

ONE Days help invigorate old north end; Celebration Hundreds take part in annual event at Victoria Square

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SAINT JOHN - On Friday night, Brenda Thorne walked alone at night in the north end for the first time in 20 years.

Thorne has lived in the neighbourhood for most of her life, growing up with 15 siblings and later raising three children of her own there.

As children, Thorne and her brothers and sisters were taught to never walk close to houses. She still carries her purse in front of her, slightly grasping onto it, just as she learned when she was a little girl.

"It was a place that you ran through, terrorized," Thorne said.

But Thorne isn't afraid anymore.

On Saturday, she sat on a bench in Victoria Square, admiring the recently renovated park and munching on a hamburger.

The park was the site of this year's ONE Days, a celebration of the old north end.

The celebrations were wrapping up Saturday afternoon with an event organized by the Golden Oldies, a seniors group affiliated with ONE Change.

The park was filled with the smell of barbecue, the sound of kids enjoying games and treats and with parents catching up with one another.

When Thorne was a little girl, there weren't any flowers or benches in Victoria Square.

Now, the spot is peaceful, she said.

"When I see this around me, it's heart warming ... it's all so beautiful.

"It takes away all the hatred and the violence within the community."

Tammy Calvin, a vice-president with ONE Change, has been organizing ONE Days for the past six years in an effort to bring community togetherness to a neighbourhood that's long had a bad rap.

The events are fuelled by community donations and volunteer work from young and old.

Seniors with yellow Golden Oldies t-shirts worked alongside teens with red ONE Change t-shirts to make sure everything ran smoothly on Saturday.

The benefit of young and old working together, Calvin said, is the knowledge and respect youngsters gain.

"The children can learn a lot from their elders," Calvin said.

"They're working together as teams, When you build teams, you're building respect."

A movie night kicked off ONE Days last Wednesday, when more than 100 kids turned out for entertainment and snacks.

The turnout stunned Calvin.

"We had popcorn, we had chips, we had pop. There was no mess. And the quietness....it was amazing."

Despite some dismal weather, the square was busy throughout ONE Days, Calvin said. Next year, she plans to make the celebrations even bigger.

"I want to do a parade and I want to do fireworks," she said. "Next year, no matter what, we need that to happen.

"I'd like to go off with a blast. Go big or stay home."

Thorne encouraged local kids around her home to attend ONE Days events as soon as she saw a flier advertising them.

She would like everyone in the neighbourhood to chip in to make next year's festivities happen.

Even if someone only has a nickel to donate, it makes a difference, Thorne said.

"We're not all rich but we give what we can."

In 20 years, Thorne imagines a very different north end than the place it is today.

By then, she imagines all of the old homes, some which have paint peeling off or are boarded up, will have been torn down.

She's always sad when old homes in the neighbourhood disappear, but she's confident her old stomping grounds will look great someday.

Thorne is also certain that change in the neighbourhood has to come from within.

"It will only be safe in the world wherever you live if you make it a safe place," she said.

"Everyone has to do their part, look out for their neighbours."