

Crystal Kids

October 2011



For impoverished kids living in Edmonton's inner city, it's tempting to get involved in things like prostitution, drugs or gangs.

"They see it as a quick way out," says Miri Peterson, executive director of Crystal Kids, an after-school youth centre in one of Edmonton's poorest communities. "These kids aren't capable of understanding the consequences of these activities."

Crystal Kids first opened in 1992 on Alberta Avenue, just north of the downtown core. Its original mandate was to provide an alternative to life on the street, offering kids a safe place to play. Eventually, it began serving nutritious meals. In the seven years since Peterson has been involved, Crystal Kids has expanded its role, offering games and physical activities along with artistic, literacy and mentorship programs.

"We're trying desperately to bring them back to community," notes Peterson. "Their parents are broken. They're addicted. They're living in poverty. They don't have the resources or the skill sets to adequately do the job of parenting in today's society. We pick up the slack. We're really making a difference in the lives of these children."

But making a difference is challenging. Crystal Kids depends almost exclusively on corporate and individual donors to operate on its modest \$450,000 per year budget. Recently, ATB Financial's Alberta Avenue branch approached Crystal Kids to see if there was some way they could help.

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"I told Miri that ATB wanted to do something for the kids, but it had to be tangible," remembers Alberta Avenue branch manager Linda Kon. "She showed me their old computers and that's when the idea for a new computer lab came up."

ATB provided Crystal Kids with 10 brand new computers, complete with all the latest accessories.

"We are absolutely over-the-moon ecstatic to have our new ATB Financial computer lab!" exclaims Peterson. "The kids now know that their computer won't crash in the middle of a homework project or in the middle of an online chat with their friends."

The Alberta Avenue branch's support for Crystal Kids doesn't end there. ATB's staff brings Santa Claus and gifts to the Crystal Kids Christmas party. And ATB volunteers help out at the Crystal Kids' annual Show 'n' Shine fundraiser every June.

"They're amazing, I have to say," beams Peterson. "Over and above what this branch has done for us, they do the same thing for the entire community. All up and down the Avenue, you can see ATB's influence and ATB's assistance."

Peterson recalls how ATB stepped up two years ago when the Alberta Avenue Community League, in total disrepair, desperately needed help. "It looked like hell," she says. "I drove by and saw no less than 15 people wearing blue ATB t-shirts out fixing things that needed to be fixed, doing gardening, picking up garbage, washing windows. They just totally adopted that community league and made it their project."

"Since then, that community hall is so busy and vibrant, it amazes me," notes Kon, a director on the Alberta Avenue Business Association board. "We're constantly making sure all of the things along the Avenue are looked after."

Peterson and Kon's work is beginning to pay off, according to Joe Holtz, executive director of the Alberta Avenue Business Association. "The Avenue is really starting to come back," Holtz says. "There's less crime here now than in other parts of the city. The businesses are getting more involved. The arts community is bringing thousands of people in here for festivals. Is the revitalization complete yet? No. It's a work in progress, but everyone's pushing ahead."

"I love this community," adds Kon, proudly. "I walk down the streets during the day and constantly run into people I know and say hello. The community spirit along the Avenue is almost infectious. It's such a pleasure to be part of it."