

KITCHEN TABLE ACTIVISM

COUNCIL CHAPTERS FEED MINDS AND FILL BELLIES

by Ariel Troster

The Council of Canadians relies on a network of over 70 volunteer chapters from across Canada to promote our national campaigns, act as local watchdogs, and promote social and economic justice on a day-to-day basis. Here are profiles of two Council chapters that are doing amazing work in their communities.

NIAGARA REGION CHAPTER BRIDGES THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE

For Frank Fohr, getting involved in the Council of Canadians was a logical extension of his work as a high school geography teacher. Fohr joined the Niagara Region chapter in 1999, after returning from a trip to the Dominican Republic, where he saw the impact of unfair trade policies on coffee farmers first-hand.

“Membership in the chapter has allowed me to be able to articulate the issues I care about more clearly, both to myself and my students,” he says.

Sue Corcoran joined the chapter around the same time as Fohr, taking on a leadership role when the group’s founders were ready to move on.

“I’d always read the news between the lines, but seeing the patterns changed things for me,” says Corcoran, a retired social worker. “Before I knew it, I was attending every Council of Canadians’ chapter meeting.”

The last few years have seen the chapter evolve into an organization that reaches out to the entire Niagara Region, drawing people from 12 municipalities, including Welland, Niagara Falls and

St. Catharines. According to Fohr and Corcoran, this makes for a good mix of urban and rural, allowing the chapter to take on a broad range of issues.

Given that the Niagara Region is surrounded by water and farmland, it should come as no surprise that the chapter is so heavily involved in the fight against factory farming and the campaign to ban bulk exports of water. The group was front and centre during the negotiations around the Great Lakes Annex Implementing Agreements. Its members were instrumental in convincing Ontario’s Ministry of Natural Resources to hold public meetings on the issue in the Niagara Region. And thanks to some quick and effective organizing by Fohr and others, those meetings were packed to the rafters with citizens concerned about protecting Canada’s water.

But despite all of the chapter’s successes, Corcoran wants to find a way for young people to get more involved in the Council of Canadians.

“We need a way to bring young people into activism that uses their talents and skills and gives them encouragement. So as they grow up, hopefully they can move into the spots that we leave open.”

When asked about why he’s remained so committed to the Council over the years, Fohr is philosophical.

“It comes from a belief that we can build a better world – even when we’re fighting seemingly insurmountable challenges.”

Ariel Troster is the Publications Officer at The Council of Canadians, and Editor of *Canadian Perspectives*.



The Prince Albert chapter’s “slow food” potlucks are extremely popular.

PRINCE ALBERT CHAPTER MIXES THE SOCIAL WITH THE POLITICAL

Delicious food, interesting films and good conversation are three techniques that the Prince Albert, Saskatchewan chapter uses to draw people to public events. And according to Rick Sawa, these kinds of tactics inspire people to take political action, while also building a stronger sense of community amongst members.

“People don’t like to go to meetings. It’s when we hold big public events that we are able to really draw a crowd,” says Sawa, a founding member of the chapter and now a member of the Council’s Board of Directors.

The chapter’s recent “slow food” potluck dinner was a huge success, drawing over 50 people to share home-cooked recipes and discuss the impact of genetically engineered food and factory farming on local food producers.

Another big success was a film series that the chapter organized with the local library. These social events, according to Sawa, have helped the chapter forge important connections, making it easier to mobilize people for future political actions.

But for chapter member Sandy Sherwin-Shields, the social interaction is just as valuable as the political activity.

“It’s just so good to have good conversations with people who care about social justice issues and the environment.”