



“I REALLY LIKE BEING WITH THIS GROUP OF PEOPLE”: SOCIAL WELLBEING AND NATURE VOLUNTEERING AT OTTAWA’S FLETCHER WILDLIFE GARDEN

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Evidence reveals that green space and access to nature have positive influences on human health, including social wellness, as demonstrated by the case study of Ottawa’s Fletcher Wildlife Garden (FWG). Members of the volunteer team involved in this urban wildlife habitat project experience social wellness in its nuanced fullness, including social cohesion, social integration and adjustment, social contribution and functioning, social support, social acceptance, and social actualization. In a society and period where increasing numbers of people are living alone and becoming socially isolated in other ways, the potential of outdoor volunteering is particularly significant. FWG volunteers being mostly of retirement age, this project demonstrates the potential for involvement in local green spaces to alleviate social isolation among older people, a population identified as vulnerable to this risk factor.

Keywords: Green space, Nature, Social wellbeing, Social isolation, Public health, Aging.

Introduction

“I really enjoy being surrounded by people that share similar passions and interests,” says Cindy, a volunteer at Ottawa’s Fletcher Wildlife Garden (FWG). Another volunteer, Sheila, adds, “I really look forward to seeing the other volunteers. I truly enjoy each one.”

Those statements capture the social significance of volunteering at a green space such as the FWG. Green outdoor settings have, in fact, been associated with a wide scope of benefits, ranging from the social, mental, and spiritual, to the physical and environmental (Maller, et al. 2009, Townsend 2006). So broad and positive are these benefits that access to natural areas has been characterized as a foundation of health and wellbeing (Bird 2008), a potential gold mine for health promotion (Maller, et al. 2006), and a valuable and versatile health resource (Reynolds 2000) that is seriously underestimated, with therapeutic value yet to be fully realized (RSPB n.d.).

Research reveals specific benefits of contact with nature to include reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol, rapid and more complete recovery from stress, lower blood pressure and pulse rate, and both cognitive restoration and better cognitive performance (Logan and Selhub 2012). Physical activity in natural outdoor locations has been shown to be more effective at improving physical and mental health than exercise in other places, or than physical exercise alone, with the key being the green, outdoor setting of the physical activity (Pretty, et al. 2005). With respect to mental health, contact with nature has been described as a cost-effective, widely accessible, and clinically valid strategy that is free of adverse side-effects (Driessnack 2009, MIND 2007).

Nature and social wellness

Social aspects of activity in green spaces have been researched less than the physical and mental benefits. Yet natural areas such as parks have been recognized for the contributions they make to social wellness, as settings where people can engage with the community, expand social networks, and develop personal relationships (Maller, et al. 2009).

The Landscape and Human Health Laboratory (LHHL) at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, is one research centre which has conducted studies revealing nature's role in encouraging strong social ties and creating cohesive, vital neighborhoods. LHHL research has found that the greener the common space in the inner city – the more trees and grass it offers – the more it is used by residents. And the more it is used, the greater the opportunities for informal social interaction. An average of 83% more people, in fact, were involved in social activities in green common spaces than in bare common spaces, while people living closer to a green space enjoyed more social activities, had more visitors, knew more about their neighbours, and had stronger feelings of belonging (Sullivan, et al. 2004; Kuo, et al. 1998).

Active engagement with green spaces and natural areas has, furthermore, been shown to foster particularly strong social connectedness among volunteers united in community tasks and a common goal (Maller, et al. 2006; Townsend 2006; Birch 2005), and to promote social interaction, conviviality, companionship, new friends, and collective identity (MIND 2007). People volunteering in green spaces express appreciation for opportunities to take meaningful action and make socially valued contributions (Townsend 2006; Miles, et al., 2000).

How can we deepen our understanding of the social wellbeing experienced while volunteering in nature? How can we make sense of the nuanced encounters, interactions, relationships and communal teamwork uniting diverse individuals in a shared purpose? An integrated conceptualization of social wellbeing opens a door to expanded comprehension.

Social wellbeing – a conceptualization

Despite a wide range of difficulties associated with the idea of social health and wellbeing – including unfamiliarity with the concept (physical and mental health are more widely discussed and better known), lack of universal agreement regarding its meaning, operationalization difficulties across cultures, imperfect measurement instruments, and no classification system for social health problems (Larson 1996, 1993) – sociologist and social psychologist Corey Keyes has developed a conceptualisation of social wellbeing operationalized at the level of the individual.

He describes social wellbeing as the appraisal of one's circumstances and functioning in society (Keyes 1998), along with the quality of an individual's relationships with other people and the greater community – as a neighbour, citizen, co-worker (Keyes & Shapiro, 2004). This "positive social health" (Keyes 1998, p. 122) perspective operationalizes social wellbeing in terms of satisfaction and personal functioning (Keyes 1998) based on a conception of health as "the presence of a high level of wellbeing" rather than absence of significant symptoms of illness (Keyes & Shapiro, 2004, p. 351).

Keyes proposes operational definitions and indicators for five dimensions of social wellbeing: (1) social integration, (2) social contribution, (3) social coherence, (4) social acceptance, and (5) social actualization (Keyes & Shapiro, 2004; Keyes 1998), as described and illustrated in the following pages. Considerations of social adjustment, social support and social functioning, as outlined by social psychologist James Larson, are integrated for even deeper understanding.

The present article illustrates, through a recent geographical ethnographic case study among volunteers at Ottawa's Fletcher Wildlife Garden (FWG), these dimensions of social wellbeing. The case study also provides insight into social implications of nature volunteering for certain vulnerable groups in contemporary society.

The Fletcher Wildlife Garden case study

Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document review nested within a case study research tradition, the FWG research project sought to understand the significance of the relationships which develop between volunteers and the natural environment on-site. The research also strove to grasp the reasons why volunteering at the site is so compelling to people, with results indicating profound implications for social wellbeing.

The FWG is an 18-acre piece of land managed to cultivate wildlife habitat in the city, and to demonstrate backyard habitat gardening approaches and techniques. Its distinct components or sub-sites (e.g. Backyard Garden, New Woods, Butterfly Meadow, Amphibian Pond, Ash Woodlot) engage volunteers in different activities and foster diverse relationships with the natural world. Reasons for selecting the FWG as the case study site include, among others, (a) the potential of these various components and related activities to offer a wide range of insight into human-nature relations, (b) the FWG's setting in an urban environment, where access to nature is limited, and where contact with the natural environment takes on particular meaning, (c) its status as a well-established public space managed and maintained for over 20 years through collective volunteer activity, and (d) altruistic volunteer participation in a project which does not provide tangible or practical benefit such as food, income, or increased property value.

Methods

Since the Fletcher Wildlife Garden research project is an exploratory look at an under-examined and highly personal phenomenon, the most fitting approach was a multi-method ethnographic case study – case studies being particularly well-suited to capturing complexity and meaning (Yin 2003), and ethnographic fieldwork typically immersing researchers in lived experience for extended periods of time through multiple methods (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). The multiple methods employed to collect data in the FWG study include participant observation, interviews and document review.

For three seasons, the lead author worked alongside other volunteers, participating in various activities at the FWG. She kept extensive and detailed field notes recording over 150 hours of site observation, observant participation, and casual dialogue with FWG visitors as they passed through the site.

The lead author also conducted in-depth interviews with FWG volunteers. The interviews were structured according to an interview guide that consisted largely of open-ended questions which provided ample scope for reflection, discussion, and individual expression regarding each respondent's relationship with the FWG. Interviews were recorded by hand, then transcribed electronically – an intuitive response to a strong sense that audio-recording technology would not be appropriate, that it might interfere with the natural flow of the interview conversation. Hand-written notes also felt more organic, more in the spirit of the FWG.¹ To ensure accuracy, passages captured verbatim were clearly identified for future citation, and transcribed notes were sent to interview participants for review. In total, twenty-seven volunteers participated in the interviews, including nine men and eighteen women. Pseudonyms were attributed to the research participants to grant as much anonymity as possible.

Document review involved an examination of ancillary sources of information relating to the FWG, including the project's website and photo-blog, on-site documentation (e.g. FWG newsletters, reports, inventories, archived documents), media articles, wildlife- and gardening-related educational information available on-site, and photographs.

Interpretation and analysis have been identified as little-addressed and especially challenging aspects of case study and ethnographic research (Crang & Cook 2007, Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, Yin 2003, Jackson 2001). The researchers therefore made sure to follow recommendations emphasizing precision,

¹ Hand-written note-taking turned out to be advantageous in other ways, beyond the scope of this article to describe.

diligence and rigor – for example, keeping systematic, extensive, detailed field notes (Roy 2003); triangulating different methods and participant accounts (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007); starting thematic interpretation with coding to facilitate the development of themes from the raw data (Braun & Clarke 2006); and coding, categorizing and linking in an ongoing, iterative manner (Crang & Cook 2007, Jackson 2001).

Fletcher Wildlife Garden volunteers

The nine men and eighteen women participating in the FWG case study range in age from mid-20s to early-80s, with most (82%) retired and over the age of 50. As in other volunteer organizations, the volunteers associated with the FWG come and go, with varying levels of commitment to the project. At the time they were interviewed, nine study participants had been volunteering for over ten seasons, eight volunteering between five and ten years, and four between one and four seasons; six participants were involved in the project for only one season (less than one year).

Despite the varying durations of involvement with the FWG, all study participants expressed a certain commitment to the project. For some, the feeling is very strong. Glenda, who has volunteered for over seven years, says she is 100 percent committed, and that the FWG is a higher priority than any of her other interests. She adds that if she lived closer, she would come more often. Robert, who has been coming to the FWG for over ten years, describes his commitment as “strong.” He explains that he schedules his week around FWG work, adding that if he fails to come, it is because he is travelling. Sheila, who has also been involved in the project for over 10 years, tells me that FWG volunteering is inscribed on her calendar. She describes her commitment as “totally enthusiastic” and says that she is proud to work at the FWG. Glenda, Robert, and Sheila are all retired.

Younger and newer volunteers also reveal commitment to the project. Lisa tells me that she has never considered herself to be outdoorsy, but that she keeps coming back to work at the FWG because it adds to her routine and gets her outside. Jo likewise shares that volunteering at the FWG is beneficial because it gives her a set time to get out of the house as well as a good workout. “Having something fixed on my calendar keeps me busy,” she says.

Social wellbeing at the Fletcher Wildlife Garden

Something that inspires the enthusiasm and commitment of these volunteers is the company of other people involved in the project. FWG volunteers are united by shared interests and efforts toward a common cause. These social aspects of nature volunteering weave through the diverse and interrelated dimensions of social wellbeing described in this section.

Social coherence at the FWG

According to Keyes, social coherence involves an individual’s perception that the world has coherence, meaning and predictability – that it makes sense. He points out that healthy people care about the kind of world they live in, believe they understand what is happening around them, and feel that their lives are meaningful (Keyes & Shapiro 2004, p. 353; Keyes 1998, p. 122). “Such people do not delude themselves that they live in a perfect world,” writes Keyes, adding that they nonetheless maintain a desire to make sense of life (Keyes 1998, p. 123).

The FWG’s very existence – as a place to create urban wildlife habitat and inspire others to take similar initiative – is a testament to concern about the world and what is happening in it. The FWG project seeks to make sense of the urban environment by rendering a part of the city meaningful to people and nature, and by fostering understanding of the natural world and its needs.

According to project archives, the idea for the FWG is rooted in late-1980s concerns that little in the way of wildlife habitat is retained in human-dominated environments such as urban subdivisions and modern agricultural lands. The “wildlife gardening” movement emerging at the time was viewed as a potential approach for meeting wildlife habitat needs, and for establishing a public wildlife garden in Ottawa. Project proponents conceived a project to create a model wildlife garden that would encourage people to garden in harmony with nature, using indigenous plant species and avoiding harmful chemicals (Hanrahan 2010, 2003).

It is an idea which resonates with the volunteers who work to maintain the site. “I wanted to do some volunteer work to network, keep busy and learn,” says Cindy, a younger team member who was not employed at the time. “I came across various organizations needing volunteers, but FWG’s mission of using native plants to provide habitat for wildlife won me over.” She wanted to have a native plant garden since college, she adds, and the FWG combined her passions and interests. “I love feeling like I am helping wildlife,” she declares.

Cindy’s story also illustrates Keyes’ observation that individuals with coherence seek to maintain it when they face unpredictable and traumatic life events (Keyes 1998, p. 123). Cindy finds coherence in the natural environment when she experiences distress, as revealed in her story about having a traumatic experience as a child and not wanting to share it with anyone she knew. She turned to nature instead, and continued to do so whenever she experienced difficulties. Cindy describes how she would walk to the stream at the end of the street where her family lived, cross a little bridge to a tree-ringed field, and immediately find refuge and peace. “I owe my life in a way to giving back to nature,” she says with feeling.

She speaks about “giving to the earth” now in gratitude, and becomes emotional as she talks. “I think it’s probably the most important thing in my life,” she says, her eyes brimming with tears. “I know it is ... see, I’m starting to cry ... I feel I’ve gotten so much comfort and peace from nature.” Cindy now finds meaning by volunteering in nature as much as possible. At the FWG, she enjoys planting trees which will provide homes and food for wildlife. “I think it’s incredible that in such a short period of time, I can give so much to the earth,” she exclaims, adding, “I just want to have a positive impact on the environment.”

Having a positive impact on the environment also arises in conversation with Gordon, who expresses meaning and coherence in cultivating harmony with and respect for the natural world at the FWG. “It’s what world peace is all about,” he says. “Just being at peace with one’s surroundings in a non-threatening way.”

Social integration and adjustment at the FWG

Peace with one’s environment, including the people, evokes the social integration aspect of social wellbeing, which Keyes describes as “the evaluation of the quality of one’s relationship to society and community.” Healthy individuals, he points out, feel that they are a part of society, and integration reflects the degree to which individuals feel they belong to their communities and have things in common with other community members (Keyes & Shapiro 2004, p. 353; Keyes 1998, p. 122). Elements of social adjustment described by Larson – interaction, general affective wellbeing, and satisfaction with relationships (Larson 1996, 1993) – also relate to social integration.

Adults who feel integrated into society, Keyes adds, are likely to volunteer to maintain their environments, possibly because they wish to be involved in their surroundings and feel that others will value their participation (Keyes 1998, p. 124). We could add that those integrated people would likely also feel good about their relationships with fellow volunteers and other members of the community.

All FWG volunteers speak about some aspect of social integration – with other FWG team members, or with visitors to the site. Theresa, for example, says, “This place is for people,” and describes the families who come on summer Sunday afternoons when the Interpretive Centre is open to the public. Children are especially attracted by the indoor exhibits and insects under the microscopes. “You should see their eyes,” Theresa exclaims with a big smile.

While encounters with FWG visitors can be satisfying and pleasant, the most significant relationships develop between volunteers, who usually carry out their tasks in the company of others. Working alongside team members at the FWG is, in many cases, one of main reasons people continue to volunteer there. "Working with the people here, that's very important to me," Glenda declares, while Gail states that the people at the FWG are "part of the positive experience." Luke agrees. "I certainly enjoy some of the people here," he says, calling them "an interesting lot."

Part of what makes this group of people so interesting is the things they have in common. Paul, for example, tells me that he looks forward to talking with people who have similar interests, while Gordon looks forward to "just sharing experiences with like-minded people." Marie tells me how good it feels to be around others who care about nature and the environment.

Shared interests, concerns and experiences unite FWG volunteers in teamwork toward a common goal. Margaret, for example, says she appreciates belonging to a group of interesting people "working together for a common cause", while Marie shares that she likes feeling that she is part of "a group trying to heal some small part of the earth." Paul likewise reveals how gratifying it is to "feel you've helped Mother Nature a bit."

The common cause of helping nature is a strong factor attracting volunteers to the FWG, keeping them coming back, and bonding the team members. The resulting sense of community – captured by Evelyn in her statement, "There seems to be a community there" – is important to volunteers, as is acceptance into that community. Randy, for example, tells me, "I enjoy being useful as well as being part of a group", adding that it is rewarding to have integrated "reasonably" well. Jo shares that the most satisfying aspect of volunteering at the FWG as being recognised, acknowledged and identified as part of the group.

Kate agrees, speaking of finding a place of acceptance among FWG volunteers, as well as a place of camaraderie. "Socially, I enjoy the company," she tells me, a point echoed by Bill, who reveals that his work at the FWG has become "more of a social activity." Marie makes the interesting statement that FWG volunteering helps to fill the social void she experienced upon retirement, a sentiment echoed by Lisa who reveals that FWG volunteering enabled her to form friendships when former friends all moved away from Ottawa. She tells me she is now "chumming around" with another volunteer.

Pauline sums her satisfaction with relationships at the FWG neatly with the statement, "There's a lot of people here I really enjoy being around." Sheila adds an element of pride. "We take great pride in our work," she tells me, stressing that it is a "huge privilege" to be part of the FWG team.

Social contribution and functioning at the FWG

Shiela's feelings of pride in FWG teamwork, and the satisfaction voiced by other volunteers regarding group efforts toward a common cause imply social contribution – an aspect of social wellbeing Keyes describes as the evaluation of one's own social value. "It includes the belief that one is a vital member of society," he writes, "with something of value to give to the world" (Keyes & Shapiro 2004, p. 353; Keyes 1998, p. 122). Wellbeing, he adds, reflects "whether, and to what degree, people feel that whatever they do in the world is valued by society and contributes to the commonweal" (Keyes 1998).

A concept described by Larson – social functioning, particularly performance in social roles – relates closely to the social contribution aspect of social wellbeing as it is experienced by FWG volunteers. Whereas Larson writes about broad social roles, from familial to occupational (Larson 1993), the roles and functions that emerged from the FWG case study relate mainly to nature volunteering on-site.

Tracey, for example, expresses her role as helping to create "a beautiful natural area that a lot of people enjoy visiting." Glenda agrees, articulating her responsibility in terms of "making it [FWG] as beautiful as it can be for whoever comes to visit." Kate adds that she volunteers on the project to create "a beautiful Eden" and "sanctuary of beauty and quiet" for both people and wildlife; she considers her role to be that of "caregiver" nurturing the land and the gardens.

Marie also views her role as nurturing, as well as counterbalancing environmental destruction. “It’s important to me to preserve portions of land that are natural,” she says. “I see it disappearing all around us, portions of land that are beautiful, not treated with respect.” Marie feels she is helping to maintain a bit of wildness in a world which is becoming increasingly urbanised. “It makes me feel that at least I am doing something to try to improve life on Earth,” she says.

Marie also makes sure to stress that group effort is achieving this improvement, a point reinforced by Thomas who adds that the FWG is “a worthwhile project which all of the volunteers contribute to.” Theresa agrees. “Success is collective,” she says. It’s teamwork.” Many volunteers find considerable satisfaction in their contributions to this cooperative effort, as vital members of the FWG team.

Louise, for example, says she feels a sense of accomplishment by helping out in different habitats. “I feel that I can contribute and make a difference,” she tells me. Lisa likewise tells me it is rewarding to contribute to something “constructive for betterment of society”, while Evelyn shares the feeling that she is doing something valuable with her time by volunteering at the FWG. “It’s a worthwhile activity,” she states. “I actually believe in the value of it. Doing something I believe in makes me feel good.”

The efforts made towards, in Marie’s words, healing the “small part of the earth” at the FWG are acknowledged and valued by visitors to the FWG, some of whom speak directly to volunteers working on-site directly. Gordon, for example, shares that he appreciates feedback from “lay visitors”, while Glenda talks enthusiastically about people approaching her while she is working to thank her for the wonderful job she doing at the garden.

Many volunteers believe the FWG’s greatest contribution involves reaching out to these visitors, and to others, to share appreciation for the beauty of native plants, and to provide general information about gardening for wildlife. Some individuals find particular reward in helping out when groups come to assist with work on-site or to tour the FWG. “It’s exhausting, but also satisfying,” says one long-time volunteer who feels she can make an important contribution by sharing what she has learned. “It’s fantastic to be a source of information,” she declares, telling me about the schools and community groups who come to the FWG for information. “It’s really great to be able to work with these groups,” she says. “It makes all our work worthwhile.”

Archived FWG documentation reports on FWG plant and seed contributions to regional school greening and conservation projects, on information and plants shared with native plant gardening projects at housing co-ops, on tools lent to different local groups for invasive species removal. A wastewater management site, health care facility, public green spaces and diverse educational institutions have also benefited from FWG resources, along with hundreds of gardeners who purchase plants each year at the FWG’s native plant sale.

Social support at the FWG

The various elements of social wellness discussed in these pages are inevitably interconnected, with social support particularly relevant to teamwork at the FWG, and to the overall sense of community among the volunteers. Described by Larson in basic terms as the availability of other people whom a person can trust and rely on, and who can make a person feel valued and cared for, social support hinges on the number and quality of contacts in a person’s social network, as well as satisfaction with the contacts (Larson 1996).

Whereas social support is offered broadly to members of society by friends, family, and others connected with home, work and elsewhere (Larson 1996), the networks that emerged in conversation with FWG case study participants relate mainly to nature volunteering on-site. The FWG team could be considered a social network in itself, with individual volunteers assisting each other to perform physical tasks on-site, supporting each other through times of difficulty, and participating in discovery and learning activities together.

As already discussed, case study participants find satisfaction in being accepted and valued as members of the FWG team, and in working with other team members toward a common goal. FWG

volunteers, interestingly, cast their contribution toward the cooperative activity in terms of support. Sheila considers her role to be "doing what everyone sees needing done", while Lisa says she offers "another pair of hands" to carry out a "fairly monumental" project. Luke sees himself as "helping in a small way" to support other volunteers carrying heavier loads; "part of the game, whenever I'm needed" are the words he uses to describe his role.

Joyce expresses similar sentiments. "I enjoy the people, and I like to help out," she states. "I like to be of use." Jo makes the quirky statement, "I bill myself as a general dog body, another pair of hands." She explains that she generally finds someone who will tell her what to do, thereby suggesting the general reciprocity that Pauline captures in the statement "me helping them, them helping me."

One way FWG volunteers help each other is by sharing information relating to their conservation tasks and other discoveries on-site. The FWG team could, in fact, be considered a network for sharing ideas and knowledge, with volunteers benefiting from each other's presence and experience. Certain volunteers, interestingly, portray the group as a learning community. Gordon speaks about community involvement and learning at the FWG, while Pauline and Theresa both praise the helpfulness of the other volunteers, particularly in terms of answering questions and sharing information. Audrey describes the project as "full of learning experiences because of the group that's there."

Volunteers help each other learn as they go about their tasks, and through exchanges during coffee break, an important part of each volunteer session. Coffee break provides an opportunity for individuals to relax over coffee and cookies, catch up with each other, make announcements, plan events, discuss issues, share ideas, ask questions, engage in show and tell, and learn. Volunteers often, for example, consult the group regarding the identification of plants or wildlife they have discovered, usually plants. Individuals typically bring a leaf, sprig or twig to show or pass around, while other volunteers have a look, consult references available on-site, and sometimes identify the species, usually through teamwork. Cindy is particularly enthusiastic about coffee break, her favourite part of the volunteer experience. "I think because it's a chance for everyone to sit down and talk about what they've accomplished, what needs to be done," she says. "I think that's when I do most of my learning."

Thomas reveals that most of his learning revolves around "co-operative working" and about bringing together people who are very different to work toward the same objective. At times, unfortunately, those differences can escalate into conflict and tension. Yet they can also encourage compassion and bonding among volunteers, as witnessed on several occasions when individuals lent a sympathetic ear and attempted to help affected volunteers deal with upsetting circumstances.

One volunteer's story demonstrates the power of social support. She describes the "atmosphere of terror" and intimidating hierarchy that reigned when she first started working at the FWG. "I had a lot of frustrating experiences when I first started," she says. "I was scared to death of pulling anything out in case it was something valuable." People were "bossier" then, she explains, adding that they were people with more knowledge, who made her feel inadequate because she knew less. Nonetheless she persevered, learned from her fellow volunteers, and now feels much more at ease, to the point of portraying her fellow team members as "a very, very nice bunch of people".

Social acceptance at the FWG

This "very, very nice bunch of people" illustrates the social acceptance dimension of social wellness, described by Keyes as "the construal of society through the character and qualities of other people" (Keyes & Shapiro 2004, p. 354; Keyes, 1998, p. 122). People who demonstrate social acceptance, he writes, hold favourable views of human nature, trust other people and feel comfortable with them, and consider others as capable of being kind and industrious – for example, doing a favour without expecting anything in return (Keyes & Shapiro 2004; Keyes 1998). Socially accepting individuals, he adds, generally acknowledge and accept people despite the fact that human behaviour can be perplexing and complex (Keyes & Shapiro 2004).

Favourable and accepting views of human nature are illustrated in Gail's description of her fellow FWG volunteers as "a very fine group of people", and Lisa's statement that she looks forward to interacting with other volunteers who are "nice", "friendly", and "pleasant." Robert adds that he looks forward to interacting with "very nice and knowledgeable people", while Pauline states simply, "I love the people."

It helps that FWG volunteers are united by common interests and goals; yet social acceptance within the team also embraces differences and, in Margaret's words, "idiosyncrasies." Some volunteers reveal that they enjoy working at the FWG because it provides opportunities to meet people who are different. Gail, for example, looks forward to the fun and "sparky" presence of a certain other volunteer at the FWG. "She's just different. She thinks differently," says Gail. Evelyn views the differences between her and other volunteers as enriching. "I feel like I'm encountering a different group of people than I encounter in my daily life," she observes. "People with knowledge that is different from people I know." That new knowledge, she notes, has benefited her home gardening project and reinforced her perspectives on the natural environment. Cindy puts the differences in terms of a diversity of opinions regarding work at the FWG – differences which, she points out, make for interesting discussion and enhanced learning.

The enriching discussions, enhanced learnings, and general teamwork alongside other like-minded people combine to result in admiration for particular qualities embodied by fellow team members. Jo, for example, says it is very gratifying to witness the commitment of people who keep coming back to work "not just for the money", while Luke expresses respect for the dedication of certain volunteers who "pour their hearts and souls" into the project. Evelyn is also impressed by her fellow FWG volunteers. "What I find to be a bonus and didn't necessarily expect," she reveals, "was that I really like being with this group of people. I find them inspiring."

Not yet of retirement age, Evelyn finds particular inspiration in the sense of purpose modeled by the "senior members" of the FWG team. Other people she knows in that age range are having trouble with aging, she reveals, so she feels good being around older FWG volunteers who are active and vibrant, who believe in what they are doing, and who are "just happy to be there." Marie, newly retired, expresses similar sentiments. She also admires the dedicated involvement of other, older volunteers who retired long before she did. These individuals have, she observes, given her "a more positive view of aging."

Social actualization at the FWG

Fellow FWG volunteers, and the project as a whole, also inspire a positive view of societal evolution consistent with Keyes' perspective on the social actualization element of social wellbeing. "Social actualization is the evaluation of the potential and the trajectory of society," he writes, adding that it involves fulfilment of societal potential through citizen effort, hope in the condition and future of society, and openness to experience and development (Keyes 1998, p. 123). Healthier people, he observes, believe that the world can become a better place, and recognize the potential of collective action (Keyes & Shapiro 2004).

The FWG project as a whole illustrates the positive trajectory of one small segment of society, along with collective action taken by a committed group toward making a little corner of the world a better place. This positive collective trajectory is demonstrated through the teamwork at the core of the FWG volunteer experience, the project's goal of creating a model wildlife garden to encourage people to garden in harmony with nature (Hanrahan 2010, 2003), and the self-perceived contributions of dedicated volunteers toward providing "a beautiful natural area that a lot of people enjoy visiting" (Tracey) and a "sanctuary of beauty and quiet" for people and wildlife (Kate).

As new volunteer Mark observes, the commitment and accomplishments of the FWG team are "awe-inspiring." He adds that he has become more optimistic about civic action based on his experiences at the FWG. Evelyn echoes his sentiments, sharing that she has changed her views on what she feels "a group of dedicated people can actually do", and that she is encouraged by the fact that the FWG has been created

by volunteers. Kate makes the interesting statement that the FWG is “a reminder that humanity has the power to create something beautiful as an alternative to something sterile and unliving.”

A volunteer since the project’s beginnings, Kate portrays the original FWG site as a “barren wasteland ... desolate ... flat, lifeless ... open, monocolour, blah” – a graphic and grim portrayal. “I thought it was insane,” she says, revealing initial skepticism regarding the trajectory of the project. “I never thought it would succeed.”

But succeed it did, metamorphosing gradually into a series of rich and diverse habitats for wildlife linked by an interpretive trail for visitors. To commemorate the recent 20th anniversary of the project, long-time volunteer Christine offers the following account of the FWG’s dramatic evolution:

The site of the newly planted trees, 20 years ago, was a mowed meadow. Now it is a woodlot (The New Woods), dense with trees and shrubs and many birds nest there, and many small animals find cover and denning sites. Where our Amphibian Pond now sits, was once a grassy dip in the land, mowed regularly. Now it supports turtles, frogs, aquatic insects, nesting Red-winged Blackbirds, muskrats, the occasional beaver, waterfowl, etc. Our Old Field habitat was once a cornfield. The Ash Woodlot, 20 years ago, was more reminiscent of Capability Brown’s version of a grand garden, lots of scattered trees with mowed grass, no understory or herbaceous cover. The Butterfly Meadow was also once a slice of mowed grass. And the Backyard Garden, was a flat site covered only with grass, not a flower in sight (Hanrahan 2010, p. 163).

Kate says she looks at the FWG now and feels “utterly amazed beyond belief, at the transformation that has occurred since the conception of the idea of the wildlife garden.” Robert agrees, stating that the garden has “improved dramatically” in the years since he began volunteering.

The “dramatic” improvement has not escaped the notice of local media, particularly in the early years of the project, when the memory of the original impoverished site was still fresh. Results of the positive change, noticeable within just a few years, are described by local writers as a “delightful ... garden and wilderness area” (Prentice 1995, p. C3) and “a wild oasis in a sea of cement, trimmed lawns and pruned trees” (Dickenson & Harrison 1995, p. I8). This garden, wilderness area and oasis has become, in the words of Christine, “a well-known destination for nature lovers, birders, photographers, and people who just like to take a stroll around a little bit of countryside tucked inside the city” (Hanrahan 2010, pp. 161-2).

A garden of wellness – concluding thoughts

The FWG has also become an oasis for volunteers who experience a variety of benefits from their work on-site: physical exercise through outdoor activity, intellectual stimulation from learning on-site, and satisfaction from “trying to heal some small part of the earth.” Notably, in part because it is addressed less often than physical and mental health, the FWG case study also demonstrates the social wellbeing, in all its nuances, that people can experience through nature volunteering with like-minded people, all working toward a common goal.

In a society and period where increasing numbers of people are living alone and becoming socially isolated in other ways, the potential of outdoor volunteering is particularly significant. Described as “a potent but little understood risk factor for morbidity and mortality” (Cacioppo & Hawkey 2003, p. S39), social isolation lacks a universal definition, but tends to be characterised in terms of an absence of fulfilling relationships (individual and societal), dearth of social contact and engagement, and lack of sense of societal belonging (Grif Alspach 2013). Social isolation has also been portrayed as disengagement from social connections, institutional links, or community participation (Pantell, et al., 2013).

Considered in terms of the various dimensions of social wellbeing discussed in the preceding sections, these descriptions of social isolation illustrate ill health, as reinforced by research which has, for example, been connecting perceived isolation with hormonal, neural, and genetic processes (Cacioppo, et

al., 2011), and with an increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, cognitive impairment, infectious illness, and heightened metabolic and inflammatory response to stress (Grif Alspach 2013; Steptoe, et al., 2013).

All things considered, the magnitude of risk associated with social isolation and loneliness is considered to be on par with cigarette smoking, hypertension, and other major biomedical and psychosocial risk factors (Grif Alspach 2013; House 2001), leading researchers to make observations such as the following: “the power of isolation as a marker of poor health cannot be ignored” (Pantell, et al., 2013, p. 2061) and “perhaps we are already overdue to initiate ... [associated] close surveillance” (Grif Alspach 2013, p. 8).

Although it is acknowledged that more research is needed to understand how and why social isolation relates to ill health, it should not be a reason for postponing action. “Without yet knowing exactly how and why cigarette smoking is damaging to health,” notes sociologist James House, “much has been done to reduce it and ameliorate its effects. We should be able to do the same with social isolation” (House 2001, p. 273).

Health researchers emphasize the “clinical importance” of making efforts to understand an individual’s social integration and support (Pantell, et al., 2013, p. 2061). Nurses in particular are encouraged to control these “modifiable risk factors” by incorporating them into existing patient assessment, surveillance, and care management plans for other risk factors such as smoking (Grif Alspach 2013, p. 11). Suggestions for public health professionals, with their “unique access to very socially isolated, homebound” members of society, include increased early assessment of social isolation, with referrals to community resources which could reduce existing isolation, or prevent potential isolation (Nicholson 2012, p. 137) – resources which include a broad range of targeted group activities (Pettigrew, et al., 2014).

As the FWG case study demonstrates, nature volunteering offers group activities and other resources for alleviating social isolation and supporting social wellness in its nuanced fullness ranging from social cohesion, integration and adjustment, to social contribution and functioning, support, acceptance, and actualization – particularly for one of the groups identified among the most profoundly impacted by social isolation: “the elderly, the poor, and minorities” (Cacioppo & Hawkley 2003, p. S39). Older members of society are particularly vulnerable to social isolation due to reduced mobility, decreased economic resources, and the loss of contemporaries (Steptoe, et al., 2013).

FWG volunteers being mostly of retirement age, this project demonstrates the potential that involvement in local green spaces offers for alleviating social isolation among older people. The aging population has, in fact, been identified as a vulnerable group that benefits from working in natural areas (O’Brien, et al., 2011; Mind 2007; Moore, et al., 2007; Elings 2006; Groenewegen, et al., 2006; Townsend 2006). While the FWG’s location is rather peculiar – surrounded by large institutional neighbours, tucked into an unused corner of an even larger green area, and difficult to access via public transportation – it nevertheless offers resources to engage volunteers in communal activities which can help to overcome social isolation and support social wellness. Evelyn, inspired by the sense of purpose modeled by the older FWG volunteers, and Marie, encouraged by the “more positive view of aging” gained from her work among “senior members” of the FWG team, would agree.

Gordon numbers among the inspiring FWG volunteers. Describing himself as “an approaching geriatric”, he comes as often as he can and helps wherever he is needed. Gordon shares that he feels comfortable and satisfied at the FWG, “generically participating” with other people he finds interesting and interested. “I guess in part it’s a function of learning to be productively engaged in retirement,” he tells me, adding that it makes him feel useful. Gordon adds that he goes to the FWG instead of “the commercial gym”, and that working at the FWG contributes to maintaining his mobility. “One can get all the exercise one needs pulling weeds and pruning trees,” he declares in conversation at this home. “I come back feeling quite refreshed.”

Gordon’s remarks, and the testimony of other FWG volunteers, confirm research findings that outdoor nature volunteering “offers an opportunity for lonely or socially isolated people to develop new friendships, improve feelings of self-esteem and gain a sense of achievement through completion of

tasks" (Reynolds 2000, 520). With sedentary living also identified as posing a serious risk to older adults (Bird 2004, 24), the opportunity to work physically in outdoor settings like the FWG is especially important and valuable.

Considering the social and additional health challenges faced by vulnerable groups in general, outdoor volunteer work may be important to more than just older adults. It has, in fact, been pointed out that volunteering in nature offers "marginalized" individuals a route for reintegrating into society via a purpose shared with others, a different role and identity, and social networks regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, and other factors (O'Brien, et al., 2011).

It is therefore not surprising that health professionals are being encouraged to integrate contact with nature into health interventions, and to become involved in helping protect community green spaces (St Leger 2003). Public health practitioners could forge partnerships with regional outdoor partners such as community and botanical gardens which offer opportunities to join others in working outside with plants and soil. Local groups working to support public parks, wildlife sanctuaries, beaches and other natural areas also seek volunteers to participate in clearing trails, planting trees, picking up garbage, maintaining signage, removing invasive species, and more. Many of these groups remain active during the winter season with communal activities such as tending plants in greenhouses, or monitoring ski and snowshoe trails at a time of year when weather conditions can limit outdoor exercise opportunities.

Interaction with nature is also being supported as a priority in health policy (St Leger 2003), a point echoed by health researchers from the Netherlands who stress that green spaces, especially in urban settings, should be given due consideration in health planning and research. They write,

Green space is more than just a luxury, and the development of green space should therefore be allocated a more central position in spatial planning policy. Healthy planning should include a place for green space and policy makers should take the amount of green space in the living environment into account when endeavouring to improve the health situation of the elderly, the youth, and lower socioeconomic status groups, especially in urban environments (Maas, et al. 2006, 591).

Protecting, prioritizing, and enhancing green space – as a resource for alleviating social isolation, boosting social wellbeing, and improving overall public health – may become less of an option and more of a necessity as the global population becomes increasingly urbanized and the economic and social burden of health issues worldwide continues to grow. Green space is a widely accessible and cost-effective health resource that tends to be seriously overlooked. Yet opportunities abound for taking action in our communities, in collaboration with local and regional partners. The time is ripe to make connections, for social wellbeing and greater health.

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