

St. John's Bakery Shares Scaling-up Lessons

Image



Social enterprise provides meaningful employment while producing top-quality bread

When Father Roberto Ubertino returned from France, where he learned to bake bread, he taught the skill to people at [St. John the Compassionate Mission](#) and discovered it made their day.

“The light went off, and they started with 10 loaves a day,” says Shawn Burk. That was in 1986.

In 2001, Toronto-based St. John the Compassionate Mission opened [St. John’s Bakery](#) next door, and currently sells its organic breads and sweets to 40 businesses and 12

markets in the city.

The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

Prince Charles bought St. John's Bakery bread at the Evergreen Brick Works Farmers' Market in Toronto in November 2009.

The social enterprise employs about 32 people including people who receive social assistance, people who have a disability, people who have an emotional or mental illness, people new to Canada and single parents.

When getting started, the Toronto Enterprise Fund — a funding partnership between United Way of Greater Toronto and the three levels of government — provided St. John's Bakery with \$80,000 towards an oven and then \$45,000 annually for about eight additional years.

St. John's Bakery then became Canada's first non-profit social enterprise that received no outside funding.

The neighbourhood has rallied around the bakery, with many people wanting to lend help to the mission and its other programs.

There are many stories of how the enterprise has impacted people's lives.

One man lived on the street for 25 years with a drug addiction and no drive to improve his life. He came to the mission and started having meals and volunteering, leading him to start baking. He became the bakery's lead morning baker, and would give speeches downtown about how the mission and bakery helped him. Now he teaches children how to bake.

The enterprise finds its best advertising comes from press coverage, says Shawn, the bakery's administrator. For example, an article in The Globe and Mail sparked a company to reach out to St. John's Bakery and offer \$80,000 worth of free advertising.

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St. John's Bakery employs more than 30 people including those who have a disability.

When asked what lessons he learned that other organizations could benefit from, Shawn shares the following three points:

1. The core people launching the business need to be professionals. St. John's Bakery had a professional baker who was volunteering at the mission as a key person who helped start the enterprise. The bakery's high-end products win awards throughout the city, a feat that wouldn't be possible without having professionals on board, says Shawn. "That's the biggest challenge: Make sure you have the best product possible or everything is going to fall apart," he says.
2. When scaling, don't get ahead of yourself. "If we tried to expand quickly and it didn't work out then not only would we close down, we are also toying with these people's lives," Shawn says. "It's a community-based system here, we look out for each other. It's important that we have jobs in place for these people and in the future so just don't get ahead of yourself and ruin the whole thing."
3. Reach out to employment agencies to find the people you want to help. St. John's Bakery reaches out to a variety of sources to spread the word about the type of people they are looking to employ. People learn about job opportunities at the bakery through St. John the Compassionate Mission, WoodGreen Community Services, an employment agency for new Canadians, Ontario Works, shelters in the city as well as social media.

To learn more about St. John's Bakery, visit www.stjohnsbakery.com.

This article is part of an ENP-CA news inquiry in scaling up social enterprise. To learn more, click [here](#).

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