



[Back to Porter: The miracle of R.V. Burgess Park](#)

Porter: The miracle of R.V. Burgess Park

July 14, 2010

Catherine Porter

Want to know what a difference six women can make?

Go to R.V. Burgess Park this Friday night.

It's in the heart of Thorncliffe Park, the city's version of Hong Kong — all apartment buildings crowded with new immigrants, where elevator service makes the subway seem roomy and punctual.

During the day, the park looks like a bad hangover — a scrap of scrubby grass strewn with garbage, a few lonely trees, some concrete and rusting metal, all bandaged up with fences. You have to sneak down an alley to get there.

By early evening every Friday, the place is transformed. If you arrived blindfolded, you'd think you'd landed in small Karachi bazaar.

"How much is this?" a woman asks, holding up a purple *salwar kameez* and matching *dupatta* from a table overflowing with Pakistani clothing. Bed sheets are on sale next door. Women pull their strollers to one side and peer through niqabs at baby-sized gold bangles. There are peacock feathers, chocolate balls, face cream, henna tattoos, warm samosas, Gujarati *chole channa* (chick peas) at \$3 a bowl, fresh Ontario strawberries, all sold by women at 13 tables lining the footpath.

A group of kids colour posters with the words "Please Keep Our Parks Clean," before lining up, donning plastic gloves and attacking the litter.

There's a kids' show every Friday night: a theatre troupe, a puppet show, a musician, a magician. I arrived one evening to find more than 100 kids crowding around a man in a white lab coat doing oddball experiments — such as pouring liquid nitrogen into a splash pad. It vaporized into wisps of white smoke. They went nuts when he dropped a Mento into a Diet Coke bottle and it exploded like a fountain.

"Diet Coke is better," 10-year-old Adel Khalqi tells me. He volunteers at the market every week, moving tables. "It's less sticky."

Some Friday nights you'll find 500 people in R.V. Burgess Park — gossiping, eating, meeting new friends. It makes College St. look dead.

It's a model for what our public parks can be — old-fashioned town squares where neighbours meet one another and become, well, neighbours. Even better, it is legal; the parks department has issued a permit for the weekly bazaars. And best, six women make this happen every week.

Sometimes, things work in this city.

The six women make up the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee. I mentioned them in a recent column about the R.V. Burgess playground, which has disappeared. They've been fighting to replace it, along with the lights and garbage cans. I called them amazing. Here's why.

They are all professionals and mothers who met in the park, around their kids. A homeopathic doctor from Pakistan, a Bangladeshi environmental health worker, a Hazara teacher from Afghanistan . . . All are new to the country, except one. Amy Sutherland moved here from Leaside to experience a different face of her own city.

Thorncliffe is a city of apartment towers, packed with new immigrants. Built in the 1950s for around 6,000, it's now home to at least 28,000 — many families doubling up in apartments.



Aamna Ikran, left, sells *salwar kameez* from Pakistan at the Friday bazaar in Thorncliffe's R.V. Burgess Park.

Catherine Porter/Toronto Star

The Science Centre is around the corner, but few here can afford it. The income rate here is 40 per cent below the city average. The community centre just reopened after more than two years of renovations. Same goes for the library. That meant not much to do. It made for some pretty heavy isolation and boredom.

The park was the answer.

"I think that's very important for learning and growing," says Sutherland. "There's no music lessons, cultural lessons, no cultural centre. People don't have money to access it. So we have to bring them in."

One of her friends started selling second-hand clothing. That sparked an idea. Thorncliffe is full of women entrepreneurs, selling their wares from their apartments. Will they come here one night a week?

"Being a newcomer, the transition stage is really a big one," says Sabina Ali, a teacher from India who arrived here with her four children and husband two years ago. "They need to come out and meet people because everything is so different for them. They have to break those barriers."

Last summer, the Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office helped them with a \$1000 grant. This summer, they struck gold: a \$150,000 grant from the Trillium Foundation for three years.

That means lots of people are getting nominally paid to do this — the vendors, the organizers. And they are all getting Canadian experience to pad their resumes.

"It's a model micro-economic development, like CIDA does overseas," Jehad Aliweiwi, the beaming executive director of the Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office, said the other night, watching the crowd of women.

"Isn't this phenomenal?"

It was. It was friendly and buzzing, full of life. It made me want to live nearby.

If you've been thinking about making a change in your neighbourhood, let this be that push you've needed. With a work, a dumpy little park can be transformed into a vibrant community centre.

The Woman's Committee has big plans for next year: a walking club, a community garden, women's swimming lessons so fewer immigrant mothers will drown on picnics.

I have no doubt they will succeed.

Catherine Porter's column usually appears on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. She can be reached at cporter@thestar.ca