



HAND IN GLOVE COMMUNITY CO-OP INC

Sewing With a Purpose - A Newcomer Co-op Model



Who is Hand in Glove Community Co-op?

An Interview with Wendy Petersen

Hand in Glove Community Co-op Inc. is a community service cooperative in Brandon and Westman with the intent to provide employment opportunities and skills training to those facing barriers to employment. They exist to improve the quality of life in their communities through the spirit of cooperation. They consist of 50 members who do this by serving and creating opportunities in the community, giving their time, growing their abilities and helping those realize their full potential, and leading others by inspiring them to give, serve, and grow. Members will learn about sewing, marketing, retail sales, and how working together as a team can be for the betterment of themselves as well as the community. Hand in Glove Community Co-op Inc is comprised of newcomers, hutterites, volunteers and board members. It was created through the combined efforts of Wendy Petersen of Community Futures Westman, Greenacres Colony from Wawanesa, St. Matthews Cathedral and a dedicated group of volunteers.

With several volunteers from the community including Green Acres Colony from Wawanesa, the program is showing tremendous growth and is changing members lives. Each week members build hard and soft employable skills and produce products for resale and are learning the value of the co-op model. 'Sew Happy!' is the first social enterprise to be launched under the new co-op. It has been running since May of 2019 and attendance each week had been averaging 10 women, men and youth.

Co-op for Newcomers

Initiation & Purpose

"The journey begins when I started working with Aurora," explained Wendy. "There was project in Winnipeg going on where a lady was bringing in newcomers and sewing handbags with them. I thought to myself, could I do something similar? So I gathered a small group of acquaintances - newcomers, those who worked in the newcomer community and the Hutterite community. We all had the common interest to help the newcomers through private sponsorship. We got together and had a discussion on what we could do. I started to talk to some of the newcomers in the community and asked what they thought about a weekly sewing program where we could come together and make products to re-sell in the community. It was not long after that I went to the Hutterite colony and asked if the women would be willing to come in and work with the newcomers. They were on board right away. When they were invested, they were invested. 4-5 Hutterite women every Saturday came in to help our participants. What really surprised me was that initially we thought we would do this for women, but it actually turned out that it became a youth driven program. Ages 10-25. They were the main participants who came every Saturday and produced amazing products."

At the start of the Co-op, they began producing bread-bags for baguettes. These bags would leave your bread fresh for 2-3 days longer than without. A local bakery in town started to carry and sell the bags. The idea of the co-op was that the members, who were mostly children in this specific project, would produce the products and would receive 50% of the income while the other 50% would go straight back into the cooperative to keep them supplied. "It's amazing to see the growth and confidence in the youth - in everything they produce. This is how our program got the name 'Sew Happy.' On every product the youth would attach a card explaining their situation - how they came to Canada, where they are from and what they love about the country. So for the person who buys the bread bag, it's a product you bought that you know makes a difference while you get to hear an important story."

In addition, the co-op is an opportunity for newcomers to foster hard and soft skills and gain confidence. It was an overwhelming feeling of "yes" from the newcomers to start the co-op. So, sewing machines started to get donated from the community. There were so many machines donated that the co-op couldn't even keep up with picking all of them up. St Mathews Cathedral in Brandon lent the co-op their space to leave our stuff set up - it was the perfect location as many of the newcomers lived close by.



The Power of a Cooperative

Giving a Voice to Newcomers

Ownership is the biggest difference in being a co-op, explains Wendy. "I instill this in the newcomers every time we meet. It's not me telling them what products we should be choosing, but them. As a co-op, we encourage them to bring their own cultural crafts and ideas to share with the others. I think sometimes we don't give newcomers or immigrants enough credit to the co-op model. Most importantly, the co-op always instills that the potential of the enterprise is driven from the members. This is your co-op, these are your decisions. How someone sees this co-op is how you want it to be seen. For example, the members take their earnings and most often invest it back into their own families. Like, oh what are you going to spend your money on? Well, my little brother needs a new pair of shoes for school."

Many newcomers have already been exposed to a co-op model before arriving to Canada. "I think there is a real desire amongst newcomers and immigrants to work cooperatively towards a goal. Our next goal as a co-op would be towards working on a multicultural catering co-op." This is currently being done in Calgary, a catering company known as EthniCity. EthniCity is a social enterprise where they offer a 10 week training program to bring newcomers in and train them on all aspects from buying groceries to serving meals and everything in-between. They are able to walk away with a Food Safety certificate that they can use for future employment. Their menu is extremely diverse, consisting of everything from simsoas to injera, and many others. They do corporate events, lunch-ins and a lot more.

Hand in Glove Co-op is always looking at new ways to incorporate needed business opportunities. For example, this could consist of doing nice bead work or sewing scarves for hijabs. Traditional clothes in Canada are very expensive, so the co-op wants to encourage these ideas to their members as a potential business opportunity where a group of women or youth could start making clothes or beads for their own community. As explained by Wendy, there has been some challenges brought on by the pandemic: "When COVID hit, we haven't been able to meet. We are trying to bring the sewing machines to the members homes now. When COVID hit we went into a different mode, but we produced over 2000 face masks with the huterrite colonies. These were produced for our health care communities, homeless shelters and people who were vulnerable. So our focus shifted during this time."

