

March 1997

ISBN #1-895796-69-5

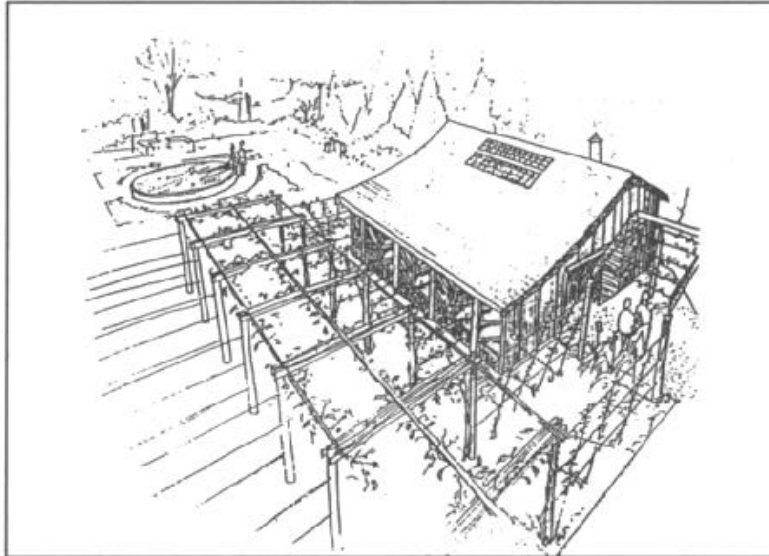
Strong social policy is essential to fight poverty, ensure economic security and achieve social justice. Social policy involves not only solid public policies but also creative and collaborative community initiatives. Caledon's Social Partnerships Project, supported by The Trillium Foundation, is exploring a range of alliances between private business and nonprofit organizations that harness untapped resources in the interest of all members of a community. Many of these partnership arrangements are spear headed by dedicated individuals. Caledon is profiling real leaders in order to recognize their efforts and to inspire others to make similar contributions to economic and social well-being.

In this second edition of *real leaders*, we profile **Sue Kurbis**, **Milder Villegas** and **Ann Cioppa**. Like many of the unsung heroes in our communities, these real leaders go about their work with quiet dedication and a singularity of purpose. They are making significant strides in promoting local economic and social well-being and addressing unemployment and underemployment in their communities. Representing the quiet dedication so often overlooked in our busy lives, they are reluctant to take credit for the positive changes created by their respective teams despite the accolades from those with whom they work. Sue in Vancouver, Milder in Montreal and Ann Cioppa attribute their success to being part of a coalition with a shared vision.



Work in progress: Sue Kurbis (second from right) and the Young Women Creating Change project.

Even in trendy Vancouver, the sight of a team of young women construction workers attracts attention - especially when they are revitalizing a poor inner-city neighbourhood using very modern engineering, architecture and carpentry skills. But **Sue Kurbis** and the many partners that support the Young Women Creating Change project (YWCC) welcome the attention. While they build an ecologically-friendly community centre, this diverse group of young women is learning non-traditional trades, a needy community is benefitting from their expertise and other communities are taking notes on this unique and innovative project.



Architect's rendering of the eco-pavilion that meets everyone's dreams.

The YWCC project owes its success to a combination of factors: community support; strong partnerships with Canadian business, government and social groups; and international links with the global movement to improve women's lives. Most of all, everyone involved with the project recognizes the strong leadership of Sue Kurbis. Her vision and tenacity have provided the foundation for the project's success. As one co-worker noted: "Not only did Sue have the vision for the project, she pulled together a group of women facing multiple disadvantages, developed a training program which equipped them with some very marketable skills and worked with the community to keep the project on track."

The Strathcona and Downtown Eastside neighbourhoods of Vancouver are the poorest communities in Canada. Many residents live in single rooms and have little to call their own. One of the few bright spots is the community garden run by the Strathcona Community Garden Association and tended faithfully by local residents. Recognizing the pivotal role the garden plays in many residents' lives, the Association decided to build a small community

centre. The Centre would provide a space for gardeners to meet, hold educational workshops, and store seeds and garden books.

Muggs Sigurgeirson, President of the Association and a founding member of the 15-year-old community garden, comments on the completed centre: "The building responded to all our dreams and is a model for other eco-sensitive buildings. It has the first composting toilet and grey water system in a public building in the city."

Initially, there was resistance to the idea. Many residents didn't want protracted construction that might destroy the garden, or a big ugly building that would obstruct the view from the nearby Chinese Freemason's Seniors Lodge. But Sue Kurbis saw a solution - an opportunity to combine her interest in environmentalism with her commitment to helping young women. Sue and the project's co-Coordinator, Rachel Rosen, designed a plan to have the eco-friendly centre built by a diverse group of young women using sustainable building practices. Rachel is 23

years old and learning about project organizing through her work with YWCC.

Once she had the support of the community, Sue had to secure funding for the project. The Environmental Youth Alliance (EYA), Sue's workplace for the past six years, was enthusiastic about sponsoring the project. EYA is a dynamic youth-driven collective dedicated to building community and environmental health by highlighting the links between social and ecological challenges. EYA projects, like YWCC, are designed for and by young people with the support of adult mentors.

EYA founding member Doug Ragan notes that working with Sue and the YWCC has transformed the organization. "She infused her vision and taught us how to be grounded and real. Without her, we would have been just another environmental organization that bit the dust after a few years."

In addition to financial support, many of the partners Sue brought together contribute other resources. The YWCC project provides technical training in engineering, architecture and carpentry - three areas that have not traditionally been easy for women to access. Local professionals act as mentors to the team. "While not all the students will go into the trades, the project teaches them useful life skills," points out sustainable builder Britt Permien. Britt owns one of the few women-only construction companies in Vancouver and teaches building skills on the project. "It builds confidence and self-esteem and teaches them to work together as a team." Britt also has high praise for Sue: "Working with Sue has been a fabulous experience. She has carried the project through many crises - financial and otherwise."

The Canadian Women's Foundation (CWF), a national charitable foundation committed to helping women and girls achieve greater self-reliance and economic independence, is another big supporter of the YWCC. "Projects which involve young women are of particular interest to us and the Bank of Montreal which funds microeconomic

development projects through CWF" says Executive Director Beverley Wybrow. "We were particularly impressed that YWCC gave participants experience in environmental and technical areas. All too often we receive requests to fund projects that involve women in food service or cooking. YWCC equips young women with skills in nontraditional areas. Mentors also enrich their learning experience."

Sue brought together a range of other funding partners. The Vancouver Foundation as well as the municipal, provincial and federal governments have contributed funds. YWCC also has the backing of BC businesses. Financial institutions such as VanCity Credit Union, Canada Trust, and Gulf and Fraser Credit Union have supported the project. Tool manufacturers, such as Milwaukee Power Tools and Hansen Tools, donated equipment.

Before actual construction could begin, architectural drawings had to be approved by the city - a process that took nine months. Sue's common sense ensured that good use was made of the time. The team did site preparation. This work included digging the foundation by hand as the mature, interwoven nature of the garden would not accommodate heavy machinery. The young women learned how to use power tools and read architectural drawings. They took courses in safety and first aid and learned to write grant applications to support the project and to request donations of materials, such as windows and doors.

While she has worked for almost a decade in community development projects both in Canada and throughout the world, Sue reflects on how teaching social responsibility presents some unique dilemmas. "Working with women who have never had a job that required this level of commitment and responsibility is a real challenge. But I think we have made some inroads. The women recognize the importance of their

participation. They knew the gardeners were counting on them to get the job done and they did it!”

Sue shies away from taking all the credit for the project - she compliments all the women involved and says the community support has been phenomenal. Sue explains that she is from a low-income rural community where things are accomplished only by people working together.

She recalls one particularly bleak period: “We were really behind schedule. The weather was terrible and I knew we couldn’t catch up without some help. I spoke with people in the community and although it poured freezing rain, the work party arrived. I never heard a complaint - people just joked and worked all day. They were fantastic.”

Acknowledging how draining this work can be, Sue says she has developed some coping mechanisms. To avoid burnout,

she makes sure she doesn’t work alone. She says the support she receives from her co-Coordinator, Rachel, is crucial: “We really hold each other up.” Sue also looks to her outside interests for balance: “I am a real wilderness person so I try to disappear to re-energize myself whenever I can.” Her 18-month-old son gives her a lot of joy and reminds her of other priorities which she shares with her supportive partner.

Everyone who works with Sue praises her success. Doug Ragan echoes the sentiments of many who live and work in the community: “Sue takes vision and commitment one step further. She is the only person I know with the capacity to handle something of this magnitude - guiding a group of young women who are exploring the possibility of changing the world.”



Sue Kurbis demonstrates her new-found carpentry skills.

It's no surprise that the Montreal Community Loan Association (MCLA) is so successful. It is a unique organization led by **Milder Villegas**.

Since Milder Villegas came to Canada from his native Peru 14 years ago, he has been working actively to create the kind of society in which he wants to live. Committed to the ideal of economic and social justice, he dreams of a time when people who want to work and participate in their communities will not be hindered by lack of opportunity.

Milder has seen too many examples of thwarted potential. He recalls when he first arrived in Canada and was providing job counselling and training to discouraged refugees. "The story was always the same. They wanted to work but there were no jobs." The same held true for the youth with whom he worked a few years later. "For the first time, students were not guaranteed jobs when they finished school and they didn't know any alternative way of earning a living or participating in society."

Milder realized he was living through a period of profound economic and social change - a time that required a new approach. While experience had taught him that communities needed to work together to find solutions, most organizations were functioning within their own separate spheres. When he was invited to join a coalition of organizations representing youth, single mothers, immigrants and the unemployed, he was inspired by the fact that these groups were united by a common vision.

Lance Evoy, a founding member of the MCLA and Coordinator of the Institute in Management and Community Development at Concordia University, recalls the first time he met Milder: "It was clear he was a leader. He was highly motivated and tenacious with a strong sense of values. Not only could Milder define problems in a way that everyone understood, he went further; he imagined solutions and identified the bridges we needed to get there."



Milder Villegas (left) and Eric Shragge from McGill University at the MCLA's first conference. Representatives from communities across the country came together to discuss alternative investment strategies.

At that time, one of the many problems confronting Milder and his colleagues was the lack of financial support accessible to people who didn't have the collateral necessary to secure bank loans. Without access to capital or start up loans, individuals with skills and initiative were unable to start new businesses, create jobs and otherwise improve their communities. The solution decided upon by the coalition was to develop a revolving community loan fund.

In 1990, Milder became one of the founding members of the MCLA. Representing a variety of sectors, the MCLA is a unique community economic development initiative through which individuals and institutions can invest in their communities. It is based on a model developed by the Institute for Community Economics in Massachusetts. Milder notes: "One of the appealing aspects of this model is that it is different in every community. Its design is influenced by local needs and local people."

The MCLA borrows money from individuals and institutions who want to go beyond charity and work with, and on behalf of, marginalized people. The money is then loaned to community groups and individuals for projects that improve the local community and create jobs - projects that are consistent with the objectives of the MCLA. Investors accept a lower rate of return on their investment because they believe in the socioeconomic benefits created by these projects.

The innovative work of the MCLA has also increased the money in its capital fund and the number of partnerships between business and community groups. Through this period of growth, it has remained responsive to individuals with the greatest need for capital: immigrants, women, youth and welfare recipients. In addition to providing financial assistance, the MCLA offers advice and technical support to borrowers.

Lorna Mata, an executive with Teleglobe Canada and a member of the MCLA Board of Directors, underlines the importance of this support. "For people trying to start a business, money is important but it is not enough. People need training and coaching through the various phases of business development. It has to be a package deal."

Bummis, for example, is a small business started by three women to produce plastic covers used with cloth diapers. What started out as a small home business has grown to a factory with two full-time sewers, a secretary and a janitor. The women enthusiastically describe their experiences with the MCLA: "When the loan fund approved us for a \$25,000 loan, it was like a dream come true ... believing in us enough to give us a chance. We have grown so much in the past two years, both as a company and as individuals ... we have all become much more concerned and involved members of our community as a result of this increase in self-confidence."

Milder reflects that since its creation, the MCLA has supported many exciting projects. 'Resto Plateau' is easily one of his favourite success stories. It is the brainchild of a coalition of community organizations which rallied around pressing social concerns: unemployment and hunger. Villegas says: "It is one of the most exciting projects in Quebec. What they are achieving goes well beyond anyone's initial expectations and investment."

With a loan of \$15,000 from the MCLA to renovate a church basement, the coalition trained unemployed local people as assistant chefs. Villegas adds proudly: "While I don't usually cite statistics, 85 percent of the trainees find jobs at salaries higher than they would have without the training." Although the training component of this venture is a significant accomplishment, Villegas points to another achievement. "Through partnerships



Having recently repaid its loan to the MCLA, Bummis has grown to employ full-time staff and has new warehouse space.

with other organizations, nutritious food is provided to those in need in the community. Imagine what this has taught everyone involved about the power of partnerships.”

Milder knows that one of the major challenges facing the MCLA is to pull all of the pieces together. As Coordinator, he runs the office, works with borrowers and establishes the links between business and community groups. Loma Mata points out that these roles require a unique combination of skills and she notes: “Milder is perfect for the job. He is outgoing, aggressive and persistent. He has a sense of humour and can appear laid back but it takes a lot of courage and stamina to keep pushing day after day - and this is what he does.”

But knowing all aspects of the MCLA operation makes Milder one of its toughest critics. As one area improves, he shifts his focus. Milder says that while partnerships with social and religious organizations have always been strong, it is time to expand and focus more on business. “Our links with the business sector are solid through an executive at Teleglobe and a lot of doors have been opened through one executive at Alcan Aluminum. But we have a lot more work to do.”

Given the community economic development mandate of the MCLA, Milder is not content just to accept donations from well-meaning individuals.

Rather, he focusses on educating potential investors. “Many companies would be happy to write us a cheque, but we want them to become involved in the community. My goal in meeting with businesses is to show what we do and let them know how they can become involved. Often I get a phone call several months later when they are ready to take the first step.”

Milder finds his work deeply satisfying and energizing. While he admits that he is an optimist (colleagues at the office call him ‘Mr. Positive’), Milder says his perseverance has deeper roots. He recalls the influence of his

mother and father. While he feels he has inherited his father’s zest for hard work, it was his mother’s approach to life that was the most influential. “She believed that anything you do, you do to the end. You should always do the best you can in whatever you undertake and you will be very happy.”

Milder says you have to believe it is possible. “Dreaming creates vision, vision creates action. If you continue to dream, to create and to do - it is possible.”



Addressing two pressing social concerns, Resto Plateau trains unemployed local people as assistant chefs while feeding those most in need.

Ann Cioppa exudes energy when she talks about her work with West End Community Ventures (WECV). She talks easily about mis takes made, lessons learned and how these experiences lead to new and exciting directions in community economic development (CED) in Ottawa. It is clear that this energetic, creative and resilient innovator truly loves her work.

WECV began in 1986 when a group of welfare and Unemployment Insurance recipients sought to improve the underserved public housing community in which they lived. The project's goal was to address the lack of employment skills and opportunities. Recognizing the essential relationship between economic and social well being, WECV promoted community development by encouraging local leadership and creating economic opportunities.

Ann has been involved with the project since its inception and was one of the first local leaders to emerge. She credits her leadership development to Sandra Mark, the former Executive Director of WECV. Ann recalls: "Sandra shared my vision. She recognized that each of us has important skills to bring to the table and she encouraged us to use them. I never realized I had organizational skills, but now I know I can make things happen."

Sandra remembers Ann's leadership potential coming to the forefront. "While Ann and other community members were pleased that a local community service centre was providing health and social services, they questioned what was being done to address the underlying causes of the problems." That questioning led to the development of community economic development initiatives.

WECV's first business venture, Green Works, was an environmentally-friendly sewing company. Ann notes: "Sewing is a skill many women have and it is something they are comfortable with. The women were able to

approach fabric stores and upholstery businesses to collect cut-offs and samples that were destined to become landfill. Soon we were sewing bags for conferences and environmentally-friendly businesses."

Marlene Catterall, Member of Parliament for Ottawa West, is a strong supporter of WECV and believes its focus on environmental services was very timely. She recalls that: "As a member of the Canadian delegation to the Earth Summit in Brazil, it was very gratifying to know that the delegates' kits were produced at Green Works - produced by women who were learning and working through the efforts of WECV."



Ann Cioppa (left) sells wares from Green Works, West End's environmentally-friendly sewing company.

While Green Works received a lot of positive attention, the recession saw retailers cut back their orders. Ann looks tired when she reflects on the experience and remembers that WECV was also grappling with some very fundamental issues. "We have a firm commitment to pay employees a living wage and the reality is that sewing jobs are low-tech and low-paying. We wouldn't advise others to replicate this project." Quickly re-energizing, she says: "There is a lesson in everything. When we looked back on what we had done and what we would do differently in the future, we realized that next time we would have to take a more business like approach."

Ann and her colleagues lost little time contacting the environmental businesses with which they had previously worked. Before long, the Ottawa-Carleton Green Community Initiative was born. Recognizing the importance of partnerships, WECV worked with Consumers Gas, Ontario Hydro, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Algonquin College and various environmental groups to develop the EnviroSense Program which provided home assessments to promote energy conservation.

Through this program, WECV hired and trained unemployed local people to conduct in-home assessments of energy, water and waste-related practices. Recommendations were made to change household habits and to suggest retrofits which would reduce environmental impacts and energy costs both within the home and the community. Follow-up visits showed impressive rates of compliance with their recommendations. Jim Nubel, Business Development Manager at Consumers Gas, was involved with EnviroSense from the start. He

recalls the first meeting he attended. “I was very excited with what I saw - a nice fit of community groups, businesses and governments all working together. This initial experience has developed into a very strong personal interest. I am now working with the Conference Board of Canada and the Ottawa-Carleton Economic Development Corporation to better understand CED and develop partnerships among businesses, community groups, volunteers and student interns to ensure successful CED initiatives.”

Ann believes that West End affects the lives of many people who become involved with its innovative projects. “One of our real strengths is training and employment programs. Participants learn skills, increase their self-esteem and develop relationships with staff and other students. Many stay involved with WECV long after they have completed their program - they want to make a contribution.”



At an early visioning session, local residents agreed upon the need to address the underlying causes of the problems in their community. West End Community Ventures was born.

Art Montague is someone whose commitment to WECV continues to grow. He first came to WECV 18 months ago to take a computer training course. As part of the program, students were also required to take courses on economic literacy as well as “the softer stuff like how to do job searches and prepare for interviews.” Art recalls: “At the time, I thought these courses wouldn’t do me any harm. Later, I realized they were the most important stuff I learned.” Art became so committed to the work of WECV that he recently joined the organization as Executive Director.

Ann reflects upon the involvement of Art and many other former students. “Leadership cannot be vested in a single individual who then becomes indispensable. Leadership must be a process and embrace a shared vision. It must be built within an organization so that the structure does not crumble when one person leaves.” This concept, Ann believes, is key to the sustainable development of both organizations and communities.

Ann credits her co-workers with keeping her going through good times and disappointments at WECV.



Conference bags made of environmentally-friendly materials, similar to those picture were given to all Canadian delegates at the United National Earth Summit in Brazil.

She says: “Everyone involved with the organization has a vision. The successes we have had are not because of me but are due to a group of committed people who want to make a difference.” Sandra Mark, however, feels that Ann is too modest. “Ann is moved through passion - she goes beyond her own needs and sees what the community needs. This, I believe, is a quality of a very strong leader ... people are inspired by her.”

Ann is also energized through her involvement with the First Unitarian Congregation where she works with the Social Justice Committee. When she realized that only a small percentage of the large congregation was engaged in hands-on activities in their own communities, she recommitted herself to making it easier for people to become socially involved. “Sometimes you have to help people see the links between their lives, their homes and their communities.”

Whatever the community in which Mn is involved, she has a burning passion to make a difference - and she is convinced it is through local economic development that change will occur.

“As a community, we are responsible for each other. We all have to work together to create an enriched sense of community. People, business ... all have to become involved in order to accomplish something.” Ann adds: “Most days I still want to change the world. But on other days, when there doesn’t seem to be enough - time or energy and some projects have to be put on the back burner, I think of the Wizard Gandolf in one of my favourite science fiction books, Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien. He says: “We are not responsible for the whole world, or the weather of the world - but for our garden and our house and maybe our neighbour’s garden. We do what we can in our own community.”

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