

VILLAGE CO-OP OF CARE (IN DEVELOPMENT)

It Takes a Village to Raise a Child



Little Stars PLAYhouse (68183 Selkirk Ave)

Who is Village Co-op of Care?

An Interview with Judith Harris

The Manitoba Cooperative Association had the pleasure of interviewing Judith Harris, professor of Urban and Inner-City Studies at the University of Winnipeg and co-founder of Village Co-op of Care who discussed the current development of their co-op and the participatory methods they have been implementing while designing their business model.

This cooperative initiative in Winnipeg's north end is focused on creating a safe and caring neighbourhood for families and suggests a return to the traditional village where it takes a village to raise a child. Indigenous grandmothers who take on many tasks related to caring for both their children and their children's children, by pooling resources, can support each other and the community. They hope to locate the Village Co-op at the Little Stars PLAYhouse since the families behind the Child Care are the families behind the Village Co-op. The initiative of establishing a Village Co-op is a way of reclaiming community functions in the inner city. Caregivers accompanying their children to North End Stay and Play (NESP) over the past 10 years, have benefited from new friendships and capacity-building where once they experienced the exclusion and isolation that characterizes lives lived in poverty. Against the backdrop of historic exploitation of the original peoples of the Hudson Bay Basin, where vast amounts of wealth were repatriated by fur merchants to England, they present an opportunity for reclaiming community.

Co-op Initiation

The First Stages of Development

Village Co-op of Care is an idea that stemmed from a group of families who have been going to NESP, a program that has taken place in the north end of Winnipeg for around 10 years. This program brought caregivers and their children together to play, learn, and develop relationships in the community. "This program was initiated by Gerrie Prymak, who is a former elementary school teacher in the north end," explains Judith. "Her feeling was that it's important to have the caregivers there with the young children. This was for children 0-5 years old." Gerrie and the NESP caregivers came up with the idea that NESP would transition into a new space at the Little Stars PLAYhouse, a provincially-operated childcare centre.

"The community members told Gerrie 'why do we have to be moving around all the time? Why can't we have a playhouse that would be just for us?'" explains Judith. The Playhouse is currently being built on Selkirk Avenue. "It's a different kind of childcare space because its going to have space for caregivers and is very culturally appropriate. Members could be an aunt, uncle, grandmother or whomever. These are the people who are interested in the co-op – the families. They needed a way of meeting all their needs, especially child care in the north end."

Judith explained a specific example of why childcare was at the heart of the development of the co-op. "One example of this was when a mother had to take one of her children to the hospital. The 12 year old looking after the kids at home got nervous and went to Ma Mawi Wi Chi Ita Centre. So, Ma Mawi was concerned that a 12 year old was left alone and frightened. So, we thought that was one of the most essential services that the co-op could provide." Co-op of Care intends to offer other services such as transportation, housekeeping, fixing things in the house, plumbing, etc. "Our thoughts around providing these services are things you used to be able to do in the community. Back in the day, you knew people in the community and you could trade these things very easily. We are bringing together a group of people who you can go to, who you trusted and had their criminal record checks etc."

On an operational basis, the co-op wants to offer a possible office space in the evening at their new Little Stars Playhouse. "There would be somebody at the switchboard, kind of a dispatcher, who could match with people who can provide services. The co-op would be one where you would have workers and consumers, otherwise known as a multi-stakeholder co-op. You would have people that would be willing to barter these services, or we could have a good wage, around \$13-14 an hour to pay people."



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The Right Model

Co-op Development from a Participatory Bottom-up Approach

Judith explained the importance of choosing a co-op model. "We've had many meetings on this at Merchants Corner with a number of people who see it as the right kind of model. One of the people who's been involved in helping us is Virginia Hunter, who was a member of Front Step Research Workers Co-op. That co-op was operating for 7 years so Virginia and others have learnt quite a bit about how a co-op can effectively function and the challenges that are involved. The key reason for choosing a co-op was that a number of the people involved are Indigenous. Virginia always reminds us that the first co-ops were really Indigenous communities. There are a number of people who see that the values of the co-op are similar to the values that are at the heart of a traditional Indigenous community. People understand how this model works."

"Another strength of the co-op model is that people are already doing it. COVID has demonstrated how a cooperative community is needed, how people hold these basic values, and we are recognizing this again during the pandemic. COVID has revealed the strength of a community and how communities are extremely important. Cooperative values are strong at the community level. The people who have been meeting over the past 2-3 years, they believe in this model and are committed to it. They have a relationship because a lot of the families went to North End Stay and Play. The women who are involved in this deeply care about their community. There is a massive strength in that. The hope is that we can be together face to face soon."



'In terms of development,' says Judith, 'we're going to start small at the Pritchard McGregor neighbourhood level. Because then we can further develop those relationships, and a sense of trust can develop for those who are involved. It's a gradual process. We have a very grounded approach. But of course, the financial side of it is what we're figuring out at this point.'

The co-op has one central person who has been doing a survey of people in the neighborhood to ask them if they have an interest in a program like this - giving them the idea that the community can reclaim the functions they once had. 'These types of surveys don't have to be done by professionals,' says Judith, 'we can do this very accurately and safely. But, we found that a lot of the people who were surveyed said that they wanted more information on this project. So, through accessing some funds, we will be able to hold an information workshop. This is how we think of slowly giving people the information that they want to have and bringing together a group to define what this co-op would look like. One of the problems is that people in the north end don't have access to internet or computers, so all of this is kind of slowing things down. People are really keen on this idea and we believe that the space component will be solved by the new Little Stars Play House. This space can be used in the evening for various things. Our hope is that we get to the point where we know it's viable.'

The co-op has also made external contacts in Italy to help guide their co-op decision making. 'We zoomed with a PHD student Michel Bianci who is studying community cooperatives. He did his PHD on cases of community co-ops in Italy and these co-ops seemed to have a similar objective driven by a community's needs.' Moving forward, the co-op will base its values on the seven sacred teachings as seen below. For Village Co-op of Care, it is clear that its Indigenous values are at the heart.

CO-OP VALUES

based on the
SEVEN SACRED TEACHINGS
(E. Isaac)

PHYSICAL

making sure the children are feeling well and are safe

COGNITIVE

- ensuring the children learn about what they are interested in and are exposed to diverse topics and information

SPIRITUAL

- asking where the children fit in this great universe
- asking with their great imaginative and creative impulses, what can they see that adults can't?

PERSONHOOD

- ensuring the children have a good sense of who they are and where they have come from (hair colour, eye colour, culture, family connections)

RELATIONAL

- understanding their connections (parents, friendships, community)

LOVE

- showing and demonstrating love in a visible, emotional, physical genitive, and spiritual way and without conditions



SERVICES

Child Minding
Housekeeping
Household Fix-up
Transportation
Laundry
Providing Cheap Essentials
Community Kitchen
Breadmaking

COMPENSATION

Our members need services and will also be workers providing services. Services may be provided in return for cash (our rate of pay is \$15/hour). Or services can be bartered.

CO-OP PRINCIPLE!

Source from ONCOOP

1ST:

All are welcome. No pressure.
No discrimination.

2ND:

One member = One vote

3RD:

No free rides. All members contribute equitably.

4TH:

Self-control. There are no parents.

5TH:

SHARE, LEARN, GROW. We will train, educate one another.

6TH:

Co-ops help co-ops.
Together Everyone Achieves More.

7TH:

Concern for community.
We build strong communities toward sustainable development.