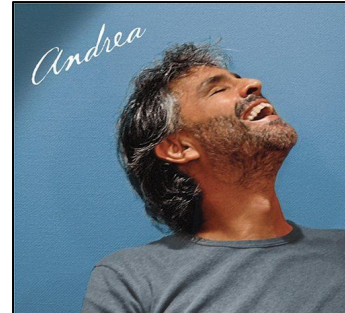


Recognizing Community Assets

This speech was made by Paul Born at B.C. Library Association Conference on Friday, April 21, 2006.

Music fans around the world are familiar with the fantastic voice of Italian tenor, Andrea Bocelli. His ability to interpret all forms of music, from ballads to operatic arias, has made him loved throughout the world. What some may not know is that this incredible musician is blind. Imagine if we were to hear Andrea Bocelli not for what he is, but for what he is not. By focusing on his blindness, we would miss out on hearing his well-known romantic tenor voice and the emotional empathy that he brings to all of his music. Andrea Bocelli has a voice that is a gift. I believe that when God created chocolate – rich, creamy, melt-in-your-mouth Belgium chocolate – she created a voice to match it and waited until just the right time to give it to the world. Andrea Bocelli is that gift.



A Look at Surrey, B.C.

Several years ago, I was asked to come and “take a look” at Surrey, B.C. As I am fond of doing, I asked a group of social agencies to take me on a tour through the community in the morning. For three hours they took me on a tour of the needle exchange clinic, the low-income housing units, the prostitutes’ corners and just about every other place that screamed that Surrey is suffering. Their message was clear.

The afternoon proved to be a different story. A group of civic leaders and business people led me on a “Surrey tour” through some great cultural institutions, the booming business core, beautiful parks and influential educational institutions. The afternoon offered a glimpse of a great community filled with great promise.

That evening, the two groups and I joined to talk about Surrey. While everyone agreed that Surrey had problems, they also agreed that, for the most part, Surrey was a very good place to live and they appreciated being part of the community. We then put the community’s challenges into perspective and weighed the challenges against the assets to realize that much more could be accomplished if we work together.

Imagine if we chose to concentrate on Andrea’s very real challenge - his blindness. We would expect the worst if the focus was shaped by what he does not have going for him. Yet, when we hear his voice - the richness and clarity, the passion and the joy – we forget his blindness and are transformed by the beauty of his voice.

Shining Light in the Dark

Communities are complex, often experiencing real and desperate challenges, but they are also places of richness and caring. When we see the assets of a community, we can put its challenges into perspective and harness the community’s strengths to make it even better.

In most communities across Canada, 80 to 90 percent of residents live in quality housing, are working and are part of functional families. Most of them donate and volunteer – but not all. It is a tremendous asset to recognize that all people are not doing well within a community. It is an even bigger asset that we desire to build a better community than we presently have.

Our assets are rooted in people, their dreams, their leadership, their hope. How we choose to see our communities is important. It shapes how we get involved, it shapes our understanding of what is possible, it shapes our dreams and the place our organization has in fulfilling those dreams.

Libraries are a tremendous community asset. They enjoy one of the highest per capita usage rates of nearly any activity in the community. In this age of ideas, libraries store not only dreams, but the key to unlocking those dreams. Libraries have the ability to shape people's thinking, often at critical times. Academic libraries play a role in shaping the brightest and most energetic youth, while supporting some of the best minds in the country. For the most part, libraries have skirted around the user fee dilemma, making them vibrant and sustainable yet still universally accessible. Very few institutions are a greater asset to communities than libraries.

Four Ideas for Transformation

What if libraries were to harness their tremendous assets to be a part of a movement that is transforming our communities? Through research, Tamarack has organized four ideas that are transformational in how we think about our communities and how we can effectively collaborate to build great communities.

1. ***See the Assets in the Community*** – The first idea is the importance of seeing the assets in our community as the lens by which we see the problems and to look for solutions to our problems within our assets. Andrea Bocelli is a fantastic symbol of this principle.
2. ***Bring the Community's Assets into Harmony*** – The second idea can also be illustrated within the field of music. The Orpheus Orchestra is a Grammy award-winning chamber orchestra that has been thrilling music lovers on four continents for 32 years. Orpheus is a self-governing organization that plays beautiful music without a conductor. Central to its distinctive personality is its unique practice of sharing and rotating leadership roles. Members of the orchestra say that they make great music, as opposed to good music, because they play without a conductor. As noted in the New York Times, "It is worth paying attention to almost anything these conductorless players put their collective hand, mind and heart to."

This orchestra feels they are achieving success because they rehearse without a conductor and collaboratively manage themselves, even though this may take 30 percent more time than that if they were led by a conductor. In addition, they make less than half the money of a traditional professional orchestra. But their energy takes their music from good to great because believe they create a harmony by working together, listening to each other and harnessing the very best from each other.

If you doubt that Canadian communities are good, can you think of a better human system in the world? Would you not agree that Canada has developed an admirable human system, one where people have the ability to care and be cared for, where there is opportunity to contribute and to build a better life?

Given that we are in the top 10 percent of human systems in the world, what can we do to improve? Doing things the same way that we have always done them will not give us the leverage that we desire. We have not made significant improvements to our human system in the past 20 years. In fact, some would even claim things are slipping. Consider homelessness, the factors contributing to global warming, clean drinking water. Like the attitude held by the Orpheus Orchestra, the challenge is to go from being good to being great.

Just as the Orpheus Orchestra works collaboratively to create their harmonic sound, we would suggest that an important path forward is through a unique form of collaboration. This is not the kind of collaboration that looks like simple coordination or partnership, but a profound new way of organizing. Collaboration may not necessarily mean operating like a conductorless orchestra, but it means coming together in ways that allow us to listen to each other, ensure that every talent is fully utilized and make certain that small ideas have the chance to make a big difference.

This kind of collaboration brings assets into harmony. When we see assets in our community and bring them together – to collaborate, to harness the best each has to offer and direct this toward the change we desire – we move our communities from good to great. By starting a conversation with government and voluntary sectors, businesses and those who are influenced by the issue, we can start to affect the desired future.

3. ***Bring a Compelling Vision that Requires the System to Engage*** – The third idea that illustrates the role of collaboration in transforming our communities also relates to music, and may be the most beautiful music that the human race has ever produced. It is the sound of a child. The cooing, gurgling sounds made by an infant. When a baby enters the system, we engage with the new life. The endearing image of a helpless baby calls out to each one of us to become involved. In the same way, when we see assets and bring them into harmony, we work together to identify a vision. Not just any vision – a compelling vision that captures the imagination and the heart, and appeals to the innate desire of a community.

Waterloo, Ontario is one of the most dynamic and successful communities in Canada. Known as Canada's Silicon Valley, Waterloo is home to two universities, one of the highest per capita incomes, the highest level of volunteerism and one of the highest charitable giving rates in the country.

Despite all of these assets, poverty has remained constant in Waterloo for nearly 20 years – ebbing and flowing with the economy, but seeing no real improvement. In 1996, I had the privilege of leading a dynamic group of volunteers to embark upon a millennium goal. Our vision was to create the lowest level of poverty in Canada and, to this, we committed to moving 2,000 families out of poverty by the year 2000.

The vision was called Opportunities 2000 and it was unique in several ways. It built on our community's pride and was embedded into our culture of caring. It used the possibility of the millennium to motivate people and it provided a real and tangible goal. The rally that ensued was nothing short of miraculous. What a great way to usher in the new millennium than to be known for having the lowest level of poverty in Canada!

Opportunities 2000 saw assets in our community and brought them into harmony. We agreed on a compelling vision that harnessed the hearts of many – a vision so compelling that people asked, what can I do now? Today, Waterloo Region has one of the lowest levels of poverty in Canada and during the period 1996 to 2000, the Region experienced the second most dramatic reduction in poverty in the country.

4. ***Learn and Change as the Vision Grows*** – The fourth idea that will help us to develop effective collaborations, moving our communities from good to great is based on a young boy named Michael. Everyone loved Michael when he was born and, as he grew, those around him learned how to best care for him. Everyone around Michael took on new roles when he arrived.

In the same way, the system changes to accommodate a vision. Without even really noticing, we are learning and changing. The real hope in collaboration is not for dramatic change. Rather, collaboration establishes a new set of relationships that, over time, become the norm. The vision is the compelling reason the result is much more profound. As we begin to see impacts on the lives of individuals, organizations and community, we begin to see the transcending impacts of collaboration.

It is for this reason that we embark on collaborative journeys. Through collaboration, we can learn from each other, and hear the issues from the perspectives by those affected, as well as from those with the power to affect them. We are better equipped to realize the vision when we work together to figure it out.

When assets (people) are in harmony and motivated by a vision, they naturally adapt to and accommodate the desired change. We have learnt that change always starts slowly and then accelerates. The goal is not to exercise power over others but to exercise the power of the collaborative to engage.

When I began working with a community in Saint John, we set up a widely successful program that ensured the full participation of children in sports and music. When I returned a year later to help develop more programs, I was surprised to find out that 300 children were on a waiting list for their program. Clearly, this was not consistent with our goal of full participation, so I appealed to their vision and asked, if everyone worked together, would we be able to solve this issue within 24 hours? After some discussion and by the end of the week, the waiting list was eliminated.

Although this may seem like a simple example, think about all of the things needed to bring about the change. In most communities, such a change could be seen as overwhelming, but this group worked together and knew what assets each person and sector had to contribute. They never questioned the vision. They worked together to realize it.

Achieving High Impact Collaboration

Libraries can achieve high impact collaboration with the following suggestions:

1. See the community's assets.
2. Bring the community's assets into harmony.
3. Build a compelling vision that requires the system to engage.
4. Learn and change together as the vision grows.

Libraries are the ideal place to convene ideas. In finding a path forward, it is critical for people who are part of the academic or broader community to engage in conversations with others about ideas, both challenging and inspiring.

Some libraries are beginning to hold "Philosopher Cafés", which I believe is very hopeful. Not only can libraries host a conversation, but libraries can also scan their bookshelves to see what books, both fiction and non-fiction, can continue to inform or inspire participants in the discussion. At Tamarack, we use a similar technique in our work called Conversation Cafés.

Such conversational cafés are important because there are very few neutral places to facilitate conversation. Libraries represent a natural place for ideas and can stimulate thought. Should City Council need to talk about affordable transportation, libraries can animate the issue through conversation and book displays. The only point of view that libraries have is that it is important for citizens and sectors to come together as a community to talk about issues that are important.

Libraries have a deep following, although most often it is an in-out relationship where readers come in for a book, information, a place to study or to check email, and then they're back out again. The question is, how can we help people meet and connect with each other while in libraries? This is not a new form of dating service but, rather, an opportunity for people to feel a sense of belonging and purpose. Libraries already have a large number of volunteers and this is always a great place to start. How do we engage our volunteers to become more active and allow them to take more leadership?

Many libraries engage donors and this is another tremendous way to build community and a sense of place. Donors provide a constituency that deeply cares about a library's relevance. This association gives donors a sense of ownership, and it animates what they desire for both the library and the community.

How do we engage our members and donors in community issues and help them to fully participate in society? Libraries can be ideal places to explore the importance of voting in municipal elections, or to review major issues in the municipality, such as homelessness, and health and hospitals.

The Importance of Relevance

To truly be a community asset, libraries need to want to be relevant, not just as a library, but as an important institution that contributes to the overall good of the community. To be relevant is to elevate the library's importance, and to be relevant libraries need to be present.

Being present means to really know what is going on in your community and to engage in it. This may mean asking staff and volunteers to liaise with different constituencies and to bring their rhythm into yours. A simple way to do this could be to form a leadership roundtable that represents different constituencies who meet monthly to set the learning agenda that the library may support. Each month could have a different focus, such as homelessness, health care and participation.

If we changed our perspective and effort by just 10 percent, the results could be phenomenal. Libraries have the power to be a constructive force in building great communities, with their volunteer base, resources, structure and organization. By collaborating with other volunteer and government sectors, donors, businesses and individuals throughout the community, libraries can develop a strong presence throughout the community that can grow and adapt to its changing needs. It is this sort of adaptable, dynamic presence that makes libraries important and relevant.

A Dream in the Works

I want to close by sharing with you a dream that I am working on, because I believe that change is possible if we consider these ideas for collaborators. Consider what a 10 percent change would look like to you.

Nearly four years ago, 14 cities gathered in a small town in Southwestern Ontario at a retreat centre run by a Jesuit priest. We met there for two reasons – it was cheap and the priests said they would pray for us at no extra charge! At the time, we thought we were a little bit crazy and felt we needed all the help we could get. Each community brought a leader from the business, voluntary and government sectors, as well as an influential individual living in poverty. Together, we shared a vision to reduce poverty in Canada to the lowest level in the world and we made the commitment to work together to create Vibrant Communities!

We started by forming a learning community. Even though we had some of the most capable people involved, we were unsure of the process to move forward. To bring our network into harmony we agreed upon five principles:

1. Change the measure – Focus on poverty reduction versus alleviation.
2. See the assets – Focus on building community assets as opposed to solving problems. Be optimistic.
3. Collaborate multisectorally – Bring our greatest assets, the people of our community, from four sectors into harmony.
4. Work comprehensively – Poverty has many faces. For instance, we would fail if we tackled housing and not jobs. See every program in the context of building community assets.
5. Understand that learning is change – Assume nothing and act as children trying to learn to walk. This opens up a world of possibilities, ideas and a sense of play.

Our goal was to help 5,000 families in four years, bring into harmony 250 voluntary sector organizations, 100 businesses, and all levels of government in every province and at least 100 low-income leaders to learn and act together. At the time, it all seemed very exciting, if not scary!

Today, the 14 cities are still together. Six have launched community-wide campaigns and are continuing to embark on more. Working together, we have managed to achieve the following:

- More than 16,200 families have been impacted.
- More than 60 donors have given us \$10.6 million dollars (with government funding as the minority, providing less than one third).
- 189 voluntary sector organizations, 120 business, 149 governments and more than 82 low-income leaders are active.
- Nearly 7,000 people join in learning with us every month through seminars, tele-learning and our website.

Have we solved poverty? No way! Will we soon? Forget it! But the energy is growing more than we can believe and every day the miracle of community is showing itself.

In Calgary, transit is now sold at 50 percent of cost to people with low-incomes, which equals a savings of \$440 per year for thousands of people. In Victoria, businesses are adjusting their Human Resources practices to improve the quality of life for low-income works. In Niagara, the CAW has agreed to donate labour to build more affordable housing units. And, Niagara's hotel industry teamed up with the city to create a job bus, allowing people who were formerly on welfare, to enjoy full time work. Saint Michel, one of the most disenfranchised neighbourhoods in Canada, has formed a partnership with Cirque du Soleil to craft a long-term community revitalization initiative. And we have only just begun...

It does not need to be the issue of poverty. It does not need to be Vibrant Communities. But it does need to be more! Libraries are far too important to Canada. Libraries can transform our communities and provide the foundation for change. Libraries are our hope.

Related Links:

- [About Paul Born](#)
- [Read Andrea Bocelli's inspiring story](#)
- [About the B.C. Library Association](#)
- [Orpheus Chamber Orchestra](#)
- [Vibrant Communities](#)
- [Community Asset Building](#)

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