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## WILLOW SPRINGS CREATIVE CENTRE CASE STUDY REPORT

JANUARY 2015

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Citation: Ferguson, M., Frecha, L., & Herzog, C. (2015). *Willow Springs Creative Centre case study report*. Guelph, ON: Institute for Community Engaged Scholarship. <https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/handle/10214/8902>



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WILLOW SPRINGS CREATIVE CENTRE

We would like to acknowledge various types of assistance from Judi Vinni and the staff and partners of the Willow Springs Creative Centre; as well as Paul Chamberlain at the Canadian CED Network.



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## SUMMARY

The overarching goal of this series of case studies is to capture the stories of three operating rural social enterprises in Ontario. This includes the development, organizational models, successes, challenges, and outcomes of each. *Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre* (Ingersoll), *Willow Springs Creative Centre* (Thunder Bay) and the *Aron Theatre Co-operative Inc.* (Campbellford) were chosen as three key social enterprises in the province with unique models, objectives, and impact. Fusion is an organization that manages three social enterprises focusing on youth engagement, empowerment, skills, and entrepreneurial development. Willow Springs supports community development through opportunities for creative expression. This case study focuses on the *Willow Springs Creative Centre*, which aims to become a “sustainable cultural hub” for its community, and showcases an innovative co-operative enterprise model.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Overview of the Literature</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Methods</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Primary data collection.....	6
Secondary data collection.....	7
Data analysis.....	7
Limitations of the Study.....	7
<b>Results/Findings</b> .....	<b>7</b>
History and Development of Willow Springs Creative Centre.....	8
Organizational Structure.....	10
• The Willow Springs Team.....	12
• Organizational Tree.....	13
Resources at Use in the Willow Springs Model.....	14
• Grants.....	14
• Partnerships.....	15
• Revenue Generation.....	15
• Other Resources.....	16
• Summary of Resources & Expenses in 2014.....	16
Successes of the Willow Springs Model.....	17
Challenges of the Willow Springs Model.....	18
Outcomes and Impacts of Willow Springs Creative Centre.....	19
Lessons Learned from Willow Springs Creative Centre.....	20
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	<b>21</b>



## INTRODUCTION

The overarching goal of this series of case studies is to capture the stories of three operating rural social enterprises in Ontario. This includes the development, organizational models, successes, challenges, and outcomes of each. *Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre* (Ingersoll), *Willow Springs Creative Centre* (Thunder Bay) and the *Aron Theatre Co-operative Inc.* (Campbellford) were chosen as three key social enterprises in the province with unique models, objectives, and impact. Fusion is an organization that manages three social enterprises focusing on youth engagement, empowerment, as well as life skills and entrepreneurial development. Willow Springs supports community development through opportunities for creative expression, and the Aron Theatre Co-operative aims to be a “sustainable cultural hub” for its community (Aron Theatre Co-operative Inc., 2014).

This case study focuses on *Willow Springs Creative Centre*. This social enterprise is unique for the diversity of programs it offers, its focus on inclusivity and accessibility, and the range of resources it uses.

## OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There is growing attention on social enterprises broadly and rural social enterprises specifically. In general, social enterprises meet social needs and generate social, economic and environmental benefits (Vink, 2010). Some examples of social enterprise are co-operatives, retail stores, business training centres, employment centres, wellness centres, and farmers’ markets. Defining a *rural social enterprise* is complicated because it involves describing “rural” and “social enterprises” independently and then merging these complex concepts together. The definition of a social enterprise used in these case studies is: “a business that engages in the sale of goods and/or services to work towards an unwavering social mission” (Vink, 2010, p.6). Vink (2010) notes that this is a “proven model for meeting community needs unmet by the public and private sectors”, with strong rural roots in Canada (p. 6). Recent research explored the socioeconomic impact of nonprofit social enterprise across Ontario; however, there is a need for further research on the unique models, successes, and challenges of rural social enterprises in the province (Chamberlain et al., 2013; Vink, 2010). This research will inform policy recommendations and thereby support rural social enterprise development (Ontario Nonprofit Network, n.d.). This series of case studies aims to further explore the Canadian context, and more specifically the Ontario context. This



case study is intended to add to the Canadian literature on social enterprises by offering a detailed view of an organization that is successfully operating as a social enterprise in rural Ontario.

## METHODS

Case study methodology is employed due to its benefits in explaining a contemporary phenomenon within its own context where the delineation between the context and phenomenon might not be clear, and where various types of data can be used to provide a more in depth description of the phenomenon (Yin, 1994). Primary and secondary data were collected and analyzed to tell Willow Springs' story from the perspectives of various individuals involved.

### PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION

A total of twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with management and employees at Willow Springs between June 10 and June 12, 2014. The interviews aimed to determine how the social enterprise developed and how it presently operates. The interview questions were adapted from a similar research conducted in 2012 by the Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNET) and the Rural Social Enterprise Constellation (RSEC) (Ontario Nonprofit Network, n.d.). The study, including the interview tools, were approved by the University of Guelph's Research Ethics Board.

Recruitment for the interviews was completed by the Willow Springs' coordinator and administrative assistant. The interviews were conducted either on-site at Willow Springs or in the Thunder Bay area during the researchers' site visit in June 2014. The researchers participated in the interviews by asking questions and taking notes. All of the interviews were audio-recorded.

The research participants included various Willow Springs contributors: the coordinator, the food service manager, the art programs assistant, the administrative assistant, the lead artists, the gardener, two artists, two community partners, and two board members. One interview was conducted with each individual, except in the case of the food service manager and the art programs assistant, who preferred to be interviewed together. Participants represent full-time and part-time staff members, as well as external contributors.



The site visit to Willow Springs in June 2014 also included a tour of the facilities and of various locations in the Thunder Bay area where Willow Springs operates (e.g., the Ontario March of Dimes and the Dawson Court Home for the Aged). These tours provided additional information about Willow Springs' programs and relationships with community partners. During the tour of the Dawson Court Home for the Aged, there was an opportunity to watch Willow Springs' artists, coordinator, volunteers, and gardener "in action" during a workshop. Photographs and notes were collected and used to develop this case study report.

## **SECONDARY DATA COLLECTION**

Secondary data were collected from Willow Springs' website and social media pages, as well as through a general internet search to provide more context regarding Willow Springs and the communities it serves.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Notes were taken during all interviews as well as during subsequent review of audio files. All note files were subject to interpretative content analysis to sort and organize data into patterns and themes.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

One of the limitations of this case study is that only select staff members were available to be interviewed; 12 individuals participated in interviews. There may therefore be gaps in the researchers' knowledge of the operations of this social enterprise.

A second limitation of this case study is the omission of participant voices, because of limited time and resources on the researchers' part, and because the study focuses on aspects of the social enterprises that participants may not be familiar with.

Finally, all interviews and observations that informed this case study were collected over a short period of time. As a result, what is captured here may not be representative of the day-to-day reality of the organization.

## **RESULTS/FINDINGS**

Willow Springs Creative Centre is based in the community of Lappe, in Northern Ontario, approximately 20 minutes northwest of Thunder Bay (Willow Springs Creative



Centre, 2014a). Lappe is a rural community with a population of approximately 1,500 (Statistics Canada, 2012). In addition to employing and serving Lappe residents, Willow Springs works in several other communities in the Thunder Bay district, including Thunder Bay. Thunder Bay is the most populous location in Northwestern Ontario, with a population of 109,140 (City of Thunder Bay, 2014). The city is located on the North shore of Lake Superior; it is rich in natural resources and is a commercial, administrative, and medical hub for the region.

Historically, the communities of Lappe, Kaministiquia, Kivikoski, and others in the Thunder Bay area have been home to many generations of Finnish immigrants (Dallen, 1995). Many of these communities were established in the early 1900s, and grew steadily until the 1930s, as Finnish families fled political and economic instability and settled farmlands in Northern Ontario (Dallen, 1995). Lappe is one of the larger rural communities in the area and is therefore socially and culturally significant.

At present these rural, agricultural communities remain small but close-knit and take pride in their roots. Willow Springs has a significant role in this respect. As part of their objectives and activities, the Willow Springs team aims to preserve and strengthen the area's history, culture, and community through creative, nature-based activities. They contribute to community development by working alongside various individuals and groups in the area, who, in some cases, do not have access to these types of activities. This includes: youth at risk, individuals with disabilities, people who face barriers to employment, the elderly, women, etc.

## **HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF WILLOW SPRINGS CREATIVE CENTRE**

The Willow Springs Creative Centre began in the 1930s as a local farmers' cooperative and part of an international network of Finnish cooperatives. Finnish farmers who had settled in the area around Thunder Bay bought and sold food through the cooperative's store in order to avoid making long trips into the city. As a result, the store became an important gathering place and social hub for families in the area.

The cooperative went bankrupt after the Second World War, but its facilities, including the store and two acres of land, were purchased by a local family, the Koski family. The "Koski store" served Lappe and the surrounding area until the early 1980s. In their old age, the Koskis passed the facility on to their son-in-law, Thomas Law. He rented the old store out as a residence.



Finally, in 2000, four local artisans, who had been interested in expanding their art sales and instruction for some time, decided to rent the old store. The artisans were four women, Judi Vinni, Liisa Leskowski, Kathy Toivonen, and Lea Hayes; they each had different specialties, including willow furniture-making, pottery, and painting. They had a range of experiences as artists, teachers, and business owners. Together, they set up the Willow Springs Artisan Gift Store and Studio as a space where they could create and sell their own art, as well the work of other regional artists. They also wanted to offer art classes to their community (Willow Springs Creative Centre, 2014b). They named it Willow Springs as a tribute to their Finnish heritage (*sisu*; meaning flexibility, growth, and tenacity, and also characteristics of the willow tree) and to the natural landscape of the region, which served as both their inspiration and art medium (Willow Springs Creative Centre, 2014b).

In their first two years in operation, the Willow Springs women realized that their work involved more than teaching art classes. In making artistic, creative, and nature-based activities available to a community that did not typically have access to this, they were contributing to personal discovery, healing, spiritual exploration, and in turn, community development (Willow Springs Creative Centre, 2014b). They re-worked their objectives accordingly, and began to transform Willow Springs from a studio and gift store into the Willow Springs Creative Centre.

Judi took on the role of Coordinator, while Liisa became a key Board Member, and Kathy and Lea took on the role of Lead Artists. During a planning retreat, they identified their mission statement: “To promote growth through creative expression and community development (Willow Springs Creative Centre, 2014a).

They also committed to the name *Willow Springs Creative Centre* because it was inclusive of a wide range of ideas and initiatives that kept “springing up” as part of their work (J. Vinni, personal communication, June 10, 2014). These changes, in turn, helped to focus their activities and solidify their presence in the community.

The Willow Springs Creative Centre was well-received. Ten out of thirteen local women (from existing networks) agreed to join a working board, and a community of artists, volunteers, and program participants began to grow. The group began applying for funding to develop their organization.

One of their first programs was called “Artist’s Release”. This program was developed by four Aboriginal artists and four Willow Springs’ artisans to bring creative activities



and an opportunity for creative expression to women in the Thunder Bay high security district jail. It was also offered to youth in the local correction centre, as well as to men and women who had been recently released through partnerships with the John Howard Society, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Thunder Bay, and the Lutheran Community Care Street Reach. The youth component of the project was so successful at the youth correctional centre that a year round art program was established and continued for the next years. This work, its impact, and the experience they gained, allowed the Willow Springs' team and their community to "see what they were about" (J. Vinni, personal communication, June 10, 2014).

In June 2006, Willow Springs Creative Centre was incorporated as a nonprofit. In the years that followed they were able to access a few significant sources of funding. This included a United Way (UW) grant to offer free art classes to individuals living in an at-risk neighbourhood, an Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) grant to develop an accessible garden and therapeutic gardening programs, and Ontario Arts Council (OAC) operating grant. This funding helped to evolve the activities and initiatives that are currently in place.

Developing the facilities has been important to the organization's continued growth. In particular, the garden opened up the opportunity to offer horticultural therapy programs, and various food-related activities and initiatives. The organization strives to preserve the facilities' historical and cultural significance and to sustain traditional activities, including weaving, clay work, and willow furniture-making. It is important to note that since the organization was incorporated, the building and surrounding lands have been purchased. The purchase was made by family members of the Willow Springs' Coordinator in order to maintain some distance between the ownership and her role in the organization.

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

One of Willow Springs' main objectives is to contribute to community development in and around Thunder Bay. The organization follows an "assets-based approach to community development" (Willow Springs Creative Centre, 2014e). That is, they strive to recognize and build on the talents and skills of local individuals in order to enhance and empower their lives and thereby strengthen the community (Willow Springs Creative Centre, 2014e). They work towards this goal by offering three types of activities across three different areas.



Their activities are:

- Programming (e.g., workshops and classes)
- Training/life skills development
- Products and services

The areas they work in are:

- Art
- Gardening
- Food

For example, in the area of art, they offer an *Adult Inclusive Art* program for adults with disabilities in partnership with March of Dimes Canada (MOD). They also offer a series of art classes for women called *Lazy Dames of Summer*, and children's art camps. In the area of gardening, they lead a gardening program for seniors at the Dawson Court Home of the Aged called *Dawson Dirt Diggers*, and also offer horticultural therapy training. Finally, in the area of food, they have a summer farmers' market, a soup and bread Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, and food service training for young adults with disabilities. This represents only a selection of Willow Springs' work (see Figure 1 for more examples).

Gardening, food, and training components have been incorporated organically into Willow Springs' work, as they are complementary to the Centre's art and nature-based activities and the staff's interests and experience. Gardening activities have been sparked, among other things, by funding from the OTF which helped Willow Springs to develop its therapeutic and market gardens on-site. A partnership with the John Howard Society of Thunder Bay also led to the development of *Willow Springs' Creative Life Skills Kit* and training (Willow Springs Creative Centre, 2014f). Food-related activities, such as the farmers' market and the soup and bread CSA, are some of the most recent additions, prompted by a new Food Service Manager joining the team. Aside from expanding Willow Springs' work, these new additions are helping the organization to move away from grant-based funding and towards revenue-based, long-term sustainability.



### The Willow Springs Team

The Willow Springs Creative Centre's team has grown significantly over the last decade or so. Presently, it includes the following contributors:

- Coordinator
- Lead Artist
- Administrative Assistant
- Art Program Lead & Assistant Artists
- Food Service Manager
- Horticultural Therapy Trainees
- Life Skills Coaches
- Gardeners
- Students and Interns
- Volunteers
- Board
- Community Partners

Judi Vinni continues to be the Coordinator of Willow Springs and Lea Hayes, the Lead Artist. Liisa Leskowski and Kathy Toivonen are no longer directly involved with Willow Springs but remain connected to the Centre through their own work and networks. An administrative assistant, a food service manager, an art program lead and assistant artists, and a gardener have also joined Willow Springs since 2006. While each individual has some specific responsibilities, they typically share various roles ranging from program coordination, to resource development, to janitorial duties.

Programming is delivered by hired artists, those trained in horticultural therapy and life skills coaches, sometimes accompanied by students, interns, and/or volunteers. There are 10 to 16 artists, six garden program facilitators trained in horticultural therapy, and two life skills coaches on the team. They work alongside 40 to 50 volunteers, and various social work, recreation therapy, and outdoor recreation students and interns. Programs are delivered either on-site at Willow Springs or at



various locations throughout the Thunder Bay area, in partnership with other community organizations. Community partners include: the March of Dimes Canada (MOD), Dawson Court Home for the Aged, Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital (LPH), Sister Margaret Smith Centre, Community Living Thunder Bay, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Lakehead University, Confederation College, and Gorham and Ware Community School.

In addition, an external board of 6 to 12 members provides guidance on: governance, business planning and development, partnership and resource development, and program monitoring and evaluation. Aside from holding regular meetings, board members and staff have annual planning retreats during which they asses and develop the various components of the organization.

### Organizational Tree

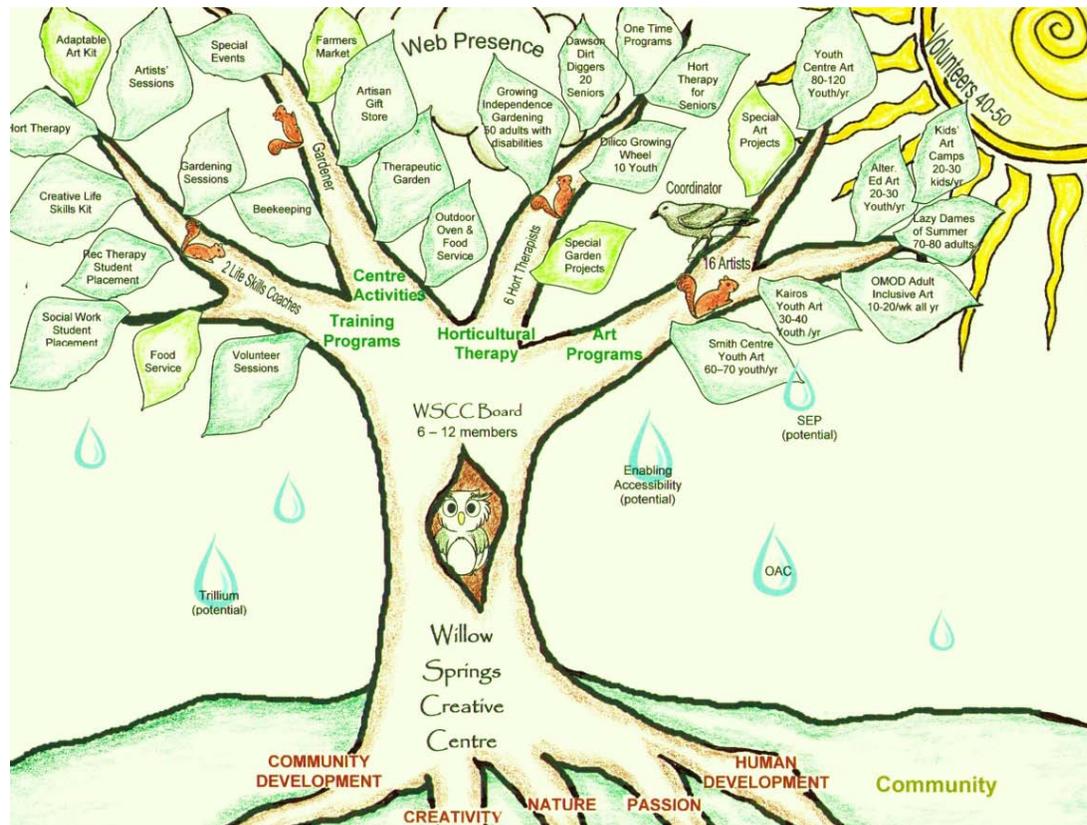


Figure 1. Willow Springs' Organizational Tree (used with permission of Willow Springs Creative Centre).



## RESOURCES AT USE IN THE WILLOW SPRINGS MODEL

In 2014, Willow Springs Creative Centre operated on an annual budget of approximately \$160,000. This includes several small and large-scale grants, partnerships with various community organizations (programming), and revenue generated from select activities. Grants and partnerships have allowed Willow Springs to set the foundation for its current activities and initiatives. As their most significant grants draw to a close, their focus has turned to revenue-generating activities and long-term sustainability.

### Grants

The largest sources of funding have been provided by the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) and the Ontario Arts Council (OAC). In 2008, they received a significant OTF grant to develop the accessible garden and the horticultural therapy program. This two-year grant was followed up by another three year grant in 2011. The renewed funds were targeted for organizational development and social purpose business planning. The OTF grant allowed the organization to keep Judi as Coordinator and to hire an Administrative Assistant. As part of OTF's requirements, the funds are on a tapered funding scheme, and Willow Springs must work towards increasing revenue, in order to sustain their social purpose, business plans, and staff positions that have been established. The funding period for this grant will be over in 2015.

In 2011, Willow Springs also received a two-year OAC operating grant. These funds were particularly important to cover the cost of Willow Springs' facilities. A renewal of this grant was not possible, however, as the OAC does not consider gardening and horticultural therapy as "art". Rather than adapting to this requirement, the Willow Springs team decided to look for different sources of funding and new revenue-generation ideas.

Smaller-scale grants from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) and the Youth Employment Fund allowed the organization to bring a Food Service Manager and an Art Programs Assistant on board. They have also received assistance from the United Way, TD Friends of the Environment Foundation, the Community Environment Fund (Willow Springs Creative Centre, 2014c). For the coming years, Willow Springs will continue to seek out a wide range of funding sources, including youth employment, accessibility, local food-related grants, and even crowd-sourcing opportunities. For example, in the spring of 2014, Willow Springs was the Grand Prize (\$5000) winner of the "Tbaytel for Good" online contest for their "Harvest Share" idea –



a training program “for young adults who turn unwanted fruit from private landowners’ trees into delicious products, sold year-round at local retailers” (Tbaytel for Good, 2014).

## Partnerships

Much of Willow Springs’ off-site programming, including the *Dawson Dirt Diggers* program, horticultural therapy for seniors, various youth art programs, alternative education art programs, and adult inclusive art programs, is supported by partnerships with community organizations. As mentioned previously, some of Willow Springs’ community partners include: the March of Dimes Canada (MOD), Dawson Court Home for the Aged, Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital (LPH), Sister Margaret Smith Centre, Community Living Thunder Bay, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Lakehead University, Confederation College, and Gorham and Ware Community School.

## Revenue Generation

Currently, Willow Springs’ largest revenue-generating activities are the farmers’ market and food service initiatives, such as the soup and bread CSA. These programs were piloted in 2013 and have already seen positive results in 2014. The soup and bread CSA, for example, has grown from one CSA session/year with 27 customers to two CSA sessions/year with 40 to 50 customers. It began with three cooks/bakers making all the soup and bread and has expanded to 13 people including a food services trainer, three support workers, four volunteers, and five young adults with disabilities training in food service, and covered most of the Food Service Manager’s salary for the winter period of 2014.

Along with the board, Willow Springs is beginning to embrace business and marketing principles in order to improve the long-term sustainability of the organization. The farmers market and the soup and bread CSA have been designed to become self-sufficient and eventually generate additional revenue to support other programs. They hope to do the same with other initiatives underway. In particular, board members see a lot of potential for revenue-generation through training activities. One board member mentioned that she would like to see Willow Springs become a “cutting-edge training centre” in horticultural and art therapy.



### Other Resources

Volunteers are another key resource for Willow Springs. Volunteers may donate their time as board members and committee members, or as promotions, coordination, fundraising, and administration volunteers (Willow Springs Creative Centre, 2014d). They may also help in designing, preparing, and delivering programs or proposals, or in doing gardening and landscaping. Willow Springs also benefits from all sorts of donations of art and gardening supplies.

Finally, Willow Springs receives much support from other arts and gardening/ environmental organizations in and around Thunder Bay. Organizations such as the Baggage Building Arts Centre, the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, CAHEP, EcoSuperior, Roots to Harvest, Food Security Research Network, Horticultural Society and the Master Gardeners work with Willow Springs to support and complement each others' work rather than compete with each other.

### Summary of Resources & Expenses in 2014

<b>Resources and Expenses in 2014</b>	
<b>Revenue</b>	
Grants	82,075
Programming	64,439
Fundraising	674
Other revenue	2,107
Plus: prior year deferred revenue	24,619
Less: current year deferred revenue	-12,945
<i>Total</i>	160,969
<b>Expenses</b>	
Salaries, wages & benefits	95,404
Program cost	24,345
Utilities	5,585
Rental	4,800
Advertising & promotion	2,380
Repairs & maintenance	2,073
Miscellaneous & other	9,809
<i>Total</i>	144,396





## SUCCESSES OF THE WILLOW SPRINGS MODEL

Since 2000, Willow Springs has grown from a historical variety store to a social purpose enterprise that employs more than 20 local individuals and runs 20-30 programs and initiatives. The organization's growth has been marked by a number of milestones, including:

- 2006 – Incorporating as a non-profit and creating a board.
- 2008-2011 – Receiving OTF and OAC grants to develop the garden and the horticultural therapy programs; and to expand arts programs.
- 2012-2014 – Hiring a Food Service Manager, developing food-related programs and initiatives, and renovating Willow Springs' on-site kitchen.
- 2014 – Growing the farmers market, the soup and bread CSA program, and improving long-term sustainability.

Judi Vinni, who has been the Coordinator of Willow Springs throughout this time, has seen these changes happen. For her, seeing the maps and plans of the garden before it was developed was one of the key milestones. This helped her to see everything that the Willow Springs team had been working towards in a more tangible manner. Positive response from the community has also shown her Willow Springs' success. People in and around Thunder Bay are becoming increasingly familiar with, and committed to, all of the different programs and initiatives they work on. In addition, Willow Springs was recently selected as a case study in leadership within complex systems as part of a course taught at Lakehead University.

Some success factors for this social enterprise are:

- Relationships and collaboration (within the team, as well as with community partners and funders, board members, etc.)
- Adaptability and perseverance
- Inclusivity and accessibility (making use of everybody's talents and skills)
- A dynamic board and strong leadership



## CHALLENGES OF THE WILLOW SPRINGS MODEL

Over the years, one of Willow Springs' greatest challenges was overcoming the loss of the OAC operating grant just as their main programs and initiatives were falling into place. This caused a great deal of stress for board members, as well as for Judi and the team, who volunteered much of their time in order to help the organization move forward.

With renewed funding from the OTF, and in an effort to ease the team's workload after a difficult time, Willow Springs began looking for an administrative staff member. The search for someone who fit "the Willow Springs way", however, was lengthy and costly and added to the hardship of losing the OAC grant (J. Vinni, personal communication, June 10, 2014).

Funding and staffing continue to be significant challenges for this organization, but long-term sustainability is now a top priority. This includes:

- Acquiring more stable funding and increasing revenue generation to sustain staff. Judi hopes that within the next 5 to 10 years, Willow Springs will be able to provide salaried positions and benefits to all permanent staff members. The organization also aims to ensure that artists on the team continue to be appropriately paid, and are not "taken advantage of". Artists are hopeful that their pay will increase as the organization continues to grow.
- Developing and nurturing the team. As programs and initiatives grow, additional program heads, food service staff, and maintenance people, and management are required.
- Defining and capturing Willow Springs' work, in order to be able to access "niche funding", and develop communication and marketing strategies. Obtaining a lease to purchase agreement for the facilities in the coming years. Board members do not yet feel that the organization is strong enough to take this step.
- Ensuring that objectives and business plans to reflect new ideas, programs, training, services, and effectively capture the wide scope of Willow Spring's impact
- Developing a funding database and a more systematic method of applying for funding.



## OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OF WILLOW SPRINGS CREATIVE CENTRE

According to many of those involved, Willow Springs' principal impact lies in how people are transformed by a connection with art, nature, and creative processes. Willow Springs' programs do not only teach skills, they also "give community members opportunities to express themselves and make something beautiful" (J. Vinni, personal communication, June 10, 2014). This makes people "come alive", feel motivated and empowered, and embrace creativity (S. Ebby and A. L., personal communication, June 10, 2014).

It is important to note that Willow Springs makes these opportunities available to as many individuals as possible, regardless of age, skills, abilities, or location. As a result, the organization also has a role in changing how people view themselves and each other. For example, youth who participate in programming typically become more engaged in the community and are able to develop better relationships with adults and peers; while individuals with disabilities become involved in a range of activities, and form new and lasting relationships within the community.

Willow Springs' activities have what staff call a "mushroom effect". They don't only affect those who participate, but also their friends and families, and the artists, teachers, gardeners, therapeutic gardeners, volunteers, and community members who interact with them. Those who lead the activities have the reward of seeing how people change and helping to effect that change. At the same time, they have the opportunity to use their unique skills, abilities, and interests towards positive social change.

In addition, the organization helps to develop rural-urban connections and relationships. The farmers' market, for example, provides an opportunity for cottage-goers from Thunder Bay (who usually drive by Willow Springs) to mingle with rural families, as well as with artists and artisans from the region. The market is becoming a community hub that brings people together and helps to "make community".

Overall, Willow Springs Creative Centre contributes to community development in and around Thunder Bay by improving inclusivity, accessibility, and quality of life, both for rural, as well as urban community members.



## LESSONS LEARNED FROM WILLOW SPRINGS CREATIVE CENTRE

From Willow Springs' perspective, the key is to be as inclusive and accessible as possible; not only with respect to participants but also in the types of programs and services provided.

- With respect to the staff team, consensus and collaboration are important. That is, all staff members – and where possible, participants too – should be encouraged to provide input into the various components of the organization. This is not only a good way to make decisions, but it is also an opportunity to build skills within the group. Collaboration is essential to make an organization grow. This refers to: group members helping each other out, keeping good communication with partners and funders, and also to leaders being able to delegate some of their work.
- With respect to new ideas and planning, it is important to balance intuition and focus. While intuition may help to generate endless new ideas for programs, it is risky to get “whooped up” by the possibilities. The long-term sustainability of the organization depends on keeping focused on the main social goals of the organization.
- Some revenue generation is also necessary. The work that social enterprises do is valuable (even if it's not easily quantifiable), and deserves to be paid for. Reaching this realization can be a challenge, but sharing the organization's “feel good” story with the community can be helpful in this respect.
- Change is good. A dynamic board, for example, can help an organization to improve its profile and grow its network.

The staff also offered some key quotes and mottos that have helped them overcome challenges and reach key milestones throughout the development of Willow Springs Creative Centre:

- “Need less, love more; things will fall into place”
- “Quit fighting and go make something”



## CONCLUSIONS

The Willow Springs model reflects the wide range of people, skills, interests, and objectives that are part of it. Despite the challenge of integrating all of these components, the impact and success of this model extends far beyond that of a traditional arts centre. It is in fact the commitment to inclusivity, accessibility, and a comprehensive model that has allowed Willow Springs to build upon the strengths, skills, and assets of individuals, groups, neighbourhoods, and communities, and use those assets to strengthen their community (Willow Springs Creative Centre, 2014).

Willow Springs' programs do not only teach skills, but also transform individuals, and by extension, the community. Some of the keys to this social enterprise's continued success and sustainability will be to find ways of communicating effectively about the broad scope and social value of its work.



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