

October 06, 2018

Open Letter: Journey To The Other Side of the Fence

Dear residents of Coventry Hills, Panorama Hills, Harvest Hills, Country Hills and Country Hills Village:

Have you ever wondered what happens on the other side of the fence? Robert lived in Coventry Hills for over 18 years: he had never walked to the outside of his fence until we knocked on his door ten months ago. To his knowledge, Panorama Hills and Harvest Hills were words strung together, and that they existed somewhere in Calgary. Okay, that's fair - whenever people move to a new home, they usually set up quite a routine: drive to work, scrounge for food, hibernate, and repeat (and perhaps shower). It's a routine that's hard to break and makes it hard for people to want to leave their own home. Robert was astounded to learn that his neighbours and four other communities were united and determined to do something about his dreaded eyesore of a fence.

On a wintry February night, we arrived at his doorstep. We didn't demand Robert to tear down his fence (it's not quite the Berlin Wall). We didn't beg him to put a bag over his fence's head. We asked him one simple question: "May we please paint your fence?" Kim, the creator and project lead for the Northern Hills Mural project explained to him the possibilities of uniting our five communities towards a common goal: to design a higher quality public realm than already exists, and to give people the opportunity to paint their personal stories on a blank canvass.

Before we had the chance to finish our pitch, he had already given us his permission. He knew in an instant, that this mural was more than an art project. For Robert, it was his chance to break free from his 18-year routine of staying at home on evenings and weekends, and to start engaging with his neighbours more regularly and meet new friends across community lines. Ecstatic about our mural project, he convinced his neighbours to let us paint their fence as well. He had only wished this opportunity came to him 18 years earlier.

Membership

We often get asked by our neighbours if they need to purchase an NHCA membership to engage with us or to volunteer. Our answer has always been an unequivocal no. When Kim approached us with the idea to paint a mural, she did not have membership. When Robert volunteered to become a mural painter, he did not have membership. Many residents who participated in our in-person engagement and online surveys, or volunteered to paint the fence, did not have membership. We never ask for membership from anyone prior to participating in our engagement or volunteer activities, because if we did, we would not be able to accomplish a quarter of the things we set out to do. We could not have painted an 850-metre mural along Coventry Hills Boulevard this summer, had it not been for our 650+ volunteers!

Community building is much bigger than an NHCA membership. It just requires you to pick up a paint brush.

Community engagement is much bigger than an NHCA membership. We don't create barriers for engagement, we go all out.

So how does the NHCA sustain itself if we don't require membership? The short answer is, that it isn't easy. We count on membership fees to help us keep the lights on in the office for you. We count on membership fees to sustain our services, programs and initiatives for the community. If all 60,000 residents in the Northern Hills signed up for membership, we would be in a much better position to expand our programs and services and continue to offer you cool initiatives like Canada's longest mural!

In the meantime, we'll do what we can to keep the lights on in the office, with what little resources we have.

Northern Hills Community Association

Serving Country Hills, Country Hills Village, Coventry Hills,
Harvest Hills and Panorama Hills

So, what?

So, what is the point of the NHCA if it's not about membership?

If we can convince just one person to venture beyond their fences and engage with their neighbours across community lines, we've done our job.

If we can inspire just one person to step up to make a positive impact to the community, tell us how we can collaborate.

If we can convince just one person, in their most difficult week, month, or year, to know that they don't have to feel alone and isolated, we'll keep the office lights turned on for as long as we can.

The Northern Hills has no shortage of torchbearers – these friends and families light our streets, parks and gathering places to ensure there's always something to do, that you feel safe, and that you have someone to turn to, so you don't have to feel alone. This past year, our torchbearers stepped up to the plate to do incredible things in the community. Here are just a few examples:

Harvest Hills Hub: Tired of seeing their children play in an aging and tiny tot lot, Victoria and Megan fundraised close to \$300,000 to design and revitalize a local park.

Break a Lego: Wanting to spread a little bit more of his energy outside his church, Brad partnered with us and Vivo to host an afternoon lego competition to challenge children and youth to something new to our community.

Arts and Crafts Committee: Knowing that there was something missing in our programming, Sally, Muzna, and Marlyn combined their passions for teaching and art to pilot a seniors watercolours program and multiple pop-up summer workshops. They are now working with us to offer arts and craft classes as a regular community programs for people of all ages.

Northern Hills Connect: Deciding that going into business for profit was not enough, business student Sanja collaborated with us and Momentum to create a social enterprise that leverages our community's assets and resources for a business that balances people, profit, and planet.

Block Watch: Wanting to take a precautionary approach to community safety in Coventry Hills, Tavis, Shane, Jesse and countless volunteers partnered with us and Calgary Police Service to put more eyes on the streets. Over the past two years, Block Watch expanded into 10 communities in Calgary, with over 5,000 members enrolled.

Creating Coventry: When Calgary Parks said they would replace several parks in Coventry Hills, Moraig McCabe partnered with the NHCA and Vivo to approach The City of Calgary with a more ambitious idea: to masterplan all fifteen parks in Coventry Hills. In partnership with the NHCA and Vivo, Moraig gathered feedback from community residents on how these parks could meet the needs of a diverse and growing population. Having received full support from The City of Calgary in May 2018, Moraig now collaborates with all three partners to devise strategies for implementing Creating Coventry.

We didn't start these initiatives and programs because we thought they were cool things to do. These initiatives started because you told us you needed it. Like any successful venture, we tested out the ideas, workshopped them with the community and delivered you the goods.

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One month ago, we saw more than a 200% increase in community participation at our monthly social gathering, many of whom expressed deep gratitude for what the NHCA does for the community. Robert was among one of the many who came out to express his exuberance for volunteering for future projects. And knowing he didn't have to purchase a membership to volunteer with us, he bought one anyways.

Get involved

There are many ways to get involved, be it venturing to the other side of the fence or picking up a paint brush. Here are two ways:

1. **Buy a membership¹:** Help us keep the lights on in the office for you. For just \$25 dollars, you can purchase a single membership, and for \$30, you can sign up your whole family!
2. **Donate your time:** Do you have a community aspiration that you want to come to life? Do you want to shape the future of the Northern Hills? If so, let's start a conversation.

We are always looking for fresh new faces to join the NHCA Board of Directors. In fact, this September, we elected six new directors to the NHCA Board. Among the six elected is a nineteen-year-old college student, the youngest in NHCA history!

We would like to thank all our community of volunteers for helping us make the Northern Hills an even better place!

As volunteers, we put our heart and soul into the community. We won't get it perfect all the time. We don't ask to be thanked. We also don't ask to be judged.

So, let us be clear: we operate in an environment of mutual respect and safety and will not tolerate any form of abuse to our volunteers and staff. If you can operate within these parameters, your ability to participate with us is limitless. We invite you to journey to the other side of the fence and get involved!

We'll supply the paint brush. Leave the spray paint at home.

Yours Sincerely,

Northern Hills Community Association Executive Team

Leah Argao, President

Simon Cheng, Secretary

David Hartwick, 1st Vice President

Jessie Leighton, 2nd Vice President

¹ Residents in Panorama Hills and Harvest Hills pay into an annual Homeowner's Association fee; this is not an NHCA Membership. The NHCA encompasses all five Northern Hills communities consisting of Coventry Hills, Panorama Hills, Harvest Hills, Country Hills and Country Hills Village.