



## Common Ground Co-operative

Since 2000, Common Ground has quietly been starting and supporting successful social enterprises that offer a bold new way to empower a marginalized population. Specifically, Common Ground provides educational programs, workshops and self-employment opportunities for a commonly stigmatized and undervalued group of amazing people: adults with Autism, Down Syndrome, Dual Diagnosis (mental health/developmental disability) and acquired developmental disabilities. Later this year, Common Ground has plans to help others replicate the unique co-op's success.

Common Ground Co-operative was created to support a woman named Cathy who had grown tired of menial jobs with token pay. She wanted to create her own business, and with a partnership of parents and community members, created the Lemon & Allspice Cookery. Soon after, this group founded Common Ground Co-operative to help other people with developmental disabilities who worked at Lemon & Allspice. Today, the unique multi-stakeholder membership (of staff, the board of directors, clients and others) is over 120 strong. 70 of those members are individuals with disabilities—called business partners—who now experience a sense of ownership and pride by working in five separate social enterprises. Almost 15 years later Cathy's entrepreneurial spirit is still strong. She continues to work four days per week, and is proud that her dream has transformed the lives of so many individuals. Cathy's mom, Carolyn Lemon, is a champion of the co-operative movement and has recently graduated from the Ontario Co-operative Association's Co-op Management Certificate Program.

This dynamic multi-stakeholder co-operative encourages the individuals they support to learn and grow in five social enterprise settings: Lemon & Allspice Wholesale Bakery and Catering Company; three Coffee Sheds (independent coffee kiosks); CleanABLE Toy Sanitation Company; and a Coffee Shed satellite that operates at George Brown College's St. James Campus.

Although the enterprises supported by Common Ground Co-operative are individually registered businesses, the business partners share in up to 40% of the sales revenues generated each month. The business partners have a say in any business decisions that are made and can vote on whether to accept or remove someone from their partnership. Executive Director Jennifer Hope explains that "We're promoting autonomy and independence, and using the co-op model to guide these partner businesses".

"The social co-op structure is much different than the worker co-op structure", says Jennifer Hope. "Our yearly membership fee is \$25.00, and the return comes in knowing that you have contributed to helping us provide much-needed support."



Common Ground's staff team is made of up 9 Job Coaches, a Foundations Skills & Training Co-ordinator and two full time Administrative Staff (Executive Director & Accountant) who are partially funded by the Ministry of Community and Social Services to provide support. The remainder of the Co-op's revenues are raised through fundraising initiatives such as events, grants, foundations, donations and co-op memberships. Common Ground is a registered charity.

This year, Common Ground is launching fee-for-service programs. Programs like Self Awareness and Financial Literacy will be available to persons with developmental disabilities and providers, and are designed to generate enough revenue to become self -sustaining. The co-op is also working tirelessly to complete a Replication Guide so others may create similar services within their own communities. They hope the project will be completed in the fall of 2013.

In 2012, Common Ground Co-operative was recognized by the Canadian Federation of Health Care Co-operatives for their positive contribution to the social determinants of health. Common Ground Co-operative has proven that an inclusive, supportive, anti-oppressive and barrier free environment in which to learn and grow (even as adults), has a positive impact on the quality of life that each person experiences.

*Common Ground Co-operative is a Supporter member of the Ontario Co-operative Association.*

To find out more about Common Ground Co-operative, visit [www.commongroundco-op.ca](http://www.commongroundco-op.ca)

To donate visit <http://www.canadahelps.org/CharityProfilePage.aspx?charityID=s93438>

