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## **Small Win Seeds Hope for Community-led Change in Haida Gwaii**

Image



Northern B.C. islands on a discovery path of what it looks like to cultivate grassroots leadership

A place on the Masset Village shoreline that resident Joan Ewson took the lead in getting cleaned up several weeks ago is still litter-free. She's so energized by this and how it happened that she's about ready to tackle the rest of the shoreline.

In the meantime, her success is being held up as a small but important win by a grassroots initiative called Haida Gwaii Voices.

Haida Gwaii Voices was created more than a year ago by several community members and Community Futures, a community economic development agency, as a way to spark and support community-led change.

“We really want to see the community shaping the future of Haida Gwaii,” says Allison Smith, a lead volunteer with Haida Gwaii Voices as well as the Community Futures business development officer.

Haida Gwaii is a sprinkling of islands off B.C.’s northern coast. It consists of seven small communities, including Masset Village and has a total population of about 5,000.

Through both kitchen-table discussions and some creative community engagement projects involving Facebook, Haida Gwaii Voices has discovered a resonating chord of dreams among the communities. For example, people want more access to local food, a vibrant network of nature trails and healing opportunities for adults.

Haida Gwaii Voices is now grappling with how to bring the communities together to create the changes they want to see.

Joan’s story offers a few clues. Taking the initiative to clean up a piece of the Masset Village shoreline all started with writing down her commitment to do so, she says.

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*Joan’s before and after photos from the Masset Village site she take the lead in getting cleaned up.*

“I had been following Haida Gwaii Voices on Facebook and I was downtown at our Harbour Day Festival where they had a booth with these grey cards for you to write down what you would like to see for Haida Gwaii.

“Well, that garbage can – or the lack of – (on the Masset dock) had driven me crazy for a long time,” Joan says. “There was always piles of garbage down there, so I

wrote down that I would like to see it cleaned up and a garbage can down there.”

That was essentially all it took, she adds. “It really spurred me to action. I had written it down, so I felt like I had to do it.”

Joan’s next step was to visit the site of contention, snap photos of the garbage and then set about cleaning up the spot, which is otherwise quite pretty. “It has a bench overlooking the village dock,” Joan says. “And I’ve seen orchids there and you can watch the boats and planes come and go.”

She then visited the Masset Village council offices to show them her before and after pictures of the site and to ask about setting up a garbage can.

Joan also posted her photos and a note about her experiences on the Haida Gwaii Voices Facebook page - who went on to tag the Masset Village council offices and add a request that something be done.

Within a few days, a garbage can had been set up.

The invitation for residents to commit to doing something about the change they would like to see is an important piece of fostering community-led change. That’s been a big “a-ha” for Haida Gwaii Voices, Allison says.

The initiative first recognized this through a project last June which invited residents to write on chalkboard both one wish for Haida Gwaii and what they intended to do about it. People were then invited to post a photo of themselves with their chalkboard message to Facebook.

“We didn’t get as many people doing it for that reason, because you’re publicly putting (your commitment) out there, but it also sometimes got more meaningful actions and more meaningful connections were made from it,” Allison says.

“So now in every project that we do going forward there will always be that commitment piece to making things happen.”

Another surprising “a-ha” for the initiative has been the power of social media on the islands. This is essentially the key way to learn of local news and community events, Allison says, adding the initiative has become intentional about tapping into that and encouraging residents to do so as well.

Looking ahead, the ongoing big question for Allison and others involved in the community building work in Haida Gwaii is knowing what how best to support or facilitate community leadership and action, without taking the lead themselves.

Energizing connections between people is definitely another key part of the work, Allison says.

And the journey continues.

To learn more about Haida Gwaii Voices, visit their [Facebook page here](#).

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