

“Growing donors, volunteers and benefactors”; Pat Lenz, President Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Particular Council of Brant (SSVP Brant)

“Committed to a culture of encounter, exercising a preferential option for the poor”; Chris N. Roehrig, Director of Education, Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board (BHCNDSB)

In these quotes lie the essence and the value of the strong partnership between BHCNDSB and SSVP Brant. Its origins lie in a meeting of the Brant deanery to which both BHCNDSB and SSVP Brant had been invited. From this connection came an invitation to a meeting of the local Catholic principals followed by participation in a Faith Day session centred on the three-year spiritual theme rooted in Micah 6:8 (Act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God).

Next came BHCNDSB’s 2015-2018 Strategic Plan that identified a need on improving connections with the broader Catholic community with an emphasis on Catholic Social Teaching and Social Justice. The connections blossomed from there.

Activities and successes of the partnership include (but are certainly not limited to):

- funding of A Bed for Every Child program which has now donated over 400 new beds to children;
- SSVP Store visits as authentic experiences of service by students from Gr. 6 up (school prefects, campus ministry teams, social justice groups, religion classes, Gr. 8 graduates, leadership classes, confirmands);
- community involvement hours opportunities;
- food drives collecting thousands of pounds of food annually and significantly lowering SSVP expenditures for the non-perishable food provided to our neighbours in need;
- Lenten Collections of Caring with Brant/Brantford elementary schools gathering specified staples for Whale Cove, Nunavut as part of SSVP Canada’s North of 60 project;
- Support of the new twinning of a local conference with a conference in Guatemala in solidarity with a BHCNDSB Encounter Trip in that country;
- in-school donation bins (some short term – for specific campaigns, others permanent);
- school presentations about the reality of poverty locally as well as the Society and how it addresses this need;
- regular financial donations to SSVP Brant by Catholic Education Centre staff (e.g. Advent, Lent, casual Fridays);
- participation by SSVP Brant in the Board’s Catholic Education Advisory Committee and Council of Catholic Service Organizations through which several opportunities for mutual support have been discovered;
- social media support (tweeting and retweeting SSVP’s communications) by the district and schools.

Why has this initiative been such a roaring success? Contributing factors include (but are certainly not limited to):

- Communications: With the support and encouragement of Director Chris N. Roehrig, SSVP Brant worked closely with the BHCNDSB Manager of Communications in developing its marketing

plan. Advice on website development, distribution of SSVP Brant print materials and a strong connection through Twitter all contribute to the strong relationship.

- Governance: SSVP Brant appointed a Vice-President responsible for youth who acts as a liaison between the Society and the wide variety of student and staff groups who support its work.

There have, of course, been challenges to overcome. As BHNCD SB spans three dioceses and SSVP Brant serves only Brantford and Brant County, board personnel are careful to reach out in other ways to SSVP or similar organizations in the other areas of the Board. While field trips to the SSVP Brant thrift store are unquestionably valuable in providing service opportunities for students and showing them where and how their donations are used, the resources (financial and human) required to organize such trips can be a barrier. Resourceful staff have solicited financial support for this purpose from Catholic service groups and their school communities. When the SSVP Brant thrift store operation was in a period of transition to a new location, space was at a premium. Creative problem solving led to strategies such as the setup of satellite sorting stations and directing donations in the short term to SSVP Canada's North of 60 project and a twinned conference in Guatemala.

What have we learned?

- Have focus: Under the guidance of local Vincentians, our students have learned the lesson that providing from your own excess is not useful unless it matches the needs of those being served.
- Be clear and specific and honest: Provide detail about what your charity needs for its service and what your school community is able to manage with maximum positive impact on the social justice awareness of staff and students.
- Keep it simple: Initial efforts to organize our partnership involved a complex organizational structure which was found to be unnecessary. School Social Justice Teams, Campus Ministry groups etc. are ideal supporters for the Society.