

A Success Story

Corporation L'Autre Cartier Donnacona, Quebec

L'Autre Cartier: en route to a successful life

In the heart of downtown Donnacona, the Jacques Cartier Hotel has sheltered travellers and hosted weddings, family reunions and other significant events for generations. Today, between its memory-filled walls, young people in Portneuf are laying the foundations for solid life plans that will lead them back to school or into the job market.

The daily menu at l'Autre Cartier routinely attracts about a hundred clients a week. Ideally located, the restaurant is also used as a work platform for local youths who have had hard lives and are getting ready to enter the job market while they live at the former hotel, which has been transformed into a social reintegration centre. And it works!

From isolation to life on the street: a slippery slope

L'Autre Cartier opened its doors in September 2004 after many long months of work, thinking and quests for funding, supported by a handful of people who dreamed of a better life for young locals experiencing hard times. "The project came about as a result of the vision of Pierrette Girard of the Carrefour Jeunesse Emploi," relates Christian Plamondon, Manager of L'Autre Cartier. "Ms Girard was working with the young people and helping them to find jobs, prepare their résumés and increase their employability. She thought that working with them a few hours a week, then sending them back to their often isolated environments, was not a solution."

The dynamics are different for young people in Portneuf than for those in large urban centres, as they are for all young people in rural areas. They spend more time home alone, often in front of their computer screens. When their family life is chaotic or dysfunctional, they cannot seek refuge downtown or elsewhere, as young people in large cities can. Giving them the tools to go back to school or to land their first job is a solution for these young people, many of whom are at risk of running off to the big cities and winding up on the street like so many other young people.

A second-chance hotel

The idea of buying and transforming the Jacques Cartier Hotel in downtown Donnacona first came up in 2001. The building on Notre Dame Street had been unoccupied for seven years and had everything it needed to become the transitional shelter and reintegration centre that the Board of Directors of the Corporation L'Autre Cartier had been dreaming of. The Board of Directors is made up of representatives of the CLSC, the school board, the municipality and various local organizations. "The project came into being thanks to contributions from the National Homelessness Initiative, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the City of Donnacona, the Sisters of Charity, the Fédération des Caisses populaires, the Caisses populaires Desjardins de Portneuf, the Centre local de développement, the Quebec Department of Culture and Communications and the Knights of Columbus. All the partners and many fellow citizens attended a gospel mass that was organized to raise funds. We were able to buy the hotel in early 2004 and renovate it so that it could accommodate 14 young people," explains Christian Plamondon.

A real life project

L'Autre Cartier's clientele is made up of young people aged 18 to 30. The only selection criterion for these low-wage earners is to have a serious life project and the determination to do what has to be done to get back on track. "The young people here keep busy all day," explains Mr Plamondon.

“Some of them go to school and others are actively looking for employment.” They come home to L’Autre Cartier at around 4:30 pm and live a normal family life. They share the kitchen and everyone pitches in to prepare meals, do chores and keep house.

Eight young people, not necessarily residents, are also in training at L’Autre Cartier’s restaurant, which will give them an attestation of semi-specialized training in cooking and possibly lead to a job in the hotel or restaurant business. L’Autre Cartier’s ingenious formula provides young people with stability, helps them to overcome the social anxiety caused by their isolation and increases their self-esteem through their work experience in the community. This project is a wonderful example of how community solidarity can prevent young people in rural areas from winding up homeless. The National Homelessness Initiative is not oblivious to its success, having contributed through the youth homelessness component \$420,000 to renovate the former hotel. “Since the centre has only been officially operating since September 2004, our results are modest, but we know that we are on the right track,” says Christian Plamondon. “Our future plans include setting up affordable housing, and a large space next to the hotel has just become available.” To our minds, this is no coincidence.

By Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

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