

MPI Winnipeg Chapter: The Prosperity of Community Spirit

It takes more than money to create prosperity in a community, and prosperity is more than money—it's involvement and the willingness to pitch in where help is needed, said panelists at a National Meetings Industry Day luncheon in Winnipeg.

The Winnipeg Chapter of Meeting Professionals International (MPI) asked representatives from four local community organizations to discuss how they contribute to prosperity. But the panelists turned the concept around, saying Winnipeg possesses a unique prosperity of community spirit that contributes immeasurably to their organizations.

“When I think about prosperity relative to our club, I think about traditions, fans, heritage, alumni—all these things that go into any type of prosperity the Winnipeg Football Club has enjoyed over the past 80 years,” said **Jim Bell**, president of the Blue Bombers CFL Winnipeg Football Club.

The Bombers have not won a Grey Cup since 1990, yet fans still rally behind their team. “That’s a long time to make you wait, but you’ve invested your money, your time, and your patience. It’s time for you to be rewarded,” Bell said. The club will build a new 33,000-seat stadium in the next few years, and the team’s goal is to bring a Grey Cup home to that stadium.

Community support has also rallied behind Believe in the Goal, said **Colleen Decker**, the organization’s president. Believe in the Goal was founded five years ago by 17-year-old hockey player Todd Davison and his family and friends. Davison had been diagnosed with cancer. While fighting the disease, he decided to mount a summer charity hockey game featuring volunteer NHL players, to raise money and donate it to causes supporting kids with cancer.

The first game, played in Selkirk, Manitoba, raised \$50,000. Davison died later that year, but the charity continued. Money raised now goes towards soft, comfortable blankets for kids in hospital with cancer (Davison hated the scratchy blankets), to send young cancer-stricken players to see their hockey heroes play in other cities and to meet them, and to have a hospital room at the St-Boniface Hospital’s cancer treatment centre set aside for youngsters with cancer.

“In August last year, we decided to move the game to the MTS Centre in Winnipeg,” Decker said. “We filled that arena with almost 5,000 fans and raised \$95,000 in one night.” Believe in the Goal hopes to sell 7,800 tickets to this year’s summer game. “We’re trying to make a difference and to make Todd proud.”

Winnipeg Harvest food bank also tries to make a difference. “The goal was always to close the doors of this organization, but sadly, last year 10 million pounds of food were distributed to 40,000 individuals a month and through relationships with 320 agencies in southern Manitoba,” said **Kate Brenner**, the food bank’s development coordinator. While it may seem peculiar to discuss prosperity in the context of a food bank, “when you walk in there and see the look on peoples’ faces, that’s prosperity.”

Winnipeg Harvest does not just feed people, it moves them toward self-sufficiency, Brenner said. “We empower them. We provide them the opportunity to volunteer, with more than 260 jobs. It’s just magic to me to see how warm this place is.”

Last year, 415 third-party events gathered food and raised money for Winnipeg Harvest, and for the past few years, the food bank has held celebrity bowl auctions, with famous people signing food bowls that are auctioned off. Last year, the event raised \$243,000 with expenses of just 5%. That money paid for 18,000 lunches for children, baby food and formula, 1,680 emergency food kits, and more. For every \$1 raised, Harvest leverages \$20 worth of donated food.

While the food bank itself has never actively fundraised, that is about to change. The province and city have offered funding of \$3.2 million to expand the food bank’s facility. “But government funding comes with strings attached, so we have to raise another \$3 million,” said Brenner. “But I have to tell you this little grassroots organization will not change—we intend to keep it a comfortable place for people to come.”

Variety, the Children’s Charity came to Winnipeg in 1978, said **Wayne Rogers**, the agency’s executive director. Since then it has contributed its own brand of prosperity to the community, funding a summer camp for kids with cancer at Manitoba’s Brereton Lake, the Variety Children’s Heart Centre at the city’s Health Sciences Centre, a speech and hearing clinic at one hospital, and a therapeutic clown program at another. A program with the University of Manitoba’s Faculty of Dentistry handles children’s dental needs in 15 inner-city schools, now expanding into northern Manitoba.

Recently, Variety partnered with Parks Canada to develop the Variety Heritage Adventure Park. The \$2 million project, slated to rank among North America’s top five play parks, will be sited at The Forks in Winnipeg. Over \$1 million has been raised so far, and the park is under construction.

But with all its projects, Rogers said, “we wouldn’t have been able to operate without the community, the province, and our volunteer base.” That sentiment was echoed unanimously by the other panelists.

This year, MPI Winnipeg Chapter presented its annual Influence Award, given to an organization or person who supports the development of meetings and conventions, to Travel Manitoba.