UNDER THE WILLOWS

Executive Summary: Assessment of the Under the Willows Program

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SPRC
SOCIAL PLANNING & RESEARCH COUNCIL OF HAMILTON

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Under the Willows is an integrated arts, gardening and play program for children who have experienced violence and/or trauma in their lives. Under the Willows maintains the vision "where children grow". The mission, as defined by the program's advisory committee, is "to create a sustainable unique arts and garden program in a beautiful natural space where children grow in relationship to themselves and the world around them".

Operating since 2003, the Willows program is a collaborative effort between Lynwood Hall Child and Family Centre, the Catholic Children's Aid of Hamilton and Interval House, a local not for profit agency that supports women who have experienced abusive relationships. The program is run on Lynwood Hall's West mountain location, where a grove of mature willow trees provided obvious inspiration for the program's name.

Dr. Ruth Pickering, Advisory Committee member and founder of the Willows program observed that "Whatever we do in these child service systems --- reducing risk, improving behavior, keeping the children safe, modifying their behavior, medicating their symptoms ----- none of it is intentionally about bringing joy, stimulating creativity and imagination or having fun with them". While the program is therapeutic in nature, it incorporates a model of social therapy. Social therapy is not traditional in that participants work together to create an environment where everyone is able to perform and create new play while learning from their various interactions.

Evaluating the Willows Program

In January 2008, the Advisory Committee for the Under the Willows program partnered with the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton (SPRC) to conduct an assessment of their program. Funding for the study was provided by the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

The research design incorporated a number of qualitative methods to better understand the value and impact of the Under the Willows Program. Consultations with key stakeholder groups made up the bulk of the research design. Specifically, consultations were held with the Willows Advisory Committee, program staff and volunteers, participants in the program and their parents or guardian. Anecdotal evidence of positive behavioural outcomes are compared with outcomes from similar programs operating in Toronto and internationally.

Secondary research included a review of relevant literature and a document review. Literature relevant to the Willows program included reports on two similar programs; the Spiral Garden in Toronto and the Butterfly Garden in Sri Lanka. In addition to related programs, the literature review also considered a model of social therapy developed through the Eastside Institute in New York. The approach employed by staff and volunteers of the Under the Willows Program draws heavily on this model.

Incorporating input and feedback from a range of key stakeholders, the full report describes the evolution and operation of the Under the Willows Program, and identifies some of the impacts of the program on participants and the community.

The Story...

Building a story involves creating a living Willows culture of events and characters. As new features appear on the site, questions are raised. Sometimes characters appear on the scene with clues to the mysteries, while other time participants themselves define the events emerging around them.

The following vignette is a real example of how story is used to create mystery and fantasy, and to engage participants at levels beyond the day-to-day activities.

Harold to the Rescue...

Beset by air and fire dragons, an urgent call for assistance was sent out to Harold the Herald. Days later, battered and bewildered, Harold burst into Music Circle, missing an eye (which fortunately was found a few days later) but eager to help.

He had been traveling far and wide. In his travels he had come across some fire and air Dragons, weeping for their children. Harold was told that Under the willows was a traditional site for Laying the dragons' (invisible) eggs, but that since they lay their eggs once in a thousand years, and the site was now crowded with busy, happy children, some of the eggs were being crushed by accident or misadventure.

Once dragons lay their eggs, they are unable to protect them until they hatch, so they need helpers on the ground to protect them from danger. Harold and the children set out to find ways to communicate with the dragons and to find and protect the eggs. Messages to and from the dragons appeared under tables, beneath the flowers and in the dirt. Children fashioned "dragon eyes" in Clayworld to assist in "seeing" the eggs, potions were concocted to reveal their location, and beautiful markers made by the children, enabled them to collect and re-locate the eggs into the Dreaming Lodge, where treasures had been also collected for the dragon babies.

Fido, the Finger Worm, who had hitched a ride in Harold's armor, revealed that there were likely many baby finger worms around the garden, and that contact with humans helped them become more lively. Fido shared that the King Finger Worm was looking for a mate, and might be coming to Willows as he was lonely. Sure enough, one morning, we came on site to see the picnic table overturned and evidence of slime near the music circle which led to several Finger Worm burrows! Although King FW did not appear on site, he left a number of messages, the last one saying that he had been so impressed with the steel drum band at Willows, he had gone to the Caribbean to learn how to drum. Over the next week or so, many young finger worms were hatched and grew, and the final day we all shared in a Finger Worm Naming Ceremony with food and music and parading around in costumes - drawing another summer to a close.

Dr. Ruth Pickering
Under the Willows Newsletter,November 2005

The Program

The Under the Willows arts garden and play program takes place over four weeks during the month of July. This outdoor program is set under nine mature willow trees on the West mountain property of Lynwood Hall Child and Family Centre. The program has been operating for the past six years, and can accomodate approximately 25 children aged 6 to 14 who suffer the "invisible" disabilities arising from adverse life circumstances; including family violence, family breakdown, mental health issues, abuse and neglect.

Many of the children that attend the Under the Willows program also live in poverty, which adds further complication to their lives. These “invisible" disabilities translate into emotional and behavioural challenges, which interfere with the ability to attend and be successful in mainstream arts and recreational programs.

While offering a range of activities the program is essentially self directed, where children attend the activity stations that they feel most drawn to. They may stay as long as they wish, and are free to cycle between several stations throughout the course of the day. For those children who are not engaged at a station, 'weaver' artists provide support and re-direction to individual art, gardening or drama activities, or develop an alternative activity with the child.

In addition to activities designed to stimulate creativity, participants are engaged in fantasy and mystery through “story” that evolves through the course of the program. Characters arrive to deliver clues and messages about the story that emerges each summer with the help of the children’s input and direction. Guest artists also visit, facilitating art stations and projects that culminate in a closing ceremony at the end of the program.

Given the complex behaviours of participants and number of activities occurring simultaneously, the program requires a large number of staff and volunteers. The ratio of program participants to staff/volunteers is almost two to one.

Conclusions

The following conclusions were generated through a synthesis of findings that emerged through the research process:

1. Under the Willows achieved its goals of seeing all participants through to the completion of the program and to "do no harm".

2. Under the Willows has facilitated some of the same positive outcomes that have been observed through similar programs including the Spiral Garden and Cosmic Birdfeeder in Toronto and the Butterfly Garden in Sri Lanka. Specifically:

• The program increased communication and positive interactions with family and friends. Participants became more polite and better listeners.

• The program helped to improve the general disposition of participants. Specifically, the children were seen to be happier and more outgoing.

• Some of the participants developed the ability to look at things differently, and consider others points of view.

• Some of the participants developed an interest and attraction toward gardening and nature.

3. The program had the effect of reducing a number of antisocial behaviours. Specifically:

• There was a reduction in the negative behaviours of bullying and possessiveness among participants over the course of the program

4. The program addresses a gap in the local child mental health system. Children with this level of behavioural issues are generally not accepted into mainstream summer outdoor recreation programs, and no comparable alternatives exists within the local child mental health system.

5. While the program addresses a gap it does not meet a need. With the capacity to accept a maximum of 25 children each season, hundreds if not thousands of children facing similar life circumstances will not benefit from the Willows experience.

Similar Programs

Nationally and internationally there are only a handful of documented programs that operate from the same general philosophies as the Under the Willows program. The origin of this type of programming lies in the Spiral Garden, a program provided through the Bloorview MacMillan Children's Centre in Toronto, Ontario. The Spiral Garden was established in 1984 and has been operating for twenty five years. Originally designed for children with disabilities, the program is now open to all children and families. In its early days, the program served 12 to 15 participants. Twenty five years later about 250 children are engaged in the program annually.

As a result of the popularity of the Spiral Garden, the Cosmic Bird Feeder, a similar program operating on a second Bloorview MacMillan Centre site, was established in 1997. An interest in having this type of programming year round resulted in the creation of The Studio in 2006.

Another program that has its roots in the Spiral Garden is the Butterfly Garden in Batticaloa, Sir Lanka. The Butterfly Garden works with children who have been affected by the Sri Lankan North East Civil War. This program is a 'peace garden' for war-affected schoolchildren and uses imagination, creative play, community caring and reconciliation, and healing to help with rehabilitation.

These programs operate from a philosophy that encourages participants to create and promote meaningful relationships with the natural world in their own lives, as well as in the lives of others in their community. The three central aspects to these programs, Arts, Garden, and Play, are vehicles that bridge the imagination, nature, and social interaction.

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