

Building Community in an Apartment Building

Bernard Baldwin

In order to provide affordable housing for seniors and those with special needs in recent years there has been an increase in the construction of apartment buildings. Municipalities, private developers and not-for-profit organizations have shared in this response to the growing needs of the elderly.

In each apartment building, there is a complex of individual living units of various sizes built to accommodate families and individuals. On each floor the architect/builder will sometimes include spaces for a lounge and common use. Unfortunately, in some instances, these spaces go unused, become depositories for unwanted household items and then may even be converted into additional living spaces. This common space on each floor is an architectural recognition of the basic need for people to come together, to socialize, to offer support to one another from time to time – in other words, to become and build a community among neighbours.

The writer was a member of the support staff in one such building under the direction of a not for profit board and the ownership of a Church Congregation.

The Community Cart – building community from the in-side out – was designed as an opportunity for a staff person to meet the residents of the building, talk about information from staff and management, discuss activities in the building and, most importantly, for the residents to meet and get to know their neighbours – other residents on the same floor.

Free beverages – tea, coffee and juice, compliments of management and the restaurant in the building – were offered to the residents. “Tim Bits” were also an enjoyable item on the cart. Occasionally, a resident would bring along some home baked cookies or slices from a baked bread loaf.

The Cart “travelled” through the building on a weekly basis, stopping at a different floor in succession every Tuesday morning from 10 to 11 A.M. Notices were placed near the elevator, in the Newsletter and under the title – activities – on the common bulletin board. On the Tuesday morning, chairs were brought to the particular floor by a young volunteer and were set up in a small circle in the common space available. As a reminder, a resident volunteer would go along the corridor of that floor ringing a “retired” school bell and acting as a “town crier” for the arrival of the cart.

The residents would assemble informally in the common space and the conversation would begin. The residents were asked to share their first name and how long they had been a resident. The family of one new resident who happened to be moving into the

building on a Tuesday – when the Cart was visiting that particular floor – were surprised and delighted with the unusually warm welcome the their family member received from the impromptu “welcoming committee” they met.

The conversation was not structured. There was no particular agenda, but, what was going on, or “needed fixing” in the building was often a starting point. Humorous stories, recent and upcoming events were shared. Frequently, the topic of having a personal contact for safety and well-being would come up. Residents would often share their personal choices based on their needs and circumstances. In this context a number of interesting stories were shared.

As an example, one subscription of a local newspaper was shared by five residents/neighbours on the same floor. Resident “A” would pass the newspaper along to resident “B”; “B” to “C” and so on. It was a simple and straight forward arrangement and was a way in which five neighbours kept in touch on a daily basis. Another story that a resident shared was how a few neighbours made themselves available for assistance, if need be, for a resident for whom English was a second language. The daughter of the resident was generally available by telephone to “interpret” her mother’s needs. It was explained to mother, a resident in the building, that if she should have any need that she could contact the neighbour across the hall or nearby. That neighbour would then contact/call her daughter. Then, mother and daughter on the telephone, and the neighbour thereafter, could discuss the issue and see what needed to be done.

In these informal, friendly and neighbourly discussions, many bits of helpful and supportive information were shared. The bottom line was that neighbours would get a chance to meet and speak with one another and in that way were more easily able to turn to one another in friendship or need by living in a community.