



Let's Paint the Town

STORY BY KIM WILLIS

On September 14, 2013 "Let's Paint the Town" was held in Dresden, ON as a way to build community and revitalize the downtown. Thirteen businesses and 70 volunteers participated by painting storefronts as a way to bring new life to the downtown core. The project organized by Lucy Ogletree was a great success. Volunteers got to work early and were able to complete the project by the end of the day.



Volunteers change landscape of downtown Dresden by painting buildings in one day

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY CAN BE AMAZING. This was certainly the case on September 14, 2013 when residents of Dresden came together to paint buildings in the downtown core. Lucy Ogletree spearheaded "Let's Paint the Town."

In November 2012, on the 50th anniversary of her father's death, Ogletree and her sister Marian visited their father's gravesite in Dresden. It was on this trip that they stopped in downtown Dresden. While they found the buildings to be amazing, they also felt that they looked tired and in need of a facelift.

Dresden is located in southwestern Ontario and has a population of 2,800 people. It is well known for the Trillium Trail Historical Walk, and the internationally known Uncle Tom's Cabin, two key destinations that attract hundreds of tourists annually.

Like other towns and villages across Canada, Dresden continues to lose its economic base as small businesses struggle to survive with demographic change and industry closures. Buildings that are not maintained eventually deteriorate to the point where they can no longer be used or saved. Empty buildings encourage vandalism, possibility of fire, insects and rodents.

With a multifaceted career spanning 40 years, Ogletree had the passion and ability to bring "Let's Paint the Town" to life. She has worked in retailing, manufacturing, folk art and consulting. In addition, she is a public speaker and active volunteer. Ogletree was in the process of creating a visual merchandising business when she visited Dresden and thought the town would be a great place to start.

"I contacted Christal Wills, President of the Dresden BIA and owner of McKellar Flowers and Gifts, to see if she would be interested in having me do a presentation for the BIA to present my vision for 'Let's Paint the Town'."



After seeing the presentation the BIA hired Ogletree to manage the project. In a matter of months Ogletree was able to bring her plan and vision to fruition.

Ogletree quickly got to work and spoke with many of the merchants in the downtown to find out who wanted to participate. The overall consensus was that the downtown was looking tired and efforts were needed to spruce things up. Owners recognized that this was vital if they wanted to bring more customers through their doors.

Following the meetings with downtown merchants, Ogletree contacted other Dresden businesses to see what products and services they could donate to the project. Ogletree also reached out to local churches to ask if they would consider holding BBQ fundraisers to offset expenses. The goal was to get as much donated as possible to keep expenses minimal.

It was critical to the success of the project to recruit several volunteers who would be willing to participate. A local advertisement ran in the newspaper asking for volunteers and high school students were asked to participate. Merchants also asked their staff to assist.

By September 14th all of the details had been worked out. Organizers could not have asked for a more perfect day. It was a beautiful late summer day with the sun shining brightly.

Thirteen businesses in the downtown on St. George Street received facelifts including; Bella's Café, Lonnie's Hair Salon, a chiropractor office, L'il Hoarder's, McTavish Pharmacy, Verna's Sewing Centre, Shelley's Painted Treasures, Coco Beach, Dr. D'Hondt Optometrist office, Foxy Cuts Hair Salon, McKellar Flowers and Gifts, and Arim's Discount Store.

Seventy volunteers, ranging in age from ten to 70, arrived to lend their services to "Let's Paint the Town." Most were from Dresden, but some came from as far as London and Windsor.

A large part of the success was due to the generosity of sponsors in the community who provided supplies, services and hospitality. All of the paint was provided by Lumberjack Home Building Center, Dresden Home Hardware provided the painting supplies, local vendors provided food and refreshments and Captured Moments supplied hats and t-shirts.

"It was important to that all supplies and services be either purchased or donated by Dresden merchants and they came ►

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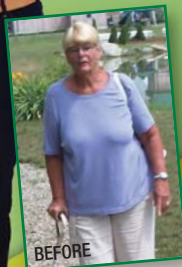
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through with flying colours. The volunteers were so excited and energized. They talked, they laughed, they worked hard and in ONE day they painted the town," says Ogletree.

Live entertainment was provided throughout the day by 12 year old Jacklyn Wills, 17 year old Lucas Roe and Classic Vibe's Tim and Jeff. The music provided a festive atmosphere and kept enthusiasm and energy levels high.

Storeowners were thrilled to be part of the initiative. Wills believes that the benefits will be felt for several years.

"It definitely achieved a facelift for the downtown. Not only did the event bring attention to local businesses, I believe that we will experience economic benefits as well. We are very thankful to Lucy Ogletree for seeing what Dresden has to offer and making this project come together the way it did. It was great to see the community come together and bring life to the downtown core. It's not the last you've heard of us, this has just got the ball rolling."

The bustle of activity attracted attention from Dresden residents who came to see what was happening. People driving through town also stopped and walked around. Participants, residents and visitors agreed there was a buzz around town that day that was contagious.

Brent Babcock was one of the participating retailers. His business, Babcock Jewellers was started by his father Walter and is currently celebrating its 60th anniversary.

"I have been working at the store for the last 27 years and have to say that this not only brought our business community together in an exciting cooperative friendly and fun event but many citizens of the community joined in in the spirit of community pride."

For her part, Ogletree felt like she was in a feel good movie.

"It truly was community at its best – neighbour helping neighbour like the old barn raising days," states Ogletree.

"When I was very little my Grandpa Ogletree's barn burned down. Shortly after that my grandpa was in a terrible accident that left him in a coma for several days. His friends, family and neighbors banded together and rebuilt his barn, that is where my vision for the merchants and residents of Dresden came from."

By all accounts Ogletree's vision was a resounding success. Merchants were in agreement that this project got them excited about the future and what Dresden has to offer.

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