



Cultivating a Community

Growing Prospects, Inc.

BY CARLY DUBOFF

In 1991 Winnipeg teacher Dave Taylor saw a need to teach his inner-city students about cooking and nutrition. He had the grade 5 and 6 students at Dufferin Elementary School begin planting lettuce and other vegetables for use in the school's lunch program. But Winnipeg, as you might know, has a short outdoor growing season. How then to extend the cultivating season?

Dave saw an opportunity for his students when he heard about a drug bust in the city. Why not an indoor hydroponics garden? Easier said than done, but after wading through a mountain of red tape, Dave convinced the federal Seized Property Directorate that the confiscated hydroponic equipment should be "recycled," not trashed.

With a grant from the Winnipeg School Division, Dave and his students set up a hydroponic operation in the school's unused dental lab. The students began growing cucumbers, green peppers, tomatoes, and lettuce. At first the police were concerned. Are the kids just learning how to grow marijuana? After the program had run for a couple of years, however, Dave was able to demonstrate the important science and nutrition skills the students had learned. The police were convinced, and offered their support to the endeavour.

It was a local tragedy that moved the project to its next level. A few years after the hydroponic garden began, a student from Dufferin School was killed in a gang-related activity. With the death of Joseph "Beeper" Spence, Dave saw the need to create a program that would offer youth an opportunity to get employment training and evade the gang trap, and even generate revenue for anti-gang programs.

With this plan, Growing Prospects (GP), Inc. was established in January 1998 as a charitable, nonprofit organization with a mission "To provide education and training for the benefit of unemployed youth in Winnipeg in the field of horticulture and related industries. To assist these individuals in making decisive improvements in personal direction and professional performance."

In adherence to a mandate of environmental responsibility, Dave found an ideal location in downtown Winnipeg: an unused space under the Canadian National Railway's Mainline. With funding from CentreVenture, a City of Winnipeg downtown business development organization, renovations to the space were completed in four months. Winnipeg Police Services donated still more hydroponics equipment. GP's board comprised Dave (as President) and representatives from the Winnipeg Police Service, CHOICES – Youth Gang Prevention Program, Winnipeg School Division #1, the University of Manitoba, the Aboriginal community, and the downtown community.

Early Adjustments

In five years of operation, a lot of kinks have been worked out.

For one, functioning as both a training program and a business was a tall order. The training program at GP began as a 6-month, unpaid horticultural work experience and life skills course for youth aged 16-29 on social assistance. Mornings, students participated in classroom work that included academic upgrading and professional skills; afternoons they spent in the grow room, working alongside employees and learning about horticulture. The training program was then reduced to four months to meet the mandates of the social assistance case workers, who wouldn't fund people in training programs that were six months or longer.

The program has since been reduced to a 6-week work experience and job placement program, providing participants with structure, a work ethic, and responsibility, rather than marketable horticultural skills. Within their first few days at GP, participants are encouraged to explore and pursue their interests.

While this may seem like a decrease in GP's services, it actually became a more effective program, according to manager Rebecca Boyar. In trying to address so many aspects of training, GP was doing too much. Rebecca talked with other programs that are doing life skills training, and encouraged them to send graduates to GP for work experience. Interested youth can now start the program at any time (not just on the start date of the 4- or 6-month course), which permits greater flexibility. Participants work with staff in the greenhouse for the full six weeks and are treated like staff.

Each year, there are up to 20 program graduates. They have gone on to such work in such fields as carpentry, electrical, culinary work, and marketing. One continued on to Red River College's Electrical Engineering program after discovering a new passion at GP. After working with physically and mentally handicapped high school volunteers, another graduate decided that he would like to work with handicapped children.

The herbs that GP grows are sold to local restaurants & caterers. Only biological methods maintain the greenhouse's balanced ecosystem. But GP's greatest successes are on the social side, helping participants make strides in health & nutrition, competence, & employability.

(right) Rebecca Boyar at work in the grow room, surrounded by some of the 5000 kilos of herbs GP grows annually. Like its Fertigation Manager, GP's heat recovery system is ultra-efficient. Cool air is brought in over the growing lights to pre-warm it before it enters the furnace. Condensation is used to water the plants.

All GP staff are graduates of the training program. Two staff members who participated in the 6-month program are still employed at GP five years later. GP's administrative assistant is a program graduate who is now learning bookkeeping on top of her other duties. As Rebecca explains, the real point of the training is to build confidence, create successes, and help people find the job that they want to do.

A Leader in the Field

In 2002, with special funding from the Province of Manitoba's Sustainable Development Innovations Fund, GP became the only business in Manitoba to employ the new "fertigation" technology. Fertigation is a system that replenishes the reservoirs with fertilizer and water, as well as testing the levels of the water. It has made GP the province's leader in hydroponic technology. (Rebecca wrote a manual for the system so others can be trained to use it.)

With diabetes ravaging communities in northern Manitoba, GP began to research and grow stevia. This herb is much sweeter than sugar but contains no sucrose. As interest in stevia grows, GP has gained a new board member, a specialist in the area of diabetes, from the Bayer Corporation. By advertising the uses of stevia at diabetes forums and in northern Manitoba, GP is helping to provide healthy, safe alternatives for people living with diabetes.

GP is also making a name for itself as a hydroponic greenhouse consultant. In Lynn Lake, like other places in northern Manitoba, the price of produce is as dreadful as the quality. (\$13 for a head of wilting broccoli!) Rebecca worked with people in that community to create a greenhouse that can supply year-round fresh and affordable vegetables and provide training and employment for local people. The community is also planning to turn a profit by marketing the produce to





neighbouring communities and First Nations.

This northern greenhouse is not just about producing food. It is all-encompassing, with a need for community training programs to show people what to do with the food, including preserving, storage, and consumption. To Rebecca, the greenhouse has been an opportunity to teach people about the need for fresh produce in their diet and how to utilize it. "It's really about changing perspective, rather than just offering something to people," she explained.

All-Round Success

The success of GP can be measured in terms of business, environment, and social impact.

The herbs that GP grows are sold to local restaurants and caterers. The demand for fresh, quality basil, arugula, chives, mint, rosemary, thyme, and sage exceeds what GP can currently grow, and the balance sheet shows it. In May of 2003, sales were \$7300, up \$1300 from May of 2002 and up \$2000 from April 2003.

In fact, 2003 is the first year that GP has been in the black. In keeping with the mandate of providing funding to anti-gang activities, this profit allowed GP to make a donation to CHOICES – Youth Gang Prevention.

GP has always adhered to its strong environmental mandate. All the herbs are entirely free of herbicide and pesticides. Only biological methods maintain the greenhouse's balanced ecosystem. Every summer businesses in The Forks (a downtown historical meeting place in Winnipeg) also contract GP to maintain neighbourhood outdoor flowers and plants. And need it be said that the recycling of confiscated hydroponic equipment has reduced landfill waste? Actually, other groups have followed GP's lead and submitted similar requests to the police. Almost all confiscated equipment now gets reused.

The greatest successes of GP can be seen on the social side of the organization. In helping GP participants make strides in health and nutrition, the organization has a marked dedication to their personal well-being. It has been Rebecca's conviction that, while there is a set curriculum at GP, it must still cater to the student – even if that policy may sometimes register a black mark against the program. For example, GP once accepted a student who needed work experience in order to qualify for a life skills program. Because the student did not go straight on to a job after graduating from GP, however, he was a failure in the eyes of the funders. This assessment makes life harder for GP's manager, but it is indicative of GP's pre-eminent commitment to people as well as to funders' mandates.

This dedication can also be seen in the way GP treats its staff. All staff members receive an adequate salary and raises commensurate with their experience. A health care plan was established for employees and, after much research and persistence, all staff now have full benefits packages, including full dental plans.

Rebecca is now moving on to another job, but GP's future looks bright. As the demand for fresh herbs grows, expansion is in the works for the organization. The training program has been graduating students at an astounding rate. Post-secondary institutions are interested in GP's fertigation system. The greenhouse in Lynn Lake is gaining great support within and outside the community. From a group of kids growing lettuce on their school ground, Growing Prospects has evolved into a model of community economic development.



CARLY DUBOFF is a graduate student at the University of Manitoba, studying community economic development organizations and their participation in the New Economy. Contact her at carlyduboff@hotmail.com. For further information about this venture, she recommends Ann Simpson, "Growing Prospects" in Caledon Institute for Social Policy's *Community Stories* (Ottawa: Renouf Publishing, 2001) and Growing Prospect's website www.growingprospects.org. All photos courtesy of Growing Prospects. (above) Basil flourishes in the in GP's fertigation system.