



Vanier's Walkaboos step into a new season

Michelle Nash
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In Vanier there is a small group who love to get together to walk around their tiny neighbourhood, pick up garbage, talk about flowers, dogs, life and homes on the streets and, most importantly, keep promoting Vanier as a great place to live.

Eyes on Vanier Walkabout was created four years ago to bring residents together as well as help clean up and take back Vanier by combating drugs, prostitution, garbage and graffiti issues. The new season began on the evening of May 11 with a group of six Vanier residents. Dubbed the Walkaboos by one of the members who has been there from the beginning, Lucie Marleau said the group gathers three times a week and walks throughout Vanier.

"Eyes on Vanier Walkabout aim to build our community, generating a sense of belonging, sharing common concerns and finding resolutions, and promoting Vanier events to residents greeted along the way," Marleau said.

The Walkaboos meet starting in early May at the corner of Marier Street and Carillion Road at Marier Park. Four years ago the park was a problem area for drugs and other criminal activities, but Marleau and other Walkaboos are proud to say the park is the community's again.

Part of the fun of walking around has been to see who collects the most garbage. In the first few years Marleau and fellow Walkaboos, John St-Aubin would compete at who could pick up the most garbage, with extra points for who found the most disgusting pieces of trash.

"It was about whatever makes it fun," Marleau said, laughing about the contest.

It is hard to stop a Walkaboo once they get started. Gloves in hand, bag in the other, they walk the streets of Vanier with one goal in mind – to make it better. St-Aubin's wife, Debbie remembers when there was a lot more garbage and a lot less care being put into certain homes.

"In the beginning there were a lot of problem homes," Debbie said.

Now, she proudly points out homes that used to house crack addicts and criminal activity that have completely turned around.

"A lot has changed since we started," she added.

Marcel Tousignant and his foster daughter Catherine have been a part of the walk for a number of years. Tousignant brings his two dogs, Thelma and Louise, to take part in the walk as well.

Marleau recalled one particularly great story about an Eyes on Vanier walk.



Walk around the town. Now that summer is on the way, Vanier's Walkaboos are out again keeping the neighbourhood streets clean and friendly. *Michelle Nash*

"One time, the Walkaboos had met up at a small park when we were joined unexpectedly by the City Church Prayer Walkers. City Church's pastor thought the park needed a prayer visit. There we were – maybe 40 of us – holding hands in a circle singing Amazing Grace," Marleau said.

After the prayer that evening, problem tenants from across the road moved away within two weeks and although Marleau knows this could be a coincidence, she loves thinking back to that day.

Most importantly, the walk is about making friends, catching up with old friends and making connections in the neighbourhood.

Debbie said that before this group was formed she barely knew her own neighbours, now, as Marleau jokes, she is stuck with all the Walkaboos.

Not just garbage pickers, this little group has been recognized for the change they have given their neighbourhood.

Eyes on Vanier Walkabout were the runner-ups in Crime Prevention Ottawa's award for Ottawa Community Safety in November 2009. They won the 2009 Community Mobilization Award from the Ontario Police Chiefs Association. And together the Eyes on Vanier Walkabout and the Together for Vanier Working Group on Beautification won the 2010 United Way Community Builder Award: Turning Lives Around.

The Walkabout starts early spring to late fall on a schedule, with a "whoever shows up, shows up" attitude. They discuss whether there are any particular concerns or areas people wish to clean or monitor and then they are off with their garbage bags once again.

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