

Parkdale is more than its problems

Enthusiasm is replacing apathy

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TORONTO — A cynic would say you know you're in the heart of Parkdale by the number of prostitutes on the corners, the syringes in the gutters, and mental patients on the benches.

It's the first image the media trot out when something bad happens in the west-end village of Parkdale — such as the disappearance this week of three-year-old Kayla Klaudusz — but it is one some residents resent.

"Parkdale has its problems, but it also has its humane side," said Rev. Nan Hudson, a United Church minister who runs a community outreach centre. "That's the side of Parkdale that has to be told."

But just describing the community is a challenge. Down one street is a diverse mixture of people and housing. Halfway houses mingle with renovated Victorian homes with tinted glass and sculptured gardens. The peaceful shade of trees gives way to the harsh concrete of a monster block of apartments with no balconies.

There are more than 30,000 residents in Parkdale, bounded by the lake to the south, Roncesvalles Avenue, Dundas and Dufferin Streets.

While it may not be inaccurate to characterize the area as a centre for prostitutes and drug users, with a large transient population living in rooming houses, there are many in the community who see a new determination to return Parkdale to livability.

"Those who were supposed to help us find the solutions have let us down. So, what has brought a lot of us together is to say from now on the community is going to have to speak up and do something about it," said Susan Shaw, a community worker who spent yesterday morning helping to search for Kayla.

The apathy of the past decade has given way to a new enthusiasm that she hasn't seen before, Ms. Shaw said.

-- **Shalom House** is a part of that change. It's an outreach centre set up by the United Church in south Parkdale two years ago to run food programs for area residents.

Every week the centre holds a community kitchen where people can cook a big batch of something and take it home. It also has a wholesale food club where people pool their grocery lists and buy food at a wholesale outlet. The goal is to help each other and reduce the need to use food banks.

Fighting for its share of sunlight out back is a community garden, including three composters. Tomatoes, peas, lettuce and beets are lovingly watered daily by Harold Sinclair, 66, who has lived in Parkdale all his life. He's the unofficial guard of Shalom Centre and has organized a 24-hour watch on the garden.

With the proceeds from the garden, the centre holds a farmer's market every week.

There are a number of new immigrants who head for Parkdale because it is one of the last bastions of relatively cheap housing in the city of Toronto.

In the basement of **Shalom House** there's a new sewing co-operative run by Latin American women. The widows of a small town in Guatemala weave textiles and sell them to the women of the co-op, who then make clothes to sell here.

In her office at the Parkdale Community Health Centre, on Queen Street West, Ms. Shaw frequently hears the pimps screaming obscenities at the hookers. More than once she has gone outside to avert yet another statistic of domestic violence.

She and her husband have brought up their two children in Parkdale, where they have lived for 14 years, and she is now program coordinator for the community centre. She is also about to take another big step in community activism by running in the municipal election in November as the New Democratic candidate for Ward 2.

Ms. Shaw is also chairwoman of the steering committee for the Focus Community Program, in which more than 100 residents are trying to prevent children from getting involved in drugs. Since April the program has organized two Drug Awareness Weeks that drew more than 3,000 people each.

The drug problem will not be solved by just throwing in more police officers, Ms. Shaw said. It is time for the community-controlled programs to take over.

In another project, the centre is hiring local people to run a breakfast club in connection with the separate and public school boards.

Ms. Shaw is convinced that her neighbourhood is a model for other communities struggling with the same problems. "There's stuff to learn from Parkdale."