

How the Keith Neighbourhood Saved its School

Surrounded by railway tracks, the Keith neighbourhood is a little “island” in the city with about 1,100 homes. The church and local school, the Robert Land, were the only places the community could meet and hold programs.

The Robert Land, built in 1914, had suffered from declining enrolment. Last summer, there was alarming news: the Board of Education was forced to sell the Wentworth Street N school at fair market value.

The asking price? More than \$300,000.

The city had a plan to put in affordable housing and keep the community programs. But the price proved too high. So until a buyer was found, the school board offered to lease part of the building to the Keith community, which sounded good – but to save on costs, the heating would be shut off and the school would be boarded up.

That’s when residents realized they had no choice - - they would have to buy the school themselves.

They wanted community programs for all ages – from babies to seniors. They wanted to bring back their Mum’s Group: they wanted a resource centre with a visiting lawyer to give advice to residents: they wanted a health nurse. Some residents needed help filling out tax returns: kids needed after-school sports programs and a safe place to enjoy arts and crafts: seniors needed a place where they could meet

A group of residents, including Jerry Polmanter, had formed the Robert Land Renewal Committee to keep the much-needed programs running at the school. Jerry has been involved with the school since 1977 when his own children were students there. To save the school he and a group of dedicated visionaries founded The Robert Land Community Association. Some of the new group’s volunteers didn’t even live in the area - but they believed in the project. They all began dedicating more hours than they’d care to think about getting on the phone, giving presentations to explain the neighbourhood’s needs - finding ways to help make the dream come true. **Here were some the daunting tasks ahead:**

- put together a dedicated committee of influential people
- create the vision
- write a business plan
- write grant proposals
- network to tell others about their plans
- raise money to buy the property

Here’s what they did:

- They won a grant from the Sydney and Sadie Bronfman Foundation that paid for a community worker, who was able to network for the group.

This was a huge help because she was able to be on the phone and have meetings during the day while the group members were at work.

- When that grant money almost ran out, they applied to the Hamilton Community Foundation and got a three-year grant of \$139,000 through the YMCA to bring in recreation and advisory programs.

What advice would Jerry give to other communities?

1. You need people who know people

Having good intentions is one thing, but you also need people with the right connections who believe in you.



Jerry Polmanter

Their Association’s board of directors consists of influential local people who were able to talk to other influential people. Members included , business people, historians, alumni and ex-trustees of the school, as well as local residents. With their connections they were able to raise the necessary funds.

2. Be well organized

Your association or committee needs to be set up properly. What are your goals? Set them out in a plan. They need to be written so that someone can understand what you’re trying to do.

3. Believe it’s somehow going to happen!

There are so many disappointments, but you just have to keep believing. Jerry recalls times when they all thought “Why are we doing this?” The toughest time was when the school was put on the market 2 years earlier than expected, which caught everyone by surprise. The other blow came when the city plan to buy the school and lease it to the community fell through.

But they got their school! The biggest job right now is cleaning it up – and getting it ready so programs can start again. The school is empty – so if you have any tables and chairs to donate, they would be much appreciated.

