



Crisis or continuity?

**Insights and Opportunities to
Reinvigorate Volunteering**

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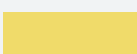
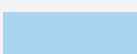






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Executive Summary

This report, a collaborative effort between InWithForward and Volunteer Alberta, offers a different take on the current state of volunteering in Alberta, from the perspective of everyday Albertans. We do so in service of re-imagining the social infrastructure and culture norms that make it easier for people to live out their values, in a society.

Our research leads us to challenge the notion of a simple “crisis” of volunteerism; rather our exploration of the history of voluntarism affirmed that cooperation and collaboration are constants, even where format, relational dynamics, and institutions shift and change. We dug into the current, evolving nature of contribution using qualitative research methods, especially ethnographic interviews with individuals across Edmonton, Lethbridge, and Fairview.

This report offers some paradigmatic shifts in how we frame and understand the value of volunteering. Chiefly, it asks what it would mean to move away from idealizing volunteering as something those with means do, altruistically, for the benefit of those without means. Instead, we might think of contribution behaviours as a vehicle for meeting some of our most core human needs for security, purpose, esteem, and connection. From this perspective, we would treat volunteerism as a public health benefit, for volunteers.

The research identifies five actionable insights, such as the tension that one segment of potential volunteers feels between self-care and community care and the importance of relationships in prompting volunteerism.

Underpinned by design methodology, the report is forward-looking and offers five opportunity areas, each with several more specific design ideas that could be starting points for experimentation and action learning, also called prototyping. These Opportunity Areas explore how we might revitalize volunteering by focusing on relational learning, innovative recruitment, public health partnerships, strengthening initial engagement, and reconsidering risk assessment.

Ultimately, this report is intended as a launchpad for further exploration and prototyping to reimagine how volunteerism can meet both societal needs and individuals’ desires for connection and purpose.

If you are excited by the work, get in touch!

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Introduction

Crisis.

/ˈkrīses/

A time of intense difficulty, trouble, danger.

Is volunteerism in crisis?

The numbers paint a dark picture:

55%

of charities have fewer volunteers than before the Covid 19 pandemic

67%

of non-profits report a significant gap between volunteers and rising demand for services

4 in 10

organizations are highly concerned about volunteer burnout & attracting volunteers¹

Equally dreary are the stories we tell to explain the numbers:

- People have less time & capacity to give
- Generations Y & Z are more self-centred and less altruistic
- Our social fabric is fraying
- We are experiencing a civic malaise

Twenty five years ago, social scientist Robert Putnam charted the decline of reciprocity and trustworthiness in American society, arguing: *“Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.”*

But, rather than adopt a crisis narrative, he took the long view: *“Debates about the waxing and waning of ‘community’ have been endemic for at least two centuries. Declensionist narratives - postmodernist jargon for tales of decline and fall — have a long pedigree in our letter. We seem perennially tempted to contrast our tawdry todays with past golden ages. We apparently share this nostalgic predilection with the rest of humanity.”*²

In other words, it’s human nature to think the past is better than the present. With that in mind, let’s take a peak into the long course of human history.

¹ Statistics Canada. Table 33-10-0617-01 Volunteers and challenges businesses face in volunteer recruitment and retention, fourth quarter of 2022
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25318/3310061701-eng>

² Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 24–27.

A look way back, at the earliest anthropological record, suggests self-interest and altruism have always coexisted.³

Informal helping predates human evolution and is one explanatory factor for our continued social adaptation and survival. Only, informal helping isn't simply a kind and selfless act: it cultivates obligation and underwrites much resource exchange.

What has changed over time is how and who we help. Formal volunteering is a historically recent development.

In pre-industrial societies, contribution unfolded within social networks, often between people of similar means.

~1800 - 100BCE

Social and economic realities were intertwined. Some of the earliest organizing structures for giving were associations and artisan groups. In China, the Tsu, Hui, and She groups formed 2100+ years ago, providing care for the elderly, education, burials, crop maintenance, and more. In Mesopotamia, during the Babylonian and Assyrian empires, trade groups emerged amongst extended families to address shared social needs.



~1800-
600BCE

~100BCE

18th-19th century

The shift from farms to factories, rural to urban environments, and extended to nuclear families amplified the risk of unemployment, sickness, and injury and disrupted reciprocal flows of care. Contribution increasingly became an activity between people of unequal means; an act of charity, rather than mutuality. By the mid-1800s, large charitable organizations sprung up across North America (think: YMCA, Red Cross, and Salvation Army) to respond to economic externalities and to needs no longer met by kinship care. These large charitable organizations drew on the success of volunteer mobilization efforts during the American Civil War, positioning volunteering as an act of purpose and patriotism.



1700s

1800s

Early to mid 1900s

War time narratives and command-and-control structures proved effective for recruiting and deploying volunteers. Volunteering was no longer just a familial and religious obligation, but a civic duty and unpaid job -- largely for women. Over time, as women entered the paid labour force, volunteering rates declined. Paid and unpaid work competed for attention at the same time that paid and unpaid work increasingly resembled each other. Framed as a job, formal volunteering embraced the logic of scientific management, centering professionalization, hierarchical oversight, and risk mitigation. Today, to volunteer, it is standard practice to apply to a posting, submit references, undergo a police check, attend training, and subscribe to a standard set of health and safety protocols.⁴



1900s

³ Staker, Ivy, in Andy Alvarez, "(Re)Engaged: A Historical Perspective on Volunteerism - Volunteer Alberta," Volunteer Alberta, October 15, 2024, <https://volunteeralberta.ab.ca/2024/10/15/a-historical-perspective-on-volunteerism/>.

⁴ United Nations Volunteers. (1999). Expert working group meeting on volunteering and social development, New York, November 29–30

Most modern definitions of volunteering describe it as a voluntary activity undertaken without financial reward and with benefits accruing to someone other than the volunteer.

Current provincial and federal legislation treats volunteers as unpaid employees. In this frame, a comparison between volunteers and employees is made. For example, volunteers need protection from workplace hazards, just like employees, and volunteers ought to be managed, like employees. Similarly, volunteers ought to have fixed roles and responsibilities, like employees. The frame is focused on the risks associated with volunteering, like any other kind of work, perhaps more so than the rewards of volunteering, such as greater freedom, flexibility, or expression and creativity in one's scope of action. Baked into the volunteer role as unpaid worker is a presumed binary: volunteers are helpers, not beneficiaries, a relatively recent idea.

The COVID 19 pandemic blurred the line between helpers and beneficiaries, and highlighted our shared vulnerabilities and interdependencies.

How current Alberta legislation positions volunteers

- **Alberta's Occupational Health and Safety Act** defines a "worker" as a person engaged in an occupation, including a person who performs or supplies services for no monetary compensation for an organization or employer. This act sets workplace safety standards, and requires organizations to take all 'reasonable measures' to protect worker health and safety.
- **Alberta's Freedom to Care Act** protects individuals volunteering for a non-profit organization or the Crown from personal liability when acting in good faith and within the scope of their responsibilities. Organizations must set out a clear scope of work for volunteers, train and 'manage' them accordingly.
- **Alberta's Society Act** sets out that directors of non-profit charities are volunteers, and recommends, but does not mandate, insurance to protect against liability.

So many of us cheered for essential workers, checked-in with neighbours, and found big and small ways to both give and receive care. Organizations suspended their usual rules to reduce barriers to collective action, and invite new/old forms of contribution. In the midst of head-spinning global upheaval, we saw what can happen when there is a frame shift: when we see volunteering not simply as work, but as a source of connection and mutual care.

Five years later, we are experiencing a precipitous drop in both formal and informal volunteering. Dominant frames have snapped back into place.

Policies and risk mitigation protocols have returned, with force. We continue to grapple with the fallout from the pandemic --including high social anxiety, a knowing sense of disconnection, and growing institutional mistrust, fueled in part by a few high-profile cases of harm at the hands of volunteers (think: Boy Scouts).⁵

While we could interpret these trends as a worrisome sign of social decline, we could also look beneath the statistics to what so many of us are craving: **a sense of security, purpose, esteem, and connection.** We want to know we matter, we belong, we are not alone, and we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Far from a historical aberration, these are our most enduring human needs.



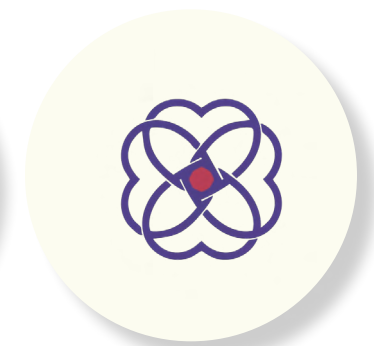
Security



Purpose



Esteem



Connection

⁵ David Fraser, "Former Scouts Canada Employee Sentenced to 4 Years for Sex Crimes," CBC, August 22, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/former-scouts-canada-employee-sentenced-to-4-years-for-sex-crimes-1.6943621>.

At the same time, we hear that relationships are risky; that taking on the role of volunteer soccer coach or youth mentor, for instance, can open the door to tricky situations and reputational danger. We are trained that the antidote is to be more professional, to keep firm boundaries, and to refrain from doing or saying anything that might be misconstrued or inadvertently cause harm. Rather than see volunteering as a site for learning about ourselves through relationships, volunteering can become another place we can't really be ourselves.

Keelae

Small Business

Michelle

Small Business

Keelae thought it was time to **redefine** the way she did business.

Michelle thought it was time to **redefine** the way she did business.

Keelae never tried to go home because, being independent is in her own words, "the way she lives." When she carries out her vast domestic enterprise, the cleaning, her restaurant sales, jewelry, "it's all about me" when she administers and she has to work with her customers, who have been verbally and physically abusive towards her. "One day I said, 'Oh, you don't know who you're getting along, this is the real' Keelae said, but her husband is not held responsible for her behavior and Keelae does the caregiving. Keelae has inspired women like this. It's her husband's job. "I would like to say I was inspired to be the person that they love...every woman should try to

understand their client" rather than pander them. Keelae has served in three boards of disability assisting organizations. She has volunteered with SAS, the Self Advocacy Resource for disabled. She goes in to help the staff of spending organizations that allowed her to address domestic violence directly, in addition to helping them staff the day care home that is "Open up a room. I was considered a success story." Recently, her husband of 15 years, "I was open to it, I was considered a success story." Recently, her husband of 15 years, "I was open to it, I was considered a success story." Recently, her husband of 15 years, "I was open to it, I was considered a success story."

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The question, then, is: how could volunteering better enable people to meet their human needs for belonging, esteem, meaning, and purpose? Rather than expect people to identify what is missing in their life and seek out volunteering, what if we proactively scouted people for learning & growth opportunities that went deeper than employment skills and work experience? And, rather than expect individual, and often underresourced, non-profits to set-up these learning & growth opportunities on their own, what if we invested in shared infrastructure and strengthened the capacity of

volunteer centres and service hubs to build community readiness to volunteer?

This report digs beneath many of the assumed logics and dominant frames of volunteering, opening-up opportunity space to reposition and reanimate volunteering. The aim is to surface insights, provoke thought, and, hopefully, generate momentum to take early ideas introduced here, co-design how they could work in practice, and test them in real life. Through prototyping, we can model and rehearse a future where contribution meets our deepest desires for connection and growth.



Who We Are

We are **InWithForward** and **Volunteer Alberta**. We are coming together to re-imagine volunteerism, and explore fresh ways to unlock contribution and care in communities.



InWithForward

InWithForward (IWF) is a social design organization whose mission is to co-create new models of care & connection and cultivate the conditions for human flourishing. We spend time listening to people on the margins; re-framing social problems; generating, testing and spreading new kinds of practices and policies.

"So many of our social policies & systems were designed in a different era for a different purpose: to keep people safe and reduce risk. Our work starts with a different purpose: what if our policies & systems were designed to strengthen people's sense of purpose, possibility, and connection?"

-Dr. Sarah Schulman, Lead Partner, InWithForward



Volunteer Alberta

Volunteer Alberta is a diverse and inclusive member association whose mission is to nourish wellbeing and healthy communities of belonging by cultivating conditions for volunteerism and civic engagement. VA was initially created in specific support of volunteer centres. VA now exists to both support and lead the way, more broadly, for volunteer- engaging organizations and the volunteer sector as a whole in Alberta.

"We need to walk the balance of helping organizations respond to the real-life challenges they are facing in the here and now, but also opening up space for something different to emerge."

-Miki Talbot-Stricker, Executive Director of Volunteer Alberta

Project Purpose

What we know

Declining rates of volunteerism are undermining the voluntary sector's capacity to deliver social support at a time of increasing need.

What we don't know

- How do everyday Albertans conceptualize volunteering?
- What pain points do they experience?
- While the current policy frame sees volunteers as a vital, unpaid workforce, what might be alternative ways to frame and structure volunteering?

We're setting out to:

A

Explore current and historical ways of 'contributing to society,' including how people make sense of words like volunteering, helping out, mutual aid, civic engagement, altruism, participation, etc.

B

Examine the interplay and/or juxtaposition between formal volunteerism structures and people's values, needs, and desires.

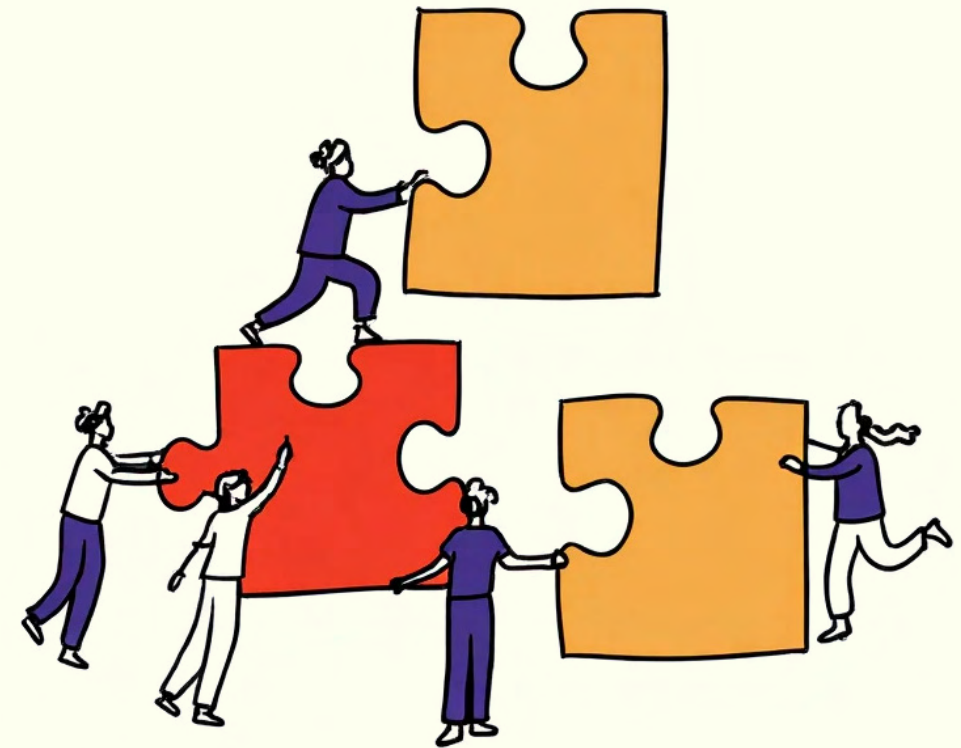
C

Identify what motivates people to contribute, and find the opportunities to co-create roles & structures that move people closer to the outcomes that matter to them.

This project seeks to both understand volunteering as it is now, and generate ideas for volunteering as it could be.

Our Goal

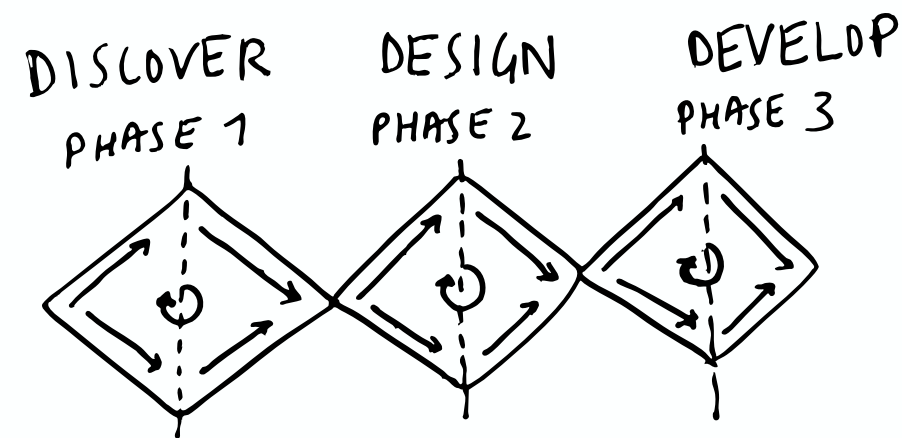
Our goal isn't only to surface fresh insights, but to use those insights to build a case for experimenting with new types of roles, incentives, organizing structures, processes, language, and narratives around volunteering.



Project Methodology

This project is drawing on InWithForward's three-phase 'Grounded Change' process to (1) gather insights (2) co-design opportunity areas, and (3) test alternative practices & policies. This report summarizes the first phase of research, and previews what the next phases could look like.

The 'Gathering Insights' phase aims to get underneath what people say to understand the tensions between people's narratives, actions, and desires. This phase includes identifying key questions and curiosities, developing an original set of tools to prompt introspection & imagination, and listening to people with lived experiences. Instead of a representative sample, design research uses extreme sampling, seeking out especially diverse perspectives. Because the aim is to open-up exploratory space, rather than to validate a pre-existing set of hypotheses, we go deep rather than wide with our samples.



During the second and third phases of design research, new ideas are developed, tested, and iterated with a wider audience. Each phase goes through a cycle of divergence - where we explore a range of problem framings and possible solutions -- and a cycle of convergence - where we synthesize learnings and name patterns. Cycles of divergent and convergent thinking are reflected in the angles of the three diamonds.

Our 'Grounded Change' approach offers an alternative sequence to policy and program development. A typical policymaking approach starts with experts defining the problem, setting the parameters for new program design, and consulting with people to confirm core assumptions and inform implementation. Consultation typically happens after issues have already been framed.

We flip the order: starting with people potentially not well served by existing policies and programs to reframe problems & brainstorm alternative solutions, testing those solutions at a small scale, and distilling key principles for policy.



Differences between traditional consultation and a Grounded Change approach:

	Traditional Consultation	Grounded Change approach
Who	Caters to people who are already connected with institutions, or people with the time, resources and capacity to participate in surveys, focus groups, and consultations.	Actively seeks out “unusual suspects:” people who are unlikely to show up to a scheduled event, fill out a survey, and who may be disconnected from services.
What	Uses surveys and focus groups to understand an issue, often with preset questions and answer choices.	Uses critical ethnography and open-ended prompts to explore people’s behaviours, priorities, narratives, aspirations, and desires.
When	Happens at a scheduled time; often one-off engagement.	Unfolds flexibly based around people’s schedules and needs; often over multiple interactions.
Where	Takes place in meeting rooms, offices, and formal spaces.	Takes place in the person’s context: where they live, play, and work.
Why	Designed to gather data on an issue, often to validate an existing analysis of the problem and/or solution.	Designed to help reframe problems based on the perspectives of people on the ground, and to open up generative space for new ideas.
How	Uses existing services to recruit or relies on passive advertisements; focus on one-way collection of information.	Starts with community pop-ups and activations; focus on relationship building and reciprocity; practice of information return.

	Traditional Consultation	Grounded Change approach
Roots	Positivist worldview: a belief that there is one knowable truth to be discovered	Constructivist and participatory worldview: a belief that there are simultaneous truths constructed by human experience and engagement
Risks	-De-contextual information -Confirmation bias -Loss of agency over data -Misinterpretation -Knowledge extraction -Raising expectations	-Discomfort -Re-traumatization -Misinterpretation -Raising expectations
Addressing Risks	-Waivers and consent forms that use legalese and small print to protect research organizations -Structured & repeatable process -Depersonalized data	-Consent process in plain language for informed choice -Participant-led conversation -Check-ins and debriefs -Returning people’s story -Choice to anonymize

Behind our ‘Grounded Change’ approach is a philosophy called **critical humanism**, and a set of methods from **social sciences, design, and community outreach**.

- **Critical humanism** emphasizes agency, autonomy, connection, and care. In research this means valuing the relationship with participants and how the inquiry relates to their needs, interests, and aspirations. Rather than attempting to extract data, research is a shared journey to open-up dialogue, challenge dominant ways of thinking, and spark creativity.”
 - **Social science methods** help us understand what makes humans tick, and what influences development and change. They attune us to context: the ways in which our behaviours are shaped by relationships to self, family, and the wider world.
- **Design research methods** help us to make visible underlying needs and desires, and give concrete form to abstract thoughts and ideas.
 - **Community outreach methods** get us out and about, showing up at public spaces and anywhere where we might find people who may not typically engage in research, or in the case of this project, formal volunteering. Rather than expect people to come to us, we go to them.

Methods

How has InWithForward's 'Grounded Change' approach played out on-the-ground? Over six months, a mixed team of InWithForward and Volunteer Alberta staff spent time in three communities across Alberta testing key messages, developing design research tools, collecting and returning stories, making sense of the data, and learning from big and small voluntary sector organizations. Here, we share what this has looked like, and what we've learned along the way.



Community selection

We chose three sites for fieldwork based on population size, demographics, industry make-up, and geography. Sites included Edmonton, Fairview, and Lethbridge.

Fairview

Population:
2,800 (declining)

Key Industries
Agriculture, oil and gas, commercial, manufacturing, transportation

Other Notes

- 17 churches,
- Home of the Satellite Campus of Northwestern Polytechnique

Lethbridge

Population:
107,000 (growing)

Key Industries
Commerce, finance, transportation, healthcare, education, retail, agriculture

Other Notes

- 20 churches, 4 mosques, 1 gurudwara, 1 buddhist temple

Edmonton

Population:
1,100,000 (growing)

Key Industries
Oil & gas, technology sector, education & research, financial, retail

Other Notes

- Capital of Alberta
- Second largest city in Alberta

Testing recruitment messages

We tested three themes, with provocative language and visuals designed to pique curiosity and conversation.

Our recruitment consists of short interactions with lots of people, allowing us to learn about different perspectives, and later follow up with a diverse shortlist. We wanted to offer up a good dose of surprise & delight, cut through the noise of the everyday, and foster a moment of connection.

THEME #1

Is Volunteering Dead?

What we tried

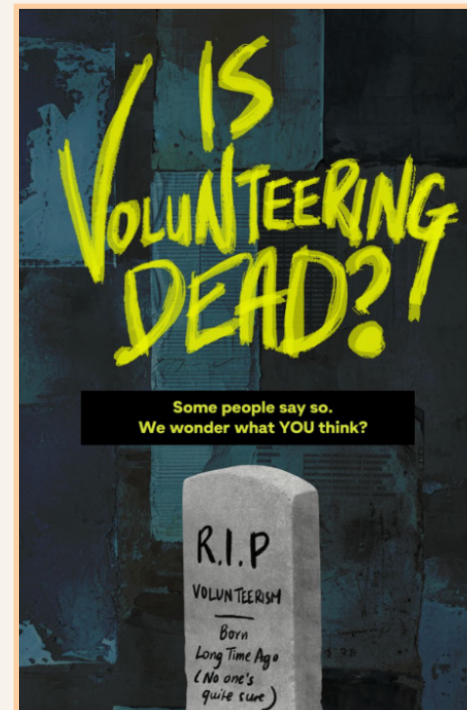
Extrapolating from current statistics which state formal volunteerism is on the decline across Alberta, we used a graveyard-theme to wonder aloud and invite people into conversation on the state of volunteering in their own lives. Our visuals were dramatic and provocative.

Our script

We are interested in how folks in your community feel about giving, helping, contributing, and participating. Do you pitch in to help out? Volunteer? Offer things for free on Facebook? None of the above? We've heard there's a crisis in volunteering, but we're not sure we buy it. How do you give back? Let's chat.

Our hunch

People might have a strong reaction to our materials, one way or another, and join the conversation. Also, by leading with statistics that volunteering is on the decline more generally, we hoped people, especially younger-skewing, would be more open to discussing what that looks like in their own lives, with honesty.



What happened?

These materials did get conversation started and people argued the point both ways! We used this approach most in Edmonton while in busy urban spaces but we sensed it might be a bit over the top as an opener in some other contexts.

THEME #2

Is Volunteering just Nostalgia?



What we tried

We tested a gentler nostalgia theme with sepia photoalbum visuals. Our activations featured nostalgic slinkies, marbles, and rice Krispies.

Our script

We asked: has volunteerism changed since previous generations? Were your parents or grandparents contributors to community? Does volunteerism need to look different for future generations?

Our hunch

We thought this provocation could start some interesting intergenerational conversations, and we hoped it would help us get to how people feel about some of the values behind volunteerism, even if they weren't volunteering.

What happened?

The slinkies, marbles, and rice krispies were great for attracting families with kids and created a community feeling quite effortlessly. People responding expressed a lot of interest in volunteerism, and desire to be part of it. Several hoped we could connect them to volunteer roles. However, when we followed up with all those people to invite them to join us on a visit to the volunteer centre, they demurred, either unavailable, or preferring a visit with us over a meal.

THEME
#3

Fast Forward

**What we tried**

Introducing a fun, futuristic vibe and inviting people to imagine how community contribution might evolve in future generations, with neon colours and graphic novel imagery.

Our script

Humans have always found ways to contribute to community, but that's looked different across time and place. Right now, stats tell us volunteerism is on the decline, but we don't know why, or what people are doing instead. Maybe we're just ready for a change. What do you think it might look like for the next generation? How would you like to be contributing?

Our hunch

People may not have considered that community contribution is a constant or that it can take quite different forms in different societies. A lot of people feel pressure to say they contribute to community, or that they want to. Maybe a discussion about how things could work differently in the future would liberate people to share their experience.

What happened

We didn't have the opportunity to use this recruitment approach as much as the other two. Few folks had considered the possibility that community contribution could look dramatically different and most had a hard time imagining alternatives, without help.

▶ Trying out settings

Edmonton

We tried a range of interactions and touchpoints at pop-up activations in Edmonton at **Churchill Square**, a **Pride Night Market**, and a **Community League's Big Bin event**. For example, to gain a sense of what we might learn from different individuals, we made a Bingo Card to gain a quick snapshot of their contribution experiences & perceptions.



Slinkies and sidewalk chalk were great for attracting families. Narrative cards invited people to share what they do or don't believe about contribution, and react to language.

Fairview

In Fairview, we tried the same activation strategy, but in a town of 2800, there weren't as many places with large gatherings, other than the Northern Redneck Riders finals. We checked out the bowling alley, rec centre, library, mall, but it was mostly quiet with not a lot of traffic. Instead, we pivoted and started a different approach: visiting churches, garage sales, businesses, posting a facebook ad, travelling by word of mouth, and getting recommendations from the locals, through 1:1 interactions.



At the Catholic church, we met people who were brand new to town, and often to Canada, too. Many were foreign temporary workers. People dispersed quickly after the mass. Conversations with other foreign temporary workers revealed that some thought it would not be legal for them to volunteer in Canada, though they might feel less isolated.

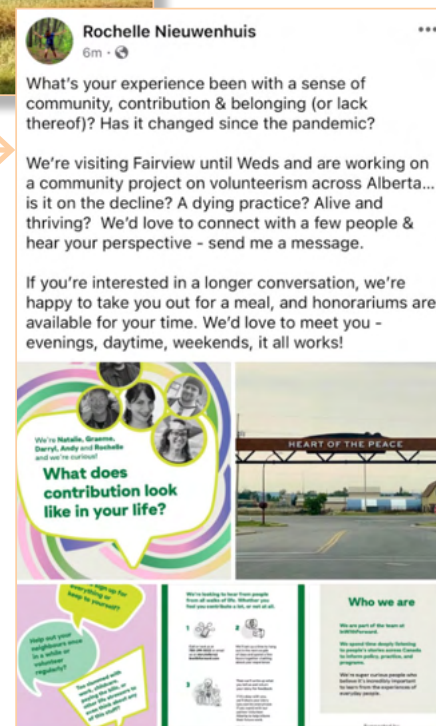


At a gymkana event, competitors play our bingo game. The event is entirely volunteer run, mostly by parents.



The view from our hotel window.

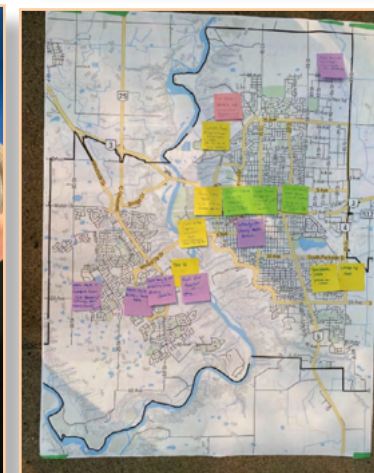
We used a Facebook post to connect with more people, whom we might not have encountered out in community.



Lethbridge

In Lethbridge, we visited local convenience stores, set up a booth at Whoop Up days, visited parks, a baseball game, a laundromat, churches, temples and gurudwaras. We also took a targeted approach, messaging community groups on facebook and seeing who might be interested in connecting, including reaching out to people who were or had been involved in the Youth At the Table initiative, Sage Clan patrol, disability advocacy, and recovery programs.

Engaging folks on their way to Whoop Up Days with our bingo dabbers and evocative signage.



Meeting with the Volunteer Lethbridge team to share our work, and create a map of possible recruitment locations across the city.

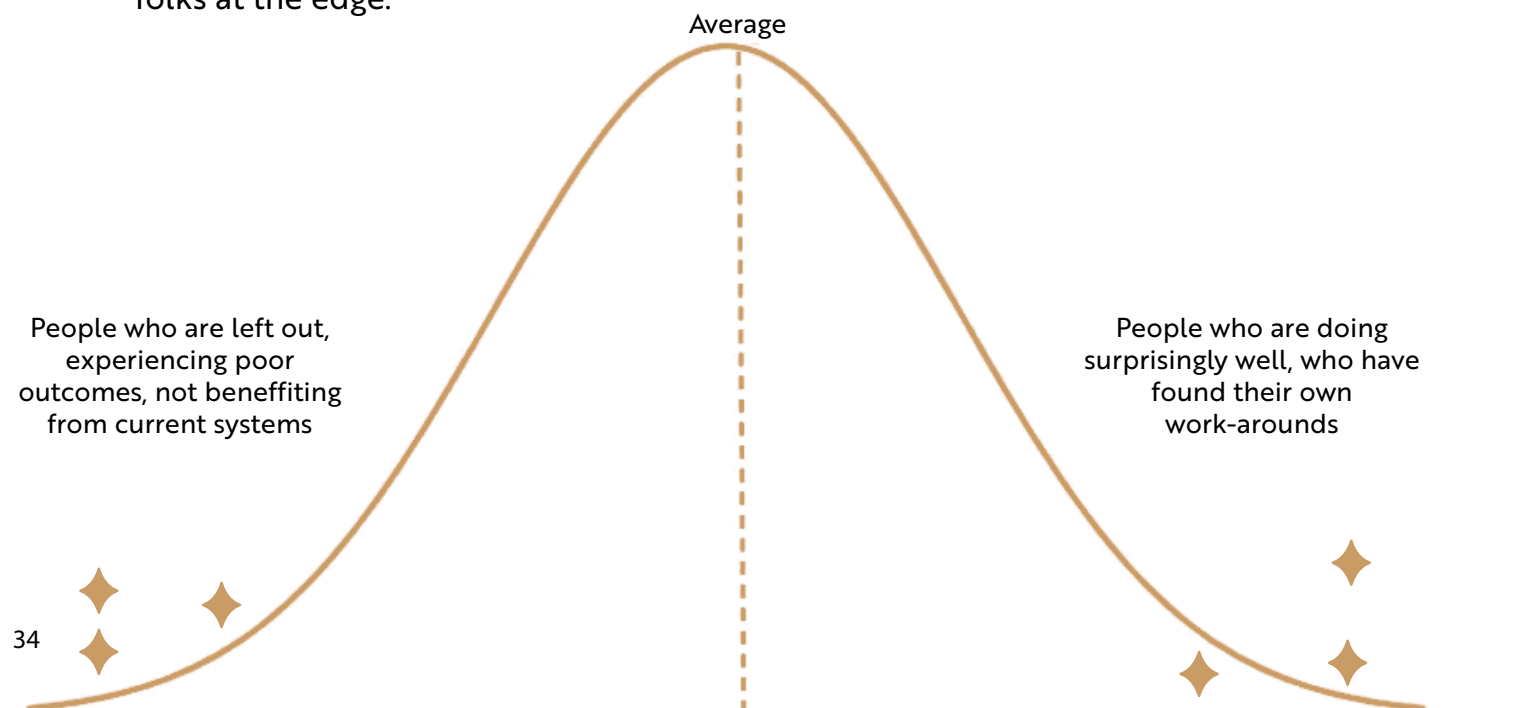
▶ Oversampling at the edge

Rather than seek out a representative sample, IWF's approach is to purposively sample at the ends of the bell curve.

At one edge of the bell curve are the people who are left out, experiencing poor outcomes, and not benefiting from current systems. On the other edge, are the people who are doing well. We especially look for those who don't have a systemic advantage over the first group but have found their own work-arounds. Paying attention to edge cases is a core principle of design methods. Why? Because when you design with and for the folks at the edges, you can typically accommodate the average, but when you design for the average, you typically exclude folks at the edge.

In the context of this project, this means we oversampled:

- People who don't volunteer at all, looking for gaps between stated values and behaviour,
- People who are hyper engaged, to understand their context, opportunities, motivations & enablers,
- Young adults, as their volunteering habits may shape the future, and because many of them became adults during the COVID-19 restrictions, and...
- People not in paid work, as they are a group who presumably have more available free time, and yet aren't more engaged in volunteering, statistically.



▶ Developing design research tools

When we sit down with people to listen to their experiences, we bring with us a suite of design tools to guide conversations and provoke new thoughts.

Unlike survey instruments, they are inherently interpretative and iterative: we add to them as we go, adapt, and abandon as needed. At their best, they provide images and words for ideas that people have trouble verbalizing. This can be especially helpful when we ask people to imagine something outside the logic and dynamics of existing systems.

In most other ethnographic research InWithForward has done, our starting point has been getting to know people whose behaviour is problematized by a system or their society -- for example, those who have been incarcerated, become entangled in the child welfare system, are houseless, struggling with addictions, and/or poor mental health. In these contexts, we often assume a role of questioning the dominant system or societal perspective, creating room for people to be reflective about their experiences, motivations, and desires in a less judgemental space.

In this project, our starting point has been quite different. First of all, anyone can be a volunteer, so, there were few bounds to our sampling strategy. Secondly, volunteering behaviour carries moral weight, so we needed to find ways for people, especially those who are not marginalized and quite invested in their good reputation, to explore their ambivalence about volunteerism. Thirdly, unlike houselessness, or child removal, being without a volunteer role might not carry a sense of urgency in people's lives. How could we explore the choice not to volunteer without pressing our agenda in a way that defeats the purpose of in-context research: seeing how people actually live and make meaning?

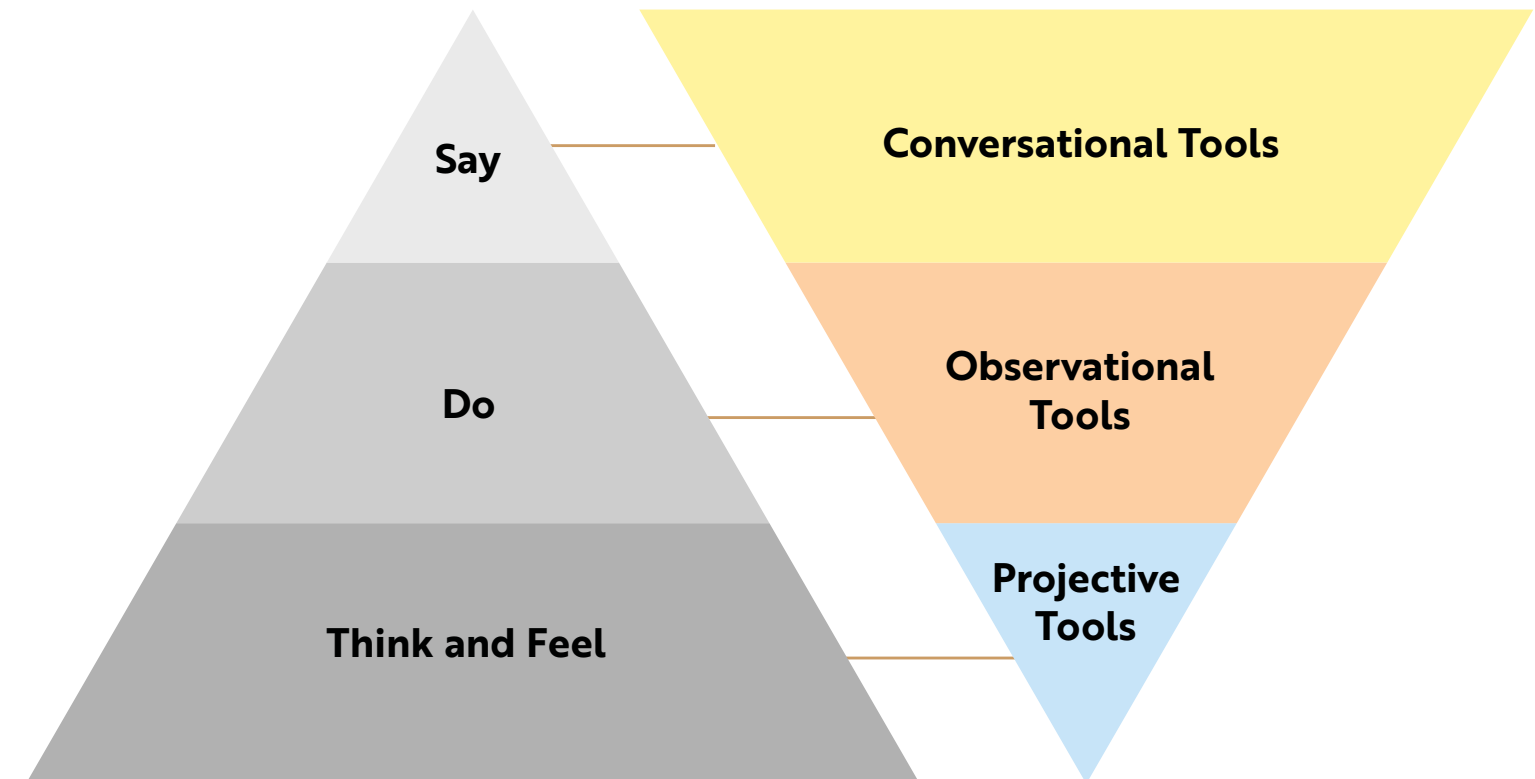
Much of what we already know about volunteering comes from large scale surveys. These surveys ask respondents about the frequency with which they volunteer, the types of volunteering they engage in, and their demographic profile. What the surveys do not tell us is people's volunteering trajectory or their values, needs, and the disconnects they might experience between what they do and purport to want.

To help us delve into people's actual behaviours and perceptions, the next page showcases the deck of original design research tools we assembled.

Comparing surveys & design research tools

	Existing surveys about volunteering	Design research tools
Time use	Ask for the number of hours in a year people spent on unpaid activities for organizations	Observational tools zoom out to look at how people actually spend their time versus how they want to spend their time, what activities they prioritize, and what stands in the way of their ideal state.
Perceived value	Ask respondents how much they agree with a set of statements like: "volunteering provides an opportunity to make meaningful connections with people."	Conversational tools give respondents an opportunity to define concepts like 'meaningful opportunity,' and unpack the conditions that make statements true or false. What one person sees as meaningful can be different than another.
Needs	Ask respondents to choose from a preset list of options of what would make formal volunteering more appealing. Options include things like matchmaking and training.	Projective tools enable respondents to get generative, envisioning different forms of community contribution and roles, and co-developing how they might play out. By exploring people's reactions to future opportunities, we can move outside existing frames of volunteering.

The three categories of design research tools help us understand people in three different levels



Conversational Tools	Observational Tools	Projective Tools
1. Value Cards 30 2. Stressor Sheet 30 3. Time Use Prompts 31 4. Eras Tool 31 5. Narrative Starters 32	1. Documenting Context 30	1. Contribution Opportunity Ads 30

All tools

CONVERSATIONAL TOOL

Values



How we used

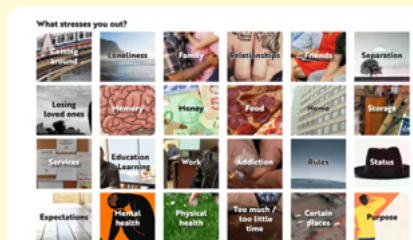
Lay out a deck of value cards. The story sharer chooses their top and bottom values. We ask what each particular value means to them, to what extent they are living out their values, and how much control they feel they have over actualizing that value.

Purpose

To identify what matters to people, to what extent they may or may not be living out their values, and how their values relate to community contribution.

CONVERSATIONAL TOOL

Stressor Sheet



How we used

Show the storyteller a sheet of visualised stressors and ask them to identify their top pain points, adding to the list as they see fit. For each stressor, we explore what that means to them and the ways in which it impacts their life, along with their coping strategies and resources.

Purpose

To name the pain points that people are experiencing, right now and how they might relate to, distract from, or act as a barrier to volunteerism or community contribution. By asking about people's coping strategies and resources, we learn about their sense of agency and capability to move towards desired outcomes.

CONVERSATIONAL TOOL

Time Use Prompts

How we used

Hand people two sheets of possible time uses, and give them a set of chocolate coins, with each dollar representing roughly one hour. Ask them to place coins on top of activity squares to represent how they spend their time in a typical week. Next, ask them to rearrange the coins to show how they would prefer to spend their time.

Purpose

To understand how people are spending their time, how much of their time is spent in caring or contributing activities, and to explore what the ideal state would be. By looking at the differences between people's ideal versus actual time use, we can explore what perpetuates the gap.



CONVERSATIONAL TOOL

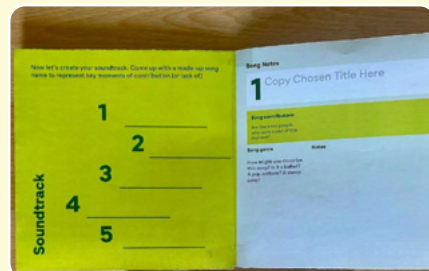
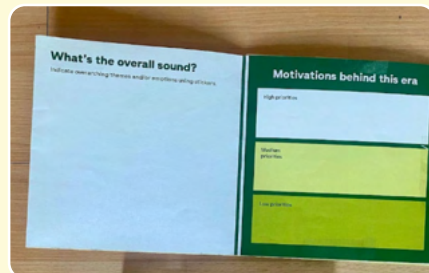
Eras Tool

**How we used**

We designed a fillable CD insert, with a blank cover page for people to add their own image and title. The first page asked people to describe the overall sound of the era, and invited them to use a set of stickers related to four core human needs: safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Subsequent pages prompted people to share what motivated them in that era, high notes & low notes of the era, a list of songs representing the era, and the song genres and "contributors" (i.e. key people who were a part of that era).

Purpose

To explore the different phases or eras of people's life as they relate to community contribution or volunteering. By using the language of album art, song titles, music genres, and sound quality, we hoped to understand people's emotional relationship with different phases of their life, and to tap into embodied knowledge that appeals to the senses rather than oft repeated personal narratives.



CONVERSATIONAL TOOL

Narrative Starters

How we used

We created a deck of 28 possible narratives that people may hold about volunteering or contribution, for people to sort into those they agreed with, those they didn't, and those around which they had mixed feelings. We asked people to explain their thought process and their interpretation of each card they chose or rejected. The cards offer a broad range of sentiments and beliefs including "There's no point: the world is falling apart," "I've got enough going on already," "Volunteering leads me to better employment opportunities," and "I help because no one else is doing it," to name a few. We also included blank cards for people to write their own.

Purpose

To understand the narratives behind people's actions, what kinds of language resonates or repels, and perhaps most importantly, where people experience ambivalence and what that can tell us about the space for intervention.



OBSERVATIONAL TOOL

Documenting Context

How we do it

Sitting with and shadowing people as they go about their day-to-day; recording interactions using audio recording, photos & video, and notes. We meet people in their familiar environments, walk them home, ask to see their space, spend time in the services they access or community spaces they frequent; and when invited, hang out with them as they engage with their network.

Purpose

To learn about who and what is already in people's lives, their habits, ways of being and doing. This helps us to contextualise what they say, ask better questions, and gain insight into any disconnects between what they do and what they value.



PROJECTIVE TOOL

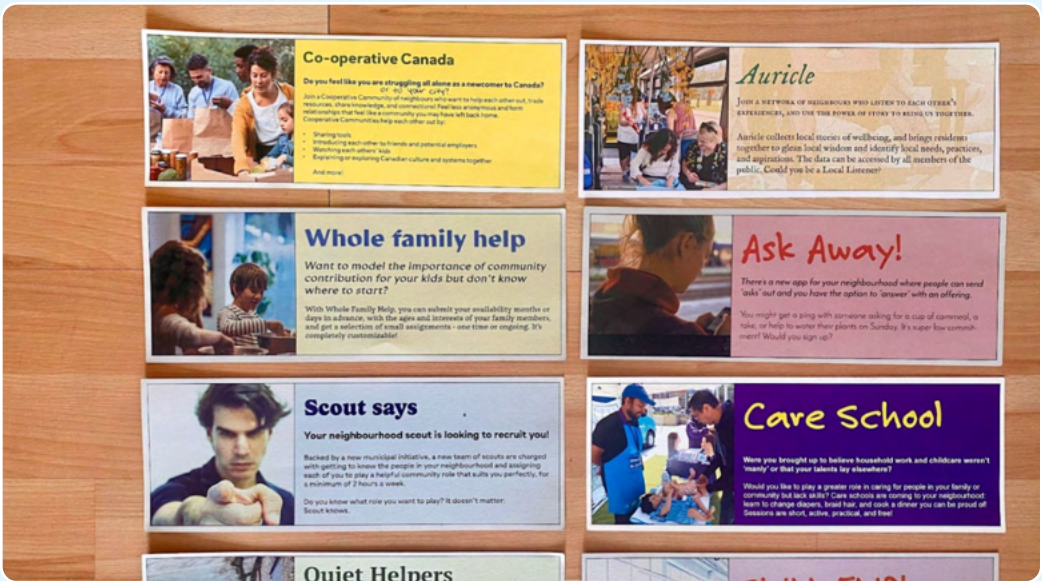
Future Contribution Cards

How we used

We shared a deck of unusual and imagined ways of contributing to community, including different kinds of roles and structures. We asked for people's immediate reaction to each card, and invited them to sort cards into piles: the ones they feel drawn to and the ones they reject. For ideas that resonate, we then explore how each might work. What would happen first? What next?

Purpose

Creating a set of fictional prompts for people to react to helps us go broad and identify what people are attracted to or motivated by. When we engage people in literally drawing out how a future opportunity could work, we learn more about their preferred order of operations, believability gaps, and behavioural drivers.



Getting informed consent

Each time we host an ethnographic conversation, we go through an informed consent process and ask people to choose how they would like their story to be shared.

Having agency over how we want to be known can be rare in research. We provide options: first name or pseudonym? Photo with face, or a non-identifying image? How would they like to describe themselves and their identity? After we write-up and return profile cards, we ask story sharers to review and update the terms of their consent. Our hope is that giving real options makes consent meaningful, not transactional.



Writing & returning stories

From our conversations, observations, and projective imaginings with people, comes a written story. As listeners, our challenge is to capture the spirit of our moment-in-time interaction with another human and make visible their distinct perspective -- in less than 600 words.

Our story cards contain a short narrative of the person, alongside key quotes, tags, and visualized data. The listener's perspective section shares our own positionality, acknowledging that who we are can influence what we focus on. The back of each story card offers a sneak peek into possible futures with three speculative ideas inspired by our conversation.

On story cards, we made little differentiation between informal contributions and volunteerism mediated by nonprofits and charities. The two are generally not in tension: those who contribute informally are more likely to also contribute formally, and vice versa. What seemed more salient were the barriers and enablers to any kind of contributing behaviour, people's motivations for contributing, and how their social networks

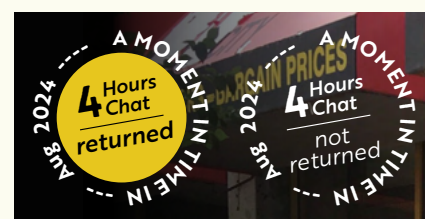
influenced such behaviours. The value of story cards is they help to centre what matters to current and former volunteers, and in doing so, enable volunteer-serving organizations and regulatory systems to reflect on how they meet people's needs and tap into their desires.

Once story cards are drafted, we return and co-edit them with story sharers. We recognize that lives are simultaneously static and dynamic, and start by exploring what has shifted and what has stayed the same, handing them a pen or cursor so they feel in control of adjustments to their story. Some deeply engage with the narrative as a prompt for reflection. Others seem more interested in our moment of reconnection than the artefact of the story itself. People are often able to ask more specific questions about how the profile might be used once they have seen it. We go through the consent process a second time to give people an opportunity to make changes to where their story goes and how they are known in it.



Front of the card

Time stamp A reminder that this story is only a snapshot of someone at a moment in time and that they continue to change and grow. It includes the date and length of conversation. If/when the participant reviews and approves the story, the circle will be yellow and read 'returned.'



Most resonant narratives

I want to leave something better for future generations

I've had tougher times so I have empathy

Nicolás 24 Male Mexican/Latino

#LethbridgeAB #Reengaged #VolunteerAlberta

"My grandma, she used to make five pounds of tortillas every single morning. And we felt like we belonged there."

Nico stands proudly on stage, sporting a red plaid shirt, black jeans and a goatee. After his 5 minute opening act at Good Times Lethbridge Comedy Club, Nico is on a high. "Comedy fills my heart," he explains. "It's part of my self care."

Now in his mid-20s, Nico has been on a journey of trying to figure out what kind of life he wants and what it means to live a good one. Although he has gone through personal struggles and wrestled with self-doubt and pressure to fit in, he's growing in self-acceptance and clarity about what matters. Comedy, for instance, is a place where he can be unapologetically himself, a core need in his life. Though it's not volunteering, it's also a form of giving

back, of helping others through tough times. "To be able to just make them laugh and maybe make them forget about their problem for like a second... it's so satisfying, because it's kind of like paying back what I received."

Nico believes in helping others, and also wants to take care of himself by pursuing his passions and a good life. Experiencing depression and undiagnosed ADHD in high school made him passionate about youth mental health. And a friendship with a fellow student with a cognitive disability led him to later pursue a degree in Child and Youth Care.

Hashtags To indicate location and the body of research to which the participant has contributed.

Most resonant narratives To indicate and introduce the person's perspective on volunteering

Picture To capture the person at the moment we meet, and give a glimpse of their context. People can choose the picture and whether to be anonymous or not.

Name & identity People choose which name to use, and the identity or demographics markers to the right of the name.

Narrative To bring the human to life: what matters to them, what's shaped them, what they want, and the key gaps and rubs with systems. We seek to contextualize people within systems, rather than reduce people's lives to a narrow set of needs or choices.

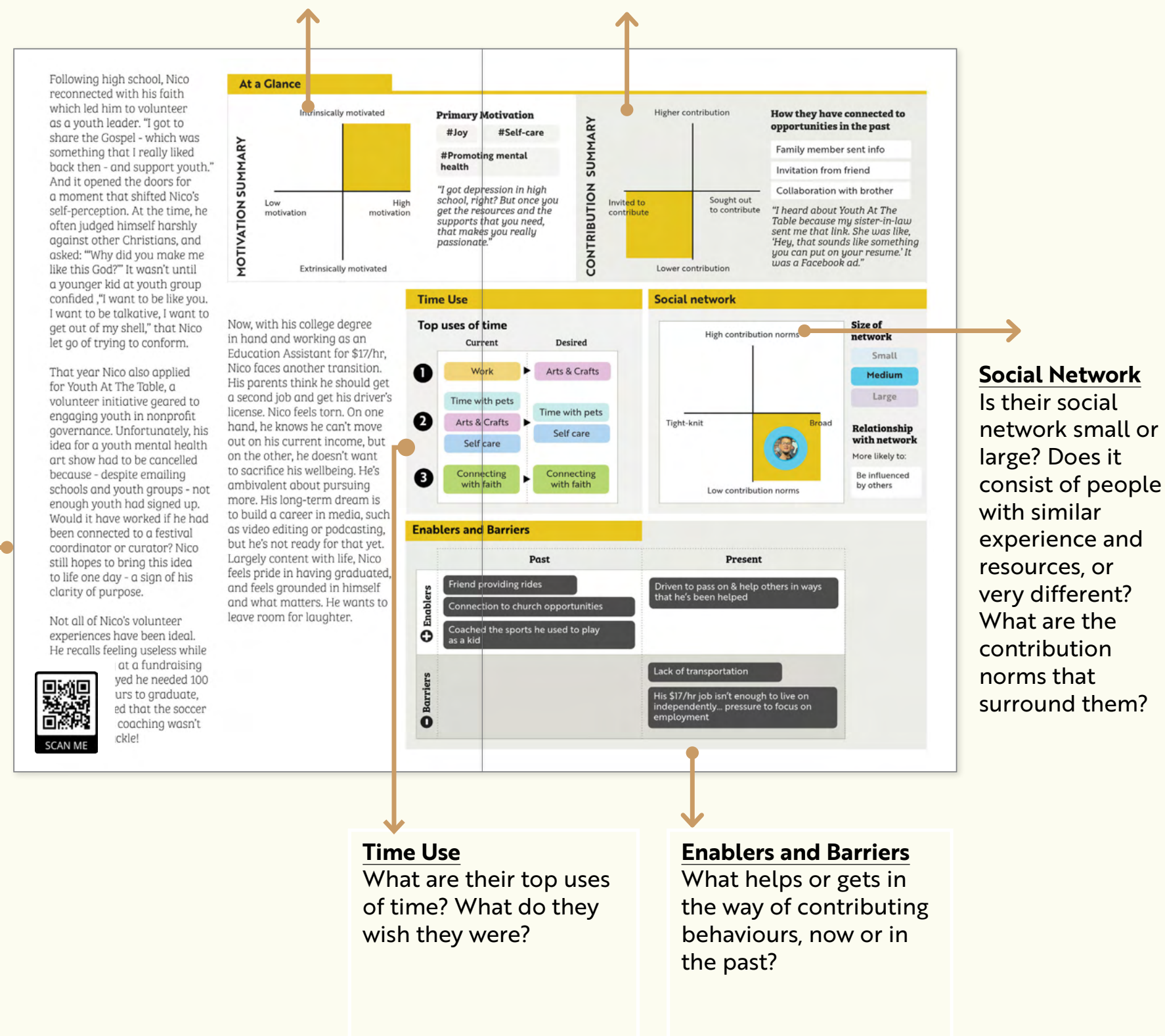
Inside of the card

Motivation Summary

What's driving or dampening a desire to contribute? What increases their motivation?

Contribution Summary

How do they engage with contribution opportunities now? How did they connect to them in the past?



Back of the card

Top stressors
How do they describe their top stressors at present?

Top Stressors

Getting Around "I don't drive yet. I'm anxious about driving, being behind the wheel and especially about the speedometer. How do I make sure that I'm still going 50 and not 80, you know?"

Services "A lack of support from the workplace to achieve self care when working with clients."

Money "Having to learn how to adult. Saving money, prioritizing stuff, like not much computer games anymore, trying to get a drivers license. How to prioritize my time."

Top Values

Community "Right now I feel like the sense of community that I have is from the comedy club."

little in life ☐ lots in life

Humility "Maybe someday I could be really good at it [comedy]. Something that I really don't want to lose is that humility, you know, understanding that I came from the bottom."

little in life ☐ lots in life

Faith "At 17 years old I decided to actually get my faith a little more involvement in my life. I felt belonging being a youth leader and like I'm reaching my potential."

little in life ☐ lots in life

Opportunity Areas

Alternate education <p>Helping others and receiving help gave Nico a way out of depression. How might the education system include more experiences of giving and receiving, as a way to help youth explore what is life-giving and build their reciprocity muscle?</p>	Contribution incubator <p>What if there was a contribution incubator team you could go to if you had an idea for how to offer care in your community? The team could help workshop ideas, offer advice and connections, and support people in bringing their ideas to life.</p>	Volunteering as self care <p>What if public health and volunteer centres partnered to expand our understanding and practice of volunteerism as a vehicle for self care, where connecting and putting energy towards something life-giving boosts wellbeing?</p>
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Listener's Perspective

Rochelle
Cis woman
White

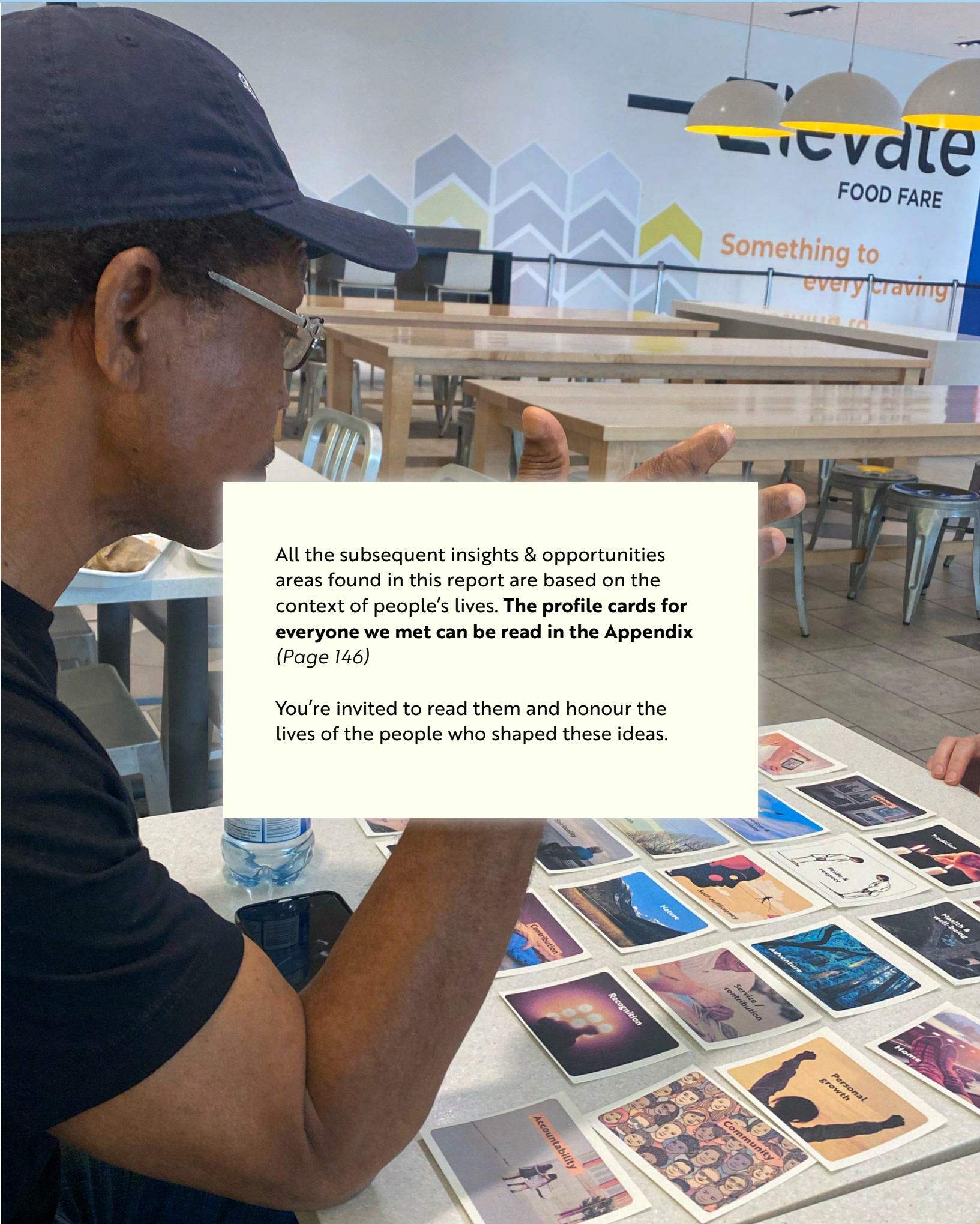
How we met
A colleague at Volunteer Alberta knew him from Youth At The Table and connected us. We went to his comedy show one Friday night, and he took us up on our invite for lunch the following day, at a local Mexican restaurant.

Points of (un)familiarity
Like Nico, I also experienced a lot of anxiety during high school about what to do with my future, and worked a low-paying frontline care job after my degree which was both meaningful and difficult. Some differences in our life experiences are that I haven't immigrated to a new country, I haven't navigated poor grades and depression, and I'm terrified of being in a spotlight on stage.

Top values
How do they describe the values that matter most right now?

Opportunity areas. To offer up some early ideas for solutions that might work for people to move them closer to their values, and that are aligned with their capabilities.

Listener's perspective. To be transparent about and reflect on how we, as story listeners, enter the picture. Despite considerable differences, there are points of familiarity and human connection that can bridge gaps in social location and experience -- at least for a moment in time.



All the subsequent insights & opportunities areas found in this report are based on the context of people's lives. **The profile cards for everyone we met can be read in the Appendix (Page 146)**

You're invited to read them and honour the lives of the people who shaped these ideas.

Segmenting and Sense Making

Traditional research groups data by demographic variables like age, gender, and race. While this kind of demographic analysis can help to surface problems and identify equity gaps, it tells us little about what's behind the gap, or what would make an attractive solution.

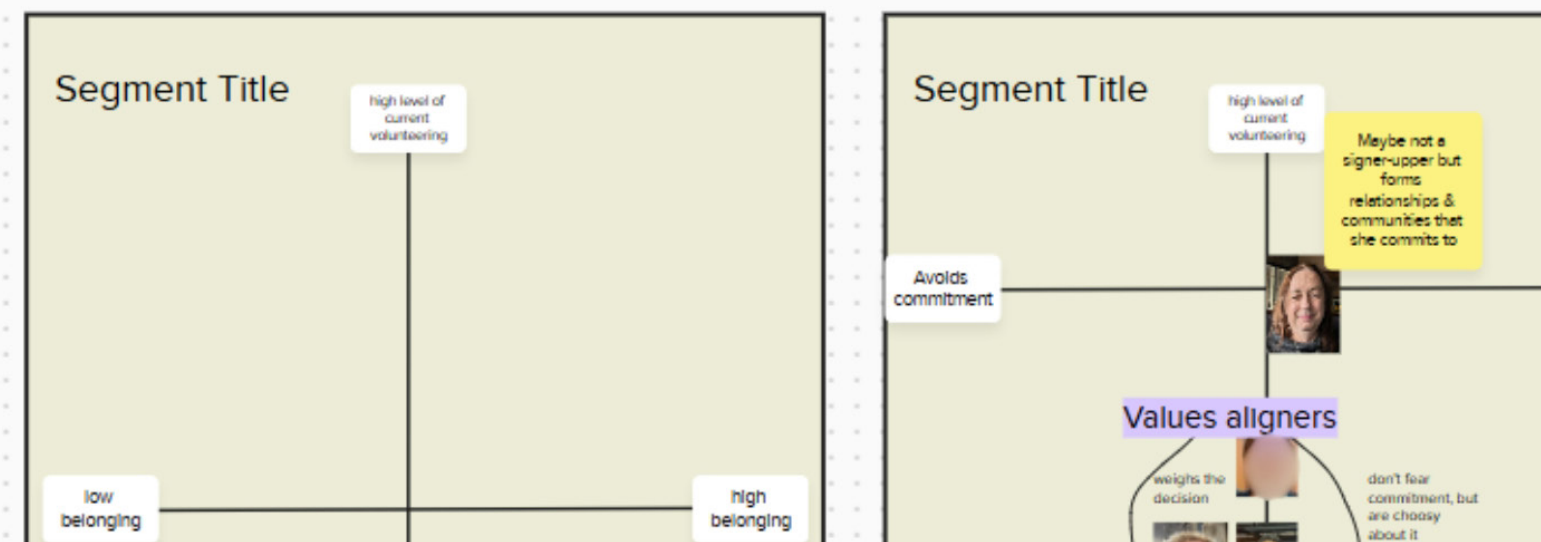
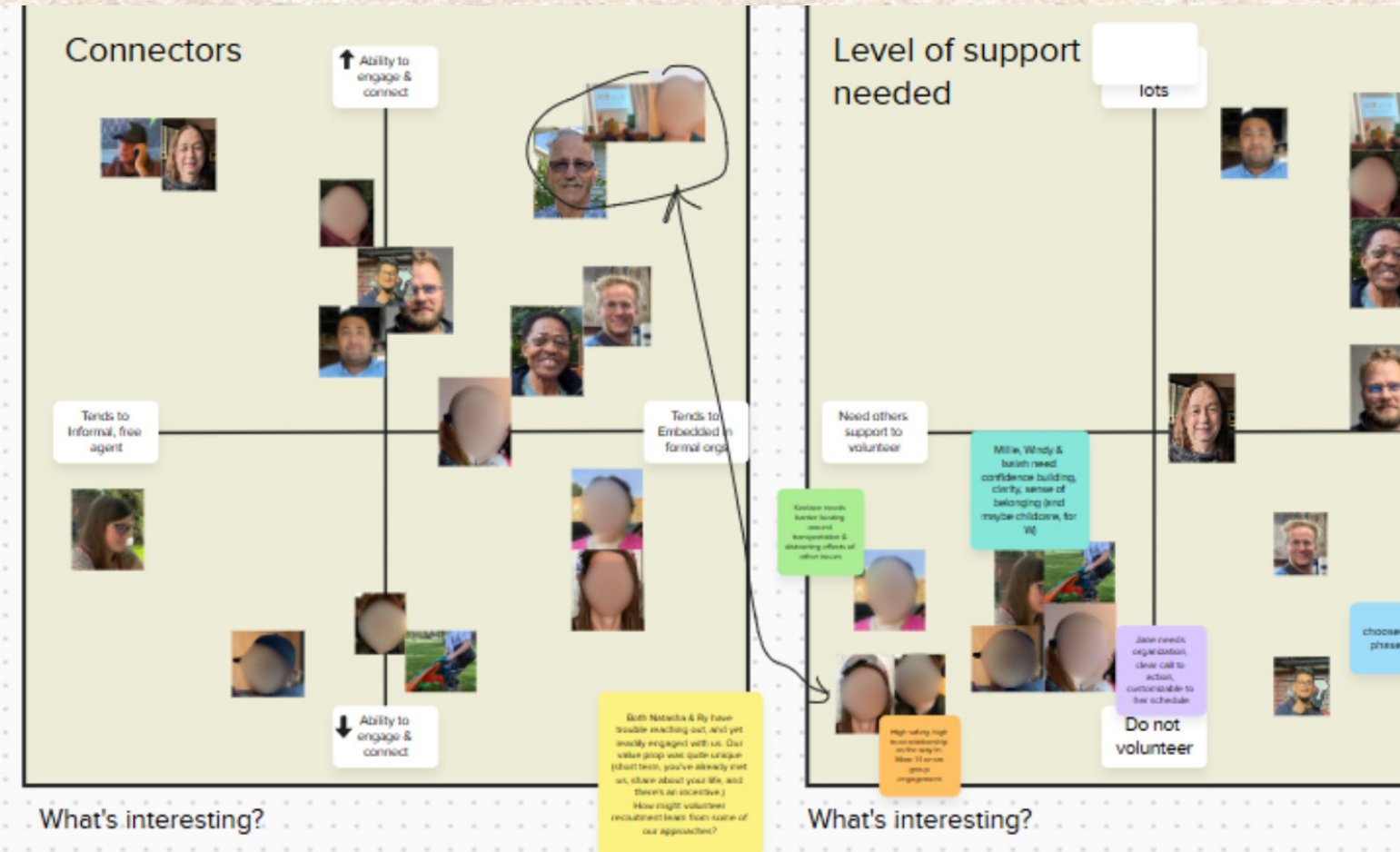
Indeed, within group variation can often be greater than between group variation.⁵ As in, within a group of older people, experiences, needs, and desires can vary widely.

To develop meaningful solutions, we group people according to what matters to them, rather than descriptors assigned to them. That's the basis for motivational segmentation. Segmentation is the process of clustering people based on behaviours, needs, motivations, and desires. Unlike demographic categories, segments are fluid: people may move between segments as their motivations, behaviours, needs, and desires change. In this project, to segment, we drew on grounded theory (using concepts from people's stories) and existing theory (using factors from social science research that may play a role in shaping our sense of contribution). The intent is to find groupings that tell us what might appeal, and to unlock fresh ideas for when, where and how to strengthen that segment's experience of contribution.

Some factors we used for segmentation:

- Sense of belonging
- Desire for structure
- Type of social network
- Self-efficacy
- Social anxiety
- Readiness to contribute

What segmentation looks like



Learning from organizations

Alongside listening to and learning from everyday Albertans, we've spent time reaching out, shadowing, and getting to know both big and small community organizations.

While our research has focused on understanding the decline in volunteerism from the perspective of everyday Albertans, we've also wanted to better understand the challenges community organizations face in attracting and retaining volunteers. We see the solution space as the space between formal organizations and individual people.

Some of the organizations we've talked with include:

Edmonton
Chamber
of Volunteer
Organizations

The Red Cross

Fairview
Chamber of
Commerce

The Town of
Fairview

Fairview
Family and
Community
Support
Services

Fairview
Cornerstone
Baptist Church

St Thomas
More Catholic
Church

Grandma's Pizza

Volunteer
Lethbridge

The Bhutanese
Canadian Society

Sage Clan Patrol

Government
of Alberta
Ministry of Arts,
Culture and the
Status of Women

Streets Alive
Shelter

Gurudwara
Khalsa Darbar
Sahib

BGC Big
Brothers Big
Sisters of
Edmonton

Unison Alberta



Who We Met

We met 350 people across three sites, and engaged 17 individuals in ethnographic conversations. We invite people to share their sense of identity in their own words rather than checking off pre-selected categories.

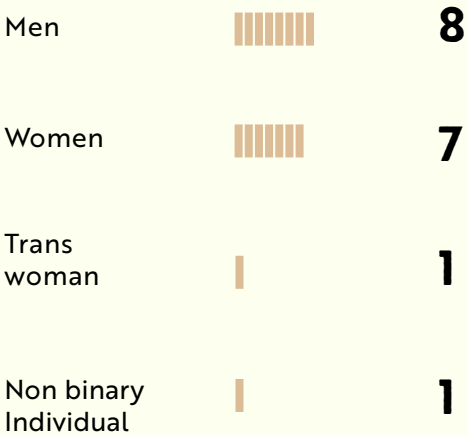
Where our sample reflects Alberta’s population

GENDER

In our dataset, participants do not choose from a list of demographic categories, but self-identify in their own language. As a result, these numbers represent how people self-identified: men and women may or may not be cis-gendered.

Our sample included a roughly even split of cis men and cis women, with one person self-identifying as non-binary and another as a trans woman.

This reflects Alberta’s gender distribution. Most people in Alberta are cis gender: meaning their self-reported gender identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth. According to the 2021 census, 2.1 million Albertans are cis male and another 2.1 million are cis female. 7000 Albertans identify as transgender and 5000 as non-binary.⁶

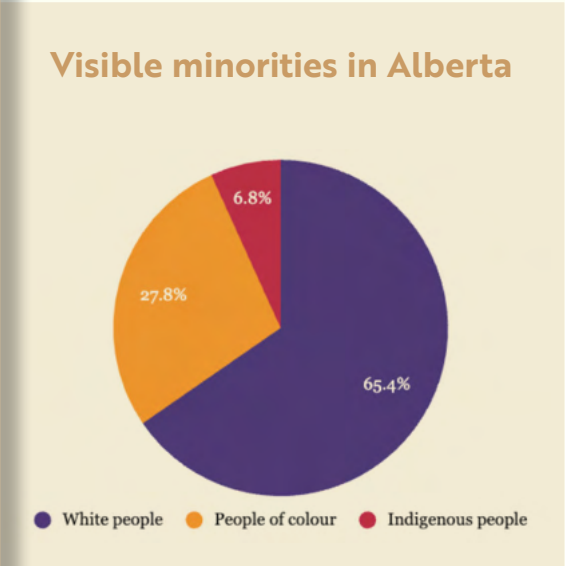
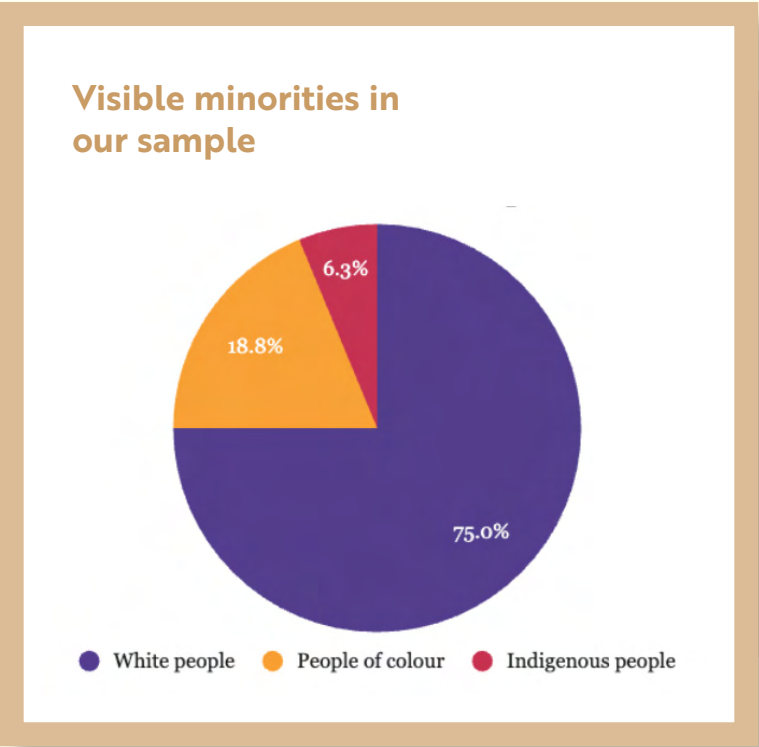


⁶ Nicholas Frew, "Census Data Gives Clearer Picture of Alberta's Transgender, Non-Binary Community," CBC, April 27, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-2021-census-gender-age-dwelling-1.6432469>.

VISIBLE MINORITIES

Our sample included a slightly higher percentage of individuals who identify as White.

However, this reflects the demographic patterns of our field sites. Both Fairview and Lethbridge have a larger percentage of people who identify as White than the provincial average.



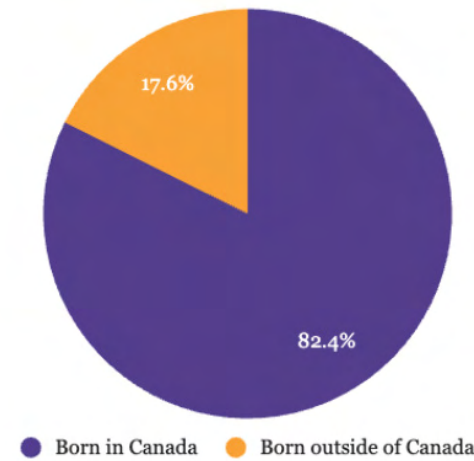
Source: 2021 Census of Canada Racialized Groups of Albertans (Statistics Canada) <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/2021-census-of-canada-racialized-groups-of-albertans>

2021 Census of Canada Indigenous People (Statistics Canada) <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/2021-census-of-canada-indigenous-people>

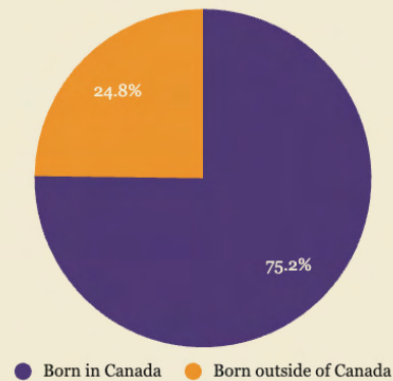
IMMIGRATION STATUS

Our sample roughly reflects the immigration status of Albertans as a whole.

Birthplace of people in our sample



Birthplace of Albertans



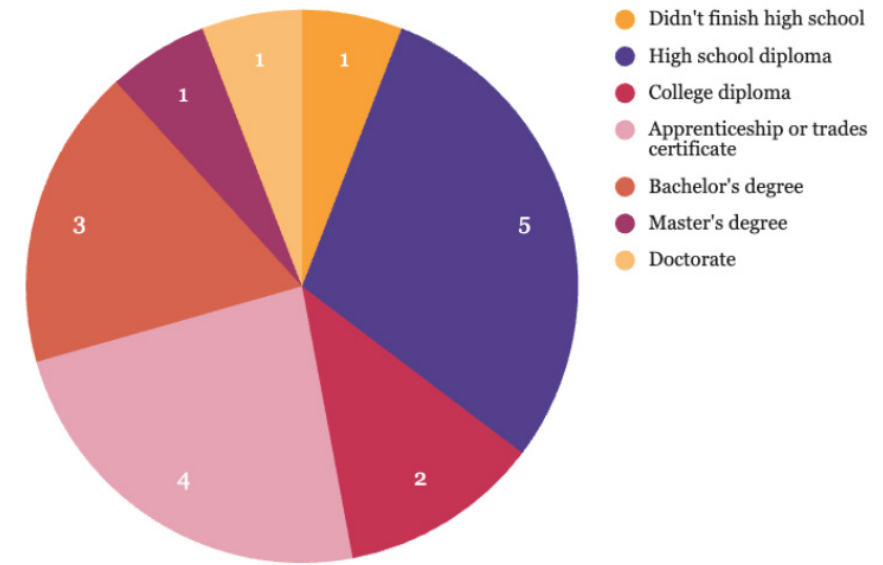
Source: Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census of Population, Alberta, Province (Statistics Canada)
<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/Page.cfm?lang=e&topic=9&d-guid=2021A000248>

EDUCATION

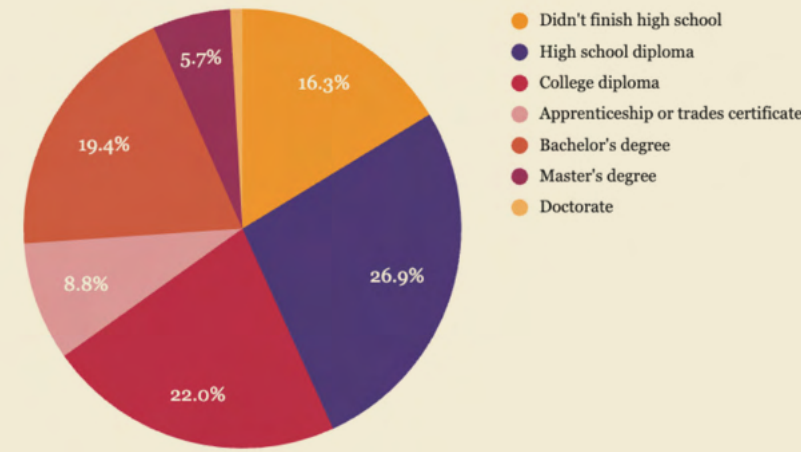
Our sample has a roughly similar distribution of educational experiences to Alberta's population

Though we talked to slightly more people with apprenticeship or trade certificates than the provincial average.

Education type in our sample



Education type in Alberta



Source: Education Highlight Tables, 2016 Census (Statistics Canada)
<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/hltfst/edu-sco/Table.cfm?Lang=E&T=21&Geo=00&View=2&Age=2&SO=9D>

OCCUPATIONS

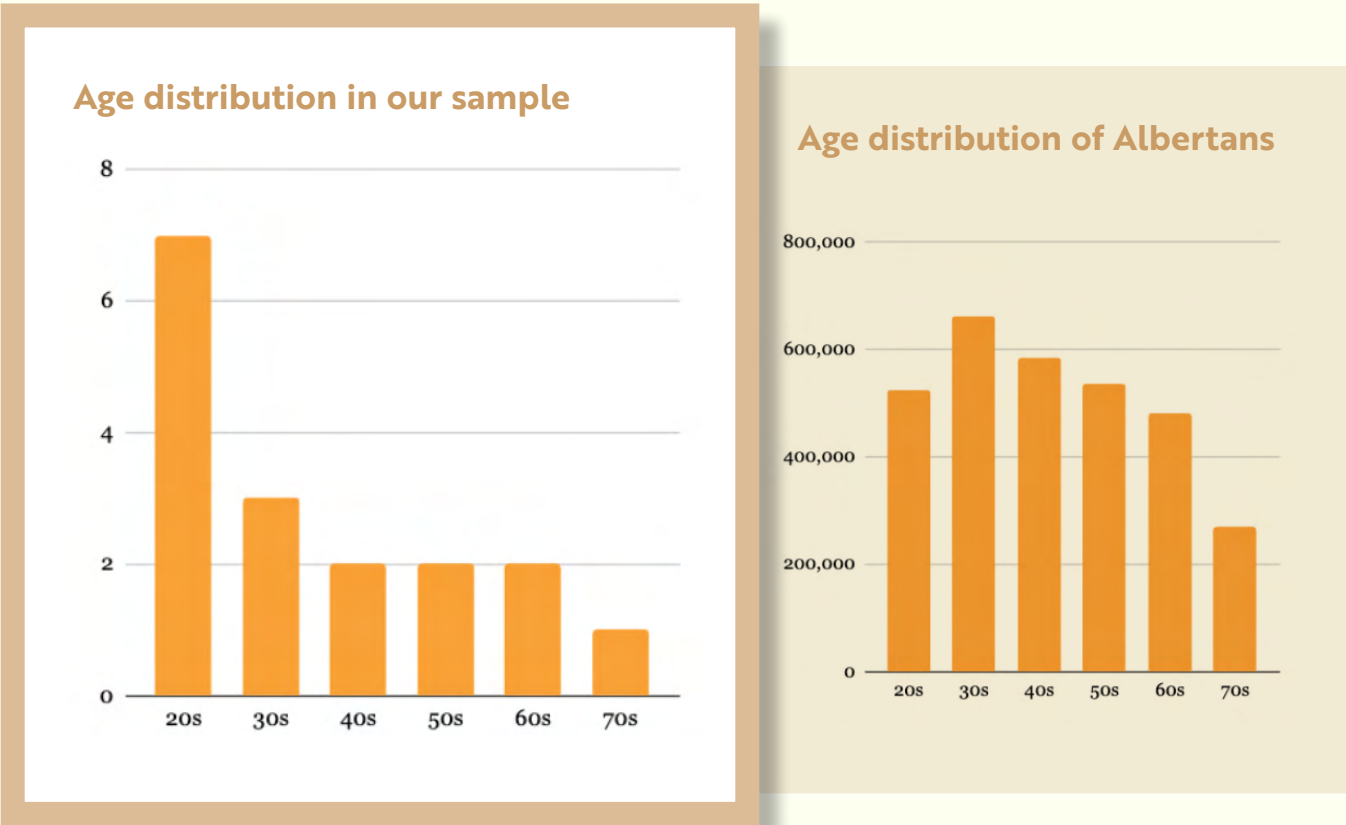
We met people with a range of current and past professions, including:

- Retired professor
- Equipment labourer
- Library staff
- Server
- Business manager
- Teacher
- Financial advisor
- Mechanic
- Former city councillor
- Former oil & gas safety consultant
- Former nurse
- Business owner
- Occupational Therapist
- Educational Assistant
- Pharmacy Assistant
- Security Guard

Where our sample differs from Alberta's population

AGE

We purposely skewed our sample towards younger Albertans, curious to understand a generation of young adults that is still not well represented in statistical research.

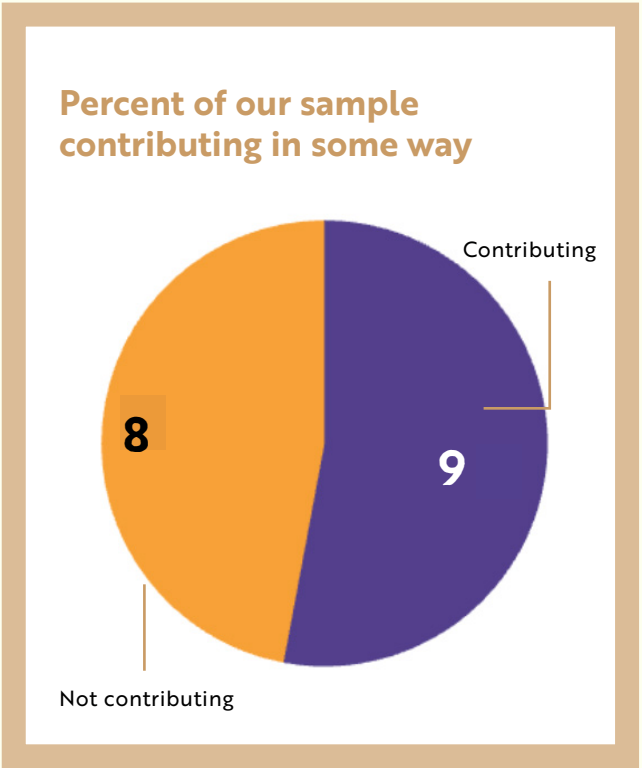


Source: Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population (Statistics Canada)
<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensem-ent/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&D-GUIDlist=2021A000248&GENDERlist=1,2,3&STATISTI-Clist=1&HEADERlist=0>

LEVEL OF CONTRIBUTION

We also sought out people who were either strongly involved in contributing and volunteering, or those who were very disengaged and not at all involved.

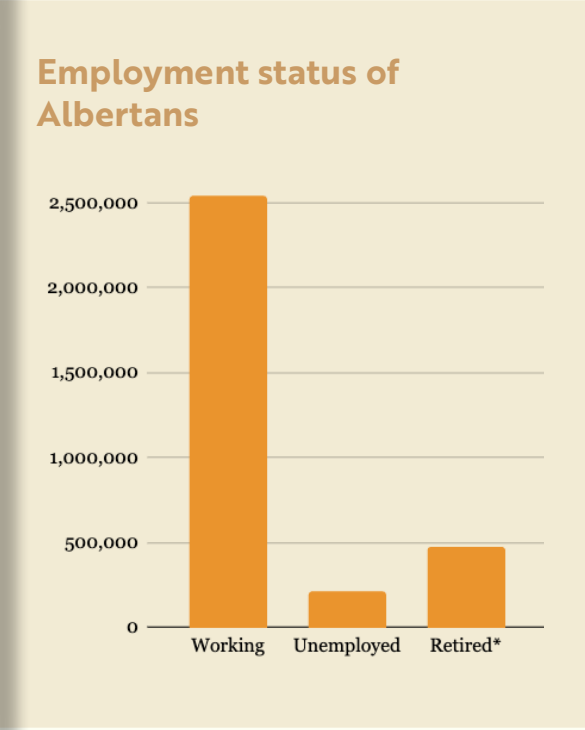
Of the 17 people we talked to, 9 were actively contributing in some way while 8 were not currently volunteering or contributing to community. The uninvolved can help us to understand the barriers to contribution, and what needs are going unmet. The very involved are a resource to draw on, and often include positive deviants: people with similar characteristics to the disengaged, but who have found their own strategies and opportunities.



EMPLOYMENT

We especially reached out to people who were not currently employed to understand how they conceptualize their time, and the role community contribution plays and could play in their day-to-day life.

**There's no decisive data on the number of retirees in Alberta, so we've estimated this number based on the number of Albertans aged 65+ ([link](#)) and the employment rate of people aged 65-69 ([link](#)).*



Source: Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population (Statistics Canada)
<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&DGUIDlist=2021A000248&GENDERlist=1,2,3&STATISTIClist=1&HEADERlist=0>

Labour force characteristics by gender and detailed age group, monthly, unadjusted for seasonality (Statistics Canada)
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410001701&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.10&pickMembers%5B1%5D=2.10&cubeTimeFrame.startMonth=01&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=1976&cubeTimeFrame.endMonth=04&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2022&referencePeriods=19760101%2C20220401>

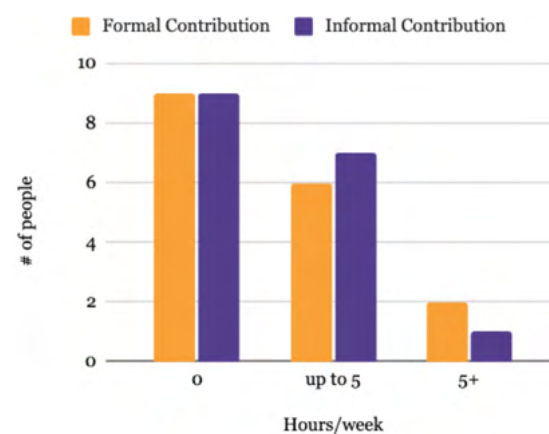
How our sample contributes

FORMAL AND INFORMAL CONTRIBUTION

Formal volunteering happens through a charity or non-profit, and often involves taking on a fixed role. Informal volunteering includes less structured ways of helping outside of one's household through mutual aid groups, social networks, and community groups.

What's interesting: Of the 8 people in our sample actively contributing, most engaged in both formal and informal ways. Just one person only formally volunteered.

Formal vs Informal Contribution (of those engaged in contribution)



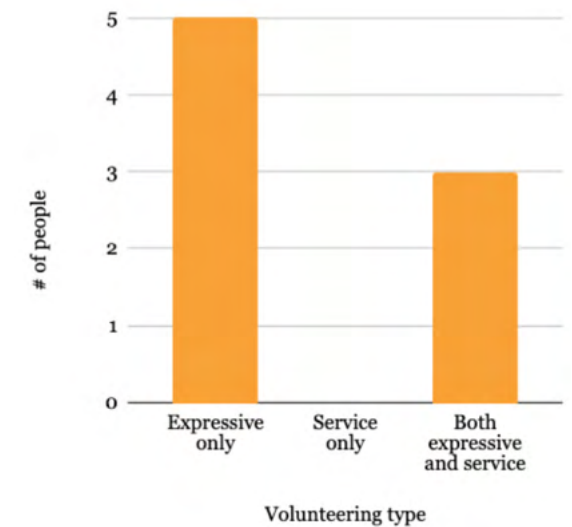
SERVICE AND EXPRESSIVE VOLUNTEERING

Another way to make sense of how people contribute is to categorize the type of roles they take on.

Lester Salamon, Director of the Center for Civil Society Studies at The Johns Hopkins Institute for Health and Social Policy Studies, differentiates between service and expressive roles, arguing that the expressive roles can be more fulfilling. "A service role ... includes activities that have a use-value to society and its members, such as fulfilling people's needs, solving social problems, or emergency relief. This role is played by activities in the fields of social services, health, education, and economic development and housing. The expressive role encompasses activities aimed mainly at the actualization of participants' aesthetic, cultural or political preferences, or social bonding."⁷

What's interesting: Of the 17 people we got to know, nobody exclusively engaged in service volunteering.

Service vs expressive volunteering



⁷ Lester M. Salamon and S. Wojciech Sokolowski, "Institutional Roots of Volunteering," in *The Values of Volunteering: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Paul Dekker and Loek Halman (New York, NY: Springer, 2003), 71–90.

What matters to story sharers in our sample

Across all stories, the number one value individuals identified was “relationships,” with “community” coming in second.

One way we try to move beyond conventional survey data is by introducing a deck of cards and sheet of picture prompts to elicit from people what matters most and what stresses them out most.

Value and stressor cards, conversational tools described in the Methods section give us context to understand people’s behaviours — in this case, volunteering, or lack thereof.



TOP VALUES

These are the most chosen cards from the Values card deck



Across all stories, the number one value individuals identified was “relationships,” with “community” coming in second. People may have gravitated to one word over another, but when asked more about how people recognized these values in their lives, the two were often interchangeable. For example, “relationships” could refer to a web of interdependence, specific relationships to family and friends, relationship-building as a way of moving in the world, and a relationship to God. Interestingly, all but one participant who chose relationships was living in Fairview, the community in which we heard about the most informal mutual aid and helping between people of similar socioeconomic status.



“Community” was also used to refer to interdependence, making friends, taking part in the organized community of church, and being part of a subcultural scene.

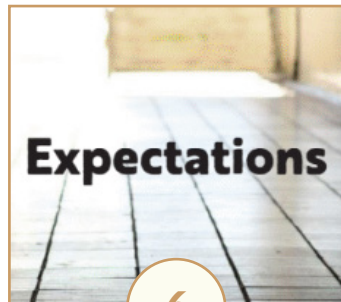


The third most chosen value was “personal growth,” which referred variously to a lifelong process of becoming a person you want to be, becoming more aware of oneself and how to meet one’s own needs, and encountering new ideas and stretching oneself.

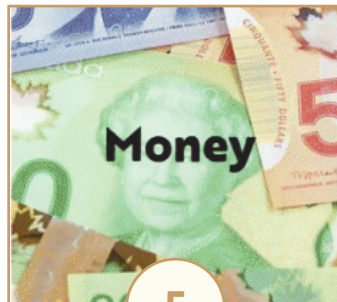
► What matters to story sharers in our sample

TOP STRESSORS

These are the most chosen cards from the Stressors card deck



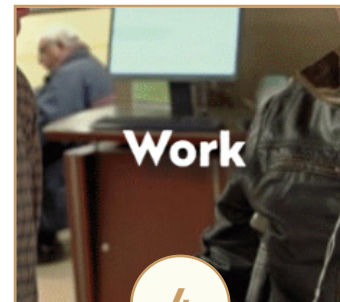
6



5



4



4

In terms of stressors people were experiencing in their lives, the top choice was “expectations:” being judged as incompetent at work, life after graduating not being what one has imagined, the gap between how one feels one should behave, or feel motivated, and how one actually does, and expectations around keeping up with new technology in one’s volunteer role.

“Money” was the second most common stressor, which often overlapped with how people defined “work”, the third most common stressor, tied with “losing loved ones.” The way people described “money” as a stressor was not so varied: it was about not having enough, and needing to learn how to manage it, and prioritize.

“Losing loved ones” referred to recent losses of friends and family who had passed away, as well as quite distant ones. In one case it referred to the loss of friendship when valued friends disengaged.

“Work” as a stressor referred to not being able to get it and keep it, or having too much of it, feeling unsafe, anxious, and/or undervalued at work, and wanting to find better strategies and role differentiation to excel at work.

TOP NARRATIVES

We also presented a series of statements with different narratives around contribution and volunteering. People grounded statements according to resonance, and told us what they meant. We have included quotes that indicate why or how people agreed or disagreed with a statement.

That People Agreed With

No. of people



I want to leave something better for future generations

12



Contributing makes me feel good

11



It connects me to something bigger than myself

11



I’ve had tougher times so I have empathy

11

That People Disagreed With

No. of people



No one helps me when I need it

12



There’s no point: The world is falling apart

11

Segments

What is segmentation?

As described in Project Methodology, our sense making process moves away from demographic analysis and averaging data to segmentation and understanding how to design for extremes: re-grouping people based on common experiences, motivations, needs, enablers, barriers, and aspirations, along with finding the positive deviants.

Segmentations are not fixed or mutually exclusive categories. People can be in multiple segments, and move between segments. That's because both stories and segments capture discrete moments in time. They reflect both people's stated needs and desires, and our perceptions of the enablers and barriers they face. We use segments in a generative way, as a jumping off point to brainstorm possible interventions. We can then validate their usefulness during prototyping.

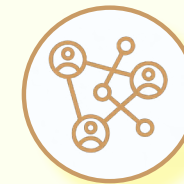
Here are eight segments that emerged from looking across all 17 stories. These segments are neither fixed, nor mutually exclusive. People can be in multiple segments at once, and are always in flux.



The
Tender
Wounded



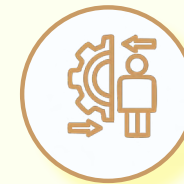
The Privately
Overwhelmed



The
Connectors



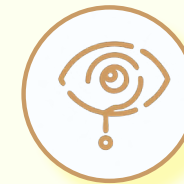
The Lifelong
Community
Builders



The
Transitioning
Contributors



The
Experience
Alchemists



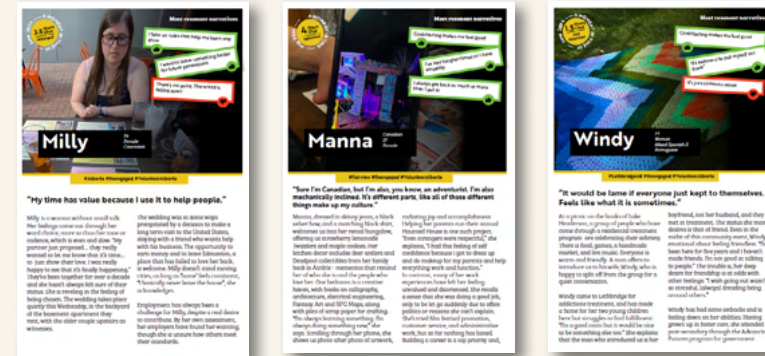
The Curious
Joiners



Segment 1: The Tender Wounded

They'd like to feel good about themselves, with others, but worry others can't see what they have to offer.

PEOPLE LIKE



DESCRIPTION

A younger-leaning set who harbour strong pro-social sentiments and esteem volunteering and community contribution behaviours, but observe, with some disappointment that they themselves have become disconnected. Many have a positive if somewhat distant memory of a volunteering gig with their family, school, church or probation office. However, they have struggled to maintain employment, or excel in school, which is an attack on their belief that they have something to contribute. They have a – sometimes latent– desire to be more involved in community but don't have the habits, relationships, or confidence that are likely to bring them into such a role in the near future.

WHAT WE HEARD

I felt like I was succeeding and going someplace. We were gonna talk the next day, and have a meeting ...but she decided instead, it was more acceptable to text me the day before and tell me, 'don't bother coming.' I was so upset about it. I felt like I was doing what I wanted to and succeeding but, it wasn't, not to other people.

- MANNA

"I kind of shy away from doing new things. It's something I need to get over. If I get over that I'll be able to live life to the fullest"

- MILLY

"I want to make friends and stuff but it's so awkward. Maybe I'm not approachable."

- WINDY

PAIN POINTS

Social awkwardness

People don't perceive them the way they think they're coming across, which can be frustrating, hurtful, and make them less likely to put themselves out there around new people.

Isolation

Part of being an adult is not having to subject themselves to bullies and people who don't know how to appreciate them, but attracting more caring, trusting relationships is still elusive.

Low Sense of Belonging

Even beyond the lack of friendship, they have a sense that they are different from others, and never 'part of the group.'

MOTIVATORS

Learning and Novelty

Pursuing their curiosity to discover new ideas, ways of doing, and skills; they often teach themselves!

Comfort

The comfort of home and the protection from judgement it offers.

Personal Growth

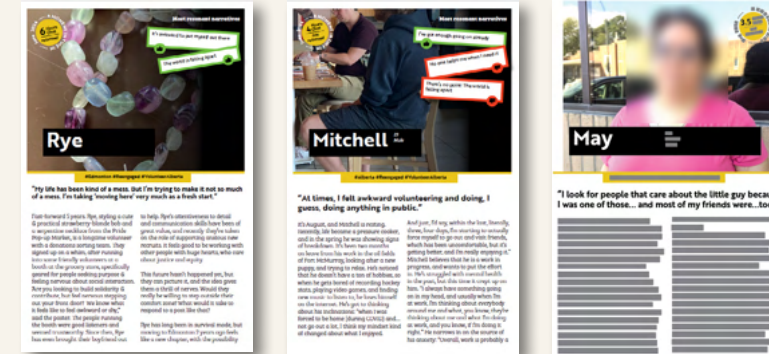
In particular, they want to develop stronger social skills, self-love, and confidence.



Segment 2: The Privately Overwhelmed

Volunteer service feels in tension with self-care, and they're overwhelmed as it is

PEOPLE LIKE



DESCRIPTION

Mostly young, anxious about the future, and anxious in general (like many Tender Wounded), this segment is less sold on connection to community as a way to happiness. They have experienced depression and even mental breakdown. They feel that those charged with nurturing their development dropped the ball, leaving them a bit broken, unsupported, and struggling more than their peers to cope with the demands of life. As a result, they may have low trust, and focus their own attention inward, to provide the self-care needed to meet their unmet needs. They tend to spend a lot of time at home, pursuing self-soothing activities, like crafting, or video games, and investing in a few core relationships.

WHAT WE HEARD

"It hurts. They judged me instead of asking me. They assumed I would make more mistakes instead of explaining to me 'you don't do that.'"

- MAY

"Say, you know you're having a tough day... you have that feeling in your mind that you feel obligated to do something that you're not comfortable doing. That can sometimes eat at you..."

- MITCHELL

"I would definitely like to figure out more of what's going on with me both mentally and physically... that probably just goes into having proper diagnoses and being properly medicated and having the right tools to help myself. Because I don't know how to help myself. And I don't know what the issue is."

- RYE

PAIN POINTS

Lack of control

They don't feel they have the agency, or perhaps the understanding, to address the sources of intolerable stress in their lives, at least not in the short term.

Others' judgement

A common inner monologue consists of how they imagine others assessing them without understanding them.

Poor physical and mental health

They appreciate that the two are connected and they are apt to experience both as just another area of uncertainty in their lives that they, and others, struggle to understand.

MOTIVATORS

Psychological Safety

Feeling they can be heard, understood, and unjudged.

Belonging

Feeling that they are a valued part of something bigger than themselves: friend groups, family, community.

Control

A sense of certainty or controllability in themselves and their environment.



Segment 3: The Connectors

Warm and magnetic social butterflies who delight in learning about people and match-making people with opportunities

DESCRIPTION

The Connectors have learned that when something upsets them they can take action and transform their feelings that way. Perhaps it is this confidence that leads them to be more experimental in their approach, happy for the learning where their experiments 'fail.' They want others to have experiences that build hope, optimism, and a sense of connection too. What separates them from a volunteer coordinator is that they always start with a personal, usually organic, relationship, not the cause. They cultivate strong, trusting connections, and discover people's interests, their needs, and where they might thrive. People sense this, and respond by stretching themselves and their comfort zones.

WHAT WE HEARD

"When it comes to being there, for others, giving what I can, and helping out... it's my way of letting others know that there's always hope."

- PANDORA

"I always go back to [what's] sustainable, right? These things don't happen: poof! Magic! We need to figure out a way to bring community together."

- MICHELLE

"I wanted to become a research scientist. But okay, I realized that's not who I am. I am more of a people's person. I would spend my day talking to people more than you know being in a lab just talking to yourself and rats."

- SANTOSH

PEOPLE LIKE



Pandora
Executive Assistant / Entrepreneur

"I used to believe it, but the world isn't falling apart. Things could be worked on: homelessness, the environment, cost of living."



Liann
Executive Assistant / Entrepreneur

"I really am working on being my best self, redefining things, not being afraid. I want to make sure that I am my gifts and talents."



Santosh
Executive Assistant / Entrepreneur

"Because I have been through so many things, I know how it feels, and I guess I have too much empathy."



Michelle
Executive Assistant / Entrepreneur

"You're not just trying to get people to help you with things. You're trying to connect people with things. I'm a connector of people. That's my whole purpose."

PAIN POINTS

Helplessness

The sense that they have no agency to move closer to a better outcome.

Disconnection

They are upset by influences that diminish, or separate us from, our shared humanity.

Purposelessness

Not being able to contribute to something that they, and the collective, value.

MOTIVATORS

Curiosity

Connectors are driven by curiosity about others and what could be, often in a social sense.

Mutual care

Trusting in others to exchange care, and depend on each other.

Optimism

Connectors can imagine good or improved outcomes where others often do not. It helps them maintain openness and curiosity.



Segment 4: Lifelong Community Builders

Powerhouses who were raised to see themselves as community makers

DESCRIPTION

They have a clear idea of where they make their best contribution, what gives them energy, and how to make it happen; it's second nature. They tend towards a more communitarian outlook and grew up in community-minded families. They use formal and informal means according to their goals. They may align themselves with organizations for camaraderie, resources, sustainability, and risk management. They can be impatient with processes that seem unconnected to the outcome they seek, just as they can be institution-builders who keep mission front and centre. They tend to straddle the divide between planning and action.

WHAT WE HEARD

"The first type of [volunteerism] I was getting interested in was first aid, medical and stuff... I was volunteering with that [ambulance] driver. And also my interest in hockey: I was already coaching the hockey team... And in summer, there was a bunch of us coaching ball teams. There was only one that was married, and he didn't even have any kids!"

- DENNIS

"A lot of our community members know I work over there, so [Nepali-speaking people] come over there all the time with little chores... Let's say to book an appointment to get lab work. The [business] is Nepalese owned, so for them this is just normal. This is part of their workday."

- SANTOSH

"I was part of a bigger organization that was Junior Chamber International. You age out when you're 40. It's fantastic: they've got leadership skills... do you know, one of the best lessons I ever got there is they would support any crazy idea. They would fund ideas. And it was okay to find success in failure"

- MICHELLE

PEOPLE LIKE



PAIN POINTS

Stagnation
Standing still; perpetuating the status quo through repetitive activities, without learning.

Self-Absorption
They see a 'me-focused' society as perilous and self-defeating, both for individuals and the whole.

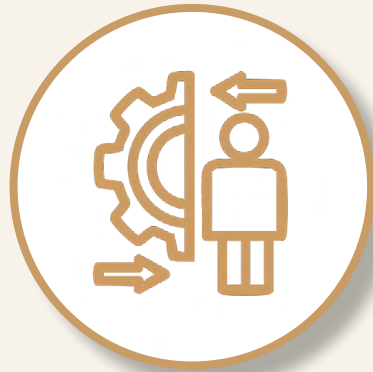
Disappointing others
Failing to follow through on a commitment or be reliable for others.

MOTIVATORS

Pride in Achievement
While not terribly concerned about personal recognition, they revel in a project coming to fruition and knowing they helped.

Cooperation
They take particular delight in work that engages a lot of people to contribute and benefit in small ways.

Mutual care
Trusting in others to exchange care, and depend on each other.



Segment 5: Transitioning Contributors

Temporarily occupied with personal relationships and re-evaluation of purpose and focus

DESCRIPTION

Individuals who have temporarily slowed down or pressed pause on a lifetime habit of community contribution, in order to attend to something a bit closer to home. Their current focus might be a new marriage, parenting young children, career transition, or other moments of significant life transition that are requiring some adjustment in their use of time and energy. There is every reason to believe that they will eventually go back to volunteering. Nonetheless, the Transitioning Contributors present an opportunity to consider how volunteering can help people navigate life transitions, finding clarity as well as new rituals and routines. To what extent can volunteerism anticipate such shifts in ways that maintain a supportive connection through life stages?

WHAT WE HEARD

"Typically I would have been [doing] a lot more community service. Currently, my kids are at an age where they need me more than the community does."

- JOSH

"I had to say that I couldn't actually help with youth group... and it was because I was looking at buying property and working extra to finish up my projects... so it was all for the purpose of looking forward to getting married."

- JOEL

"That's probably a big reason why I haven't been involved in something recently because... I am just kind of at capacity in my life already and I don't feel like I would be so much use where I'm at right now because I am just so busy."

- JANE

PEOPLE LIKE



PAIN POINTS

Scarcity

Feeling their attention and presence is sought beyond what they can offer.

Disappointing others

Failing to follow through on a commitment or be reliable for others.

Exhaustion

Whether in response to long hours of work and domestic care or a sense of misspent energy, many are responding to their own exhaustion.

MOTIVATORS

Choice

Practicing agency in putting time towards top priorities and energizing activities.

Learning and Personal Growth

Attracted to learning and personal growth that could help them navigate and grow through the challenges of their current transition.

Passion

At this point in time, they want to feel committed to what they do, acting out of love, not obligation.



Segment 6: Experience Alchemists

They've come through great difficulties and feel connected to others who are struggling

DESCRIPTION

The Experience Alchemists have come through a great life challenge - homelessness, incarceration, depression - and they have transformed it into compassion and commitment. They are more likely to operate outside of formal systems, creating their own initiatives, and contributing to inclusive subcultural spaces where they can stay true to their values without fearing judgement and further marginalization. Nonetheless, they are willing to work with a system that listens, open-mindedly. They tend to be people with great humility – but they aren't in the habit of joining organized volunteer initiatives without clear and dependable signals that their perspective is desired. They represent tremendous value to organizations willing to make relationships and shared values a top priority.

WHAT WE HEARD

"I got looked down upon by everybody... Being on the streets taught me a lot of things, most of which was my own value, my own self worth... What I like to do with people in my community is try to give them hope."

-PANDORA

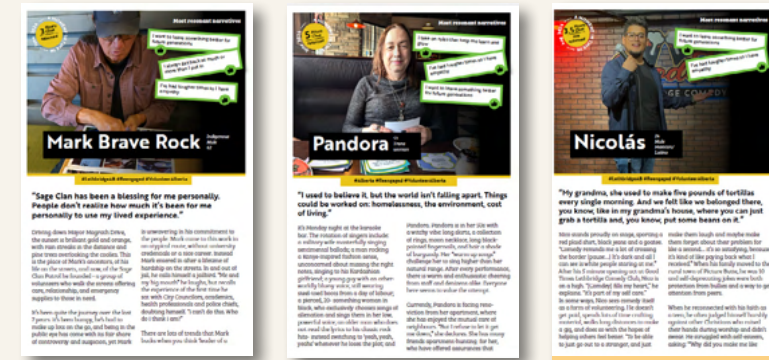
"'Kimmapiypitsin means 'to wait for,' literal translation... The collective society cannot move on unless they do their best to help these people [that] need to be helped... or else it will come back to haunt you if you don't do your best to help."

- MARK

"During the times where I was like, not having a good time, I would just put on my favourite comedian... and then just laughing for that one or two seconds... Like, Oh, my God, this feels good... So to be able to just go to a stranger and just make them laugh and maybe make them forget about their problem for like a second... it's so

-NICOLÁS

PEOPLE LIKE



PAIN POINTS

Disconnection

They are upset by influences that diminish, or separate us from, our shared humanity.

Co-optation

The sense that their resources, energy, or voice are being mobilized towards something misaligned with their values.

Hopelessness

The sense that they have no agency to move closer to a better outcome.

MOTIVATORS

Profound connection

The sense of having touched someone deeply, momentarily altering their outlook.

Wellbeing

Feeling in touch with their own sources of meaning and energy.

Spirituality

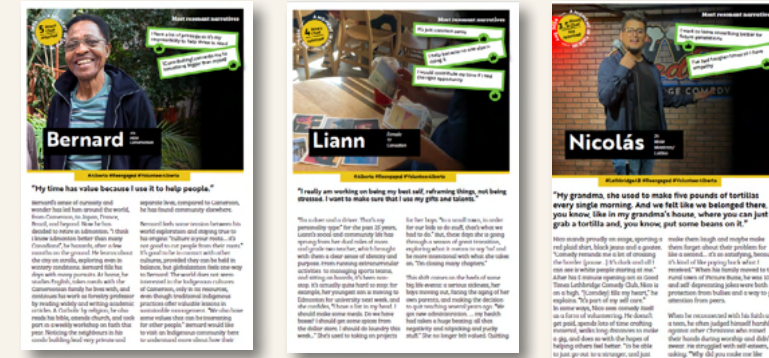
Connection to a greater power; access to the sacred.



Segment 7: Curious Joiners

Curiosity and a belief in collective power drives them to seek out new communities and pitch in

PEOPLE LIKE



DESCRIPTION

The Curious Joiners are the minority of people who seek out opportunities and sign up, or who reply to the email that asks for help filling a role. Their default understanding of agency is collective rather than an individual. If they want something to happen, they first ask, 'who could I join forces with?' They are generally curious about the world and it moves them to engage with others. They are confident talking to strangers and don't over-think it. Sometimes they are left holding the bag when others are looking out for their own self interest, which can be frustrating. They appreciate the work it takes to organize a group to do something worthwhile.

WHAT WE HEARD

"I would join only if it's quite interesting... I got an advertisement, online, and I applied... for the tree planting and for becoming a member of this alumni [volunteer association]."

-BERNARD

"I would love to have just paid, and then my kids could do things. And I couldn't. I had to do it, so that my kids had the opportunities [in a small town.] ... I've got three of these little boys and I'm like 'this is killing me!'... Yes, I'm going to volunteer again, and I want to make sure it's fun."

- LIANN

"I believe in community. We weren't designed to do this alone. I'm a single person that doesn't have kids. I'm going to need somebody to take care of me, right? So wouldn't it be better if I make friends with the 27 year old...?"

- MICHELLE

PAIN POINTS

Disconnection

They are upset by influences that diminish, or separate us from, our shared humanity.

Uselessness

Not being able to contribute to something that they, and the collective, value.

Idleness

Being without a pursuit or meaningful activity. They are not big on rest as stillness.

MOTIVATORS

Joyfulness

An attitude towards both work and togetherness.

Learning & Novelty

Pursuing their curiosity to discover new people, places, ways of doing, and skills.

Mutual care

Trusting in others to exchange care, and depend on each other.

Actionable Insights

What are actionable insights?

An insight is a hunch, rooted in the data, about what might be going on. It tells us where to focus attention or where to act.

We look for a particular kind of insight: an actionable insight. Beyond mere observation or fact, an actionable insight hints at the nature of the opportunity space offering some sort of design specs for building an alternative. It might tell us about the kind of relational dynamic that a particular segment is attracted to, the conditions under which another segment is likely to take a risk they believe could pay off, or the way that a formidable barrier might be overcome, perhaps based on what works in another area of people's lives. Actionable insights usually emerge from the in-context details of people's day-to-day lives, along with identifying the sweet spot between people's needs and organizational needs.

From story gathering, we've pulled out five core insights:

- 1 Personal growth is not an individual activity
- 2 Endemic Social Awkwardness
- 3 Stinking Thinking
- 4 Joyful Commitment
- 5 Roles you can bump into



INSIGHT 01

Personal growth is not an individual activity

Currently, self-care seems to be competing with community care, but it's a false tension

In our ethnographic interviews, we heard the term “personal growth” left, right, and centre from people in hot pursuit of it. There are multiple markets that target the desire. The “personal development” market defines its customer goals as to “improve oneself, often through learning new skills, gaining knowledge, and enhancing one’s abilities and qualities.”⁸ It often overlaps with a wellness “lifestyle” market characterized by fitness routines, mental health advocacy, and new habit formation, the focus of so many social media influencers. Both markets are large and growing.



On the ground, we found that The Privately Overwhelmed segment, especially, interpreted personal growth as entwined with self-care and often in tension with commitments to others, around which it might be difficult to set boundaries or protect one’s scarce energy. Messaging around the importance of individual self-care is dense and ubiquitous, especially on social media; however, researchers and practitioners are speaking up in favour of more relational understandings of human development. Dr. Terry Real (psychotherapist, speaker, author), and Dr. Anna Lembke (professor of psychiatry, author) argue that our culture of hyper focus on the individual is feeding a lot of pathologies that ultimately lead to destructive and addictive behavior, because we’re lonely, and disconnected from our own needs and others’.



Dr. Anna Lembke



Dr. Terry Real

Dr. Real champions personal growth⁹ through relationship building and Dr. Lembke tells us identification with a collective is a much needed break from the unnatural and culturally-induced focus on self.¹⁰ From this evidence-based perspective, community service and volunteerism can offer important opportunities, not only to develop one’s skills and personal qualities, but to connect to others and stave off depression and addictive behaviours.

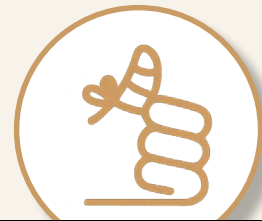
⁸ The, “Personal Development Global Market Report 2024,” Thebusinessresearchcompany.com (The Business Research Company, 2024),

⁹ Terrence Real, Us : How Moving Relationships beyond You and Me Creates More Love, Passion, and Understanding (New York: Goop Press/Rodale, 2022).

¹⁰ Anna Lembke, Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence (New York: Dutton, 2021)

INSIGHT 01

How it affects different segments

THE TENDER
WOUNDED

They are great autodidacts but lack skills & confidence socially

"They won't let me touch vehicles [at my apprenticeship], it's very sad because I already know how to do all of it... I finished work today and I was like, I just want to go crawl in a hole and bawl my eyes out."

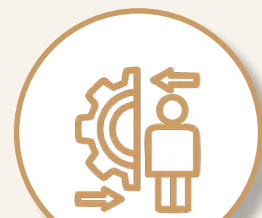
- MANNA

THE PRIVATELY
OVERWHELMED

Feel goal of self-care is in tension with volunteerism

"You're having a tough day... you have that feeling in your mind that you feel obligated to do something that you're not comfortable doing. That can sometimes eat at you...."

- MITCHELL

THE
TRANSITIONING
CONTRIBUTORS

They are re-evaluating how and where to spend time in nourishing, values-aligned ways

"I would like to be able to put aside an hour a week to do something specific to help, right? But that's hard to find when you're in such a small community."

- JANE

THE CURIOUS
JOINERS

As life-long learners with a collective orientation, they are a great resource for re-framing personal growth.

"My time has value because I use it to help people."

- BERNARD



THE CONNECTORS

As warm and relational types with people smarts, they are a great resource for building inclusive, motivated, tight knit community

"This lady kept judging my plants, and I say, 'hey, what do you do with all your time?' She's like, 'I don't know. I'm retired.' I said 'I really need somebody to help me with these plants.' Yeah, that's how [our helping relationship] evolved."

-MICHELLE

What we heard from an
organizational perspective

Most volunteer recruitment programs focus on recruiting & training individuals. The benefits of volunteering are increasingly framed at an individual level: "adding to your resume, skills, a reference letter."

"They want to know, what am I going to get out of this volunteer partnership? And so we do tell them straight up, we will give you letters of reference, building that resume... And so we're really trying to put the emphasis on like, this is all about you, the volunteer."

-NONPROFIT STAFF MEMBER

INSIGHT 02

Endemic Social Awkwardness

The pandemic's in the rearview mirror but we're still scrolling instead of hanging out together.

"The often isolating experience of the COVID 19 pandemic led many to pay more attention to existing research on what happens when we spend a lot of time alone. This research included ship crews, prisoners, hermits, soldiers, astronauts, and polar explorers, showing that "extended periods of isolation [affect our] social skills like muscles that atrophy from lack of use." When we return to social life we report feeling "more socially anxious, impulsive, awkward, and intolerant."¹¹



Jake Ernst

Jake Ernst, a social worker and clinical director of Straight Up Health in Toronto, says this is because extended time alone "changes our executive functioning, which happens in the front of our brain, and it actually starts to impact the way that we can connect, think, plan, organize and socially engage with other people."¹²

Out of 14 people in our sample whom we asked directly, eight expressed that they feel very awkward about putting themselves forward as a volunteer. Another two felt that it sometimes was.

There are some related factors prolonging our awkwardness. We are spending less time hanging out with others, more time on screen. "Third places" – locations outside of work and home where socializing takes place, are disappearing. None of this means our need for social connection is less, but we see the attempts to satisfy that need as more costly. Former US. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has diagnosed a "social recession."¹³ What is the societal treatment or stimulus package for a social recession?

¹¹ Kate Murphy, "We're All Socially Awkward Now," The New York Times, September 1, 2020, sec. Sunday Review, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/01/sunday-review/coronavirus-socially-awkward.html>.

¹² Katie Dangerfield, "The Loneliness Epidemic: How Social Isolation Can Damage Our Minds and Bodies," Global News, May 14, 2023, <https://globalnews.ca/news/9684469/loneliness-crisis-canada-covid/>

¹³ Shaunice Ajiwe, "Four Years after the Pandemic Began, Are We All Just Awkward Now?," Philadelphia Magazine, April 14, 2024,

INSIGHT 02

How it affects different segments

THE TENDER
WOUNDED

Eager to contribute, but identified as 'socially awkward' by others, they withdraw to avoid judgement.

"It's hard for me to make friends. It always has been."

- MILLY

THE PRIVATELY
OVERWHELMED

Social anxiety is a major factor inhibiting the prosocial behaviours that could promote a sense of belonging.

"When I was forced to be home [during COVID] and... not go out a lot, I think my mindset kind of changed about what I enjoyed. And just, within the last, literally, three, four days, I'm starting to actually force myself to go out and visit friends, which has been uncomfortable, but it's getting better, and I'm really enjoying it."

- MITCHELL

THE LIFELONG
COMMUNITY
BUILDERS

Constant in their dedication to community, they have habits and attitudes to model for those who want to find their way back.

"You know, I can't pinpoint the volunteer things that I exactly done, because it didn't feel like volunteerism, it seems like a will to do something."

- DENNIS

THE
TRANSITIONING
CONTRIBUTORS

Focusing their energies on something they might not define as relational, but which volunteering might help them advance through relational development.

"[I'm] having to learn how to adult: saving money; prioritizing stuff, like not much computer games anymore; trying to get a driver's license."

-NICOLÁS

"So I am really working on being my best self, reframing things, like not being stressed."

-LIANN

What we heard from an
organizational perspective

Worry that adding to a utilitarian intake process will make it too long and turn people off but also feel that a stronger basis of relational trust would meet a need of many potential volunteers.

"I try to keep it light-hearted and show appreciation. The interview is quite long, people can feel intimidated."

-NONPROFIT STAFF MEMBER

INSIGHT 03

Stinking Thinking

We're all over-thinking volunteerism, and the remedy is action.

Overwhelmingly, the people we spoke to had positive memories of volunteering and how it made them feel. Most who were not currently volunteering were thinking about it to some degree, an activity that didn't seem to boost motivation to action. Stinking thinking refers to the unhelpful self-talk that keeps us feeling stuck and pessimistic about the potential or perceived outcomes of our actions. We observed another kind of thinking that got in people's way. It might derive from the cultural trend in pursuit of purposeful work: we worry about what kind of volunteerism will be most meaningful or impactful, or the best fit, when really, most kinds of connection to our community would improve our lives.



Conversely, many of those in the Lifelong Community Builders segment had a well worn feedback loop: something upsets them, or makes them feel hopeless or despairing; they find a way to take action and invite others; their sense of personal and collective agency increases, leading them to take more actions.

As Robin Wall Kimmerer asserts in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the antidote to panic is not talk and awareness-raising, but getting our hands dirty: "Despair is paralysis. It robs us of agency. It blind us to our power and the power of the earth."¹⁴

¹⁴ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 318.

INSIGHT 03

How it affects different segments

THE TENDER
WOUNDED

Know what they should do but psych themselves out because their self-esteem has taken some hits.

"I wasn't involved enough. I kind of sort of wanted to volunteer for the Humane Society, but I didn't actually pursue that very much."

- MILLY

THE PRIVATELY
OVERWHELMED

Have lost touch with the feeling of belonging & contributing to something bigger.

"It's hard [to act] because I find myself almost overwhelming myself with how many things I care about and wish weren't the way that they are."

- RYE

THE EXPERIENCE
ALCHEMISTS

An org focus on paperwork and risk mitigation can feel discordant with their values, which tell them to jump right in.

"You guys tell me I'm 'volunteering.' no, I just do this because you're supposed to, and I've been designated somehow, some way, so I do it."

- MARK

What we heard from an
organizational perspective

Pressure to "make an impact" or "change a life" can turn away volunteers.

"The resounding feedback we got was that our messaging was too high pressure for the volunteers. It used to be like, 'You can change a child's life.' That's a lot of pressure to put on one person. 'I don't want to be responsible for changing a child's life. I just want to hang out with them.' And what we know from our data is that that's all it takes."

-NONPROFIT STAFF MEMBER

INSIGHT 04

Joyful Commitment

The bar for commitment may be high, but people still want it.

When volunteers are scarce or slow to jump on board, it's hard to know what's behind that reluctance. Should organizations change their approach? Should they create more flexible roles? We observed that it can be hard for individuals to move from contemplating volunteering to taking action, but that doesn't mean they want a low-commitment gig. Those we spoke to who were having trouble acting on their desire to volunteer agreed that a formal and regular commitment was what would work best for them. And people made an interesting distinction: they feel very good about "commitment," and very adverse to the notion of "obligation." The difference was about their level of intrinsic desire and motivation (commitment connoted high motivation).



Douglas Atkin

Perhaps the need to feel confident about committing joyfully is what makes it difficult to start.

As a society, it's in our best interests to cultivate inclusive communities that cross lines of difference, as well as communities based on shared experience, identity, and like values. Douglas Atkin, author of the Glue Project says that when people join a community, they ask two questions "1) Are they like me? And 2) Will they like me?"¹⁵ Becoming a volunteer for a cause or an organization likely invokes these self-conscious questions which people want an answer to before they commit. Another way to think about it is that people want to know a community is as committed to them, as they are to it. So, there needs to be a way to get to know each other, authentically.

¹⁵ Sean Bolton, "Why Do People Join and Stay Part of a Community (and How to Support Them)," about:community, July 24, 2014, <https://blog.mozilla.org/community/2014/07/24/why-do-people-join-and-stay-part-of-a-community-and-how-to-support-them/>.

INSIGHT 04

How it affects different segments

THE TENDER
WOUNDED

Pessimistic about achieving mutual belonging and acceptance.

"I'm anticipating that [any new] person is going to pull away. And I don't know why that is."

- MILLY

THE PRIVATELY
OVERWHELMED

General outlook is that the world is a threatening place.

"It's a scary world out there for...even just having short hair, sometimes people look at me like I said the nastiest thing."

- RYE

THE
TRANSITIONING
CONTRIBUTORS

Are pruning and cultivating their time use and thus have a high need to ensure an opportunity matches them well.

"I have to have a complete understanding of what I'm contributing to. I find that with big organizations... I struggle with that sometimes, because you hear about all these things online like, 'this charity had this huge scandal...'"

- JANE

What we heard from an organizational perspective

See weariness of commitment as a major reason that people drop out of the volunteer intake process.

"We're dealing with a 50% drop off rate right now. ...Usually it's them kind of saying, 'You know what? This is maybe more of a commitment than I initially thought, and I'm not interested in pursuing it further.'"

-NONPROFIT STAFF MEMBER

INSIGHT 05

Roles you can bump into

Most people don't go looking (very far) for a volunteer role.



According to the 2023-2024 Survey of Albertans, 42.2% of Albertans who volunteered in the last year learned about volunteering opportunities from friends, family, or neighbours; another 31% from past experience. Only 8.8% found opportunities through a web search, and 3.4% from volunteer centres. Everything between those two extremes was mediated by some kind of existing connection.¹⁶ This mirrors what we found: of those who were interested in volunteering but not currently volunteering, they had encountered past opportunities through family, school, church, or being scouted. Scouting happened when young camp goers were asked, individually, if they would consider becoming a volunteer counsellor, or when helping out informally led someone to

say, "You're good at this. We could use someone like you over here!"¹⁷

Others were mandated to volunteer as part of a program, or encouraged to do so by someone in a support role. Whether mandatory or by personal invitation, these volunteer roles were recalled as mostly positive. Of the people we met at activations in Edmonton who said they would like to volunteer more, none of them took us up on an invitation to visit the volunteer centre together, though several were willing to meet with us to chat. Why would that be? These folks were contemplating volunteering, but they didn't seem ready for planning or action; they were still trying to build up motivation. They may have perceived the volunteer centre as a place for those ready to commit.

¹⁶ "Survey of Albertans : Online Survey - Open Government," Alberta.ca (Government of Alberta, 2023), <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/survey-of-albertans-online-report>.

¹⁷ Indeed, most people who had informal helping roles also took on formal volunteering roles. The more people contribute, the more they contribute!

How it affects different segments



THE TENDER WOUNDED

Need to satisfy themselves that they will be accepted and valued before seeking a role.

"I was able to meet [the founder] at the level that he was at, talking about these concepts that no one really had any idea about.... I was like, 'he's cool!'"

- MILLY

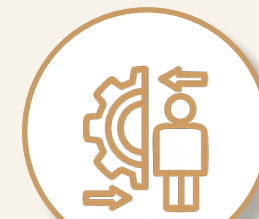


THE PRIVATELY OVERWHELMED

Aren't feeling much personal agency at present and are more likely to engage as part of a high trust duo or group.

"I really, really enjoyed [making yarn bugs for school fundraiser]... It was actually a really good memory for me and my mom. And it was fun because a bunch of my friends wanted them."

- RYE



THE TRANSITIONING CONTRIBUTORS

Are the people who scout, match, and refer. How can organizational networks work better with them?

"If I could get paid to be a connector?! [sighs with delight] You need something? Dah, dah, dah-dah dah: there you go! You know this person? I know this person!"

-MICHELLE

INSIGHT 05

How it affects different segments



**THE EXPERIENCE
ALCHEMISTS**

Have networks of people with lived and living experience waiting for the signal that their know-how is valued and welcomed.

"I've just used my old experiences, where I'm from, where I'm at, and it's worked for me, and it's helped [me] guide other people, other volunteers... Those six [volunteers], they come from the same area I'm coming from."

- MARK

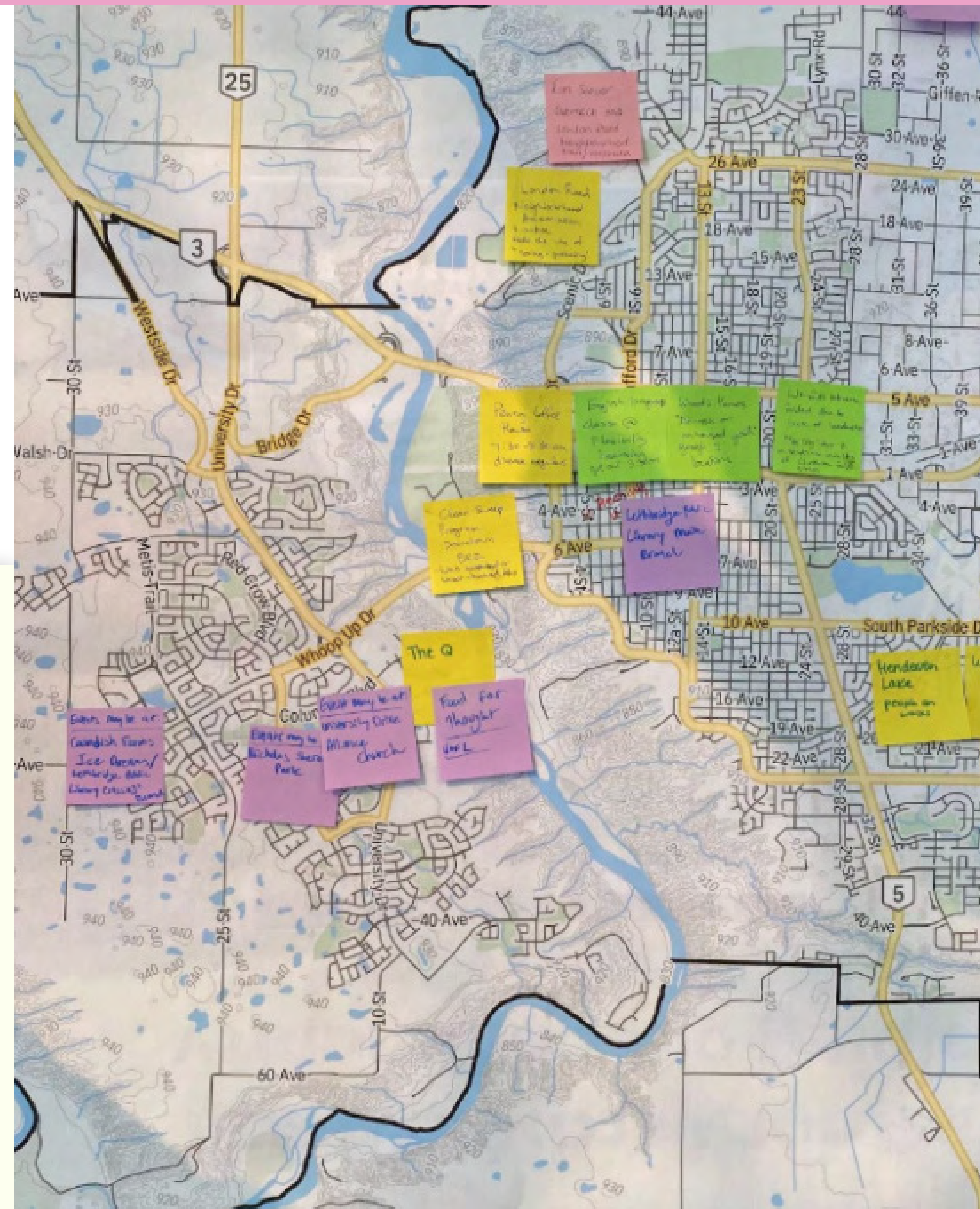
What we heard from an organizational perspective

Trying many techniques to find volunteers, including social media, billboards, TV and radio ads, info tables at universities or festivals, and asking existing volunteers to be ambassadors.

"Honestly, like a lot of our job is just trying to figure out other avenues [to find people.]"

"We started a volunteer ambassador program because we did a survey a couple years ago, and the number one reason people signed up was because of somebody they knew."

-NONPROFIT STAFF MEMBER



Opportunity Areas

What are opportunity areas?

An opportunity area is a promising area for exploration and testing emerging insights. It is not a recommendation so much as a provocation: ‘what if we were to...?’

Design is a process of inquiry, in which we use data to ask increasingly better and more specific questions. In a more traditional research process we attempt to validate our data at an earlier point, in order to present recommendations or findings. In design, the point of validation occurs later, through prototyping, which is another stage of research.

Why the difference? Design recognizes that the devil is in the details; specifically, the devil is in implementation. The loss of fidelity from idea to implementation is unavoidable: an idea is transformed and developed through implementation, raising new questions and presenting new opportunities. Designerly approaches to social problem-solving emphasize prototyping as a phase rich in learning, when we can begin to validate insights and opportunities that emerged through the initial Gathering Insights phase.

Designing at multiple levels

What people do is shaped by their environments. We can think about the factors that influence our attitudes and behaviours as a set of nesting dolls. Closest to us are our family, friends, neighbourhoods, schools, and workplaces. Next up are the policies that enable or constrain our family, friends, neighbourhoods, schools, and workplaces. That includes everything from zoning protocols to welfare rates to labour law. And then there are the cultural norms and institutions that guide policies and practices. Welfare policy, for instance, is a product of our broader economic system and cultural ideas about the value of work.

To influence an attitude and behaviour like volunteering, then, we need to be able to intervene at multiple levels. An Opportunity Area offers a provocation and presents a set of ideas for what could be. These ideas, or “what ifs” target different levels of a system, from practices that volunteers would experience directly, to those that operate at the level of policy and culture. Prototyped together, they may be able to shift the conditions of the voluntary sector. This is the route to more lasting, systemic change.



18 Built on the work of Small, Harding, and Lamont. Mario Luis Small, David J. Harding, and Michèle Lamont, "Reconsidering Culture and Poverty," The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 629, no. 1 (May 11, 2010): 6–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716210362077>.

Getting to cultural change

We consistently find that culture eats policy and practice for breakfast -- meaning that the beliefs and big ideas we hold determine how we write policy and what practices are valued. The cultural change wheel says that a society's prosocial behaviours can be enabled or hindered by the rules society sets, the narratives and messages we hear, the interactions and routines we have, and the roles we assume. Rather than see community contribution as the responsibility of programs and services, this wheel reframes enabling contribution as the responsibility of our collective culture. We can think of rules, norms, narratives, interactions, routines, and roles as cultural change tools that influence how we relate to the social collective.¹⁹

¹⁹ Built on the work of Small, Harding, and Lamont. Mario Luis Small, David J. Harding, and Michèle Lamont, "Reconsidering Culture and Poverty," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 629, no. 1 (May 11, 2010): 6–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716210362077>.



What are opportunity areas?

Strengthening motivation, capability & opportunity.

Our research has reinforced over and over that programs don't change people: relationships do. Perhaps we could even say, good interpersonal interactions. Cultural levers of change are powerful, and they need to be complemented by equally strong interaction design on the ground. Even small interactions can transform what we think is possible and desirable. Professor Susan Michie of University College London offers us a framework for the conditions required for individuals to experiment with, or adopt a new behaviour (e.g. volunteering); namely, a sense of capability, opportunity, and motivation.²⁰ Ideas presented within opportunity areas are designed to address these needs at the individual level.

Across opportunity areas, we're arguing for investment in volunteer infrastructure. As Hager and Searing remind us in *Nonprofit Quarterly*, "There's a nonprofit maxim that says, 'Volunteers are not free.' To take your nonprofit down, all you have to do is foster the idea among your colleagues that volunteers actually are free."²¹ But why should it be on the shoulders of individual nonprofits, or even the social sector, to invest in volunteers, when contribution is a public good? Civic participation, taking part in a cause that stirs you, and connecting to others through acts of care, is an important expression of our shared humanity. How, then, might we repurpose existing volunteer infrastructure and build capacity for volunteering to function as a site for relational learning -- an experiential way to meet our need for meaning, purpose and esteem?

²⁰ Susan Michie, Maartje M van Stralen, and Robert West, "The Behaviour Change Wheel: A New Method for Characterising and Designing Behaviour Change Interventions," *Implementation Science* 6, no. 42 (April 23, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-6-42>.

²¹ Mark Hager and Elizabeth Searing, "10 Ways to Kill Your Nonprofit," *Non Profit News | Nonprofit Quarterly*, January 6, 2015, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/10-ways-to-kill-your-nonprofit/>.

Taken together, we've generated 5 opportunity areas for further co-design and prototyping.

1



Volunteerism as relational school of life

2



Recruitment in the wild

3



Public health partnerships

4



Stronger beginnings

5



Let's get real about risk

The next pages highlight 15 ideas for deeper discussion and design

5

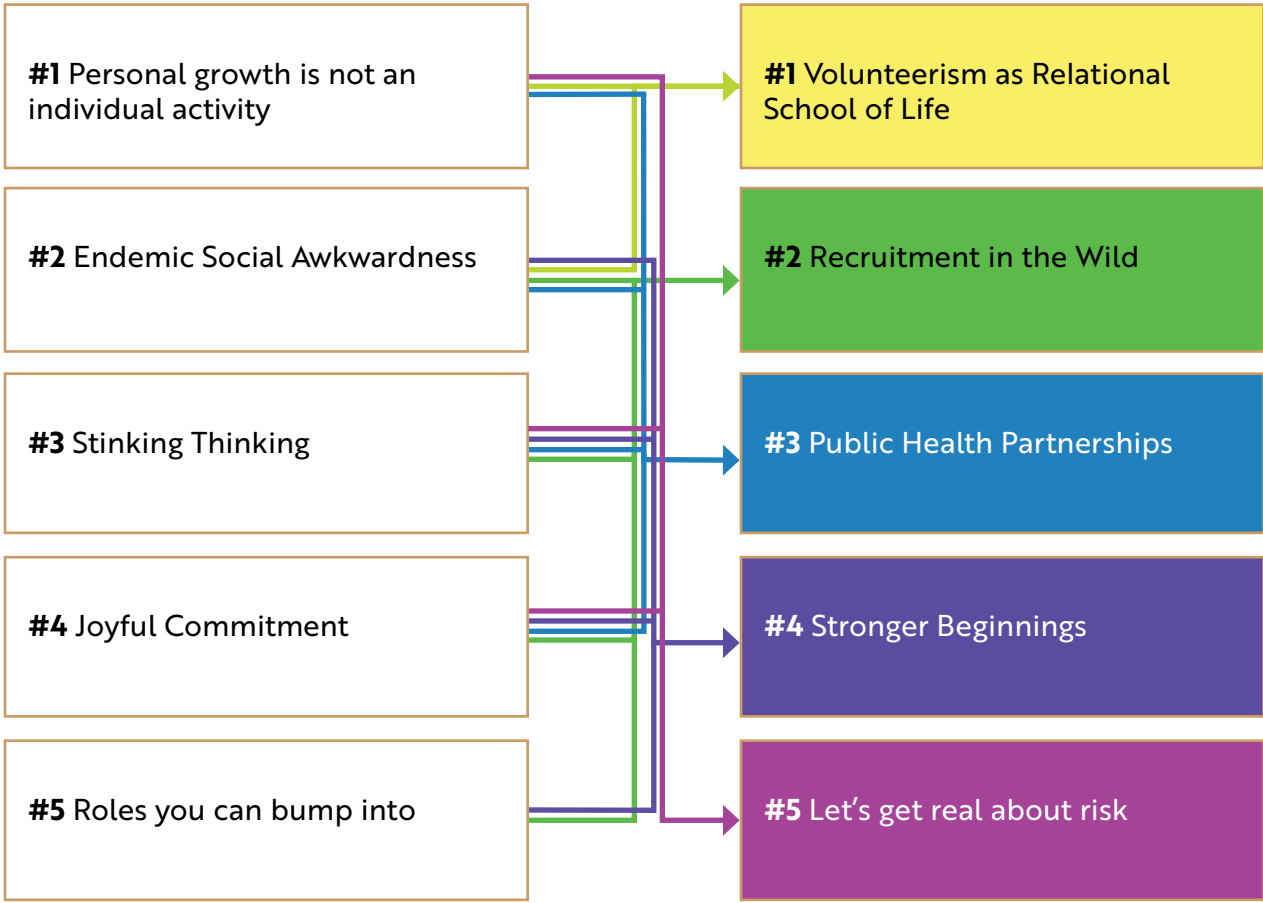
ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

tie to

5

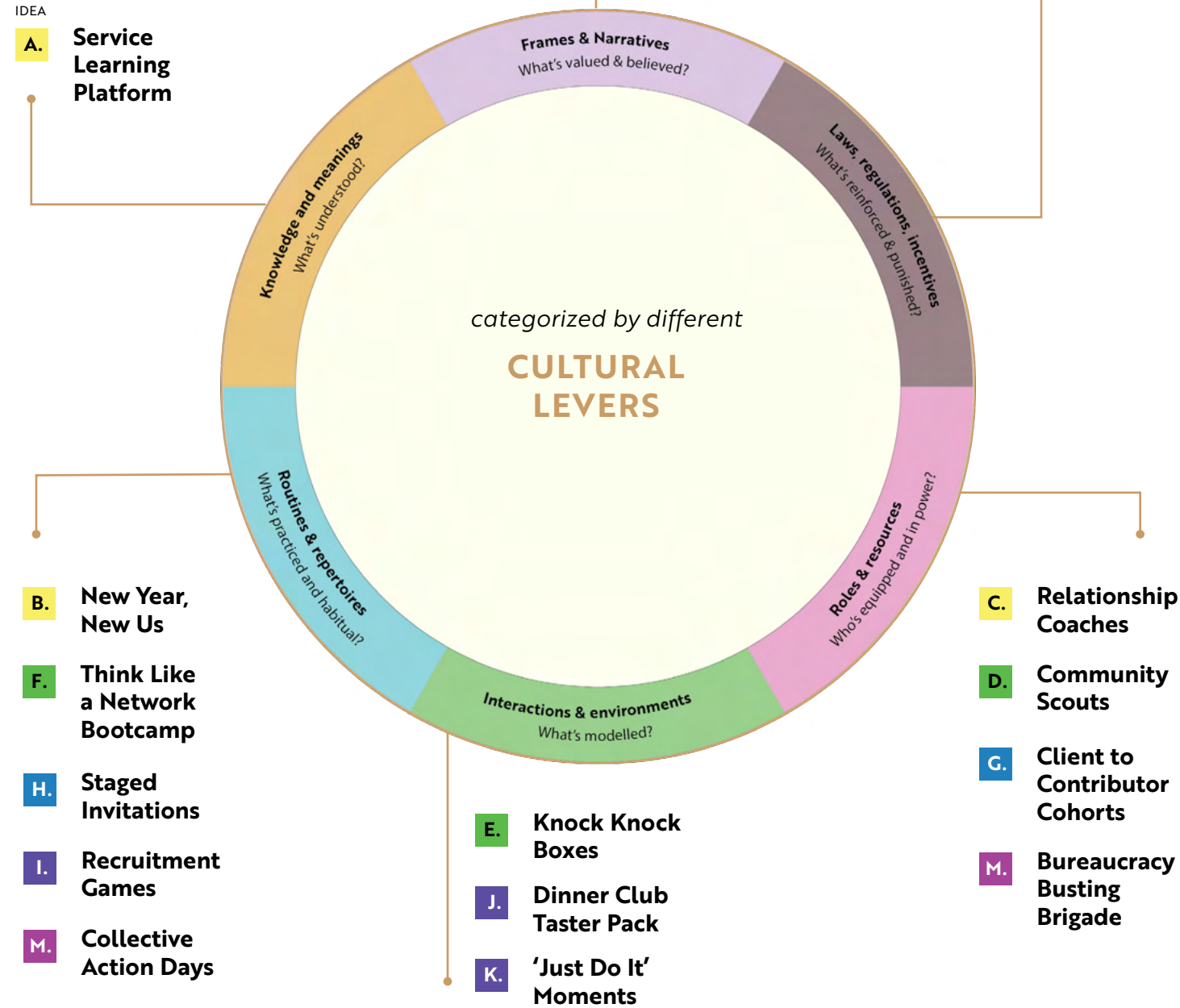
OPPORTUNITY AREAS

tie to



15

DESIGN IDEAS



OPPORTUNITY 01

Volunteerism as Relational School of Life



What if we invested in ways to explicitly blend volunteerism with personal development, emphasising experiential learning of relational and soft skills?

WHAT'S THE SHIFT?

FROM

Volunteerism as an altruistic act

Volunteer support organizations as matchmakers

TO

Volunteerism as a site of valuable learning about how to function and excel as a member of a collective -- building verifiable skills, relationships, confidence, and sense of purpose

Volunteer support organizations as service learning hubs

RELATES TO INSIGHTS

- #1 Personal growth is not an individual activity
- #2 Endemic Social Awkwardness
- #3 Stinking Thinking
- #4 Joyful Commitment
- #5 Roles you can bump into

INTERVENTIONS



OPPORTUNITY 02

Recruitment in the Wild

What if we flipped the script on volunteer recruitment?

Instead of putting it out there that volunteers are wanted, hoping people will identify a desire to volunteer and step forward, we build networks of super connectors who can spot & boost motivation and make personal requests on the strength of existing relationships? We reframe “organizations are looking for volunteers” to “Our community needs people with your passion and dedication to youth sport and you’re looking to grow your leadership skills. I’d like to introduce you to an organization I care about.”



RELATES TO INSIGHTS

#1 Personal growth is not an individual activity

#2 Endemic Social Awkwardness

#3 Stinking Thinking

#4 Joyful Commitment

#5 Roles you can bump into

WHAT’S THE SHIFT?

FROM

Volunteer intake

TO

Scouting networks

INTERVENTIONS



Roles & Resources

1 #new role

Community Scouts

How might we upskill, support, and incentivize hairdressers, pharmacists, karaoke hosts, and other natural connectors to function as scouts & bridgers: spotting when people around them have strengths they could share? These natural connectors might receive bite-sized learning on techniques to broker people together, and in exchange, receive free tickets to community events and small grants to host gatherings that build relationships. Think tupperware parties for contribution!

Interactions & Environments

2

#campaign

#toolkit

Knock Knock Boxes

What if we created a Doorknocking Box for volunteer centres and volunteer-engaging organizations with all the scripts & props you would need to organize a group of neighbours to knock on doors to talk to fellow neighbours about local opportunities to contribute. The script might sound like: ‘Here are some places to lend a hand. What are you into?’ This would include adaptable templates and tools for recording information learned.

Routines & Repertoires

3

#training program

Think Like A Network Bootcamp

What if we developed a ‘Think Like a Network Bootcamp’ for volunteer centres and volunteer-engaging organizations, introducing creative techniques to shift from volunteer recruitment to network building, and offering backend tools to track community members’ interests and needs?

OPPORTUNITY 03

Public Health Partnerships

What if we conceptualized community contribution as core to our health and wellbeing?

We know that cooperation has been key to human survival, and that we have a real need for purpose, esteem, and belonging. A successful culture helps humans meet their needs. However, many aspects of mass culture may be influencing us in ways that are detrimental to our health: to eat food that doesn't nourish us, to exploit the natural systems that sustain us, and to focus on ourselves over our connection to others. In the Canadian charitable tradition, we have often framed volunteerism as something we give selflessly for the benefit of others; increasingly, volunteer-engaging organizations are promoting what individuals get from volunteering (e.g skills, better resumes, reference letters). It's time we recognize that volunteering should and does also nourish the volunteer's social and mental health.



RELATES TO INSIGHTS

- #1 Personal growth is not an individual activity
- #2 Endemic Social Awkwardness
- #3 Stinking Thinking
- #4 Joyful commitment

#5 Roles you can bump into

WHAT'S THE SHIFT?

FROM

Volunteering as altruism

TO

Volunteering as a public health tool

INTERVENTIONS



Roles & Resources

1 #new role

Client to Contributor Cohorts

How might we enable a visible pathway for people who are or have been recipients of services, and may not have a clean criminal record, but are ready to reflect on their experience, identify skills they want to build, and try out roles that allow them to give back? Quarterly province-wide cohorts led by coaches could encourage and support this transition, working with volunteer centres and organizations to find the right starter roles.

Routines & Repetitoires

Frames & Narratives

2

#policy

Staged Invitations

What if we partnered with hospitals, schools, workplaces, and volunteer centres to develop & distribute invitations to contribute that were aligned to life events and stages? For instance, when parents give birth to a child, how might they receive a delightful basket with invitations to mutual aid groups, babysitting co-ops, toy libraries, and peer support groups? What if when kids reached school age, families were invited to take part in volunteering roles they could do together? At the other end of the spectrum, how might workplaces gift retirees a basket with invitations to contribute and connect in new ways? Imagine if volunteering opportunities were packaged and promoted across the life course -- the more enjoyable cousins of vaccinations, paps, and prostate exams?

OPPORTUNITY 04

Stronger Beginnings

The non-profit sector has become increasingly savvy about communicating its message, a necessity in the age of distraction.

This includes moving beyond endless awareness-raising to clear calls for action. And we can get savvier still. Our research suggests that people are interested in contributing to their communities and esteem this behaviour highly, but have trouble bridging the gap between contemplation and action. How might we create more moments that crystalize motivation and lead to trying out a role, in a context that strengthens people’s sense of competence & control (self-efficacy)? Workplace volunteerism is an example of how the sector has helped people take up volunteering behaviours without having to plan for it themselves. How can we create more opportunities for people to move through ambivalence so they can play rewarding roles in their communities?



RELATES TO INSIGHTS

#1 Personal growth is not an individual activity

#2 Endemic Social Awkwardness

#3 Stinking Thinking

#4 Joyful Commitment

#5 Roles you can bump into

WHAT'S THE SHIFT?

FROM

'Come see us when you're ready'

TO

Actively developing volunteer readiness

INTERVENTIONS



Routines & Repertoires

1 #practice

Recruitment games

These days, people can feel bombarded with information, asks, and unspoken expectations. Trust, on the other hand, is built from shared experience & mutual vulnerability. For people seeking a sense of purpose, yet afraid of putting themselves out there (whether for fear of judgement or failure), building trust early on could be a deciding factor. How might we co-create a set of interactive games and exhibit booth materials for recruitment events, volunteer onboarding, and debriefs? These games and materials would be designed to surface top values, foster a moment of mutual sharing, and could draw on practices from improv theatre, participatory exhibitions, and public space activation design.

Interactions & Environments

2

#program

#cohort

Dinner Club Taster Pack

How might we create taster experiences around different typologies of volunteer roles, with varied settings and schedules, and package them as a journey that a group of friends, students, or strangers might sample over a 3 or 6-month period? Think Oprah's Book Club! Groups might be supported to meet monthly for a meal with conversation prompts that encourage reflection around what people are learning and experiencing.

Interactions & Environments

3

#app

#website

'Just Do It' Moments

Micro volunteering refers to completing small tasks that contribute to a larger project such as signing a petition, liking or sharing a social media post, picking up trash, writing letters to hospitalized patients, and tagging photos online to help visually impaired people. How might we use micro-volunteering tasks as a gateway to more sustained roles? Perhaps pop-ups at the bank, grocery store, or gym could engage people using a micro-volunteering app or website that tracks your contributions, rewards milestones, and directs you towards doing more with organizations whose causes you are supporting?

OPPORTUNITY 05

Let’s get real about risk

Ostensibly, a strong reason to incorporate as a non-profit organization is to manage risk and reduce individual liability.

It comes with a world of conventions, laws, and expenses which can sometimes be at odds with mission-driven activity. Risk is real, but are we giving organizations the best opportunity to manage it effectively while carrying out activities that reduce social risks for everyone? For example, organizations often feel a tension between frontloading the volunteer experience with waivers, vulnerable sector checks, rigid role descriptions, and safety training, while also trying to express other aspects of their organizational culture and values, and build interest in volunteers. “[Our insurance] is not cheap. It’s gone up 20% in the last year,” says one Executive Director. Decisions about how to interact with volunteers can be overshadowed by a need to reduce liability. “There’s a cultural pendulum swing in our society. In the 80’s there was stranger danger, and block parents. Now again, the tone is risk averse.”



RELATES TO INSIGHTS

- #1 Personal growth is not an individual activity
- #2 Endemic social awkwardness
- #3 Stinking Thinking
- #4 Joyful commitment
- #5 Roles you can bump into

WHAT’S THE SHIFT?

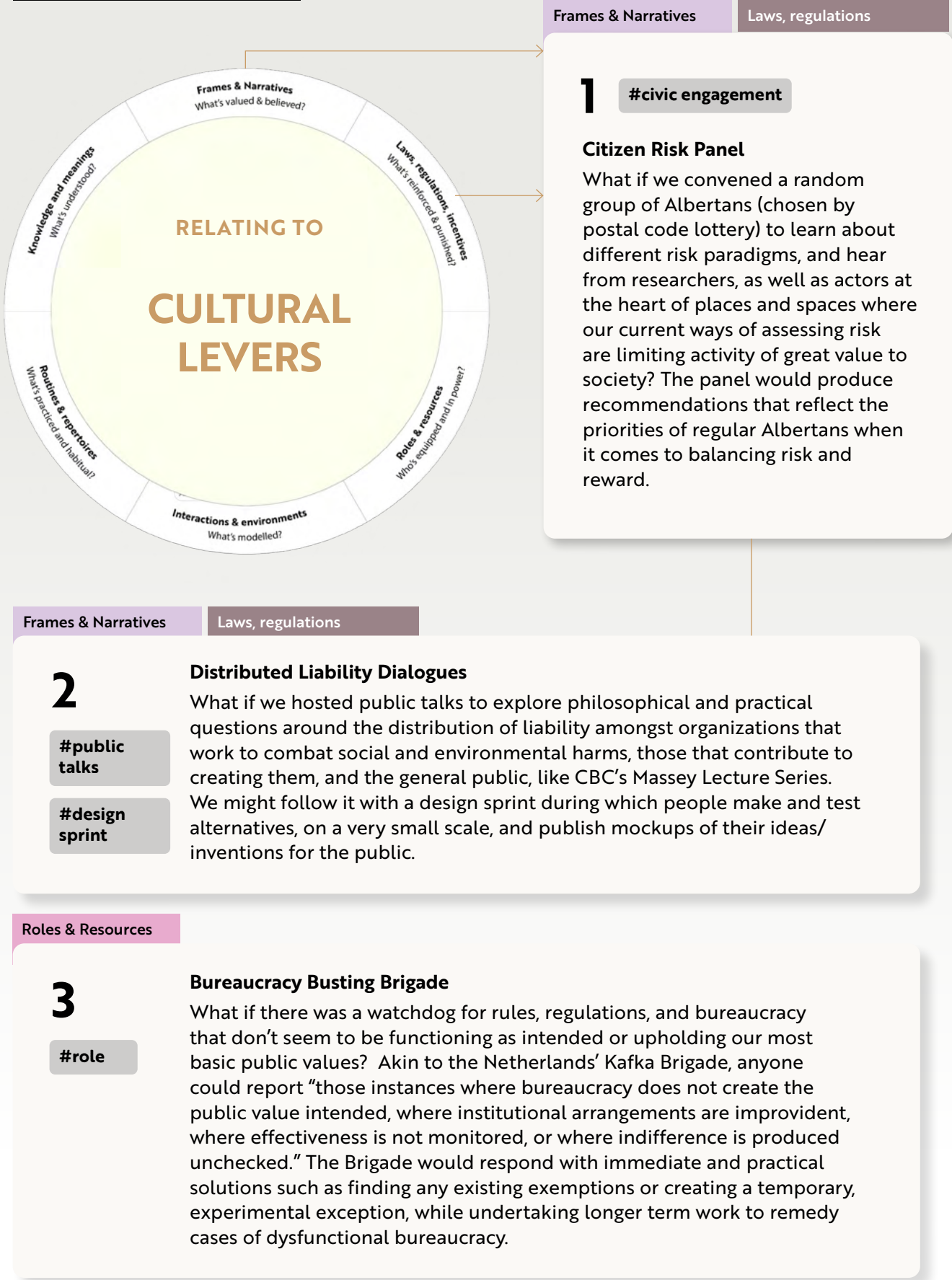
FROM

Letting convention and the insurance industry dictate a risk assessment paradigm

TO

Working collaboratively to articulate different kinds of risks, ways of distributing liability, and solutions that support our collective social welfare.

INTERVENTIONS



Where to next?

The opportunities and ideas offered here are not meant as recommendations. They are launchpads for deeper dialogue, co-design, and prototyping.

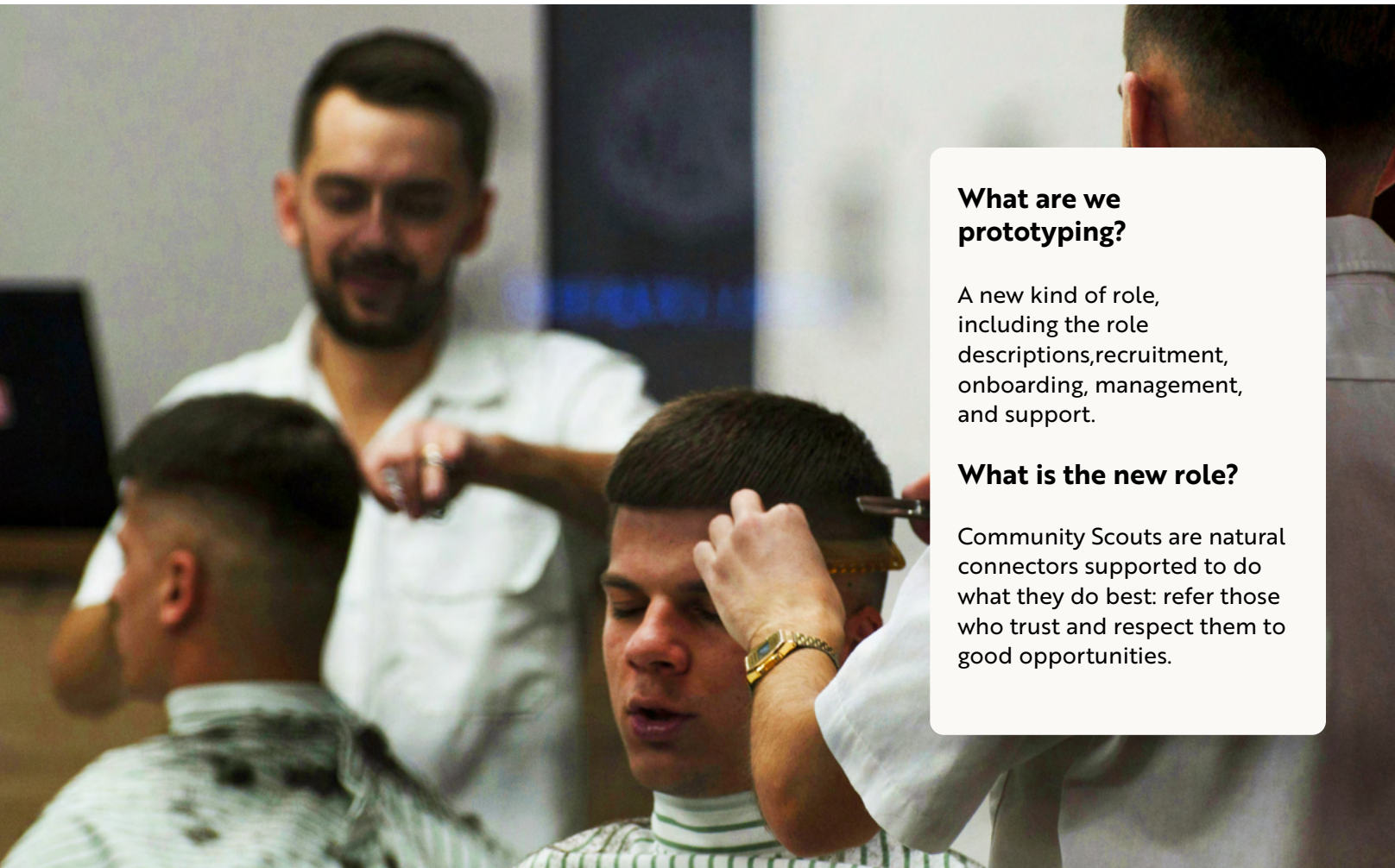
Co-design and prototyping are methods for bringing ideas to life so we can rapidly sketch, build, and test their component parts. The goal is to learn how an imagined intervention works, for whom, under what conditions. Through an experience prototype, participants simultaneously experience and shape the form & function of key elements of an idea - from how it is framed to its value propositions, core interactions, and all the backend processes, resource flows, and technologies required for implementation. Say there is an idea for a new kind of role. In an experience prototype, we would test different versions of role descriptions, hiring processes, onboarding, tools, systems, and metrics.

Like pilots, experience prototypes take possible interventions from paper into real life environments. Unlike pilots, experience prototypes are set-up for quick cycles of making, testing, and tweaking. Rather than seek to validate an idea, prototypes are intended to unlock continuous inquiry, ingenuity, and interest. Because prototypes solicit ongoing feedback to propel the next iteration, participants tend to have a different stake in the idea and its outcomes. There is often more collective ownership. Here's a summary of some of the distinctions between experience prototypes and their more familiar cousins (at least in the third sector), pilots.

	Pilot	Experience Prototype
Definition	A preliminary study of an already designed solution conducted to evaluate effectiveness and viability	<i>An early representation of an idea in which specific elements are brought to life, in context, tested & iterated to learn what works, for whom, under what conditions</i>
Intention	Designed to validate & prove value	<i>Designed to generate alternatives, build collective ownership, and learn</i>
Starting point	A fleshed out solution that can be run end-to end	<i>A concept that can be developed by focusing on key interactions.</i>
Sequence	Linear: Design pilot > Run pilot > Evaluate pilot	<i>Loops: Co-design early concepts > Mock-up concepts on paper > Get feedback & iterate concept > Develop & run higher fidelity versions > Get feedback & iterate ></i>
What can be tested	-Effectiveness -Efficiencies -Viability	<i>-Attractiveness & desirability -Frontend and backend interactions -Governance and evaluation -Context & conditions</i>
Evaluative methodology	Summative evaluation at end	<i>Developmental evaluation along the way; Realist and Most Significant Change evaluation towards the end</i>

Anatomy of a Prototype

Let's prototype: Community Scouts



What are we prototyping?

A new kind of role, including the role descriptions, recruitment, onboarding, management, and support.

What is the new role?

Community Scouts are natural connectors supported to do what they do best: refer those who trust and respect them to good opportunities.

Start with:

- 1 **Thinking about a character experiencing a problem (possibly two - a system actor and potential volunteer)**
- 2 **Get explicit about how the system is lacking, by design**
- 3 **Get clear about the value prop of the idea to the character**

EXAMPLE

Part One: In A Rut



Josiah takes a break from video games when his mum gets home from work. He asks her about her day and then gets straight to the point: "Can you lend me some money to get my hair cut this week?" His mum says, as if to an unseen bystander, "This young man needs a job."

Josiah is hurt: "That's not fair. You know I applied for jobs everywhere but no one calls me back!" How am I supposed to get a job if I look like nobody loves me?" Three days later, Josiah is in the chair of his favourite barber, Noah. "Make me look professional! I need a job!" he says, with a grin.

Noah has known Josiah for years, since he was a young teen. "Weren't you working at the furniture store?"

"Yeah. But that's over. It was boring. And I guess they could tell I wasn't that into it. I like talking to the customers, but, they always wanted me in the warehouse, hauling stuff."

"Yeah, that's not for everyone."

"No," says Josiah. "... But, I feel like I never find the right thing. Before that, I had that gig inputting data. I kept making mistakes, and they were always mad at me. I feel like I will never be anybody's employee of the month, but... I am not a useless guy! I just hate being inside all the time, or doing the same thing, over and over. Maybe that's just what the work world demands and I don't know if I can deliver."

THE IDEA

LEVERS BEHIND THIS IDEA

Roles & Resources

The Scout role is about resourcing people with natural relationships in a specific community to recruit individuals to roles that will benefit the broader community and contribute to that individual's growth and sense of connection. They lean on the strength of their relationship and reputation because we know this is more likely to persuade would-be volunteers.

FOR WHOM IS IT?

- volunteer centre staff & Leadership
- volunteer managers at volunteer-seeking organizations

WHAT'S DIFFERENT

Volunteer Centres refocus some of their energy and resource towards grassroots network building, rather than direct provision of matchmaking services.

SEGMENTS



The Connectors:

Warm and magnetic social butterflies who delight in learning about people & match-making people with opportunities.



The Tender Wounded:

They'd like to feel good about themselves, with others, but worry others can't see what they have to offer.



Transitioning Contributors

Temporarily occupied with personal relationships and re-evaluation of purpose and focus, their next role will have to fit in with their new priorities.

Putting our resources where they count

Knowing that 42.2% of Albertans who volunteered last year learned about the opportunity through friends, family, or neighbours, and only about 4% from web searches and volunteer centres, this role resources people with big personal networks.

Scouting builds motivation & sense of capability

A sense of social purpose and mastery of skills are core human needs; however, when we aren't confident in our ability to contribute, it can dampen our motivation. When those who know us reflect back to us what they see as our strengths and value, and ask for our help, it has the opposite effect, and can create a window of heightened motivation to contribute.

Supporting a network

Rather than seeking to directly engage potential volunteers, recruiters at volunteer centres and service organizations would cultivate a pipeline of opportunities relevant Community Scouts and their network, and support them to make stronger connections with organizations and their own community: think, free tickets to fundraising galas, and microgrants to host their own dinner parties.

Part Two: Scouted at the Barbershop



"You know you're not useless. You like being outdoors and changing it up. Where do you think you could use your strengths?" asks Noah.

"I don't know. That's the problem. I'm a people person, but I don't want to be in retail... I just don't find that very interesting, but that's where I'm applying. I'm probably too fussy, but when I'm not into what I am doing, it's hard to fake it everyday."

"It sure is. And it can take some trial and error to find what you're into. In my experience, once people see you using your gifts, the work starts coming to you." "That'd be nice," sighs Josiah. "If only it were that easy!"

As Noah executes the fade he is known for, he gets thoughtful... "I have a friend who works at an organization that does programming for seniors, and he has really been wanting to shake things up – provide some new activities that take advantage of what's going on in the community, but he needs some help."

"Really? That sounds kind of fun, and seniors are my jam! Just ask my Granny: I love hearing her stories."

"This one's a volunteer job, and I really think it could help you explore your strengths in a different career area. Actually, I have a feeling that you are just the guy he needs. Your energy would be great in this role. It's not full time, so you could still look for work."

"Okay, okay... I mean, I haven't volunteered since school, but it was actually a really good experience. I do need to make some money but I'm feeling a little stuck, so, if you think this guy could use my help, I'd give it a good try. I wouldn't let my buddy Noah down... or who would make me look this good?!" Josiah checks himself out in the mirror.

THE PROTOTYPING

PROTOTYPING QUESTIONS?

- How are Community Scouts trained and supported differently from volunteer centre staff?
- What makes for a good Community Scout? (mindset, skills, practices)
- Evaluation: how does an organization support a network of scouts well?
- What are valued outcomes for Community Scouts, potential volunteers, and volunteer organizations?
- What are the principles and practices that staff use to identify and recruit Community Scouts?

WHAT MIGHT WE MAKE?

- Observation tool, for volunteer centre staff to identify potential Community Scouts
- Develop a value proposition for Community Scouts and mockup recruitment materials
- Community Scout Job description
- Design and run an onboarding process for Community Scouts
- Mockup and curate a pipeline of relevant volunteer opportunities for Community Scouts
- Storyboard a referral process between Community Scouts, potential volunteers, and volunteer-seeking organizations
- Journey Map of a Community Scout role
- Journey Map for recruited volunteers

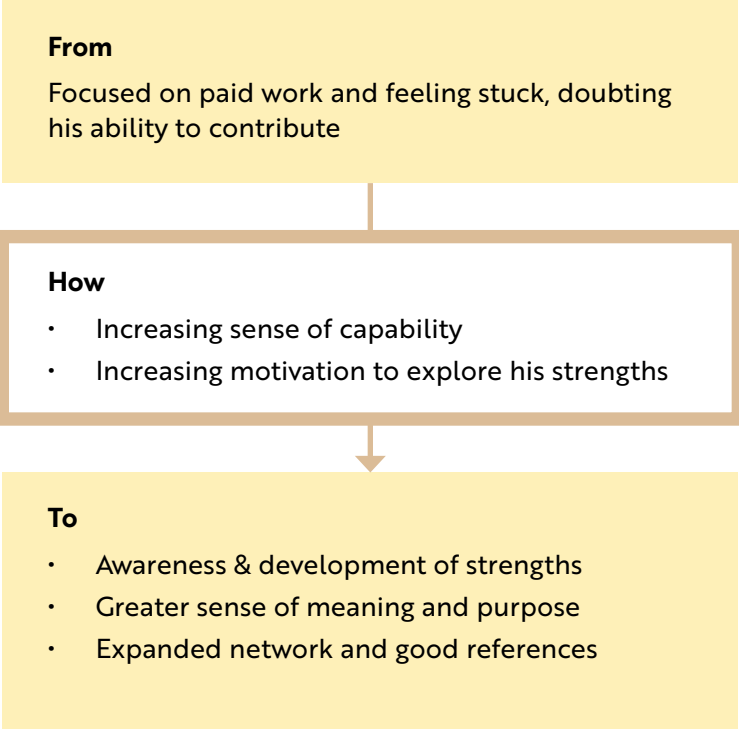
TYPES OF EXPENSES

- Resource a small team of connectors (eg. with gift cards to local businesses or access to special experiences)
- Second a pair of volunteer centre staff
- Transit around town
- Tickets to community events
- Microgrant fund for network building

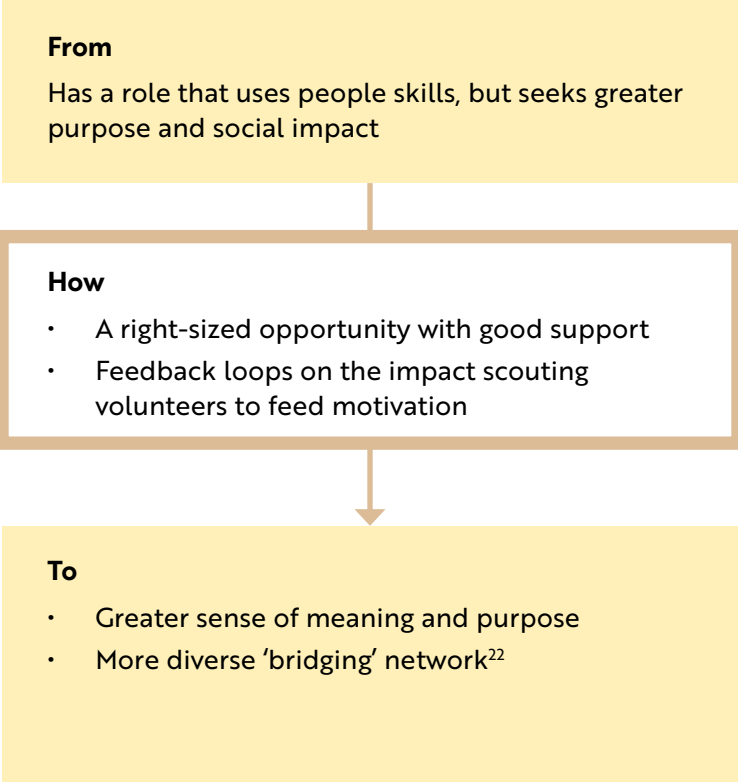
OUR HUNCH

What creates change?

FOR JOSIAH



FOR NOAH



²² "Bridging" and "bonding" relationships are different types of social capital referred to by Robert Putnam. Bonding social capital is within a group or community whereas bridging social capital is between social groups, social class, race, religion or other important sociodemographic or socioeconomic characteristics. Putnam says bonding social capital helps people get by, and bridging social capital helps people thrive and get ahead. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 24–27.

The Provocation

This type of report doesn't have a conclusion or set of recommendations: it is a provocation. It's a call out to others who would like to experiment, with purpose, towards imagining the sorts of social infrastructure that could animate a future in which we are flourishing, together -- A future in which more of us are finding security, purpose, esteem, and connection through acts of contribution that allow us to express ourselves and care for one another.

As a provocation, this report marks the beginning of a process partnership building, codesign, and prototyping.

Through a series of open sessions, Volunteer Alberta membership are invited to engage with the ideas, and work alongside existing and potential volunteers to shape them. With these partners in reimagining, we will selectively bring new ideas to life so that we can see what works, for whom, under what conditions.

Join us!



Appendix

Losing loved ones “Our daughter-in-law from Vancouver is up. I lost a son, her husband. Her husband passed away two years ago, so she’s up and she goes out to the cemetery.”

Separation/family “I mean you’re always, not stressed out, [but] you’re always thinking of your kids you know. And having kind of separation anxiety.”

Education & learning / expectations
"Like that first AGM meeting was that first Zoom meeting. I had to do the invite for 20 people and figure out exactly what was happening."

Contribution *"The gift is in the giving so to speak, or you've been gifted with the opportunity to be able to help somebody."*

Spirituality/Faith *"The spirituality is, you know, where I put my life into. ... It's my belief."*

Relationships “Family is dear to me, and I have a few close friends.”

wife Merel is one example, with the town donating water, a local nursery dropping off peat moss, his son designing the water tank stand, and a fellow hockey player paying for new signage.

Dennis feels deep fulfillment and satisfaction from contributing to his community. The factors that enable his projects include: access to institutional decision-makers, a wide network, and a flexible system with few bureaucratic barriers. For instance, when he wanted to pave the ground under a neighbourhood basketball hoop, he simply “went to the Town and said, how about when the pavement crews come in next, we get them to pave this area.” It was done in no time. Being on the Rotary Club has also opened up fundraising capabilities. In 2002 they got approved for a matching grant to support a Kenyan school with fencing, latrines, desks and a water tank, where his daughter was then teaching. “We spent \$7500 and made the biggest difference in the world.”

Society used to look a lot different when Dennis started volunteering. Back when he used to volunteer as an ambulance driver it was still run by the local funeral home and only required a class five license. During his 25 years working as a Licensed Practical Nurse, the hospital

had its own local board. And regarding his later work in oil and gas emergency response planning, he says, “you’d probably need a university student with a degree for it these days.” Slowly, things have become more centralized and professionalized. It raises the question: How might this trend be impacting the ways people volunteer and get involved in their communities today?

With signs of Dennis' and others' work throughout the town, he also makes sure to acknowledge the huge personal blessing he experiences from contributing. "I always get back more than I put in," he notes. He was named District Rotarian of the year in 2022, but he doesn't do it for recognition or accolades. "The gift is in the giving so to speak, or you've been gifted with the opportunity to be able to help somebody."

Primary Motivation

#Fulfillment

#Personal blessing

#Seeing opportunities

"It's just a feeling, you know? Not for any reward. You're not doing it for the recognition, you're just doing it because it feels good to do, to help out."

How they have connected to opportunities in the past

Following dad's footsteps

Large network including with people in organizations

"Well, my dad was a Rotarian. The only rotary meeting I think I'd been to with him was the Friday morning my firstborn was born. So then I always kind of thought about rotary."

A MOMENT IN TIME
Aug 2024
3 Hours Chat returned

Dennis
72
Male
Caucasian
Retired

Most resonant narratives

Contributing makes me feel good

I always get back as much or more than I put in

I'm carrying on the work of people who came before me.


#Fairview #Reengaged #VolunteerAlberta

"I had done a video presentation for our club of the whole thing [donations and volunteer trip to Kenya] and you know, I said, "One person can make a difference."

Dennis leans down and points out the dark red needles on a spruce seedling - an affliction called 'red belt' caused when growing trees are unable to soak up water after an early warm spell. Dennis himself has soaked up a wealth of knowledge, learning about red belt and preventative measures from a forester he met through the Rotary Club. The 100 spruce seedlings running along the utility line behind his house are his brain-child - a win-win situation that benefits the community and beautifies his neighbourhood. Dennis brought together support from the town, fellow Rotarians and friends, and a local tree nursery, and takes it upon himself to trim around the young

spruces so they don't get mowed down during town maintenance.

Just like the many cotoneaster suckers that Dennis transplants and nurtures, evidence of his ideas and energy can be seen throughout Fairview: from planting the Rotary-sponsored flower beds across town, to mowing the church lawn, to strategic planning on the North Peace Regional Landfill committee. “You don’t do it to make an impression, but you do make an impression,” he confides. He has a knack for utilizing his networks - both personal & institutional - to bring ideas to life. The community garden he founded with other community members and his



Listener's Perspective

How we met

My colleague found an online news article about the community garden in Fairview and it had Dennis' contact info, so she reached out and he agreed to meet! He also also gave us a tour of town, pointing out the various flower beds he tended, the corridor with the spruce saplings, his church yard, and the community gardens.

Points of (un)familiarity

Dennis and I both are in our happy place when we're outdoors tending to plants, and find a sense of fulfilment from being engaged in our community. However, I don't know what it's like to be a parent, be on Town Council, and I haven't lived through as much of the changing world as he has.

Low contribution norms

Be the influencer

“This guy said your sign is broken down there. And he said, ‘You get it redone and I’ll help pay for it.’ Well I play hockey with him and stuff like that too.”

Top Stressors

Losing loved ones “I’ve lost a lot of people I cared about who were important in my life.”

Expectations “What other people expect of you. Typically, expectations doesn’t bother me too much. But right now, it is just because of what my family expects and like what people who I’m new to working with expect of me.”

Separation “I used to [have a friend group]. Then they decided that they didn’t want be friends anymore and they wanted to just toss all that friendship and all that time together out the window.”

Top Values

Tradition “I have family heirlooms that I care about. I cherish them and I love them. I was raised to eat moose and elk meat, so for me it’s important in my life.”

little in life lots in life

Learning “I’m always learning something, I’m always off on an adventure, like trying to find something new. It’s doing research.”

little in life lots in life

Relationships “I was mostly forgotten and left alone as a kid. So I value the relationships and bonds I have with other people.”

little in life lots in life

Opportunity Areas

Welcome to Fairview Care Packages

What if everyone who was new to Fairview got a little care package, and everyone on a block was invited to sign up to host newcomers for dinner? What if Manna was recruited to create little care packages with little pieces of art for all newcomers to Fairview?

Community connectors

What if there were lay people in the community known as “community connectors,” and anytime someone joined a workplace from out of town, the community connector was invited to have lunch with the new person, get to know them and their interests, and welcome them to join an opportunity that fits their passions?

Tradition exchange

What if - for those who were new workers in Fairview, there was a quarterly ‘tradition exchange’ - where people could go, share about the traditions that matter to them, bring an object or photo to showcase, and witness the celebrations of others? At the end, there could be an opportunity for people to vote & bring one of the traditions to life, and anyone who wanted to help could pitch in.

Rochelle
Cis woman
White

Listener’s Perspective

How we met

We were chatting with a group of people, when Manna pulled one of us aside and said that if we were looking for more people, she’d be happy to chat. She didn’t know many restaurants in town so we googled a few and landed on the Stirfry Garden Restaurant and shared some chow mein noodles and lemon chicken.

Points of (un)familiarity

Manna and I both enjoy working with our hands, fixing things, supporting friends through tough times, and caring about wildlife. Although we’ve both moved away from home, and have worked at places of employment where the culture was very different from our own, I didn’t have to live on my own right away, and I haven’t had to navigate the confusion and discouragement of job losses.

A Moment in Time

4 Hours Chat returned

Most resonant narratives

Contributing makes me feel good

I’ve had tougher times so I have empathy

I always get back as much or more than I put in

Manna

Canadian
27
Female

#Fairview #Reengaged #VolunteerAlberta

“Sure I’m Canadian, but I’m also, you know, an adventurer. I’m also mechanically inclined. It’s different parts, like all of those different things make up my culture.”

Manna, dressed in skinny jeans, a black velvet bow, and a matching black shirt, welcomes us into her rental bungalow, offering us strawberry lemonade Twizzlers and maple cookies. Her kitchen decor includes deer antlers and Deadpool collectibles from her family back in Airdrie - mementos that remind her of who she is and the people who love her. One bedroom is a creative haven, with books on calligraphy, architecture, electrical engineering, Fantasy Art and RPG Maps, along with piles of scrap paper for crafting. “I’m always learning something. I’m always doing something new,” she says. Scrolling through her phone, she shows us photo after photo of artwork, radiating joy and accomplishment. Helping her parents run their annual Haunted House is one such project. “Even strangers were respectful,” she explains, “I had this feeling of self confidence because I got to dress up and do makeup for my parents and help everything work and function.” In contrast, many of her work experiences have left her feeling unvalued and disoriented. She recalls a sense that she was doing a good job, only to be let go suddenly due to office politics or reasons she can’t explain. She’s tried film festival promotion, customer service, and administrative work, but so far nothing has lasted. Building a career is a top priority and,

thanks to her brother and sister in law signing her up, she’s now on track to becoming an auto mechanic. This path is what brought her to Fairview three weeks ago as an apprentice. So far the going has been tough and she feels like a glorified janitor. “They won’t let me touch vehicles, it’s very sad because I already know how to do all of it.” Socially too she’s been struggling, finding it hard to fit in given the prominently religious culture. To stay positive, she makes silly sounds and talks to herself in an accent. There’s a stark absence of close connections. “I finished work today and I was like, I just want to go crawl in a hole and bawl my eyes out. Not healthy, not good.” She calls her parents frequently, plays an online building game with her dad and Call of Duty or Warframe with friends on Discord, but acknowledges “I’m separated from my usual nucleus of support.” Still, she’s determined to stay positive. She has a strong self-narrative of being someone who overcomes and pushes through, and she regularly makes a point of not dwelling on the negatives. “I just want to be happy in the end.” She’s also comfortable in her own skin and is nonplussed by societal expectations.

Though she’s not currently involved in volunteering, she speaks highly of past

At a Glance

MOTIVATION SUMMARY

Intrinsically motivated

Low motivation

High motivation

Extrinsically motivated

Primary Motivation

#Group belonging

#Feeling helpful

#Feeling respected

#Learning & engagement

“I would try to be there for all the cadet [volunteer] activities. When you’re part of a group, you have a connection and it’s easier to go do those things as a group, whereas if you do it alone, it’s kind of sad and lonely.”

CONTRIBUTION SUMMARY

Higher contribution

Invited to contribute

Sought out to contribute

Lower contribution

How they have connected to opportunities in the past

Via family or extracurricular groups

Seeking out a safe place

“I was a library helper. I loved my librarian. It was my safe place.”

Time Use

Top uses of time

Current

Desired

1 Work

Fulfilling activities (arts, reading, friends)

2 Home chores

Home chores

3 Fulfilling activities on the weekends

Social network

High contribution norms

Tight-knit

Broad

Low contribution norms

Size of network

Small*

Medium

Large

Relationship with network

More likely to:

Say yes when someone asks

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers

Past

Being a part of groups that volunteered

Family had ways of helping others & creating community events

Barriers

Meaningful work was cut short

Separated from family & groups that provided a community

Lack of personal connections in Fairview

Top Stressors

Managing daily life “I need life to be a bit slower for me. I definitely was trying to live my life as typical as possible. And that led to me having burnout.”

Sense of injustice “My partner’s stepdad’s dad always gets the excuse, ‘Oh, well, he’s an old farmer,’ whenever he’s rude to us. It’s like, okay he’s an old farmer. But that doesn’t mean he needs to say rude things to us.”

Addictions “I don’t feel like I’m fully out of it. Honestly, I definitely still struggle with feeling like I need some sort of fix.”

Top Values

Personal growth “I’m in my mid 20s. So it’s a time to explore a lot of things and get out there and figure things out and learn a lot of new things, meet new people.”

Health & Wellbeing “I would definitely like to figure out more of what’s going on with me both mentally and physically.”

Home “A comfortable place where I feel like I can be myself.”

Opportunity Areas

Mental hospital to homestead


What if, after being involuntarily held at a mental hospital, people were given the choice between being discharged or going to a week-long yoga retreat, with room and board in exchange for labour, as a way to re-awaken the part of themselves that thrives when contributing & connecting to a strong sense of self?

‘Just do it’ Moments

What if someone like Rye could begin to see themselves as a contributor through online micro-volunteering (eg. signing petitions, tagging photos to help visually impaired people, etc) but in a way that steadily develops relationships to organizations in their community, eventually transitioning to in-person gigs?

Ubuntu Health

A Bantu word, Ubuntu refers to our interconnectedness, being part of a greater whole. What if, in addition to teaching about individual physical & mental health, we prioritized community interconnectedness for K-12, where youth could experience curriculum on contribution and reciprocity?



Rochelle

Cis woman

White

Listener’s Perspective

How we met

We were running a pop-up bingo draw outside of the Pride Night Market during pride week, and Rye came over to chat. I asked them which narratives about community contribution resonated with them, and they were drawn to the one about the world falling apart, which sparked interesting conversation which we both enjoyed!

Points of (un)familiarity

Rye and I both love sorting things, thrifting, cats, and both sometimes feel overwhelmed by injustice in the world. We’ve both felt socially awkward, experienced burnout, and had thoughts of suicide, though I haven’t been hospitalized against my will, and my addictive tendencies are more towards work rather than substances.

A MOMENT IN TIME

6 Hours Chat returned

June 2024

Most resonant narratives

It’s awkward to put myself out there

The world is falling apart

Rye

24 Female Non-binary

#Edmonton #Reengaged #VolunteerAlberta

“My life has been kind of a mess. But I’m trying to make it not so much of a mess. I’m taking moving here very much as a fresh start.”

Fast-forward 5 years. Rye, styling a cute & practical strawberry-blonde bob and a serpentine necklace from the Pride Pop-up Market, is a longtime volunteer with a donations sorting team. They signed up on a whim, after running into some friendly volunteers at a booth at the grocery store, specifically geared for people seeking purpose & feeling nervous about social interaction. ‘Are you looking to build solidarity & contribute, but feel nervous stepping out your front door? We know what it feels like to feel awkward or shy,” said the poster. The people running the booth were good listeners and seemed trustworthy. Since then, Rye has even brought their boyfriend out

to help. Rye’s attentiveness to detail and communication skills have been of great value, and recently they’ve taken on the role of supporting anxious new recruits. It feels good to be working with other people with huge hearts, who care about justice and equity.

This future hasn’t happened yet, but they can picture it, and the idea gives them a thrill of nerves. Would they really be willing to step outside their comfort zone? What would it take to respond to a post like that?

Rye has long been in survival mode, but moving to Edmonton 2 years ago feels like a new chapter, with the possibility

of stability, home, and figuring out who they are. Back in small town BC, high school was “a shit show” and they got kicked out, bounced between jobs, struggled with getting out of bed and burnout, plus COVID on top of it all. Rye eventually got kicked out of their dad’s home (where weed and alcohol were always on hand), and the immense emotional turmoil landed them in the psych ward due to suicidality. No one there talked to them about what was going on in their life. Rye was terrified of being discharged onto the streets or a shelter, and encountering even harsher drugs.

They got through it, but not unscathed. Rye lives with frequent fear, wants to hide from the world, wants safety and calm and to nestle in somewhere. At the same time they feel a great amount of passion for the injustices and harms of the world, and want to use their 20s for learning & growth. But, things like fake GoFundMes and bigoted people make them wary. They’d like to contribute more, but maybe not just yet. Thinking about the future feels out of reach, along with ideas of a career or education. Rye’s primary focus is their physical and mental health. Maybe a proper diagnosis and meds would help?

Despite feeling avoidant of new situations, Rye was happy

At a Glance

MOTIVATION SUMMARY

Intrinsically motivated

Low motivation

High motivation

Extrinsically motivated

Primary Motivation

#Safety #Trust

#Managing energy

#Real impact

#Remedying injustice

“I just, it’s hard because I find myself almost overwhelming myself with how many things that I care about and wish weren’t the way that they are.”

CONTRIBUTION SUMMARY

Higher contribution

Invited to contribute

Lower contribution

Sought out to contribute

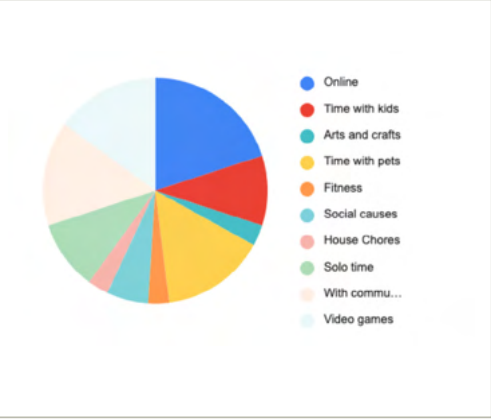
How they have connected to opportunities in the past

School-led events

Food donations at events

Online fundraiser live streams

Current Time Use



Social network

High contribution norms

Tight-knit

Broad

Low contribution norms

Size of network

Small

Medium

Large

Relationship with network

More likely to:

Be influenced

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers

Past

Volunteering embedded in school

Present

Partner & pets are a reason to take care of themself

Doing things with partner or friends

Barriers

Deep sense of fear of the world

Feels socially awkward

Feels struggle, low capacity

Top Stressors

Family “A family in Canada is mainly mother, father, and children. The family I refer to [is] my cousins, to my nephew, to my... large! So for the time being there is no problem, but I said okay, if [something] happens, what should I do?”

Top Values

Nature “Human beings tend to destroy everything, need to transform everything. And this is done at the expense of many other things.”

little in life lots in life

Culture “You need to make sure that you don’t forget how it used to go with your parents.”

little in life lots in life

Spirituality “We didn’t have Catholicism in our culture, but before Catholicism came, we were already believing in God.”

little in life lots in life

Opportunity Areas

Traditional Learning Exchange

What if part of Bernard’s Newcomer welcome process included a learning exchange with a First Nation, through which he might get an introduction to land-based traditional knowledge?


Contribution Ambassador

What if Bernard were invited to play an ambassador role, learning about a range of ways into volunteering, and helping to match friends and family to roles that could bring joy, learning, and/or opportunity?

Volunteer Culture Orientation

What if ESL classes had a unit on contributing to community in Canada with field trips to explore mutual aid & cooperatives, roles with charities and non-profits, expressive vs service roles, in person vs. online, etc., while making connections to student’s own values?

Listener’s Perspective



Natalie

Canadian-bornWhiteWoman

How we met

Bernard passed through an activation we staged in Churchill Square and was attracted by our sign, which featured lots of different traditions for contributing. He said he was very drawn to Mutual Aid.

Points of (un)familiarity

Bernard and I are both curious about the world and delight in connecting to new places and languages. We both value the natural environment and want to see it protected from human exploitation. However, Bernard is retiring while I am entering middle age; he has been raised in a very different, communal culture compared to my British-Canadian upbringing. I was inspired by his readiness to get involved and ‘be useful.’

June 2024

5 Hours Chat returned

A MOMENT IN TIME



70sMaleCameroonian

Bernard

Most resonant narratives

I have a lot of privilege so it’s my responsibility to help those in need

[Contributing] connects me to something bigger than myself

#Edmonton #Reengaged #VolunteerAlberta

“My time has value because I use it to help people.”

Bernard’s sense of curiosity and wonder has led him around the world, from Cameroon, to Japan, France, Brazil, and beyond. Now he has decided to retire in Edmonton. “I think I know Edmonton better than many Canadians,” he hazards, after a few months on the ground. He learns about the city on strolls, exploring even in wintry conditions. Bernard fills his days with many pursuits. At home, he studies English, takes meals with the Cameroonian family he lives with, and continues his work as forestry professor by reading widely and writing academic articles. A Catholic by religion, he also reads his bible, attends church, and took part in a weekly workshop on faith this year. Noticing the neighbours in his condo building lead very private and

separate lives, compared to Cameroon, he has found community elsewhere.

Bernard feels some tension between his world exploration and staying true to his origins: “culture is your roots... it’s not good to cut people from their roots.” It’s good to be in contact with other cultures, provided they can be held in balance, but globalization feels one-way to Bernard. The world does not seem interested in the Indigenous cultures of Cameroon, only in its resources, even though traditional Indigenous practices offer valuable lessons in sustainable management. “We also have some values that can be interesting for other people.” Bernard would like to visit an Indigenous community here to understand more about how their

culture has evolved with this environment. Soon after he arrived in Canada, a friend recommended that Bernard volunteer for Roots for Trees, a tree-planting initiative run by the City. Bernard was happy to contribute to a healthy environment. He went online, found the initiative, and signed up. He acknowledges that planting trees doesn’t take much skill or meaningfully draw on his expertise as a forester, but he appreciates that it is in line with his values and interests, and that he can be useful. Since it began in May, Bernard has given half of every Saturday to tree planting. He is delighted by how organized it is. He reflects that there is nothing like it in Cameroon, where this type of formal volunteerism is not an institution the way it is in Canada. He meets lots of people through the work, though they change every week, so the relationships do not develop.

What has developed is Bernard’s relationship to volunteerism. On his head, he wears a branded cap, embroidered with “Roots for Trees”. His tshirt declares that he is part of the University Of Alberta Alumni Volunteers. It seems that never having been a U of A student is not an obstacle. This is another group he has found online, leading him to help out at the Prairie Urban Farm. While tree-planting comes to an

At a Glance

MOTIVATION SUMMARY

Intrinsically motivated

Low motivation

High motivation

Extrinsically motivated

Primary Motivation

#Usefulness

#Belonging

“I just went there. I had it in my mind to be useful... The most interesting way [to create a healthy environment with reduced pollution] is to use trees. I am very happy to find that I can be of some help to this organization. That’s the main reason: I said, ‘Okay, that’s something I know!’”

CONTRIBUTION SUMMARY

Higher contribution

Invited to contribute

Sought out to contribute

Lower contribution

How they have connected to opportunities in the past

A friend suggested it

Goes online to research opportunities & sign up

Through Church

“[Organized volunteering] is a new experience, something discovered in Canada.”

Current Time Use

Work

Health and fitness

Reading

Connecting with faith

Added: Going out / exploring

Added: Formal volunteering

Social network

High contribution norms

Tight-knit

Broad

Low contribution norms



Size of network

Small

Medium

Large

Relationship with network

Network enlarged through volunteering

Enablers and Barriers

Past

Present

Enablers

Barriers

Neighbourhood norms of working together and helping out

Little organized volunteering

Everything is online (can find, research, and register to volunteer)

Neighbourhood norms of anonymity

“The complicity of neighbours!”

Housing "For now, it's a stress. Being renoicted. But I refuse to let it get me down. I've never had trouble before."

Community & sense of belonging “I’ve been that island. I know what it’s like to feel isolated and alone.”

little in life ☒ lots in life



Currently, Pandora is facing renovation from her apartment, where she has enjoyed the mutual care of neighbours. "But I refuse to let it get me down," she declares. She has many friends apartment-hunting for her, who have offered assurances that

Formal volunteering opportunities don't seem to offer a great deal to Pandora who makes direct connections:

Gesturing to the Community League across the street, where she attends events, we present her with a fictional opportunity to join the board in a seat specifically for a renter, who will bring ideas and insights based on their own lived experience. Pandora is cautiously interested. She would want to assure herself that this board is “open-minded,” but thinks she could have a lot to offer in this role.

"When it comes to being there, for others, giving what I can, and helping out...it's my way of letting others know that there's always hope."

Jiu Jitsu

Low contribution norms

Large

Be the
influencer

Woman

On the face of it, Pandora and I have little in common, though we both like to talk! I appreciated the way Pandora really lives her value of personal growth and tends to the community she credits for her own sense of stability.

Top Stressors

Money “It’s difficult when you’re first starting out, to know where your priorities should lie with your money. You’re just learning to budget.”

Work “Takes up a lot of my time. Six days at one, three at another, sometimes no break between two eight-hour shifts. One is very fast paced. Switching into and out of work modes can be hard.”

Expectations “I think it’s something a lot of people transitioning from teenager to adult go through. You are asked to picture your life in one way, and it doesn’t always work out. Re-orienting my expectations is a daily thing for me.

Top Values

Contribution “What I’m putting into the people around me: I’m very aware that I am where I am because of the people around me. If there’s a community-wide problem, I want to be there because I would want it for myself.

little in life lots in life

Stability “In the sense of financial stability, but also in my relationships. my community, having people around me.”

little in life lots in life

Relationships “I like to have people around me that I know are going to be there, and that I can be there for.

little in life lots in life

Opportunity Areas

Career builder

What if, as a recent graduate who is unsure of whether she is where she wants to be, career-wise, Jane was offered a session with a career counselor through the Volunteer Centre, with the aim of finding a volunteer opportunity that could strategically build skills and test waters?

Modern guild

What if, harkening back to an earlier time, it was normal for Jane to have joined an association of workers, who organized mutual aid, collective insurance, and volunteering? Perhaps with government matching their contributions?

Dinner Club Taster Pack

What if Jane could join a cohort for ‘taster experiences’ around different typologies of volunteer roles, sampling over a 3 or 6-month period? Think Oprah’s Book Club! Groups might be supported to meet monthly for a meal with conversation prompts to encourage reflection on what people are learning and experiencing.

Listener’s Perspective

Natalie

Canadian-born

White

Woman

How we met

We kept running into Jane at her places of work. She expressed a lot of interest in our research question: ‘why are Albertans volunteering less?’ Jane wondered the same about herself.

Points of (un)familiarity

Jane and I both got into volunteering during school and developed a lot through those experiences; however, perhaps because of the urban-rural difference in our upbringing, I was struck by Jane’s sense that her contributions were an investment in her own local safety net. In general, her sense of herself as one part of a larger web felt remarkable and hopeful to a city girl like me he grew up in a very individualist ‘80s culture.

Aug 2024

4 Hours Chat returned

A MOMENT IN TIME

Most resonant narratives

I would contribute my time if I had the right opportunity

I’ve had tougher times so I have empathy

It connects me to something bigger than myself

Jane

21
Female
Caucasian

#Fairview #Reengaged #VolunteerAlberta

“I like to have people around me that I know are going to be there, and that I can be there for.”

Jane works six days a week, at two jobs. She is trying to pay off debt from her wedding, keep up with car payments, and save up for a house, all while her husband is off work on a mental health leave. It’s Sunday, and she has spent hours with me at Tim Hortons, bringing her husband along on their one full day together. I keep trying to buy them something to eat, but Jane’s all business.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“The question really interests me. I have looked for places to volunteer. I think I’m a pretty good case study with my recent lack of volunteering. Maybe it’s COVID, maybe it’s the economy right now. It’s

She is very attentive to social interconnectedness: you show up for people, reliably, and they show up for you. Having your people around you is a powerful form of insurance against life’s surprises. Jane also associates volunteerism with a more instant return: “I definitely feel like there’s a sense of purpose that comes from volunteering specifically... being somewhere purely because you want to be there... and you really believe in what you’re doing, is so satisfying. ... A camaraderie between you and other people who are volunteering for the same cause... it’s a special kind of community you get out of it.”

At 21, Jane refers back to high school as the time she felt best about her contribution. She volunteered at a bible camp that she had attended as a kid. Her help ensured the camp ran. Sometimes she might have liked to volunteer for less of her summer but the camp was in such need that she would give up whole summers. It felt good to know she was making something – that had mattered to her – happen for the next generation of kids. She also notes that her first references and resume entries were for volunteer jobs, “which is definitely the reason I’ve never had trouble finding jobs.”

At a Glance

MOTIVATION SUMMARY

Intrinsically motivated

Low motivation

High motivation

Extrinsically motivated

Primary Motivation

#Feeling connected

“If there’s a community-wide problem, or something that needs doing, I want to be there. Because if it was me in this situation or in the place of need, I would want somebody to step in.”

CONTRIBUTION SUMMARY

Higher contribution

Invited to contribute

Sought out to contribute

Lower contribution

How they have connected to opportunities in the past

Church

School

Trash pick-up

Help at food bank

For fires, Jane reached out directly to small community

“As a camper, I expressed interest, and I did CIT (Counsellor in Training)”

Time Use

Top uses of time

Current

Desired

1

Work

Catching up with friends

2

Time online

Time with pets

Reading at home

Reading

Work

3

Reading

Personal projects

Social network

High contribution norms

Tight knit

Broad

Low contribution norms

Size of network

Small

Medium

Large

Relationship with network

More likely to:

Find those with shared values or do own thing

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers

Past

Clear asks with clear impact

Present

Sense that contribution is fundamental to community

Barriers

Disorganized opportunities where Jane felt useless

Long work hours

Trouble finding a fit

“Something I miss from being a teenager is that I had so much to give, and I don’t feel like I have that anymore.”

Top Stressors

Work “I was having huge anxiety attacks and stressors... at work, I’m thinking about everybody around me and what they’re thinking about me and what I’m doing...”

Addictions “Vaping and smoking: it’s affected money, and it’s affected, you know, my physical health, mental health...”

Health “It’s sometimes out of your control, and I think that’s a big stressor for me. Health issues that I’ve had over the years...and wondering... if that’s going to happen to me again.”

Top Values

Personal Growth “I had a different upbringing than a lot of people in the community. I try to be aware of opportunities for growth, I am pretty open to recognizing where I need to grow, and my emotions.”

little in life

lots in life

Belonging “Belonging is feeling accepted for your differences, who you are. Being able to vent what’s in my head.”

little in life

lots in life

Safety [To] feel safe in your opinions, going out in public, talking to people, hearing different perspectives.”

little in life

lots in life

Opportunity Areas

Anxiety Aware

What if, when Mitchell’s social anxiety appeared in school, a guidance coun-selor had a list of volunteer opportunities with organiza-tions pre-approved as social anxiety friendly? Groups with inclusive and aware cultures, empathy, lots of feedback, and clear structure?

Low intensity purpose

What if Mitchell’s doctor gave him a social prescription for a sense of purpose and a referral to a volunteer centre with low intensity roles, like delivery, animal care, or sorting, to keep Mitchell in the saddle and optimistic about his potential to contribute?

Expressive Service

What if we crafted more volunteerism roles that blended service (E.g. assisting a person with disabilities, as Mitchell did) and “expressive” forms of volunteering, like sports, arts, and religion (typical of the summer camp they attended)? Research suggests the latter have the most positive impact on volunteers.



Listener’s Perspective

How we met

We met Mitchell’s wife, and she asked about bringing her husband along to meet us.

Points of (un)familiarity

I have conducted ethnography with couples several times in the past. Jane and Mitchell struck me as very different. They never interrupted each other. They didn’t speak for each other or finish each other’s statements. They asked for consent before raising something that pertained to the other’s experience, and they listened very carefully to each other. These are all skills that I have worked on but not attained, especially with my partner!

Natalie

Canadian-born

White

Woman

Aug 2024

4 Hours Chat returned

A MOMENT IN TIME

Most resonant narratives

I’ve got enough going on already

No one helps me when I need it

There’s no point: The world is falling apart

Mitchell

23 Male

#Fairview #Reengaged #VolunteerAlberta

“At times, I felt awkward volunteering and doing, I guess, doing anything in public.”

It’s August, and Mitchell is resting. Recently, life became a pressure cooker, and in the spring he was showing signs of breakdown. It’s been two months on leave from his work in the oil fields of Fort McMurray, looking after a new puppy, and trying to relax. He’s noticed that he doesn’t have a ton of hobbies, so when he gets bored of recording hockey stats, playing video games, and finding new music to listen to, he loses himself on the internet. He’s got to thinking about his inclinations: “when I was forced to be home [during COVID] and... not go out a lot, I think my mindset kind of changed about what I enjoyed.

And just, I’d say, within the last, literally, three, four days, I’m starting to actually force myself to go out and visit friends, which has been uncomfortable, but it’s getting better, and I’m really enjoying it.” Mitchell believes that he is a work in progress, and wants to put the effort in. He’s struggled with mental health in the past, but this time it crept up on him. “I always have something going on in my head, and usually when I’m at work, I’m thinking about everybody around me and what, you know, they’re thinking about me and what I’m doing at work, and you know, if I’m doing it right.” He narrows in on the source of his anxiety: “Overall, work is probably a

big stressor for me because of just not feeling like... I belong in the workplace. ...I’m a good worker, but I struggle with... knowing what I should be doing at what time, how long I should do it for, you know, how above and beyond I should go on the task?” When it’s two weeks of 12-hour days away from home and his new wife, those doubts can pile up.

Figuring out how to look after his mental and physical health, which Mitchell notes are closely connected, is just another kind of labour. Now he wrestles with the decision to stay in with few expectations on his time, or venture outside, and engage with others, which tends to invite expectations. Mitchell often feels a tension between prioritizing his mental health, and making commitments with his time: “Say, you know you’re having a tough day... you have that feeling in your mind that you feel obligated to do something that you’re not comfortable doing. That can sometimes eat at you...” In that situation, he tends to fulfill the obligation.

In the past, fulfilled obligations have brought meaning and pride. He volunteered at a bible camp he attended as a child, and met his wife there. “I had an eight to five o’clock job, and after that, I would go [to the camp] and just stay there overnight because they needed somebody else to stay at the cabins, right?

At a Glance

MOTIVATION SUMMARY

Intrinsically motivated

Low or inconsistent motivation

High motivation

Extrinsically motivated

Primary Motivation

#Belonging

“Sense of belonging is something that is important to me even though at this point I haven’t fully understood where that is for me.”

CONTRIBUTION SUMMARY

Higher contribution

Invited to contribute

Lower contribution

Sought out to contribute

How they have connected to opportunities in the past

Scouted

“Working with a camper with disabilities led to camp leaders asking me to take a position. They said “Hey, would you be interested?”

Time Use

Top uses of time

Current

Desired

1

Spending time online

Time with pets

2

Playing music

Time with pets

Relaxing at home

Journalling sport stats

Journalling sport stats

Seeing friends

Playing music

3

Journalling sport stats

Spending time online

Social network

High contribution norms

Tight

Broad

Low contribution norms

Size of network

Small

Medium

Large

Relationship with network

More likely to:

Be influenced by online content/social media

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers

Past

Feeling connected to a cause

Present

Barriers

Social anxiety

Social anxiety

Mental exhaustion

“When I was a kid, the camp was important to me. So, I just felt like it was getting back into something that helped me.”

Top Stressors

Services/social system “Changes have to be made and they’re not. They’re just using old solutions. The welfare system started 60, 70, years ago, back in Chicago, and they’re still using it to this day. Why? It’s most convenient I guess.”

Physical health “Well, my age. Everything’s catching up to me, all the old injuries. I wasn’t supposed to be walking by age 60. I’m still walking but my feet are giving up.”

Public scrutiny “The public... distrust of us. ‘What are you trying to do? What’s your agenda?’ We have no agenda. It’s just helping the homeless and addicted. That’s all it is.”

Top Values

Kimmapiiyipitssinni “That thought of caring and sharing and loving. Everybody [in Blackfoot society] had to work under that banner.”

Humility “Other volunteers catch on faster than me. Just me being there allows that. A door opens for them and their knowledge, their wisdom, their kindness shines through.”

Presence/grit “[If someone is aggressive], somebody else, from say the city, they would say ‘Back off. We got to watch him. Stay away from him.’ We don’t say that. We go right in there. We don’t leave people.”

Opportunity Areas

Client to Contributor

What if there were guided cohorts for people who have been on the receiving end of services (and may not have credentials, references, or a clean record) to navigate a path to a greater sense of contribution through well-supported starter roles in volunteerism?

Citizen Risk Panel

What if people with experience like Mark’s could take part in a citizen panel to evaluate the dominant risk models that shape voluntary sector regulation, and recommend ways to balance the risk and reward of valuable, life-giving work?

New Year, New US

What if there were a near-peer volunteer campaign about walking alongside someone who is struggling, but wants to pursue a goal that matters to you too? Like getting fitter, eating better, practising gratitude? Rather than helper-helpee, it would foster more reciprocal relationships, like gym buddies, or cooking pals.



Listener’s Perspective

How we met

We researched volunteer initiatives in Lethbridge, and messaged the Sage Clan Patrol on Facebook. Mark met us at strEATS. Despite having worked three consecutive 12-hr night shifts doing security at the Lethbridge shelter, he launched into conversation.

Rochelle

Cis woman

White

Points of (un)familiarity

My dad and Mark are both 62. They grew up across the Old Man River from each other; my dad in Lethbridge, Mark on the Blood Reserve. My dad is the son of immigrants, welcomed by the government; Mark the son of generations of Blackfoot people, who had their land and kids taken by the government. Mark and I have both worked at homeless shelters and have deep convictions about the importance of connection and treating others as humans. Unlike Mark, I am quickly trusted by the nonprofit system, and I don’t know what it’s like to live on the streets.

A MOMENT IN TIME

3 Hours Chat returned

Aug 2024

Most resonant narratives

I want to leave something better for future generations

I always get back as much or more than I put in

I’ve had tougher times so I have empathy

Indigenous Male 62

Mark Brave Rock

#LethbridgeAB #Reengaged #VolunteerAlberta

“Sage Clan has been a blessing for me personally. People don’t realize how much it’s been for me personally to use my lived experience.”

Driving down Mayor Magrath Drive, the sunset is brilliant gold and orange, with rain streaks in the distance and pine trees overlooking the coolies. This is the place of Mark’s ancestors, of his life on the streets, and now, of the Sage Clan Patrol he founded - a group of volunteers who walk the streets offering care, relationship, and emergency supplies to those in need.

It’s been quite the journey over the last seven years: it’s been bumpy, he’s had to make up lots on the go, and being in the public eye has come with its fair share of controversy and suspicion, yet Mark is unwavering in his commitment to the people. Mark came to this work in an atypical way, without university credentials or a career path. Instead, Mark was building from a life of hardship on the streets. In and out of jail, he calls himself a jailbird, partly attributed to, “Me and my big mouth.” He recalls doubting himself when he first sat with City Councilors, academics, health professionals and police chiefs, thinking, “I can’t do this. Who do I think I am?”

There are lots of trends that Mark bucks in his approach to providing care, from

staying in relationship with people who are aggressive, to his abiding faith that “the right people always show up” rather than worrying about numbers, to his refusal to use people’s stories to secure funding. “When people come back and they say thank you, that’s the win for us. Whether you want to believe it as fact is up to you, I don’t really care.” He doesn’t bow down to the metrics or “proof of success” that funders so often demand of charities. He isn’t afraid to speak his mind, even around others with formal education or training, and isn’t afraid to speak honestly and humbly about not always knowing the way forward. Honesty is a core value of his, and is more important than image or reputation. “You guys tell me I’m volunteering. No, I just do this because you’re supposed to, and I’ve been designated somehow, some way, so I do it.” Mark also believes that solutions have to be connected to place, models can’t be replicated and spread independent of deep connection to the land and spirit of a place. “Well, there’s the spirit of this area. When Sage Clan deals with a person on the street, it’s not just mind and body. Us Natives, we lost our way of life. We were very spiritual people. Spirituality was just as powerful as eating. So that’s something that’s not accepted, because all of a sudden, you’re including religion in there.

At a Glance

MOTIVATION SUMMARY

Intrinsically motivated

Low or inconsistent motivation

High motivation

Extrinsically motivated

Primary Motivation

#Lived experience

#Compassion

#Purpose & calling

“I do this because I’ve lived it.”

CONTRIBUTION SUMMARY

Higher contribution

Invited to contribute

Sought out to contribute

Lower contribution

How they have connected to opportunities in the past

Voluntold to attend a conference; free food

Invited to sit with City Councilors, police, academics, policy makers

“I got told [by an addictions worker] ‘Mark, you want to go to Winnipeg? You’re going to be an ambassador for our homeless and addicted.’ It was the National Awareness on Homelessness. I came home and I knew we needed a Bear Clan here.”

Time Use

Top uses of time

Current

Desired

1 Work Time with family Time doing arts

2 Time with family Work Time doing arts Playing music Reading

Social network

High contribution norms

Tight knit

Broad

Low contribution norms

Size of network

Small

Medium

Large

Relationship with network

More likely to:

Mutual influence, evolving over time

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers

Past

Present

Not beholden to the nonprofit system of policy, metrics, and meetings

Support from buddies I grew up with, people on the streets and on AISH

Barriers

Wouldn’t pass criminal record check

No university degrees, employment references, resume

Top Stressors

Time “Balancing new role as parent with work, community, friends, and obtaining the prerequisites to study pharmacy.”

Money “Money is always a stressor, especially when I am volunteering a lot.”

Top Values

Home “It’s like your foundation of what you are, what you wear, and sometimes what you can be or what you will be. I think most things start from home, including learning.

little in life lots in life

Community “When you look at people of different groups, and different kinds, and you still feel like they’re one of you, then I think that’s when you know that you are living in a community which you feel like is yours.”

little in life lots in life

Pride/Respect “I want to feel respected in the same way I want to respect everybody.”

little in life lots in life

Opportunity Areas

Intercultural Parenting Co-op

What if the first birthday of Santosh’s son brought an invitation to explore culturally-rooted parenting traditions, understand different parenting contexts, and join a co-op to collectively meet member families’ needs for childcare amidst schooling, shift work, etc.?

Pharmacist Scout

What if Santosh-as-pharmacist were invited to join a network of scouts with a pipeline of volunteer opportunities, enabling him to make personal referrals: to help his clients build a sense of connection, belonging, and purpose?

Applied training

What if part of Santosh’s training to be a pharmacist involved volunteerism as a site for transferrable relational learning? For example, he might get certified in Appreciative Inquiry while working with immigrant youth.

Natalie

Canadian-born

White

Woman

Listener’s Perspective

How we met

Having learned that Lethbridge is the heart of Canadian Bhutanese community, we decided to swing by the Canadian Bhutanese Society’s office on our first day in town: it was Santosh’s home! We sheepishly knocked on the door and expressed our interest in learning more about what community contribution looks like in their community. Santosh was welcoming and made time for us in the next few days.

Points of (un)familiarity

I was surprised to learn that Santosh was only 30. The life events he described seemed like those of someone beyond his years. While I had a lot of independence as a teenager, I didn’t have anyone relying on me much. I see how a sense of interconnectedness and responsibility has really shaped who Santosh is.

1.5 Hours Chat returned

A MOMENT IN TIME

Most resonant narratives

I’ve had tougher times so I have empathy

Contributing makes me feel good

Santosh

30
Former Bhutanese refugee, now Canadian
Male
Nepalese-born

#LethbridgeAB #Reengaged #VolunteerAlberta

“Because I have been through so many things, I know how it feels, and I guess I have too much empathy.”

Like a lot of new fathers, Santosh is learning fast. Based on lots of experience with nieces and nephews, “I thought raising him up was pretty easy, but no, apparently not,” he admits with a chuckle. Unlike many new fathers, Santosh has helped support people, including his elders, since he came to Canada as a refugee at age 15. He reflects on his experience differently now that he has his own son. “When I think about it, I wouldn’t give that much responsibility to my kid, but I had to take it because my parents had no idea about the country, the culture, the language.”

Young Santosh helped by getting a job, navigating systems, doing paper work, and translating for his elders.

For four years, Santosh has been the President of the Canadian Bhutanese Society which supports Nepali-speakers in Lethbridge with practical help, like translation, and cultural celebrations. He also maintains strong ties with the Southern Alberta Ethnic Association and says all the ethnic groups attend and volunteer at each others’ cultural events. “It’s fun: you get to meet people with different ideas, and you get to try different stuff, and you know this place [Lethbridge] is a small place, you don’t have much else to do!”

In the refugee camp in Nepal where Santosh was born, everything ran on volunteer labour, from schools to dispute resolution processes: “I think that’s what shaped the sense of volunteering in me. Both of my parents were volunteers.” While he originally went to school to become a research scientist, “I realized that’s not who I am... I really like to spend my day talking to people more than you know being in a lab just talking to yourself and rats.” Currently he works in a pharmacy and is taking the prerequisites that will allow him to study pharmacy next year.

Santosh’s Nepalese-owned workplace is an important point of contact with people in his community. “A lot of our community members know I work over there. So they come over there all the time with little chores.” If it’s something quick, he’ll handle it on the spot. If not, he arranges to help them after work or refers them to someone else. “We don’t realize that something that we think is a tiny task is a big task for somebody else. Let’s say, just to book an appointment to go do the lab work. People can’t do that, so they come to me.” He also helps with travel documents and having done about 200 applications, is a bit of an expert.

At a Glance

MOTIVATION SUMMARY

Intrinsically motivated

Low or inconsistent motivation

High motivation

Extrinsically motivated

Primary Motivation

#Pride

#Empathy

“I can proudly say that I give to my community.”

CONTRIBUTION SUMMARY

Higher contribution

Invited to contribute

Lower contribution

Sought out to contribute

How they have connected to opportunities in the past

Asked informally

Helping elders (using English language skills, navigating systems)

“We didn’t have much of a choice when we came to Canada: a lot of our parents, they don’t have that language ability... We had to start volunteering so that we can convey what they’re trying to say, right?”

Current Time Use

Top uses of time

Current

1Work (9am–6pm)

2Family time

3Community responsibilities

4School

5Visiting with friends

Social network

High contribution norms

Tight knit

Broad

Low contribution norms

Size of network

Small

Medium

Large

Relationship with network

More likely to:

Be both an influencer and be influenced by other volunteers

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers

Past

Close ties (helping family & friends)

Language acquisition

Culture of volunteerism in refugee camp

Present

Big network (people know to ask him)

Employer who shares community values

Enjoys connection

Barriers

Economic and time pressures

“I don’t have time to think about what I do all day... it’s usually like ‘go, go, go!’”

Top Stressors

Losing loved ones “Losing my grandparents and my sister. My sister’s death [when I was 6 years old,] I haven’t gotten over it. I’ve gotten kind of past it.”

Mental health “It’s more [that] I have a lot of stressors, like my roommate, my workers. They don’t listen. I would try to give them advice about how to work with my roommate, and they’re like ‘Oh, you don’t know what you’re talking about.’”

Physical health “I need to lose weight. That’s one of many things, but, I don’t want to lose too much weight because I don’t want guys to whistle at me.”

Top Values

Advocacy “What does that look like where everyone’s included, you know? I think those that don’t understand people, or especially those that don’t understand people with disabilities, should learn from them.”

little in life

lots in life

Friends “I have like five best friends... [I look for] honesty, kindness, that loving bond between friends.”

little in life

lots in life

Community “I go to church every Sunday... I try to participate in my church activities... like dinners.”

little in life

lots in life

Opportunity Areas

Contribution as Core

What if it were widely recognized that contribution is a core human need? A group home would be run with co-op style roles suited to each person. Helping individuals get to volunteer gigs would be prioritized like taking medication.

Relational Super Heroes

What if part of the support VA & volunteer centres provided to members was fantastic relationship management skills training, including radical candor and getting creative about roles to prioritize relationships and growth opportunities for volunteers?

Roaming Advocate

What if May could volunteer as an advocate for younger people with disabilities in rural areas of AB to find satisfying roles, coaching them over the phone, and traveling to work with organizations to improve communication and understanding?



Listener’s Perspective

How we met

I was introduced to May by leadership at SAIPA, the organization that SARS is part of. She agreed to spend some time with my teammate and I, so we went to brunch together.

Points of (un)familiarity

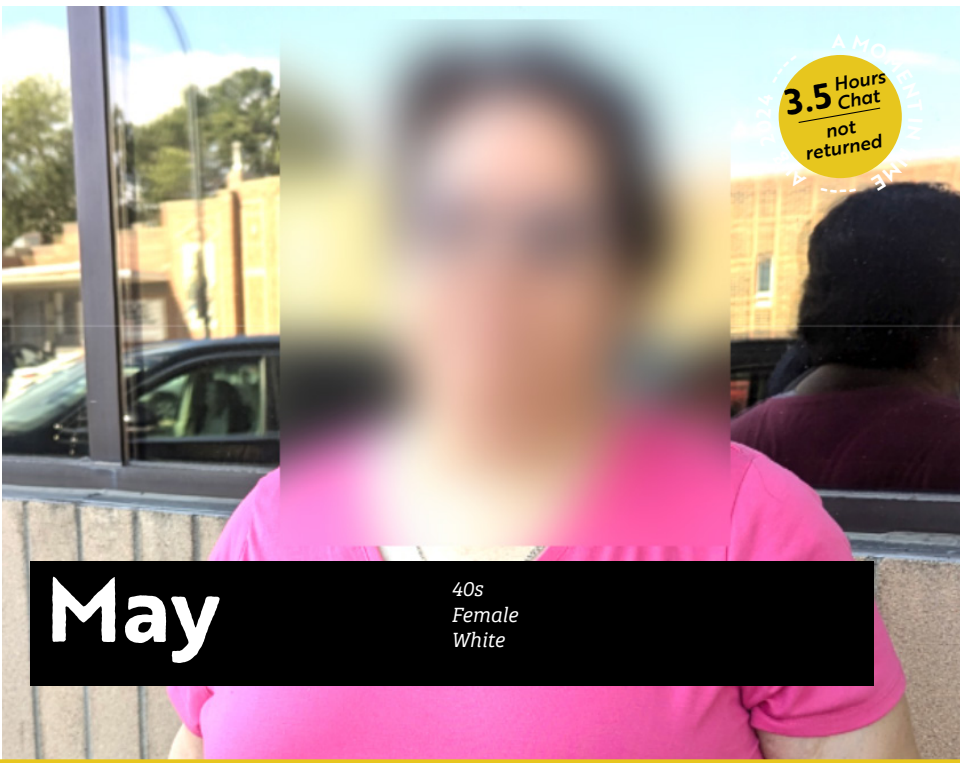
May and I both developed grit and gumption in response to the meanness of other children. Whereas for me, growing into adolescence afforded me some mental freedom, May has had to work much harder to liberate herself from the assumptions of others, including those meant to care for her as an adult, but who consistently make her feel underestimated and undermined, whatever their intentions.

Natalie

Canadian-born

White

Woman



3.5 Hours Chat not returned

40s
Female
White

#LethbridgeAB #Reengaged #VolunteerAlberta

“I look for people that care about the little guy because I was one of those... and most of my friends were...too.”

May moved to a group home from living independently in her own condo, three years ago. Now, when she carries out her usual domestic activities, like cleaning, her roommate asks, peevishly, “Do you work here?” When she advises staff about how to work with her roommate, who has been verbally and physically abusive towards her, “they’re like, ‘Oh, you don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m the staff.’” She feels that her roommate is not held accountable for her behaviour, and it’s May who lives the consequences. May has trained workers like them. It was her favourite job. “I would talk about how I was treated in the past by staff and ...how every worker should try to understand their client” rather than judge them. May has served on three boards of disability-focused organizations. She has volunteered with SARS, the Self-Advocacy Resource Society, for almost 20 years which led to all kinds of speaking opportunities that allowed her to address decision makers directly, in addition to helping train staff like the ones who now dismiss her. “Once upon a time, I was considered a success story.” Ironically, her feelings of helplessness around her current living situation are reducing the energy she has to continue decades of advocacy work: “So this year, I’m not going to do any of those, because I’ve just been under a lot of

stress... and I forget a lot when I’m under a lot of stress... but when I volunteered, we did a lot of things.” May acquired a brain injury as a baby, in a car accident. As a child she became aware that people underestimated her if they knew she had an invisible disability. She was reserved, but harassed by bullies, she “developed a little more gumption” as she got older. “I used to get into fights. I wouldn’t start it... You couldn’t pay me to be a kid again.” At age 18 her mother, with whom she is close, enrolled her in a day program for people with brain injuries and ensured supports were in place for May, before moving to the United States. The day program was boring: “literally, you just sat there and did squat.” She didn’t get a lot of social interaction out of it either, though, looking back, she needed that. In the program, May recalls labeling bottles and margarine containers... for about 40 cents an hour. It took her eight years to liberate herself from that program, and the notion that her time wasn’t worth much to anyone. Her first volunteer job, at the hospital, ended seemingly because no one believed in her ability to learn and adjust her behaviour. It hurt her deeply. It was in her early 20s that a support staff suggested she might get involved with SARS, The experience was transformative. May

At a Glance

MOTIVATION SUMMARY

Intrinsically motivated

Low or inconsistent motivation

High motivation

Extrinsically motivated

Primary Motivation

#Feeling Agency

“When people know who I am for what I’ve been doing and what I’ve been trying to accomplish: I’ve been asked to go to seminars, participate in several activities that have to do with advocacy... and I enjoy that, I do. It makes me feel like I’m doing something good.”

CONTRIBUTION SUMMARY

Higher contribution

Invited to contribute

Lower contribution

Sought out to contribute

How they have connected to opportunities in the past

Opportunities through SARS

Suggestions of support workers, mother

“[SARS - Self Advocacy Resource Society] was suggested to me by a worker at one of my own programs and they thought that it would be a good fit for me. And I think they also thought that I needed to learn some advocacy things myself, because I was a very shy adult.”

Current Time Use

Top uses of time

Current

1 Talking on the phone (4-5 hours/day)

2 Meal preparation & grocery shopping

3 Cleaning

4 Reading scripture

5 Attending church

Social network

High contribution norms

Tight knit

Broad

Low contribution norms

Size of network

Small

Medium

Large

Relationship with network

More likely to:

Be both an influencer and be influenced

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers

Past

Used transit a lot

Walkable neighbourhood

Access to decisionmakers

Present

Church community

Less frequent (monthly) meetings

Rides from friends (ad hoc)

Barriers

Past

Poor communication

Assumptions about her abilities (hospital)

Present

Transportation

Living/roommate situation

Support hours at wrong times

“I always feel empowered after [speaking up]... Even if they don’t always quite listen to me, at least they heard.”

“They thought because I had a staff, I was an idiot.”

Top Stressors

Interdependence

“We weren’t designed to do this alone... The way it is going with our bigger fences and our smaller yards and nobody knows their neighbor anymore is not how I want to see my future.”

little in life

lots in life

Learning

“[I do] social experiments, I guess, right? Is this going to work? Is it not going to work?”

little in life

lots in life

Community

Sees community as an exchange of care and respect. “Lots of people [in the seniors’ home] are cared for, and now they’re getting to care for [chickens], and they’re in charge, so they regain the independence, and I think that’s huge for them.”

little in life

lots in life

Opportunity Areas

Community Scout

Risk talks

Anxiety busters

What if Michelle were part of a cadre of people with the connector superpower, and she had a pipeline of volunteer opportunities to which she might match people in her extensive network?

What if risk tolerance on some social & environmental benefit activities was determined more locally, through a citizen-led process? As someone who questions rules and is oriented towards action, Michelle might play a role in codesigning alternative risk models to test.

What if young adults who experience anxiety were exposed to the “Michelle program” in which they might experience how community action can be a way to connect with others, feel more belonging, and test your assumptions?

Listener’s Perspective

How we met

Before coming to Fairview, we researched what was going on there, and came across an article about Michelle’s dignity barn. My teammate called her up and immediately recognized that Michelle might be a bit of an outlier, on the contribution front.

Points of (un)familiarity

Michelle grew up in a tight-knit rural communities in Alberta and BC, and I grew up in Vancouver: we had very different cultural influences! Michelle attacks a difficult problem while I sometimes avoid a problem I don’t know how to solve; however, we are both people who put ourselves out there and connect with others without fear or hesitation.

Natalie

Canadian-born

White

Woman

Michelle

47 years old
Taurus
Born in Fairview, world traveller

2 Hours Chat not returned

A MOMENT IN TIME IN AUG 2024

#FairviewAB #Reengaged #VolunteerAlberta

“You’re not just trying to get people to help you with things. You’re trying to connect people with things. I’m a connector of people. That is my super power.”

“Some of it’s just been out of pure frustration, right?” Michelle explains her many community endeavours. “There’s sacred cows or myths in this community,” and when she encounters one, her instinct is to investigate and test it. For example, after returning to her native Fairview in 2018, and opening a wellness business, she kept hearing “that nobody stays in Fairview on the weekends, so don’t open up your business on a Saturday, because... it’s not worth it.” Michelle was dubious about the possibility that there was a mass exodus of 3000 people every weekend, with no one coming to visit. She worked with “a ladies mastermind group” to probe at it, and they created

a Facebook group just for weekend events. It now has 1.9K members (there are only 2.8K people in Fairview.) When she was disappointed at the lack of stuff happening, even outdoors, during COVID, she pioneered an Easter egg scavenger hunt, which has become a growing annual event, involving many local businesses and organizations. She learned that, “a lot of people do leave town, but it is not everybody.”

We are walking a trail, on Michelle’s suggestion, and as we round a pond, she tells me the story of its namesake. “She was very involved with many, many different things.” She ran a variety store in the mall and also provided

rentals - everything from birthday cake molds in all shapes and sizes to wedding items. Michelle admires her entrepreneurialism, but even more so that she “was always contributing to something in the community. She would be a sponsor for everything.”

Michelle is also a business owner who supports her community. After repeatedly seeing people searching through the garbage cans behind her home and business, that she knew were full of “construction nails and dog crap,” Michelle created “the dignity barn.” Looking much like a little free library, the mini barn on a post is stocked with essential items, food, and anything else “people” want to donate. They drop donations at the door of her business, which is also her home. After donations of bread attracted birds, she added a large Rubbermaid container. She re-stocks the barn up to three times a day. Originally it was located on the boulevard, but when she heard of a business neighbour complaining about it, she moved it back off town property, onto her own. She also receives notes of thanks and appreciation.

Michelle attributes her community involvement to the example of her grandmothers (“hands down!”) who were always “doing stuff together.” They were probably both

volunteering “like the day they died,” she figures. While living in Vernon, BC, as a young adult, Michelle joined Junior Chamber International, and it was a formative experience. Contributing to community was a core aspect of membership, and Michelle helped organize a big ball tournament. “One of the best lessons I ever got there is they would support any crazy idea. They would fund ideas and it was okay to find success in failure.” There was a rule that events needed to be phased out before they became stale, promoting continued learning. Currently, Michelle is on the farmers’ market board, heads up the Fine Arts Centre’s Enhancement Committee, is a member of the community gardens group and the Recreation Advisory Committee, and sits on a committee of the Society of Alberta Occupational Therapists. “I’ve been trimming.”

At her own business, she has developed a system where she barter her services in exchange for help around her property, using a credit system. After a retired woman criticized her plants, Michelle recruited her to water them. The woman has now named them all, and they look much better. Another woman began cleaning her pool, and has since had a baby. As the baby got busier, the plant waterer offered to amuse him in his

Motivation Summary

Intrinsically motivated

Low or inconsistent motivation

High motivation

Extrinsically motivated

Primary Motivation

#Connection

“We weren’t designed to do this alone...I’m a single person that doesn’t have kids. I’m going to need somebody to take care of me, right?!”

Contribution Summary

Higher contribution

Invited to contribute

Lower contribution

Sought out to contribute

How they have connected to opportunities in the past

Sees opportunities, possibilities, and needs everywhere

Takes initiative

Social network

High contribution norms

Tight knit

Broad

Low contribution norms

Size of network

Small

Medium

Large

Relationship with network

More likely to:

Influence

Enablers and Barriers

Enablers

Barriers

Past

Curiosity

Ability to Connect People

Junior Chamber International

Present

Curiosity

Ability to Connect People

Business ownership

“I’m totally the type of person to be like, ‘Yeah, I think I’d like to help out with that.’”

In the face of barriers, Michelle acts.

