



A Growing Home for Youth Social Enterprise
Kate Daly
The Canadian CED Network

Background

Since its creation in 1971, Operation Come Home (formerly known as Operation Go Home) has been working to help homeless and street-involved youth in the Ottawa area. Operation Come Home has created a unique approach that allows the youth accessing their programs to engage in a wide range of meaningful education and employment opportunities.

Through their 'Works' and 'Matters' programs, Operation Come Home has found a way to assist homeless and at-risk youth in an individual and personal manner. 'Works' programs include BeadWorks, BottleWorks, Buy Your Beau's Online (B.Y.B.O), Finance Matters, Housing Works, the Job Action Centre, Jobs Matter, re: Purpose, and the Rogers Achievement Centre. The 'Works' programs often provide paid opportunities for youth and support them in gaining knowledge or experience through education and employment.



Operation Come Home and the re: Purpose storefront

Last year alone, the Job Action Centre helped over 36 youth find jobs with a wide variety of employers, including two of Operation Come Home's social enterprises: BottleWorks and Beadworks. Alternatively, 'Matters' programs, such as Reunite, the Drop-In, Outreach, and Health Matters, focus on increasing quality of life and are often a first point of contact for youth. Every year the Drop-in and Resource Centre provides services that assist over 150 local youth in accessing basic

needs, while the Reunite Program was able to help 70 young people between the ages of 16-19 return to their families in 2011.

New Directions at Operation Come Home

With an extensive background in social enterprise and working with homeless populations, Executive Director, Elspeth McKay, came to Operation Come Home almost five years ago because of her desire to work with youth again. McKay believes that there is great potential for youth to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty. When asked about her personal philosophy on what should be done about youth homelessness, McKay asserted, “my philosophy around social work in general is to work from an employment and education first model. Work and school are the way out of homelessness”. Like many urban centres, Ottawa faces the persistent problem of youth homelessness. McKay estimates that there are between 300-400 homeless youth on the streets of the city every night. The limited number of emergency shelter beds and transitional housing units available for youth do not come close to meeting the needs of Ottawa’s street involved youth.

Operation Come Home has grown dramatically since McKay became Executive Director in 2007. There has been a great increase in program diversification and options for youth. The organizational annual budget has also increased from less than half a million dollars to almost 1.5 million dollars. McKay explained “you go through a lot of growing pains when you develop that quickly”.



Youth working on BeadWorks projects

Rather than using the traditional more clinical orientation, McKay sees work and education as the key. With a wealth of experience in developing social enterprises, McKay brought the concept to Operation Come Home. She recognized social enterprise as an opportunity to engage clients and staff in a new manner, while at the same time being a means to increase organizational sustainability.

When asked to describe social enterprise in her own words, McKay simply states, “social enterprise is a business with a social mandate...That can be a nonprofit that is using their expertise to sell products and services and putting the profit back into the mission...It may be engaging a marginalized population to provide them with work opportunities”. What McKay emphasizes is that there needs to be a balance

between social and financial return on investment and those profits must be re-invested in the enterprise or returned to the parent organization.

Growing through Diversification and Innovation

Operation Come Home currently runs four unique social enterprises designed specifically to promote youth employment: Beadworks, BottleWorks, Buy Your Beau's Online, and Re-Purpose. BottleWorks, for example, is a commercial bottle pick-up service currently holding contracts with 75 local restaurants, bars, hotels, and conference facilities in Ottawa. The enterprise employs and trains youth for periods of 12 weeks at a time, giving them valuable work experience along with access to social supports.



Display at re: Purpose

More recently, Operation Come Home transformed the front of its 150 Gloucester Street location in downtown Ottawa to become the re: Purpose storefront. re: Purpose is a shop that sells products that are made by at risk and homeless youth at Operation Come Home, other social enterprises, and local artisans. There is an evident emphasis on showcasing products that use recycled materials and that are created by young people.



Working at re: Purpose

In fact, many of products being sold been created by youth in the BeadWorks program, which allows youth to create their own unique lines of jewelry or one of Operation Come Home's signature lines. On December 6th, 2012, re: Purpose hosted a shopping party, which gave customers the opportunity to meet the talented youth and local artisans who sell their pieces in the store.

One of the main benefits of using social enterprise as a means of training and employing is the feeling of empowerment it provides to its employees. All of Operation Come Home's social enterprises involve youth in a wide variety of business practices, including administration, inventory, sales,

branding, product development, marketing and accounting - encouraging them to learn new skills and regain ownership over their own lives in the process.

The success of Operation Come Home's entrepreneurial activities is widely acknowledged. The organization recently won the 2012 Youth Social Entrepreneur Award for outstanding commitment through socially responsible activities. The success and continued expansion of Operation Come Home's social enterprises can also be attributed to the organization's commitment to staying ahead of the curve by looking for underdeveloped sectors and identifying niche markets. McKay notes, "BottleWorks is the only one of its kind and same with Buy Your Beau's Online. Re-Purpose is the only space in Ottawa that provides retail space for social enterprises". Operation Come Home observes consumer demand in the Ottawa area and responds by linking enterprises and customers to one another. Considerable work has also gone into developing private and corporate partnerships, which are integral to the growth and development of the social enterprises.

Recently, there has been a lot of discussion within and outside of the nonprofit sector in regards to nonprofit organizations intentionally generating profits through business like activities. When asked about her opinion on this issue, McKay states, "I believe that nonprofits operate like businesses anyway and to stay afloat you need to engage. The only difference is that nonprofits offer social support. There is nothing wrong with nonprofits earning their own way instead of relying on tax dollars". This is exemplified in the case of BottleWorks. While BottleWorks received funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation for start-up and development costs, it has become incredibly financially viable and will continue to operate successfully even after its funding ends this year.

Conclusion

Operation Come Home is helping to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty through an innovative approach that truly empowers youth to take ownership over increasing their quality of life. While a work and employment first model is key to Operation Come Home, the organization has flourished through visionary leadership and an emphasis on expansion by diversification. Namely, diversification of income streams for the organization and programming options for youth. By looking to what matters and what works for Ottawa's street involved youth and by leveraging the resources and strengths of the organization and larger community, Operation Come Home is leading the way in helping young people overcome whatever barriers they face in order to reach their greatest potential.