

THE BICENTENARY CELEBRATION

The Don Mills and Finch Pockets

SINCE LAST YEAR...

In the Don Mills and Finch neighbourhood, four pockets of the neighbourhood have been opened to the community building process. Last year, the four pockets held a large Holy Day between all four of our pockets. This year, we wanted to celebrate the Twin Holy Days and the Bicentenary in smaller celebrations across the neighbourhood engage many individuals and families with knowing more about the impact of the life of the Bab and Baha'u'llah and the Teachings. The neighbourhood held 16 celebrations, with another two that will happen this coming week. The following is an account of reflections from four pockets that live within a short distance from each other near the same intersection of two streets, Don Mills and Finch.



THE BICENTENARY CELEBRATION

The Chester Le Celebrations

The devotional character of the bicentenary celebration was strikingly beautiful. We've been having a devotional every week with a few families, and children and junior youth that attend the classes. Also, individuals are moving through the sequence of courses. I believe this all contributed to the devotional spirit felt in the gathering. The feeling of joy carried through the entire evening. Also, a feeling of gratitude and love to God. Some in attendance also attended the Holy Day celebration in 2018, so they now were eager to contribute to organizing a celebration in their own neighbourhood. This was the first time that, as a nucleus, we felt that the neighbours together planned a gathering. We met just 5 days before and we all thought of how we needed to show a segment of the new film and that we could elevate the conversations with our neighbours. One neighbour discussed how important it would be to discuss the concept of Oneness and so we all thought of questions that we could ask the neighbours in a large group consultation. The questions were meant to also be simple and profound enough that children, youth and adults could contribute. We asked, "What does it mean when we are "unified?" and "Why is the oneness of humanity necessary? or even inevitable?". One adult said that we need to see the similarities in one another, and that we need to love one another, especially people we don't know. A child said that we need to show love and be kind to one another.



Another adult said that we are all created by God so we are all brothers and sisters and in response a child said that that's amazing. Another highlight of the gathering was the ability for all to feel engaged. An art room was created where an adult painted the Shrine of the Báb, the children from the children's class also created clay models of a shell with a pearl in it. They had met the week before to create it and prepare to showcase it at the celebration. Another adult used a painting from the previous bicentenary of a Oneness tree to add orange fruits on it, where the friends wrote activities that contribute to unity that we see happening in the neighbourhood. All friends in the neighbourhood were given a chance to add fruits to the tree. We discussed the following quotation from the Báb:

"Become as true brethren in the one and indivisible religion of God, free from distinction, for verily God desireth that your hearts should become mirrors unto your brethren in the Faith, so that ye find yourselves reflected in them, and they in you. This is the true Path of God, the Almighty"

We ended the evening with reflecting on our children's classes, junior youth groups, study circles and devotionals. This allowed for some neighbours to share that they would be eager to join a study circle and another neighbour shared they would tutor them.

The next afternoon, another celebration happened with the nucleus team where we had lunch together and reflected on how the evening went. Keisha shared that she found out that the City Counsellor will be redeveloping the whole subdivision, meaning everyone will be moved in a few years into other Toronto Housing neighbourhoods. She said that, in the spirit of unity and with an eye of justice, she worried that the City Counsellor needed to be more aware of how this will affect the families. She worried that they were going to just move people out without consulting with the residents or helping the residents relocate. She also shared there will be a community meeting at the end of November. As a team, we decided we will learn more about the City Counsellors plans and their history of redevelopment, and we would consult with the community members, so we could be more knowledgeable and united at the meeting.



THE BICENTENARY CELEBRATION

The Peanut Celebrations

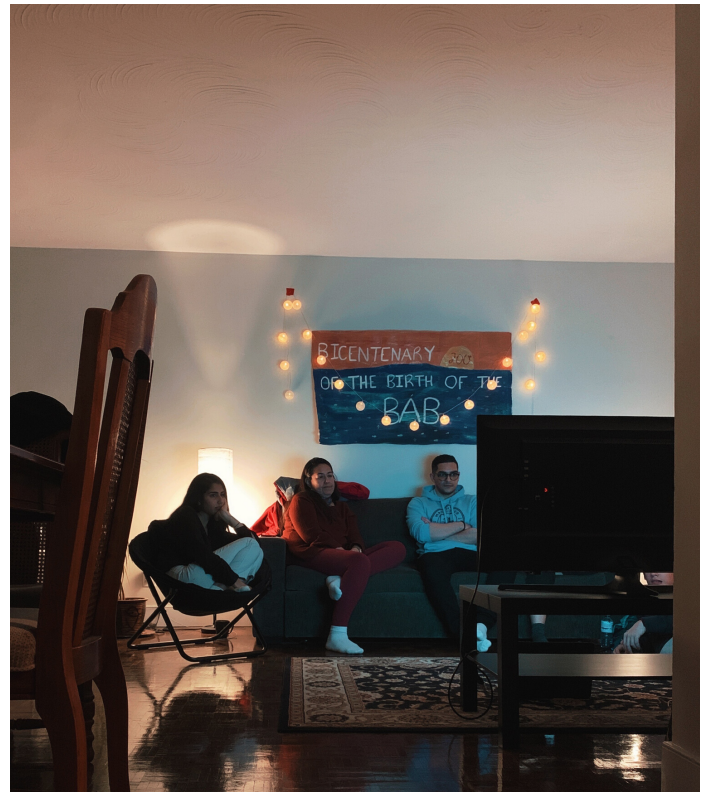


In the neighbourhood of Peanut, there were a variety of settings in which friends celebrated the 200th anniversary of the birth of the Báb. Families of the junior youth and youth were invited to a neighbourhood wide celebration, or they celebrated in their junior youth groups or in apartments. In these celebrations, portions or the entirety of the Dawn of the Light film were shared, along with portions of the October 2019 Universal House of Justice letter, prayers and songs. Junior youth and animators also created spaces together, before, during the celebrations, to reflect on the life of the Báb and Bahá'u'llah by creating art. Some of the junior youth and youth took initiative and came earlier to help set up the room and a few families despite their busy schedules made food to contribute.

As a result of the beautiful celebrations in Peanut, and the process of preparing for them, there were several spiritual advances that were made, especially among families. Here are a few illustrations of these families.

We have been connected to a family, which includes a mother and her 15 year old son for the last year. In the last few months, they have begun to attend the weekly devotional in the neighbourhood, and felt attracted to the environment. Her son, who has always had a difficult time committing to a junior youth group, has made an effort to come to the devotionals with his mother, as he said he feels he he can grow closer to God in these environments, as well as meet other youth in this community.

After attending the neighbourhood wide celebration of the Birth of the Bab, which included small portions of the 'Dawn of the Light' film, this family agreed to watch the entirety of the film with some of the animators. They came over on a rainy night, and after enjoying soup and cake together, we watched the film in silence. In our conversations after, the mother and son both noted how similar the Báb was to Christ, and they wondered if they knew each other. This led to a conversation about how all the manifestations of God are connected through the Holy Spirit, and how they all have the characteristics of having great influence on the masses and experiencing great tribulations. There was also a discussion on how everyone in our community requires these teachings from the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, in order to raise a new generation that is more kind, just and united. The mother felt greatly blessed to be connected to this process, and shared her desire that her son be more involved with the community building process.



Very soon after the film 'Dawn of the Light' was released, we arranged to watch it with a family who has been connected to the Baha'i community in Iran, but not so much in Canada. Both their sons attend the junior youth program and are eager members of their groups. A few animators went over to their apartment in early October to watch the film with their children and their mother. Throughout the film, many questions were asked to us, questions about the life and death of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, about life after death, and the life of Tahirih. A sweet conversation also arose out of the screening about having photographs of central figures of the Faith in our homes, and they asked us to get them a photo of Abdu'l-Baha for their apartment. That night, they also agreed to host their own smaller celebration at the end of October.

Each week after that, when they came the weekly neighbourhood devotional, they learned more about the life of the Báb through stories. When it came time to host their celebration, their mother prepared tea and food for us, and we had a small and simple program including songs, prayer and a story of the life of Bahá'u'lláh. Again, they had another opportunity to ask questions as a family about their faith and to deepen their understanding. The family's Baha'i identity was strengthened during the month of the bicentenary celebrations, and we may not have had the courage to have such direct conversations about our beloved Twin Manifestations without this precious anniversary and worldwide celebrations.

Sam's family has always been very receptive. They have been supporting the program since it first began in Peanut and encouraging both of their sons, Sam 11 and Samaan 10, to participate in weekly groups, camps, service projects and devotional gatherings. Before the celebrations, the team of animators and tutors decided to regularly visit families that they are connected to, to share prayers, to speak about the life of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and to share the film Dawn of the Light. Sam's family has always been familiar with the Bahá'i inspired nature of the Program, however they knew little about the history of this precious Faith. Although in the beginning of these visits, it seemed a bit unnatural to share prayers or speak directly about the Faith, they responded to it with open hearts and radiant faces. The animators certainly realized that the junior youth had never learned about the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh this directly in the past; however, many of the junior youth and devotional gatherings were dedicated to the stories about the Báb and activities inspired by His life.

One night at the end of a devotional gathering, just before the neighbourhood celebration, Sam the junior youth approached his animator and expressed his concern about reciting the Bahá'i prayers regularly and learning about the Faith in every space. He felt concerned about the Baha'i inspired nature of the program. His exact words to his animators were: "I love reading Bahá'i prayers and I feel like I'm forgetting my own religion."





I don't want to forget my religion; I feel like this is affecting me. So, I've decided not to say Bahá'í prayers anymore." This sparked a conversation on how all the words of the manifestations of God exist to help us grow closer to our Creator, no matter from which Messenger.

The next day, Sam's animator home visited his family to remind them for the neighbourhood celebration and she was not sure how they would respond considering Sam's words to her the night before. Sam's family, to our delight, was so welcoming and everything went as usual. As his animator was leaving his house she thanked the family for having her and Sam's father said: "You are always welcome here."

Sam, Samaan and their grandfather participated at the neighbourhood celebrations, where his father read the entirety of the October 2019 Universal House of Justice letter. A few days after the celebration, while Sam and his friends were learning about a new quotation in their junior youth group, he turned to his animator and said: "By the way, I talked to my dad about reading or memorizing Bahá'í prayers and he said that there is nothing wrong with that, my religion is not going anywhere and I'm just learning about a new religion. That's okay." Sam's animator was filled with joy. Sam and his animator talked about the importance of communion with God and if anything the devotional gatherings should encourage him to pray more with his family. They also talked about the beauty of freedom from ignorance and prejudice and how that is the only way to accept all the religions of God.

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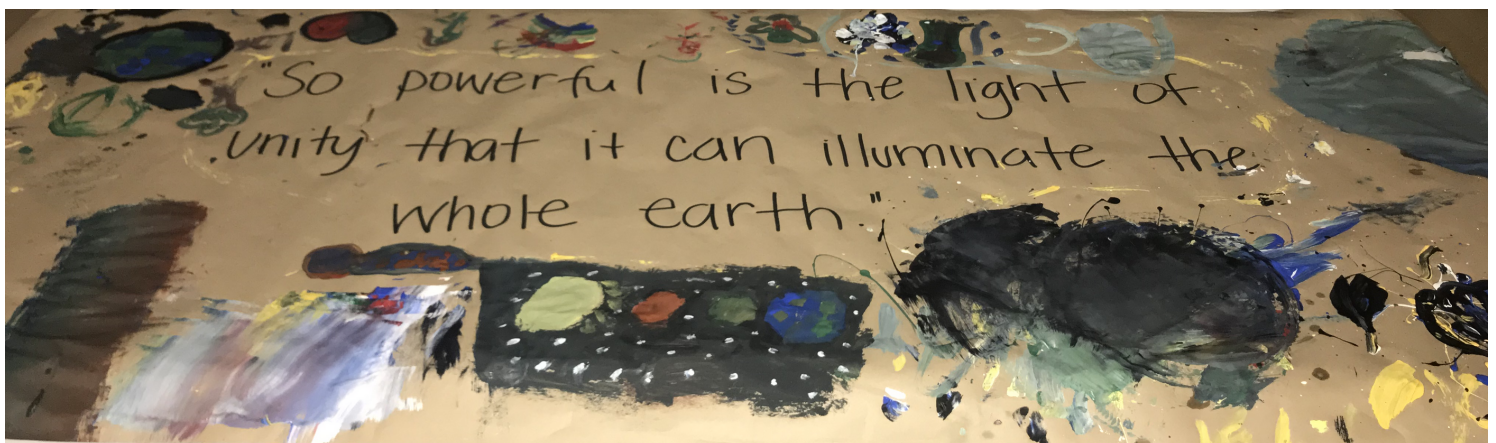
The Sparroways Celebrations

In the Sparroway's pocket, the Book 4 Study Circle planned two celebrations. The first celebration was for the participants of their junior youth group, siblings and parents. For the first celebration, some of the children and youth came and assisted in decorating the recreation room and setting up artistic activities for the junior youth and children to engage in. Families also contributed refreshments and dinner. A few of the youth introduced the evening, sharing that the junior youth program is inspired by the Baha'i Faith and that this is a special time for the world as the world is celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of the Báb and the anniversary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and that the theme they wanted to explore with the group was the power of unity. The group then went on to read a few of the Writings and discussed their meaning. The junior youth as well as the children participated in the discussion enthusiastically.



This was followed by a few artistic activities and dinner. At the end of the night, a parent once again asked if their child could be in a children's class in the neighbourhood and when it was expressed that it was merely a shortage of teachers that was preventing a class from starting, she spoke to her daughter and asked her if she would consider teaching the class. Her daughter accepted and since the gathering has started preparations to begin a class with the help of someone in the neighbourhood that has taken Book 3.

The second celebration was for youth and families in the neighbourhood to have a chance to consider the teaching of the Faith, watch the film "The Dawn of the Light". One of the youth in the study circle prepared a short introduction and the group gathered and watched "Dawn of the Light" followed by dessert and individual conversations.



THE BICENTENARY CELEBRATION

The Pineway Celebrations



After the "Dawn of the Light" was released, we decided to invite some of the neighbours and friends to watch it with us and consult about the preparation of the celebration of the Bicentenary. Four families came and one of the youth were very moved that they said they would like to learn more and serve. That youth was able to attend a book one study circle the following weekend.

Our children class decided to also hold a bicentenary celebration and invite families. We prepared three banners by painting and drawing about The Bab. We had our celebration on October 27 and 36 people attended, 12 were friends of the faith that are already attending core activities.



On October 29, we had dawn prayers and breakfast and invited some of the teachers from the near public school. Two teachers came and also two of our neighbors came.

After the breakfast, there was a great consultation about the importance of spiritual growth of the children and we decided we would extend the existing children's class in Pineway.

We are still preparing to have another celebration as some of our friends couldn't make it to the first one.