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Porter: The power of soup, skates and simplicity

Published on Saturday November 21, 2009

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If you've been grumbling about the rain these past few days, blame Jutta Mason.

She's been praying for it.

Not one to leave things up to bureaucracy – even a celestial one – she's taken matters into her own hands. If you, like me, had reluctantly tugged off your pyjamas before midnight one night this week, pulled on your rain boots and ventured across the city to Dufferin Grove Park, you too would have found her beneath the foggy lights – oversized winter coat, canary-coloured mitts, struggling with a heavy industrial hose to flood the two rinks.

"If they knew I was doing this, they'd be completely aghast," she says, smiling mischievously. "What the hell? The problem is they're not doing it."

The "they" is city parks and recreation staff. Mason has a long history of fighting – and making up – with them. Her latest triumph: Weather permitting, Dufferin Grove's rinks open this morning, a week earlier than last year.



Jutta Mason helped ensure the rinks at Dufferin Grove Park will open Nov. 21, 2009, a week earlier than last year — and that the hot chocolate will be on.

CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR

She wants to make sure it's a success. Hence the hose at midnight, when the sun's rays aren't melting the ice quicker than the underlying cooling pipes can form it.

There are two options for a disgruntled community activist: Grumble, or do it yourself. "Maybe they are right," she says. "Maybe I'll find out it's useless. I hope not."

Never heard of Mason? You must not live by Dufferin Grove. She is an institution. Drop by today and see what she and her friends have done. It's heartbreaking – only because you don't live around the corner.

Resolution: When buying a house, don't research crime statistics or Starbucks locations in the area. See if there is a Jutta Mason living nearby in the neighbourhood. If so, you'll get a community, not just a neighbourhood.

The proof: instead of the stinky concrete bunker you find at most city rinks, Dufferin Grove's rink house is a little cottage. There are windows. Pictures on the walls. A wood stove pumping out heat beside a bookshelf, cluttered with kids' books. There are card tables for the old Portuguese men to play *sueca*.

The old staff room is now the "Zamboni Café," where workers ladle out hot chocolate, \$2 bowls of split pea soup and fresh bread still hot from the park's wood-burning oven, 25 cents apiece.

You can rent skates for \$2. And then, you can skate all day – drop-in shinny on one rink and wobbly loops on the next. Permits are issued only for late at night. The ice is for everyone.

On a nice winter day, 400 people will be buzzing around here. Mason once counted seven games of shinny.

"A whole bunch of Tibetans come here," she says. "For some reason, Cubans really like it. That means the whole family, including grandmother, go out skating for the first time. They think it's hilarious."

I've skated at other rinks and had a good time because I went with friends. We brought life to the rink. Dufferin Grove is alive when you arrive.

It's not by chance. There is a formula here.

Two decades ago, this was the same sort of quiet, rundown rink you'll find all over the city. It was used mostly by teenage boys who got into fights.

Change number one: food. Some neighbours brought over Jamaican patties and apples. They baked cookies at home to sell at the rink. The kitchen came later.

"We figured out part of the meanness was hunger," Mason says. "Boys get so engrossed in play, they forget to eat. I couldn't believe it would be that simple."

Change number two: rentals. During the hockey players' strike, Mason wrote to the National Hockey League Players Association for help. They donated 50 pairs of skates, hockey sticks, gloves, helmets. That move appealed to people usually not found on the ice – new Canadians, grown women, grandmothers. For only \$10, you had a whole family outing.

Change number three: space. Concrete walls once divided the rink house. Mason and her team proposed they come down. That would cost \$8,000, the bureaucrats said. Who has \$8,000? So, late one Saturday night, Mason et al. crept in and dismantled one.

"It's really easy to take down concrete blocks," she says. "You and I could do it tonight, but let's not." The reaction? "It's often been my experience when you do something like that, bureaucracy laughs. They find it very droll. They are so much struggling with the rules too."

Put in a wood stove, some donated books and voilà – you've transformed a changing room into a community centre. All so spectacularly simple.

"It's not rocket science," says Mason, a grandmother now, who has started a little non-profit out of her house to research what builds community. "What is it people need? Skates, fire to sit around, something to eat because they get hungry, a friendly face and to know there won't be bullies."

Last year, her group spread the ideas up the hill to two neighbouring rinks. The results were immediate. This year, they proposed a similar plan for the Giovanni Caboto rink, near St. Clair W. and Lansdowne Aves.

The bureaucrats aren't sure. They want to consult with an advisory board. Staff can't give out hot chocolate. It's not in their job description, parks and recreation general manager Brenda Patterson told me.

Also, maybe the community isn't game for change. "We don't want to spend taxpayers dollars on a public facility only to find it's a passing interest and the community can't sustain it," Patterson says.

I haven't skated at the Caboto rink. I've skated on a few like it – big, quiet, underused, sometimes very pretty. Those things aren't bad. Compared to Dufferin Grove though, it's the difference between a quiet night at home alone and opening night at the theatre with a hot date.

Who – other than drug dealers and antisocial cranks – wouldn't want a little piece of Dufferin Grove in their neighbourhood?

If I lived near Caboto, I'd get in on that advisory group.

In the meantime, I'm going to take my kids across town today for their first taste of winter this year. Neither has skated before. I haven't tried it for years.

Join me?

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