

Social enterprise enriches Yarmouth

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Published: Jun 10 at 7:27 a.m.

Updated: Jun 10 at 9:08 a.m.



Mindy Meuse breads onion rings after she's completed making bread and buns for the day at the Shanty Café. - Sandra Phinney

If you were a first-time customer at the Shanty Café in Yarmouth you'd never know that it was a social enterprise. Nor would you know that beyond the confines of what you see in the restaurant, there's a beehive of activity that takes place under the same roof at 6 and 6B Central St.

At any given time of the week, you'll find scores of adults in the back of the building preparing food items for the restaurant, while others are at work recycling bottles, or sorting out clothes to make rags. In another section more employees are building everything from furniture to book shelves and coat racks out of recycled hockey sticks.

Everyone involved here faces some kind of employment barrier, such as a disability, mental illness, age, language, or literacy issues. Yet the building hums with energy and smiling faces. It's all part of

the Shanty Initiatives and The Store Next Door which, in turn, are social enterprises operating under the umbrella of the Yarmouth Association for Community Residential Options (YACRO).

YACRO provides residential support in Metro Halifax and Yarmouth to adults and children with disabilities. It also provides vocational skills training and work opportunities for adults through a series of social enterprises.

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In a nutshell: a social enterprise is a market-driven business model which tackles social and environmental issues. It's about making positive changes in people's lives by providing training and meaningful work. As well, all employees are paid.

Sandra Quesnel, program director Yarmouth Social Enterprises, says, "The mandate of our social enterprise is to ensure that people with disabilities, who traditionally experience higher unemployment and under-employment, are well-trained and receive a paycheque, the same as their counterparts elsewhere. As well, our team receives at least minimum wage when they are working in either the manufacturing of products or food prep for the café."

Making food, changing lives

The organization's flagship social enterprise was The Shanty Café, Consignment and More, which started in 2007. However, six years later, it became apparent that trying to manage and expand a Social Enterprise along with trying to manage and expand a vocational services program was a difficult proposition. The latter became the Shanty Initiatives with its own staff and mandate.

The Shanty Initiatives now features several programs, including Tall Boys—a food and delivery service. Quesnel explains that a dozen local businesses fax their orders for food and beverages from the Shanty Café, Tim Hortons or McDonald's.

Tall Boys also provides a delivery service for orders from the café between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. "We also have a bottle recycling program, job brokerage, rag creation (including clothing pick-up and

recycling), and a laundry business," Quesnel adds.

Mindy Meuse works in the bakery section behind the restaurant. Meuse is hearing impaired, and when she first started working there as a volunteer making candles, she barely spoke to anyone. She then learned how to make bread in the bakery section.

Meuse says, "I work from 7 a.m.-2 p.m., and I make three batches of white bread and three batches of whole wheat every morning for the Shanty."

She also makes buns, and it's not uncommon for her to make 400 to fill catering orders.

"I love my job," Meuse says. "The bread feels so soft. It's a real nice feeling." She works hard but she also has a lot of fun. She and a co-worker, Tahrira Abdulhasan, are known to pull practical jokes on each other. Laughter often permeates the air, along with the smell of freshly made bread.

Meuse also works at the station where day-old bread is pulled apart, baked, crushed, then used to bread items like onion rings and mozzarella sticks for the café.

Aimee Acker, operations manager at YACRO Social Enterprises notes how being employed has boosted Meuse's self-esteem.

"When Mindy first started coming here she was unmotivated and lacked confidence. She mainly kept to herself and needed much encouragement to participate," Acker says. "Since obtaining paid employment, Mindy's confidence has grown tremendously and she's made meaningful connections with her co-workers. She obtained her driver's licence, and also purchased a new vehicle."

Hockey sticks become furniture

The latest addition to the social enterprise network is The Store Next Door. Located on the same site, it started in 2016 with two employees; it now employs 10. The operation consists of two parts: manufacturing and a storefront. Most of the manufacturing uses recycled products in general, and hockey sticks in particular.

With a stated mission to recycle and reuse, the team at The Store Next Door turn thousands of damaged hockey sticks into items like chairs to tables, coat racks and coasters.

Acquiring a vast amount of hockey sticks is a huge undertaking, although many companies and agencies have partnered with The Store Next Door to ensure its success. For example, Cleve's Source for Sports came on board from the get-go and the owner of the store has made arrangements to donate all sticks which get returned to his 16 stores.

The Yarmouth Mariners Centre has a recycling box at the arena where people can deposit sticks for The Store Next Door; Kent Building Supplies donated an entire lift of pine boards; and Flower Cart serves as a pick-up and drop-off centre for donated hockey sticks in the Annapolis Valley.

Further afield, Requip'd Canada in Hamilton, Ont., donated over 3,500 sticks; an individual in Ottawa has spearheaded a used hockey stick drive ... and on it goes. Partnerships are flourishing; jobs have been created; landfills are being spared.

Acker adds, "We have another employee who had little self confidence and wasn't sure there was anything she could do. Once she tried our woodworking she discovered something she really loved and has increased her hours here. She's become really motivated and reliable."

A lifeline for staff

Stephen Davidson sees working at The Shop Next Door as a lifeline.

"I have my ups and downs and a lot of health problems, from insomnia to depression. I used to work 32 hours here. But my body gave out," Davidson says. "I just changed medication so I'm only working 10 hours a week. Even that's hard, but it's going to get easier and I'll be able to add more hours when my body can handle it without crashing."

Over the years, Davidson has become a jack of all trades. "I don't have formal training, but I learned here how to do masonry, siding, shingling. And how to use tools. Now I work on things alone, like building headboards and trophy racks."

After a slight pause to catch his breath, Davidson grins, adding, "And the people here tolerate me to no end."

It's all about acceptance, dignity and pride.

It's also about making really good food. The Shanty Café — Yarmouth's first social enterprise that morphed into a full-fledged restaurant back in 2014 — has consistently garnered a number one rating out of 30 restaurants in the region on TripAdvisor.

The eclectic menu includes dishes from Cuba, the Middle East and India, as well as local Maritime favourites. Food selections are reasonably priced and, when possible, the ingredients are sourced locally. And of course the bread and buns are made on site.