

Local developer making waves in the community

As the weather turns colder and our fall campaign kicks into high gear, I'm reminded that it's been almost 10 years since the Kitchener-Waterloo and Cambridge United Ways released a joint report outlining the community's views on social services needs. This research and practical wisdom has had a direct impact on how United Way invests community dollars within the Region, and on the future social health of area residents.

Using a set of shared community priorities for Waterloo Region, the two United Ways engaged researchers from the Centre for Community Based Research and Wilfrid Laurier University. Our goal was to understand the social issues that really affect people's day-to-day lives in this region. We used a balance of community wisdom, academic research and the expertise of agency leaders.

For example, many research reports have identified neighbourhood health as key consideration as our region grows. United Way's research report recommended increased social capital and inclusiveness within neighbourhoods.

My breakfast companion this month, Shawky Fahel, is doing his part to build more inclusive neighbourhoods in our region. The CEO of JG Group of Companies has used his tenacious personality and passion for heritage to renovate and restore countless buildings that were destined for demolition. He's now taking things a step further by focusing on independent living and intelligent independent living spaces for seniors.

This is great news for our community and ties directly to United Way's stated regional priority to ensure neighbourhoods are inclusive and thriving. By preserving and restoring history in our region, and by addressing key seniors' issues such as isolation and helplessness, JG Group is accomplishing more than a commercial venture. "We're preserving history, culture and identity," Shawky explains. "The work we do makes

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this a better community and allows people to feel proud of their surroundings."

Shawky and his team are so passionate about the issue of intelligent independent living for seniors that they're now sponsoring research and initiating partnerships with the local universities.

JG Group is known for its expertise in adaptive re-use, a process that adapts buildings for new uses while retaining their historic features. An old factory may become an apartment building. A rundown church may find new life as a restaurant. A restaurant may become a church.

JG's 50,000 square foot facility on Roger Street is itself an example of adaptive re-use – a showpiece for what the company can do. Shawky and his team took the former Electro Porcelain Plant, which was slated for demolition, and turned it into a sparkingly clean 50,000 square foot woodworking and

millwork manufacturing plant.

He points to Laurier Brantford's Wilkes House as a primary example of community pride. Directly across the street from the property is a seniors' home. "The seniors watched every day as JG Group transformed the biggest eyesore in the neighbourhood into a beautifully preserved piece of history," recalls Shawky. Many of the seniors remembered this building as the former Boy's Club, where they would go for dances. Now they'll witness another generation of young people as they enjoy the building and benefit from the legacy left to them.

The next big project is even loftier: a condo development in the old American Standard building, situated along the Speed River in Cambridge. Zooming in on every little detail – from custom design of intelligently 'wired' shower stalls with soft landings to the connectivity needs of seniors with long-distance family members, JG Group is going above and beyond to ensure quality of life for future residents.

According to Child and Family Canada, social capital affects the entire community. In communities where people know and trust their neighbours, people are happier and children are better taken care of. There is less family violence in communities where social cohesion is high. People can rely on informal social support systems to help them out in times of need. These social supports can include exchanging childcare with a neighbour, or helping out a neighbour in grief by preparing meals for them.

It's these kinds of concrete benefits that United Way aims to achieve in K-W. Through our member agencies, and through system-based initiatives, we're striving to address the root causes of community issues, not just the symptoms. When I hear stories from business leaders like Shawky Fahel, I see what a tremendous role businesses have to play in these solutions – perhaps beyond donations and charitable involvement.

Now grooming his son to take over the family business, Shawky sees his business and



Shawky Fahel

his 30 years of community involvement as a family legacy. "It takes many ripples to create a wave. It's lots of people doing little things that makes a better community."

Shawky, I couldn't agree more. Let's all make some waves.

Note: I'm 'taking reservations' for this column. If you'd like to meet me for breakfast and a discussion, please drop me a note at jvarner@uwaykw.org.