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## Putting a Fresh Face Forward



Store makeovers don't always have negative outcomes. According to the Danforth East Community Association (DECA), successful projects can even revive and re-energize a desolate community.

DECA was formed this past spring by a group of neighbours living between Mortimer and the train tracks south of Danforth, and Main and Coxwell to the east and west. Its founding members read a *Toronto Star* article that described their community in unfavourable terms and they decided to take action in order to improve the neighbourhood's commercial value and social interaction. Examples of their initiatives have included running a Farmers' Market on Thursday evenings in the summer and providing walking tours of the area.

DECA now wants to make a bigger statement. To do so, its members have started a store makeover initiative in order to revitalize the neighbourhood's commercial strip on Danforth Avenue. Their test-run efforts have been aimed at Roger Wang and Julie Liao, the new owners of Michael's Meats and Deli. According to DECA board member Ellen Long, the store has historically been overcrowded with inventory and it has had a mishmash of products spread across the store in no logical groupings. Its customers are loyal, though: they are primarily older Italians who trek all the way from Mississauga or Scarborough because of the exclusivity of its products.

It was Long who initially saw the store's growth potential—she would occasionally browse through it and realized that it sold a number of products, like gluten-free pasta, that she thought younger, health-conscious consumers would like. "The young people who took it over, it's almost like they didn't know what they had there," she said. After proposing the location to DECA, Long sold the owners on the makeover idea and DECA put an ad asking for project volunteers in its newsletter. Within twenty-four hours eight people had

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signed up, some of whom were artists and designers.



Because DECA is so young, it didn't have the money to assist the project financially. Fortunately, this hasn't been a problem because most of its costs total less than a thousand dollars. (The new store sign is the only expensive addition.) This thriftiness is largely a result of the project's nature: it is more about reorganization than construction. Volunteers have opened up both the storefront and the front window to allow customers to see in, decluttered the store by storing inventory in back rooms, created in-store product signs to ensure customers know what is sold, and this past Sunday, they painted the walls to give the store a fresh, new vibe. A name change has also occurred and going forward, Michael's Meats and Deli will be known as The Plank Road Market—an allusion to the history of the The Don and Danforth Plank Road Company that built Danforth Avenue.

The makeover is now nearly complete and The Plank Road Market will host a grand opening in the near future. But that doesn't mean that DECA doesn't want to do more, and it is meeting tomorrow to discuss what its next project should be. According to Long, "if we do good work at a couple of these stores, it might create momentum to convince other stores to do improvements." If this were to happen, the made-over stores and new hot spots like *Melanie's Bistro and Patisserie* just might ignite a community development that could turn Danforth East into the new Parkdale. A thriving neighbourhood would definitely benefit shop owners, but Long stresses that the makeovers are aimed at more than just the stores: "we're helping the store owners, but we're also helping our neighbourhood and our community." And it required the efforts of only a few people.

The Plank Road Market is located at 1810 Danforth Avenue in Toronto.

*Photos by Natasha Granatstein.*

By [Tim Kiladze](#) in [Culture, News](#) on January 8, 2009 11:00 AM 0 3 [Share +]

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