

## Seeing good amid the garbage

**For some, the continuing walkout is a reason to compost, eat better and spend more time with grandma**

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Nancy J. White

Feature Writer

No sooner were their kids on the plane to England than Sharon Weller and her husband skedaddled downtown to join friends at a restaurant.

Since then, she spent a leisurely afternoon reading in the garden while he sailed with friends, and they caught a movie after work. For once, it wasn't PG.

All this courtesy, indirectly, of the city workers' strike.

When their children's city-run camps were cancelled, the grandmother, visiting from England, offered to take the kids, 10 and 12, back with her for a few weeks.

"For us, it's a real treat," said Weller, a policy manager with the province. "We're not over-programmed and tightly scheduled. We're enjoying new-found freedom."

A lucky break.

Ask most Torontonians if there's been any upside to the municipal workers' strike now into its fourth week with no garbage pickup, no city-run daycare or camps, and no pools – to name just a few missing services – and they, well, they laugh at you.

"Wow," said an amused Chris Thompson at Kew Beach Park playground with his toddler. His wife chuckled. A father with an infant snickered. Then awkward silence.

"I don't see a lot of upsides," Thompson said, listing the downers: no Riverdale Zoo, no Centreville Amusement Park. But as he talked, a few positive glimmers came to mind: a neighbour with a composter offered to take his organic waste and he's seeing more of his mother in the suburbs – he brings her his garbage.

It may take a cockeyed optimist to see the glitter for the garbage piles. But these sunny types do walk among us.

Take, for instance, Rob Harris. He's turned the workers' job action into eco-action for his kids, aged 7 and 9. The family had been musing about buying a composter – "It wasn't at the top of the to-do list," explained Harris – but the strike spurred them on. Now the children sort the food to be composted, taking responsibility for it, and the family has declared war on packaging, shopping for items with less wrapping.

"We're doing this as a family to reduce our environmental footprint," said Harris, an administrator with the Toronto District School Board.



*Getting garbage out of Chinatown As the city strike continues, the Toronto Chinatown Business Improvement Area is providing weekly garbage removal for members. Video by Randy Risling. (July 15, 2009)*

Thinking along the same green lines, Michael Forbes and his family not only rediscovered their backyard composter, which was ignored for years. They're also trying to eat more vegetables to avoid the stench of fat and meat waste, which doesn't get composted.

"With the strike, we're planning meals ahead, looking for vegetarian options," said Forbes, a corporate communications consultant.

"I don't know if it's an upside, but it's a good lesson learned."

Lessons in community action have also sprouted up along with the long grass and garbage heaps. In several overgrown parks, do-it-yourselfers have wheeled in their mowers to keep fields usable. Some neighbourhood shop and restaurant owners have banded together to de-litter their streets.

On Queen St. W., business improvement groups covering the stretch from University to Roncesvalles Aves. have pooled resources for a cleanup crew.

Maria Hajigeorgiou watched as her 8-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter chanted "Parks are not dumps" along with the rally crowd at Christie Pits earlier in the strike. Now the kids, soccer players at Christie Pits, are asking questions about the walkout and why parks were picked for garbage pileups.

"It was an excellent civics lesson," said the mother, a medical writer. "You can talk to them until you're blue in the face, but they learn by their own experience."

Many of those experiences have been last-minute and unexpected.

Lisa Bendall had her daughter's whole summer schedule neatly set by March. "I'm a bit of a planner," said the freelance writer. But with the strike, her two-week swim camp went down the drain.

Bendall and a neighbour in the same bind found a local art camp. Although it was full, the owner opened extra spots for them. "My daughter had a blast and wants to do it again next year," said Bendall. "It was nice she had the opportunity to do something different."

Some parents left stranded turned to their folks, who were happy for rare downtime with their usually busy grandchildren.

"We had sort of a painting camp," said retired teacher Bernie Crawshaw, who shared his hobby with his 11-year-old granddaughter, Leah Kay. With her city camp cancelled, she came for several days.

"It was an adventure for her," said the grandfather, "and a delight for us."

As for Weller's two kids in England, they are not only getting precious one-on-one time with their grandmother, but they're also visiting cousins they rarely see and accompanying granny on a camping trip in Switzerland.

"It's win-win for everybody," said Weller.