create new inspection standards that would allow community kitchens to be used, then to upgrade those kitchens to meet inspection standards. The first formal year of the bazaar, Ali picked up vendors and groceries on Friday mornings, taxied them to a community kitchen in nearby Flemington where the women prepared food for the market, then taxied vendors and food to the bazaar. Her days could stretch to twelve hours from 10 am to 10 pm by the time volunteers cleaned up the park after the bazaar. The next year, the Women's Committee was able to use the kitchen at the more conveniently located Jenner Jean-Marie Community Centre, and

Ali got all her food vendors trained with food handler's certificates.

The Women's Committee secured a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to help pay for start-up costs — the permits, the liability insurance required by the city, vendors tables, chafing dishes for safe food storage, and a shed to store everything. A proven desire to follow the city's permit requirements to the letter made city staff willing partners in the venture. "They understood our position and that we were all trying to find reasonable solutions to issues," explains Brenda Patterson.

...they began to imagine other ways to animate the park. Knowing Dufferin Grove had a pizza oven, the Women's Committee began to explore bringing what would be North America's first tandoor oven to the park.

Ali admits the arduous permit process has some benefits. It gives her authority to enforce the rules of the market, and she has been tested. "People come from cultures where you can use a park for all kinds of activities. They don't always understand the rationale for the

city's bylaws. One woman came directly to the bazaar with her food prepared. She had spent money on ingredients and I felt bad for her, but I said, I can't give you the spot because you didn't prepare the food in the certified kitchen. It's not safe. Some vendors say, oh, we're from the same country, you can make an exception for me. But I explain that we can't because we have to be responsible to the whole community. We have to be fair and transparent."

The bazaar quickly became a grassroots community incubator for micro-entrepreneurship. For example, Fathima Farook, a teacher in Sri Lanka, had no idea how to make money here. Though she had no experience cooking commercially, she says, "I saw vendors in the market selling food and thought, I could be a food person. Sabina (Ali) is there to help and she encourages us to go to workshops." With Ali's guidance, Farook scaled up her business and began selling at outside markets. The confidence and skills she gained with the Canadian work experience has helped her land a part-time job as assistant nutritionist for a school lunch program.

Ali says she takes every opportunity to learn from Women's Committee allies so that she can mentor her food vendors

and create opportunities for them. She guides them on menu planning, choosing low-cost ingredients, and finding a price point that allows a profit yet keeps prices affordable. For vendors who want to grow their ventures, Ali draws on her contacts to facilitate access to more lucrative markets such as Evergreen Brick Works Farmers' Market and Tasty Thursdays at Nathan Phillips Square. To offer yet more food-related work, Women's Committee vendors created Flavours of Thorncliffe, a small social enterprise catering company, and ended up taking home top prize in a community cooking competition.

The bazaar can attract some 500 residents, a number that swells into the thousands during Eid and festive Neighbourhood Night. Close to 150 women currently apply to be vendors. Ali rotates vendors so that no more than 20 work at any one bazaar. This gives all vendors an opportunity to participate while ensuring there are enough sales to be profitable. Limiting commercial activity also keeps the bazaar from crowding out green space and protects the shared backyard feeling of the park so neighbours can gather in a festive atmosphere without feeling there is an entrance fee. So much of what makes the bazaar successful is that it is situated in a park. While children enjoy their pocket of freedom



Photo: Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee



— playing and making new friends in a park setting — parents enjoy an evening out, strolling and socializing against the backdrop of a vibrant bazaar.

In 2011, bolstered by their success, they began to imagine other ways to animate the park. Knowing Dufferin Grove had a pizza oven, the Women's Committee began to explore bringing what would be North America's first tandoor oven to the park. Such bake ovens are used widely in South Asian countries to make flatbreads such as naan. The women wanted to introduce children to that tradition and also welcome people from other parts of Toronto to share in the celebration of their heritage. To their surprise, the city said yes and offered a \$1600 grant to purchase an oven, though it would take another two years for the oven to be installed. There was a cement pad to be laid, a storage shed to be built, and an oven that could withstand Canadian winters to be sourced. The city was also pressed into developing a city-wide outdoor bake oven policy, largely credited to the advocacy work of the Women's Committee.

When the tandoor oven was unveiled in 2013, not only the local community, but the city-wide network of friends the Women's Committee had forged came out to celebrate. Lauren Baker, head of the Toronto Food Policy Council, who worked on the bake oven policy, recalls long lineups for naan and an atmosphere of joyous pride. "What the women achieved was a victory for their community and the city. They're an example of dynamic, creative community building. We know how challenging it is to navigate the political process. For many other communities, Thorncliffe was proving, hey, we can do this too."



Sourcing the ingredients for a strong future

As the Women's Committee began to earn a reputation as civic champions, many, including the Metcalf Foundation, wanted to learn alongside them. In 2012, the Women's Committee became a partner in the Foundation's Resilient Neighbourhood Economies initiative. The three-year pilot was designed to help develop strategies to support people and organizations wanting to build resilient and inclusive neighbourhood economies. The Foundation recognized that the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee was a group maneuvering both institutional and municipal systems. Their efforts to improve their neighbourhood were plagued with obstacles, yet rife with burgeoning possibilities for improving the economic livelihoods of residents.

Through the Resilient Neighbourhood Economies project, members of the Women's Committee realized their role was much more than coordinating a community development initiative or revitalizing and animating a park. They were shifting city policies and

procedures. They broadened their vision from empowering the women of Thorncliffe Park to improve their community and public space, to being a catalyst for community economic development. This shift has validated the Committee's grassroots, collaborative approach and inspires the women to continue their work.

Ali has been invited to conferences in Barcelona and San Francisco to talk about turning a near-dead park into a vital asset that drives social connection and creates economic and entrepreneurial opportunities for low-income individuals. Ali's leadership has also been recognized through her participation in the Toronto Food Policy Council.

Ali, a determined networker, set up a steering committee comprised of larger organizations with experience in food, park animation, and community building.

Just as the vendors were gaining confidence through the market, the Women's Committee was gaining confidence in its own leadership and ability to create positive change.

Helping each other build skills and confidence, says Rahime, has fostered “a strong sense of volunteering for each other and for other women in the community.” Project funding and small grants have enabled the Women’s Committee to pay people from time to time, though its work requires an extreme level of volunteerism. The challenge now is to find ways to increase capacity to effect change and also make that work economically sustainable. The Committee would like to have permanent funding to be able to hire staff to scale up the micro-enterprises and offer more opportunities for vendors.

The Women’s Committee recently formalized a partnership with FoodShare, a Toronto non-profit that delivers a host of food programs and education. The Committee became part of FoodShare’s Cross-Cultural Food Access Innovation Hub, which provides mentorship to help multicultural urban food groups grow their organizations and increase their change-making capacity. Recognizing that a key secret ingredient to the Women’s Committee’s success is learning from mentors, the FoodShare partnership provides a strong governance model and support in the struggle to find new sources of funding.



The power of small

Samima Patel, a fashion designer from India, says she had no idea what to do when she arrived in Canada. "I tried to sell clothes from home but it was too hard." When the bazaar started, she leapt at the opportunity to sell her imported line of clothing there. While her children play in the park, she makes from \$200 to \$500 at the few bazaars she works over the summer and the exposure brings more customers to her home-based business during the winter.

In a recent focus group the vendors reported enormous benefits. In addition to making friends and feeling a greater sense of connection, the women discussed how they had acquired business skills and work experience, improved their English, and developed a stronger sense of self. The profits of these micro-entrepreneurs may be small — enough to earn a plane ticket to visit family or buy extra things for their children. Yet their earnings can also supplement the family income and help a family through periods of unemployment

and seasonal work. By helping in this way the women gain greater support from their families, who often help at the bazaar. One of the things women reported being most proud of achieving is acquiring an identity as a businesswoman.

The Women's Committee itself is as grassroots as you can imagine, yet it provides a launching pad that helps many women find the confidence to get involved in their communities by taking courses and classes, starting small businesses, or acquiring skills and experience to land jobs. The importance of these opportunities cannot be overestimated. Enabling vendors to test their markets in a low-cost, low-risk way, to develop a sense of independence and entrepreneurial acumen, is crucial to finding economic inclusion in the mainstream economy.

That's an impressive achievement for a group of local residents who met in the park a few years earlier with a vision of improving their park.





From a bench to a bazaar to inclusive city building

The Metcalf Foundation began working with the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee to deepen its understanding of neighbourhood economic resiliency. Yet what the Foundation discovered is an example of inclusive, grassroots city building. At first this description might seem a bit grand. After all, the women were improving their park and their community, and that occurs frequently all across the city. But when the members of the Women's Committee encounter obstacles they not only overcome them, they work to remove systemic barriers.

The Women's Committee's work with Public Health and Parks, Forestry and Recreation has changed practice and policy. The Committee works with institutional partners to remove barriers that grassroots groups and community organizations across the city face in

animating their public spaces, be it installing outdoor ovens or organizing art activities in the park. The city still approves applications for commercial activities in parks on a case-by-case basis, but the Women's Committee bazaar, by leading the way, has made it easier for the city to accept socially sustainable enterprises in parks, such as container cafes.

"Their efforts illustrate the kind of on-the-ground work that is required to effect neighbourhood change and the extraordinary outcomes that can emerge as a result," explains Adriana Beemans, Metcalf's Inclusive Local Economies Director. "It is exactly what bottom-up community planning is meant to be: a grassroots group influencing policy and decision-making for the betterment of the city. It's more than neighbourhood resiliency, it's inclusive city building."



Written by Margaret Webb
Design by Pat Dumas-Hudecki
All photos by Kevin Konnyu, except where noted

With support from The George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation

METCALF
FOUNDATION

metcalffoundation.com



tpwomenscomm.org