

Mill Woods Cultural Diversity Collaborative



Intercultural Dialogues

September
2020

Addressing racism in the Mill Woods community by engaging in open and meaningful conversations with one another.

Executive Summary

The Mill Woods Cultural Diversity Collaborative (MWCDC) facilitated a series of intercultural dialogues in the community of Mill Woods. The aim of these dialogues was to provide an opportunity for people from different cultures to discuss, learn, and share ideas and challenges about race, culture, and Canadian identity.

Over the period of one year, the MWCDC hosted four Intercultural Dialogues in Mill Woods at four different locations. This initiative, which was funded through the Anti Racism Grant from the Government of Alberta, provided a safe space for intentional conversations aiming to break down barriers and address issues of racism in the Mill Woods community. A free meal and childcare (as needed) was provided, and participants took part in discussing and sharing their experiences of culture, race, and ethnicity with one another.

All four events were well attended with at least 25+ participants at each intercultural dialogue event. A celebration event was held in November 2019 where participants from all four events were invited to share a meal, celebrate each other's culture, and discuss how to continue having these conversations in the Mill Woods community. Two large canvases were painted by those in attendance to symbolize their expression of culture.

Many participants have expressed an interest in hosting an Intercultural Dialogue event in their communities and want to remain involved in the work that the MWCDC is doing. These individuals have shared their contact information with the MWCDC so that they can be involved in future community work.



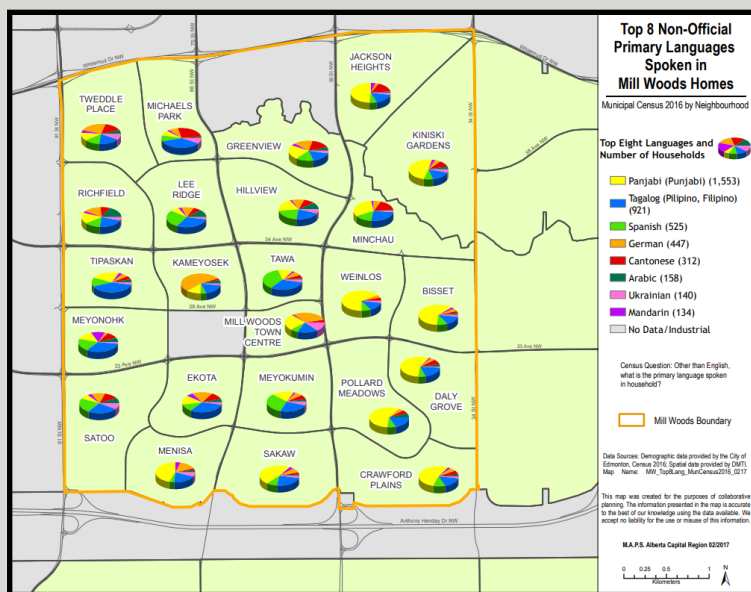
Introduction

Mill Woods Cultural Diversity Collaborative (MWCDC) is a multisectoral collaboration group of 30+ service providers, ranging from not-for profits, churches, government bodies and community members, who are passionate about an inclusive, healthy, and thriving culturally diverse community. Members include but are not limited to: The Indo-Canadian Women's Association, The Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, Multicultural Health Brokers, Mill Woods Seniors Association, Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues, Edmonton Public Library, Child and Family Services, Alberta Health Services, and The City of Edmonton.

The Mill Woods Cultural Diversity Collaborative (MWCDC), formerly known as the Immigrant Sub-Committee, was formed in 2006. M.A.P.S. Alberta Capital Region facilitated a discussion within the Mill Woods community under the Mapping and Beyond Initiative, and one of the top three needs identified was to address immigrant-related issues Mill Woods community members were facing, such as:

- Increasing service providers' knowledge of diversity issues in Mill Woods;
- Strengthening relationships and collaborative efforts of service providers in Mill Woods;
- Enhancing awareness of existing resources and community supports in Mill Woods;
- Increasing accessibility of existing community services and resources in Mill Woods;
- Identifying existing/emerging diversity issues and concerns in Mill Woods;
- Identifying new ways of delivering services to diverse communities in Mill Woods.

The MWCDC hosted a year of facilitated discussion among partners, as well as a broader community consultation, which identified a need to bring cohesion in the Mill Woods neighbourhoods. Mill Woods is a very culturally diverse community within the City of Edmonton. We know that language is a conveyor of culture, and in Mill Woods there are 4190 homes where the primary language spoken at home is not English or French (2016 Municipal Census). The top 3 being: Punjabi, Tagalog, and Spanish. Hate crimes are very under-reported, there were 92 race/ethnicity motivated hate crimes documented in Alberta (Statistics Canada, 2016). From these statistics, we believe there is subtle or overt forms of microaggression and racism in Mill Woods.



The strategy was to facilitate a series of intercultural community dialogues in Mill Woods, which provided an opportunity for people from different cultures to discuss, learn, and share ideas and challenges about race, culture, and Canadian identity. The project goals were to establish linkages and common ground between different cultures, communities, races and people, and to create space and conditions to respectfully exchange views between individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds with the aim of promoting interaction, awareness and understanding.

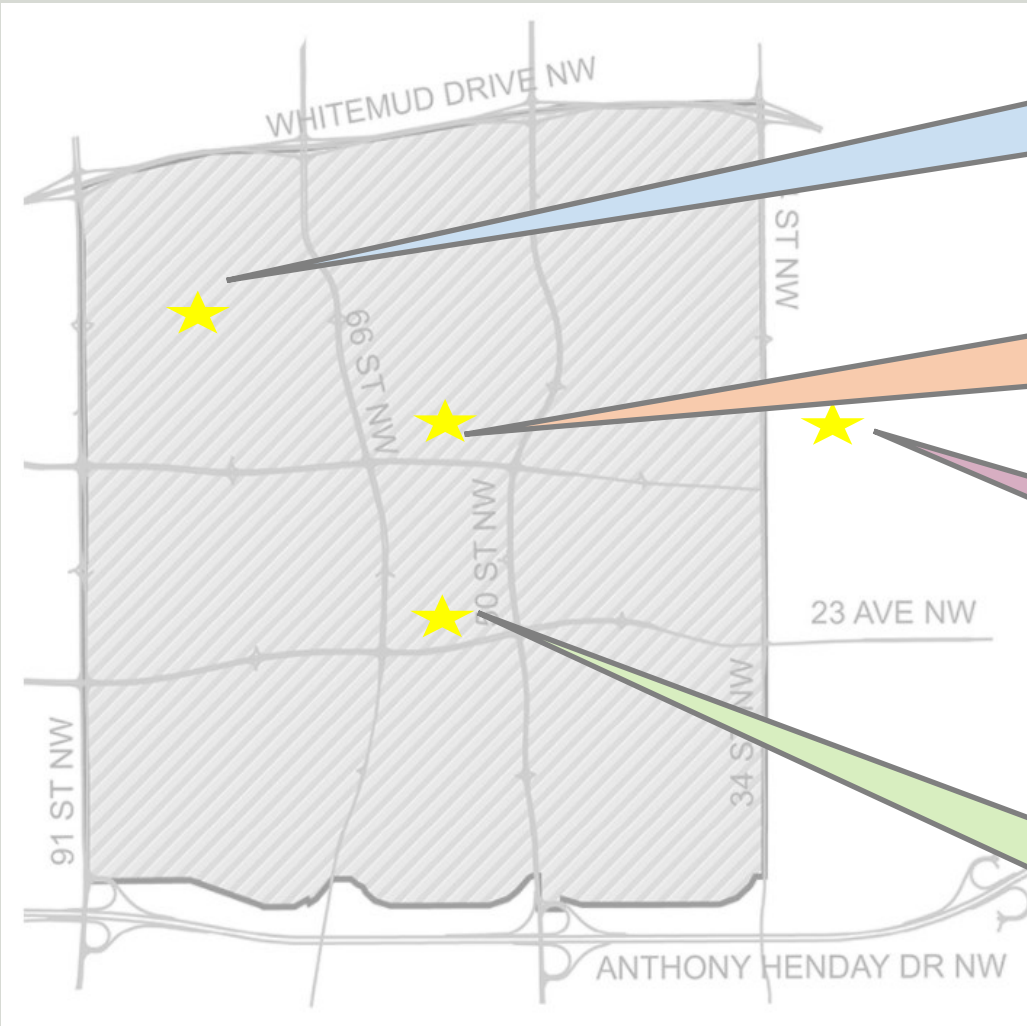
The MWCDC identified neighbourhoods that could host such discussions and applied for the Alberta Culture and Tourism Anti-Racism Grant in July 2018, the application was approved with funding to begin the project in November 2018. The Mill Woods Cultural Diversity Collaborative hosted four independent facilitated intercultural community dialogues in Mill Woods. It was the belief that we cannot counter racism without a good understanding of race and culture.

Overview

For the purpose of this project, our working definition of an intercultural dialogue is: *The open and respectful exchange or interaction between individuals, groups and organizations with different cultural backgrounds and worldviews.*

Unlike multiculturalism, where the focus is on the preservation of separate cultures, intercultural dialogues seeks to establish linkages and common ground between different cultures, communities, and people, promoting understanding and interaction. An underlying principle of this project was to talk “with” and not “to” people. Accordingly, it was not our intention to convince participants of a ideology but to create an opportunity for them to learn from one another. Through dialogue and sharing meaningful experiences, we aimed for assumptions to be challenged and participants had an increased awareness and understanding of each other’s journey and be able to discover common ground. This aligns with one of the themes that emerged from Government of Alberta’s Taking Action Against Racism (2018) report which states that “the more we know about other cultures, the less we’ll fear them” and that face to face interactions can help break down barriers.

Four intercultural dialogues were hosted in Mill Woods. These dialogues created a common understanding of key terms as there were presentations around the subject of race, culture and ethnicity, and cross-cultural identities. The event facilitator prompted conversation and dialogue with specific questions and invited participants to converse about common ground between them.



November 1, 2018
Leefield Community League
29 participants

January 31, 2019
The Shaama Centre
35 participants

May 2, 2019
A. Blair McPherson School
32 participants

October 22, 2019
Mill Woods Seniors Association
27 participants

The process for the conversations was small group discussion which was not recorded. However, at the end of each conversation, participants were provided with an opportunity to provide final reflections. The following is a summary of these final reflections:

- It is important to celebrate and acknowledge one's own culture.
- Relationships are challenging when there is a power imbalance and/or prejudice. Respect is very important.
- There can be cultural differences/expectations across generations. For example, expectations of in-laws and expectations of grandparents for their grandchildren.
- Time is needed to learn about each other's culture and values. There needs to be openness and willing to learn. Need to see some behaviours as misunderstandings rather than negative. Being open minded, taking time and food are important for building relationships.
- Common and community spaces are important. For example, parks. These spaces support individuals to come together and participate in activities.
- Children are a critical connection for developing relationships.
- Language can act as a barrier, but eye contact and a smile can make a difference.
- Volunteering and employment can support relationships across cultures.
- It is important to meet your neighbours as well those who are from the same ethnic group.
- Empathy is needed. If there is no empathy this a challenge.
- Fear can get in the way of building relationships.
- Looking at what brings us together –common interests build relationships. This creates connection.
- If someone reaches out this makes a difference.
- Sharing stories and experiences builds relationships.
- You can come from a different culture or ethnic group but still have similar experiences.
- It can be difficult to make transitions to a new country/home. Connection to service and needed transitions can be hard.
- Edmonton is dynamic and changing in many ways. This impacts everyone.
- Celebrating success is important.

“ I enjoyed the food and getting together with people from different cultural backgrounds. It was nice talking with each other and learning about our cultural similarities and differences. ”





“This was a great opportunity, a common place to share each other’s ideas. Initiating people to talk and share experience on common level. Break down the walls, not build them!”

At each of these Intercultural Dialogue events, participants were welcomed and invited to indicate their country of origin OR their ancestral country on a world map by means of a sticky dot. The event was facilitated by Anne Smith who then introduced the Mill Woods Cultural Diversity Collaborative and their role with implementing the events that were funded through the Alberta Government Anti Racism Grant. A presenter from the Mill Woods Diversity Collaborative then facilitated a small exercise with participants to discuss the difference between the terms "Race/Ethnicity/Culture". Participants were then invited to join in sharing a meal together. After the meal was done, facilitator Anne gave each participant a piece of coloured paper which corresponded in colour with a specific table. The participants were invited to join others at that table that had the same colour of paper. At each table, a facilitator from the Mill Woods Diversity Collaborative was present to welcome each participant. Anne then invited everyone to have small table discussions around the following question, "What do you like about living in the multicultural community of Mill Woods, and what are some of the challenges?" The small group discussion was animated, and table facilitators ensured that every participant had a chance to engage in the discussion. After 30 minutes of small table discussions, Anne invited every table group to share some of the reflections from their discussions with the larger group. Afterwards, participants were invited to fill out a quick questionnaire before they left the event.



In more than one conversation, community members identified that although they came from different cultures, they did have things in common. In one conversation, an individual shared that in his small group they discussed the importance of family and expectations of family members, particularly parents. Although the cultures of participants were varied, connection and communication issues related to the family were often identified as similar.

Lessons Learned

The following lessons were learned during the four MWCDC Intercultural Dialogues and the Intercultural Celebration Event:

- Guidelines for a successful conversation set the frame for our communication. These guidelines were:
 - Listen for understanding.
 - Share ideas in a respectful manner.
 - Ask questions.
 - Recognise we may have different opinions and experiences.
 - Do not share the details of the personal stories you hear without permission.
- Part of the process was to provide definitions of race, culture, and ethnicity. This was very helpful.
- Providing childcare supported participation in the conversations.
- People who were new to Edmonton and Canada came to check out the conversations and used it as an opportunity to meet people.
- The conversations helped residents become familiar with the venues where the meetings were held like – schools, community leagues, and community agencies. The mere act of reaching a new venue, exploring and knowing more about it opens more learning opportunities and engagement of people.
- Food, song and humour helped community members feel comfortable.
- The passion and commitment of MWCDC members was essential for success. The events required promotion, room set up and tear down and meal pick-up and clean-up.
- The small table facilitators played an important role in the process. They made community members feel welcome, kept the conversation on track and encouraged participation.
- Open ended questions were used, and this provided lots of room for community members to enter the conversation.
- We focused on the conversation itself. There was an opportunity for reflection, but no formal note taking.
- Participants were from all age groups and cultures. Some were very recent newcomers while others were born here. The conversations provided an opportunity for people to connect, and experience that there is a great diversity, and general curiosity and willingness to listen to, validate and learn from each other.
- The final celebration event that brought community members together helped to build conversations and continued to expand the circle of who was involved. Organizations such as community leagues indicated interest in being involved in future conversations.



Challenges related to the Conversation were:

- Although there was a conversation registration process, not all who attended registered. As a result, knowing the precise number of community members attending each conversation was a challenge. The process needed to be able to accommodate this uncertainty.
- At times there was reluctance by community members to be in a small group with individuals they did not know.
- Language challenges did occur. The conversations were held in English and for some participants this created challenges for their participation. We were fortunate that other community members provided informal translation.
- Explaining that, although the government provided funding for the conversations and city and provincial staff are part of the MWCDC, the conversations were not part of a government process. Was challenging. We had to explain the conversations were not designed to lead to government change/action and that conversation and connection among community members was the end in and of itself.
- Some community members did share experiences of racist comments/negative experiences. This discussion supported others to develop tools by which they could respond if they too experience racism.

Future Implications

The Mill Woods Cultural Diversity Collaborative will continue to work with the community in ensuring that Mill Woods is an inclusive, healthy, and thriving community for all. Interest was expressed by the community to continue this work. This interest can be gauged by the fact that several people shared their names to host such conversations on their own. The conversations provided them with an example of how they can contribute to community building by hosting these dialogues. If participation in these conversations can make people dream to host conversations or even to say a friendly “hello” to someone from another culture and an increased willingness to talk to that person, the conversations definitely broke down a barrier – fear of “other”. The MWCDC hopes to build on these conversations and support others to keep them going.

