

NEIGHBOUR 2 NEIGHBOUR BUILDING BETTER FUTURES PROJECT EVALUATION

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1.0 INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

1.1 Program Description

Building Better Futures is a program run through the Neighbour 2 Neighbour Centre that is dedicated to engaging and empowering unsupported and under-supported women raising children on the Hamilton Mountain and in surrounding isolated areas. The program engages, empowers, and builds the confidence of women by increasing their knowledge, raising their awareness, and strengthening their social networks. This is done through a variety of sessions that teach them the practical skills and information required to succeed and/or improve their current situation. Building Better Futures also attempts to contribute to ending violence against women living in isolated urban and rural communities by giving them leadership and mentorship opportunities. The program began in May 2011 and concluded in March 2014. Building Better Futures is currently funded by the Status of Women Canada.

1.2 Evaluation Objectives

The objective of this final evaluation is to determine and analyze the outcomes achieved and report on key learnings. It is intended to benefit program providers, funders, participants, and the greater community by providing a summary and analysis of the data collected and discussion of implications for the program's future.

1.3 Methods

Methods were chosen in order to provide a better understanding of the Building Better Futures program at different points throughout its funding cycle. An interim evaluation was prepared in 2012 by Neighbour 2 Neighbour to assess how closely the project was aligning and meeting with its objectives. The interim evaluation (Appendix A) provides a check-point against which this final evaluation can be compared to determine successes, challenges, and key lessons learned.

In order to capture both session-by-session feedback as well as overall experiences post-program, weekly feedback forms were distributed at the end of each session and focus groups were held to reflect on broader experiences of the program as a whole. Weekly feedback forms were filled out by participants and collected after each session. The forms asked for an assessment of the day's session using a Likert scale from 1-5 and provided space for further comment. The scale ranged from 'Horrible' (1) to 'Amazing' (5), and a full copy of the feedback form can be found in Appendix B. A record of activities listing the type of session attended (e.g.: special event, class on a specific-topic, guest speaker, etc.) and the number of participants attending was also maintained by the BBF trainers in order to identify the most popular program sessions offered.

Three focus groups were held by the end of the project. The first focus group was a mid-project focus group that prompted women to reflect on their experiences and determine what they like most, least, and wanted to see changed about the Building Better Futures program. Moreover, it enabled women to speak up about how they did (or did not) feel empowered and/or confident as a result of the program. These themes were also addressed in the final two focus groups; one for general BBF participants, and the other for participants of the train-the-trainer 'facilitator training' session. The train-the-trainer 'facilitator training' session was a specific session run for women who had already participated in the general BBF course and expressed a desire to continue and potentially facilitate groups in future. Holding two final focus groups, one for the regular BBF group and one for the facilitator-training, was useful in providing further context into how a session specifically focused on leadership (i.e.: the facilitator-training) was (or

was not) influencing the women. It also enabled evaluators to follow-up on particular comments made during the mid-project focus group that stressed the importance of the facilitator training session.

2.0 KEY FINDINGS AND EVALUATION

2.1 Project Statistics: Overview

PROJECT ELEMENT	QUANTITY
Project Information	
Total number of Building Better Futures program participants	131 participants total <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 85 full completion • 12 partial completion • 34 special workshops
Total number sessions (<i>approximately 12 weeks each</i>)	9 sessions total <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 regular sessions • 3 facilitator sessions
Total number of session hours (<i>does not including special workshops & awareness raising activities</i>)	312 hours total <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 204 regular sessions • 108 facilitator sessions
Total number of women trained to be facilitators <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total number of trained facilitators that went on to serve as facilitators in community programs 	13 trained total <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 facilitated programs
Total number of special workshops & awareness raising activities	15 special activities total Breakdown provided under "2.2 Record of Activities"
Total funding received	\$85, 568.00 total <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$37,383.00 Year 1 • \$25,233.00 Year 2* • \$26,312.00 Year 3*
Total program costs	\$109,008.00 total <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$54,103.00 Year 1 • \$28,593.00 Year 2* • \$26,312.00 Year 3*
Participant Feedback	
Median participant satisfaction rating (scale of 1-5) (1 = horrible, 2 = bad, 3 = okay, 4 = good, 5 = amazing)	5
Average participant satisfaction rating (scale of 1-5) (1 = horrible, 2 = bad, 3 = okay, 4 = good, 5 = amazing)	4.6

**Differences between received funding and total program costs in Year 2 and Year 3 were met through in-kind donations by Neighbour 2 Neighbour and community partners.*

2.2 Recorded Activities of Participants

Six regular Building Better Futures sessions and three facilitator sessions were held from May 2011 – March 2014. In addition to these sessions, a record of special workshops and awareness raising activities was maintained by Neighbour 2 Neighbour which tracked the number of participants at these various additional events. The following chart provides a breakdown of the activities run and the number of participants involved:

Workshop/Awareness Activity Name	Total Number of Participants
Networking Workshops (2)*	13
“Fun Sessions” (2) held between main program sessions	10
Car Maintenance Workshop	8
Violence Against Women Workshop	6
“Freedom from Violence” Awareness Activity	7
“T-Shirt Message Designing” Awareness Activities (2)	20
Buttons, White Ribbons, and “WE” (Women Empowered) Bears – distributed at events to advocate for women’s programming	Not Reported
Cards distributed at “Baby Bump Trade Show”	2
Bookmarks distributed at “Take Back the Night”	2
Buttons & Pins distributed at Art Crawls (2)	10
Self-Defense Workshop	11

**Workshops and activities held multiple times are identified with a numbered bracket that indicates the number of times the activity or workshop was held (e.g.: “(2)”*

This record of activities indicates that fifteen additional activities (either workshops or awareness raising activities) were held during the three year period and that participation was highest for the two T-Shirt Message Designing awareness activities, followed by the two networking workshops and the self defense workshop, respectively.

Four workshops were focused more exclusively on practical skills (e.g.: self defense, violence against women, car maintenance, and networking), while the majority were geared toward awareness-raising through the creation and distribution of various media (e.g.: buttons, pins, cards, ribbons, bears, and t-shirts). Only one type of activity – the two “Fun Sessions” – was solely dedicated to maintaining engagement during the break between regular programming.

2.3 Weekly Participant Feedback Form Findings

Participants’ weekly ratings of the BBF sessions were very positive throughout all three years of the program. With a total of 310 individual feedback forms submitted, and a median of 9 feedback forms submitted per weekly session, the median score of sessions from participants was 5 on a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = ‘horrible’ and 5 = ‘amazing’). The exact statement corresponding to this rating (i.e.: 5) was, “Amazing - everything I [the participants] needed today happened.” The average score from all

feedback forms was also impressive, with a rating of 4.6. This means that the average rating for weekly program sessions was closer to “Amazing” (5) than simply “Good” (4).

All participant comments provided on the feedback forms were listed and coded into six emergent response themes. The majority of comments focused on general, positive feedback about the program. The other most prevalent response themes dealt with the benefits of social connection with other women, and/or participants’ appreciation of the specific topics covered in class that week. It should be noted that comment codings were not always mutually exclusive, so some comments bridged across themes and were coded under both themes.

Among the comments provided, all were accompanied by a rating on the Likert scale of 3, 4, or 5, with a few comments left without any ranking. With the exception of one comment that focused on how an activity (painting) was particularly difficult, all of the comments were positive in nature. The frequencies of types of comments (‘response themes’) are summarized in the chart below:

Response Theme	Frequency
General, positive comments about program as a whole	26
Benefits of social connection with other women	14
Benefiting from or appreciating specific topics covered or specific staff/presenters	14
Wanting the program to continue	10
Skills or topics participants would like to learn about	4
Difficulty with session (mental, emotional, physical)	1

In addition to the weekly feedback forms, some participants offered the program coordinator unsolicited feedback. An overview of this feedback, as written & catalogued by the program coordinator, can be found in Appendix C of this report.

2.4 Mid-Project Focus Group Findings

A sample of participants in the Building Better Futures (BBF) program took part in a focus group in March of 2013. In total, 6 program participants took part in the focus group. Child care and refreshments were provided on site to make the focus group more accessible.

2.4.1 Highlights

Participants found many topics from the program helpful. Specific topics mentioned by participants as being the best or most helpful included:

- Domestic violence
- Home budgeting
- Meal planning and healthy eating
- Helping prepare your own business and other career directions
- Promoting self-esteem and self-care
- Legal advocacy/advice
- Scheduling and time management

- Collaboratively planning and mapping community resources and services that would be useful to each woman in the group on a map of Hamilton, which helped connect participants to organizations and other community resources
- Orienting new neighbours to the neighbourhood
- Constructing birthing kits for midwives in Haiti as a way of giving back
- Belly dancing
- Making own laundry detergent
- Learning how to do common home repairs
- Hobbies, arts and crafts, e.g. knitting, crocheting, etc.
- Vision board exercise for goal setting and planning for the future
- Networking

Participants felt that these topics should be kept as the program goes forward.

When asked what topics should be taken out of the program, most participants felt that no topics should be removed and that, in fact, more topics should be added. One participant noted that not all topics apply to all participants, but maintained that each is important to different people based on their individual experiences (e.g. legal advice) and so had value.

2.4.2 Suggested Changes

Participants were asked which topics they felt were missing from the program, or which topics they would like to learn more about that they did not learn about in the program. Responses were many and varied, including:

- Computer and technology courses including Microsoft Office
- How to audit existing courses (with certificate upon completion)
- More specific budgeting opportunities, such as how single mothers can better manage funds to help buy a car or invest in a house
- Education around women's health issues, both physical and mental
- Gardening activities (e.g. getting to put together plants that participants could take home)
- Financial advice/education (e.g. how to maintain/improve/regain credit)
- Self-empowerment and self-esteem were covered, but should be reinforced more in all aspects of the program
- Cover the topics not chosen out of all possible options
- More detail on what is needed to start one's own business
- Environmental issues

Some participants suggested getting back together with program participants after the sessions end a couple of times a year for an opportunity to maintain relationships and community connections. Participants also mentioned that it would be helpful to have a translator when possible within the program's sessions. Addressing language barriers throughout the program was viewed as important as it helps newcomers integrate in Hamilton.

Participants were also asked which topics helped them feel most empowered, engaged, and/or involved in their communities. Participants identified the facilitator course as particularly empowering, but also felt that other available courses were helpful as they offered busy mothers opportunities to learn something new, since often neither their schedules nor income allow them to normally do so.

2.4.3 Indicators of Change

Focus group participants were asked what activities in the program helped in raising the awareness amongst community members of the topics covered in the BBF program. Abuse and violence against women was one topic mentioned by participants, while the other was help in navigating language and cultural barriers. This second topic was seen by several participants as an opportunity for all participants to get a more diverse perspective and learn about the various cultures that exist within their community.

When asked what they gained from the program overall, participants noted a sense of achievement for their children. When asked about specific things that they learned, participants' responses were as follows:

- Learning to put yourself first (self-care and empowerment), especially with regard to newcomer women who come from different backgrounds
- Sharing knowledge and learning from others' strengths, skills and experiences
- Nutritional education, such as how to cook with food from the food bank

Participants were also asked how they had applied things they had learned to real life situations. Several participants appreciated the opportunities to give back to help others as a way to show their appreciation for the help and support they had received. Some participants also felt they had gained skills and confidence, as well as support from the group, for new experiences, such as pursuing new careers and education. Other responses included:

- Environmental issues (e.g. composting, recycling, making own laundry soap)
- Planted with children
- Goal setting
- Mentorship

A key goal of the BBF program is to support women's confidence building. As such, participants were asked to reflect on their confidence levels before and after taking part in the program. Some participants described having experienced some emotional trauma and illness, and had felt that they needed something to help them get things back on track physically, mentally, and emotionally. Others felt that "the confidence is there, however negative experiences have chipped away at it" through the course of their lives. Another participant described themselves as having been traumatized.

Perspectives on the benefits of the program in terms of participants' confidence were all very positive, and included:

- It feels good to be supported and know that you're not going through it alone
- The group is a safe place; everyone is very supportive of one another, which helps build confidence and promote empowerment
- The program helps people realize their own capacity and strengths, which are already there, though they may not know it
- The group helps make people feel appreciated and valued/valuable

When asked to describe how they felt at the end of the program, participants invariably offered positive descriptions. Several participants emphasized the closeness and support that developed within the group, and described the sense of empowerment gained from sharing with others and learning from one another's experiences. One participant described the group as starting to feel like a family, while another

described being able to see some women “blossoming” through the program. One participant said, “You realize your own strength.” Several said they were sad to see it end and wanted the program to continue.

Positive feedback was also given about the expertise among the presenters in the program for various topics (e.g. knitting, fitness, nutrition). Another program with which Neighbour 2 Neighbour collaborates, Home of the Heart, was seen by some participants as synergistic. Such connections and partnerships with other programs and organizations were seen as beneficial to participants.

Specific supports offered by the program – child care and bus tickets – were identified as being crucial to facilitating participation and removing barriers facing many participants who otherwise would likely not have been able to take part. Offering child care has also had the added benefit of offering opportunities for the children to meet other children to connect and play with; some children of program participants have developed friendships which still continue beyond the life of the program.

2.5 Concluding Focus Group Findings

Two concluding focus groups were held in February 2014 with Building Better Futures (BBF) participants. A sample of participants in the BBF program took part in a focus group on February 11th, 2014, which focused on experiences during the core program sessions. In total, 8 program participants attended. Three of the participants had also taken part in a facilitator-targeted focus group one week prior, but were asked to respond to the main focus group in relation to their experiences with the general program and not the facilitator program (questions were slightly different between focus groups). The facilitator-targeted focus group was a supplementary session held on February 3rd, 2014, to determine insights from that stream in particular, due to its more explicit focus on leadership and teaching.

The BBF program generally receives women ranging from their mid/late twenties to early 60s, and the majority of focus group attendees were in their 30s and 40s (one was in her 20s). Child care and refreshments were provided on site to make the focus group more accessible. All of the feedback listed pertains to the main focus group (held on February 11th, 2014), with any additional insights from the facilitator focus group listed at the end in a separate section. This has been done to delineate overall program feedback from the more specific facilitator-session feedback.

Of Interest: Three of the women in the focus group had discussed difficulties and/or encounters with the Children’s Aid Society. Whether or not this bears resemblance to the BBF group at large might be worth investigating, as this is a very specific group of women.

2.5.1 Highlights

When asked about the best and/or most helpful topics in the program, participants stated that “all of them are important”. That being said, the following topics were identified more specifically as being particularly helpful:

- **Home budgeting**
 - E.g.: One woman went on to explain that the home budgeting class had enabled her to plan ahead and support her newborn baby, whereas she was unable to do this previously.
- **Domestic violence & the ‘cycle of abuse’**
- **Meal planning and healthy eating**
- **Legal advocacy/advice**

All participants were extremely happy with the instructors & facilitators, explaining that they “have the ability to hold conversations in welcoming and engaging ways”. Having facilitators that “understand diversity culture” was deemed incredibly important, along with positive and welcoming body language, and the BBF program seemed to do well on that front. On occasion, the program was compared in a positive manner to other programs that seemed less understanding of diversity culture. Participants also noted that the child carers were particularly good.

When asked what topics (if any) should be taken out of the program, all of them agreed that more should be added rather than taken away, but one participant mentioned that the hobbies & arts and crafts topic (e.g.: knitting, sewing, and crocheting) could be removed. This statement prompted the other seven women to speak up and state their disagreements, arguing that they had learned a lot from those classes. One woman stood up to display her hand-sewn outfit that she had created, based off of that workshop. The arts & crafts workshop was later highlighted as being particularly empowering during one of its sessions (mentioned later).

2.5.2 Suggested Changes

Participants offered numerous suggestions about how they would like to see the program changed, and were keen to discuss the program’s future opportunities. When asked about topics they felt were missing from the program, or topics that they would like to learn more about and had not already learned in BBF, they mentioned the following:

- **Diverse discussion & education around women’s health issues – both physical & mental**
 - E.g.: Breast exams, OBGYN visits, cancer screening, and medication advice. Medication advice was emphasized a lot during the discussion by the women, especially those suffering from depression. One participant explained, “We need to learn all sides [of women’s health].”
- **Field trips**
 - One participant mentioned that she really enjoyed strawberry picking with ‘NatureWise’ because it helped demonstrate where strawberries came from and how they grew, but that this was part of a different program that the participant’s BBF program facilitator knew about & had mentioned. The participant would like to see field trips like this offered through the BBF program.
 - Some asked for field trips to educational places like the museum or art gallery
- **Days or sessions where you can bring your partner** or supportive friend/family member (potentially male) so they can see the process participants are going through
- **Classes for self-defence**
- **Coping skills classes** (in order to deal with abuse and/or stress)
 - Specific suggestions included meditation & yoga
- **Cooking classes**
 - “Lots of us need to cook” ... “we could learn how to bake” (referring to dinners baked in the oven). “We need cooking days [not just healthy meal plan days].” All participants felt that cooking classes would be a useful improvement to the program.
- **Parenting & awareness classes**
 - Classes where the instructor/facilitator teaches how to advocate for your child
 - Sessions that help navigate the Children’s Aid Society system (and similar groups pertaining to child custody) would be helpful. At least 3 participants wanted this

specifically based on personal experiences with the CAS, and many others agreed that this would be helpful once it was mentioned.

- **Sessions on health & beauty**
 - E.g.: How to dye or cut your hair for the purposes of low-cost maintenance and a look of professionalism
- **More network and/or 'homecoming' days** both within & across programs (other programs at N2N or more generally with women & programs in the City) to help build (or maintain) community connections and relationships.

On a more general note, participants were keen to see the following changes incorporated into the program (not class-topic specific):

- **Increased session & program length**
 - “If we had more time or more projects, I could study all of them” ... “it’s hard to choose”
 - It was important to participants that they could learn “a variety of things”
- **Certificates offered for the completion of specific courses**
 - One participant explained that offering a certificate of completion would aid them in searching for jobs by demonstrating they have some training & skills

Overall, participants were largely pleased with the program and their suggestions for change mostly focus on expanding the BBF program to incorporate more opportunities and classes, rather than less.

2.5.3 Indicators of Change

Indicators of change were determined by asking questions about the participants’ levels of involvement within their local community, awareness activities that may have been held to increase community members’ understandings of the topics covered in the BBF program, and topics that helped participants feel most empowered, engaged, and involved.

All women reported feeling more empowered and confident than before. These feelings were occasionally linked to specific classes, like the arts & crafts sessions, but were often described in reference to how participants’ approaches to day-to-day activities had changed. The women self-identified themselves as being more outspoken and unafraid to speak their mind than when they started the program. When asked what made them feel more empowered (e.g.: a specific class, a particular aspect of the course), one woman explained that “the attitude of the program” was empowering, and that it was like “building a family tree” with more connections and support. Another woman said that she was “learning that you can say things without needing to worry about being judged” and that there was “so much respect and love” amongst participants and facilitators in the Building Better Futures group.

Increased ability to communicate was also listed as particularly empowering. For example, one woman who had immigrated to Canada explained that she was unaware that looking people in the eye was acceptable. She often felt uncertain and uneasy about speaking with her neighbour about disrespectful behaviours he would target towards her and her property, and she would frequently avoid expressing her point of view because she was nervous and unsure. After participating in the BBF program she “learned to look him in the eye” and tell him “not to blow snow on [her] driveway”. Another woman stated that she had “more confidence in every aspect of life” and that they were all “learning how it is in Canada to express yourself here.”

A large part of the empowerment came from understanding how to deal with situations in Canada and Hamilton more generally. This was evident in both immigrant women and those who had lived in Canada all their lives. For instance, one immigrant woman discussed learning the “proper channel to plant basil and tomatoes” and how, while she knew how to do it in her previous country, she was now “learning how it is in Canada.” In a similar manner, but related more to navigating social services, one life-long Hamiltonian mother expressed amazement at the extent of available services that she had learned about through the BBF program. This also prompted her, and others, to heatedly discuss the need for information to be disseminated more effectively:

“There’s not enough advertisement of Neighbour to Neighbour [or Building Better Futures] – we would like to see more [advertising] & more reach-out so that people hear about it”

On this topic of increased advertising, one participant stated that “there should be more pointing [between organizations] to other groups and organizations that offer useful programs,” promoting greater connection and a better overview of what is available. A suggestion was even made by one of the younger mothers that, since Neighbour to Neighbour is specific to the Hamilton Mountain, a centre should be placed “halfway between North and South, East and West, like Gore Park” with an overview of “all the information about services” available (e.g.: a bulletin board downtown). This request for general change fit with another participant’s description of resources being “hard to find” and that things are “not at [your] fingertips.” One of the mothers explained:

“I was talking to someone and they had said, “I didn’t know Neighbour to Neighbour offered all these things, it’s like a well-kept secret” ... but it shouldn’t be [a secret].”

That said, all participants wanted to applaud Neighbour to Neighbour for spreading information that was *not* just about their food bank. Participants recognized that many people have a negative stigma about the food bank (and food banks more generally), but they all expressed interest in sharing information about the Neighbour to Neighbour centre on a broader basis (e.g.: discussing the programs & workshops offered). As one participant explained, “People don’t understand the resources behind [the food bank at N2N].” This interest in raising awareness about the Neighbour to Neighbour program can be taken as an indicator of positive engagement, change, and growth in participants’ confidence levels.

In terms of raising awareness of N2N’s activities amongst community members, all participants discussed how they shared information they were learning with friends, family, and other community members in the area they lived. This awareness raising and sharing of information would almost always occur by word-of-mouth.

The key indicators of change identified at the focus group were:

- **Increased confidence** in dealing with problems and personal matters
- **Desire to have their voices heard**
- **Interest in leadership activities and opportunities** (PSW workshops, facilitator classes)
- **Self-identified increase in knowledge & ability** to navigate Canadian/Hamiltonian cultures and norms (leading to increased ability to find help)

2.5.4 Facilitator Group Findings

The facilitator-targeted focus group was held on Monday, February 3rd, 2014, one week prior to the main focus group. Six women participated, three of whom later contributed to the main focus group. All

participants were asked to focus on their experiences of the facilitator training sessions, rather than the core BBF program sessions.

Most participants, with the exception of one, got involved in the facilitator stream after already taking another BBF course. All of the women expressed that the BBF program “helps build strength” and enables them to “understand each other”, so they were keen to begin the facilitator program and “pass on power”. The immigrant women also emphasized that taking the program helps them to better understand the English language and that “language builds confidence” and they “learn about opportunities.” One of the women got involved because her “aim [was] to get a job” and she found that the program “opens many doors.”

2.5.4.1 Highlights

When asked what they liked most about the facilitator training, participants highlighted the empowering feeling of “how to help people”. As one participant explained, “You learn to ask people what’s wrong before assuming [what’s wrong].” Participants learned to ask others about “what they need” without making judgements beforehand.

When asked to identify more specific ‘favourite aspects’ of the training, participants struggled, arguing that “all of it” was great. They went on to explain that the training gave them “lots of time to build trust and feel connected” and to have discussions. Two of the women said that they felt “empowered by [the new] knowledge” they were learning in the course, stating that the “things we’re learning is useful anywhere in life.” Moreover, they found the facilitator training gave them the “proper method and channel to lead and pass on [information] to help others.” This ability to help people was frequently discussed as positive and empowering.

The ability to understand broader cultures – not only for general interaction, but for facilitating groups – was also deemed very useful by participants. Many claimed that their “eyes were opened to other forms of communication,” enabling them to better understand and respect how people from different cultures might engage in diverse ways.

All of the participants highlighted how beneficial their trainer was. The trainer was described as “a great leader and great role model,” who “explains and ensures you can understand.” The positivity of the trainer contributed to overall atmosphere of the program, such that participants described the environment as “very welcoming” with “enough time to say what you want.” One participant emphasized that there was “so much respect and love” in the group; something that she had not experienced with other programs in Hamilton.

2.5.4.2 Suggested Changes

When asked about things they would like to see changed, all participants mentioned that the training should last at least another two weeks. They also agreed that the individual classes could be longer. One participant explained that everything is covered quickly, so increasing the overall course length as well as the individual class sessions would provide “more time for practice.” The only other recommendation was to number the pages in the facilitator training manual.

2.5.4.3 Indicators of Change

Increased confidence, trust, deeper understanding and active employment of leadership methods can all be seen as positive indicators of change within the group. Boosts in confidence were evidenced by

women explaining that they are now aware that their voice matters, feeling increasingly more comfortable speaking their mind. The group also felt more empowered and wanted to help empower other women. When asked why she wanted to participate in the facilitator training sessions, one participant explained that “once you’re empowered, they can’t take it away.” This statement indicates two things. First, it highlights how many of the women felt empowered by the Building Better Futures program and valued that empowerment as something permanent. Second, it shows their determination to help empower others by becoming facilitators (a position of leadership). Their experience of the BBF program was positive enough that they wanted others to experience it as well. As part of this desire to empower others as facilitators, the women also discussed how they better understood and employed different methods of leadership as a result of the training sessions. As one woman mentioned, “Before, I wanted to give people answers, now I learn to let others answer.” Leadership through facilitation was developed as a skill that increased the women’s trust in letting other people do things, and understanding different forms and ways of leading.

3.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this Building Better Futures evaluation has been to illuminate project outcomes, key findings and lessons learned, opportunities for improvement, and implications for the project's future. In reviewing the data collected through weekly feedback forms, records of activities, and multiple focus groups, it is evident that Neighbour 2 Neighbour has delivered a successful Building Better Futures program over the past three years (from May 2011-April 2014). The success of this program is clearly demonstrated by its ability to meet its two target objectives:

1. To engage, empower, and increase community participation of unsupported & under-supported women raising children on the Hamilton Mountain and in surrounding isolated areas through learning and skills development.
2. To contribute to ending violence against women in isolated rural and urban communities by providing them with leadership and mentorship opportunities.

Weekly feedback ratings on the Likert scale of 1-5 were all positive, with a median of 5 ("Amazing") and an average of 4.6 (falling between "Good" and "Amazing") over the three year project duration. Moreover, most comments highlighted participants' enjoyment with the sessions and a desire for the program to continue. This feedback complemented the equally positive and enthusiastic focus groups. The focus groups provided an opportunity for participants to elaborate upon their experiences and weekly feedback ratings with personal stories, along with their hopes for the future of the program (including potential changes). All focus groups highlighted how the program was a positive experience and that there was "so much respect and love," with "enough time to say what you want." Participant discussions often concentrated on how their social networks were stronger and they had "built a family" within the BBF group. The women were able to identify with one another and expressed that they no longer felt as isolated and alone.

Perhaps of greater note was the participants' engagement and enthusiasm within the focus groups, which demonstrated their confidence and desire to be involved with community and the future of the program. All participants were highly vocal – both newcomers and long-standing residents of Hamilton. Suggestions for improvements were plentiful, including the opening of more centres, an expansion of the diversity of course topics offered, an increase in class hours, and lengthening of overall session duration (i.e.: more weeks). Not only did participants explain that they felt their voice mattered now, but they actively indicated through their dynamic, vocal participation that they had increased confidence and felt that their input was valuable. Their requests to open more centres and increase outreach through advertising also demonstrated that they found the program to be valuable. Their increased interest and engagement with one another and their communities at-large speaks to the BBF program's positive influence and ability to succeed in its first objective.

The ability for Building Better Futures project to contribute to ending violence against women by providing them with leadership and mentorship opportunities was not successfully demonstrated through this project evaluation, though there were small indications via focus group comments that this objective is in the process of being met. It was not clear to what extent violence experienced by these women had been reduced, but it was evident that the women were standing up more for themselves in smaller instances of abuse. For instance, the concluding focus group discussed how one woman was successful in defending herself and her property against a neighbour's offensive actions. While the offense did not consist of verbal or physical abuse, it had been a personal affront to the woman's property and she had felt targeted by the neighbour. Her new ability to explain her position and tell her neighbour that this behaviour was unacceptable can be seen as a positive sign of both confidence and the ability to stand up against various

forms of abuse. There was also a clear focus on increasing awareness of violence against women and improving practical skills to effectively handle violence and abuse (e.g.: self-defense workshops) throughout the Building Better Futures project duration.

Based on the information collected for this final evaluation, the Building Better Futures program can be considered as largely successful in meeting its objectives. Project outcomes include increased confidence, engagement, and empowerment of women on the Hamilton Mountain and surrounding isolated areas. The project has also resulted in the creation of a group of women who are keen to lead and empower others within their community, and who increasingly stand up for themselves in times of conflict or discord. Participants were able to better identify paths for seeking support and assistance, and opportunities to influence and make positive changes in their community. With respect to participants' suggestions for changes, a few key lessons can be taken away. To begin, the program is greatly needed and desired within the community. All course content was considered to be useful and, if any content were to change, it was recommended that the program expand to include more diverse topics. The second key-lesson to be taken away is that the Building Better Futures program is an effective vessel for the empowerment of women. The women's responses indicate that they believe in the program's ability to positively influence community members and other under-supported (or unsupported) women, and that they would like the program to continue.

The future of the Building Better Futures program will be dependent upon continued funding. Given the largely positive reviews of the program and evidence of a number of key indicators of change (e.g.: increased discussion & activity participation, desire to lead and share experiences, etc.), this evaluation would recommend for the program to continue. The program is an invaluable vessel for female empowerment, and has successfully engaged and given hope to previously isolated women. Moreover, it should be noted that the program can be viewed as particularly successful given its relatively limited amount of funding and personal resource capacity (e.g.: one trainer). With increased funding, the program could be expanded to incorporate many of the suggestions desired and recommended by the women themselves.

APPENDIX A – INTERIM REPORT

Building Better Futures Interim Evaluation – June 2012

(Prepared by Neighbour 2 Neighbour)

Building Better Futures

Project started in May 2011, funded by Status of Women Canada.

- Our project objective is to empower women to be more confident and more involved community members through learning and skill development.
- Our project goal is also to contribute to ending violence against women in isolated rural and urban communities by giving women opportunities for leadership and mentorship roles.

Attendance

Two sessions have been run since the beginning of this project. The first one ran from September 2011 to December 2011. The second session was from March 2012 – June 2012. There were also 3 workshops to date that were run as single events during the gaps between programming.

September – December 2011: 7 women participated

March – June 2012: 10 women participated

Workshops:

February: 10 and 5 women attended

June: 7 and 9 women attended

Self-Assessments

A questionnaire was provided to each woman at the beginning of Building Better Futures sessions and then was filled out again by the women at the end of the program.

Eleven women's responses were collected at the beginning and end of programming.

Questions were divided into 5 categories:

Self Awareness;

Values and Parenting;

Health and Nutrition;

Finances and Business Skills;

Violence Against Women Awareness and Speaking for Change/Communication Skills

Self Awareness:

The majority of women described feeling that they know themselves, what makes them happy and how to deal with emotional reactions when they arise. (7 out of 11 women: 63%).

The largest area where women described wanting to improve was in taking more time for themselves, and about half of the women(54%) indicated that they had slightly improved in this area after the 3 month check-in.

Overall, 9 out of 11 (81%) women reported some improvement in at least one aspect of feeling happy, being self-aware, and being able to manage their emotions.

Values and Parenting

A great majority of the women described knowing their own values, what is important, and what they wanted in life (81%).

Most of the women felt that they were the kind of parent they wanted to be, and had some understanding of how their own upbringing contributed to their parenting. The area of most improvement in this category was in participants feeling more confident in being able to correct behavior and appropriately discipline their children. (54%)

Health and Nutrition

Most of the women described feeling like they knew a lot about health and nutrition, making meals for their children, and the importance of engaging in regular physical activity. Overall, 63% of the women described feeling like they had learned something new in this regard, and had improved in at least one aspect of this category.

Finances and Business Skills

This was an area where most improvement was noted by women who took part in this evaluation. 90% (10 of the 11) women said that they felt that they had been able to gain a stronger knowledge of finances and investing, and had a better sense of what their skills were and how they might get involved in activities that generate money for their families. Most women said that they were saving some money for the future.

Violence Against Women Awareness and Speaking for Change/Communication Skills

72% of women who participated in programming indicated that they learned about how to identify abuse in their own lives and in their communities, and felt that they would know how to respond to situations where violence might occur. Women also indicated that they felt they learned a great deal about community resources and would know where to go to connect to support, and felt it was important to speak up against injustice.

“Mind Maps: Graphic Evaluations”

During a workshop in June, women who had completed BBF were invited to take part in an art project that would function as a method to communicate what their lives are like. Women were provided with art materials and the session was led by a local mural artist who gave some guidance in working with different mediums. 7 women attended this group.

Pictures of the art created are attached here.

Art was displayed at a Neighbour to Neighbour function on June 24th, “Art in the Garden”, where over 150 people in our community came to view our community gardens, listen to music and view art that was displayed. All of the women were interested in displaying their art (with the exception of one woman who did not finish hers in time). Participants felt that this was an extremely successful awareness-raising project; raising awareness of the challenges that single mothers in our community face.

Comments from some women in regards to explaining their work:

“I feel hurt, broken, scared and lonely. I’m still trying to be positive and strong in the worst time of my life”

“Art and family are important to me. My girls just think I’m weird...and that hurts...I wish they could understand why like my friends, and that they are good people. I don’t know what I’d do without my friends”.

“My kids are everything to me. My home and garden help me through the days”

“I’m in my head a lot. I have OCD. I rarely see my daughter. My son is so much to me...we laugh...he has stuff going on too – medications, not too many friends. He struggles. My ex was horrible to me. I’m angry. I believe giving to others and being a helper is very important. Strength at my roots”

“I am always trying for balance. My daughter is 3 and it’s just us. I was so happy about my family and am very sad that my family is “broken”. I am proud of my daughter. She takes a lot out of me. Our routine is important. There are days I feel drained. I usually fall asleep with my daughter after we eat dinner, watch tv, and read.”

APPENDIX B – WEEKLY CHECK-IN FORMS

****Formatting of this form has been adjusted for ease of display****

Weekly Check In:

Today's session was: (circle one)

1 = Horrible - not interesting, relevant, nor helpful

2 = Bad - I enjoyed only one thing or learned only one thing

3 = Okay - some helpful ideas and good interactions

4 = Good - I learned a bunch of new things and felt encouraged by others in the group

5 = Amazing - everything I needed today happened

Any comments? (Especially if you circled 1 or 5)

APPENDIX C – UNSOLICITED PROGRAM FEEDBACK

Building Better Futures

Unsolicited Feedback for September – December 2013 (Fall-Winter)

(Prepared by Neighbour 2 Neighbour's BBF Program Coordinator)

- There was 15 women who took this class
- Women ranged from ages mid-20's to mid-60's
- Most women had grown children
- ¾ of the women needed public transportation
- All women were very eager to get to know other women
- Women felt alone and uninspired when started class also dealing with self-esteem and depression issues.

The subjects that were covered were:

- 1st class was an introduction to the course and to each other. The women shared stories of their lives and the reasons for why they wished to take the classes.
- 2nd class Evelyn DeKlein, Nutritionist, came to talk to women about healthy eating and holistic cooking.
- 3rd class Monique Taylor MPP came to speak to the women on advocacy and believing in yourself.
- 4th class Healthy Relationships with Cyndy Robertson from Interval House: identifying abuse.
- 5th class The women discussed parenting, what they found challenging, with each woman giving advice based on experience.
- 6th class Michelle Obermuller from VPI Employment and introduced the women to budgeting and financing, the importance of being prepared.
- 7th class Multiple intelligence test, knowing your options with returning to school.
- 8th class T-shirt painting, advocating for Freedom from Violence.
- 9th class Image boards, how women see themselves
- 10th class Why do we do the things we do. Trying to understand our past in order to understand our present.
- 11th class Christmas craft; a gift to give someone at Christmas (e.g.: Reindeers and Santa-cinnamon sticks, hot chocolate and candies....).
- 12th class - Last class we spent discussing if our perceptions had changed from the beginning of the session women were very open in what they enjoyed and what more they would like.

Some women walked in the Take Back the Night parade and some of us took to the street with our buttons, "There is no greater force than that of a determined woman," down to the Art Crawl on James Street North. Some of the women also took part in our Neighbour 2 Neighbour Santa Claus parade.

Some of the things the women said in regards to the program:

"This program is a must for women, it has made a big difference in my life. I look forward to signing up again."

"I never had a mother but meeting Edna, has opened up my life. She has become like the mother I never had."

"I look forward to getting to see the women, we all have become close and can call on one another when we need. Nice to have that support."

"I have been somewhat lost but being with these women has made me feel, like I belong."

"When is the next session?"

"I wish it was an ongoing program, weekly, workshops, conversations. It is really nice to feel like you are not alone in your thinking."

"It has been a privilege hanging with all these amazing women."