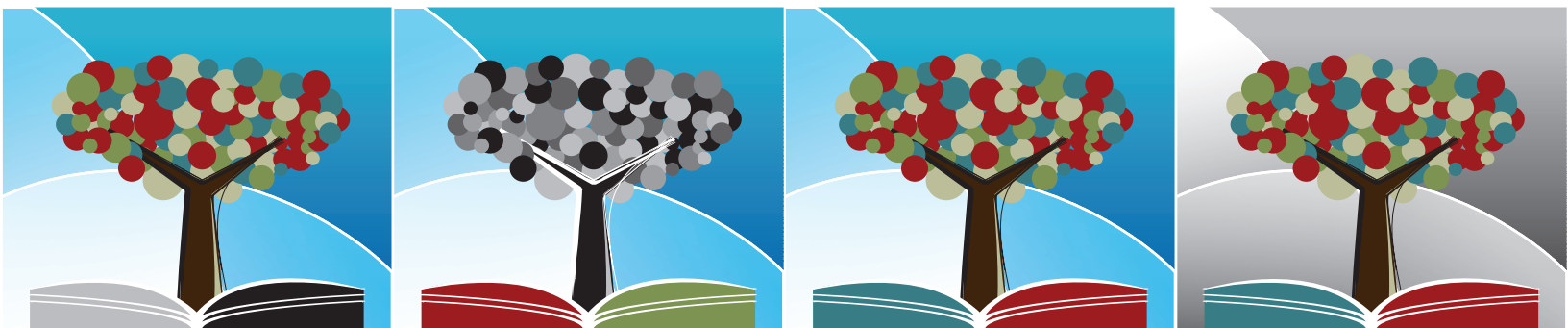


K N O W L E D G E   D E V E L O P M E N T   C E N T R E



# Aboriginal Participation in Neighbourhood Revitalization

A Case Study

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for West Broadway Development Corporation

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small maple leaf icon above the letter "a".

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# Aboriginal Participation in Neighbourhood Revitalization: A Case Study

## Introduction: The urban Aboriginal experience

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In the post-Second World War period, Winnipeg followed the pattern of many inner cities throughout the United States. Inner cities were ‘hollowed out’ as a result of suburbanization and de-industrialization. People who could afford to move relocated to the suburbs; businesses followed; and factories closed or re-located offshore. Those who could not afford to move were left behind in deteriorating inner cities. The result was an increasingly concentrated and often racial form of poverty (Wilson, 1987; 1996). Typically, the most recent arrivals – African Americans and Latinos in the United States; Aboriginal people and, more recently, non-European immigrants and refugees in Winnipeg – located in inner cities where housing costs were low and employment opportunities few. Unemployment rose, rates of labour force participation declined, and, over time, detachment from the labour force often became inter-generational. Social and attitudinal skills associated with attachment to the labour market were lost, and the social networks through which young working class people traditionally found jobs were eroded (Harrison & Weiss, 1998; Wilson, 1996; Loewen, Silver, August, Bruning, Mackenzie, & Meyerson, 2005). Many inner-city residents consequently lost confidence in their ability to secure employment. Although the causes of these phenomena are structural and are for the most

part based in economic change, the manifestations are often behavioural and attitudinal, and show up in increasing school dropout rates, gang activity, and feelings of hopelessness.

This pattern is very much in evidence in Winnipeg’s inner city, particularly among Aboriginal people. Winnipeg has Canada’s largest urban Aboriginal population – 55,755, according to the 2001 Census of Canada. Aboriginal people began to move into Winnipeg in the early 1960s, and their numbers increased significantly in the 1970s. But their arrival coincided with the hollowing out of the inner city due to the post-war suburbanization and de-industrialization that began in earnest in the 1970s. The kinds of factory jobs that young people with modest levels of education might historically have secured to lift them out of poverty were rapidly disappearing from Winnipeg’s inner city just as Aboriginal people were arriving (Loxley, 2000).

Also, Aboriginal people arrived in Winnipeg’s inner city carrying the damage of 100 years of colonization. When Canada moved to take over the Canadian prairies, Aboriginal people were moved onto reserves. Their economic and political systems were eliminated. They were subjected to the paternalistic and often

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harsh control of the Indian Agent and the Indian Act, and many of their cultural and spiritual practices were outlawed. Their children were forcibly seized and sent to residential schools where they were denied the right to speak their languages, were subjected to an inferior education, and were led to believe that being Aboriginal was something to be ashamed of. All of this was predicated on the false assumption that Aboriginal cultures and ways were inferior to European traditions. Many Aboriginal people internalized this false belief and carry the pain of colonization with them (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Public Inquiry into the Administration of Justice and Aboriginal People, 1991; Milloy, 1999; Miller, 1996).

The result for urban Aboriginal people has been high rates of unemployment, low levels of labour force participation, and a host of related social difficulties. Lezubski, Silver, and Black found that almost two thirds (65%) of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg and more than four fifths (80%) of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg's inner city had incomes below the Statistics Canada Low Income Cutoff (LICO) in 1996 (2000, p. 39). That year, the unemployment rate for inner city Aboriginal youth (ages 15-24) was 24.6% and their labour force participation rate was 51% (Lezubski, Silver, & Black, 2000, p. 34). This means that only about one half of inner-city Aboriginal youth at that time were working or looking for work. More recent studies (Silver, Hay, & Gorzen, 2004; Silver, 2006) have shown that Aboriginal people feel excluded from mainstream society in Manitoba and that among the many forms that this takes is that young Aboriginal people are frequently exposed to various forms of discrimination when they apply for jobs.

It follows, we believe, that steps need to be taken to break down the barriers that lead to feelings of social exclusion among Aboriginal people. We know that there are many initiatives in Winnipeg's inner city, led by Aboriginal people themselves, that are creating opportunities for Aboriginal people and are proving successful in breaking down the barriers of social exclusion (Silver, 2006). These small opportunities can be the first step in a process of personal and community transformation. Our interest in this research project has been in determining what role volunteering plays and can play in this process.

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## Why we undertook this research

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The objective of this research was to explore, in a qualitative way, Aboriginal volunteer experiences in the broad-based neighbourhood revitalization process in the West Broadway neighbourhood of Winnipeg between 1996 and 2004. Specific questions that the research addressed were:

1. What unique cultural approaches do Aboriginal residents in West Broadway bring to volunteering?
2. What motivates Aboriginal volunteers and what barriers do they face?
3. How do Aboriginal volunteers connect with the larger volunteer community?
4. What impact did the volunteer experience have on Aboriginal volunteers?
5. What impact did Aboriginal volunteers have on the revitalization process in West Broadway?

The research is important because there is a critical need to involve Aboriginal people in developing their capacity to make positive changes in the communities in which they live and in improving inner-city neighbourhoods that have significant numbers of Aboriginal residents. We hope that the results of the research will help other organizations design volunteer opportunities for Aboriginal people that will be meaningful and helpful both to the volunteers and to the organizations or projects that involve them.

## The West Broadway neighbourhood

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West Broadway is a downtown Winnipeg neighbourhood with a population of about 5,000. It developed for the most part in the early 1900s and was at that time a neighbourhood of middle-income and working-class people. Because of its location close to the commercial centre of the city, it also attracted a number of wealthy and prominent residents including, at one time, the Mayor of Winnipeg. A number of grand homes were built in the neighbourhood.

From the 1920s on, the neighbourhood began to change gradually as the development of transit systems encouraged residents to live farther from the city centre. Gradually, many of the owner-occupied single-family homes were sold to absentee owners who converted them into rooming houses. West Broadway also suffered additional negative effects that resulted from planning decisions that developed Broadway as a busy thoroughfare that bisected the neighbourhood, Great West Life's expansion of its corporate head office and demolition of homes and businesses in the neighbourhood, and the establishment of a centralized City Welfare office in the neighbourhood.

By the mid-1980s and into the early 1990s, West Broadway was in serious decline, as evidenced by the number of boarded-up and derelict houses, crime concerns, and a negative reputation throughout the city. In 1992, a safety audit initiated by the local city councillor found that nearly 80% of West Broadway residents were afraid to go out after dark. This made headlines in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, which also characterized the area as 'Murder's Half Acre' because of a number of homicides that occurred there in the first half of the 1990s.

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West Broadway's turnaround began when the neighbourhood businesses came together as a Business Improvement Zone (BIZ) following the wounding of a Broadway businessman during an armed robbery. The BIZ recognized that it could not attract customers to neighbourhood businesses without dealing with the safety concerns in the neighbourhood. It initiated regular neighbourhood meetings where residents, business people, the police, and agencies came together to discuss issues and concerns (e.g., gang activity, a neighbourhood sniff or crack house, and problems with housing). In 1996, a community organizer, funded through a three-year Urban Issues grant from the Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Family Foundation, began working in the neighbourhood and focused initially on mobilizing the existing small residents' association, which at the time was primarily made up of homeowners, even though the neighbourhood consisted overwhelmingly of renters.

A number of meetings brought together various community organizations, university planners, elected local government officials, active residents, the police, and others to look at ways of revitalizing West Broadway. Out of those meetings, West Broadway Alliance, an informal coalition of more than 40 organizations, was born with a mission "to renew and revitalize West Broadway through the responsible leadership and participation of the people who live work and play in the neighbourhood." West Broadway Development Corporation, an incorporated nonprofit development corporation, was created in May 1997 as the legal arm of the Alliance. Its role was to coordinate revitalization activities, to involve new partners, and to develop programs where there were gaps.

Between 1997 and 2001, West Broadway became known throughout the city for its revitalization efforts. Derelict homes were renovated for homeownership or affordable rental accommodation, and the community centre that had been seen as gang territory became a vital centre of programs for youth and adults. New organizations and resources opened in the neighbourhood, including Art City, a drop-in centre where children and youth could express their creativity; Wolseley Family Place, a centre for parents and their young children; Little Red Spirit Aboriginal Head Start, a pre-school program for Aboriginal Children that mandates parental involvement; Youth Builders, a program for at-risk youth that provides renovation training and a stipend; and a neighbourhood Job Resource Centre where residents can do job searches and improve their employability skills.

Since 2001, the number of new programs and organizations has stabilized and revitalization efforts have entered a maintenance phase. At the same time, the turnaround in West Broadway, considered an attractive location by many, led to increased private sector interest in acquiring and renovating apartment blocks in the neighbourhood. These renovations, while needed, have led to higher rents and put pressure on many of those most disadvantaged who had settled in the neighbourhood because of its low rental rates. The effects of this can be seen in decline in the percentage of Aboriginal residents, who are generally low-income, from 30% to 27% between the 1996 census and the 2001 census.



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Although Aboriginal people make up a significant percentage of West Broadway's population, they were not strongly represented in early revitalization efforts, especially at the organizational level. Efforts were made to attract Aboriginal people to the boards of community groups and in neighbourhood renewal activities. Some Aboriginal residents thought it was important to have their own exclusively Aboriginal organization and formed West Broadway Aboriginal Residents' Group in 2003; this was supported by the Development Corporation.

## Research methodology

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Our research was community-based and participative, and we involved Aboriginal people in its design and implementation. In his study of Aboriginal families in Winnipeg's North End, Deane advised that *"If researchers cannot create a relationship of mutuality, respect and shared purpose with their subjects, then it is unlikely that they can acquire authentic information"* (2006). As a result, in our study, the initial co-investigators considered it highly important for Aboriginal cultural concerns to be investigated by Aboriginal people themselves and for Aboriginal people to determine the appropriate research methods. This was accomplished in three ways. First, an Aboriginal Advisory Group made up of Aboriginal people connected to particular organizations in West Broadway was recruited to provide feedback and to act as a sounding board for the researchers. Second, the researchers who conducted the interviews were recruited from the Aboriginal community. Finally, two of the three interviewers were closely connected with West Broadway as residents and/or volunteers themselves.

The questions that were asked to research participants were developed through a consultative process. Researchers developed a first draft and presented this to the Advisory Group for comments and suggestions. The questions were then refined and reviewed by Knowledge Development Centre researchers, who provided additional suggestions.

The goal of the research was to interview 30 Aboriginal residents or past residents of West Broadway who had been actively involved in volunteering in the neighbourhood between 1996 and 2004. Potential participants were enlisted through

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consultation with a number of organizations, through personal contacts of the investigators and local research associates, and through suggestions from those interviewed. An initial list of some 50 names was developed. After the interviews, the research team followed up with a small focus group of six individuals to pursue several ideas that had come out of the interviews. In addition, representatives of three nonprofit organizations in West Broadway that recruit volunteers were interviewed about their experience and approaches in working with Aboriginal volunteers. The summary findings were circulated to the Advisory Group for comments and suggestions.

## Characteristics of interviewees

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A total of 32 individuals were interviewed. Of this number, all but one were current or past residents of West Broadway. The lone non-resident was someone who was employed full-time in the neighbourhood, who was committed to its improvement, and who was a volunteer. Of the 32 interviewees, 19 were women and 13 were men (see Tables 1 and 2). Those who were interviewed represented a range of ages, length of residence in the neighbourhood, and levels of formal education. They were disproportionately low-income people – 23 had incomes of less than \$20,000 per year; 15 had incomes of less than \$10,000 per year. Participants were disproportionately outside of the formal labour force: only 11 of the 32 were employed and of these, only two were employed full-time; 12 of the 32, or almost one in three, were on social assistance. These data are roughly consistent with what one would expect, given the corresponding data for Aboriginal people in Winnipeg generally and in Winnipeg inner-city neighbourhoods in particular. Rates of unemployment for inner-city Aboriginal people are relatively high and rates of labour force participation are relatively low. At times, many Aboriginal people feel socially excluded.

Altogether, interviewees had volunteered in more than 15 community organizations in the neighbourhood as well as at events such as neighbourhood clean-ups and celebrations. Their volunteer experience ranged from helping to deliver food to those in need, to helping the local school on its outings, to sitting on the board of the local Development Corporation. Some had volunteered for as long as seven years; others had volunteered for only a few special events during the year.

**Table 1: Characteristics of female participants**

Participant	Age category	Highest education level	Annual family income	Employment status	Years resident in West Broadway	Aboriginal affiliation
1	25 – 35	College/TS	<\$10,000	Unemployed + social assistance	Less than 1	Ojibway
2	25 – 35	Some HS	<\$10,000	Unemployed + social assistance	1 – 3	Yes
3	25 – 35	Some HS	<\$10,000	Unemployed + social assistance	1 – 3	Yes
4	25 – 35	Some HS	<\$10,000	Part time with social assistance	5 – 10	Cree
5	25 – 35	College/TS	<\$10,000	Part time with social assistance	5 – 10	Ojibway
6	25 – 35	Some HS	<\$10,000	Part time with social assistance	5 – 10	Métis
7	25 – 35	Some HS	<\$10,000	Part time with social assistance	5 – 10	Cree
8	35 – 50	College/TS	<\$10,000	Disabled	1 – 3	Métis
9	35 – 50	Some HS	<\$10,000	Unemployed + social assistance	3 – 5	Yes
10	25 – 35	Winnipeg Education Centre	\$10-19,000	Student	5 – 10	Cree
11	35 – 50	University experience	\$10-19,000	Student and Homemaker	1 – 3	Ojibway
12	35 – 50	College/TS	\$10-19,000	Student	3 – 5	Mi'gmaq
13	35 – 50	College/TS	\$10-19,000	Disabled + social assistance	3 – 5	Métis
14	35 – 50	HS diploma	\$20-29,000	Student and Homemaker	3 – 5	Cree - Ojibway
15	50+	College/TS	\$20-29,000	Disabled with insurance	5 – 10	Métis
16	50+	–	\$20-29,000	Unemployed + social assistance	10+	Yes
17	50+	University Degree	\$20-29,000	Self-employed	10+	Ojibway
18	16 – 25	College/TS	\$30-39,000	Student	5 – 10	Yes
19	35 – 50	College/TS	\$30-39,000	Unemployed + Homemaker	3 – 5	Cree

Notes: HS = High School; TS = Technical school; < = less than; Yes = Aboriginal affiliation but specific affiliation not cited by participant; Dark bars separate different family income levels.

**Table 2: Characteristics of male participants**

Participant	Age category	Highest education level	Annual family income	Employment status	Years resident in West Broadway	Aboriginal affiliation
1	16 – 25	Some HS	<\$10,000	Student	10+	Yes
2	16 – 25	HS Diploma	<\$10,000	Student and Employed	3 – 5	Cree, Ojibway & Métis
3	25 – 35	Some HS	<\$10,000	Unemployed	5 – 10	Ojibway
4	25 – 35	Some HS	<\$10,000	Unemployed + social assistance	1 – 3	Métis
5	35 – 50	Some HS	<\$10,000	Part Time employment	10+	Yes
6	35 – 50	Some HS	<\$10,000	Unemployed	10+	Dene
7	16 – 25	Some HS	\$10-19,000	Student	1 – 3	Ojibway
8	35 – 50	College/TS	\$10-19,000	Self employed	5 – 10	Métis
9	35 – 50	University Degree	\$10-19,000	Unemployed	3 – 5	Cree and Ojibway
10	50+	Some HS	\$10-19,000	Unemployed + social assistance	5 – 10	Métis
11	35 – 50	College/TS	\$20-29,000	Part time with social assistance	5 – 10	Yes
12	35 – 50	College/TS	\$30-39,000	Full Time Employment	5 – 10	Métis
13	35 – 50	University Degree	More than \$40,000	Full Time Employment	3 – 5	Métis

Notes: HS = High School; TS = Technical school; < = less than; Yes = Aboriginal affiliation but specific affiliation not cited by participant; Dark bars separate different family income levels.

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## Research findings: What interviewees told us

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### What volunteering means

We asked interviewees what volunteering meant to them. For most, their responses involved the ideas of helping out in the community, being a role model, and making a difference. Only two of those interviewed connected volunteering specifically to improve their skills for the purpose of gaining employment, even though as a group most of those interviewed were not employed full-time.

Here are some of their responses:

*“Helping people who cannot always help themselves, the elders and the disabled especially.” (Stephanie)<sup>1</sup>*

*“Helping out people. It’s usually a positive outcome, so it’s good to help people. Sometimes a lot of corporations or a lot of nonprofit organizations depend on their volunteers. They can’t afford to pay people. People with good hearts like me.” (William)*

*“To me it means civic duty. To me civic duty is something that everyone should be doing anyway. Other people call it helping out, but to me volunteering is civic duty. It is just something that everyone should be a part of, as contributors to our society, not just contributors to ourselves.” (Julie)*

*“What it means to me is being able to help other people and feeling good about it, without getting paid for having to do stuff.” (Sarah)*

*“Volunteering means investing your own time without being rewarded, to be a part of something in your community, something that is of importance to yourself on a personal level, something that you give to your community.” (Darlene)*

*“Helping out of kindness instead of pay.” (Dale)*

*“Volunteering means giving my spare time to help other people to better their lives, giving my skills to help them have a better quality of life.” (John)*

Two volunteers had a different perspective on the question:

*“It’s a positive step to gain experience. It could transfer to job skills and a job, especially with Native people with certain agencies.” (Anita)*

*“I give of my time and do what I can to get experience that could get me a job.” (Blake)*

Interestingly, these last two respondents were a mother and her son, both of whom volunteered in the neighbourhood. The mother was one of the few interviewees who had completed university.

This general perspective of helping without regard to particular benefits is one that is rooted in the Aboriginal approach to volunteering. “Caring, sharing, and giving – this is an idea so basic in Aboriginal societies that none has a word to describe it, yet volunteering is at the centre of who we are. We have

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<sup>1</sup> All names used in the report are pseudonyms.

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no word for 'you're welcome'. The word 'megwetch' sometimes used is something much beyond that. It has as its sense that it has been an honour to serve you." (Voluntary Sector Initiative, 2002)

## Motivations for volunteering

For the Aboriginal volunteers we interviewed, volunteering came out of a sense of wanting to give something to the larger community. In some cases, this community was seen as the neighbourhood as a whole, but it also referred to the smaller community in which they were active or lived. Darlene, a young mother who had come into the city from a reserve and had moved into cooperative housing, described her reasons for becoming involved in this way:

*"I began volunteering because of how the structure of my building is, where there is a sense of community. Living in a place like this has given me a sense of community. I was never exposed to this. Before I never had no control of my environment or surroundings, like, to my neighbours drinking or something like that. It is my first-time experiencing having control over your environment for your children. Here people work together to make sure that you have a healthy environment to bring your children up in. When I moved here, I got an understanding of that but not really understanding that it was community development, until about five months ago. When I look back and see how it has helped me to change my life for the better, I am making more decisions in my life about what it is to be a positive role model to my children."*

Being a positive role model was a strong motivator for a number of those we interviewed. This applied to how they were seen both by their own children and by the youth in the neighbourhood.

James, a young man in his early twenties, volunteered to help with security during the visit of some Aboriginal people from reserves to the city and their encampment at the Legislature:

*"Young people my age might identify with what they had me doing and could gain the same interest. I thought after I was there doing the security that this would motivate other young people that they could do these kinds of things."*

For Cheryl, who moved to the neighbourhood from out of province, volunteering was connected to the process of becoming part of the community.

*"When I lived in West Broadway, I was very new to the community, so for me volunteering was a way to get to know my community. I believe very strongly that a community is built by people within the community, and not from outside. So coming into the community, it was a way for me to get to know my community as well as be a participant and make it a better place to live."*

The opportunity to use their special skills or gifts was a strong motivator for a number of the volunteers we interviewed. Julie is a passionate gardener and, after moving into the neighbourhood, became involved in helping with a neighbour's garden and later with a community garden near her apartment block. For



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her, gardening is a natural way to build a sense of connection:

*“I can use my talents someplace where I can enjoy it, and because of my health, I can walk away when I need to. There will always be someone else who will come in; a garden is not something that is hard to look after, yes, but it is not in a way that I find draining. You know, we don’t have to meet every week but when we do see each other, it is something that we share. We are walking down to our gardens anyway and being close, you always run into each other. We ask how are things going over there, which leads to more communication in the street with people. I find that in places that have that sort of environment that the crime is less, because the criminals see that there are people out there that are talking to each other, and this is enough to stop them from wanting to do the things that they want to do, because they know that someone could be watching. Even though they are just talking about gardening, the criminal doesn’t know that. Seeds and plants are donated from people in the neighborhood. We are going starting a plant bank and an adopt-a-yard program. We hope this will bring youth and elderly people together. This will help the elderly or people who are just too busy working who need someone to do their yard. Also, university students who still want to grow their veggies, it will bring the people together.”*

Mark, a young man who helps out at the Community Centre, is passionate about music:

*“I’m really, really motivated when it comes to music and try to motivate the kids to do something with that, because there are so many people and kids out there with great talent and voice and stuff like that, but they don’t get recognized. So it’s our job to give them that recognition and the compliments that they need to hear. I write my own music, I’ve written songs and lyrics for about four or five years now and it’s just a passion. Some people have hobbies with building stuff, little airplanes or cars or things like that, mine’s just music. Instead of flicking on the TV, I grab a guitar.”*

Peter, a volunteer who has had considerable experience in a variety of employment situations, contrasted his motivation for volunteering with his past experience earning a living:

*“There are rewards. I know what it is to put effort in and there’s no money involved, and I know what it is to go to work because I had to get paid, I needed a salary. So there’s a big difference, I worked two and a half years...and didn’t like it. I did not enjoy that work at all. The volunteer work I pick and choose, it’s a larger playing field where I can find things, places where I can make a difference, and it’s rewarding because you do meet people who have been at it for a long time, their heart is in it, and you get to know who they are. It’s interesting to see how they can be effective, and to get to know them is very rewarding in itself. So the*

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*dollar part is secondary. The work involved is more interesting and more rewarding.”*

For five of those whom we interviewed, the motivation to volunteer was connected to their wish to remain close to their children and to strengthen their family life. For example, Mathew, a single father who is raising his own children and those of his brother, volunteers at the local elementary school:

*“Helping the neighbourhood kids has benefits at school and in their community. I want to be a part of day to day activity of my kids at school.”*

For Darlene:

*“Being a part of my children’s hobbies, within the housing, it gives me empowerment. You get a sense of belonging which you can take pride in. You can take pride in your home even though it’s a building of 35 families. You get that empowerment that what you say gets involved with how they do things in the building, which can motivate community participation, closeness of families. My motivation was also on a social level.”*

Phyllis, a mother of two, has volunteered at the elementary school for many years:

*“I figure I could be closer to my kids if I volunteer and that my kids can trust and know the school system more and plus you know what makes me act mostly is to protect them, to know that I’m going to be here, I’m going to be around, if anything happens.”*

Several volunteers explicitly stated that they were giving back something that they had learned through their own difficult life experiences. They felt that they had a gift to share in a different sense. For example, Cheryl volunteered at the neighbourhood community health centre that served people with AIDS:

*“I volunteered with Nine Circles because I’m an ex-addict myself, and I managed to make it through my addiction without becoming HIV-positive, having AIDS, having hepatitis, any of that kind of thing, and I’m so grateful and thankful for that, that I feel I have to give back for that, for my own luck.”*

## **Barriers to volunteering**

We did not ask any specific questions about the barriers that volunteers experienced in choosing to volunteer. However, information about barriers emerged through volunteers’ responses about their experiences and about what they might change in their volunteering, as well as in the focus group that followed up on several themes that emerged from the interviews. There appeared to be four types of barriers:



1. a feeling of not being comfortable within a group of non-Aboriginals;
2. feelings of lack of confidence;
3. social, institutional, or policy environment barriers, e.g., social assistance officials do not encourage clients to volunteer because they believe that this will take away from time that they should devote to finding employment; and
4. not having the information necessary to find out about volunteer opportunities.

Here is what two of the volunteers we interviewed said about these barriers:

*“I think especially nowadays they’re really pushing for Aboriginal people to work in different areas and volunteer, and when people get there, when they get to the work or the volunteer, it doesn’t matter if it’s work or volunteer work, it’s very uncomfortable because you feel like, ‘Oh, they had to hire me because I’m Aboriginal’ and they end up treating you like, ‘You shouldn’t be here because you’re Aboriginal’ and they don’t look at what you can do.” (Sarah)*

*“Before that I had no volunteer experience at all. I got involved more like six years ago, but not in the capacity that I am now, it took me a couple of years just to gain confidence to actually volunteer, it’s not that I didn’t want to, it’s like I didn’t know how to go about it. I didn’t have the confidence then that I do now, but when I voiced my concerns to [a staff person], he said we need people in the neighbourhood, and he told me ‘You’ll learn,’ and he was right, I did learn. I learned how to speak up for myself. I learned that me living in the community*

*is what volunteering is about. I think volunteering should come from community, that’s what it’s always been about.” (Louise)*

Not having information is a barrier. The lack of information about volunteer possibilities came up several times during interviews. It also came up in the focus group when we asked about how to increase volunteer participation in the neighbourhood.

## Describing the volunteer experience

We asked the volunteers we interviewed for three words to describe their volunteer experience and its impact on them. The words they chose were overwhelmingly positive. The most common words chosen were ‘rewarding’ (nine instances) and ‘learning’ (six instances). Of the 32 participants interviewed, only three used terms that suggested dissatisfaction with their volunteer experience (e.g., two said ‘frustrating’).

Here are some of the volunteers’ comments:

Martin volunteered with the Good Food Club whose members grow organic vegetables at a Community Shared Agriculture farm outside the city. The vegetables are distributed to Good Food Club members or sold inexpensively in the community. Martin described his experience:

*“Grateful, sometimes overwhelmed, positive experience. I felt good that I could do the things I did to help other people. Sometimes the crops we got out of the garden, I wouldn’t expect a crop to come out as much as it did. I was amazed at the stuff we got out of there. It was a pleasure to take everything out of that garden.”*

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William volunteered with the Aboriginal Residents' Group:

*"Great, wow, it made me feel good. It just makes you feel good about yourself, and you know you're doing something positive. With all the negative things happening around these neighbourhoods now, it's good to be part of the good things that are happening. So, great, wow and cool."*

Julie volunteered at a community garden:

*"Invigorating, motivating, at times draining, but in a good way. It's a type of draining that is a satisfaction. I can say it is only a little thing but at least it got done. I can make the place look better. You motivate other people too. The motivation carries on because someone might say, 'Well, gee, I saw that plant and that plant, and how do you grow it,' then they want to grow it in their yard, so it helps motivate them. We give plants to the people in the community if they want them, then they do not have to pay money for them. It is invigorating because you are outside; I'm out early in the mornings because I can't be out in the sunlight. The freshness of the air, hearing the birds, it's invigorating when you have to go out because someone needs some water, you get to share information."*

Sarah, a single mother, volunteered with a number of different organizations in the neighbourhood:

*"One of the words I would use would be rewarding, definitely, because you get a sense of accomplishment with being able to help other people. Rewarding as well. Did I say that? [Laughs] Rewarding without having to get paid, because people value money way too much. Learning, also, learning different things and how to interact with people as well. You have to have those skills and learn those skills as well to be able to work with other people...people skills."*

For Darlene, volunteering is an activity that builds self-esteem:

*"Accomplishment, I feel like I am contributing to society. Rewarding, for my self-esteem, and positive encouragement in my successes. Educating, a learning experience."*

Cheryl talked about the differences in her volunteer experiences in British Columbia and in Manitoba:

*"Interesting, challenging, and rewarding. It was very interesting coming to Manitoba and learning about the differences between the way people interact, from British Columbia to here. I find that living here in Manitoba, the Aboriginal people have a strength that they don't on the coast. Not that the people on the coast aren't strong, but on the coast they still have their fishing and their traditional lands and things that*

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*we as Aboriginals on the prairie don't have. The buffalo just don't exist anymore. I mean, we can't go back to our lifestyle because our lifestyle is gone. And there's an underlying strength and dignity that comes with having accepted that and learning to live with that. It was really interesting to me to learn how people act and interact within the community and how much more important the community seems to be in a lot of ways."*

David, a man in his fifties, helped out with tree banding to prevent Dutch Elm disease as well as with various feasts. He found volunteering difficult:

*"Frustration, frustration, frustration. There's times and people you have to deal with any time you go out, and I've got heart and stroke trouble happening. Any time I go out and have to deal with stressful situations, it's frustrating. If I'm not out volunteering a lot, that's probably the reason. I had a good time, I got sun on my neck, I don't want to harp on the frustration. We had a good time. Sometimes there's some food; you can try what someone else is eating for a change. I've brought bannock I've baked to various meetings."*

Peter provided a good summary:

*"All of them are rewarding, learning experiences, instilling self-worth and accomplishment."*

## The importance of tradition

We asked volunteers if incorporating traditional Aboriginal teachings and practices into their volunteer activities would make for a more rewarding experience. Six of those we asked did not think it would. Among those who responded affirmatively, a dozen felt strongly about the importance of tradition. For example, John, who grew up on a reserve in Northern Manitoba and who returns there on a regular basis, volunteered with both the Aboriginal Residents' group and on the board of the Development Corporation. His comments suggest the importance of a way of relating that enhances the volunteer experience for him:

*"Sharing food together, particularly traditional foods, is important. Also talking and telling stories about elders and creator stories. In terms of the food, up north we have different ways of preparing food and particularly foods that are important. For Ojibway people, wild rice is a traditional food. For the Northern Cree, it is moose or deer. Non-Aboriginal students would come to the meetings because they were interested in learning about these ways. In the Development Corporation meetings, there wasn't the same relationship building, it was more the business end of things. The relationship building was missing."*

Darlene has lost touch with some of the traditions. She feels that loss and thought it would be important to regain that knowledge. She volunteers with the Aboriginal Girl Guides program, which teaches young women about traditional practices:

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*“Yes, I think the history of my whole culture and what life was like before Europeans moved in is important. It’s a part of who we are and even though I do not know of my true ways of life, I still want to get the background of it or experience it once in my life, like making moccasins. Those skills are important because that’s who I am. My culture is going into extinction because my mom did not pass those skills down to her children, so it stopped the knowledge, I don’t know my own language.”*

Cheryl brings a different perspective to the question of tradition:

*“Yes and no, I don’t know that they’re unique to my traditions, but, yes, honesty and respect and caring and all those things that have been taught to me all my life...the seven teachings and the sacred medicine wheel all lead me to volunteer work. But I think that those things are the same whether you believe in traditional Aboriginal spiritualism or not, whether you’re a Christian or a pagan or a spiritualist or whatever you are. I think those ideas of being good to each other and taking care of other people as well as yourself belong in every idea of religion and spirituality. So, yes, my traditional beliefs and stuff lead me to volunteerism, but I think that anyone who believes in being a good person follows those same beliefs, whether they call them the seven sacred teachings or the ten commandments or whatever.”*

Mark brings the traditional practices to his volunteer activities:

*“Yes, I like to smudge, even during the music classes. We always have a smudge bowl and sage burning the whole time while we’re in there; it runs an hour or even a little more. Even at my house, my mom’s pretty big on that. That’s about as far as it goes, I do believe in all the spiritual medicines and stuff like that from the elders, like Indian tea, a drink to help me get better, sun dancer., I’ve gone to sweats about twice a year. [Did you bring the smudge into the music class?] Yeah, I brought that in. Aaron Peters is an Aboriginal artist and musician as well, but he never thought about it. They had the program running about a month before I came in, and I said, ‘Most of the kids here are Aboriginal, why don’t you start teaching it a little bit?’ You know, through music, because we do the powwow music sometimes, and drums and stuff like that.”*

Mathew volunteers at the local elementary school that his children attend. He has been active on the Parent Council and with the School Pow Wow Club:

*“I like to keep our tradition alive with the Pow Wow Club. With the youth involved, they will learn to respect their culture. I feel good about that.”*

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## Do Aboriginal volunteers bring a unique perspective?

We asked the volunteers we interviewed if being Aboriginal meant that they brought a unique perspective to their volunteering. All but three of those interviewed said yes:

John had considerable experience with Aboriginal culture through his travels:

*“The Aboriginal perspective as a volunteer is to give your time hopefully and unconditionally. Up north, there is a strong sense of the whole community supporting someone who is down and out. This is a common theme in all the communities I have visited – Micmac, Haida, Mohawk.”*

James expressed it another way:

*“I think what I’ve learned and what I’ve brought to my volunteer work is important because it taught me, my traditional background taught me patience and also respect for other people as well, like, everybody is equal. If I didn’t have that to bring into any part of my life, I don’t think I would have made it very far.”*

Others felt that the perspective they brought to volunteering stemmed from their uniqueness as individuals and not from their status as Aboriginal. For example:

*“I think that I bring a unique approach to my volunteer activities because of me, not necessarily because I’m an Aboriginal person, just because I’m a person and every person is unique and individual. I think it wouldn’t matter if I was Aboriginal or not, I would bring a unique perspective to my volunteer activities. I guess, yes, because I am Aboriginal and, no, because I would no matter who I was. I’m a unique person and I’ve had a unique set of life experiences that lead me to where I am. Having been an addict, having been a single parent, having been on social assistance, having had to deal with the court system, having had to deal with the social assistance system and all those things lead me to want to help other people through that. And none of those things happened to me because I was an Aboriginal person, but because I’m me.”*  
(Cheryl)

*“Well yeah, I’m left-handed, colour-blind, and Métis. Everything I do is unique and off the wall. I don’t think I do anything different, not really, just a respect for nature and mother earth.”* (William)



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For Phyllis, the pain of her childhood is what gives her the ability to make a difference:

*“I feel like I can make a difference just being myself. When I grew up, I grew up with just Aboriginal people and I didn’t see any racism, but I guess I was sheltered from it. When I did go to school, they just didn’t bother me because I was an abused kid. My teacher was racist, but he didn’t bother me because I was beat up every day and I was a very quiet child. I had my own troubles to think about other than what was going on around me”*

Michael’s comments about being a caring Aboriginal father applied to a number of the other fathers we interviewed:

*“Unique, one thing I always hear when I’m outside the neighbourhood is surprise that I’m spending time with my kids, like it’s unusual for an Aboriginal man to be with his kids, I don’t know if I should take that as a compliment.”*

## **The importance of other Aboriginal volunteers**

Most of the volunteers we interviewed reported that they volunteered with other Aboriginal people. They considered this to be important for a number of reasons.

First, given that Aboriginal people make up 27% of the population of West Broadway, it made sense to interviewees that there be strong Aboriginal representation among volunteers:

*“I think it’s important in the fact that if the area has a higher concentration of Aboriginal people, then so should the volunteer projects that get put together. It’s good to have people of that ancestry involved as well. It’s not necessary, but I think it shows well on both sides of the coin, it’s good to have that opinion as well.”*  
(Richard)

*“Yes, 75% of the kids at Mulvey School are Aboriginal so we are always trying to get as many parents involved as we can, and of course, most of us at the Ma Mawi Pow Wow Club on Wednesday nights at the Broadway Neighbourhood Centre are Aboriginal.”* (Mathew)

At the same time that Richard and Mathew explained the importance of Aboriginal volunteers, they also responded that it wasn’t personally important for them that they volunteer with Aboriginal people.

Other interviewees felt that it was important to volunteer along with other Aboriginal people because it sends a message out to the larger community and to members of their own community.

*“Yes, I think that it is one way to break down stereotypes of any group. Others can see even though we are all different, we are all the same though. We all want the same things. We all want peace and tranquility. All the good things in life that everyone else wants, too. We can all contribute; I want all those stereotypes to get broken down.”*  
(Julie)

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*“Oh yes, very much so. The organizations that I’ve dealt with are mostly Aboriginal organizations, so the people volunteering are often Aboriginal or of some kind of Aboriginal descent, like Métis, something like that. [Important?] Oh, for sure, most definitely. Aboriginals, just the stereotypes that are around these days are horrible, that Aboriginals are nothing but drunks, yadda yadda. But that is so far from the truth it’s not even funny. So yeah, we need a lot more Aboriginal volunteers, for sure.”*  
(Mark)

*“Yeah. Just because the majority of the kids that go there are Aboriginal, it’s positive for them to see other native guys doing something else.”* (Michael)

There is also the strength and pride that comes from Aboriginal people working together:

*“Yeah. It is important to develop and to work together, get the work done. It makes me feel good if I see other Aboriginals participating. Working together with other Aboriginals is rewarding.”* (Martin)

*“Yes. It’s important to me because there is a diversity, people from different communities. The Ab res group had Métis, Ojibway, Cree and even Dene. It was also important to see non-Aboriginals who wanted to learn more about Aboriginal culture, that’s good.”*  
(William)

Volunteering also allows Aboriginal people to connect with other Aboriginals:

*“For the neighbourhood cleanup, sure, it shows that we do care about our neighbourhood. There were only Aboriginal people in the group working the ‘crisis line’ at Klinik [a neighbourhood community health centre]. I think they [the troubled youth] could connect better now if there were Aboriginal counsellors.”* (Anne)

A number of volunteers reported that they felt a stronger feeling of comfort and acceptance if they volunteered with other Aboriginal people:

*“I’d feel out of place if there wasn’t. Like for the doula training I was the only Aboriginal first nation women there and I felt very uncomfortable when I was there. I felt that they didn’t want me there because of my skin not because of who I was, I tried not to let it bother me but it did, like I felt out of place because I noticed I was the only one there.”* (Phyllis)

For Dianne, the issue was one of power in numbers:

*“Oh, absolutely. I want more Aboriginal involvement because when Aboriginals do come out, it feels like we get stifled, we get pushed in the back and then we get discouraged. And if we make a stand and want to be heard it feels like we’re being abrupt.”*

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A number of volunteers reported that volunteering with other Aboriginal volunteers just wasn't important. Joyce's comments typify that feeling:

*"I always seem to work with Aboriginals volunteering and a few non-Aboriginals. I find that none of this matters. I never think about who is there as far as that goes. I'm comfortable with everybody. Just tell me what to do."* (Joyce smiled)

## Volunteering with non-Aboriginal people

We asked the volunteers we interviewed if they got to know non-Aboriginal volunteers through their volunteer activities in the neighbourhood. Everyone said that they had. A number added that getting to know non-Aboriginal volunteers was important to them because it broke down their own stereotypes. For others, getting to know non-Aboriginal volunteers wasn't an important issue. One volunteer said, *"I just got to make friends, no matter who they are."* For a few, volunteering with non-Aboriginals brought up feelings of being excluded or controlled. There was no obvious correlation between the background or education of a volunteer and how they responded to this question. Here is what some participants said when asked if they had volunteered with non-Aboriginals:

*"Yes, many. That is what I like about the organization of this community – the diversity of the people, from every walk of life every financial and social level. You can work with and get along with one another and that is what a community is. That's what I like about it here."* (Julie)

*"Yes, all different kinds of folks, sex and age groups, a mixed bag of Winnipeggers, mainly concentrating on the neighbourhood. It was interesting to hear new Canadians who were non-Aboriginal, to listen to their opinions and statements, different things they felt could change for the better."* (Peter)

*"Yeah, I got to know a lot of different people, which was really good because it just shows that not all people are racist. And I've been lucky so far with that, that I haven't met any people that were malicious."* (Mark)

*"Yes, but I felt that non-Aboriginal people that [volunteered] seemed like they were trying to take more control. It felt like they were smarter, or they were trying to be smarter."* (Dianne)

## Contributions to West Broadway's revitalization

We asked the volunteers we interviewed to assess the impact that Aboriginal volunteers had on West Broadway's revitalization process. What revitalization meant wasn't spelled out, so volunteers could give their own meaning to it. The question brought out individual volunteers' perspectives on their own contributions.

Cheryl's response put the revitalization efforts into a broad perspective:

*"I don't know, I did stuff like when they had neighbourhood cleanup, I would go out and help with stuff like that, so, yes, in that way, but as far as direct revitalization, not necessarily. But I think that everything that*



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*you do within the community that's positive helps towards revitalization, because you can't revitalize the community unless the community is feeling happy, healthy, and strong. And I think that anything that one does within the community helps to make people feel healthy and strong."*

For Julie, revitalization was something one did as a civic responsibility:

*"I'm hoping that it is, that's what I feel is a civic duty is to help any neighborhood that you are in to be a better place for everyone. If I can bring a bit of green or a bit of happiness to someone by just looking at a plant or flower, then great. I passed out over a hundred tomato plants this spring. We share. Also helping a neighbour out with plants they may want in their yard, it brings people in community closer together."*

The visibility of Aboriginal residents helping out in various ways and being role models was important for many of the volunteers:

*"Yeah, kids got more active. When they see other guys my age with kids and trying to be positive with our kids, they turn around and start acting more respectful to kids smaller than them and authority in general. Being a positive role model." (Michael)*

*"Mainly being out there visible to encourage others to try to be a role model for this kind of activity." (Patricia)*

*"Being visible, to inspire other Aboriginal people to get involved in making it a better community to live in." (Priscilla)*

*"Yes, working with the youth and getting involved. Now my children are willing to participate. To create role models is important, I can see that now. Get the kids to learn and get them to participate." (Mathew)*

Martin was able to see changes over the more than ten years that he had lived in the neighbourhood:

*"Knowing that this community was trying to change and to be positive because there was so much neglect at one time, and I've seen this community change in the last ten years. It was a fairly rough area when we moved here. But it's not like it was back then. Things have changed almost 180 degrees with the housing and the different groups they have for the kids now, like Art City and the youth group at Crossways and the community centre."*

In addition to his volunteer activities in the neighbourhood, William was employed with a neighbourhood community access program:<sup>2</sup>

*"Yeah, I think it's helped quite a bit. The CAP site, it's another place for the people to come instead of staying out on the street and getting into trouble. They're in here getting knowledge of computers and growing into the twenty-first century instead*

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<sup>2</sup> A community access program (CAP) is a program that supports public Internet access at community sites in the neighbourhood.

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*of staying out back in the back woods, in the bush. You get some Aboriginals that come down from up north, like me. It took me years to smarten up and get that way of thinking out of my head. Still know which way is north anywhere I go, though.”*

For John, revitalization was linked to building a social fabric in the neighbourhood:

*“A lot of people got to know each other and it helped to bring out the best in people, helping out those who were down and out.”*

David saw things in a similar way:

*“Gathering the people together with a common goal is always a contributor to the revitalization of a neighbourhood, whether for change for the better or a social event to get out and meet the people you live with.”*

Five of the volunteers reported that they measured revitalization by the positive impact that programs and activities had upon neighbourhood youth:

*“It got kids off the street, coming in to the program instead of going out and doing whatever else they could have been doing. It gives them something to do other than getting in trouble, playing video games, or watching TV.” (Mark)*

Louise had volunteered at a board level for a number of organizations. For her also, the impact of programs upon neighbourhood youth was critical:

*“The Odd Jobs program. That is such an excellent program, because it deals directly with kids, and I think that’s what you have to target these days, is children. Because in order to have good adults, you have to start them young. The Odd Jobs program gives them that, it gives them little jobs in the community that they can do, and they get paid for it, and they learn that you have to be there at a certain time, that you have to do a good job, and they learn all these skills when they’re young, they take them with them when they go into their teens and older.”*

## **Personal benefits of volunteering**

All of the volunteers we interviewed reported that they had gained personal benefits from their volunteer experience:

*“Oh yeah, just in growth of spirit itself; you make good friendships, you share ideas, there is just so many good things about it. It helps the community to become strong. You know if someone needs something, then you know you can help out this way or that way. I know that if I need something that someone will find something for me.”*  
(Julie)

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*“What we were talking about, I’ve learned a lot from just working with other people. All the time it’s not always what you’re volunteering for, it’s other stuff you learn as well pertaining to the volunteer work. You learn so much from people.”* (Sarah)

*“I met a lot of people, made a couple friends, and feels like a more safe neighbourhood when you know everybody.”* (Cameron)

*“Yes, I benefited through my social skills, my work environment skills, helping me find my goal in life and helping me to live a healthier lifestyle.”* (Darlene)

For several of the volunteers, the benefits were more tangible: For example, Dale helped out with the neighbourhood distribution of food from Winnipeg Harvest, an agency that distributes excess food to those who need it:

*“Helping out others is a good feeling. It was also nice to be given food to take home after we were finished.”*

Sylvia also did food-related volunteering:

*“Yes, for all the reasons we just talked about except I always have a good feeling after that it was time well spent. The small portion of food we were given after that’s always left over really helps. We’re a pretty low income family.”*

Other volunteers gained other benefits:

*“Yeah, I guess. I got a job out of it.”*  
(Patricia)

*“Yes, I learned new things – how to get things organized in a project, finding money. I also developed my people skills through talking/communication. I learned more humility. Seeing others less fortunate in their lives made me feel that I am not better than anyone else.”* (William)

*“Being a positive role model to my children, or trying to be.”* (Frank)

*“Yes, I benefited. I came out of my shell and got involved.”* (Lawrence)

*“Yeah, a big learning experience. I learned a lot about myself, a lot about kids, and people in general, and all the different cultures. You can’t just narrow it down to Aboriginal. There were lots of Filipino kids, Caucasian kids who came to this camp.”* (Mathew)

*“Yes, I got to know the teachers at the school better and the counselors. I got clearer on what the rules are, what you can do and what not to do. I got to meet other parents. I got to learn about the kids, what kind of kids they are.”* (Margaret)

*“Helping the seniors and the disabled gave me a good feeling about myself like I made a difference.”* (Tina)

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*“Yes, I enjoyed getting out there with others. I felt good about myself.” (Priscilla)*

*“Making new friends. It’s a good experience. It brought out a positive side in me. I like that.” (Ryan)*

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## Reflections on the research

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### General observations

The responses to our interview questions suggest strongly that volunteering has been a very positive force in the experience of those whom we interviewed. All study participants gained personal benefits, including increased self-esteem and confidence, new skills, feelings of being connected to others in the neighbourhood, and, in a few cases employment opportunities. For the most part, they believed that their volunteering made a positive impact on the neighbourhood as a whole and, in particular, influenced youth and broke down stereotypes about Aboriginal people. Although we expected these results at least to some extent, the overwhelming nature of the positive response was a surprise to the investigators. This suggests that volunteer activity is an important step on a path to continued engagement and benefit for Aboriginal people in their neighbourhoods.

Volunteers answered research questions about the impact of their volunteer activities on themselves and on West Broadway’s revitalization. However, from the interviews, we were not able to draw definitive conclusions about the overall impact of Aboriginal volunteers on the revitalization process. We were able to determine what motivated Aboriginal volunteers and to get some sense of the barriers, although this area was not deeply enough discussed in some cases.

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The question of how Aboriginal volunteers connect with the larger volunteer community is one that was only partially answered. There was a mix of responses to this question. A number merely answered that they volunteered alongside non-Aboriginal people without going into any detail. Separate interviews with non-Aboriginal volunteers would have been a useful addition to the research.

Aboriginal people bring a tradition of sharing and caring to their community life. Informal helping out is built into social interactions, particularly around large extended families. Some of those whom we interviewed explicitly knew of these traditions and stated them. Others did not, but still had the impetus to help out. Generally, Aboriginal volunteers have been able to incorporate these traditions and informal approaches to helping out into their neighbourhood volunteer activities.

### **The volunteer process**

Because most of our interviewees volunteered with smaller community-based organizations, the process of becoming and remaining a volunteer was fairly laid back and informal. We spoke with representatives of three organizations in the community about how volunteers are incorporated – Wolseley Family Place, Nine Circles Community Health Centre, and Misericordia Health Centre. For Wolseley Family Place, volunteering is very much matching needs with the volunteer’s skills and interests. There is no extensive formal training, and there is no organizational capacity for a dedicated volunteer coordinator. About half of Wolseley’s 50 volunteers are Aboriginal women from the neighbourhood. At Nine Circles Community Health Centre, a larger organization, there is a more formalized volunteer training and a volunteer coordinator. Aboriginals who

are interested in volunteering at Nine Circles have the opportunity to interact with an Aboriginal peer support staff person who has interest in traditional healing approaches. However, most of the Aboriginal volunteers go through the same training as non-Aboriginals and are quite comfortable with it. Although Nine Circles has many Aboriginal volunteers, most come from outside of West Broadway. Only ten or fewer are West Broadway residents. Misericordia Health Centre is a large hospital at the edge of West Broadway and serves a wider geographic base. While it has formalized training in a number of volunteer areas, it also tries to tailor the training to the skills and backgrounds of prospective volunteers. Misericordia doesn’t ask volunteers to identify their ethnic or cultural backgrounds, so it could not give exact numbers of Aboriginal volunteers. The majority come from rural or northern reserves or programs for week-long volunteer placements. Misericordia is actively looking at more effective ways to recruit volunteers from within the neighbourhood and inner city and is partnering with Wolseley and the local elementary school to explore this further.

### **Enhancing local communications about volunteering**

The volunteers we interviewed, both individually and in the focus group, suggested that many would-be volunteers didn’t know where to go or how to go about volunteering. We learned from the interviews that 15 of the 32 volunteers we interviewed got involved in volunteering through personal contact. For some, it was a family member or friend telling them about an opportunity. For others, staff people active with community organizations invited them to participate. This openness and invitation was an important factor. Other volunteers took the initiative to get involved, while for a small minority, the impetus was seeing

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a poster or article. Because many of the smaller organizations in West Broadway do not employ a volunteer coordinator, it would be a real asset to West Broadway to have a neighbourhood-based volunteer coordinator, preferably an Aboriginal person, who would focus on personal contact by knocking on doors and visiting groups, and who would have a good sense of the volunteer opportunities available in the neighbourhood. Funding would have to be found to support such a position.

Acknowledging and appreciating Aboriginal volunteer contributions to West Broadway would benefit the neighbourhood and the volunteer community. In fact, as a result of this research project, an appreciation feast for Aboriginal volunteers is being planned. Community organizations are being invited to participate and to invite their current and past Aboriginal volunteers. Profiles of some of the Aboriginal volunteers and an article on West Broadway's Aboriginal volunteers are being planned in conjunction with this event and will hopefully be inserted into the community newspaper in West Broadway. A regular feature on volunteer opportunities and profiles of volunteers in the community would be an excellent addition to the paper.

## Volunteering and life-long learning

When we asked volunteers to describe their volunteer experience using only three words, the words 'learning' or 'education' were the second most frequent responses after 'rewarding'. As a group, those we interviewed did not have extensive formal education: 13 out of 32 (40%) had some high school experience but no diploma, and only three had a university degree (see Tables 1 and 2, pages 7 and 8). Through volunteering, they have gained greater communication skills and other skills, and

more awareness of themselves. Only six of the 32 volunteers reported receiving formal volunteer training. They learned 'on the job', from other volunteers telling them about what was required, or, in some cases, the volunteer work required little training and could be picked up easily.

In the focus group, we asked about the desirability of more formal volunteer education and training. The responses were mixed. Some respondents said that imposing too much training might frighten away more casual volunteers. Perhaps making training available without forcing it on volunteers would be a helpful approach. Most of those who attended the focus group thought that providing opportunities for certification in areas such as food handling or first aid would be an incentive. We suggested that perhaps volunteers could meet weekly to learn more about traditions, community development, and group skills. This was received favourably, although with the caution that such an initiative would require structure and coordination. As a result of these discussions, the researchers developed a proposal that outlined such a group-learning experience and submitted it to Canadian Council for Learning.



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## Conclusion

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We believe that our interviews with 32 Aboriginal people living or working in West Broadway serve to break down the stereotype that Aboriginal people are not actively involved in their community or neighbourhoods. In fact, these 32 people were active volunteers. Most of them liked their volunteer activities. For the most part, they enjoyed meeting other people and felt a sense of satisfaction about volunteering. Some were committed to volunteering in the community as the result of their own difficult life experiences. Most volunteered out of a sense of civic duty in a way consistent with traditional Aboriginal beliefs in caring, sharing, and giving. We conclude that, contrary to what one might expect given social exclusion and high rates of unemployment and low rates of labour force participation, many Aboriginal people in West Broadway are very actively engaged in their neighbourhood through volunteering.

Of particular note may be what many of our participants pointed to as the benefits of their volunteering for children, particularly Aboriginal children. Many worked directly with Aboriginal children; many others talked about the importance to Aboriginal children seeing Aboriginal adults actively engaged in the community. Our participants saw themselves, through their volunteering, as role models for Aboriginal children.

Volunteers also benefited personally in many ways from their volunteer activities and were happy to acknowledge this. Many mentioned how much they had learned and how much they appreciated the opportunity to learn. Many spoke about the importance to them of new friendships made as the result of volunteering. Many said that volunteering

had built their self-confidence and their sense of self-esteem. We would argue that this is a particularly important benefit of volunteering for Aboriginal people, given the damage to their self-confidence and self-esteem caused by colonization. Many volunteers also mentioned that they had learned new skills.

The West Broadway neighbourhood also appears to have benefited considerably from the volunteer efforts of Aboriginal people. The report *Uncommon Sense: Promising Practices in Urban Aboriginal Policy-Making and Programming* (Hanselmann, 2002) summarizes the results of interviews with 109 representatives of government, Aboriginal organizations, and non-Aboriginal organizations and identifies “promising practices,” most notably, the importance of building social capital. Social capital is the creation of social support networks within communities that enable people to help each other in times of need and to share experiences, collaborate, and coordinate their community development actions: *“The importance of social capital to successful policy-making and programming came through again and again in the interviews...Efforts by public servants to build social capital are essential to successful relationships with the communities...In addition, many interviewees spoke of the importance of urban Aboriginal people needing to build social capital within their communities”* (Hanselmann, 2002, p. 2).

The connections that are made as a result of volunteering, the friendships that are cemented, and the activities and programs that involve youth all contribute to a richer store of social capital in West Broadway. Investing in activities that continue to build social capital is essential to the increased well being of urban Aboriginal people. In West Broadway, this means ensuring that effective programs have

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the funding they need and that neighbourhood organizations continue to build organizational capacity by recruiting volunteers and providing them with real opportunities. Interviewees and focus group participants told us a number of times of the importance of maintaining programs and activities for neighbourhood Aboriginal youth and families. Although volunteer effort is critical to the success of many of these activities, it is not sufficient. There is also a role for various levels of government in developing policy and programs that can continue to sustain personal growth and community healing in West Broadway and other neighbourhoods.

Many Aboriginal people in West Broadway are actively engaged in the neighbourhood, making the community a better place to live and improving their own quality of life. This should be supported, promoted, and celebrated. This will require, among other things, adequate funding for community-based organizations that involve Aboriginal volunteers. In addition, greater publicity of this volunteer effort would let other Aboriginal people know about the volunteer opportunities that are available and how they can get involved. Many of our research participants pointed out the importance of this. Publicizing the volunteer effort and achievement of Aboriginal people to the non-Aboriginal community would also be beneficial and would help to break down negative stereotypes.

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# NOTES

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