



GARY YOKOYAMA, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

On Saturday, people like Ted Hodkinson were canvassing the Keith neighbourhood to see what additional services might be useful to them.

# Robert Land's new life

## Former school is a successful hub for poor neighbourhood

BY MEREDITH MacLEOD

The elementary school had always been the heart of this struggling but proud neighbourhood.

When Robert Land closed in 2004, residents worried it would deliver a death blow to this impoverished section of the city's industrial core — Wentworth Street North and Burlington Street East — where modest homes share space with scrap yards and factories.

But thanks to a relentless drive by a community association, tireless volunteers and the support of local businesses, the 95-year-old building is now a thriving community hub called the Eva Rothwell Centre.

An outreach drive and celebration on the weekend proved the Keith neighbourhood's heartbeat is stronger than ever.

Volunteers combed the neighbourhood Saturday morning, knocking on more than 500 doors. They asked residents what they would like to see offered at the centre, solicited volunteers, offered free memberships and invited them over for a barbecue, entertainment and prizes later in the day. It's estimated more than 400 people showed up.

"There's a lot of new faces here and faces I haven't seen in years," said Heidi St. Pierre, a volunteer with the centre who grew up in the neighbourhood. "I hope it will bring more people to the centre."

The Robert Land Community Association operates the centre with the Lakeshore chapter of Project Managers Institute (PMI). Volunteers with PMI are leading the drive to develop a strategic plan for the community centre.

Getting out into the neighbourhoods to hear what people have to say is key, said Kelly Ann Pauly, a member of PMI's board of

### The neighbourhood

There are about 1,100 homes in the catchment area served by the Eva Rothwell Centre in the Keith, Hillyard and Land areas. According to census data, the neighbourhood has:

- The highest percentage of families in the city living at or below the poverty line.
- The highest percentage of single-parent families in Hamilton, at more than a third.
- Only 1 per cent of residents with a university degree.
- One of the highest crime rates.
- More than 60 employers in the immediate neighbourhood.

directors and a Dofasco employee.

"Getting involved here was really an easy sell to our board once they saw this place," said Pauly.

The survey information gathered will be compiled over the next month or so and will be funnelled into setting priorities for the short- and long-term future of the centre.

The 48,000-square-foot building is now almost entirely leased by various non-profits and community groups, said Don MacVicar, chair of the Robert Land Community Association (RLCA) and the man credited with being the force behind the centre.

The centre offers breakfast programs, after-school clubs, clothing and furniture depots, a food bank, health clinics, dental services, a community policing centre, job supports and a wide variety of recreation programs for kids, adults and seniors.

"Three years ago this place was empty and

now we're double and triple booking some space. It's amazing," said MacVicar.

Future plans include a Habitat for Humanity townhouse development on the former schoolyard at the rear of the property.

Yet the RLCA believes there is much more they can do.

MacVicar is a whirlwind as he leads a group of Redeemer students knocking on the tidy, small homes along Niagara Street Saturday.

He urges an elderly handicapped woman to take advantage of home repair and maintenance services offered at the centre.

MacVicar warmly greets 18-year-old Chelsea Glenn as she walks down the street. He peppers her with questions about the centre and what it needs.

She'd love to see a pool and likes the teen hangouts at the centre.

He talks at length with Mary Lou Horne, who gathers up clothing at the centre to distribute to street workers. She says the centre should send a bus around the neighbourhood to pick up seniors. She'd also like to see the food bank expanded.

"There's a small amount of food donated by neighbours but the people around here are poor. They can't afford to buy a can of soup and give it to someone else."

Leiha Amyotte, 4, left the community barbecue clutching a new soccer ball she'd won and a helium-filled balloon.

Her mom, Leanna Millar, said they use the centre a lot. "Every neighbourhood like this one should have a place like this," said the Burton Street resident.

More than 180 signed memberships for the centre, to take the total well over the 1,000 mark.

mmacleod@thespec.com  
905-526-3408