

A Success Story

Atelier Action Jeunesse T.R. inc. Trois-Rivières, Quebec

A hands-on project with a lot of heart in Trois Rivières

To get young people off the street and into the job market, a repair and body shop has been transformed into a school of life. By helping young people acquire skills and the wherewithal to get off to a good start, we are restoring their pride and self-esteem.

Hélène Trudel is the first to admit that at Atelier Action Jeunesse TR Inc, which she manages, body and repair work are just a pretext for creating a bond of trust between young people and significant adults. "Our young people come from disadvantaged environments and have had serious problems at school, which has given them a very poor self-image. We want to restore their self-confidence and show them that they can succeed." And it works: the workshops have had an 84% success rate since they opened in 1997. In eight years, some 250 young people at risk of becoming homeless have opened the door to a new life.

Tools instead of books

Their success is due to the approach used in the workshops. An offshoot of the Corporation de la maison des jeunes Action Jeunesse, the workshops were designed to accommodate the way these young people, who are not welcome in school, learn. "As early as 1994, we noticed that many young drop-outs were spending their days tinkering with cars in neighbourhood backyards. We wanted to give them some technical training that would interest them, and we knew that the traditional school model was not for them," says Hélène Trudel. "So we decided to play up the practical side and drop the theory." Mission accomplished: the training has captured their imaginations and, more importantly, they stick it out right to the end.

A school of life

The young boys and girls who come to Atelier Action Jeunesse are referred by CLSCs and schools. This is often their last chance to build a future. With an average age of 20 years, many have barely completed their first year of high school and have spent years moving from one home to another. They have a tremendous need for stability. Atelier Action Jeunesse provides them with a real living environment for about 18 months, sometimes longer. Throughout their training, acquiring know-how and people skills are the priorities. "They learn manual skills and we teach them how to conduct themselves in the workplace, how to address their bosses and how to maintain good relations with their co-workers. We give them the tools they need to keep their jobs and to deal with life's hardships."

Transferable skills

The enormous building that houses Atelier Action Jeunesse is not just used to train autobody repairers. Although that was the case at the beginning, the people at Action Jeunesse quickly realized that not all drop-outs dreamed of working with cars. Their solution was to teach them transferable skills that they could apply in various job areas. "The young people who come here cannot fail again and go back to the streets. If they don't turn out to be autobody repairers, the skills they acquire in our multidisciplinary workshops will serve them in other job sectors," explains Hélène Trudel. Some of them learn how to repair bicycles or small appliances, while others learn to detail cars. In all cases, everyone gets a chance. The important thing is to commit to the full training, which also involves workshops on health, drinking, drug addiction and interpersonal

relations. In short, Atelier Action Jeunesse is a little like a family, a place where you learn to build your own life.

“Like manna from heaven”

The SCPI* helped Atelier Action Jeunesse find a permanent home in the heart of Trois Rivières. A \$115,000 contribution went toward the financing package for the enlargement and renovation of a building that now houses the offices, work spaces and body shops. Contributions were also made by the Government of Quebec, Gentec, a Montreal company that donated plymetal, and Home Depot, which donated materials. The SCPI* also contributed \$12,000 for the purchase of a truck used to salvage parts and transport various items the young people need for their work. “This funding was manna from heaven,” says H el ene Trudel. “Without the SCPI*, there would be 15 more young people on the street and on our waiting lists.”

by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

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*SCPI: Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative