

**“I KNOW IT’S THREE IN THE MORNING, BUT OUR HOUSES HAVE JUST BLOWN UP! CALL NANCE TO OPEN THE COMMUNITY CENTRE!” THE ROLE OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATION IN SUPPORTING RESIDENTS IN A TIME OF CRISIS**

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In the early 1970’s, Cambridge City Council was asked to approve a housing development in the northern section of this southern Ontario city. This development proposal became highly controversial as it was planned to include both detached and semi-detached housing units, and local residents were concerned that the construction was going to be sub-standard. It was also feared that this amount of high density housing was doomed to be a hot-bed for a variety of social problems. While the housing development did proceed, the stigma (Goffman, 1963) attached to that neighbourhood by the broader community was significant.

In response to this stigma, the residents formed a neighbourhood association to address the lack of recreation opportunities that existed, and to strategize some community pride initiatives. Over many years, the neighbourhood association was highly successful in planning and implementing a full range of recreation programmes for its youth and families, and had developed partnerships with a number of community organizations to provide continuing education opportunities, health services, and social supports to its’ residents. Meeting informally in residents’ homes during its’ formative years, the neighbourhood association eventually located its operation in a rented town-house, and in time expanded into larger accommodations within a non-profit housing co-operative situated prominently in the neighbourhood. The neighbourhood association began to refer to the area as ‘Preston Heights’ in an effort to distance itself from its original identity - a name that is still commonly used.

The Preston Heights neighbourhood enjoyed a stable environment for many years until 2:27 a.m. on Sunday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1997 when Ron Campbell, upset upon hearing that his wife was leaving him and taking their children, tampered with three gas appliances and blew up his home. In the process, however, he blew up several other houses as well. Four homes were completely destroyed, eight had heavy structural damage and had to be condemned, and 52 had exposure damage from concussion (Cambridge Fire Department, May, 1997). Once again, Preston Heights was being stigmatized where in the words of one local man, “see, now they’re blowing each other up” (Fred, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to explore how residents recover from a neighbourhood trauma. Through an analysis of the data collected, it became clear that it was the community capacity (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993) of the resident-led neighbourhood association that provided the necessary services to support the Preston Heights residents during their crisis, and that it was the neighbourhood association that sustained the response to the explosion over the many months that followed. Through recreation activities, social support such as counseling services, the provision of clothing and household items, and assistance finding housing, the neighbourhood association had the flexible mandate required to support residents in multiple ways. This paper explores, then, the social capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Coleman, 1988) that emerged from this crisis, the multi-sectored approach to the explosion response; the programmes and services most needed by the residents during this crisis; the learning and

best practices identified by the neighbourhood association in the post-crisis evaluation; and the community-building activities that supported the residents in the days and months that followed the events of May 4, 1997.

## **Method**

This study was qualitative in nature and case method (Stake, 1994, 1995; Yin, 1994) was used to explore the phenomenon under study. The data were collected in 2004 and consisted of audio-taped, semi-structured, individual interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994) with two groups: residents of the Preston Heights neighbourhood; and various community officials who played a role in the days immediately following the event (e.g., Fire Department, municipal officials, social service providers.) Document review of the Fire Department records and the neighbourhood association files – both extensive in nature due to the criminal nature of the case – were also analyzed, as were newspaper reports.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). NVIVO, a data management software programme, was used to organize the data for analysis. Notes were taken during and after each interview and supported my own reflexive practice as the researcher. Descriptive notes helped reconstruct the dialogue, and reflective notes helped identify my impressions, ideas, and personal feelings of the narratives I was hearing (Creswell, 1994). Triangulation of the data (Denzin, 1989) was used as a verification method and focused on the two types of data collection methods (interviews and document review), as well as various data sources (residents, various community officials).

## **Findings**

As noted above, the community centre where the neighbourhood association was housed was opened soon after the explosion occurred. Even though the municipal government's disaster plan called for the local school to be opened in the event of an emergency, it was the neighbourhood centre that came immediately to mind for the residents in Preston Heights. While the school was opened and was used as the place for the Police and Fire Department officials to provide news updates about the cause of the explosion and the risks to homes and property, the neighbourhood centre became "command central" for families as they attempted to find temporary housing and support.

One role that the municipality played was to provide a list of housing options to families, yet what became apparent to those involved with the neighbourhood association was that rather than merely give residents a list of phone numbers with temporary housing options, families needed someone to actually make these phone calls. As the evaluation report from the neighbourhood association suggested, "Families in crisis need an advocate to act on their behalf. As residents have said, they "just did not have the strength to deal with one more situation".

The social supports that residents need must be provided immediately. The neighbourhood association stepped in to help within hours of the explosion to provide shelter, neighbour support, household and personal necessities, etc. "The greater community did not provide support until one week following the explosion. Had the centre not responded, what would have happened to the families?" (Preston Heights report, November, 1997).

In addition to finding housing, clothing, and household goods, normal day to day activities were now more complicated because the families were residing outside of their immediate neighbourhood. As a response, the neighbourhood association realized that one of the things that would support the children and youth was affordable or free access to recreation programmes and activities in their own neighbourhood, so that they could continue to connect with their friends after school and during the summer months. Funding was sought to subsidize these recreation programmes. As well, recreation activities such as a Family Fun Day of horseback riding were offered to enable families to enjoy time together with reduced stress.

The neighbourhood association also responded with workshops such as “Coping with the Explosion” where topics included: symptoms of traumatic events; coping with the event; and resources and information. As well, information sessions related to the stress resulting from critical incident trauma provided families with information related to post-traumatic stress syndrome and how to deal with their children’s anxiety. One of the ‘lessons learned’, as identified by the neighbourhood association, was the importance of a community celebration to recognize how community members/volunteers/partners had harnessed their resources in support of the residents.

The “Celebrating Community Pancake Breakfast” was held on June 21<sup>st</sup> of that year to recognize the many volunteers (aged 12 to adult); the 19 community agencies that formed a partnership to support the Preston Heights residents; the 178 ‘in kind’ donations (e.g., meals, clothes, household items) and the financial generosity of the community’s donations to the relief fund. In evaluating the explosion response, the Preston Heights neighbourhood association file indicated that “the breakfast was very important to the healing of the wider community. The community needed to have positive recognition of the efforts that all ‘neighbours’ provided following the explosion that rocked the neighbourhood.”

## **Conclusion**

Of interest from this study is the level of social capital that was quickly harnessed by the neighbourhood association to support the Preston Heights residents during their time of crisis. Previous studies (Connolly, 2001; 2004a; 2004b) have found that three neighbourhoods experiencing stigma from the broader community developed neighbourhood associations to resist this stigma. Coincidentally, each neighbourhood experienced a crisis, such as the Campbell incident in Preston Heights, or as a result of drug dealers and prostitution. Through the established neighbourhood associations, the residents were able to access this social capital to sustain the balance within their neighbourhood and provide residents with much needed support when they were most at risk. The case study discussed above has been analyzed “within case”. Conducting a cross case analysis of the three “at risk” neighbourhoods noted above will prove instructive to our understanding of systemic stigma, social capital, and the role that organized neighbourhood associations can play in supporting residents during a time of crisis and trauma.

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