



Traveling LITE

A Winnipeg nonprofit helps bridge the gap from charity to CED

BY CARLY DUBOFF & BRENDAN REIMER

Why is charity so easy for people to support and yet social justice or CED poses such a challenge? Even when they are shown that charity is little more than a band-aid – or that it is actually harming people while helping them?

Ten years ago, for example, community activists in Winnipeg's inner city realized that Christmas charity was actually undermining some really brilliant solutions to poverty. A new Aboriginal grocery store in that part of town, Neechi Foods Co-op Ltd., was seeing their sales crash every December. Why? Because the very generous people of Winnipeg, under the co-ordination of their Christmas Cheer Board, were sending 20,000 Christmas hampers to folks in need, many of whom usually bought food at Neechi Foods.

Hmmm, what to do? Giving a box of groceries to those who were short on food was a wonderful gift. Yet nobody wanted their generosity to force Neechi Foods to close its doors. Neechi creates good jobs,

which remain one of the best ways to ensure that people don't need food hampers in the first place.

The Cheer Board itself spends more than \$750,000 purchasing food for the hampers. So the activists suggested that a small portion of this be spent at Neechi. People would get their food hamper, Neechi Foods wouldn't suffer, and the community would benefit by ensuring that Neechi would be there all year long.

It seemed like a brilliant win-win idea. But the Cheer Board said "no." The stratagem was "too political." When it comes down to a choice between the simplicity of charity and the complexity of development, many people cling to the former for safety.

What then does it take to help people shake that habit? The Christmas Cheer story has something to say about that too.

Turned away by the Cheer Board, the activists decided to follow their own advice. They pooled their annual hamper donation money, actively encouraged others to send in their money as well, and then spent it at Neechi Foods. The food was then dropped off at the Cheer Board to make use of their distribution system.

Was the Cheer Board excited over this new stream of donations? No. Worried that money was going to be diverted from their coffers, the Cheer Board frankly and publicly criticized the activists for their actions. But that initiative was the

beginning of Local Investment Toward Employment (LITE), a singular example of the evolution of charitable activity into community economic development.

The Next Step Up

If a "brilliant idea" is the first step in that evolution, the next step may be "perseverance."

This year marks the 11th LITE campaign. Since its inception in 1994, LITE has collected more than \$800,000 in support of Neechi Foods and other inner-city businesses and employment initiatives and more than 2,500 families have received "CED Christmas hampers."

Now, it may seem strange to find "hamper" and "CED" used in the same breath. But LITE has found a way to consistently channel the Christmas burst of generosity towards the community's longer-term benefit.

Every year, for example, Andrews Street Family Centre gets together a group of women from Winnipeg's North End to bake more than 14,000 cookies for the Christmas hampers, buying their ingredients from Neechi Foods. A new project will see LITE purchase honey from a bee-keeping business run by Aboriginal youth.

(above) The 2005 LITE Wild Blueberry Pancake Breakfast, (inset) members of the Native Women's Transition Centre serve pancakes. All the photos in this article are courtesy of Trevor Brucki.

People in a tough spot get food; local business is supported; jobs are created; and donors get excited about “donations that give twice!” A lot of these jobs are short-term, of course. But for some participants, this can be the first step on the road to something bigger and better and it provides the opportunity to give, as well as receive. One younger woman, after she finished a food handling training course through the LITE project, felt inspired to complete her Grade 12. Another pursued a food-related diploma at Red River Community College.

“Sometimes all it takes is that one opportunity to find out that you actually can do things,” says Lillian Richards of Andrew’s Street Family Centre. “Suddenly much more seems possible. And in the meantime these women earn some money. They get to buy presents for their kids and maybe some nice food for a good meal with the family. And they feel good that they are making food for others rather than just waiting for food to be sent to them.”

Brilliance, perseverance, & expansion – but not dispersion. An important aspect of the evolution from charitable activity to community economic development is to get focussed, as well as creative. Unfortunately, while LITE’s purpose has remained straightforward, its ultimate message is not & never has been.

More than Food

Okay, a brilliant idea and persevering in it. What then? Stretching it in space as well as time, maybe.

To guide its work, LITE adopted the CED principles developed by Neechi Foods. Wanting to be much more than just a grocery store in the North End, Neechi refers to 11 criteria when making decisions:

- Use of locally produced goods and services
- Production of goods and services for local use
- Local reinvestment of profits
- Long-term employment of local residents
- Local skill development
- Local decision-making
- Support for public health
- A healthy physical environment
- Neighbourhood stability
- Human dignity
- Support for other CED initiatives

Using the “Neechi 11,”* LITE increasingly began to look beyond food and hampers and Christmas. There were many great CED initiatives being started by community groups in the inner city. LITE decided that some of the money it raised ought to go toward these other initiatives in order to have more of a year-round impact locally.

Writing, design, editorial, and delivery jobs at several community newspapers are now supported by LITE grants, as are a variety of skill development and job opportunities for youth in three different communities. LITE was also a significant funding partner in the creation of a unique project where at-risk youth were partnered with Aboriginal journeymen carpenters to form a renovation crew. At the first house blessing, one of the youth was moved to speak, “Thank you for giving us a chance to prove ourselves when no one else would!”

Another unique social enterprise is a worker co-op that produces high-end Aboriginal star blankets. LITE purchases up to 20 of the co-op’s blankets and donates them to nonprofit community organizations that then auction or raffle these beautiful works off at a good deal more than their \$300 retail. The co-op gets sales and publicity, and the community organizations are able to leverage another income stream. Realizing this, many of these organizations now purchase blankets directly from the co-op for fundraisers. LITE’s impact on the sales at the co-op, therefore, has become greater than its own annual blanket purchases.

Focussed Creativity

Brilliance, perseverance, and expansion – but not dispersion. An important aspect of the evolution from charity is to get focussed, as well as creative.

*The “Neechi 11” have come to be quite well-known in Winnipeg’s CED community, including the adoption of these principles by the Government of Manitoba in the creation of its CED lens and such programs as *Neighbourhoods Alive!* See “The Good News from Manitoba,” *Making Waves* 15,2 (Summer 2004), pp. 26-29. Photos: Also featured at the Pancake Breakfast were (left) local merchants, (right) Graffiti Art Program artisan Cody Starr, and (inset) “Genesis” rappers Joseph Louis and Breanna Wade.





So a big part of the answer to the paradigm shift is, of all things, “partying.” To get people to grasp a higher purpose for their charitable instincts, give them a taste of the brimming community life we are promoting.

LITE does not work directly with residents, for example. The credit for this goes to the brilliant and determined work of those in the community organizations that LITE supports. LITE’s primary role is to raise money in support of inner-city initiatives by promoting and building awareness of CED throughout Winnipeg and by creating events and tools that “infect” people with the CED “bug.”

Several years ago, LITE did explore another role. In response to its partners’ request for technical assistance and capacity building, LITE made a proposal to the provincial government (interestingly, one of four similar proposals all made at the same time). The Province responded by encouraging the four organizations to come up with a collaborative initiative.

Two things have emerged. The CED Training Intermediary is an educational program that offers a range of learning opportunities for CED practitioners including tailored workshops, internships, and CED diplomas and certificates. The CED Technical Assistance Service matches up community initiatives in need of some specific help with professionals willing to donate their time and expertise. While LITE has not been directly

involved in the development of the Training Intermediary, it continues to be active on the Steering Committee of the Technical Assistance Service.

While these two initiatives go well beyond targeted fundraising, their importance to LITE’s primary role is clear. Nevertheless, despite the great and diverse needs all around it, LITE has withstood the temptation to “do everything, for everybody.” By remaining focussed, it remains something that people can get a handle on.

Making the CED Bug “Infectious”

Unfortunately, while LITE’s purpose has remained straightforward, its ultimate message is not and never has been. What CED can achieve, and how, is not easy to explain.

To promote CED, LITE uses a variety of traditional fundraising methods. We send out letters of solicitation to supporters, community organizations, businesses, unions, and many others. We issue press releases. We give radio and newspaper interviews, and make as many presentations as there are churches, schools, and workplaces that

will have us. LITE is never short of passionate volunteers willing to go out and tell people about CED and the great things that are strengthening Winnipeg’s inner city.

Unfortunately, LITE’s request is one of so many. What would make someone take special note of our particular campaign? When asked what would get more people to donate, almost all our existing donors assured us that more people would give “if they only knew what LITE was really all about!”

So therein lies our greatest challenge: when all is said and done, we still have to win over people’s hearts and minds from the simplicity of charity to the complexity of development.

What works best? Stories!

Is that any surprise? It shouldn’t be. We (and many of you, dear readers) have seen eyes glaze over under the impact of passionate but depersonalized discourses about the economy, politics, and development.

This is where things like the “CED Christmas hamper” can be quite useful. It is a real and tangible example of the message we are trying to get across. And on top of that, people can literally buy into this new concept right away.

LITE's 2005 Partners

- Andrews Street Family Centre Community Kitchen
- Lord Selkirk Aboriginal Women's Group
- Native Women's Transition Centre Catering
- Neechi Foods Community Store
- North End Housing Project
- The Northern Star Workers Co-operative
- Odd Jobs for Kids
- The Good Food Club
- The Point
- The Up Shoppe
- Spence Neighbourhood Association First Jobs for Youth Project
- St. Matthew's-Maryland Community Garden Preserves
- West Central STREETS
- Winnipeg IDA Pilot Project
- Wolseley Family Place Food Connections Project
- Youth Opportunity Project ■

Evolution has been essential to LITE's success in the past as a leader in Winnipeg's CED community, & will remain so in the future. The ability to read the public & its partners, & to respond creatively, has modeled the evolution in thinking that LITE has sought from them.

When you make it live, real, interactive, and a whole heap of fun, the vision becomes so much more interesting and clear. For example, LITE created an engaging video a few years ago. It demonstrates CED in action, allowing viewers to see and hear about the very real impacts of CED initiatives on the lives of participants.

LITE's approach to the annual general meeting is another example. Is there anything more boring than an AGM? So why not turn it into a storytelling opportunity? Since LITE had a hard time getting quorum at its AGMs in the past, someone suggested holding the AGM on a transit bus. We would get the business done while our volunteer bus driver took us from one location to another, visiting and learning about LITE's partners. The "AGM on a Bus" has solved the attendance problem while developing new supporters of LITE and of CED.

This idea led to another brainwave, LITE's annual "Dine & Dash." Once again a transit

driver volunteers their time to drive a whole bunch of people around town for an evening of fun, music, food, and learning. Last year, about 60 people listened to a jazz quartet, ate salad and toured Andrews Street Family Centre, supped on bannock and pickerel at Neechi Foods, and finally tucked into a raspberry dessert at another community partner, The Good Food Club. It generated income for the people at these initiatives, and 60 people had a ton of fun learning about CED. "I had no idea that there were so many amazing things going on in Winnipeg's inner city. It is truly incredible!" said one passenger.

So a big part of the answer to the paradigm shift is, of all things, "partying." To get people to grasp a higher purpose for their charitable instincts, give them a taste – no, a mouthful – of the brimming community life we are promoting.

The biggest CED party every year is LITE's Wild Blueberry Pancake Breakfast. It's officially LITE's Christmas campaign kickoff, but so much more in fact. It is a celebration of Winnipeg's inner city and a demonstration of CED in action.

LITE hires caterers from local organizations to make delicious wild blueberry pancakes, muffins, and fruit salad. All the groceries are purchased at Neechi Foods. Local performers are hired to entertain diners, and inner-city crafters and artists sell their wares. Young artists from a local community arts programs are hired to create a piece of art in the course of the morning, which is then auctioned off as a fundraiser for LITE.

Last year more than 800 people from all walks of life came to the Indian and Métis Friendship Centre to take part. This year, the Breakfast's ninth, was bigger still. CBC Radio sponsored it, and their promotions and live broadcast brought more than 1,000 people through the door. It is truly wonderful to see residents passing the maple syrup to politicians, grannies telling stories to academics, kids dancing to a women's drum group, and CED practitioners starting their holiday shopping by purchasing locally-made art while networking with other progressive

(left) North End Women's Centre Drumming Group.

folks at the biggest CED event in Manitoba, if not Canada!

New Challenges

However, it is time once again for LITE to figure out its identity and its niche. LITE was created to help support CED initiatives when few other funders would. Now United Way of Winnipeg, the Winnipeg Foundation, and the Province of Manitoba have all begun to fund CED organizations and social enterprises, including many of LITE's partners.

This is fantastic, but what now is LITE's role? Has it worked itself out of a job?

The purchases of food and blankets, the promotion of CED and inner-city ingenuity, and creating events that give Winnipeggers the opportunity to see and support these great initiatives – these are still valuable things for LITE to do. But grants of less than \$10,000 pale in comparison to the dollars that some partners receive from other funders.

Should LITE continue to top up these larger grants, or should it focus instead on supporting initiatives that still fall through the cracks? Should LITE try to get larger funders to undertake its annual commitments to partners, and then redirect its own resources into new initiatives – perhaps sponsoring an annual CED project competition that would draw out even more CED initiatives?

“The Pancake Breakfast is a magnificent event, a real celebration of community development in Winnipeg’s inner core. LITE promotes the long-term benefits of jobs, rather than the short-term effects of charity. This kind of work is vital for the survival & growth of this city.” (MP & long-time LITE supporter Judy Wasylcyia-Leis)

Or LITE could return to its original focus: raising money to assist the community sector through grants and periodic bulk purchases. The purchases have much less of an impact than grants do, unfortunately. Much of the purchase price must go to offset an enterprise's cost of goods, whereas 100% of a grant may be spent where management judges best. Given that fact, what deserves more of LITE's energy: collecting cash to support community initiatives by means of grants and purchases? Or creating events and celebrations that educate and build awareness about social enterprises and CED?

These tough decisions are made still more difficult by the fact that LITE's board – the people that make the funding decisions – is very soft-hearted. It sees the value in the many CED activities going on in Winnipeg. The temptation, as ever, is to say “yes” to every good idea and thereby disperse the money and our energy in many directions.

But the choice will have to be made, and that is the last point we have to share with you for now. Evolution has been essential to LITE's success in the past as a leader in Winnipeg's CED community, and will remain so in the future. The ability to read the public and its partners, and to respond creatively, has modeled the evolution in thinking LITE has sought from them: from the charity model to the development approach, from the hand-out to the hand-up, from “political” activity to sound community investment and really making a difference.



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For more on Neechi Foods and the Northern Star Worker Co-op, see “Inner-City Co-ops, Crafted by Women,” *Making Waves* 16,3 (Summer/Autumn 2005), p. 57.

Looking for resources on social enterprise, related events, and a way to connect with other social entrepreneurs? Interested in social enterprise impacts, hybrids, and policy implications?

The Fraser Valley Centre for Social Enterprise has launched online at www.centreforsocialenterprise.com. Sign up for our regular e-newsletter, and bookmark the site. Check back often as this online resource grows!

The Fraser Valley Centre for Social Enterprise is an initiative of Community Futures South Fraser, in partnership with MCC-Employment and Community Development.



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