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“Generation X” Takes Control

Youth-operated Social Service Organizations

At a time when economic uncertainty and decreasing government revenues have placed the welfare state in crisis, many young people are founding non-profit organizations. Based on public-private partnerships, these initiatives are increasingly characterizing social services in the 1990s.

by Erin Wright

The impact of the state of the economy on the prospects for today's youth has been deliberated *ad nauseam*. And contrary to popular Generation X stereotyping—that people in their twenties are self-absorbed, directionless and lack a work ethic because of a childhood polluted with technology and material excess—there are many young adults who are refusing to accept passively the dismal economic picture. Despite the fact that Canadian youth continue to face economic uncertainty, many young people have chosen community service and aiding others as a unique and entrepreneurial way of helping themselves.

“Citizenship has responsibilities as well as rights”

Socrates

Nineties-style social welfare

The idealism which surrounded Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's 1960s social policy initiatives and popular faith in the welfare state has virtually disappeared. Although Trudeau's initiatives won mass appeal at the time, it is clear that his social spending scheme was over-ambitious.

During the past few decades, Canadians have become accustomed to an exten-

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sive government social safety net which helps to ensure that basic needs are met. The recession, however, is forcing many social welfare services to look for alternate funding methods as the government's purse strings draw tighter.

In the 1990s, the combination of an aging population relying on an inadequate tax base has forced Canadians to confront the reality of over-extended services—such as health care—no longer able to meet demand. A flailing economy and high unemployment means that fewer people are paying into the system while more people are withdrawing from it. With a growing number of service organizations forced to look

for alternatives, the trend towards privatization to compensate for these cutbacks has been almost inevitable.

Youth-initiated non-profit organizations

Recently, youth-operated social service organizations have proliferated and are meeting present social and economic challenges with new funding strategies, management styles, and youthful idealism. While these initiatives can be seen merely as vehicles for self-employment or personal achievement, these organizations are nevertheless having a positive impact on young people's attitudes about the importance of a healthy community.

Forced out of traditional industries

because of dwindling jobs, many young people are creating their own opportunities by focusing on social development. While differing in approach, all organizations refer to their youth, energy and ingenuity as being instrumental to their success. These same Gen X-ers, burdened with the image of having a poor work ethic and no direction, may just be the ones repairing the national psyche and regenerating a lost sense of community. Perhaps, then, they embody the ultimate Gen X *raison d'être*: following one's heart to meaningful work, rather than just "getting a job."

Serve Canada

"Serve Canada combines private funding and youthful energy to meet local community needs."

Just over one year old, Toronto-based Serve Canada was inspired by City Year in the the U.S. City Year, a type of urban youth corps, began in Boston and now operates in over ten cities across the United States, and was a model for President Clinton's national youth service program. Whereas City Year operates as a three-way partnership with government, community agencies, and private sources to support the project, Serve Canada does not have any government assistance (although the organizers envision a model similar to the City Year partnership eventually).

Cynthia Godsoe, a 23-year-old from Toronto who recently completed a degree in Social Studies at Harvard University, founded Serve Canada along with fellow-Canadian and Harvard colleague Hugh Silk, 26, and social-work student Maria Muir, 24. Godsoe was intrigued by how different the social service environment is in the U.S.: whereas Canadians are used to government services, corporations in the U.S. are accustomed to contributing to the community to compensate for the relative lack of state welfare.

Although Godsoe admits that there are problems with the American system, she says that because of Canada's cut-backs partnerships between government, private interests, and other community agencies are the most realistic approach. Godsoe also believes that having private funding "makes organizations more efficient because they are forced to prove

themselves year after year."

Serve Canada's program responds to the problems of homelessness, drug abuse, gang violence, and youth delinquency in Toronto. According to Statistics Canada, only 11 percent of all social service done in Canada is performed by those under the age of 25. Serve Canada's goal is to harness the energy and enthusiasm of the city's youth—from high school drop-outs to university graduates—in order to confront these challenges.



"Setting examples through action": tree planting with the Evergreen Foundation. [Evergreen Foundation]

A primary function of the organization is fulfilled by teams of eight members and two leaders who work in various service projects around Toronto for eight months of the year, with one day a week dedicated to education and career planning. For example, team members may work either in elementary schools as teacher's aids and running after-school programs, at the Daily Bread Food Bank sorting food, or conducting visits through the Ontario Paraplegic Association to assist people in their homes.

Godsoe says she wanted to start the program "to show that it could be done. I

was sick of the Gen X stereotype depicting our generation as lazy and despondent."

Serve Canada, like many other private social service organizations, was initiated by people who benefit from a degree of financial security. Godsoe attributes the surge of youth initiated non-profits to people with affluent upbringings wanting to give something back. "The people who have the most privilege also have the most responsibility...it's time for individuals to realize what their responsibility is..."

The Evergreen Foundation

On a different track from Serve Canada, the Evergreen Foundation is "dedicated to preserving and restoring natural areas in the urban environment through education and action projects."

Kevin McLaughlin, 27, is one principle organizer of the Evergreen Foundation, a three-and-a-half-year old organization which initiates tree planting projects around Toronto, coordinates school ground naturalization schemes, and produces educational material.

"People of older generations are not at all living up to their responsibility...(T)hey advocate teaching younger generations about the environment, meanwhile they are doing all the consuming," says McLaughlin. Although he remains outspoken about issues which concern him, McLaughlin asserts that he is no longer cynical about the system in general. "I'm more worried about things I'm directly involved in...cynicism is self-defeating after a while." Instead, he believes in improving society by "setting examples through action."

McLaughlin says the main reason for the surge of youth initiated non-profit groups is the availability of one key resource—labor. Furthermore, he feels that many young people are unsure of what they want to do. Starting up a non-profit requires a certain "entrepreneurial element" which also satisfies young people's desire to make their mark in society.

Discussing his own funding difficulties, McLaughlin explains that because Serve Canada is a support organization—providing volunteers which assist service groups in fulfilling their mandates—they are in a good position to market them-



A Generation 2000 theatrical production encouraging young people to become involved in national and local issues. [Generation 2000]

selves to potential financiers. Funders want to feel they are part of a team of supporters: “‘partnerships’ is a buzz word in this business today.” Particularly frustrating is the fact that many funding sources are wary of new organizations, and “want organizations which are created to support existing needs, existing programs.”

McLaughlin, who graduated in 1989 with a degree in commerce from Ontario’s Queen’s University, says his motivation came from recent examples of “idealism” in business. He refers to *The Body Shop*, which began by not testing its products on animals and now supports numerous social causes, and *Ben and Jerry’s* ice cream, who promotes environmental causes, as models of businesses “with a social component to them.”

Like many soul-searching Gen X-ers, McLaughlin refers to the “emptiness” in many careers, making him question the energy people put into a job and what they get out of it personally. “Everybody wants to change the world,” says McLaughlin,



Making a difference where you can: kids participate in an Evergreen school grounds naturalization scheme. [Evergreen Foundation]

who also suggests that perhaps his generation is experiencing “‘throw back’ idealism of the 1960s,” because, like the youth of that generation, “we grew up being allowed to dream.”

McLaughlin also concurs that he has had tremendous opportunities in life: he and his partners Lindsey Taylor and Geoff Cape had to invest in Evergreen

themselves by working for free and living with their parents. He mimicked the words of Peter Dawglish, founder of the Toronto-based development organization Street Kids International, who questions “if people from privileged backgrounds aren’t going to change the world or at least be willing to try, then who is?”

Generation 2000

The future can only get better “if you create a strong generation of young people now,” says 27-year-old Robert Barnard, founder of Generation 2000. He explains that Generation 2000’s goal is to encourage young people to strive actively to make their communities better places to live. In a sense, Barnard believes in taking a bottom-up approach to solving social ills: problems of violence, substance abuse, suicide, jobs, teenage pregnancy, AIDS, and the environment are manifestations of root causes such as boredom, alienation, powerlessness, and fear of the future. “If someone feels powerless, why should they wear a condom?” Barnard asks. Instead, he advocates spending more time helping young people with esteem and control.

Generation 2000’s main event is a cross-Canada tour, with participants from a diverse cross-section of society. They each provide a portion of their travelling expenses; the rest comes from Generation 2000’s fund raising efforts and some

government assistance. The participants are placed into groups who lead workshops in schools and community centers across the country to inspire youth to take a more proactive social role. The “action teams” which emerge are hooked into a national Action Network which is facilitated by Generation 2000 and provides information and advice on planning and acting out an idea. They advise groups to use the resources in their community, seek professional advice and involve parents.

A conservation established in Northern Manitoba is the product of one such group, aided by Generation 2000, “that wanted to do something.” Barnard believes that among youth today “the big issue is boredom...they want to be contributing and TV isn’t doing it any more.”

When Barnard embarked on Generation 2000, he had no idea he was starting up a charity organization. Barnard calls it a “benefit” that they did not know how to do anything: the more you know, the less flexible you are willing to be. “The premise was to create an amazing generation—everything else filtered down.”

A new generation: building “we” from “me”?

While “state responsibility” is the essence of Canada’s welfare concept, current trends towards public-private partnerships are establishing new notions of “individual responsibility.” Ironically, privatization seems to be encouraging a renewed sense of community by forcing organizations to make their services more accountable to financiers and encouraging people to donate their time rather than money.

Although there are fewer jobs available in the marketplace for young adults, there is no lack of work to be done, as youth non-profit organizations are quick to demonstrate. Working in community development can be personally rewarding. It also allows young people to be productive and help others, while acquiring skills and work experience.

Privileged enough to be able to dream, in a sense these Gen X-ers represent the ultimate stereotype of the romantic seeking personal fulfillment rather than a large salary. However, as such youth organizations grow in number, scope and accomplishment, it is difficult not to share their mood of pride and optimism for the possibilities of the future. ●