

A Success Story

La Soupe populaire de Hull Gatineau, Quebec

The little house that grew

Founded by nuns in the 1970s, La Soupe populaire de Hull had to overcome many hurdles before it became a key link in the community help network. Thirty years later, the soup kitchen has become a place where people come to talk about their problems, obtain support and learn to reintegrate society, and it could serve as a role model for many communities.

It all started in a furniture store. The idea for the soup kitchen was actually spawned at the St Vincent de Paul store in downtown Hull in 1974. Having nowhere to go, many of Hull Island's disadvantaged people would gather amid the used sofas, kitchen tables and chairs to find a little company and someone to talk to. That's when the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa, with the help of local residents, set up the organization. "The people at the St Vincent de Paul store visited the Accueil Bonneau in Montreal and were inspired to set up the Accueil Ozanam, which would later become the Soupe populaire de Hull," says Manager Lise Paradis. Today, the soup kitchen does much more than serve meals: a number of partnerships with other organizations in the area have helped set up on-the-job training sessions and a whole range of help services.

Moves and upheavals

Over its 30-year life span, La Soupe populaire de Hull has moved five times and has restructured at least as many times, but has always continued to serve its clientele and adjust to their changing needs. Its first home was a space downtown. It moved on to a community centre, then shared premises with an emergency shelter before setting up in a church basement. At one point, La Soupe populaire even occupied a little "matchbox house." These little houses, which were built for the influx of workers employed at the EB Eddy matchstick factory, still stand in the heart of the city's working-class neighbourhood. "Imagine serving 70 meals a day in a kitchen with a small stove, fridge and freezer. There were tables in all the rooms and filing cabinets in the washroom!" recalls Lise Paradis.

Larger premises to serve a larger clientele

In 1997, La Soupe populaire ventured into training and education, a direction it still follows today. Local organizations got together to do some serious brainstorming: a Table on Homelessness was created, representing about 40 help organizations in the greater Gatineau area, and it conducted a huge needs analysis. In light of the data that was collected, La Soupe populaire de Hull finally decided to set up two service points and to do more than just serve meals. "We finally went back to our little house, which we were renting," explains Lise Paradis. "It was much too small, but it enabled us to serve our clients on their turf."

From the Centre Saint-Joseph located in another part of town, La Soupe populaire started to offer subsidized on-the-job training in its kitchens, offices and second-hand clothing boutique to people receiving social assistance benefits, as well as job reintegration services. That is when the SCPI* stepped into the picture. "The first contribution we received, along with other donations, enabled us to expand the Centre Saint-Joseph, reorganize the kitchen and add a community hall," explains Lise Paradis. Inaugurated in summer 2003, the Centre welcomes 80 or 90 people a day, and extramural school projects for people who want to continue their education or go back to school are being prepared with the school board.

“This is our house!”

The little matchbox house on Charlevoix Street has also changed a lot since the days it had tables in the bedrooms. A second SCPI* contribution made it possible to hire a mental health worker and to buy the little house, which was expanded and renovated. A dozen private donors pitched in to help with the work: Pierre Cayer et associés, a group of architects, drew up the plans for free; Notary Charles H Rioux notarized the building purchase; Pilon Ltée supplied all the decorating materials; Rampes Mirik donated balconies and stairways; and Construction JPL did all the work. In September 2004, the little house became the pride of the entire community. “We even have an elderly gentleman who comes for his meals in a suit and tie. Everyone is proud to set foot in the little house on Charlevoix Street, and there is a very strong sense of belonging,” says Lise Paradis, who wanted to point out the exceptional contributions from private companies in the Hull community: the Maxi supermarket in Hull, among others, continues to provide free food. This is completely in keeping with the Centre Ozanam’s original mission, 30 years ago: helping people in need is what Frédéric Ozanam, founder of the Order of St Vincent de Paul, wanted to do.

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*SCPI: Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative