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Locals start extreme make-over of Danforth

Property Values; Deli first to undergo facelift by volunteers in the neighbourhood

Kate Scroggins, National Post

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Peter J. Thompson, National Post

Plant Road Market owner Roger Wang, left, and Danforth East Community Association member Ellen Long enjoy the success of the new storefront -- the first to undergo a make-over by the association.

An east-end residents group has decided it is tired of waiting for big chains to bless its neighbourhood with gentrification.

A team of eight volunteers from the Danforth East Community Association (DECA) took matters into their own hands, approached the owners of specialty grocer Michael's Meats and Deli to ask if they would be the guinea pig for the first store transformation in the area. It's an extreme make-over that's good for the storeowner, and also for the neighbourhood.

"A number of us shop there and it's such a gem. Well, more like a diamond in the rough. It's an old-style Italian store and a lot of younger people were overlooking it," said Ellen Long, a DECA board member. "We wanted to show it off a bit, to modernize it. The owners were really keen to make improvements."

The owners paid for materials; in return, the volunteers showed up every Wednesday for three hours to help paint, spruce up the storefront and declutter the mishmash of specialty pastas and Sicilian goodies. A local business development expert gave the deli a new logo.

When chains like Starbucks open new stores, property values in the surrounding neighbourhood can reportedly jump anywhere up to 5%. But DECA felt it could just improve local businesses on its own.

"The number one thing for most of members is to improve the commercial strip along the Danforth, which has had a lot of empty shops and has sort of been lacking in certain types of businesses," said Ms. Long, who has lived in the area for seven years.

The eastern strip of the Danforth, east of Riverdale and northwest of the Beaches, is rugged and worn. Many of the local shops look like drab cousins of the ritzy, blue and white adorned stores of Greektown down the street. Housing prices are reasonable and the area has become a popular home for new, young families who want to see the street revitalized.

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