

Inner-City Co-ops, Crafted by Women

By Louise Champagne

Winnipeg's troubled inner city is home to two striking examples of a rare breed of social enterprise: those that are financially independent, staffed and owned by local residents, and long-lived. To top it off, most of the worker-owners of both these firms are women.

Neechi Foods Co-op, a full-service grocery store, emerged out of a re-awakening of Aboriginal identity and a desire for renewed self-determination within the Aboriginal community of Winnipeg's North End. During the 1990s, unemployment, abandoned housing, drug dealing, prostitution and other gang activities became rife in the neighbourhood. Yet these were also the formative years of Neechi. Although commercial survival has been often maintained by a very narrow margin, Neechi has never received an operating subsidy. Part of the reason lies in Neechi's enduring commitment and connection to its broader community.

Now in its sixteenth year, with six full-time and six part-time employees, Neechi produces fresh bannock and deli products, and sells Aboriginal specialty foods and books, in addition to groceries.

Its impact goes well beyond employment, skill development, and business ownership. Neechi workers subsidize a "kids-only" fruit basket at the front counter, sell tobacco for ceremonial purposes only, run a diabetes awareness program and a neighbourhood walking club. They have organized two community dry socials, promote high-nutrition specialties such as wild rice, wild blue berries, and freshwater fish. They market the crafts of Aboriginal artisans and have helped to initiate neighbourhood patrols and community policing.

The worker co-op model has provided collective entrepreneurial opportunities for individuals who otherwise would have had very little chance of ever becoming business owner-operators. In turn, the opportunity for "raised poor" Aboriginal women to develop business understanding and leadership skills has contributed to wider personal and community benefits.



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The story of The Northern Star Worker Co-op is different in detail, but similar in message. Co-op members use industrial sewing machines to manufacture uniquely designed and quilted Star Blankets and other items.

The origins of Northern Star go as far back as 1989, to a social and cultural program of an inner-city women's resource centre. Eventually, the sponsoring agency managed to obtain substantial private and public grants to turn these activities into a commercial enterprise. But after a few years the funding ran out and the heavily subsidized project ended. In the hope of keeping their jobs and craft alive, however, five employees of the star blanket enterprise boldly went on to incorporate as an independent, worker co-op.

Following a tough start, the fledgling cooperative gained a new lease on life after its members sought advice from a co-op development support project at Assiniboine Credit Union. Assiniboine helped the co-op to implement realistic pricing and financial controls, develop market focus, and acquire a life-line loan secured by the Jubilee Fund, an inter-faith community loan fund. Assiniboine and the Jubilee Fund also helped to plug managerial gaps with mentorship support. The Mennonite Central Committee arranged for a volunteer placement to help with sales and marketing. The

Co-op is now gearing up to take its cultural heritage products into new market segments.

In the meantime, at Northern Star as at Neechi, the social motivation and community-mindedness that are embedded in their product and in their collectivity run as strong as ever. ■

LOUISE CHAMPAGNE is an owner-member of Neechi Foods Co-op and a happy customer of Northern Star Worker Co-operative. For further information, contact Neechi 204-586-3798 or Northern Star 204-944-1440 or louisechampagne@mts.net. (top) The shop floor at Northern Star and (bottom) at Neechi Foods. Photos: Assiniboine Credit Union.