

# Helping Communities Change

## The 15 Year Tamarack Story

*Written by Kris Culp*

Tamarack's story begins in the late 1990s with a series of conversations between Paul Born and Alan Broadbent. At the time, Paul was leading the Community Opportunities Development Association (CODA) and in particular, Opportunities 2000, a millennium campaign with a bold goal of reducing poverty in Waterloo Region to the lowest in Canada by the year 2000. Alan, of the Avana Capital Corporation and as chairman of Maytree, a foundation dedicated to advancing systemic solutions to poverty, was interested in the campaign's progress.

Paul and Alan talked about what it takes to get a broad range of stakeholders – business, government, faith, volunteer, and nonprofit – working together with people with lived experience of poverty to address this big, complex issue. CODA and Opportunities 2000 offered much learning in this regard. Alan and Paul began to see the outlines of something bigger: a national organization to promote the art and science of community change for cities, where people are engaged and working together to strengthen their community.

In 2001, Alan as Chairman and Paul as President jointly launched Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement. Its mission was to develop a process to help people create bold visions for the future of their communities and work together to achieve those visions more easily and effectively.

### **The Early Days:**

Alan, through Maytree, made a long-term commitment to funding and giving leadership to Tamarack, and with this confidence Paul consulted with a small group of founders on how to scale Tamarack and the Opportunities 2000 learnings to a national level. Among the early founders were Alan Broadbent and Ratna Omidvar of Maytree, Tim Brodhead and Katharine Pearson of the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation, Frances Westley of the McGill-McConnell program at McGill University, and Sherri Torjman of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. "I shuttled between them over a six-month period, going from one visit to the next and passing on the ideas of one to the other," Paul recounts. "It was a brilliant 'meeting' that continued, at least for me, seemingly without pause."

When a plan was in place, Tamarack put out an invitation to community leaders: Would you like to meet and talk about the possibility of working together in a new way to advance new thinking about how communities change, and in turn create a new approach to reducing poverty? The answer was resoundingly "yes."



*Paul Born, 2003*

"Back when we started, no one had a community-wide plan to reduce poverty. Now, nearly every Canadian city has or is working on a poverty reduction strategy. That's 61 regions representing more than 175 cities. I find that remarkable, and I believe that's one of our greatest achievements in 15 years."

*Paul Born, Co-Founder  
& Co-CEO, Tamarack*

## 2002 - Vibrant Communities Is Launched:

With leadership support from the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation, just over 50 community leaders from 14 cities gathered at the Ignatius Jesuit Centre in Guelph, Ont. "We spent four days together having a really good conversation," Paul recalls. "On the last day, we introduced the idea of Vibrant Communities Canada. People were excited."

Thus began a unique 10-year experiment. Thirteen Trail Builder cities agreed to explore a collaborative, cross-sector approach to local poverty reduction. Through Vibrant Communities, the cities received financial and technical support. In return, they tracked their lessons and outcomes and shared them with national sponsors in an "action-learning" process.

"We knew that in order to get scale, we had to follow some new principles," reflects Mark Cabaj, the first director of Vibrant Communities, who had worked with Paul at Opportunities 2000. "We were interested in finding how those played out in practice. We had done that in one context, Waterloo, but we wanted to know how this would play out in other cities." It was exciting work – building a new platform and a practice for social change in Canada.

## 2003 - Building and Sharing Knowledge:

Tamarack established a Learning Centre to document community-building activity and disseminate the learning. It quickly grew to include web-based learning, three e-newsletters, tele-learning, online workshops, and research papers. The knowledge was shared freely with anyone who wanted to access it. By 2004, more than 5,000 people used the open learning services every month.

"The building of the knowledge base has been very important and was a very intentional thing at the outset," Alan says. "This was going to be the basis of Tamarack's work – we would not only work with communities but learn from them, document their learning, and leverage their learning so other communities and individuals could benefit from it."

## 2005 - The First Community Change Institute:

Tamarack's signature learning event, a five-day gathering to inspire and renew community changemakers, took place at the Ignatius Jesuit Centre in Guelph. Interest ran high and registration overflowed, so Tamarack arranged off-site accommodations and buses to carry people back and forth. "We wanted to produce events that gave people the very best experience," Paul says. "There was a sense that the people coming to our events were going to contribute to the wellbeing of the Institute."

"Tamarack has emboldened and strengthened lots of social innovators and would-be community builders across Canada because they feel like they're part of something bigger and they feel connected. Tamarack has helped strengthen the ecosystem of social innovation and community change."

*Mark Cabaj, Here to There Consulting*





## 2008 - Publishing Books, Sharing Knowledge:

Tamarack captured Trail Builder stories and learnings in a new book, *Creating Vibrant Communities – How Individuals and Organizations from Diverse Sectors of Society are Coming Together to Reduce Poverty in Canada*, edited by Paul. “Good things start with a conversation. So do good communities,” Paul wrote in the introduction. Fittingly, that year Paul also published *Community Conversations: Mobilizing the Ideas, Skills, and Passion of Community Organizations, Government, Businesses, and People*, a book that is now a Canadian best seller and has sold more than 20,000 copies.

## 2010 - Entering a New Phase:

As the Trail Builder experiment drew to a close, Mark stepped down as Vibrant Communities Director and Liz Weaver, of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, took up the role. “Tamarack was in the process of engaging its Vibrant Communities partners in a conversation about where to go from here,” Liz recalls. “What would be the next iteration of the poverty

reduction movement? How could we keep working together and building momentum? We started to refocus on what Cities Reducing Poverty could look like, how it could be member-driven, what would be the priorities for our members in a shared learning community, and how we could grow the base.”

## 2011 - “Collective Impact” Gains Profile:

Tamarack was writing its Trail Builder report when an article entitled “Collective Impact” appeared in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. It presented a framework for how organizations across all sectors could work together to achieve a common goal. It described, in fact, what Tamarack had been doing since 2002 with the Trail Builder experiment. “We had been doing [Collective Impact] ourselves, just using different language,” Mark says. “We were doing a Canadian version with on-the-ground experiences and practices. The ideas we had been writing about and implementing in communities became very popular thanks to our partners at FSG and Aspen in the United States.”

“We recognize Tamarack and its commitment to bettering Canadian cities, particularly through its work with municipal actors who are members of the Cities Reducing Poverty network. Tamarack has convened municipal leaders and community collaboratives in an online learning community and national movement to end poverty for over fifteen years. We recognize Tamarack for its early work with municipalities to develop poverty reduction plans, and how this resulted in a 10 per cent reduction in poverty in some cities between 2002 and 2012 and over 202,000 poverty reducing benefits for low-income Canadians.”

*Brock Carlton, Chief Executive Officer, Federation of Canadian Municipalities*

## 2012 - Trail Builder Success:

Results were tabulated and they were extraordinary. “We way overshot our targets,” Mark says. The original goal was to assist 5,000 people out of poverty, but after 10 years nearly 200,000 people had experienced benefits and 15% reported a deep and durable reduction in their poverty level. “We learned that these things could mobilize at a scale we hadn’t seen before.” The experiment would eventually impact nearly 250,000 people, producing solid evidence that collaborative, cross-sector action is a successful way to reduce poverty. Based on these results, Vibrant Communities opened its model to all cities. Membership jumped to 26 cities. Liz attributes this to Tamarack’s open-source information platform: “Cities Reducing Poverty was out there on a platform that everyone could access. Lots of communities were listening to our webinars, participating in workshops, and downloading our resources, so when we opened it up, they were ready to join.” At the same time, Canada’s cities were increasingly viewing poverty as something they could tackle. “Key mayors like Naheed Nenshi [Calgary] took on poverty early in his term,” Paul says. “In Calgary, city council adopted a process that would allow anyone who was low-income to get 50% off their bus pass. That was our first really big systems change, affecting about 10,000 people.” Another was the Niagara Jobs Bus. Hotels in Niagara Falls needed workers, but low-income people in nearby St. Catharines didn’t have the means to get there. The local poverty reduction group worked with the hotels to provide transportation via a Jobs Bus, resulting in 200 new jobs.

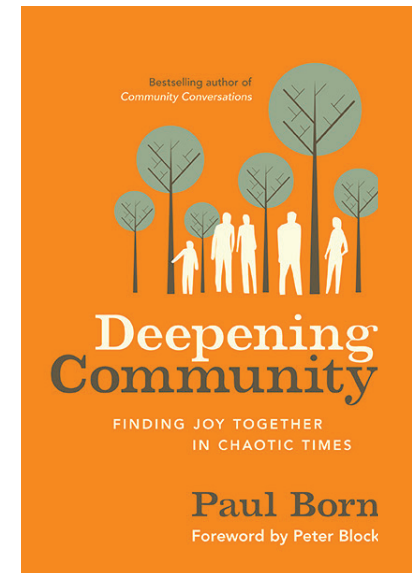
## 2013 - Growing and Evolving:

Bolstered by an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant, Tamarack attracted more cities to the Vibrant Communities network. “We published the business case for poverty reduction, did policy work, convened the network, built out our online platform, and held webinars. It was exciting work,” Liz says.

Tamarack refined its learning approach by grouping resources and learning into five core idea areas: Collective Impact, Community Engagement, Collaborative Leadership, Community Innovation, and Evaluating Impact. Liz became Vice-President and Lisa Attygalle joined as Director of Engagement. A new practice area was launched based on what we had learnt from growing Vibrant Communities. Based on Paul’s research for his forthcoming book, a community of practice known as Deepening Community, with Sylvia Cheuy as director, was formed. Created to explore how to build stronger, more inclusive neighbourhoods, Deepening Community was first supported by Tamarack members and then bolstered by a three-year grant from Ontario’s Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration that allowed prototyping of the model. Another social innovation was underway.

## 2014 - Deepening Community in Canada:

Paul published his book *Deepening Community: Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times*, which has sold more than 20,000 copies to become a Canadian best-seller. The book presents four pillars of “deep” community:



“Tamarack has a long-standing reputation for its ability to convene community leaders and organizations in online learning communities, where people can gather, learn and share with each other. Tamarack brings great value and expertise to the community change sector.”

*Bill Morris, National Director, 211 Canada and Public Policy, United Way Centraide Canada*

When people share their stories, take time to have fun together, care for one another, and work together to make the world a better place, their communities become more connected and resilient places to live. These themes formed the basis of the growing Deepening Community practice.

## 2015 - 2017 - Poverty Reduction Gains Momentum:

Under Paul's leadership Vibrant Communities hosted three annual national summits that continued raising the profile of poverty reduction in Canada. The 2015 summit in Ottawa called for the three levels of government – municipal, provincial, and federal – to align their efforts to reduce poverty. The 2016 summit in Edmonton, called Cities Reducing Poverty: When Mayors Lead, drew mayors from cities large and small across Canada to discuss and share ways to build economically inclusive communities. The 2017 summit in Hamilton, Cities Reducing Poverty: When Business is Engaged, featured business leaders who profiled initiatives such as Living Wage, financial empowerment, food security, education, and more. With the federal government committing in 2016 to a national poverty reduction strategy, momentum was on the rise, and Tamarack was a consistent national voice and advocate.

In 2016 Tamarack welcomed a significant, multi-year contribution from Suncor Energy Foundation to grow the work of Deepening Community across Canada. A Deepening Community summit in Montreal marked Tamarack's first bilingual learning event, bridging experiences and perspectives of francophone and anglophone community builders.

## 2017 - Two National Movements and a Learning Centre:

Vibrant Communities today is engaged in two national campaigns to reduce poverty and deepen community in Canada. Cities Reducing Poverty has a bold goal to improve the lives of 1 million Canadians within 10 years. Cities Deepening Community is building a network of 25 member cities by 2021 to strengthen local communities and deepen bonds between neighbours. Tamarack's Learning Centre is positioned to grow the capacity of the 24,000 community builders in our network by equipping them with the skills, knowledge, resources and connections to make lasting change. "It's humbling to partner with so many engaged learners who share our vision of creating community change," Paul says.

"As communities everywhere face increasingly complex challenges — from climate change to economic inequality to disruptive technologies — Tamarack's expertise is more relevant than ever."

*Elizabeth McIsaac,  
President,  
Maytree*





**With a lot of hard work and perseverance, Change Is Happening:**

Anyone involved in community change knows the work requires a lot of hard work and perseverance. “All of us who do this work are privileged to be able to do it,” Alan says. “You only get there by going at it every day and working hard and keeping at it. All of us have to have a sense of faith and trust that our efforts will pay off for the communities we live in, and particularly for those who have the most difficulty and struggle, so they can live lives of dignity.”

Tamarack’s first 15 years have been dedicated to helping community leaders ensure that everyone can live in a great city, free of poverty with a deep sense of community. The next 15 years will be a time of unprecedented change in Canada and the world. The work of Tamarack will be more relevant than ever as we help citizens and networks work together, learn together, and care for each other to ensure a great world for our children and our children’s children.

**We look forward to the challenge.**

“Can we systematically transfer the knowledge of how to create community change? Can we make it easier for people to do that in their community? What is the knowledge and what is the coaching that allows them to operationalize the knowledge? Because of Tamarack, Canada now has a network of cities that have the ability to interconnect and learn from each other — an essential foundation for social innovation.”

*Alan Broadbent, Chairman and Founder of Maytree, Chairman and CEO of Avana Capital Corporation*

“Tamarack is an outstanding organization with a 15 year track record in the field of community change and we recommend them based on our long-standing partnership and their record as a partner and leader in the field.”

*Jayne Engle, Lead, Cities for People, The McConnell Foundation*

## 15 YEAR IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

In the last 15 years Tamarack received over **\$10M** from our amazing Donors and Grantors and nearly **\$9M** from our learners and community partners and achieved these amazing outcomes:

### Vibrant Communities:

We pioneered the idea of Learning Communities for large scale community change and implemented this approach in Cities Reducing Poverty and Cities Deepening Community

Today, **175** municipalities (from over **61** Regional Partners) have or are working on Cities Reducing Poverty strategies. When we started, there were none.

Because of these strategies, at least **250,000** families are less poor

**8** Cities deepened community for at least **10,000** people

**35** cities are learning and working together to strengthen neighbourhoods

### The Learning Centre:

We pioneered work in the areas of Collective Impact, Community Engagement, Evaluating Impact, Collaborative Leadership and Community Innovation

Our members attended more than **55,000** learning days of training with us

We hosted more than **200** webinars for an estimated **25,000** people

At least **250,000** resources were downloaded by learners from our websites

**7** books were produced and nearly **40,000** were sold