

CASE STUDY: WILLOW SPRINGS CREATIVE CENTRE

*Contributions to the emergence
of the Northern Ontario resilient
and connected food hub*

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Willow Springs Creative Centre

Social Innovation

Willow Springs Creative Centre (WSSC) is an innovative grassroots organization committed to providing innovative training and meaningful connection opportunities via the local food system.

WSSC offers unique food and garden related initiatives including:

- Providing training about growing, processing, preparing and preserving skills to young adults facing barriers to employment such as intellectual disabilities;
- Offering locally grown and processed foods as part of social enterprise food initiatives;
- Accessing would-be wasted fruits in the community and turning them into training and revenue generating opportunities;
- Providing opportunities for micro economic development in an extremely underserved rural region just Northeast of Thunder Bay (Gorham/Ware/Kaministiquia);
- An impressive network of partnerships with over 18 community organizations;
- Expertise in incorporating holistic and therapeutic benefits related to food gardening with local schools and community groups.

Overview

Nestled in the rural area northwest of Thunder Bay sits Willow Springs Creative Centre. It is housed in the historical International Co-op built by local Finnish homesteaders in 1934. The facility transferred hands in 1945 when it was purchased by the Koski family. They ran the Koski's Store as a general store until 1983. Their son-in-law took over the ownership of the building at this time and rented it out as a personal residence until the year 2000 when the founders of Willow Springs Artisan Gift Store and Studio purchased it.

After running as a small for-profit business for six years, the owners recognized the community development opportunities that Willow Springs could provide in their rural location. In June 2006, Willow Springs Creative Centre was

incorporated as a not-for-profit with the mission *to promote growth through creative expression and community development.*

From its beginnings as a rural artisan gathering space, present day Willow Springs is a novel community social enterprise that offers training, as well as therapeutic and social enterprise programming related to food, gardening and art. Willow Springs offers programming both in its rural area, as well as in the closest urban centre of Thunder Bay.

Willow Springs is run by a small team of dedicated staff and numerous volunteers. WSCC is governed by an active eight-member Board of Directors. Willow Springs has partnerships with numerous community organizations and educational institutions where they facilitate art, food and garden programming, either on or off-site. WSCC actively partners with over eighteen community groups, one elementary school, Lakehead University and Confederation College. WSCC subcontracts additional gardeners, artists, and others to deliver programming with these partners. Willow Springs is financially supported through a mix of fee-for-service programs and subsidies/grants/awards.

Willow Springs Creative Centre offers four separate food-related “initiatives”:

Soup & Artisan Bread Extravaganza Social Enterprise:

Willow Springs’ Soup & Artisan Bread Extravaganza began in 2013 in response to a community need to connect young adults facing barriers to employment with meaningful opportunities to connect to, and work with, food in a meaningful way.

The Soup & Bread Extravaganza operates on a Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) model where customers pre-pay for their weekly subscription and receive two litres of freshly made, locally sourced soups and a large loaf of freshly made artisan bread each week for 8 weeks. WSCC grows many of the ingredients for the soups and breads and sources from other local producers, when possible, such as Belluz Farms and The Squash Queen. Local flour from Brule Creek Farms is used in the breads.

Staff and volunteers (many facing barriers to employment) in the Soup & Bread Extravaganza make the meals from scratch at the Regional Food Distribution Association (RFDA) as well as at Willow Springs. Participants work co-operatively in an intimate setting and learn all of the steps involved in food preparation from picking/harvesting, washing, cutting, cooking, kneading, baking, packaging and preparing the meals for pick up. Each week, a beautiful recipe card is included highlighting the ingredients and emphasizing which are local, as well as profiling a participant in the program, or a positive social outcome of the program.

The Soup & Bread Extravaganza runs two to three subscriptions per year and has pick up locations in both rural and urban areas, as well as pick up at

Lakehead University via the sustainability initiative run through the student union (LUSU).

Harvest Share:

Harvest Share is an urban gleaning project where youth, staff and volunteers turn would-be-wasted fruit into preserves and other products such as cider and sauce for sale at local markets.

Participants in Harvest Share include young adults facing barriers to employment, Lakehead University students with no or limited knowledge about food processing/preserving, as well as other interested community members. Urban and rural property owners provide the participants with the opportunity to pick fruit that would otherwise be wasted and prune trees to improve next year's harvest and long-term tree and fruit production viability. They wash, cut, cook, and can all of the harvested produce. Participants learn about all of the steps involved in that process and leave with knowledge and skills to replicate food preserving at home.

Harvest Share gives some of the finished preserves to participants, but most products are then sold at local markets so the profits can be reinvested into the training program. Trainees are also included in this component of the program so they can learn customer service, connect with those who appreciate the local food items, promote the program, identify new fruit donors and volunteers, and feel a sense of pride for what they have made.

Willow Springs' Farmers Market:

Willow Springs started a small Farmers Market at their rural location in 2013. This seasonal Market offers new and micro vendors in agriculture, food processing and other artisan crafts an affordable and interactive venue to showcase and sell their wares. The market is a joyful meeting place that incorporates food, art, art activities, music, as well as providing income for vendors and for Willow Springs.

WSSC personally provides fresh baked goods, handcrafted pizzas, local produce (when available), preserves (from Harvest Share) and retails other local food offerings. WSSC incorporates training opportunities for community members facing barriers to employment to help harvest, prepare and serve food at the Market.

Horticultural Therapy & Garden:

Willow Springs works with school groups, disability organizations, treatment centres, retirement and long-term care facilities and other community organizations to deliver therapeutic gardening programming. Willow Springs

plans, delivers and maintains flower, vegetable and special butterfly gardens at seven sites in the community, as well as at their own location.

WSSC knows how to fit programming to perfectly match the needs of their clientele whether it's hosting an outdoor Butterfly Tea Party at a retirement residence, planting a traditional Medicine Wheel Healing Garden for children in treatment for trauma, or making fresh potato and bean salads with produce from the school garden for a back-to-school BBQ. Willow Springs works their magic by connecting, sharing and celebrating gardening.

The Horticultural Therapy division grew significantly in 2014 when WSSC was asked by the Food Security Research Network to take over management of the large urban community garden on Lakehead University campus. This garden has approximately 100 plots that are tended by community gardeners (students, community members and four community-based organizations). WSSC coordinates the garden and provides gentle training, mentorship and therapeutic facilitation to individuals and partner organizations at the site on an individual and group basis.

WSSC is working to grow this initiative to further connect the benefits of food and food production with the therapeutic benefits of gardening, especially for those with social, physical and mental health issues. WSSC is working to build on partnerships with local rehabilitation hospitals, community-based groups and other clients in the coming years. In the near future, WSSC and the School of Social Work at Lakehead University will integrate the Horticultural Therapy Certificate Program into the social work program at the university.

Impact & Benefits

As a relatively small grassroots organization, Willow Springs has a huge impact on its rural community, as well as in Thunder Bay through extensive community partnerships and innovative programming. WSSC only began formally expanding their programming reach to focus on food in 2012 and already they have seen growth and expansion in their food-based initiatives, as well as a deepening of community based connections with other organizations, individuals and businesses.

Willow Springs is unique because it involves people that don't normally participate fully in the food system (youth, people with intellectual disabilities). WSSC looks beyond the simple nutritional value of food and uses it as a tool to build confidence and empower participants, to bring groups and the broader community together, and to celebrate creativity and passion via food and gardening.

WSCC incorporates a training element into all of the food initiatives. Participants aren't passive recipients of programs, they are active participants in these initiatives and they learn real, tangible skills and practical knowledge that can be applied beyond the initiative. WSCC works quite often with participants with intellectual disabilities that face disadvantages in terms of labour force and community participation. WSCC supports these individuals to participate in supportive and inclusive paid training and skills development opportunities within their food-based initiatives.

In order to fully grasp the impact and benefits of WSCC's food-based initiatives, we need to look at each initiative separately:

Soup & Artisan Bread Extravaganza (Social Enterprise)

WSCC's Soup & Artisan Bread Extravaganza continues to grow. The first subscription to the program saw 30 shares with one session and one pick up location. Now in its third year of operation, the Soup & Bread program offers 70 subscriptions over three sessions, with pick-ups at three locations (urban and rural). For the Winter 2015 season, the Soup & Artisan Bread Extravaganza will make approximately 1040 litres of soup and 540 loaves of bread for customers to enjoy! Soup & Bread continues to attract loyal customers from the rural community, as well as a growing number of urban customers and students/staff at Lakehead University.

As demand for Soup & Artisan Bread grows, so does the demand for produce and other locally sourced ingredients. WSCC is able to grow many of the ingredients themselves, but is able to purchase other needed ingredients from local food producers like Brule Creek Farms, The Squash Queen, Aspen Croft Farm, Belluz Farms and some WSCC Farmers' Market vendors.

One of the many impressive innovative features of the Soup & Bread program is its economic viability. In only two years of operation, WSCC has refined the program to not only cover the costs of staff time, ingredients, and materials, but to generate a small profit that gets reinvested back into WSCC.

Participants in the program love the Cranberry Wild Rice Bread, the fact that WSCC is training young adults with disabilities, and that locally sourced produce is used in the creation of the food. (WSCC Soup & Bread Evaluation, 2014)

Harvest Share

Harvest Share has grown in size and scope since it was taken over by Willow Springs in 2013. WSCC provided needed leadership and direction to this innovative idea and incorporated elements of education and training for participants, as well as offering an incentive for landowners to participate by offering fruit tree pruning services. Pruning the fruit trees encourages a more abundant harvest in following years. During the harvest season, Harvest Share

staff and participants are continuously busy gathering fruit, processing it and selling it.

In 2014, Harvest Share worked to collect unwanted fruit from 17 properties, ran approximately six processing training workshops with over 30 participants, and sold nearly 500 jars of preserves at two markets, three retail outlets and at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto. These numbers are very impressive for such a modest initiative.

Harvest Share is unique in the fact that it is mostly run by young people with an interest in, but not necessarily knowledge of, food preservation. Harvest Share works with residents in urban and rural areas to take advantage of fruit that would otherwise go to waste or attract nuisance animals (deer, bears). In return for the fruit, Harvest Share helps land owners with maintenance and pruning of fruit trees to help increase yields in future years.

Harvest Share has started to incorporate some elements of wild harvested foods such as raspberries and wild roses; and incorporates knowledge of picking and processing wild foods into their training sessions. This is important for this region as there is an abundance of wild foods that have many nutritional benefits, but not everyone knows where to find them or how to use them. It is hoped that as this program grows, wild harvested foods will be incorporated into more and more preserves to take advantage of these readily available herbs, flowers and fruits.

Willow Springs' Farmers Market

Starting a new farmers market in a rural area can be very challenging. But WSCC tackles that challenge with passion, creativity and flare! Ignoring naysayers, WSCC embraced their dream of offering an intimate farmers market in a rural setting to showcase local micro enterprises, as well as their own food, art and gardening products and initiatives.

Although the market is small by more urban standards, it offers many benefits to the community and to vendors. Willow Springs offers space for up to fifteen vendors to sell their wares. They also sell their own products such as ready to eat foods such as their special on-site artisan oven baked pizzas made primarily with local ingredients and garden and wild preserves; and consignment products from other local vendors (meats, cheeses, flour and teas). This is an impressive alternative in a rural area where there is literally one small store/LCBO outlet and no other retail outlets.

The cozy market size makes it more feasible for smaller scale producers to test their products in a market setting and be able to interact with customers in a less threatening venue. In only two years of operation, WSCC has encouraged fifteen micro businesses to vend at the market. Most of the businesses at the market

are run by female first-time entrepreneurs. WSCC supported five of these enterprises to pursue kitchen certification through the local health unit. Initially, certification seemed a daunting task for these businesses, but WSCC's gentle and supportive nature helped them achieve this requirement.

For the community, the Market provides a central meeting space on a weekly basis during the summer and early Fall when there are no other open hubs in the community (the only school/community centre is closed from end of June until early September). And it provides a fun, safe and accessible gathering place for parents of young children, potentially isolated seniors, or those with transportation barriers to the larger urban centre.

Therapeutic & Community Gardens

Willow Springs has demonstrated their ability to support a variety of populations and ability levels when it comes to therapeutic gardening. In a typical week during the summer, Willow Springs' staff will garden with young students, older students, adults with development disabilities, adults with barriers to employment (mental health issues), seniors and children in treatment. Their gentle, inclusive and non-threatening approach helps facilitate practical, social and interpersonal skills development. Participants are thrilled to dig in the dirt and learn a thing or two about vegetables, flowers, bees, soil, etc., while strengthening their social capital ties across the communities.

Quote from Michelle, volunteer and parent of a Soup & Bread participant:

My son is a young adult with autism and by spending a day volunteering in our community kitchen with the Willow Springs Creative Centre team each week, he's learning skills that will not only help him gain greater kitchen independence for himself, those skills may also lead to other work placements in the food industry. That's the obvious impact.

The less obvious gains may be the more valuable ones. The opportunities for social and community engagement once individuals with developmental disabilities leave school are limited. Being part of the Willow Springs Soup & Bread team has been an amazing opportunity to be part of a truly inclusive and integrative social and work environment. Yes, he's learned to peel potatoes and grate cheese and operate an industrial dishwasher, but we're also seeing gains in other areas. Areas that will see his opportunities for meaningful inclusion increased and enriched. He's learning the names of the other volunteers in the program and the importance of greeting them when he sees them. He's learning to work as part of a team, picking up a task where another leaves off and working in tandem to complete it. He's learning about respecting his peers work environment by giving them space and minimizing the noise he makes in that shared space.

And what are they learning? They're gaining a greater understanding of autism and the communication challenges, interference of repetitive behaviours and lack of social understanding that is often associated with that. The end of each work day sees the team gather to share something positive they noticed about their coworkers that day. This process leaves participants with a sense of pride, not just that they were able to pull together to produce a beautiful, quality product for our local food system but also knowing that they are recognized, appreciated and even admired for their own unique skills and abilities.

Opportunities for Growth

There is interest and opportunity to grow all of Willow Springs' food initiatives:

The Soup & Artisan Bread Social Extravaganza continues to garner new and continued interest from the community. Sales of Soup & Artisan Bread subscriptions pay the participants (those facing barriers to employment), WSCC staff, and all materials and ingredients. The profits are reinvested back into WSCC to support other social enterprise initiatives. WSCC's Soup & Bread Program is now being used as a model for expansion and replication at WSCC and beyond. Currently, the Soup & Artisan Bread subscription is the mainstay of the approach, but numerous alternatives are in the works including value-added Harvest Baskets, Holiday Gift Baskets, artisan baked pizza & Salad subscriptions, and a Meals on Wheels program all using locally grown or prepared foods.

Harvest Share has the potential to grow within the urban and rural communities surrounding Thunder Bay. WSCC is currently working to review the last year of operations to ensure that this initiative can be self-sustaining and even profitable. Willow Springs would like to incorporate more wild harvesting into Harvest Share, as well as work more closely with other organizations (including Roots to Harvest) to bolster the positive impact in the community.

Willow Springs' Farmers Market provides much needed micro business economic development and rural community economic development opportunities. Willow Springs is committed to growing the Market so that it can become a seasonal mainstay of their rural area and provide opportunities for food, fun and profit for local businesses. They would like to offer training opportunities for small vendors in the area to assist them in producing more and marketing their items as effectively as possible.

WSCC's Therapeutic Gardening initiatives have the potential to significantly expand in the coming years. WSCC is committed to continuing with numerous

community partnerships and working more closely with hospitals, rehabilitation facilities and other community organizations at the larger community garden site at Lakehead University.

One of the many exciting undertakings is a new partnership with Lakehead's School of Social Work to begin a Horticultural Therapy Certificate Program. Once implemented, this partnership will provide first-class training on site to developing practitioners. WSCC's expertise and leadership in this area is very exciting for the community and has the potential to reach across all of Northwestern Ontario.

Challenges & Limitations

Willow Springs generates half of its operational income through fee-for-service programming. This is remarkable for a small not-for-profit organization, but issues of ongoing stability are still a concern.

The Soup & Artisan Bread Extravaganza consistently has a waiting list due to the limitation of certified kitchen spaces in which to work. As they make approximately 140 litres of soup per week, they need access to an industrial soup kettle and blast cooler in order to safely and efficiently scale up production. This equipment is only available at the Regional Food Distribution Association in Thunder Bay, and renting the kitchen must be done months in advance to secure a space. Scaling up equipment at the WSCC site would be a costly undertaking.

At the Willow Springs' Farmers Market, some barriers include restrictive regulatory barriers for selling certain items like farm fresh eggs, wild game, wild forest foods (berries, mushrooms, etc.). Having greater access to these products would enhance the attractiveness of WSCC's Market, as well as the value added products they offer in their Soup & Artisan Bread Extravaganza (*venison bisque, anyone?*).

Lastly, Willow Springs notes that government, private and grant funding is often too strict and doesn't reflect the broad range of programs and projects that WSCC is involved in. Willow Springs would like to see more innovative funding for projects that think outside the Market/Farm/Co-op "box" when it comes to food.

Visions for the Future

Willow Springs is brimming with excitement about the future! They are becoming more and more sustainable. With an impressive 50% of revenue from fee-for-service projects, WSCC is leading the way as a model for sustainable community organization development.

The main priority for the organization is to solidify sustainable business plan practices with their long term vision. It's an ongoing challenge to work toward these broader visions when staff time for development, lack of core funding, and shortage of funders that fund multi-stream organizations is present. The importance of building on community relationships and providing accessible, inclusive programming is paramount to their future direction.

WSSC would like to expand in the areas of therapeutic gardening and food production, more extensive and varied skills training for disadvantaged groups, and incorporating more social purpose enterprise principles across all of their food, gardening and art initiatives.

Key Successes:

- Prioritizing social capital investments: all of Willow Springs' networks are intentional and centered around relationships, building connections, foods, gardens and art to make for a more deeply connected, inclusive and vibrant community.
- Partnerships! Willow Springs actively works with eighteen community organizations to deliver or facilitate programming. They work with a wide variety of organizations and client groups and this makes them innovative and a treasured resource in the community.
- Supporting non-traditional employment and training opportunities: Willow Springs works effectively with organizations and individuals who have traditionally been isolated from food preparation/sales and gardening. Initiatives like the Soup & Artisan Bread Extravaganza help provide inclusive opportunities for developing real work skills for adults with intellectual disabilities.
- Ability to "think outside the box" and apply fun, creativity, passion, therapy and more via food, art and gardening initiatives. Willow Springs tries new approaches, asks participants what they want to learn about or do, and provides needed encouragement or creativity to seek success. WSSC crosses boundaries and takes chances, but their impact on participants, organizations and the broader community is incredibly inspiring.
- Flexibility re: delivery of programs. Willow Springs does offer some traditional "workshops" and "training sessions", but they mostly focus on being flexible and adaptive to meet the needs of the partner organization or target clientele and start from where "the client is" instead of imposing pre-determined actions and outcomes.

If you are participating in food initiatives with Willow Springs, chances are you will leave feeling happier, healthier, more creative and certainly energized! We could use more of this in all of our communities.

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<http://willowsprings.ca>