

Roar for the Sorrow: June 26, 2007
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Address to UWYR 31st Annual General Meeting and Leadership Breakfast

There are two ways of getting home. One is to never leave; the second is to travel the entire world until you return to the same place – different, changed and grown, like you, but still home.

I am glad to be home. I am heartened by the warm embrace I have received over these first four months.

I recognize United Way of York Region has matured, strengthened - as I trust you recognize of me.

I have waited for this moment. Years that stretched and spilled and felt like forever. I have dreamed visions, scribbled sentences and expressions for this.

This is how our *'remarkable'* begins.

It begins with a priest, two ministers and a rabbi - seriously. 1887 in Denver. A neighbourhood struggling with poverty. The four agree on a united voice, actions and outcomes to address the social determinants impacting their neighbourhood: The genesis of United Way, the first united appeal on behalf of ten agencies - \$21,700K achievement.

It begins with me having a coffee with Sandra Silcox, April 2007 in King City. 31 years before, in that same room, she sat with her husband, father and another volunteer. The four agree on a united voice, actions and outcomes to address the social determinants impacting neighbourhoods across the nine municipalities of York Region. The genesis of United Way of York Region, the first appeal on behalf of thirteen agencies - \$186,000 was raised.

My friends, 120 years ago or thirty one years ago, we began with:

- People
- Neighbourhoods
- Impact

All to address the root causes - the social determinants of health: income and access to employment, food security, affordable housing, social inclusion and a social safety net.

So far, I think we would all agree we are at the same AGM.

This is where we may disagree – and after four months, I fully understand the risks inherent in my next statements. I am nothing if not honest and passionate.

There is no doubt, we are successful: we have a leveraged and professional volunteer base, a recognized brand that is the envy of the sector, year over year campaign growth, capable member agencies and partners, a committed staff core. And so, rightly, we are comfortable at home.

I posit for United Way of York Region to be remarkable – for us to truly mobilize the capacity of community, seize the opportunities afforded and avoid a future lexicon of “at risk neighbourhoods”, we must travel the world with humility and honesty and return - to a bold old home. 1887 Denver, 1976 King City.

Our bold old home must roar for the sorrow and strength of the people we serve.

Our bold old home must live in, listen to and host neighbourhood solutions.

Our bold old home must have the courage to set seemingly unachievable outcomes and measure our ability to address not only present needs but root causes.

This is the value add of United Way of York Region – our ability to tell the story of the people we serve, to be a change agent in neighbourhoods and to be able to clearly articulate our measured impact.

And this is where we must return.

Years ago, as Director of Community Resources, I visited Sandgate and sat with some of the women and children living there: professionals, entrepreneurs, working moms, some from 4 bedroom homes, manicured lawns, welcoming doors they opened six or seven times before they finally, boldly, escaped to safety.

One woman thanked United Way for funding and support and a roof and safe refuge for their kids. Another woman, likely in her mid thirties, sat quietly in the corner. She scribbled on a torn paper. As I was leaving, she passed it over: It read, “Please roar for the sorrow and strength that lies on the other side of silence.” A line from Canadian poet George Elliott.

I carried that torn note with me in my wallet.

Months later, a York Region woman, a mother of high school students, living in a neighbourhood close to me in Vaughan, who had connected and accessed Yellow Brick’s outreach programs, was killed at the hands of her husband.

And I thought about the woman who sat quietly at Sandgate. And of the over 300 women and children who, last year, were turned away from local shelters. And the countless more who find the strength to persevere, silent, at home, one try away from opening the door and leaving for good.

UWYR should roar for the sorrow and strength that lies on the other side of that silence.

A recent article in *Vaughan Today*, "Locals shocked to find homelessness problem has arrived here too." As I read it, I was struck by the balance of confusion and compassion.

The article said, "*Toronto's homelessness problem may be spreading north to Vaughan, based on recent sighting.*" It quoted a couple of York Region residents:

"At first I thought I was imagining things. I was shocked."

"There is such a low level awareness about it. It is not on people's radar. I am not sure how to deal with this, to be honest."

And we know many of our homeless and at risk are working full time but cannot afford housing. And we know, from a recent study, *Hidden from Sight*, that most of the region's homeless women have been living outside for over a year, walk 10 – 12 hours to transit for appointments or work. And we know that our shelters – Pathways, Leeder, Transitional – are full.

And UWYR should roar for the sorrow and strength that lies on the other side of that silence.

Monday June 18th, CMHA York Region hosted Margaret Trudeau, with Ian Proudfoot, our keynote speaker, as the emcee. Over 500 people at the Markham Hilton Suites – workers from our corporations, neighbours, parents. And a tiny voice from the back microphone – as I turn to look, 5 years later, the woman from Sandgate – strong, safe, surviving, raising her children.

I tossed my prepared notes of Thank You, and stumbled my way through some line from a Canadian poet on roars, sorrow, strength and silence.

My friends, our bold old home must give loud voice – measured, reasonable, deliberate – yes, but loud and unrelenting to the people we serve and the underlying root causes they face - daily.

This is especially difficult – and I would say critical – in a remarkable region, filled with remarkable neighbourhoods. Statistics Canada continues to indicate we York-ians, we are the healthy, the wealthy and the wise. We are overwhelmingly pleased and positive with our quality of life.

All of this provides unparalleled opportunity for United Way of York Region – to be present, grow with and in remarkable neighbourhoods instead of re-claiming distressed ones in 20 – 30 years.

Do not underestimate though; this represents a radical departure for United Way – a United Way of York Region present and visible in neighbourhoods from Mount Albert

and Maple, Almira and Beverley Acres, Pefferlaw and Snowball, Holland Landing and Bloomingdale.

But this is where, I contend, our bold old home must be - where people connect best, where change is visible and experienced – in my neighbourhood.

Across Canada, United Ways are re-engaging with neighbourhoods – in partnership with member agencies. Hosting town halls, identifying local challenges and local solutions, engaging and funding flexible and collaborative models – by issue, by neighbourhood, by community.

The results across the United Way movement are stunning: United Way's focused on root causes in neighbourhoods demonstrate higher trust and satisfaction among donors and volunteers. They also achieve, on average, consistently higher workplace and community giving.

It is important for us to be United Way of York Region – speaking to regional issues and priorities. It is as critical though - that our bold old home live in, listen to and host visible solutions and changes in municipalities across York Region.

And our difference must be measurable. My father, a man of few words (like me) says – and I am sure he stole the line - if Michelangelo did not aim high, he would have painted the floor of the Sistine Chapel.

UWYR has articulated clear and relevant priorities – identified by leaders, partners and agencies. We can outline clearly now, how much of our funding goes to each priority. Our next step is to paint the ceiling.

In 2000, United Way Dane County met with neighbourhood leaders and parents across Madison. At each meeting, parents said their children were falling behind in grade school testing – specifically, children from particular racial groups.

And at each meeting, United Way said – we are funding this agency and this program. All, of course, important supports to address the need, but none, according to residents, addressing the root causes in their neighbourhood. And none truly quantifiable.

So United Way gave voice to their stories at government tables, corporate board rooms, and to donors. United Way set up temporary but visible offices in neighbourhoods to listen to solutions.

And at a broad and inclusive table, United Way and its partners set the seemingly unachievable target to eliminate the racial achievement gap by 3rd grade. Funds were directed to this goal, agencies delivered after school clubs, early year supports, mentoring classes, parent teacher associations were refreshed, citizens got active. In 2004, all kids in Dane County were learning at the same level, with the same achievement results, regardless of race.

We know the work we do through our member agencies and volunteers and donors is important. We know that lives are improved and that the whole community benefits when social issues are addressed at the root cause.

It is no longer enough to know intuitively. We must show. Our bold old home must, focused on people in neighbourhoods, measure our impact. We must, over the upcoming years, set seemingly unachievable results and measure them.

My friends, we return to where we began.

Today's United Way of York Region is strong, thanks to each and every one of you, our donors, volunteers, agencies, partners, staff and my predecessors.

We are a United Way of York Region poised to be remarkable, I would suggest, *if* we return to a home built in Denver in 1887 or King City in 1976.

A home that is focused – always – and gives voice – clear and loud – to the sorrow and strength of the otherwise silent people it serves.

A home that is present and visible in MY neighbourhood – because that is where I live and experience change.

A home that sets outcomes on addressing root causes, measures them and demonstrates impact.

This is how our *'remarkable'* begins.

I am humbled to walk with you towards a bold old home.