

A Successful Succession

for the Victoria Women In Need Society

By SANDRA MARK

There are few social enterprises that can claim the success of WIN. Seventeen years ago, Charlotte Semple, who had herself experienced abuse, decided to create an organization that could support the efforts of other women to remake their lives. After asking around for donations, she and some friends, among them Carole Fast and Michelle Young, incorporated the nonprofit Victoria Women In Need Society. With a small personal loan, WIN opened the doors of its first resale shop in April 1991. Charlotte, Carole, and Michelle became the managers and “Leadership Team.” They learned and grew along with the venture over the next 16 years.

Since then, three WIN stores in Victoria’s downtown neighbourhoods have come to be known for the quality of the merchandise they provide. WIN is also known for creating employment for women and providing many kinds of programs and support for women in the transition process.

Good Works

WIN has never relied on government or any other funding body to cover the costs of operation. From the beginning, it has been a priority for the Board of WIN to remain a self-sustaining organization.

WIN has partnered with women’s organizations and with retailers and other community organizations to promote their work and to encourage a steady supply of high-quality donations (clothing, accessories, household items, linens, furniture, books, collectibles, jewellery, etc.), mostly from Victoria residents. The first priority for the donations is to meet the needs of the clients. What remains is sold in WIN’s resale shops. The revenue generated by loyal store customers sustains the community programs and services:

- New Start Program: the WIN Society has provided over 1500 women with the furniture and household items they needed to set up their own home as they left a transition house in the Greater Victoria Area.
- Gift Certificate Program: enables women and their children who are residents or outreach clients of transition houses and second-stage houses to receive essential clothing, household, and children’s items.
- Community Gifts in Kind Program: provides essential items to other organizations to support their program development. (Individual Victoria residents can also gain support from this program on a walk-in basis.)
- Bursary Program: an annual \$500 bursary has gone to graduates of an employability program to help them in their educational and vocational pursuits.

Creating employment in supportive working conditions has always been a priority. From 1991 to 2006, WIN’s stores employed an average of 25 women in any given month. WIN has also created volunteer opportunities for hundreds of women over the years.

(above) The WIN Resale Shop at the Westside Village, Victoria. WIN prides itself on both the quality of the items for sale and the shopping experience.

Résumé : Une relève fructueuse à la Victoria Women in Need Society

Il y a dix sept ans, Charlotte Semple, Carole Fast et Michelle Young, qui avaient toutes subi de l'abus, ont décidé de créer une organisation qui pourrait appuyer d'autres femmes qui voulaient refaire leurs vies. Depuis ce temps, la Victoria Women in Need Society (WIN) [Société de femmes dans le besoin de Victoria] a érigé trois magasins de revente de vêtements très respectés à Victoria tout en créant de l'emploi, des programmes et de l'appui pour les femmes dans le processus de transition. Il y a trois ans, avec des subventions du Programme d'appui technique en développement économique communautaire (PATDÉC), les trois femmes ont entamé une révision opérationnelle complète afin de préparer WIN à leur retraite.

La révision a démontré clairement combien de « bons coups » WIN avait accompli. Elle a aussi montré qu'il reste encore beaucoup de choses à faire. Quelle est la différence entre des bons coups pour des femmes en crise et des bons coups pour aider à développer les capacités des femmes et de la communauté à long terme? Comment les magasins WIN pouvaient-ils devenir plus responsables écologiquement et créer encore plus d'emplois? Finalement, qui d'autre que les trois fondatrices pouvaient réaliser ces tâches et prendre avantage de ces opportunités?

Après beaucoup de discussions, la réponse leur est tombée dessus. Les mêmes femmes qui avaient travaillé dans les magasins WIN pendant toutes ces années étaient parmi les plus dévouées à l'organisation, à sa raison d'être et à son avenir. En 2006, la Victoria Women in Need Community Cooperative [Coopérative communautaire des femmes dans le besoin de Victoria] a repris toutes les responsabilités d'affaires de WIN. C'est un brillant exemple de comment une coopérative peut résoudre des questions de succession dans une entreprise sociale. ■

The Succession Issue

As is happening with so many managers and owners of businesses in Canada, the day came when the founders needed to confront the fact that they would soon be ready to retire. They applied to the Community Economic Development Technical Assistance Program (CEDTAP) for funding to support a full operational review prior to resolving the succession issue. In all, the review and training in strategic decision-making took two years.

The review was a chance for the Leadership Team to look back and recognize the highs and lows of their journey. They took the time to deeply consider the nature of the contribution that they had made to the community. Their greatest achievement, they realized, was to create employment for women. They showed the community that women who suffer abuse need help, but also have a lot to offer their community. Their greatest satisfaction was to realize how many women had been able to move forward in their lives in a self-directed way due to WIN's support and to involvement in its operations. They had built equity by buying two buildings that would ensure the long term success of WIN. By diverting textiles and other materials from the landfill they had made a huge environmental contribution. It is a wonderful legacy to leave.

On the other side of the coin, they began to ask some very pointed questions about the organization's focus on "good works." What was the difference between good works for women in crisis and good works that help to develop women's capacities and the capacities of the community to support women over time? They concluded that a rebalance of activities to favour development over crisis intervention would provide a more durable impact for their good works, countless hours of human resources, and many truckloads of donated goods each year. By profiling and tightening up their practices of recycling and re-use, they also saw an opportunity to increase their ecological impact, to explore new enterprising options, and to create new jobs.

But where would they find the right people to take over such an organization?

Over the years, a very small Board had worked hand in hand with the Leadership Team. Together they had tightly governed and managed operations. Many practices were specific to the needs and abilities of these particular people; they probably wouldn't fit others. It was incredibly important to all three women to solve this problem.

So, they brought the workers into the picture. In a series of workshops over a period of several months, workers provided input to all aspects of the organizational review. It was clear that the workers could offer a great deal of insight and experience. Their dedication to the vision and mission of the organization was palpable. They were grateful to be invited in to these serious deliberations. They expressed their appreciation of the amazing contribution of the Leadership Team but wondered how they could be replaced.

Finding a Solution

It was during the wind-up, an intense and passionate brainstorming session, that the answer emerged. The workers held the vision of the organization; the workers had a big stake in its future. Could they lead the organization into that future? What would this look like? How could such a shift be accomplished? The possibility of creating a social co-operative where the workers would be the members became a viable solution.

With further discussion, it became clear that the organization had been operating for a long time in many ways as if it were a co-operative. The lack of distance between the Leadership Team and the Board was one reason for WIN's success. From this point of view, a co-operative model was a comfortable fit. Yet, because the Leadership Team and the Board had collaborated so well in planning, budgeting, and management, staff had not been required to help with these functions on an ongoing basis. Would they like the idea? Would they be willing to take on the responsibility of governing a co-operative?

Another meeting was held. The workers showed great interest in the idea. Some were overwhelmed. Others felt that

“When choosing to become a co-op member, I chose to become associated with an organization that holds similar values to my own. It is personally rewarding to know that the place that I am employed by is making a contribution both socially and environmentally. I am looking forward to joining together with other members in offering ideas and suggestions on the future of the Cooperative.” Wanda Card



the Leadership Team and Board were recognizing their worth and contribution to the organization in a new and exciting way. Everyone agreed that they had a lot to learn and would prefer a gradual shift. The Society would gradually phase out as the social co-operative took over the Society's work.

That's what has happened. A new entity, the Victoria Women In Need Community Cooperative was incorporated in December 2005 as a nonprofit co-operative association. WIN's original Leadership Team became the Cooperative's founding members, giving it time to establish and train new members. The Society donated to the Cooperative a significant portion of the equity of one of the Society's two buildings. In these ways, the Society has incubated the co-op and strengthened its ability to carry forward WIN's vision and mission.

Clare Yazganoglu, who had participated in the review process, was invited to serve as the Cooperative's Executive Director. She was joined by a new Management Team consisting of Michelle Young, Nicole Fast, and Wanda Card. Over the last two years, the new management and governance structure has become well established.

The Cooperative launched a 1-year development and training process for new members. It has dedicated considerable resources to training workers in the ideals and skills of co-operative governance. At the first member development retreat, it was clear that the workers were indeed "catching" the founders' strong sense of ownership. One of the Production Leads, Rose Marie Walker, stated that she "is proud to be a part of an organization that contributes to our community". Employees were able to see how their new roles would develop in the coming months as they sorted out the difference between governance and management. Since then, three more members have joined the Cooperative and three more members are now eligible to apply.

In July 2006, the Cooperative took over all of the business operations from the Society. The WIN Cooperative is an entirely self-sustaining organization like its predecessor, and continues to carry out the "good works" originally carried out by the Society. It also continues to enjoy the support of

WIN's loyal customers and donors and has maintained strong partnerships with local transition houses, along with many other community organizations that support women. Since that July, the Cooperative has delivered just under \$130,000 worth of services to local women and their families and delivered furniture and household goods to 102 women leaving transition houses. Increasingly services are geared to create opportunities for positive change in women's lives through self-sufficiency, employment, training, and connection to community.

WIN's fourth resale shop opened in February 2007. The Cooperative now employs 30 people, most of them women, and continues to create employment and volunteer opportunities in the community. A research grant from Enterprising Non-Profits (Vancouver, B.C.) will enable the Cooperative to conduct a feasibility study into scaling up the diversion of textiles and other materials from the landfill.

The careful and considered effort that the Leadership Team put into preparing the organization for change is culminating in a home-grown succession strategy and a strong, clear organizational and business framework. The WIN Society is now able to turn its attention to the development of a new strategic plan for the coming years, confident in the Cooperative's ability to continue its path in Victoria.

The new WIN Cooperative has benefited from the courage, ingenuity, love, and inspired teamwork of these splendid women who built their dream from the pain of personal struggle. They have poised WIN to move into a future that will demonstrate and entrench the spirit of their work.



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