



St. James, Minn., is at a crossroads. Demographics have shifted dramatically over the past two decades, transforming the classic midwestern train town into a multilingual melting pot with a higher-than-average poverty rate. Will St. James be derailed by the change, or draw vitality in its newfound diversity? With a boost from Extension and the Northwest Area Foundation, St. James factory workers, high-school students, business people, educators and civic leaders have joined together to shape an exciting new chapter in the history of this small town with a big vision.

Hope on the horizon

Dreams of reducing poverty take a big step toward reality

If hometown pride were money, St. James would be wealthy. By more conventional measures, however, this south-central Minnesota community is hurting. Nearly 11 percent of its 4,695 residents live below the federal poverty threshold, compared to 9.2 percent statewide, according to U.S. Census figures. Cultural barriers—nearly one in four of the residents of this traditionally German-Scandinavian town are Latino—have made it difficult to muster the “one for all, all for one” attitude needed to turn the poverty equation around.

Two years ago, the Northwest Area Foundation, in partnership with Extension, invited St. James to participate in Horizons, a program that guides small communities with high poverty rates as they develop and strengthen local leadership and in turn create a viable, prosperous community. Communities that complete the 18-month process receive \$10,000 to carry out their ideas for action. St. James is one of nine Minnesota communities to complete the program in 2008, and one of 21 to work with Horizons since it began in 2003.



By participating in the Horizons program, St. James area moms, from left to right, Ana Gonzalez, Martha Gracia and Veronica Garcia see their dream become reality. School bus shelters protecting children from harsh weather will be installed this year before the first snow flies.

"It's an attempt to allow those smaller communities to have sufficient time and resources to figure out what they have to do to get the community back on track," says Extension Horizons program director Monica Herrera.

Led by local organizer Sue Harris, director of community education for the St. James school district, and coached by Horizons community coordinator Jessica Peterson, more than 100 residents formed 12 study circles in early 2007 to discuss poverty and ways to reduce it. Close to one-third of those residents participated in leadership training. A daylong visioning session in October brought still more residents together to create a picture of what they want St. James to be. Now the community is focusing on making the dreams come true.

For one mother, that dream was to build bus shelters to protect children from harsh weather. Veronica Garcia has been credited with the idea, even though her children don't ride the bus. Garcia says many parents report to work early, leaving their children to walk to the bus stop and wait, often without proper winter coats and clothing. A local business has donated \$2,000 toward the project, and a high school shop class will build the first shelter this fall, with the goal of having it installed before the first snow flies.

A youth council also formed as a result of Horizons. Among other activities, the group has set up a recycling program and traveled to Iowa, Missouri and Chicago to do service work. Youth council member Julio Zelaya, who has been part of Horizons from the beginning, says he was particularly struck by an activity in which students participating in the service trip put down on paper what they thought about St. James.

"Every one of the things that we wrote down was positive," he says. "I really think Horizons did that. ... It changed the mind-set of the community."

In response to a suggestion made through Horizons, the community education program and Pleasantview Nursing Home are training Latino women to become certified nursing assistants. Harris also hopes to develop a childcare education program that would provide more jobs and improve the community's ability to attract businesses.

The secret to success of the program, Harris says, has been its focus on a "grass roots, not top-down" approach. Including community members young and old, and from all walks of life, has been key as well.

"It's about getting people together to solve their own issues," she says. "Once you do, magic happens."

For more information on Horizons, visit www.extension.umn.edu/Community/Horizons



As local organizer for the St. James Horizons program, Sue Harris, director of community education for the local school district, makes sure all residents have an opportunity to be heard.

Poverty in Minnesota?

According to a 2008 Northwest Area Foundation survey, nearly one in three of us in Minnesota worries that our family income won't meet expenses in 2008. And 51 percent of us know someone who is working two or more jobs and is having trouble making ends meet.

The good news? We also believe progress is possible. The survey found that 89 percent of respondents believe that the number of people struggling to make ends meet in their communities can be reduced. And 87 percent of respondents said they would like to do more to help those who are struggling financially.

Up to 15 additional communities will begin Horizons this fall.

For more information, visit

www.extension.umn.edu/Community/Horizons/Map.html



The quilt speaks

In wrapping up the 18-month Horizons program in St. James, organizers invited participants to write down words of wisdom on pieces of fabric to be sewn into a community quilt. Among them:

"You must be the change you want to see in the world." —M. Gandhi

"Respeto para los niños." (English translation: "Respect for the children")

"We are amazing, positive people."

"Embrace the future, treasure the past, CHANGE IS OKAY!"

"You don't have to save the whole world, just save your hometown, it'll add up."

—Hubert H. Humphrey

"Adelante y buena suerte." (English translation: "Go forward and good luck.")

"Together, we can!"