

**Solidarity Economy in Montréal**

**Women's Activism Creating Alternatives Through the Ethics of Care**

**L. Marie-France Germain**

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## ABSTRACT

### Solidarity Economy in Montréal: Women's Activism Creating Alternatives Through the Ethics of Care

L. Marie-France Germain

The feminization of poverty has been, and still is, a problem in North America. Canadian public policies have a negative affect on women, especially those who are mothers, single or elderly. Large urban centres such as Montréal, Québec have a large proportion of women living on low incomes or on social assistance. Through participant observation at Food Central, a community organization, I interacted with these women and the women activists who work with them to assist in easing the difficulties women experience in providing for their families and themselves when household income is insufficient to cover monthly bills. My fieldwork was conducted from August 2008-March 2009, some of the most expensive months of the year for many women.

Québec's history of social upheavals since the 1960s and its economic instability has created a situation that closely parallels Latin American countries. Both Québec and Latin American countries have increasingly large and popular activist organizations seeking social justice. Many of the grassroots Latin American activist organizations are creating alternatives to the globalized capitalist economy such as "*economía solidaria*" which is based on an ethics of care, reciprocity, and non-monetary forms of exchanges. This thesis presents the narratives and life stories of the women activists, volunteers and women who came to Food Central as clients to learn what alternatives to the formal economy if any, the women use as strategies of survival in a large city.

In acknowledgement of and gratitude to the women who gifted me with their valuable time, knowledge and insights and who shared their life stories in the hope that their narratives might benefit at least one woman in the future.

*We cannot accept that attempts to maintain this system are made at the expense of women. The mass layoffs, cuts in public spending in social fields, and reaffirmation of this production model increase the work involved in reproduction and sustainability of life, and thus directly affect our lives as women... On behalf of all these women, and of ourselves, we continue committed to the construction of the feminist movement as a counter-hegemonic political force and an instrument for women to achieve the transformation of their lives and our societies, by supporting and strengthening the self-organisation of women, dialogue, and networking between social movements' struggles.*

*(Excerpt from the Women's Assembly Declaration, World Social Forum, Porto Alegre, Brazil 2009)*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION:

*While economic circumstances fall far short of a lived experience and are not culturally neutral, a nuanced reading of them can provide some basis for understanding how, why, and from what positions women decide to engage in collective action (Stephen 1997:6).*

It is a little after nine in the morning when I arrive at Food Central<sup>1</sup> and though the doors do not open to the clients until ten, there are already eight people lined up in front with their pull-carts, bags and backpacks waiting for the food distribution to begin. The last two weeks of the month before the first of the next month, the welfare “cheque day,” are usually the busiest. Today is no exception to the rule. As I pass, the people who know me as a volunteer greet me while the others look on curiously when I enter the building and close the door behind me. Teri, Charli and Marshall are sitting in the office space drinking coffee and discussing the plans for the day. How many families do we think we will serve today? Seventy, eighty or ninety? Will our dwindling supply of milk and rice last through the day if there are over seventy clients? Did you hear the latest unemployment figures? Will it affect us? I stop to talk to them before going into the main room to start up the computer and prepare the screening room for the intake with Queenie if she hasn’t already done so.

Few of the regular volunteers have arrived yet to set up for food distribution. The perishables need to be brought out of the walk-in refrigerator and set up for accessibility. The snacking goods have been brought out of the back storeroom and some of the food bags had been prepared ahead of time to keep the tempo going once the “service” gets in full swing. At present though, there is calm and little noise, just Marjorie banging pots as

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<sup>1</sup> “Food Central” is a pseudonym for the organization.



she heats up the vegetable lentil soup for the clients to sample. I get a cup of coffee and rejoin Teri and Charli in the office space as the volunteers start coming in and heading for their stations. The radio is turned on in the food preparation area and Mama B starts moving crates and getting her workspace ready. A couple of the young male volunteers bring the crates of eggs, juice, fruit cups [a special treat] and produce from the refrigerator as Mama B directs the traffic flow. The jokes and banter start up and the movement is constant: 9:40 a.m. and the countdown begins as we organize the chairs to maximize the space for the clients to fit in the room without restricting movement around them, nearly a futile effort when the room is full.

Ten minutes before service Annie enters going directly to her desk to prepare to greet clients and pass out the numbered cards. I have already sorted and reorganized the cards so that she does not have to do it. She thanks me. Annie gets herself a cup of coffee and pulls out the various forms she is likely to need today: the information slips for new clients and referral slips for those living out of district and the listing of other food distribution outlets in Montréal. Teri comes in and asks if everyone is ready because it is almost 10:00 a.m. and the clients have started to file in. There are no arguments today about who was first in line: it is the three elderly pensioners who always come very early to socialize outside by pre-arrangement on the service days they have chosen. I notice on my way to the intake area that we are already at number fifteen; the clients are in for a long wait because even with two of us screening, Queenie and I take at least an hour to process twenty clients. We cannot, and do not, allocate a time limit for each client. Sometimes the clients need to talk, to tell us a bit about their lives, their

issues, their triumphs, or their difficulties so while some clients may take five minutes, others may need twenty as we listen to their stories.

Now that the common room is full, there is a feeling of chaotic movement as the noise level escalates and we start loudly yelling out the numbers: number one, numero un, number two, numero deux! I am in front of the computer with the client database, so Queenie has to depend on her clients to know their file numbers to enter by hand in a notebook for later inclusion in the computer. All the clients have to show their family members' IDs and proof of address to make sure that their files are up-to-date. We chat casually with our clients as we process their information trying to maintain an informal atmosphere unlike the formal social agencies many have to depend on, such as social services, the medical services or employment offices.

Filling out the order slips is the next step after entering their information: "Do you want the baked beans?" "No? Okay, then do you want to replace those with other kinds of beans, extra eggs (1/2 dozen), tuna or legumes?" "Extra eggs." "Anything else, coffee, tea, flour, jam, condiments?" "Tea and sugar, please if you have them." If the client has children, they also can choose peanut butter, juice and/or cereal. The slip goes into the basket for the food packers to fill out and they in turn, call out the client's number, adding to the cacophony in the room. This ritual of calling in the clients, talking to them, filling out their order slips then calling the next one continues until one of us needs a break, usually after two hours of chatting, joking, sympathizing, cooing over babies, giving sweets to the children [candy is always donated after a seasonal occasion such as Hallowe'en] and sometimes dealing with difficult clients. It is halfway through the service hours and the clients keep on coming. By one-thirty, both Queenie and I are

getting hoarse and hungry, but with just a half hour and over ten clients left, we both keep on going and the food packers keep on packing though some of the items have run out. We are told not to offer them anymore. It is two-thirty before we are done with the screening. The radio has been turned off and the clients' chattering has diminished. There is only so much noise anyone can take during the course of the day and we are all ready for silence or as close to it as can be had.

The volunteers who have not had a chance to eat lunch do so at this time and then we start cleaning up for the next day, sweeping the floors, washing the dishes and the tables, putting out the garbage and the recycling and just debriefing after another busy day. We saw and fed over one hundred families today; fifteen new families with only three being referred out to the food distribution outlet closest to their home boroughs. It is more than we had anticipated earlier in the day, but reflects the difficult economic situations that more people are enduring as local jobs are being lost to the economic collapse that has spread globally since the summer of 2008. It is not only the small companies that are closing, but many of the multi-national franchises are also downsizing their operations by laying off workers.

With so many new clients, Teri is worried that the supplies and the budget will not stretch to meet the growing demand for food assistance. Rufus is more casual about it though it is part of his job description to maintain the budget and food orders. They often clash on this issue but there is not much that can be done except hope that donations keep coming in. Alia at the InfoCentral desk<sup>2</sup> is kept busy with the clients we send to her for referrals to the many resources available, where she provides the names and phone

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<sup>2</sup> The InfoCentral is an information and resource centre operated by the Community Council organization at Food Central during food distribution hours.

numbers for everything from free legal advice, to rental issues and support clinics to free language lessons. The clients help out too, with the knowledge they have acquired through experience and freely share with others as they wait for their food allotment to be prepared.

Everyone is at Food Central for the same reasons – food insecurity, whether to help alleviate it or because it is a chronic problem for their households. Food Central clients tend to hold two stances in their need to rely on food assistance. There are many who feel at ease at Food Central building community bonds and associating with their fellows there. Others have not yet overcome the perceived stigma from needing aid and they keep to themselves, trying to be invisible. If they knew that there are full-time wage earners, part-time workers, former millionaires, business persons, nurses, teachers, architects, professors, doctors, chemists, scientists, engineers, photographers, documentarians, writers, musicians and artists sitting in the room with them, they might think differently. These are the “nouveau pauvres” and Montréal abounds with them as the global economy falters.

## **TOWARDS SOLIDARITY ECONOMY IN THE GLOBAL NORTH**

It is in the context of such life-changing experiences that many start rethinking community and their place within it. When the dominant global market economy fails to provide stability and economic security for people and communities, more traditional forms of social interdependence using reciprocity-based solidarity economies often become ascendant (Gibson-Graham 2006). Gibson-Graham argue that the dominance of

neo-liberal economic<sup>3</sup> policies are disrupted when the formerly seemingly stable lives of the working class and that the breaking of the social contract creates openings for a “different economic subjectivity based on an ethic of care for the other” (2006: 32-33). The solidarity economy mobilizes local – that is, the community – cooperation amongst its members in efforts to ensure that, through reciprocal agreement, all have access to the basic needs to survive. Urban communities like NDG are very large and are comprised of smaller communities within it creating networks of interdependence often working together to benefit the greater community. Their collaborative actions form the foundation for the implementation of solidarity economy.

Solidarity economy is actualized through community-based reciprocity between its members. It is a growing movement in some Latin American countries such as Brazil which has a government department and minister of “Economía Solidaria” fostering and supporting community-based economies in conjunction with support for participatory democracy through community councils which encourage community solidarity and a politicized citizenry. Solidarity economy can involve transactions based on money or on a non-monetary exchange of goods and services based on a mutually agreed value.

Community gardens, collectives, cooperatives, bartering networks, community kitchens,

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<sup>3</sup> Because the term “neo-liberalism” occurs frequently in recent literature documenting female poverty, what is meant by neo-liberal economy, or neo-liberalism, should be explained. After the faltering of the global economy in the 1970s known as “Stagflation,” University of Chicago professor Friedrich von Hayek and some of his students, most notably Milton Friedman, defined neo-classical liberalism or, more commonly, neo-liberalism. It is based on a theory of “trickle-down” economics that proposes that if economic markets were deregulated, taxes were decreased for corporations and public institutions were privatized, the market economy would be more efficient and everyone would benefit economically (Waligorski 1996). Over time, neo-liberalism has proven to be a failure in terms of enriching the greater populations of the world; instead there has been increasing poverty while a small percentage of the global population has benefitted. Professor Emir Sader (2003) of Rio de Janeiro was one of the first to use the term “post-neo-liberalism” when he described the rise of the left-leaning governments of Latin America. It is yet to be seen if the new socially beneficial economic policies, many based on renationalizing former public institutions and supporting solidarity economies, applied by Latin American governments will be able to survive the enormous pressures applied on them to revert to neo-liberalism (Sader 2003).

clothing exchange groups, book exchange groups and small market enterprises are some examples of systems included in solidarity economies. Solidarity economies are notably democratic and non-hierarchical which complements local participatory democracy which has often been led by women involved in the communities due to their attachment to place. The Brazilian government encourages community councils to gather its citizens' participation to decide where the municipal funding known as Orçamento Participativo (OP) or "Participatory Budget" should be directed to ameliorate the community's living conditions (Baiocchi 2005:2). Gianpaolo Baiocchi who has studied participatory democracy in Porto Alegre states that "the OP stands out as a system that has not only provided services and improvements for the urban poor but involved large numbers of them in active civic life (2005:2). According to Baiocchi (2005:4) even though the participants are poor and often not formally educated they consider themselves as "militants" in the struggle for social justice and are civically engaged referring to themselves as citizens with rights and responsibilities. The premise is that the citizens living in the communities are best situated to know what improvements are necessary for the well-being of the people. Health, education and infrastructural projects are of foremost importance to the members of the community so clinics, schools, housing improvements and utilities are built or upgraded to meet the needs of its citizenry (Baiocchi 2005). Because of their participation and militancy, even the poorest in the city of Porto Alegre are enfranchised and empowered through the municipal programs (Baiocchi 2005:4).

Montréal does not have large slums or favela style community because every borough has mixed socio-economic classes, but the city has always had a high percentage

of low-income residents. Because of this dispersal of indigent citizens in the city, there have always been many community activists united as a force to keep the issue of social injustice visible. These activist groups exist in lieu of Latin American community councils as they strive towards more equitable distribution of the basic needs such as food security and affordable housing that allow marginalized persons to live with a measure of dignity. While this is admirable, it is not always conducive to civic engagement by the poor themselves who continue to feel disenfranchised and seldom self-refer as “citizens.” Baoicchi notes that “Much as social movements are contexts in which activists engage in the practices and relationships they would like to see extended to society at large, “prefiguring” them, in the democratic world such movements rarely extend beyond a small fraction of a population” (2005:5). Social justice movements need to actively encourage the engagement of the communities they work with. Baoicchi argues that exploring the correlation between participatory governance and civic life “helps explain what happens when social movements’ innovative practices are extended to broader publics” (2005:5).

Many of the activists in both Latin America and in NDG are women and my research has found that most of those who are experiencing food insecurity and inadequate housing provisions are women. Some of the low-income women are also activists but following Baoicchi’s reasoning, if more women were to participate in social movements, their level of civic engagement would be higher and it follows that the women would also feel enfranchised and more empowered to demand their rights as citizens. There are a number of reasons women tend to be more involved in social justice causes which make encouraging participation in social movements by low-income

women a political extension of defending “place.” In the introduction to their book,

*Women and Politics of Place*, Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar (2005:2) write:

In putting this book together, the question of why women and why place emerged in multiple ways. As the project unfolded, we started by theorizing place to mean what women define as their environment and what determines their livelihoods, being and identity: that is, body, home, local environs, and community—the arenas that women are motivated to defend, define, and own politically.

Viewed in these terms, the women activists are – especially concerning food security – defending their rights in a political struggle against their effacement as citizens. Because solidarity economies comprise many of the same characteristics as household economies: they depend on community – a commons<sup>4</sup>, sharing, allotment, apportionment within and reciprocity between other communities – these characteristics resonate with many women. The main features of solidarity economies are that they are ethical, caring, democratic, innovative, and require local participation, and dedicated time to allow them to flourish.

#### **WOMEN AND CANADA’S PUBLIC POLICIES:**

In her book, *From Outrage to Courage: Women Taking Action for Health and Justice*, Anne Firth Murray quotes the World Bank’s 2000-2001 report on poverty:

Poor people live without fundamental freedoms of action and choice that the better-off take for granted. They often lack adequate food and shelter, education and health, deprivations that keep them from leading the kind of life that everyone values. They also face extreme vulnerability to ill health, economic dislocation, and natural disasters. And they are often exposed to ill treatment by institutions of the state and society and are powerless to influence key decisions affecting their lives (2008:2).

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<sup>4</sup> A commons refers to a public space free for use by all members of a community – in a household the living room, the kitchen or the family room would be a “commons” area.



Though Montréal is in the Global North, much of the World Bank's definition is applicable to those who live in low-income situations in this city and it is indisputable that poverty often wears a woman's face hence the term, "the feminization of poverty." Because poverty is a national issue experienced locally, the intersections of history, current economic and public policies and social norms need to be part of the question asking why poverty continues to affect women in far greater numbers than men.

Lesley Harman asks: "What is meant by the feminization of poverty? Simply put, it means that without the support of a man, a woman is likely to be poor" (2006:199). Harman also writes that 84% of Canadian women will at some point in their adult lives find themselves living without a man, therefore, supporting themselves and often their children at a lower economic standard and, as in many cases, becoming dependent upon the state (2006:199). Thus, Harman argues, as much as post-feminism has touted the achievement of equality between men and women in the workforce, the reality is that women have not yet achieved economic parity and are still far more at risk of becoming poor than men (2006:199). Statistics Canada (2004) charts indicate this lack of parity and the implied social status of women: for a man to be considered 'middle class' he must earn at minimum 57 000\$ per annum whereas a woman is considered in the middle class if she earns 40 000\$ per annum. There are two implicit readings in these data: the first is the near guarantee that the woman has a university degree to earn that income but it is not necessary for a man to obtain the equivalent because many traditionally male-dominated blue-collar occupations do not require it. The second is that the male needs to earn that much more to be considered middle class implying that he is maintaining a family as well as himself while the middle class woman is not.

Because women's labour – paid or unpaid – continues to be undervalued in Canadian society and because women's labour is most often in the service sectors and which generally comprise the lowest paying jobs, women continue to be dependent on men or the state for economic security (Harman 2006:200). Like many feminist authors before her, including Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong (1978), Meg Luxton (1980, 2001) and Heidi Hartmann (1974, 1981) have argued, Harman writes that it is women's reproductive role that "legitimise[s] women's inferior position in the paid labour force" (2006:200). The longer a woman is out of the labour market for childbearing and caring, the more difficult it becomes for a woman to re-enter the job market without suffering some kind of loss in previously acquired skills that need constant upgrading or some downward pay adjustments from taking a lower level position (Harman 2006:200; Waring 2006:224-225). According to Marilyn Waring: "Research results suggest a 'human capital depreciation' for each year of absence from the paid labour market...For women, the finding [verdict] of a child penalty is consistent regardless of whether or not we control for marital history" (2006:224). Given the enormous cost to women returning to work after having a child, many women find that they cannot afford both the childcare costs and the costs associated with returning to work: transportation, clothing and lunches apart from regular household expenses (Harman 2006:201). To this list, we can add the costs of upgrading education in an attempt to maintain her skills in an ever advancing technology based workplace, even at the retail and clerical levels. These are the women who are more likely to become dependent on the state. However, it is often these same women who continue to contribute to society through their unpaid labour volunteering in community organizations and in their children's schools. This unpaid labour is not

recognized nor included in the productivity figures because it has no monetary value attached to it.

If the Canadian government were to remunerate women for their unpaid labour at the going wage, Waring estimates that it would be equal to 33% of Canada's GDP (2006:225). Waring gives a concrete comparison: "If you take a look at the monthly GDP figures for Canada in March 2004, unpaid work was equal to the total production from agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting, mining and oil and gas extraction, manufacturing, and the construction industries utilities—and at that point it was still 20\$ million short" (2006:225). Isabella Bakker argues that women's unpaid labour, if utilizing market based performance indicators, is now an "externality" (2002:238-239). An externality is a hidden cost, not included in the price of production much as pollution is not factored in the cost of transporting goods. Canadian economic and public policy under neo-liberalism overlooks the value of women's unpaid caring labour as the state continues to make cuts to the social welfare programs shifting the responsibility onto women.

Policy changes are made with the assumption that the family includes a male breadwinner and is therefore, not financially insecure. The focus has turned to the issue of "child poverty" without considering who provides their care. This focus on children living in impoverished circumstances makes them the "deserving poor" and their mother's are the "undeserving poor" who are made to appear irresponsible through the public discourse and rhetoric that are rooted in state policy texts (Kingfisher 2002; Armstrong 2006 et al).

Janine Brodie writes, "Poor children just float out there completely decontextualized from the circumstances that surround and shape them" (2002:109). Catherine Kingfisher notes, "Any focus on child poverty that excludes consideration of who cares for children will necessarily lead to failure. This myopic and ultimately doomed approach to poverty reflects the fact that children are among the last of the 'deserving' poor, a category within which their mothers are clearly no longer included" (2002:178). The discourse of child poverty and the alleviation of their poverty without taking into consideration their mothers' needs has consequences that will incur much higher costs later on when the persistent inequity takes its toll on women's health.

Other social programs that have been cut under neo-liberalism include elder-care and health-care. With cut-backs, hospital stays are shorter and the patients are expected to complete their recovery at home. As privatization of homecare and long-term care facilities have advanced and the funding for them by governments is cut, many of the elderly and their families cannot afford long-term care. Consequently, families end up caring for their ageing parents at home; work which usually falls to women (Brodie 2002:101). This often requires the caregiver to leave her paid employment in order to care for her parent or an infirm family member who requires long-term care. The negative impact this has on many single women cannot be trivialized or made invisible. Caring for an incapacitated ageing parent or family member takes precedence over a woman's normal social activities anchoring her more firmly in the home and isolation as she too, becomes part of the "undeserving poor."

There are numerous other effects that neo-liberal policies incur when their application means cuts to social programs. As Alexandra Dobrowolsky notes: “In place of collective struggle, neo-liberalism heralds the individual.”

Neo-liberalism calls for state cutbacks: downsizing, deficit and debt reduction, devolution, and deregulation are dominant ideals and practices. The market is maximized, and the state minimizes its role with respect to social well-being. As public space contracts, more scope is given to the private, including the assigning of individual solutions to societal problems. Individual ‘choice’ and self-sufficiency are championed. Individuals’ duties and obligations are trumpeted over deeper and broader citizenship rights, like social rights, to which the welfare state was committed under Keynesianism (2009:6).

Cutbacks and downsizing have affected many aspects of how the federal government views its role. Provincial governments have been made more responsible for social programs funded through federal transfers to the provinces which were paid in a lump-sum to provinces’ general revenues for those governments to apply the monies to various programs as they saw fit (Brodie 2002:103-104). At the same time the requirements necessary to qualify for unemployment insurance (EI) changed having an enormous impact on women (Brodie 2002:103). The provincial welfare rolls expanded as more people were disqualified from the federal program and the costs to the provinces soared as they bore the costs. According to Martha MacDonald, there was a decrease of 20% in claims made by women between 1995 and 1997 versus 16% for male claimants (2009:82). The increased demand for social assistance, in turn, led to the restructuring of and funding cuts to welfare programs, health and education after the 1995 implementation of the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) (Brodie 2002:104). The federal and provincial governments are now promoting policies using words such as “social cohesion,” “social inclusion,” “social reintegration,” and pushing community

values meaning the responsibility now lies with community members to care for the marginalized within their locale. While this policy may seem to bode well for community solidarity, it also means that because it is the community's responsibility to care for them, there may be additional pressure for those needing social assistance to conform to societal norms with less tolerance for difference and more exclusion which can lead to violence within the community (Armstrong 2009:90).

Pat Armstrong suggests that the promotion of social cohesion relieves the state of many of its responsibilities shifting them to civic organizations and allows the state to reduce funding for social programs. Armstrong argues the state "shift[s] responsibilities to communities without providing them with the means to take up these responsibilities in ways that promote equity, ... [and] can also be a way of shifting responsibility to women ..." (2009:90). Often the shift to civic organizations leads to blaming the victims for their indigence and importantly, as Armstrong states in her critique "social networks can be defined as a substitute for welfare-state programs, with exclusion from state support justified on the grounds that there are lots of friends and family to compensate for the poverty of services and income" (2009:90). It is also premised on the idea of women's ability to form interpersonal connections in the community because of their traditional roles as care-givers to their families and volunteers in their communities. While it is true that women have traditionally maintained the household, it can be seen as a means of locking women into the patriarchal structures that aggravate the feminization of poverty, keeping them "in their place." The alternative view is that nearly every advance in social justice has come about because of women's activism when societal inequities became intolerable.

The cumulative effects of government cutbacks in social spending under neo-liberalism are visible as Brodie elaborates:

The homeless and food banks have become a familiar part of the social fabric when only twenty years ago they would have been exceptional. The income gap between the rich and poor has widened while the poor have become poorer. The poor are also more likely than a decade ago to be concentrated in urban ghettos... Women are more likely to be poor than men and visible minority women are more likely to be poor than the “invisible” majority of Canadian women (2002:107).

How do women on low or fixed incomes survive in a neo-liberal economy based city such as Montréal? How do they feed and clothe their families after paying rent and utilities? Do many of these women use the community services available to them? Are women turning to forms of the solidarity economy to survive such as exists in Latin American countries? Is the solidarity economy viable in a large North American urban community?

Montréal has a significant number of women-oriented community organizations which utilize characteristics of solidarity economies and promote communal unity. How much are they used by Montréal’s urban poor/marginalized women in their survival struggles or do women depend more on kinship ties and friends for assistance? Do these organizations really attract those women who are deemed the most highly food insecure? Do these organizations assist women to integrate into a labour system and provide them with the social networking necessary to support them? If there are a great number of low-income women who use the community organizations to assist them in providing for their families and themselves, how strong is the community and municipal government’s support for the organizations?

In this thesis, I explore the place of Food Central in depoliticizing and denaturalizing neo-liberalism and in re-politicizing and re-naturalizing solidarity economy in a North American urban centre. Food Central is an example of the application of solidarity economy through a community organization. Food Central illustrates what Harcourt and Escobar call a move towards a “transformative politics of place” (2005:3) by opening up spaces for the insertion of solidarity with others and politicizing poverty that stigmatizes, marginalizes and oppresses those in subaltern positions. Harcourt and Escobar use the term, “subaltern” to describe “groups that, in a given hegemonic formation, occupy subordinate positions vis-à-vis the dominant groups in relation to questions of work, exploitation, racism, ethnicity, and other forms of cultural subordination” (2005:3). According to Harcourt and Escobar, the application of neo-liberal economic policies by the state is felt most harshly by women of colour, the urban poor, migrant ethnic minorities, and indigenous peoples – precisely the people who are the majority of Food Central’s clients.

The programs and projects operating through Food Central are based on the ethics of care and community that form the core of solidarity economies. Through the networks and opportunities to interact that Food Central programs offer, poverty can be and is, politicized as are the structures of neo-liberalism that contribute to the inequities experienced by so many women who work at, who volunteer at, or who are the clients of Food Central. Harcourt and Escobar write: “This transformative politics may involve resistance, but it also involves *reappropriation, reconstruction, reinvention, even relocation* of places and place-based practices; and the creation of new possibilities of



being-in-place and being-in-networks with other human and nonhuman living beings” (2005:3; emphasis added).

This thesis describes the work of social actors utilizing the solidarity economy framework to alleviate the growing food insecurity that daily confronts an increasing number of women and children in the Global North, in this case, in Montréal’s borough of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (NDG).

## CHAPTER 2

### THE QUÉBEC CONTEXT:

*In Québec, the Church's social policy and strategy, which succeeded in eliminating socialist expression during the thirties, paradoxically laid the groundwork for the establishment of a socialist society by evoking the collective interests of the people in relation to their everyday economic and social needs. But it could only be socialism and not the Church that could meet these needs (Milner and Milner 1973:238.)*

Geographically, Québec's population of 7 750 500 comprises of various ethnic backgrounds apart from the predominant French including: English, Italian, Greek, Middle Eastern, African, Latin American/Caribbean, Russian/Slavic and Asian. French is Québec's official language and it is spoken by 80% of the population (Gouvernement du Québec 2009). Québec defines itself as a "distinct" society which "aims to promote the expression of that diversity in a context where citizens, regardless of their differences, share a kinship with Québec society and express it through a respect for common laws and institutions, in terms of civic relations" (Gouvernement du Québec 2009).

Québec was settled through the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries mainly by immigrants from France where Catholicism was the official state religion. In the earliest years of settlement, the Roman Catholic Church sent its priests, nuns and missionaries to the colony to establish churches, schools, hospitals and charitable welfare missions. For over 300 years, the Roman Catholic Church exerted great influence on socio-cultural institutions and policy making in Québec until the Quiet Revolution<sup>5</sup> of the 1960s.

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<sup>5</sup> Union Nationale premier of Québec, Maurice Duplessis, who was considered a traditionalist, resisted modernization in Québec society during his 18 years in office. In the 1960 Québec elections, a Liberal, Jean Lesage, won the premiership making progressive changes and moving toward modernity. The changes he and the Québec government instituted occurred so rapidly that a journalist from Toronto "declared that what was happening was nothing short of a revolution, albeit a quiet one" (Belanger 2000). The Civil Rights movement in the United States and the move towards decolonization were instrumental in pushing the societal changes that were being implemented in Québec and elsewhere. Belanger notes "Objectives of democratisation of the political system or of the educational network, equal and adequate accessibility for classes and regions to educational and social services, economic well-being for all, and the

According to Gregory Baum: “The Quiet Revolution, beginning with the election of a Liberal government in June 1960, released a movement of secularization that dissolved the cultural monopoly exercised by the Catholic Church in Québec” (1992:141).

Apart from the Quiet Revolution, changes were also implemented within the Catholic Church itself following the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65. Baum relates that “the Roman Catholic Church left behind its defensive stance towards modern society and solemnly declared itself in solidarity with the entire human family, beginning with the poor. The Council also placed a new emphasis on freedom of conscience, and urged Catholics to react in novel and untried ways to the social and economic problems of their societies” (1992:140). This led to the adoption of the Catholic left’s “Liberation Theology” based on Marxist socialism which originated in Latin American countries and strongly influenced the Catholics in Québec. According to Baum, there are three principles advocated in Liberation Theology: 1) the necessity of analysing the “social sin” which are the systems of oppression; 2) the Christian community needs to adopt “the viewpoint of the oppressed and act in solidarity with their struggle for liberation;” 3) the Church is tasked with “the ‘conscientization’ of the people, which means raising people’s awareness of the societal obstacles that prevent them from assuming responsibility for their own future” (Baum 1992:140). The newly politicized Québécois Catholics formed organizations that worried the bishops because of their radical bent towards socialism influenced by Marxist theory (Baum 1992:143).

In the early 1970s, these organizations had formed coalitions in solidarity with the labour movements which also were moving in a Marxist-socialist direction (Baum

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establishment of a social safety net were voiced and pursued strongly here, as they were in many other places” (2000).

1992:144). However, by the late 1970s, “the left-wing Catholics moved increasingly in the pluralist direction,” (Baum 1992:144) and included the struggles of the marginalized sector expanding their solidarity movement beyond labour. Throughout the 1980s, Catholic socialist organizations continued to metamorphose and the two largest of these, l’Entraide and Canadian Organization for Development and Peace (Organization Canadien pour le Développement et paix) are still strongly influential in the Roman Catholic Church of Québec. These organizations have ongoing commitments to solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed both in Québec and in the Global South, especially Latin America (Baum 1992:146-149).

In order to educate and sensitize both Catholic parishioners and the greater society of Québec to the oppressive inequities in the province and elsewhere, these Catholic organizations and institutions publish articles and write letters criticizing governments and their social policies that continue to keep marginalized sectors of their population in poverty and excluded from full participation in society (Baum 1992:148-149). Baum describes the Catholic activism as still “display[ing] considerable vitality” in the 1990s (1992:150). Since the late 1990s the Catholic left-wing has diminished becoming a minority movement of Québec Catholics but it continues to be active often in conjunction with secular social justice organizations (Baum 1992:152). Many people who once belonged to the Catholic left-wing but who have subsequently left the Church are now working in the secular social solidarity movements and organizations bringing with them “an ethics of ends, not of means;...sustained by the virtues of love and justice” (Baum 1992:152). This is an “ethical tradition” that Baum believes remains even if those who work in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized are secular; “...these workers

have experienced moral outrage at all conditions of oppression; they have inherited a passion for justice derived from religion, from a deeply lodged memory of a God who is intolerant of oppression and exploitation” (1992:152).

Thus, according to Baum, the Roman Catholic Church has had a deep impact on the Québec society and has laid a foundation for the secular community activism that has mushroomed in the last two decades. The ethics of care and solidarity with the poor continues to grow as the failures of neo-liberalism are felt by growing segments of Québécois society. The province of Québec has one of the highest rates of poverty in Canada<sup>6</sup> and it is expressed in the number of urban poor in its two largest cities; Montréal’s poverty rate being much higher than Québec City’s.

## **THE CITY OF MONTRÉAL**

Large urban centres in Canada such as Montréal have pockets of very low-income women living in core regions. In 1995, Montréal had a poverty rate of 27% while the overall provincial poverty rate was 23%. In the latest statistics, overall, Montréal has a poverty rate of over 31% (CCSD 2009). Montréal’s population, counting both core and outlying regions totals 3,426,350 inhabitants, is 47% of Québec’s total population (Schetange 1999). In 2006, the core urban area of Montréal (which is comprised of all boroughs on Montréal Island proper) had a population of approximately 1.8 million (Ville de Montréal 2008). The number of urban poor is estimated at 890,000 individuals;

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<sup>6</sup> British Columbia is now the province with the highest rate of poverty per capita in Canada (CCSD 2009).

higher than in the rest of Québec (MUCS 2005). In comparison to other major Canadian cities, it would appear the urban poor in Montréal exceed the number elsewhere as well<sup>7</sup>.

It is estimated that lone parent families are the most at risk of living under the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO). According to StatsCan figures for 2007, the LICO for a single person in an urban centre of 100,000 or more inhabitants is 21 666\$; for two person families – 26 972\$; for three person families – 40 259\$; and the amount goes up as the size of the family increases (NCW 2008)<sup>8</sup>. As seen in Figure 1, the LICO measure of poverty aims to consider full social inclusion and not merely the basics of food, clothing and shelter like the federal Human Resources Development Canada's (HDRC) Market Basket Measure<sup>9</sup> (MBM) accounts for and that is a lower assessment than the LICO<sup>10</sup> (CCSD 2000). Basing their statistics on those of the Montréal CMA StatsCanada census of 1996, CCSD published a Preliminary Research Report of 1999, compiled by Sylvain Schetange. The report found that 55% of **all** lone-parent families and 87% of **young** lone-parent families lived below the LICO (Schetange 1999). The CCSD

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<sup>7</sup> The City of Toronto has a core population of 4, 633, 415. Seven years ago, the number of urban poor in Toronto was estimated at 771, 530 persons – 17% of Toronto's core population under the Living Income Cut-Off (LICO) (CCSD 2007). The Canadian Council on Social Development (2007) estimates there are over 40,980 single parent households living in poverty out of a possible 94, 690 mono-parental homes in the Toronto CMA. It is noted that the LICO for Toronto is set higher than any other city in Canada (City of Toronto 2004). Vancouver CMA statistics (2001) number the total population at 1, 955, 015 and of that number, 407, 136 or 21% are considered impoverished (CCSD 2007). Of that number, 41, 040 are single headed families of which 21% live under the LICO (CCSD 2007). Edmonton CMA is home to 919, 820 persons of which 148, 870 or 16% are considered in poverty. There are 10, 560 (34%) of the single parent households out of 23, 215 living under the LICO (CCSD 2007). Alberta's other large urban area, Calgary CMA, has a total population of 938, 435 with an estimated 132, 060 (14%) people living in poverty. There are approximately 20, 650 lone parent families with 7, 500 (36%) considered living under the LICO (CCSD 2007).

<sup>8</sup> See Figure 1 for comparisons with MBM and actual social assistance income.

<sup>9</sup> Market Basket Measure – Québec – allots 13 188\$ for a single person, employable or disabled; 17 144\$ for a single mother with one child; and 26 375\$ for a couple with two children (CCSD 2000).

<sup>10</sup> See Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
**Comparison of Québec Social Assistance and Child/Tax Benefits to MBM and LICO Figures Compiled from National Council of Welfare 2007 Statistics (Reports 2008)**

Type of family	Basic Social Assistance (SA)	Additional SA Program Benefits	Federal Child Tax Benefit	Provincial Child Benefit	GST Credit	Provincial Tax Credits	Federal Energy Cost Benefit	Provincial Resource Rebate	Total Income	Market Basket Measures (MBM)	Living Income Cut-OFF (LICO)
Single person	\$6,800				\$230				\$7,030	\$13 188	\$21 666
Single disabled	\$10,028				\$269				\$10,297	\$13 188	\$21 666
Single Parent, one child	\$8,180	\$960	\$3,796	\$2,766	\$580		\$250		\$16,533	\$17 144	\$26 972
Couple, two children	\$10,533	\$1,159	\$5,928	\$3,073	\$701		\$250		\$21,644	\$26 375	\$40 259

numbers show that there were approximately 44, 595 single parent families who live in poverty out of the approximate total of 93, 995 in 2001 in the Montréal CMA (2007).

The LICO seeks to consider the minimum low-income families need to live with a measure of dignity and autonomy in a North American setting. In his book, “Affluent Society” (1958:250), economist John Kenneth Galbraith asserted:

People are poverty stricken when their income, even if adequate for survival, falls markedly below that of the community. Then they cannot have what the larger community regards as the minimum necessary for decency; and they cannot wholly escape, therefore, the judgement of the larger community that they are indecent (cited in Bains, Evans and Neysmith 1991:171).

Applying Galbraith’s standard, Bains, Evans and Neysmith (1991:171) suggest that “poverty lines” or the MBM maybe a useful measure for poverty alleviation, the MBMs “are woefully inadequate reflections of an experience that, in addition to a lack of income, is so frequently accompanied by a sense of powerlessness, isolation, and stigma.” By living on inadequate income, women become the very visible and feminized face of poverty in Montréal.

Using StatsCan’s numbers from the 2001 census, McGill Urban Community Sustainability<sup>1</sup> (MUCS) reported that most of these low-income and very low-income families paid more than 30% of their monthly income on rent. Thirty percent of income going toward rent payment exceeds the recommended percentage for shelter which is approximately one quarter of one’s wages but has become a normal standard. MUCS also noted that rents in Montréal, while still lower than most urban centres in Canada, are rising. In 2005, the average rent for a one bedroom apartment was \$509 and it is now \$580 according to the National Welfare Council (2008). Ville de Montréal (2008)

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<sup>1</sup> Since publishing this report, MUCS has changed its name to *Montréal Urban Community Sustainment*.



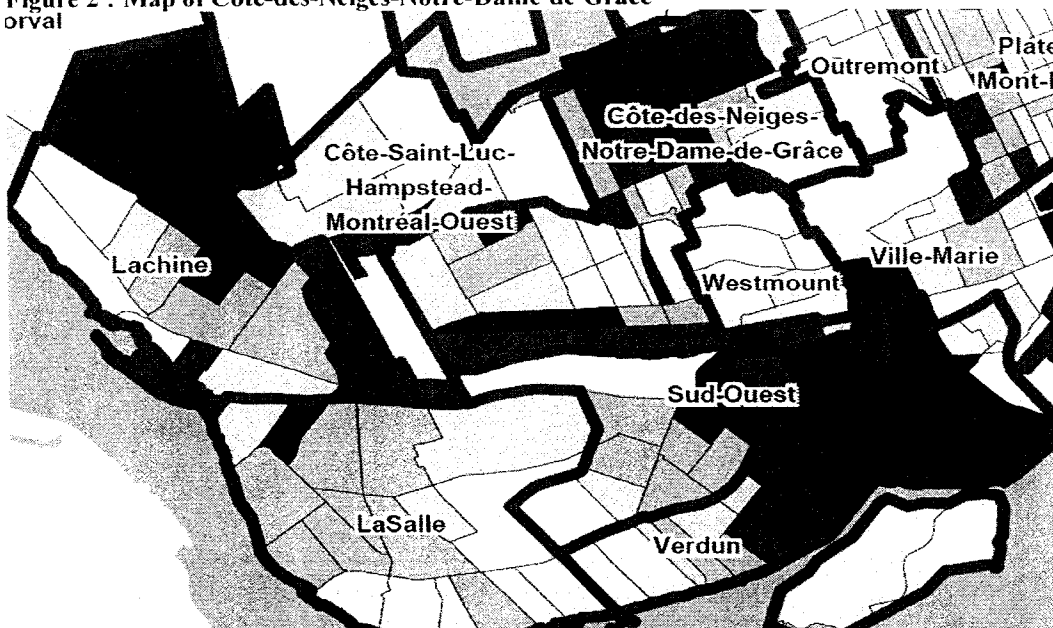
statistics claim that the average monthly rent in the city is \$661 and that 38.6% of the population pays over 30% of their incomes in rent. This means that most senior, elderly and single women who live alone, as well as lone-parent households are paying an unaffordable rent. It is common knowledge that most lone-parent families, which total 85% of **all** poor families in Montréal (CCSD 1999), are headed by women (87% of lone-parent families). According to StatsCan (2004), 35% of Canadian women under the age of 65 and living alone, are impoverished or living under the LICO. In Montréal, most women living alone with low-incomes rent unaffordable housing in the urban core (MUCS 2005) and many have difficulties in supplying all their basic needs. It is also known that most of the elderly population in Montréal are women and these three groups are most likely to be at risk of living in poverty.

For lone-parent families, combining the higher than recommended percentage of income for rent, the cost of home services (hydro, water, heating and telephone), the increasing cost of basic foodstuffs (rice, pasta, flour, fresh vegetables, dairy and eggs), the cost of non-covered medical expenses, the cost for children's education, clothing, and transportation, single women with children have little if anything left over from their limited income. The most difficult stage for single mothers on social assistance is when a child turns eighteen years of age and their benefit is terminated. Often these children are still finishing high school or are attending post-secondary institution while living at home putting additional stress on the woman's shrinking income. It is not unusual for a child in this situation to leave high-school before graduating contributing to the high drop-out rate in Québec, or they are financially unable to continue attending post-secondary

institutions. In both cases, the children tend to take dead-end, low paying jobs, thus reproducing the poverty cycle.

Because single women tend to live alone, they too suffer from overly high rents, hydro, food and transportation costs. Those who are on social assistance also have a far lower income than single parents because the child benefits are not part of their incomes. Many of the women are mothers but their children have left home and the women may be unsure of their abilities to find employment after staying at home raising children. These women often suffer a double loss: a loss of income and a loss of identity which frequently leads to demoralization and for some, debilitating depression.

Figure 2 : Map of Côte-des-Neiges-Notre-Dame-de-Grâce  
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Map of CDN-NDG (Ville de Montréal 2008) – the darkest areas denote those with the highest percentage of families living with low-income (up to 87%) and the lightest areas are those with little to no poverty.

## THE BOROUGH OF CÔTE-DES-NEIGES/NOTRE-DAME-DE-GRÂCE

The Montréal community of NDG where I conducted my research on the economic survival struggles of low-income and at risk women is part of the Borough of Côte-des-Neiges/Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. This borough is the most populous in Montréal's core region having slightly fewer than ten percent, or 164 246, of the city's total inhabitants living within it (Ville de Montréal 2008). The borough itself is split along electoral districts with the north or CDN region comprising Snowdon (pop. 32 633) and Côte-des-Neiges (pop. 29 372) with a 36.2% poverty rate overall and the south, or NDG region comprising of Loyola (pop. 34 573) and Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (pop. 30 102) with an overall poverty rate of 30.6% (Ville de Montréal 2008).

While the south region (NDG) of the borough is quickly becoming gentrified, the north region (CDN) is considered to have a greater number of low-income inhabitants of all ages. The more densely populated north Côte-des-Neiges area has a more French, Arabic and South East Asian population than Notre-Dame-de-Grâce which has a higher percentage of English, Blacks and Latinos (Ville de Montréal 2008). Both parts of the borough have large bilingual allophone populations, or people whose first language is neither French nor English, in comparison to many other boroughs in Montréal (Ville de Montréal 2008).

There are 26 385 families with children living in the borough with 8 730 of these, single parent families. “Des 8 730 familles monoparentales, 7 315 ont à leur tête un parent de sexe féminin (83,8 %) et 1 285, un parent de sexe masculin (16,2 %).” [Of the 8 730 mono-parental families, 7 315 are headed by a female parent (83,8%) and 1 285, a male parent (16,2%)] (Ville de Montréal 2008). By using the statistics provided above, of the female headed households in CDN-NDG, it can be extrapolated that 6 218 of them

are living in poverty, or under the LICO. Continuing to use the Ville de Montréal statistics for CDN-NDG area, there are 33 463 single, separated, divorced, widowed women inhabitants from the age of twenty to over 85 (2008). By removing the lone senior women (age 65 to 85 and above) who comprised about 6 875 of the total, there are 24 788 single women over twenty years of age and under sixty-five. The statistics show that in Canada, approximately 35% of these women will be living under the LICO, or 8 676 lone women in CDN-NDG. For the senior women, approximately 19.3% will be living in poverty, or 1 327 female seniors. If the total number of women in the CDN-NDG area living under LICO is 16 221, it represents nearly 10% of the inhabitants of this borough<sup>2</sup>.

#### **NOTRE-DAME-DE-GRÂCE:**

NDG has a greater number of community organizations dedicated to anti-poverty and food security than CDN even though the poverty rate is 6 percent lower than the latter region. The preponderance of community solidarity networks in NDG prompted my choice of sites in which to research the use of solidarity economies with a focus on low-income, women-centred homes. Few other regions in Montréal have such a vast and dedicated network regardless of the number of low-income households in their regions. St. Henri, south of Westmount, has very few in comparison though it has a higher per capita number of poor. The Pointe-Saint-Charles and Griffintown borough has a number of active community centres and social activists, but they do not match NDG for food security networks and anti-poverty movements. At 31% the poverty level in NDG is still

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<sup>2</sup> These calculations [mine] are extrapolated by using the cited statistics. They may not be completely accurate but do provide a reasonable percentage to work with.

higher than that of Montréal in general. It is estimated over 19 750 inhabitants of NDG live under the LICO. Consistent with the statistics from the whole borough of CDN-NDG, 10% of the total population of the NDG region are single women living alone with or without children. Of the 19 750 persons living with a low income, 10 665 are women, 4 000 are children and the other 5 085 are men.<sup>3</sup> According to the NCW statistics, 10% of the men and women represented in the above numbers are married couples. These statistics still place women in the majority of all those living with a low income and those chiefly responsible for the provisioning and maintenance of household needs such as food and clothing for the family.

Given these statistics, it is not surprising that there would be so many community organizations that have grown in the NDG borough to provide for low-income persons, especially women. NDG community organizations such as: The NDG Community Council, The NDG Housing Committee, The Borough Council, Food Central, Co-op La Maison Verte, Head and Hands, Chez Soi, The NDG Black Community Association, Women on the Rise, The NDG Barter Network [presently inactive], The Carrefour Jeunesse Emploi of NDG, The Urban Planning and Democracy Committee, The InfoCentral, Le Corporation de Développement Economique Communautaires (CDEC), and Les Habitation Communautaires (HC) NDG all work towards social cohesion, food security, and anti-poverty solutions. While some of these are corporate or public institutions, they are supportive of the community initiatives in the NDG borough.

There are other organizations that help inhabitants of NDG create bonds and promote social inclusion. NDG Food Network provides a database of food security services in and around NDG. These organizations are the loci for farm food share boxes,

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<sup>3</sup> These figures are not precise having been calculated using the percentages given by Ville de Montréal.

collective and community gardens, and Food Centrals, culture Food Centrals, Church groups, volunteer centres, senior daycare centres, anti-poverty groups and rehabilitation centres.

Community organizations and women's activism within them may have been increased by state inaction and funding cuts for social programs but these may become the catalysts for the growth of solidarity economies in urban localities. Community activism toward a more democratic and just society may result in displacing the dominant discourse of the globalized economy that promotes social and economic inequities by insisting on a public-private collaboration advancing solidarity economies in urban centres.

## CHAPTER 3

### SOLIDARITY ECONOMY AND WOMEN'S ACTIVISM:

*In a market people exchange goods, buying and selling at the best price available until satisfied they cannot better their personal holdings. Exchanges in community are different, for they revolve about ways of dividing a shared base, are guided by multiple values, and have to do with fashioning identities as well as material life (Gudeman 2001).*

Solidarity economies have been emerging in Latin American countries since the 1980s due to the economic difficulties arising from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) demanding debtor nations apply Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), also known as austerity measures, in order to repay their loans to the IMF. These SAPs require that the debtor nations cut funding from social welfare, health and education programs; the result is often that only the more affluent can afford the services. The IMF insists on the privatization of publicly owned institutions and public, communally held, arable lands leaving many of the rural villagers who depend on subsistence farming on these lands, in very straitened circumstances. A great number of poor rural farmers have been displaced from their family or tribal lands to make way for mono-crop agro-businesses promoted by neo-liberalism and multinational corporations. The populations of urban centres swell with these displaced persons who are often less educated and less skilled to compete in the formal markets. These marginalized urban poor are some of those people who had previously employed and still tend to use solidarity economies as part of their survival strategies to feed their families and themselves.

Peasant or “campesino” lifestyles that are dependent on community cooperation still exist or are not forgotten in Latin America. Brazil’s Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) or the Landless Peasants’ Movement (in English), is a

resistance movement which emerged during the 1940s (Brown 2001). Organized by peasant farmers to take back unproductive land owned by agricultural conglomerates, the landless peasants occupy and cultivate the land establishing small cooperatives communities. Once settled, MST and the farmers petition the government of Brazil for legal title to the land (Brown 2001). As the MST works toward social justice, its first steps have been to inform and educate the landless Brazilians about their land rights. “[U]nder the Brazilian Constitution, the state reserves the right to expropriate agriculturally viable property which remains unused. The second steps for MST is to identify the land that is not being used and then obtain a request from the government saying the land is expropriated” (Brown 2001).

Though the MST has been fairly successful in achieving its goals, it has not always been smooth or void of past violence from the state<sup>4</sup> and there are continued inequalities towards the women who have struggled alongside the movement’s men. Rute Caldeira (2009) who has been researching the movement since 2002 has found that once a settlement has been created, single women have been denied the same rights as men and are relegated to the fringes often without title to land if they do not conform to traditional roles and persist on dealing with women’s issues rather than the common good. However, having struggled to have land, the women are not giving up. The women have no intention on giving up the little bit of land they have acquired even though they and their children are undergoing much hardship to do so, in many cases because they have no where to go due to their socio-economic situations (Caldeira 2009:246). Caldeira suggests that unless the women of the MST join with both rural and

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<sup>4</sup> One of the more widely known incidence of violence, the massacre at Eldorado dos Carajás, Pará State, in April 1996 resulted in 19 deaths of demonstrating peasant farmers after the government ordered 200 police to clear the highway of the approximately 1500 protesters.



urban women's organizations for support and information, they have a long way to go to stop the reproduction of social inequities and towards achieving parity because the leftist MST views women's rights issues as "class divisive" (2009:254). This is a paradox because women are not included in a gender neutral and fair redistribution of land setting them apart as a different class based on gender. This problematic, Caldeira notes, has been part of every leftist political social movement since the "collective entity would inevitably take precedence over potentially class-divisive issues" or in other words, women's issues would be addressed once the movement has achieved its larger, collective goal (2009:240).

The international peasant organization, Via Campesina, has actively recruited subsistence farmers around the world to unite in solidarity to counter large agribusinesses which are pushing out small family and community owned farms. Via Campesina and its members advocate food sovereignty, sustainability, gender parity and social justice for all peoples world-wide (Via Campesina 2009). Annette Demarais who has been researching this organization of small farmers writes that the women involved with Via Campesina have been highly active in achieving gender parity since 1996 and are now visible and vocal in the movement (2003). According to Demarais (2003), the women's organization in Via Campesina has been reaching out to land reform organizations in Latin America and assisting the women in those movements, including the MST, work toward gender parity. Possibly it is due to the fact that Via Campesina has partnerships internationally they were more easily able to assure gender equality within its organization unlike the MST, which does agree in principle to gender parity as well as food sovereignty in their campaign for social justice, but is regional and only operates in the Brazilian nation.

Lynne Phillips and Sally Cole have researched differences between grassroots feminist non-governmental organizations and UNIFEM programs operating in Brazil and Ecuador. Citing the effects of IMF and WTO policies, Phillips and Cole (2009:190) observe their disproportionately negative affects impacting poor women, Indigenous women and those of Afro-descent. However, the negative consequences of globalized economies have also fostered a unity in women's feminist organizations representing the many voices and expressions of Latin American feminisms seeking social transformations (Phillips and Cole 2009:191-193). UNIFEM has a Western/International oriented view of feminism while feminists in Latin American countries recognize socio-cultural differences hence the term "feminisms."<sup>5</sup> The UNIFEM supported programs are less "fluid" than those of the women's organizations which are not funded by an international body and are "dominated by issues of accountability and results-based management. [and] the possibilities for imagining long-term feminist alternatives are constrained" (Phillips and Cole 2009:191). Phillips and Cole note that regardless, these feminists, working within their constraints, are bringing attention to issues affecting Latin American women through their "politics of presence" through their presence (2009:191). The feminists who are not "in the UN orbit" have more flexibility or "fluidity" to "imagine new forms of economic organization through *economia solidária* (the solidarity economy), combined with new forms of social organization where gender and diversities are transversal axes" (Phillips and Cole 2009:192). Their flexibility allows these feminists to improvise or to change directions in accordance to changing needs of the communities' women.

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<sup>5</sup> Women's Studies institutions like Simone de Beauvoir Institute in Montréal are increasingly teaching feminisms rather than feminism and include many works by authors of non-Western countries.

Can community solidarity, like that found in Latin America, be built in a large market-driven, hyper-individualistic city such as Montréal? Fortunately for many Montréalers, there are a large number of community-funded and based organizations that are dedicated to anti-poverty measures, food security and community solidarity much like their counterparts in many Latin American countries. Some are grassroots while others operate as home-based NGOs like Food Central<sup>6</sup> where this study was conducted and are more structured and constrained by the delineation of and adherence to their mandates to receive the grants necessary to keep them operating. Unlike the movements Phillips and Cole researched in Ecuador and Brazil, Food Central cannot be described as a feminist organization nor do they overtly advocate for solidarity economy. However, many of the women workers and volunteers in this study either identify as feminists or subscribe to feminist beliefs of social justice, gender parity and economic equity. Much of the InfoCentral literature and brochures are directed towards women's issues and solidarity economy praxis. Many are also members of feminist organizations such as Head and Hands, Women Aware and Women on the Rise.

While Canada has not had IMF structural adjustment policies enforced on it, the federal and provincial governments have self-imposed similar policies believing that privatization would enhance the Canadian economy and improve citizens' standards of living (Kingfisher 2002; Dobrowolsky 2009; Jensen 2009; Waring 2006; et al). Unfortunately, these measures have not brought about higher employment rates or liveable wages for many Canadians. The most recent Canadian statistics show a higher percentage of persons living in poverty now than ten years ago.

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<sup>6</sup> Pseudonym

On November 5, 2008, Ligue des Droits de Montréal sponsored a lecture featuring the UN Special Rapporteur for The Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter to speak about UN measures toward reducing food insecurity globally. Before he spoke, Mme. Nicole Jeté of Front Commun des Personnes Assistées Sociales du Québec delivered a talk about food insecurity in the Canadian context. She linked the privatization of services, the increased stress on individuals over society and the increase in women's poverty, to the source of societal instability and the deterioration of living conditions. Jeté accused Canada's federal and provincial governing bodies of "breaking the cultural and social pact" with the people of Canada and lacking the political will to bring back just policies and to fulfil the rights accorded to Canadians in the pact. Supported by l'Institut de la Statistique Quebec figures, Jeté stated that since 1993, the number of visits to Food Banks has increased by 91%. Over 700,000 people are presently served in Canada. In total, Jeté claimed that for 1,000,000 people in Canada, eating has become a privilege. Communities are in crisis, Jeté asserted. The cost of living has increased for nearly all consumer goods and services, yet incomes have remained fairly stagnant and, as previously noted, the Canadian social security net has seen severe cutbacks. Citing the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report made public in October of 2008, Jeté remarked that the wealth gap between the rich and poor in developed nations had widened to unprecedented levels. There is a need to re-evaluate the social costs of "hyper-individualism" and privatisation of public services in urban centres where many are falling into poverty, especially children and women.

The growth of Food Central as a food provisioning organization does coincide with the federal and provincial governments' implementation of cost cutting measures to

social programs using the neo-liberal policy framework that became popular in the 1980s and fully embraced by the 1990s (Dobrowolsky 2009; Jensen 2009; Kingfisher 2002).

The cutbacks in funding to social welfare programs, public education and health care mirror the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), or austerity measures, imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on the debtor countries of the Global South.

Catherine Kingfisher argues:

While sky rocketing poverty rates among women in the South can be said to result from structural adjustment programs initiated by external agents such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, similar increases in poverty rates among women in advanced welfare state societies may be interpreted in relation to an analogous, internally initiated restructuring, usually entailing cuts in social provisioning (2002:3).

Those most affected by cuts to public spending in both the North and the South are poor women. Kingfisher contends “These parallels may in turn be situated in the larger context of the global spread of neo-liberal approaches to economic, social, and state organization” (2002:3).

As the social programs were diminished much of the burden of care fell on families and especially women “given the gendered construction of social reproduction” (Dobrowolsky 2009:7). It is not only families bearing the brunt of cutbacks; communities are being affected and encouraged to pick-up where state agencies leave off. It is this responsibility placed on communities that created the expansion of food provisioning services, shelters for the homeless and other not-for-profit organizations which attempt to fill in for diminishing social spending and it is mostly women who are establishing and working in these community organizations.

Gunewardena and Kingsolver use the term “economic globalization” to describe neo-liberalism, but they too, agree that globalization is gendered and the “local and global constructions of gender are employed in the operations of transnational capital to exacerbate women’s economic and social vulnerabilities” (2007:3). Nonetheless, the authors argue that economic marginalization does not necessarily rob women of agency to act as individuals or as part of a collective. The actions of women uniting to better their situations collectively or individually has been described as “place-based politics” that draw on gendered constructions of social reproduction to counter the effects of inequitable institutional policies that disfavour women (Harcourt and Escobar 2005).

Most of the women who work or volunteer at Food Central are committed to maintaining community solidarity and resisting the hyper-individualism fostered by the neo-liberal policies. The women’s collective action against economic inequality through their involvement with Food Central’s provisioning activities and its ethics of care is part of women’s place-based organizing that re-circulates surplus to the community in non-capitalist ways creating “ethical spaces of interdependent economic activity” (Harcourt and Escobar 2005:12).

I believe that the prevalence of the women-oriented community organizations in Montréal’s urban sectors indicates that they are not only a necessary connection between women and their communities, but also important to many at risk and low-income women. Just as poverty has been “feminized,” organizers of anti-poverty and food security programs have a feminine face in the greater majority of these community organizations. I intend to demonstrate that women are important to the functioning and growth of solidarity networks in Montréal because women have historically been the link

to communal unity and food security as well as being those who have traditionally been the unpaid, caring labourers whose work ensures the survival of states and nations.

Nancy Neamtan (2002), the president of the Chantier de l'économie sociale has most succinctly enumerated what solidarity economy is. According to Neamtan, solidarity economy is a social movement because: 1) The objective is to serve people in a community rather than merely achieving profits; 2) it is autonomous from the state; 3) it is democratic in decision making necessitating the involvement of both its users and workers; 4) people and work are prioritised over capital in allocation of surplus and revenue and finally; 5) the principles are based on participation, empowerment, individual and collective responsibility or, inclusive participation (Neamtan 2002:1).

Stephen Gudeman (2001), an economic anthropologist, has documented the use of solidarity economies in Latin American countries. He separates economies into four distinct domains. The first is kinship based which operates on a shared common interest and this domain spreads into the second with a group of families who form a larger community, but still share a common base or interest. The third domain represents a number of communities which may not share a common interest, but conduct reciprocal trade amongst themselves. These three domains form the informal, or local economies, which may not be completely egalitarian, but where people have the greatest say in how goods and surplus are created, allotted and apportioned. The fourth domain is that of the formal market which is based on profit making and uneven allotment of goods and surplus. This domain is where the globalized economy is situated (Gudeman 2001:8-9).

Gudeman argues that formal market discourse has become dominant through the rise of globalized economies and so the daily interactions of local economies are either

dismissed completely or devalued under the shadow of the dominant. However, local economies tend to surface in times of uncertainty and upheavals in the neo-liberal economy. In times of economic upheaval, people feel the lack of control in determining the allotment, allocation and apportionment of surplus that they have produced. Local economy returns control to the community supporting and re-empowering its base, while protecting its commons against disintegration and unsustainable exploitive policies that are the hallmark of formal economic practices. Gudeman suggests that often allotment and apportionment are gender biased even in local economies, disavouring women. It is with this in mind that the women-oriented community organizations in Montréal work to remove the gender bias such that women receive what they need in order to shift the imbalance of resource allocation. Gudeman, citing Aristotle, calls this “ethical economics” that comprises of two kinds of justice. One is “rectificatory” correcting unjust distribution and the other is called “distributive” justice redressing proportionality in sharing (Gudeman 2001:61).

Marguerite Mendell (2006, 2003), advocates for social economies in Québec through Le Chantier de l'économie sociale, a lobbying organization for economic justice. Mendell asserts that Québec is uniquely situated, both because of its designation as a “distinct society” and its history of strong religious influence that has created an ethic of community based caring for those in need. While it is true at the present that religious communities continue to provide food and clothing to the needy, they are not often organized to re-empower them with a sense of autonomy and control over their lives. The many community-based organizations, cooperatives and collectives found in Québec and more specifically, in Montréal, are determined to create solidarity communities



through anti-poverty programs. It is for these organizations collectively that Le Chantier lobbies the Provincial government.

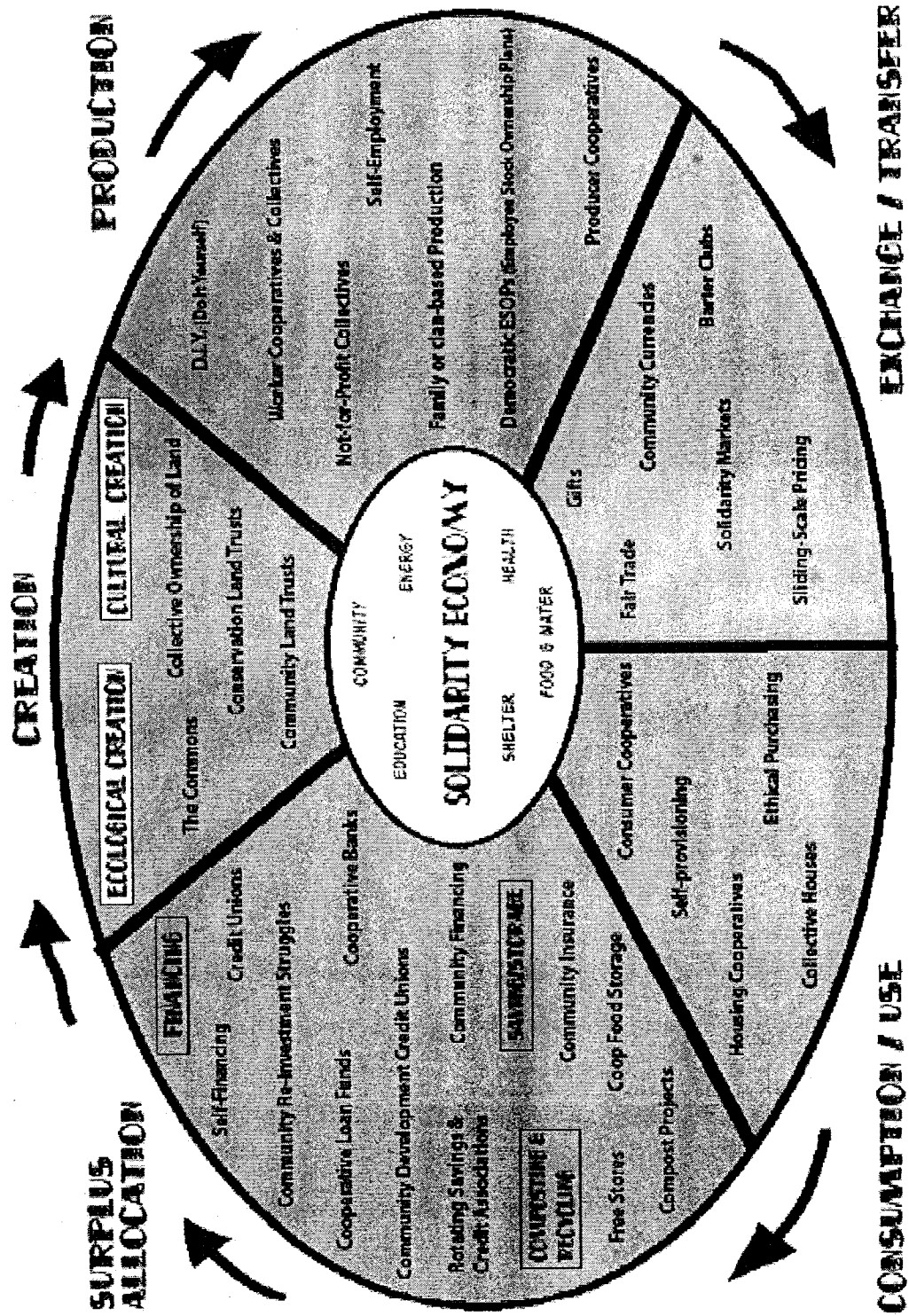
Mendell claims that Québec's economy has long been a combination of both social and market. Social economy is so deeply embedded in Québec, she writes, that it is not at risk of being completely replaced by the dominant market economy. Part of this, Mendell states, is that previous governments had been made aware of the successful nature of local economies in creating employment in an ecologically sustainable manner. However, continuing governmental fiscal support for local economic cooperatives, collectives and community organizations may be at risk due to political policies produced by more right leaning (conservative) governments that favour corporate and neo-liberal economic models for job creation. Mendell argues that socialist and welfare states have been pressured by the dominant markets to reorient. Where governments have submitted to the pressure, Mendell says there has been a rise in the development of solidarity economic strategies. This may be because corporate based economies do not provide the economic growth and security that they promote according to both Mendell and Neamtan. Instead, subsidies given to corporations to entice them to set up business takes money away from those who would most benefit and gives it to those who put profits over the good of the people. Solidarity economies place people over profit and consequently, spread the profit over a larger segment of the population. By using a multi-sector approach, creativity, innovation and human networking, solidarity economies prove highly successful in countering the economic upheavals that leave people with a disempowering loss of control in their fiscal security.

While not providing data or sources for her argument, Mendell also contends that women form the greatest bloc of community organizations geared towards social justice and solidarity economy. Mendell does cite the social activism organized by women such as the March for Bread and Roses from 2005 where women gathered and demonstrated against economic inequality and poverty that leads to social exclusion and food insecurity. Activists in the community organizing in my chosen field site were women more often than men so my research may provide support for Mendell's statement.

J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) also document that women are more prone to be actively involved in community organizing. Their research found that women participants in the Latrobe Valley community project in Australia were open to the concept of informal economies because they were less invested than men in the formal economy and they understood the amount of unpaid, yet necessary, labour that is done by women daily. Consequently, the idea of an informal, caring economy is not foreign to women. Solidarity based organizing and implementation is just a more public face and extension of labour already performed by women.

Gibson-Graham cite examples of the dis-empowering aspects capitalist policies may have on communities when large corporations shut down operations, leaving many without jobs or incomes. This leads to the loss of self-worth and dignity. However, Gibson-Graham make clear that creativity and innovation often follows as communities rally to find economic alternatives. Member owned cooperatives and collectives, community gardens and bartering systems are sometimes the outcome of community organizing. The authors call this "finding cracks" in the dominant language of capitalism

Figure 3: Components of Solidarity Economics Circle (Miller 2006)



where solidarity economy can be re-embedded into communities through social activism and communal unity.

All literature regarding solidarity economies points to the fact that their practice, while never physically absent, is overshadowed by the globalized economy even though it is less effective in providing economic security to most people. Ethical economies, not-for-profit organizations, subsistence labour, and domestic labour are often undervalued as are the women who do the caring labours in human economies.

Hillka Pietilä (2007, 1997) provides a strong argument for acknowledging the unpaid labour contributions by women to their communities. By using statistics to make her claim, Pietilä writes that if women were to be paid for all the caring work they perform on a daily basis, depending on the country, their earnings would account for anywhere from 30%-60% of the national GDP. The volunteer work that women contribute to community organizations keeps these organizations operating and able to provide support to those who need their services. Pietilä suggests that it is these activities that are the bases of the economies that contribute to sustainable survival.

The point that Pietilä makes in her writing is that non-monetized labour ensures the prosperity of countries but that it is not valued in kind. Because women contribute the most in terms of non-monetized labour activities, they themselves are not appreciated or valued by societies that claim to be family oriented, yet demonstrate the valuation of money over women and children through their fiscal policies that leave women vulnerable to poverty. There are repercussions to the undervaluation of women's labour: loss of dignity, disempowerment and loss of self-valuation producing a reduction in quality of life (Pietilä 2007, 1997). Many women are now organizing to change the

Figure 4: Solidarity Economics: "Living Economies" and the Informal Valuation of Labour (Pietilä 1997)

### The Productive "Living Economy"

The household economy:

- 1) skills and ability,
- 2) voluntary work,
- 3) care and wellbeing

### Sustainable "Living Economy"

The cultivation economy:

- 1) life in nature,
- 2) ecological cultivation,
- 3) production of food and other necessities

### Extractive "Dead Economy"

Industry and trade:

- 1) raw materials and fuel,
- 2) extraction and refining,
- 3) business for profit

dynamics of market economies through programs designed to re-empower women, helping them (re)gain their sense of agency, autonomy and control over their lives. Shelter, food security and social ties are important to women and as a result, often it is women who will be at the forefront of organizing services within the community, strengthening the bonds and uniting against poverty.

Most, if not all, the literature concerning solidarity-based local economies stresses the failure of the globalized formal economy to provide adequately for a great number of people. Far from “lifting all boats” through “trickle down” economic policies, many academic researchers are finding that the current economic model is worsening the living standards of many, leaving them dispossessed and marginalized. Solidarity economy, based on community cooperation and support networks, strengthens communal unity, provides goods and services and promotes the right to a dignified living to all who participate. Local governance in communities is far more democratic, inclusive, ethical and just for all members of those communities. The solidarity networks created and maintained through the labour of women uniting to protect their spaces have greatly improved the lives of many. Neamtan (2002) and Mendell (2006, 2003) suggest that more research is needed on the effectiveness of social economies in order to foreground the widespread usage and dependence on human economies by many who find themselves left behind by the dominant economic model.

In this thesis, I take up the challenge proposed by Neamtan and Mendell and seek to document through this ethnographic study at the micro level of a community’s informal sector and the women who labour within it and the women who depend on it. The research reveals that community organizing for the retaking of urban spaces in many

Montréal communities is occurring with a great deal of success considering the challenges mounted against them. It is not surprising to find that much of the organizing and the work are taken up by women who see the need to occupy emptied spaces to fulfill community needs in terms of food security and shelter as well as social inclusion. Women can and do provide many of the grass-roots, solidarity networking that is necessary to promote and advance workable, equitable and just, solidarity economies.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS, METHODOLOGIES AND FIELDSITE:

*Feminist methodologies, cognizant of the limits of the partial perspectives that any particular method or methodology yields, have advocated a multimethodological approach. This approach can be strengthened by epistemological and methodological coalitions among feminists who recognize the value of cross-pollination and collaboration (Harrison 2007:30).*

My fieldwork, conducted from August 2008 to March 2009, was based on: participant observation at Food Central; semi-structured interviews with the staff there as well as at other community organizations; and, unstructured interviews and conversations with some women who are either volunteers or clients of Food Central. In some cases, the women fit both of the latter categories. Not all conversations were digitally recorded; this depended on the individual's wishes. I used some quantitative supporting data drawing on statistics compiled from those published by Ville de Montréal, Stats Canada, and the National Council on Welfare and other reputable sources like Montréal Urban Community Sustainability and Food Central's database (numbers and age groups only).

My research focused on women specifically because as noted in previous chapters, poverty is gendered as is women's labour and "place" in most societies globally. Since the globalized economy adopted neo-liberalism, women have been negatively affected by the implementation of its policies that have cut back the funding of social welfare, health and educational programs (Gunewardena and Kingsolver 2007; Kingfisher 2002; Dobrowolsky et al 2009). So too, women are the hardest hit by the present world-wide recession, in both the global North and South. Researching the effect of neo-liberal economic policies on women's lives in a major Canadian city through a feminist lenses requires "an egalitarian ethic of care that promotes face-to-face, hands-on, reciprocal relations between researchers and those being researched" (Harrison 2007:24).



Consequently, beyond ethnographic methods, I used “feminist methodologies” attempting to reduce any “power disparities” (Harrison 2007:24) while researching women and the economic survival strategies they employ while living with a low-income. Anthropologist Faye V. Harrison contends “...feminist research should represent an alternative approach that emphasizes the experiential, takes a contextual and interpersonal approach to knowledge, is attentive to the concrete realm of everyday life and human agency, and is conducted with empathy, connectedness, dialogue, and mutual consciousness raising...” (2007:24). Harrison argues that “Methodologies provide the philosophical or logical rationale for the links researchers make among theory, pragmatic research strategies, evidence, and the empirical world” (2007:25). Feminist methodologies “articulate conceptual, theoretical, and ethical perspectives on the whats, whys and hows of research and the production of knowledge...” (Harrison 2007:25).

Given my placement within Food Central as a daily volunteer, I found myself conducting hundreds of spontaneous, unrecorded “mini” interviews with Food Central clients, some memorable and some not. I jotted down the most memorable at the end of each day as well as I could remember them. My collaborators at Food Central were generous in sharing their histories, experiences and views through many conversations and interviews. In this thesis, I present each woman individually through their thoughts, aspirations, important social interactions and relationships. Some women focussed nearly exclusively on their work, what they do and how they view the issue of food insecurity, the clients and other workers at Food Central but their personal stories intermingle since their personal and public efforts are closely related.

Because each woman has a different way of seeing and understanding I have made every attempt to present their stories using their own words and, in Donna Haraway's (1988:581) terms, their "situated knowledge." That is, their feminist empirical objectivity blended with lived experiences, to explain and convey a snapshot in time at Food Central. So, following the feminist methodology Harrison calls for, I present a number of stories as they were told to me. Those events that occurred while I participated could only be related through my own perspective. The stories were chosen for this ethnography in order to illustrate the everyday dilemmas, tactics and strategies, of social actors who experience food insecurity, and who are mobilizing and building the foundations for solidarity economies in NDG.

#### **MARISELA'S STORY:**

Thursdays tend to be quiet at Food Central, but on this day it was even more so because of a scheduled meeting in the early afternoon. Teri had requested that volunteers take the day off since she would not be available to assign work detail. Consequently, there were only four volunteers in attendance. We were stuffing envelopes, answering phones, breaking down boxes, and sweeping the floors. I was contemplating going home since it was so quiet with Teri away and because Charli and Rufus were about to meet. It was then that a woman came into Food Central and on his way to the meeting, Rufus asked me to take care of her: "Hey, there's a Spanish [speaking] woman who just came in and needs food. Could you take care of her and refer her out? She's from the Pointe. Devora is still here if you need help with the Spanish." I went around the corner and beckoned the woman into the common area toward the screening area where I would take

her information and find an appropriate food security organization close to her residence since she lived in Pointe St. Charles and not in NDG.

Marisela sat in the chair in front of the intake desk, removed her hat, scarf and mitts and loosened her heavy winter coat, apprehension clearly delineated on her face. We started what is normally a standard process even if she would eventually be referred out: identification for all persons in the family and proof of address in the form of a bill. The conversation proceeded brokenly in three languages – French, some English and a lot of Spanish on her part and a smattering on mine: “Su nombre?” “Marisela Grace Morales Castro” “Directione?” Marisela pulled out a Hydro bill and I filled in the address on the intake form. “Nombre de su esposa?” “Raul Hugo Ortega Ruiz,” she said as she placed the family’s Canadian visas on the desk; hers, her husband’s, her seventeen year old daughter’s and her fifteen year old son’s. Carefully choosing her words, she told me, “We come to Canada one year from [sic] Peru.” She needed food for a family of four. It was at the point when I picked up her son’s visa that everything began to come apart for her. She started pulling out sheets of paper: a written proof that her husband is working at an agency earning \$10.00 an hour; the lease for their apartment at \$675.00 a month; hospital reports, appointment schedules with doctors; and more bills. It was the desperation in her voice that made me look at these private and confidential forms and papers – they are unnecessary to the provisioning of foodstuffs. We are not a government agency; we do not need our applicants to disclose that much information because no one would want to survive dependent on a Food Central diet unless it was absolutely necessary.

Picking up her lease, Marisela told me that her landlord said that she will have to get a night job if they can't afford to live on her husband's wages. "Il dit: travail le soir si tu ne peut pas travailler pendant la journée. Je prends les leçons de français: trois jours, mais il faut que j'arrête – mon garçon, mi hijo – he is diagnosed with brain tumour one month now." Marisela began to cry and Armand, stuffing envelopes across the room, looked up and pointed to the box of tissue on the desk near him. I nodded and he brought it to us. I was glad for the momentary respite as I found myself speechless, silenced by my shock at her plight and by the panic and fear in her voice. Having two children myself, I can wholly empathize and know the fear a deadly disease inculcates in those dealing with possibilities and probabilities of a sick child's survival.

Marisela continued, tears streaming down her face, describing the physical effects the disease has on her son and the constant hospitalizations, her trips with him to appointments and the endless testing at clinics. Once again grabbing the papers from the desk, abandoning English or French, in quick Spanish she threw down the bills one by one, enumerating them: the rent, the hydro, the gas, transit passes, and the telephone. There is anger, frustration and fear, expressed both in her voice and on her face. I don't understand all the words, but I understand what she is saying. When she is done, she asks me: "Comprendes?" "Sí, comprendo." I understand her clearly expressed emotions and I understand her need for assistance. She needs and wants the emotional support of female family members, but they are in Peru, Marisela told me. She is going through this alone. The only way to make the payments for everything rests solely on her husband's wages. Since she cannot work at this point, she is hoping to drop an expense: food. That is why she came to us, not knowing where else to go. I went around the desk and gave her a

long hug; I could not think of anything to say to soothe her because there are no adequate words in any language.

Some quick research from our resources book and a phone call later, I gave Marisela the directions to the closest agency for food support in her neighbourhood. They would take her in that same day and make sure that she was given food. I went and got Devora before she left for the day because I wanted Marisela to understand exactly where she was to go and that the assistance would be ongoing until her situation changes, hopefully for the better. I gave Devora a quick rundown on Marisela's background details, including the information to pass on, and she translated. I hugged Marisela again and told her I will be right back as Devora continued talking to her. Armand had taken it on himself to start making up a food bag for her and I helped, throwing in some of what was available in the refrigerator plus other goodies from the storage area. We filled two large bags full; a good start from us to be complemented by the agency that will take over her case.

When I got back to the intake area with the heavy bags, I found Marisela on the telephone and Devora filled me in on what has transpired. She had connected Marisela with a support agency in Côte-des-Neiges, Multi-écoute, which she is affiliated with. They specialize in telephone counselling for immigrant women in any one of eight different languages and if the counsellor feels that the woman seeking support needs more than phone contact, they provide face-to-face support. In Marisela's case, an appointment was made. As she got up to leave, Devora hugged her, I hugged her, and then, after she had prepared herself to go home, we all hugged again: long strong hugs that were heartfelt. The tissue box got a lot of use that afternoon.

Devora and I looked at each other after Marisela left. Unspoken, but clearly understood in that shared look was the fragility of life and how easily an event can derail one's goals in life. Here was a woman who had bravely left everything she knew in her home country to make a new life in Canada with her children and husband. Her husband had found a job and though earning low wages, they were supporting themselves and life would get better after her language lessons allowed her to find employment too. Those dreams of a better future had suddenly been shattered for Marisela.

#### **CHALLENGES IN THE FIELD:**

*Qualitative research generally and ethnographic endeavour in particular is, by its very nature, interpersonal and intimate. Fieldwork relies upon the establishing and building of relationships with significant others in the field. It is these relationships which give ethnographic research its intensity, its quality and insight into the everyday social world (Coffey 1999:56).*

When I chose to conduct fieldwork with women living with low incomes, I thought that I was well equipped to handle the difficulties these women faced in strategizing for economic survival. For nearly two years, I had been a single mother on welfare before gaining minimum wage employment, and had faced economic hardships and deprivation [compared to what I had become used to when married]. I had at times been forced to use the services of a food bank when an unexpected expense threw my tight budget off track. I knew what to expect in this field. Yet, the stories women shared with me were demoralizing in their number, day after day, challenging my emotions in a way that I had never thought would be so overwhelming. I stopped writing for two weeks in September because all I could write was how enormous the problem of poverty was and how easily one can lose economic independence. I had been quite fortunate in

spite of my low-income status: my children were healthy; I had a strong social network of peers, family support, and access to a myriad of resources. I knew, however, that I had to persist in this work though, because the women's stories had to be told in order to help break the some of the myths and stereotypes of women living with low-incomes. The stories make clear how narrow the line separating comfortable living and austerity is for many women and how just one single event can drastically alter the course of their lives. Throughout these encounters, I found the incredible resilience of women who were determined to survive the obstacles set in their way through sheer will, quiet humour, and deep compassion for others.

Harrison writes, "Anthropologists are "ethnographic listener[s] and storyteller[s]" (quoting Kingsolver 2001:26) who weave together larger patterns of stories to develop social analyses, often those that link complex macrostructural forces to the intricate micropolitics of everyday lived experiences" (2007:27). The women's impromptu stories from Food Central were chosen as exemplars of the issues women face on a daily basis. While the difficulties are unique to each woman and experienced through the lenses of their personal lives, these stories are those shared by many other women and therefore become representative narratives. Their stories often depict women's embodied experience of poverty through health, events, subjectivities, opportunities [often lack of], limitations and future prospects. All the names have been changed to protect the women's privacy and any similarities between the chosen names and experiences as related are coincidental.

The names of those whom I interviewed as volunteers and clients were chosen by the women themselves and provide interesting insight into their characters. The staff

members have also chosen their own fictitious names though they have been interviewed often by news agencies regarding their organizations and therefore their real names are publicly available.

Through my daily interaction with most of the women portrayed in this thesis, I have become friends with many and we have shared many intimate moments for which I am grateful. Their collaboration and support through some of the most difficult times made this research possible. Their determination and that of many others who share their vision of building a stronger social commons in their community strengthens my conviction that women are the backbone of community and hence solidarity economies.

Through “participatory-immersion” (Harrison 2007:26) I was able to learn much from all the women with whom I shared conversations, life experiences, perspectives, meals, time and work. Though unintended, I must place myself into this academic work because of the situation and my positioning within its context. As Coffey notes: “Our analyses of *others* result from interactional encounters and processes in which we are personally involved... We are, after all, concerned with the observing, reconstructing and retelling of people’s lives. In seeking to understand a particular social world we attempt to people that world” (1999:115; emphasis in the original). In “peopling” Food Central and retelling the women’s stories, their lives became entwined with mine, however fleetingly some passed through it.

#### **FIELD SITE: NDG FOOD CENTRAL 2008**

Food Central is, in part, a food provision organization and one of many in Montréal. It is not a food bank, but a point of distribution though it operates



independently from Montréal's other food distribution outlets and it has its own budget from which to buy the food basics as set out by the National Food Guide of Canada. The food bank, Moisson Montréal, which is the central hub for food distribution to all of Montréal's food depots, allots extra foods, usually donated by corporations and grocery stores, according to population use at each Food Central. Food Central in NDG provides food service to well over 2,000 individual people a month, by which I mean, men, women and children regardless of the size of the family. Families, whose members may, or may not, be related<sup>7</sup>, range from one person to over ten persons and Food Central has now nearly 3,000<sup>8</sup> registered families in its computer database.

Emergency food provisioning is Food Central's main function, but it has a number of programs operating independently within it that provide resources, workshops and activities to promote community solidarity. I will give an overview of Food Central, The Good Food Box, The Community Council and InfoCentral, The Communal Kitchen, and the Pre-Employability program (BiL) as my field site. In the next chapter, the activist staff members share their "situated knowledge," experiences and future goals of their respective organizations and programs.

## **HISTORY OF FOOD CENTRAL**

In late October, 1986, Food Central was established by a group of women volunteers from different NDG churches and was situated in the basement of St. Augustine's Church [now known as River'sEdge]. According to Teri, the Volunteer Coordinator at Food Central, it was organized by a small collective of women, active in

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<sup>7</sup> They may be room-mates or "fictive" family.

<sup>8</sup> NDG Food Central statistics as of April 2009

their churches, who saw a need. Teri explains; "Every week the women who volunteered, they used to go and shop and pick up some food and then distribute it one day a week [using money from their church affiliated fundraising activities]. You know the usage at that point was a lot smaller but then word spread and need spread." The volunteers had decided to centralize the food assistance programs that each church operated individually and it remained in the River'sEdge basement for the next two years continuing to serve a small number of people in need of assistance.

By the summer of 1989, the service moved out into the chalet in the park across from the church because of the "critters," as Rufus, the Executive Director of Food Central calls the rodents the food was attracting to the basement of the church. Rufus says that it was a picturesque setting and that the volunteers had fun wheeling the food out to the chalet for the now twice weekly food service days. Rufus, who had started volunteering at that time, remembers: "At first there were not too many clients, maybe fifteen at the beginning of the month to about 80-90 at the end of the month. But, by 1990 the need for its services expanded again and Food Central moved to a converted house on NDG Avenue." The space was large enough for their needs until 1993 when more people were in need of assistance in food provisioning. At that time, more programs started to be added to the emergency food services such as a referral service, and an informal drop-in centre where members of the community could hold discussion groups. In February of 1993, the site became too small for the growing needs of the community. The Community Council<sup>9</sup> took it over as one of their projects and acquired the building where Food Central is now housed (which is now "not big enough" for the

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<sup>9</sup> The Community Council provides information regarding the community resources available to NDG residents. They are a partner to Food Central as well as initiators of other community service projects.

large number of clients Food Central serves). Rufus describes the building as “uncomfortable with a cold cement floor and dingy interior walls, but it is not glum because people make the difference. When reporters and news outlets come for interviews, they seek dingy, depressing buildings and the negative passivity of the people – “if it bleeds it leads” as they [news editors] say.”

A referral service, InfoCentral, was also initiated and an employee of the Community Council was hired as an information officer in charge of that program in house. That year Rufus was hired as the paid coordinator to oversee the operations of Food Central. The next year, 1994, a pre-cursor to the Good Food Box was created through a governmental program with a year’s funding but it discontinued in 1995 because of lack of funders for the group food-buying program. Rufus muses that “it was more popular in the Plateau [one of Montréal’s districts] where the more upscale yuppies lived.”

The Community Council began implementing the separation of Food Central from their organization in 2001 and Food Central became an independent and autonomous entity in 2003. It was because Food Central and the needs of its clientele became so large that a Board of Directors was created to manage the budget and hire an executive director and a coordinator to run it.

Already its coordinator, Rufus became the executive director of Food Central with its attendant duties – maintaining the books, applying for funding, buying the food basics, overseeing the volunteers and other organizational needs. Shortly afterwards, Teri was hired as coordinator overseeing inventory control and allocation of food resources and coordinating the volunteers to promote efficient human resource management. Food

Central continually changes in its programs and projects as funding allows, so while some projects and programs may be dropped, others are created to better serve low-income families and individuals. This also serves to create dynamism in the shape that the organization takes, constantly remaking itself to reflect the public needs.

### **FOOD CENTRAL MANDATE**

Food Central has a written mission statement defining objectives besides food provisioning which allows for greater flexibility in the organization. Though Food Central and its varied components deal with emergencies—food security and other crises such as assistance in countering alcohol and drug abuse, mental health issues and legal problems – the activists’ aims go further. Food Central agents want to improve neighbourhood relations in order to deal with the causes and not just the consequences of poverty. “Food Central seeks to sensitize the public to the issue of poverty and hunger, to accept and not distance or marginalize people who find themselves living in low-income situations which in our society produces a poverty culture” (Mission Statement)

Food Central’s mission statement asserts that the organization works toward “breaking isolation, fostering interactions between the clients, staff and volunteers, providing resource information and treating all individuals with respect and dignity.” Rufus sees the work that Food Central does as “an applied present with an envisioned future.”

### **FOOD CENTRAL FUNDERS AND VISITORS;**

Food Central depends on charitable and philanthropic funding to maintain and support itself. Because it has moved beyond its history as a grassroots movement and now requires more formal funding sources, it could now be considered a local NGO serving the needs of a specific community and therefore must follow its mandate as presented to its supporters. As a charitable publicly funded organization it also must adhere to government policies and restrictions in order to keep its license<sup>10</sup>.

Its core funding comes from Centraide<sup>11</sup> and responsibility for the acquisition of further funding falls to the Board of Directors and the Executive Director<sup>12</sup>. They apply for various grants: some of the grants are for one year only, some are for three years, and some only given once. The rest of the funding is through community members, private donors and as well as some family-run companies' philanthropic foundations such as the Bronfman, the Hogg and the McCain Foundations that support local causes. Possible future donors are often given a tour of Food Central.

A portion of the Centraide funding pays Rufus' salary with the rest applied to overhead costs. Teri's salary is paid through other grant portions but the majority of the funding is applied to food acquisition. Food donations are always welcomed, but when resources or money get low the staff and volunteers at Food Central launch food drives, public appeals, talks with members of Church groups and target other institutions. Sometimes the requests are for specific things like baby formula, baby food and other

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<sup>10</sup> Le gouvernement du Quebec (<http://www2.publicationsduquebec.gouv.qc.ca>).

<sup>11</sup> Centraide of Greater Montréal [originally the United Way] is an independent organization receiving its donations from organizations and companies (28%), the individuals in the community (12%), employees and trade unions (57%) and other revenues (3%) ([http://www.centraide.mtl.org/index\\_flat\\_frame\\_hp\\_en.jsp](http://www.centraide.mtl.org/index_flat_frame_hp_en.jsp)).

<sup>12</sup> Unlike grassroots organizations, registered not-for-profit organizations must have a board of directors according to Canadian regulations. Not all not-for-profits are charities but all charities are considered not-for-profit organizations.

non-standard items such as gluten free foods or nutritional supplements for those unable to eat due to illness.

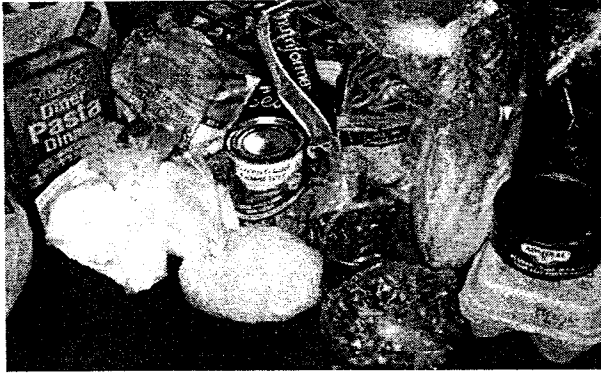
While I was conducting my field research, a federal election was called for October 2008. Dutifully, all the parties' candidates filed through for their tour and photo-ops. None spoke to the volunteers and the visits were never during service hours so they did not meet with clients. This was explained as a non-partisan effort to remain apolitical as required by the regulations charitable organizations must follow to keep their license. However, since all parties were represented it could have been offered as an opportunity for instructional purposes and to increase voting percentages in the low-income demographic. Participatory democracy does not seem to be part of Canada's future at this time.

### **FOOD DISTRIBUTION:**

The food distributed by Food Central is basic but nutritional having the necessary elements for survival. A nutritionist established the menu and is based on the Canada Food Guide pyramid. Not everything on the list<sup>13</sup> is purchased by Food Central but depends on donations. The donation of the foods the organization does buy stretches its budget insuring enough for a longer period of time. There are times purchased items like powdered milk, the most expensive item, are not available because there is no money left in the monthly budget. The food menu, determined before Food Central became independent from the Community Council, is enough for meals for two and a half days.

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<sup>13</sup> See figure 3.



Food package for one person: dried black and brown beans, rice, pasta, powdered milk, ½ dozen eggs, one can tuna, one can vegetables, fresh vegetables and fruits as available and bread item.

**Figure 3: NDG FOOD CENTRAL – OFFICIAL MENU (Stars after items not purchased)**

# OF PERSONS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
RICE	1	2	2	3	4	5	5	6
KRAFT DINNER	1	2	2-OR PASTA	1 PASTA	1 PASTA + 1 KD	1 PASTA + 2 KD	1 PASTA + 2 KD	1 PASTA + 3 KD
MILK	2	3	5	6	8	9	11	12
BEANS	2	2	2	2	4	4	4	4
Equivalent	<b>2 PORTIONS OF DRY = 1 CAN</b>							
TUNA	1	1	2	3	4	4	5	6
EGGS	½ DOZ.	1 DOZ.	1 DOZ.	1 ½ DOZ.	2 DOZ.	2 ½ DOZ.	2 ½ DOZ.	3 DOZ.
TOMATOES	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	2
CANNED FRUIT OR VEG*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
SOUP (GUIDELINES ONLY)*	1 SMALL	1 SMALL	1 MED.	1 LRG.	1LRG. + 1 SMALL	1 LRG. + 1 SMALL	1 LARG. + 1 MED.	2 LRG.
BREAD*	DEPENDENT ON SUPPLY							

Proportionally, single persons receive the same amount as large families, however, items such as cereal, peanut butter, juice and puddings are allotted to those with children who have priority over adults. Though peanut butter is no longer acceptable for children's sandwiches at school because of possible allergies by fellow school mates, the

eggs and tuna Food Central supplies as part of the regular food bags can be sandwich fillers.

At present, the clientele at Food Central continues to swell in number with almost one hundred new applicants per month since August, 2008. The ongoing monthly budget overruns reflect unanticipated growth in the number of people now needing assistance in food procurement and the higher cost of the food basics Food Central buys, such as rice, eggs and powdered milk (which costs the same as fresh milk).

### **FOOD CENTRAL AS A PHYSICAL SPACE**

Food Central as a physical space has been organized in such a way to maximize its utilitarian functions, but it has also created a large common space where the clients can interact and socialize amongst themselves and those working at Food Central. Gudeman writes that a community needs a base of shared values to maintain solidarity (2006). The need for food is shared and Food Central is a valued resource to those who need it. Thus, I argue, it can be viewed as a base for community.

Situated on the corner of Oxford Street and boulevard de Maisonneuve, Food Central has brightly painted murals adorning its three facings. On the left front wall of the building the art depicts a soaring dragon, flowers and trees, a circus wagon, a horse rearing behind its trainer and a woman performing with snakes coiled around her. On the right of the woman, there is a branchless tree trunk with a heart carved into it, pierced with an arrow, the names Eville [the artist's street signature] and Emily inscribed within the heart and a brown bear peering out from behind the tree. There is no sign indicating the purpose of the building.



Food Central is unlike any food bank I have ever known. As a single mother on social assistance in the early 1980s, I had at times needed to use the services of the food bank. My second experience with a food bank was when I worked as the coordinator of a community gardens and I had brought donations of excess produce from the gardens to a nearby by food bank. The food banks I had known were organized in two separate spaces: a front area where people show their ID and welfare stubs to the volunteers stationed behind a long counter; and a closed-off backroom where the volunteers prepare the food baskets. The clientele comes in one door and after a perfunctory interaction with those working behind the counter, leaves through another door with a box pre-packed with non-perishable goods according to family size. There is no common room for socializing, no mingling with the volunteers and there is certainly no requesting of extras such as honey or flour or peanut butter, or other needed cooking materials.

Food Central has a small foyer with two doorways. The facing door leads to the open offices of the staff and the door to the right opens onto a passageway leading to the large, open, main usage area where the physical labour is conducted and the clientele is served. When I first visited Food Central, I thought it was like a social club with members of the community dropping in at will, which at times it is, except the people who come and go on non-service days are mostly volunteers just touching base and seeing if anything needs doing. If you are there, you work. If there is something that needs to be done, the volunteers mobilize and get working, but the atmosphere remains casual for the most part.

Though it is one large room, the layout of Food Central has been modified by partitioning this room into several smaller ones using various objects that serve dual

purposes such as bins, cabinets and filing shelves. Some areas are obviously marked as “no go” areas to the general public, but the proceedings are pretty much open to view and the remaining commons area has an eclectic mix of chairs and pews that invites clients to socialize while waiting for service.

The commons area has a bookcase that is usually filled with an assortment of donated books from children’s books and novels to textbooks of every subject in various languages. There is also a “free” table that is often piled high with used clothing, toys, dishes and sometimes small appliances, donated by both Food Central clients and people from the community at large. In behind one of the pews, close to the public washroom is a cabinet which is covered with computers yet to be set up<sup>14</sup> except for one which is available to members of the public upon request. It is not connected to the internet and so therefore seldom used. There are two desks in the common area: one is for the “greeter” who hands out the numbered cards to the clients as they enter and who takes the information of new clients so the screeners (in the intake area) can open a file for the client with their own Food Central file number. The other desk is for the staff and the volunteers from the NDG Community Council who operate the InfoCentral at Food Central during food service hours.

The area at the far end of the commons room, separated by a table, is “The Food Kiosk” or community kitchen. There is a large refrigerator, a large pantry cupboard, a state-of-the-art computerized stove, a counter with double sink and dishwasher and many cupboards. It is not a very large area for a communal kitchen, but there is room enough if the cooks are organized and coordinated.

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<sup>14</sup> If plans go through as hoped, money will be found to set up an area so that members of the public can use the computers and access the internet and possibly lessons for basic computer use.

In another large area, situated to the left as you enter the commons area, is: the staff/volunteer eating area, the storage area, Teri's office and a hallway that leads to the meeting room and home to the Budget d'initiatives locales (BiL) Pre-Employability Project<sup>15</sup>. This area is where a new walk-in refrigerator is installed as well as one of the three freezers that contain meats or other frozen foods for distribution whenever those are donated to Food Central – a rare occurrence.

Between the passageway and the main room is a small office that has been created for client intake/screening at each visit. It is half hidden by a large freestanding cupboard filled with adult diapers and a cupboard that holds baby formula and cans of meal replacement liquids for those who are unable to eat due to illnesses and soy products for those with gluten intolerance. There are bins containing cat and dog foods and a set of shelves where baby diapers (10 per bag) and personal care products such as soap and toothpaste are kept in plastic milk crates for those who ask for these items. On occasion there are donations of menstrual pads and tampons; products that are in high demand because of their cost. At times laundry soap (repackaged at 3 cups per bag) is donated which is also appreciated by the clients.

The food preparation area is partitioned off from the commons area leaving a large enough gap to push a shopping cart through. In the semi-enclosed area formed by filing cabinets filled with canned goods, pasta, condiments, cake mixes, crackers, cereal, peanut butter and other assorted non perishable goods including baby food there is a table set up where the food is bagged during the food service hours (known as "The Service").

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<sup>15</sup> This Emploi Québec program was instituted three years ago aimed to help people who have become marginalized for various reasons prepare to return to the workforce, though in reality, it is more of a mechanism for people to start reintegrating with the community as a first step towards employment. Everyone at Food Central simply refer to it as the BiL project.

The table holds plastic milk crates containing the non-perishable food basics for easy access. During food service, a row of stacked cartons filled with the eggs, fruits, vegetables and breads are set in front of the table. According to Health and Safety guides for food handling all foodstuffs must be kept off the floor so empty crates form the base of the stacks.

The middle section of the room contains a series of small tables used as food preparation stations for bagging bulk food items such as the milk, rice, fruit and vegetables and for placing the eggs in cartons for distribution. At the very end of the food preparation room is a large delivery door that is kept open in the summer/fall days and kept shut except for deliveries in the winter. The food preparation area has a large storage room where the non-perishable foods are kept on warehouse sized shelves and on wooden pallets. The food preparation area is where most of the labour is conducted by the volunteers and staff.

Because Food Central is a multi-resource site with various programs operating in the building space, there is always some activity, planned or spontaneous, centred on food issues and food itself. For so many, food provisioning is an issue at home, therefore, food acquires a greater importance to them than for people who have plenty. The food service on distribution days has taken on a reverential ritual quality not unlike a church service. The workers at Food Central pronounce "The Service" like it is capitalized. The food samples provided during service is a form of communal dining and is part of the ritual. The communal, or community, kitchen is always in use, feeding clients, volunteers and staff.

## **THE GOOD FOOD BOX**

The Good Food Box program operating throughout Montréal began four years ago as a pilot project in NDG through Food Central. Charli was the coordinator at start up, before it became an established program. It is a not-for-profit project aimed at providing low-income families with affordable vegetables and fruits. A small box for two persons costs \$7.00 every two weeks, a medium sized box for four persons is \$11.00 per two weeks and the largest, a box for more than four person costs \$16.00 every two weeks. The Good Food Box program is modeled after Toronto's highly successful program created in 1994 which now packs over 1 000 boxes a week and which has expanded to provide fruits and vegetables in a school program. Montréal's program may also move toward a school program as it grows in demand.

Because of the success of the pilot project in NDG, the group buying program has expanded quickly to other boroughs with a possibility of centres in the Laval and South Shore areas, each with their own area coordinators. The Good Food Box in Montréal is spreading outward to other regions of the province including Quebec City. In Montréal, the office of the regional coordinator of The Good Food Box is housed at the Moisson Montréal, the city's food bank, but is a separate entity. As the Food Box popularity grows, new jobs are being created to develop and coordinate the program in new boroughs and to assist in setting up the program in the outlying regions.

As a group buying organization, The Good Food Box buys in bulk quantities, often directly from local farmers. The Good Food Box produce costs less than most retail outlets and grocery stores because it often cuts out the middle buyer. Transportation and delivery costs of the boxes to the distribution points are kept at minimum through route

planning to save on fuel consumption. The money collected in the sales of the boxes covers the purchasing and transportation of the produce only which Charli estimates as less than 10% per box and so the program is subsidized. Salaries for the area coordinators are paid by Centraide as are those of the regional coordinator, her assistant and the driver. It could be wholly self-sustainable should the program expand greatly and by adding a small margin to the cost of the vegetables. The Good Food Box is heavily reliant on volunteers to pack the boxes and to provide pick-up points for distribution which are close and accessible outlets for neighbourhood residents. Food Central is only one of many NDG pick-up spots.

During the summer months the boxes contain a high proportion of local produce while in the winter more is imported and only storage vegetables and fruits are from regional farms. The contents of the boxes may increase or decrease with the seasonal fluctuations in cost so that a customer may receive far more produce in the summer months than in the winter. The produce is purchased to maintain a variety of colours, textures and types of fruits and vegetables in the boxes. At present, The Good Food Box buys mainly from one area farmer and through a wholesale distributor. The organization is actively seeking more farmers to become involved so that it can access a more diverse crop. The Good Food Box is dedicated to supporting local farmers forming part of the network for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).

## **THE FOOD KIOSK AND COMMUNITY KITCHEN**

Like many of Food Central's projects The Food Kiosk was conceived by Teri and a written proposal was submitted for funding by Centraide. The project and funding for a

part-time [totalling two days] contract employee and a budget for basic supplies was approved. The intention is to cultivate bridges with Food Central clients by teaching them how to stretch their food budgets and how to create flavourful meals from the basic foods they receive. The interaction between the kiosk staff, volunteers and clients helps to break the social isolation and provides a medium for the clients to converse amongst themselves.

Food samples are prepared for the clients before every service using the basic foods on hand and the foods donated in large enough quantities, like vegetables, for inclusion in the day's food bags. The accompanying recipes for the food samples provided are photocopied and made available to the clients who may wish them. Usually, they are simple soups or stews or small slices of omelettes stuffed with stir fried vegetables served in little sampling cups like those used in food demonstrations. Sometimes these preparations are appreciated by the clients and sometimes given the thumbs down. Through observations, the samples are generally much appreciated by the single men who "sample" more than once. Teri once observed that the samples may be the clients' first hot, nutritious meal in a day or two and so the amount of samples a client may take is not limited.

The kiosk serves a second function during food service days. The Good Food Box program is promoted through displaying the fruits and vegetables included in the boxes and preparing recipes using lesser known, but inexpensive vegetables such as fennel, turnips or eggplants. A third function of the kiosk is a forum for an intergenerational skills exchange which is intended to harmonize relations between youth and seniors. This project is funded through another philanthropic agency, The Heritage

Fund, and provides Marjorie, the kiosk staff, with another 6 remunerated hours a week. The premise of the program is to encourage young people to interact with seniors through the exchange of skills. The seniors teach the youth to cook and the youth then teach the seniors how to use computers. The sessions during the eight week project in the fall were not as successful as hoped for, but with time and further funding, the program can be realized. Because there were few internet-connected computers available and the participants already knew how to use them, the focus was mainly on the meals and conversations. There was little age differentiation; all were middle aged and all but one participant were men. The project was successful insofar that the participants, all representatives of one of the most marginalized groups of people, those with special needs, had an opportunity to congregate in an integrated setting.

The community kitchen is used daily for meal preparation to feed those working at Food Central. Lunches for the staff and volunteers are always made by someone willing to take the time, or who has a new recipe to try out. The food supplies are taken from Food Central stock or if a special item is needed, such as chicken or ground beef, the cook of the day may buy it or request that Teri buys it, but the cost is reimbursed through the petty cash budget. Sometimes, it can be as simple as soup and sandwiches and at times as extravagant as lasagne made with homemade pasta. There are very rarely leftovers from lunch and if one of the volunteers is busy, their portions have to be set aside and strictly guarded for when they can take a break – this mostly happens on service days when the screeners and baggers are unable to stop their work.

Special occasions are also celebrated with meals prepared in the kitchen. Teri always makes sure that volunteer and staff birthdays are celebrated with cakes and



candles and a hearty meal. Thanksgiving and Christmas are celebrated by staff and volunteers with turkeys, hams, salads, vegetables and all the trimmings. Some of the trimmings are brought in by the volunteers and some by staff members. Sharing meals and occasions elevates the feeling of community and strengthens the bonds amongst the volunteers and staff at Food Central.

An element of solidarity economy, communal kitchens and the effect of cooking and eating together enhance a sense of unity, cohesion and community. Food brings people together in a social setting where the exchange of innovative and creative ideas can flow and new partnerships formed.

#### **THE NDG COMMUNITY COUNCIL/INFOCENTRAL:**

The InfoCentral, a resource centre, is a satellite project that is run through the NDG Community Council. Its function is to provide resource information to the clients of Food Central to better equip them to become integrated into the NDG community, to become aware of their rights, to direct them to other organizations through which the clients can find further assistance with their needs. There are brochures and pamphlets representing organizations which provide language lessons, job opportunities, skills training, nutritional services, free legal services, family planning services, housing issues counselling and many other agencies. There is also a thick resource book compiled by Natasha, the InfoCentral Volunteer Coordinator who works for the Community Council. It is a compendium listing of all of Montréal's organizations and agencies and many provincial state agencies. The InfoCentral desk is staffed by volunteers during service hours at Food Central.

The Community Council was established in 1942, the second in Canada, by a group of volunteer women. It is a process-driven organization, always fluid and evolving, but its main function is to help the community find the resources needed when gaps in public services are identified. It is also a place where citizens can come together and talk about community issues and in the last three years, it has become the “table de cartier” in NDG. Organizations come together in concert at scheduled round table meetings to share bigger ideas. Many of NDG’s community organizations were born out of the Community Council. Food Central became one of these after the Council had taken over from the church-affiliated women’s group.

The Community Council provides much of the advocacy for projects in NDG and as such, has become the hub of community organizations through providing a networking system. The Community Council works toward recognizing the issues of all socio-economic classes in the borough through providing a forum for various groups to meet. Many of the workers and volunteers in the community unite here to make their voices louder as they advocate against inequities.

A future goal is for Food Central to take over the InfoCentral so that the Community Council can focus on tackling other community needs. To assist the InfoCentral in becoming independent from the Council and added to Food Central’s programs, Natasha is working towards finding the funding for an Outreach Coordinator and a working budget for the program.

#### **THE BiL PROJECT:**

The coordinators of the pre-employability project, Devora and Marshall, expend a lot of energy in making sure that this project works as well as it does at Food Central. The Budget d'initiatives locales (BiL) projects<sup>16</sup> are government subsidized programs under the auspices of Emploi Quebec to counter unemployment and poverty. It is Emploi Quebec which pays the salaries for Devora and Marshall and those of the computer/language instructors [I was one of the instructors they hired]. The Emploi Quebec grant also pays the participants to attend the eleven week intensive pre-employability workshops and to complete their "stages" or internships volunteering in an organization closely affiliated with the participants' career interests.

The original proposal for Food Central's BiL project was written in 2006 by one of the summer students Food Central hires every year through a federally funded program. The proposal was accepted as were the consequent proposals<sup>17</sup>. This year's proposal, covering two sessions, fall 2008 and winter 2009, targeted women who were 35 years and over and who were of a visible minority or who were immigrants. The proposal for the next year is once again targeting this demographic. Past projects were geared towards other demographics including single mothers, youths, and those who had experienced long-term unemployment. A number of volunteers at Food Central are graduates of the BiL project.

The structure of the program consists of three weeks of workshops and outings followed by eight 15 hour weeks of internship volunteering at an organization or institution that best fills the participants' future aspirations and goals and eight hours of

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<sup>16</sup> There are a number of BiL projects operating through other agencies in Montréal, each targeting varying populations deemed to be most marginalized in their communities. Carrefour Jeunesse Emploi, a youth job finding and training centre in NDG has a BiL project for young male Russians.

<sup>17</sup> Like all the projects operating through Food Central, the proposals must be submitted every year for funding approval.

basic computer or language lessons [survival skills] over the eight weeks. The workshops focus on personal development like assertiveness training, household budgeting, anger management, domestic abuse, communication skills, housing and welfare issues and advocacy, job search and preparing curriculum vitae. The end of the training period is marked by a potluck lunch where the graduates receive their certificates of completion.

Food Central activists have many plans and proposals waiting to be implemented when funding and opportunities arise. These include formal information sessions as well as social activities geared toward sharing ideas and possibly finding innovative economic solutions. Because Food Central, as a social movement, believes that the problems facing low-income residents can only be solved through community involvement and the empowerment of marginalized groups, they are working to make that a reality. Food Central and its integrated programs have created a physical space where the ethics of care and egalitarian community solidarity are practiced and promoted.

## CHAPTER 4

### FOOD CENTRAL'S ACTIVIST STAFF

*In cities of the global North, movements of urban women are at the forefront of challenging restructuring and it impacts on daily life and livelihoods and in constructing and reconstructing urban spaces. They emphasize the social construction and defense [sic] of place, belonging, and new forms of democratic participation (Wekerle 2005:98).*

The activists who work at Food Central are good examples of the values of caring, generosity and interdependence that are the foundation of the solidarity economy. These are the agents of change who visualize a different energy and vitality in their community opening the space for a social economy that benefits all NDG residents. Louis Favreau suggests “More generally, even if they only operate on a local scale, community groups are dynamic social sites in which new forms of socialization, new ideas, new social relations and challenges to the dominant social order are emerging” (1992:203). There can be no doubt that the women who staff Food Central are seeking to “upgrad[e] the socio-economic lot of the poor and the marginalized” (Favreau 1992:204).

The community activists at Food Central are mostly women. Some are NDG residents who choose to give their labour to the community because, as humanitarians, they believe that a community looks after all its members. In many ways their work can also be seen as an extension of the gendered division of labour within their homes in which they are the primary caregivers and responsible for food provision and preparation. Others are women who in their own life trajectories have experienced economic hardship and may have turned to community services, welfare and Food Central itself in times of need.

These women are committed, through their own performance and action, to improving the well-being of their community and the relations amongst the members of

the community. Because the remuneration is not commensurate with the work community activists do, for most, money is not the *raison d'être* for their activism. These women seek, through activism, to effect social change whether around the issues of poverty, food security, ecology or environment. Most of the activists who work at Food Central belong to more than one organization through volunteerism, board membership, fundraising or community outreach utilizing various media including interviews and speaking events. Though fewer in number the male activists who also work at Food Central are equally committed to community organizing and social justice.

Wekerle (2005:89) writes; “The food security movement operates at multiple sites and scales, including agencies of the local state, places where food is grown, community agencies, regional links between farmers and consumers and coalitions that span the scale from the body to the household, neighbourhood, city, and globe.” The creation of food security networks and the re-appropriation of public spaces by women have the effect of politicizing food (Wekerle 2005:95), poverty and social inequities rife in large urban centres globally. Favreau argues that what is occurring in Montréal’s “popular organizations” since the 1980s is a collaboration between social militancy and charitable organizations creating “new forms of politicization...more clearly focused on objectives shaped by hard day-to-day realities” (1992:200-201).

In this section I describe those who work at Food Central and through their words, visions of communal solidarity these activists strive to attain through the food security and anti-poverty programs and networks they have fashioned and implemented through their transformative politics.

**TERI:**

My first encounter with the people of Food Central was with Teri whose title is “Volunteer Co-ordinator,” but who, in practice, does far more than coordinating the volunteer workforce. Petite and energetic, with a youthful face that belies her age, Teri can only be described as the living hub of Food Central. It is she who keeps everything running as smoothly as possible during the chaos of a food service day. She is the one who turns Food Central into a home for many by decorating and celebrating seasonal events such as Thanksgiving dinner and Halloween. Teri appears to have the ability to juggle all the demands placed on her while always trying to maintain a calm demeanour. At times, it is impossible and Teri’s temper flares after which she seldom fails to apologize for “losing it” saying, “I could have dealt with that in a better way.” Multi-tasking is necessary in Teri’s job and she can easily switch from one direction to another, sometimes doing two things at a time if one task is repetitive and requires little concentration. This flexibility is necessary at Food Central because no two days are ever the same. Daily life at Food Central has dual qualities: there are fixed events, schedules and timetables but within that framework everything is fluid and there are always unexpected situations and unplanned incidents. These incidents need to be dealt with as they happen and this is where Teri shows her talent to absorb the information quickly and to improvise solutions, revising plans made at the beginning of the day. While making some decisions on her own, most often Teri will consult with the volunteers, asking for input from those who will be affected by the change in directions. Because Teri often has to change directions mid-task, she sometimes complains about never feeling that she has accomplished her goals for the day, especially the paper-work and office duties. Teri

says, “When I finally get on the computer to read my emails, I get called away. When I come back, I find that someone else is on the internet and so never finish what I started. I must have over a hundred emails in my inbox, unread and unanswered! I would just like to go home one day after work and feel that I had completed everything I needed to do.”

Charitable organizations need the support of the public through funding, volunteerism, and donations. To achieve these goals, the personnel often act as spokespersons providing information about the organization to those who seek it. Because of this, Teri is long familiar with giving interviews to strangers and so on my first visit to Food Central – unannounced and without an appointment – she took the time out of her busy day to answer my questions about the work of Food Central.

Teri is open, easy going (with limits), has a good sense of humour and is very approachable and involved. As she explained her position at Food Central, Teri stated, “I could just stay in my office and delegate, but I would never ask a volunteer to do something I wouldn’t do, such as cleaning up vomit after someone gets sick which has happened. It would be so much easier if I could just delegate, but I also know that if a volunteer doesn’t show up, I have to be the one to replace them.” Teri is actively working, both physically and intellectually, during her workday and because of this, she has the respect and trust of the volunteers and other staff members. An empathetic listener, Teri often becomes Food Central counsellor, for clients as well as for those who work there. She treats everyone with dignity and respect regardless of their social status in the world outside Food Central. However, if a client or a volunteer is drunk, belligerent, disruptive or threatening, Teri will expel that person from Food Central for a week. If the person, client or volunteer, continues acting in an unacceptable manner, Teri



may permanently bar the person from coming to Food Central, but always with a referral to a food assistance agency in St. Henri which provides for the greater Montréal area.

Like most of the people working at Food Central, Teri has experienced life in a low-income situation as a young child and later as a single mother of two daughters. She returned to university studies after her divorce, earning a degree in social psychology and has been active in issues of poverty, food security, and domestic violence ever since. It was through her volunteerism and activism in the network of organizations including Women Aware and Women on the Rise, that Teri found herself in her position at Food Central. She told me, “The pay as a community organization worker is not great. You would never get rich at it, but the unwritten perks are worth it.” Teri recognizes that were it not for her partner’s income, she would not be able to afford her present lifestyle on the salary she draws at Food Central. One of the differences between working nine-to-five in a corporate job, according to Teri, is that if there is need for “some personal time off like when my daughter was about to deliver, the rest of the group said, ‘go ahead and things will work out here.’” Teri was also able to take a week off on short notice at the beginning of December when she was unexpectedly given tickets for a Caribbean cruise, a well-deserved holiday away from the stresses of Food Central before Christmas.

While the perks may be appreciated, the work is often stressful, emotionally taxing, physically strenuous, and often thankless, taking a toll on Teri (and the volunteers). One day, after a particularly demanding day when she was listlessly sprawled out in a chair, I queried Teri, “If the pay is not that great and the work leaves you exhausted like this, there must be something else that keeps you here.” To which she responded simply, “If it was just about the pay, it would be so easy to quit.” Teri was

alluding to the deep sense of satisfaction that most workers and volunteers feel from providing a much needed service. Teri advocates for social inclusion and to this end, she continues to advance programs at Food Central that will draw people together while giving them the tools to advocate for their rights, find the proper community resources for their needs and provide for a safe and cohesive environment for children and adults in the community.

The food kiosk which is meant to demonstrate ways of preparing the foodstuffs Food Central gives out was conceived with Teri's assistance, as is the communal kitchen. When Teri began working at Food Central, there were no communal lunches for the volunteers and staff. It is she who began organizing these lunches consisting nearly always of sandwiches and Teri often bought the supplies necessary such as bread, condiments or sandwich filling. With the rebuilding of the kitchen area, the lunches are often hot meals, most often cooked by Teri, but in many instances, volunteers or other staff may decide to jump in and make the meal. It is due to Teri's concern with food security for all that the volunteers get at least something nutritious to eat in exchange for their labour.

Weeks after our conversation about what kept her working at Food Central, Teri told me a story about a recent event which she wanted related in this ethnography. This is her narrative:

We got a phone call one day from a policeman asking about our service hours. I didn't take the call. Either Rufus or Charli took it. Anyway, he said that he had a man with him who hadn't eaten in three days and who needed food. Could he bring this guy in to us for some food? I don't know how the policeman found out about us; maybe he was one of the police who brought

us the beans after their fundraiser<sup>18</sup>. So, the police brought this guy to Food Central who had been caught stealing food. Not the expensive stuff, you know, like steak or anything. Just small basic food items he could put in his pocket. He was hungry and he only stole to feed himself.

For some reason, the policeman understood and was sympathetic enough to bring him to us. I wish I had gotten his name: it would be nice to thank him and commend him to his chief. I was making sandwiches for everyone at the time the policeman brought the guy in so I asked him [the man caught stealing] if he wanted a sandwich. I gave him one and he downed it in nothing flat! I said to him that he must be really hungry and asked if he wanted another one and he said yes. Well, he ate that one fast too. He was really hungry and that was the only reason he resorted to theft. We gave him food and a reference to Welcome Hall, but told him that if ever he didn't have food, to come and see us before stealing again even if he didn't live in NDG. I think that this is a good story about the police who always get bad publicity, they are not all bad: some police have empathy and care. It's also about why we do what we do at Food Central. For me, it's stories like this one that make it all worth it.

This form of formal inter-community cooperation makes a difference to the people living in the communities and it is the foundation of solidarity economies. It is different members of communities coming together to build stronger social ties and solidarity between the various actors within it. As Gibson-Graham writes, it is the practice of the ethics of caring that is at the base of social economies (2006).

### **CHARLI:**

The sense of community altruism is shared amongst most of the other staff at Food Central expressed in differing forms. Charli is the coordinator for the Good Food Box program which operates from Food Central and is an integral part of the food security network. While she has never been in a low-income situation, Charli is highly active in community organizing envisioning a community where everyone lives in an

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<sup>18</sup> Apparently every fall, the Montréal police hold a fundraiser where they sell locally made brown beans. They bring all the unsold containers of beans to Food Central for distribution for our clients, volunteers and staff.

equitable situation. She tells me that “I would like to be more involved and help in coming up with solutions for the poverty and isolation in our community. I think that there are a lot of people who we don’t even know are there. They have fallen through the cracks; people who have fought different problems like mental illness, addictions, break up of their families or loss of jobs. People who have found themselves in an impoverished situation who weren’t before, who had jobs and businesses and families and now don’t. How do we keep them as vital people, as members of our society? I would like to see everyone find their place where they feel they are contributing in any way they can in order to feel fulfilled and not feel isolated and have enough to eat. I would like to get the ethnic communities more involved in the community too, because they are in their little pocket, to draw them out so that everyone feels welcomed and so that people would have a chance to meet each other. I would like to work toward those goals.” In this regard, Charli would like to see that everybody has the necessities of life in order to live in a dignified manner. She believes that each person, as a citizen of the community, has a responsibility towards those who have less and towards each other.

Charli’s involvement with the Good Food Box began through volunteering at Food Central which she has done for 10 years now. The job came to her “completely out of the blue. It fell into my lap because the previous coordinator just quit, you know, didn’t even give any notice. They didn’t have anybody and it was the summer time and a woman from the Board [of Directors for the NDG Food Central] asked me if I could just give them a hand for a month or two. So I did – I did what I could because I was travelling so I tried to keep it going and I really didn’t know that much about it [The Good Food Box]. I knew that it existed, but I had never been involved with it.

Eventually, they were looking for someone to replace the former coordinator so they said would you consider applying and I hadn't really but I was looking for a change in careers. I had been teaching science to kids and I had done it for 10 years and I really wanted to be more involved with people. I mean, I loved the kids and all, but it was a very lonely kind of job, never talking to other adults, just lots of kids [laughing as she says this].”

While the work at the Good Food Box was very different, Charli felt “it really fell into where I thought my skill levels were and it is. I have done a lot of organizing in the community – I organized an after-school program – mostly through schools because I have three kids. I have learned what I know [about food security and anti-poverty organizing] from being here. I feel this is the direction I would like to take: to continue working with the community and working to help people get out of their situation, especially women, but also everyone in general.” Charli’s tireless efforts have been instrumental in generating the community support for the project and assuring its success.

Charli recognizes that she is privileged in her situation. She is tall, slender, athletic, well-educated holding an honours BSc in biology with minors in sociology and psychology, economically secure and describes herself as someone who needs to be constantly busy. She is married with three children and lives in NDG. She also has a wicked sense of humour that often is appreciated after a long day at Food Central, though sometimes we are disposed to laughing at the most senseless things when we are so tired. I often found myself discussing issues of community cohesion with Charli and the difficulties in attracting support for social programs by local institutions. She is very

involved in anti-poverty initiatives and calls our discussions “figuring out how to save the world.”

Charli leads by example; she is not beyond sharing her good fortune with those who have unmet needs. Often when delivering the produce from the food boxes to shut-ins who are mostly elderly and/or disabled persons, she will do little things like offer to put the produce in the refrigerator for them. She has told us stories about how little the fridges contain and so Charli will go out and buy food and bring it to them “from Food Central.” Charli becomes angry when she knows that many of the elderly people she delivers to have children, yet they do nothing to assist their parents, “even just to drop in and make sure they have food!”

Though the fruit and vegetables in the food boxes are not always organic, Charli believes that providing fresh produce at an affordable price to low-income persons is more important and that the difference in nutritional value is comparatively minimal. She is especially proud that approximately 75% of the produce is either local or from farms that are not too geographically distant. As a keen outdoors enthusiast, Charli is concerned about the environmental aspect of non-organic produce, but the affordability is undeniable in comparison to the produce boxes sold by cooperatives invested in organic only products. One such organisation, Les Jardins d’Ambroisie in the Mile End/Plateau area, charges 440 \$ for 20 weeks from July to November, for a basket for two adults for organic produce paid in advance. In comparison, the Good Food Box sells their baskets for two adults for 10 \$ without having to commit for twenty weeks: one pays when one places an order for the basket and it is available year round. Charli believes that to be the reason for the success of the program amongst low-income persons.

Charli is also working towards providing NDG with a weekend farmers' market where the people in the community can purchase inexpensive produce from local farmers. One of the obstacles she is encountering is non-responsive municipal board members who are reluctant to allow the usage of park space for this project. The open markets that Charli organized in Benny Park and conducted for two weekends in the fall of 2008 proved highly popular; many people asked for more of the markets to be held on a regular basis throughout the summer months. The biggest problem for the people who volunteered to work the markets was the lack of toilet facilities because the municipality would not open the washrooms in Benny Park where the markets were held. Charli often expresses frustration when dealing with government agencies, especially those having mandates geared towards social well-being. Often the people who work at these agencies come from outside the borough and are not invested in the community, so that they do not know about the services offered by other agencies or the broad spectrum of community organizations that exist in NDG.

Among her other interests, Charli is active in promoting the inclusion of the elderly, or seniors in the community in social activities. One of her programs is the previously-mentioned promotion of intergenerational cooking workshops where the seniors teach younger persons to cook in return for basic computer skills. The idea of developing social inclusion for both groups, whose members often find themselves marginalized, has potential, but is difficult when recruiting participants. Often, the elderly may view the youth with distrust. Another project created for seniors involves making a simple soup and serving it at seniors' daycare facilities on days where lunches are not provided. After sampling the soups, seniors have the option of purchasing at a

low price, the pre-bagged soup ingredients Charli and Jasmine bring with them. Besides fostering social interactions amongst seniors, the soups are nutritious and promote healthy eating.

It is clear that Charli believes that building strong and united community ties, all members need to feel a sense of belonging through fun events where social mingling amongst different age groups leads to a new understanding of the “other.”

### **MARJORIE:**

Marjorie is a part-time worker at Food Central. She is the single mother of a grown daughter and two younger children and is in the low-income bracket depending solely on her job at Food Central and the child benefits she receives for her younger children. Marjorie claims that she has never been on social assistance though one of my collaborators who knows her well, told me differently. At this time, she is not receiving benefits and is justifiably proud of that fact. Marjorie is a complex person, as most people are. She presents herself as a strong, competent, independent individual yet she also seeks affirmation of her competence and a partner she can depend on. On the rare occasions she goes out to dance, she tells me, “I’m going to dress to kill and find me a husband and father for my kids” after days of saying “Men, pittui [pretending to spit], who needs them.”

When I first met Marjorie in August 2008, she was worrying about the cost of schooling for her son and daughter. She was not the only parent on a low-income budget who worried about the costs associated with back-to-school preparations: it was the main topic of discussion at Food Central amongst clients with children. Marjorie told me



about the school fees that amount to approximately 80\$ per child, the 250\$ fee for the noon meal the school charges, the cost of the uniforms and the assorted costs of the various field trips the children take and how difficult it will be to come up with the money. This is on top of the books and supplies all students need to have at the beginning of the school year. She receives no assistance or support from the children's father so she suffers severe budgetary restrictions after the start of the school year. Last year, a person from Food Central covered the costs of the school meals for her children, anonymously, so as not to embarrass Marjorie with her act of charity. Because she was unaware of the gift, Marjorie tried to "apply for the same kind of funding relief" she received last year, but "they kept telling me there was no such program and that I had to pay like everyone else. Maybe I should apply for welfare, I would get more help."

Marjorie has had a difficult life and consequently, embroiders some, though not all, of her stories to enhance her role in the various situations she has experienced. This became obvious to me when listening to her talking about the same events but always with a different outcome or response from her. As the stories were retold, she always took on a more proactive role until finally becoming the empowered protagonist who was able to avoid being taken advantage of by unscrupulous persons.

It is Marjorie who is responsible for preparing the samples of the foodstuffs to be given to the clients at Food Central. The executive director gave her the job because she claimed to be an extraordinary cook as well as the fact that he is very big-hearted and wanted to help her out. Marjorie is different from the rest of the staff because she does not seem as invested in her work or commitment to food security and accessibility as the others at Food Central. She does exert great energy into her job but it is sporadic and

dependent on how well her life is going at the time. If she is distracted by a vexing issue in her personal life, it is reflected in her work. One of the tasks Marjorie approached with great enthusiasm was the mini farmers' market organized by Charli and The Good Food Box program. She eagerly promoted it, helped set up the booths and enjoyed selling produce.

Another assignment Marjorie was hired for was to do community outreach with NDG seniors and youth to participate in the intergenerational cooking project coordinated and organized by Charli. Not only did Marjorie not manage to attract the generations, she outwardly hated the project and her resentment tinged the experiment, though Charli is committed to trying it again next fall. Because of new regulations, Marjorie will have to apply for her current position, competing with others who may wish to have that job and Marjorie is unhappy about the requirements now in place. Though the other staff members sympathize with her present situation, they also agree that if she were to apply and win against the competition, she may have a change of attitude towards her responsibilities.

#### **DEVORA:**

As one of the two coordinators for the Pre-Employability Project (BiL)<sup>19</sup> which is housed at Food Central but is funded by Emploi Québec, Devora is another strong community activist. Extremely vigorous and involved in a number of women's organizations, Devora directs her energies into working towards ameliorating women's

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<sup>19</sup> Many BiL projects have been proposed to and accepted by Emploi Québec. There are a number of community centres in Montréal offering the service with the purpose of assisting the most marginalized move towards employment. The project is more fully described in chapter 6.

lives through advocating for social inclusion, respect and dignity, equity and self-empowerment for women specifically but she advocates the same for men.

Devora began her involvement after finding herself on social assistance and needing the services of a food provision organization in Montréal. She says: “Here I was, with a university degree, at a Food Central and wondered ‘what the heck am I doing here?’ and that was when I decided I needed to get out and find a job.” So she went to the social assistance agency and requested funding to upgrade her computer skills and French language skills which she would need to be competitive in the Montréal job market. Devora explains that it took a lot of arguing with her agent from social services, but he finally relented “when I told him that if he wanted me to get off the system, the only way I could find a job was to return to school.” It is always an ongoing battle for those who need assistance to negotiate the system that seems to be designed as confrontational: some community college courses can be covered by Emploi Québec which is the sister agency to the social assistance program. It is reasonable to assume that the agents would want to assist their clients to become employed but it involves so much red tape that often people requesting help to become employable give up.

Upon completing the computer upgrading course, Devora decided to go even further and was accepted into the McGill accelerated social worker program with a major in community development where her interests lay. After achieving that degree, Devora found the position she currently occupies.

Like many people who have themselves needed social assistance, Devora has anger towards the government agency saying that “they treat you like a criminal, like you have committed a crime before you even walk into their offices. It’s a crime to be poor.”

Many of Food Central's clients and most of my collaborators have expressed the same feeling of being constantly disrespected by the authorities and social workers to whom they must report regularly. It is for this reason that Devora works hard to treat her workshop attendees with the dignity and respect these women deserve. The program has been successful because most of the participants do feel more empowered and confident in themselves after completing the eleven weeks of workshops and the hands-on volunteer work "stages" (practicum). Some participants have gone on to find employment, while others continue to volunteer until they feel comfortable and confident enough in their employability to apply for paying jobs.

Living in Côte-des-Neiges, Devora also devotes much of her time to the women's support group, Femmes du monde à Côte-des-Neiges, at the large community centre on Rue Côte-des-Neiges. Over time, Devora has acquired a large network of resources upon which she can draw to provide outreach to the women who have become the most alienated and marginalized in both NDG and CDN.

Devora tells me that though not everyone who graduates goes on to find employment, many of the participants do move closer to social reintegration. Emploi Quebec originally wanted the projects to lead directly into employment for the participants. However, Devora says that the agency accepted the difficulties in pulling in the most marginalized in communities and expecting that the participants would be job ready in the short eleven week program. She draws a line with a starting point and end point to illustrate how far some of the participants have to go to become employable. It looks somewhat like this:



The left hand dot is where the participant starts by enrolling into the program; the next dot shows the distance many move on to after the program; the next dot means the participant is moving closer to reintegration but still is not self confident enough to reach the last dot which comprises a sense of empowerment, of self confidence and of integration necessary to become employed. Devora explains that not everybody starts at the same level, but most of the participants achieve at least the midpoint after completing the eleven week program though some do not go beyond the second dot. Even that is an accomplishment, says Devora, “It means that they are taking the initial steps away from isolation towards connecting with others. In fact, just by enrolling these people recognize the need to change their lives.”

Some of the women were definitely not yet ready for employment after completing the program because their situations were more complex involving more than a lack of self confidence or isolation. One woman has serious health issues that contributed to her inability to work—the physical pain caused by a back injury left her frustrated. Her frustration was compounded with her anger towards the social services and her ongoing battle with the school system regarding her son’s education. One of the women had not felt competent enough to start the program but between her friend who accompanied her, Marshall and Devora, they managed to talk her into enrolling. Her lack of confidence stemmed from her having only a grade 6 education. As she became more confident in her practical abilities, her outgoing personality, her enjoyment of the program and her positive internship experience, this woman decided to continue volunteering to build up her resumé which would allow her to find a job based on hands-on training.

Devora beams as she talks about “the successes.” A couple of the women found themselves working for the same organizations where they had volunteered—one as a translator and another as a paralegal. Both had needed some form of Canadian work experience even though they had been post-secondary graduates in their related fields. Canadian work experience is one of the biggest challenges immigrants face so their volunteering internship really serves in making them more employable. One of the women in the fall 2008 group enjoyed her volunteer experience at a hospital so much that she applied for and was accepted in a nurse’s assistant training program.

Devora explains why some of the unemployed remain so; “people tend to disrespect them for being on welfare and not working. They don’t get treated with dignity. Sometimes there are reasons why people can’t work—they are not just lazy. Most people want to work. One thing that stops a person from working is mental illness—a lot of people on welfare have mental health issues.” Another problem is dealing with women who were and in some cases, still are in abusive relationships. Some of these women tend to passive-aggressive behaviour making it difficult for the other participants to connect with them. However, having the other women listen to them with compassion as they tell their stories can make a difference. In one case it certainly changed one woman’s attitude just in the eleven weeks she participated in the program.

Getting back into a regular schedule that requires time management, making and keeping appointments and taking responsibilities such as phoning if one is sick or is going to be late is another challenge for some of the participants. Many of the women in the program were mothers so they were already used to a structured day, but for some, it made no difference. For those, it was a reminder that if they missed too many days, they

would be taken out of the program which would eliminate their remuneration for attending that provided the impetus to be more consistent in their attendance.

The women often come a long way towards turning their lives around. Devora points to the bonding and feeling of belonging the women feel while taking the intensive workshops. They build trust for each other through learning to patiently listen to one another even though sometimes heavy accents make comprehension difficult. All the women treat each other with respect and dignity because each one of them has felt the humiliation associated with their situations. Devora says that when the women graduate, many thank her and Marshall for treating them with decency, respect and dignity. Some have learned to live with a schedule and say they will be at a loss at the end of the program, so they continue to volunteer to give their lives structure and at the same time, to maintain a sense of belonging.

When asked what she would do should the project contract not be approved for the next year, Devora did not even skip a breath and responded, "I would go back for my masters in Community Development and combine that with my love of theatre to present plays devoted to teaching community involvement." Devora has a vision of how things can be changed and so she acts assertively to implement her goals but tempers this passion with her good listening skills and her sense of empathy with those who have been marginalized in Québec.

#### **MARSHALL:**

One of only two men who work at Food Central, Marshall is the other coordinator for the Pre-Employability program. He is a gentle man who has long embraced

community activism and volunteerism, no matter where he has lived in Canada. Because of his feminist leanings, sometimes he has been dubbed as an “honorary woman” even by the women participants who at first were wary or distrustful of him because of previous abuse in their domestic relationships.

Marshall came to Food Central in 1998 as a volunteer, but he supported himself through his four years as “chef d’équipe” for a social economy cooperative venture called “Coup de Balai.” It was a cleaning service subsidized through Emploi Québec’s “Fonds de Lutte Contre la Pauvreté” at a time when that agency was more active in promoting l’économie sociale. The service cooperative was conceived as a means to provide jobs for people who were on welfare and the funding was provided on the condition that the cooperative became self-supporting within a set time limit. Marshall said that although that they had the clientele for the cleaners and it was a service provided through the Ministry of Health, the cooperative was still unable to become self-supporting and so collapsed<sup>20</sup>.

Marshall says he learned his listening skills through working with people who, after coming off welfare, had “a lot of pent-up resentment and frustration after years of being on the system.” The problems that Devora and Marshall seek to help these women overcome are onerous. Marshall enumerates some of the obstacles the women have before them: there is the stigma of poverty and coming from a rough area. To depend on relief “is bad and it works away at their pride leaving them with feelings of shame.” The invasive nature of the welfare system does little to bolster people’s self-confidence. People lose the ability to believe in themselves which often leads to self-destructive behaviour, bad habits and loss of jobs once they do get hired.” Leading people who had

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<sup>20</sup> As of this writing, the solidarity economy initiative “Coup de Balai” has been re-launched.



recently been on welfare and dealing with the issues they had. “I became an unofficial counsellor.” His work with low-income workers and his volunteering at Food Central giving theatre workshops provided Marshall with the practical counselling experience needed for his role in the BiL project.

Marshall is getting close to retirement and is looking forward to it, both for his health, and so that he can finally pursue his goal of writing novels. Besides his work at Food Central, Marshall also works at the YMCA in NDG with adults with mental development challenges. No one at Food Central is looking forward to his leaving because he makes himself available for conversation and he can be depended on to provide reasonable counsel when asked for his advice. Marshall has a quiet sense of humour and openness to address issues that could become confrontational if left to fester. He is a good mediator through having the ability to see both sides of an argument and presenting them logically and without prejudice to those who seek his advice. He has often intervened when personalities at Food Central clash. His sensitivity towards others, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or age is noticed and so he is very highly respected within the community organizations where he is known.

The BiL project as coordinated by Devora and Marshall at Food Central is a positive step towards forming the sense of solidarity and unity underpinning the ethics of care, community networking, bonds of interdependence and social inclusion.

#### **RUFUS:**

Rufus is the executive director of Food Central and has been since the position was created in 1996. He is from a “large Irish welfare family,” as he says, and so has

very little in the way of “class separation” attitudes and treats everyone equally regardless of social status. However, he can be off-putting when discussing education as he distinguishes himself by insisting that everyone knows that he has a degree in History and English Literature. That, Rufus says, allows him to have first choice of the books that are regularly donated to Food Central for the clients.

Regardless, Rufus is very empathetic towards the people at Food Central and insists on being accessible to all by eschewing a closed office, preferring to occupy one of the desks in what is called “the office area.” Rufus will generally allow the clients and other volunteers to interrupt his work if they want to talk to him unless he is feeling particularly harried. At times he is pulled away from his desk to discuss issues with clients who may become problematic, argumentative or aggressive with other clients or with the volunteers. Rufus is quite good at diffusing difficult situations in these circumstances.

There are times though, where Rufus himself is the source of confrontational attitudes with the volunteers and staff. Although he most often stays at his desk and just allows the day to unfold around him, at times Rufus can become dictatorial, issuing commands and demanding instant response to his barked orders. It is this inconsistency in his behaviour that creates a general lack of respect for him within the ranks of volunteers. He is not a hands-on director, leaving all the physical labour to others and delegating much of the paper work to his volunteers while he conducts his arcane duties. No one really knows what he does, though it is assumed that he is fulfilling his duties. Rufus shows the classical signs of burn-out that often accompanies long-term community

service which becomes obvious when he speaks about the formative years of Food Central.

The difference between other food provisioning agencies and Food Central according to Rufus, “is that we have an innovative aspect in that we treat people individually on a case by case basis. If someone needs more help than others, we can adjust to that.” Rufus also claims that the clients receive “extraordinary treatment – we attempt to behave with unflappability towards unusual behavioural conduct that is non-harmful but bizarre. That’s not important. What is important is that we are listening to those who may not “fit” into the “normal” behavioural patterns.” The clients, says Rufus, “are generally not concerned about the unusual behaviour. There is hospitality amongst the poor and they seem to have more empathy for their neighbours. There is a lot of sharing in the ‘underclass’ and it may be because they share concerns that are immediate.” Rufus believes that there is recognition between those who live in poverty as they share an existing culture. “We, the staff and volunteers, fit into that culture [through our own empathy] and we can help cultivate their strengths and work toward rebuilding community and showing the community that governments don’t make communities, it is people.” Rufus argues that “in building community there is a learned solidarity that fulfills personal and emotional needs through recognition and praise, which is very important.” Rufus says that he tries to always thank the volunteers for the time they put in, complimenting them as hard-working and helpful [which they are].

When Rufus is relaxed, he is outgoing and displays a sharp sense of humour which is at odds with the dour persona he more often projects. It is at these times his passion for community activism and the programs that have evolved because of it, shows

through. Rufus fondly remembers the two most interesting programs operating through Food Central starting in 1994: “The CultureDepot and CaféDepot, informal cultural arts and discussion programs where between seven to twenty people would gather for socializing and artists had a venue for their works such as poetry readings, original theatre performances and musical performances.” One of Rufus’ contributions was a play “about going to the Welfare office with a parody of the agents.” Another was an improvisational theatre piece set as a “news program” sensationalizing the everyday events and topics of the time. Rufus says that the art produced was high quality and the artistic level was both interactive and performative with suggestions from the audience members and participation in the form of sing-alongs. Movie nights were organized and a monthly newsletter written by Food Central clients. The events moved from “an apolitical night out to becoming more political creating a learning venue for agency which provided opportunities and motivation for those involved. Some were more self starting while some needed more coaxing from the audience which took on supportive rolls and encouraged interaction.” Some other offerings provided through Café evenings were two week anger management courses, and ten week language courses. It was through the interaction with the local community that Rufus says he learned to be more hands off as a director of Food Central, letting it organize in a more organic form. However, Rufus misses the Culture/Café Depot that he describes as “fun and it gave a welcoming physical space for local people to meet and gave them a proprietary feeling. There was an economically diverse mix of people but the better off were aware that this place belonged to the less well-off and it was they [the low-income persons] who wielded the power at Food Central.” The Culture/Café Depot ended in the winter of 1997-98.

Rufus strongly believes all persons should live a life of dignity and equity regardless of their social status and this conviction is not contained to the NDG community but is global for him. He is planning to move onto a more global sphere of activism in Africa where he has worked previously with the poor on issues of food security. He has been taking evening courses in international development at McGill towards these goals and he has tendered his resignation to the Board of Directors of Food Central for the end of April, 2009.

**NATASHA:**

Natasha, who is 40, was born with a progressive disability, cerebral palsy, and is now wheel-chair bound so she has intimate knowledge regarding issues faced by the disabled community. Before she became employed at the NDG Community Council, Natasha was a single mother on welfare/disability assistance but active in volunteerism. She enrolled in a six month reintegration program for disabled persons funded by the provincial government which Natasha said did not pay more than disability assistance but it did give her the experience that helped her land her Council position. Natasha describes herself as “self-generating” and tells me “I empowered myself—I want to be making a difference and know that I am going where no-one has ever gone before. Some people think that I am a little pushy but I want to make those differences. I believe in inclusion and making it *happen*, which means that I am going to be working side to side with people with two legs and I am going to be in my wheelchair but that’s what inclusion means and anything less than that is not enough.”

Natasha was hired by the NDG Community Council as the InfoCentral coordinator in 1998 and was quartered at Food Central until 2003 when she was moved to the Council's offices. Once there, Natasha was given the additional task of compiling a list of service organizations and institutions in Montréal but focusing on those in NDG. Her involvement as board member in multiple organizations (MUCS, CLSS Ethics Committee, and CLSC Users Committee) in NDG has given Natasha insight when discerning the needs of the heterogeneous sectors living in the borough. Her counselling and organization-building work at the Community Council has helped launch many groups such as Project Genesis [legal and rental counselling], Project 10 [LGBT group], Carrefour Jeunesse de NDG [youth employment service] and others. Natasha also assisted in building the Walkley Street neighbourhood association. The Walkley Street area is mostly a Black neighbourhood and it has become notorious for youth [of all ethnicities] criminal activities and drugs. Natasha tells me, "People have come in and tried to 'fix' Walkley, but the residents don't want to be 'fixed'." They have their own intelligence and their own way of doing things. At one point there was funding for a project in conjunction with the police where we would go knocking on doors for information sessions, but then the police used that to find out where the drugs were and so that is why there is a resistance to certain people coming there." Natasha devised a program where volunteers, the community leaders living in the Walkley area were trained in empowerment strategies. However, Natasha says that because of ethno-cultural differences there is still a lot of mistrust making it more difficult to attract these leaders.

While she works to counter all forms of discrimination and prejudice, Natasha's personal interest is advocating and lobbying for the disabled against ableism and against the indignities suffered by disabled persons.

It is expensive to be disabled because many of the services are not covered through public funds. Natasha tells me that "if you are on disability, you don't get all your medications paid for like on welfare so the system is screwed. It tells people if you are disabled or are injured, you become the victim of the system and you are nothing." It is this form of non-inclusion or invisibility that bothers Natasha when discussing attitudes towards disabled persons. Natasha argues that it is not that disabled persons cannot work; it is just that they have to work differently than able persons and that needs to be recognized. It is a matter of valuing the persons' abilities instead of focussing on what they are not able to do." Natasha does not notice being treated differently in public anymore, probably because she is so well-known in NDG, but there have been times when some form of discrimination was present. Natasha relates the time she "had the audacity to become pregnant. You just didn't do that—I didn't think there was that type of ignorance. Even my mom, who is a registered nurse, when I told her I was pregnant said "oh no." But I told my mother that she was the one who taught me to go out and do the things that I want, so I am doing it."

Natasha does push herself to break through the barriers faced by disabled persons with the idea that once an obstacle has been removed, it will help those who follow. It is hard and she has moments of mild depression, but redirects her energies to deflect those feelings. "Some people say that *all* disabled people are depressed. Well if you have to put up with all the crap and the attitudes towards the disabled..." Chronic and constant

pain is another issue she deals with. Natasha tries to put it in the back of her mind and focus on her work, but it affects her most at the end of her day, in the evening. She tries to take her pain medication only when the pain is too intense to ignore.

Natasha relates that as she gets older and with her disability, she no longer has the same level of energy as she had previously and so moderates her physical activities as much as possible. That has not affected her love of talking though, when I ask her if she finds it hard to deal with all the people referred to her from Food Central. She laughs when she says “talking is not a problem. I enjoy doing it. The pain I have *psychologically* is that I know I am sending them out into a system that is broken. And sometimes the services or the things they need don’t exist but what I try to do is to equip them with the tools to better get where they want to go. And I spend the time explaining that.”

Expecting people to be constantly productive when they have chronic disabilities or illnesses may be a product of society that needs to be re-examined, says Natasha. “I think society needs to rethink what they think production is because there are things that we could do that would enrich society in different ways and not just, perform, perform, perform.” There are some things that Natasha is not capable of doing like typing and writing is difficult for her, but she is very good at teaching and that is what she should be valued for, not dismissed as incapable. The lack of public education about cerebral palsy and the myths surrounding it has people making erroneous assumptions about those who have the disability. “Having cerebral palsy has nothing to do with my intellectual ability. Because I write the way I write since it is hard for me, one coordinator, who used to work



here, made assumptions about my intelligence. I was in tears to be assessed on the performance of my physical writing. Having those kinds of judgements too are difficult.”

Natasha believes that the valuation of women, in general, “is still that—she is a woman, she is less of a human. But in terms of economic development I think that it is mothers – well mostly mothers – but women, who make the world go around. We train the children, we socialize the children, sometimes we have to train our husbands or partners too [laughing]. Women don’t think – the average woman doesn’t think that. Women don’t think linearly, they often think in collective ways. So I think that it shouldn’t be equality but equity. Women should be treated equitably.”

Empowerment is important to Natasha and she strives to give the low-income community the tools to become empowered, unlike many in the Council who Natasha says tend to follow the service model of assistance. “It takes longer to foster empowerment and so you are not going to get it quickly. It’s easier to just give people things but I don’t believe that—you can give people fish, but you have to teach them how to fish. Then you can leave them to their own devices using their own intelligence because people are very capable of taking care of themselves.” One of the tools Natasha teaches people living on a low-income is the “language” or key words used by social assistance agencies.

“Often people at Food Central will need to speak to social workers...I will tell them, “Okay, you need to speak to a social worker and I will give you the key words to say to the receptionist, but *don’t* tell your story to the receptionist. She’ll just bounce you out of the system. Tell her you need to speak to *social intake* and expect that you will be put on an answering machine because that is how the system works and within 24 hours

or 48 hours depending on the request, you'll get a call back." But if it is urgent, and this is something that people don't know, is that you can go to the CLSC, go in and sit down and you will be seen eventually, by a social worker. So it is teaching people how to frame their request to get a response." Natasha works to change the attitudes at the social agencies, or as she says, "to shake them up because they all talk the same language and it is self-perpetuating. They say, "oh, but we're right" and you think, how delusional are you? Because they have been in the social work agencies and the CLSC/CLSS for so long, they don't question their thought processes; they don't question the way they do things so in the end, the people they are there for are not being served properly.

It becomes obvious why Natasha is working in the field she has chosen: "Changing concepts and changing what's valued in society is what we are attempting to do and we are challenging the structure. It is not the individual that has issues; it is the relationship between the individual and the structure. Women are victims of this and also people with disabilities and people with different orientations, too, are very much the victims. These are the people who because they need change, they can bring it about. That is why I like to teach people on welfare and on disabilities about their rights. It is empowerment. People who are empowered can't be stopped. There is going to be resistance because it is like rowing upstream, but if there are enough people rowing upstream maybe it will be easier to row."

## **FOOD CENTRAL AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT**

The community workers at Food Central have taken this organization from a charitable one to one of social movement, working for social transformation. Favreau's concept of a popular movement is relevant:

The popular movement is a social movement to the extent that it exists at least partially, as a collective challenge to political and cultural domination. Popular groups take up this challenge when they display the ability to mobilize human and material resources around collective issues, bringing together often heterogeneous forces within a given community, initiating democratic social change and implementing strategies for solving new social problems (1992:205).

Food Central's activists are challenging the neo-liberal social policies that produce the inequities that leave a large segment of NDG's residents without the means to provide for their families. They are conduits for social change by building a space to politicize the dominant neo-liberal structures and to mobilize the low-income residents of NDG who have borne the brunt of the state's cost cutting policies. Instead of simply providing a charitable service, the women work towards solving the underlying causes of poverty. The programs the women have set in place at Food Central are innovative and geared towards rebuilding community through empowerment, social inclusion, integration and solidarity. The initiatives set in motion by the women at Food Central have great potential to lead to envisioning the creation of collectives or cooperatives that are part of solidarity economy.

Stephen Gudeman recognizes the value of innovation in fostering solidarity in a community. Innovation changes the way we relate to each other, to our communities and the politics espoused within because the substantive is in the formal rationality and verso. "Innovation, or human creating and extending, lies at the basis of all economy" (Gudeman 2001: 21). However, in terms of capital and its place in communities,

Gudeman explains: “When capital expands, we often find the debasement of community as its values evaporate in support of the market; but the creations, maintenance, and expansion of the base also may transform market life” (2001: 22). The activist staff at Food Central well illustrate the “resubjectivation of community, reasserting community values into market capital and reinforcing community solidarity that will force a reassessment or re-politicize markets,” the goals that comprise the “ethics of care” Gibson-Graham say is the foundation of social economies (2006:90).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### VOLUNTEERISM AT FOOD CENTRAL:

*Unpaid work is the predominant form of labour in four sectors: subsistence production, the household economy, which includes unpaid productive, reproductive and service work, the informal sector, and in voluntary and community work. The informal sector includes large numbers of people who are marginal to the "modern economy" and often invisible (Waring 2006:222).*

Volunteerism is integral to the maintenance of Food Central and the services provided there. As volunteer coordinator, Teri maintains a list of those who wish to donate their time and labour to Food Central, whether on a casual or trial basis, or as an ongoing effort. Teri only requires that those who do volunteer be sympathetic, without prejudice, and dependable. If a volunteer cannot attend as promised, Teri expects them to phone in so that she can draw on her casual volunteer pool. "It's just like any other workplace, if you can't make it, you phone and say so. You won't last long on a job if you don't show up on time or you don't phone in." Teri has, at times, found it necessary to let volunteers go if they continually demonstrate unreliability through absence after they have assured her of their attendance.

Some people have come in and offered their services, only to find that this is not the place for them to do so for any number of reasons. These potential volunteers may lack the necessary flexibility and adaptability to be able to move from one position to another as the various tasks require or they may find the chaos and multiple demands of food service days to be at odds with their personal nature. Personalities may clash or, in rare cases, power struggles may ensue as the more permanent volunteers feel threatened by a dominant or aggressive new volunteer who believes that their methods should be adopted by all. In these situations, Teri needs to step in and mediate which sometimes

requires the new volunteer to alter their stance or to leave. There have been occasions where a beginner volunteer has been asked to leave after too many complaints such as the time when one man with strong Christian beliefs, started evangelizing and moralizing to the ethnically and religiously diverse volunteers and clients. Food Central is a secular social space so that all persons who volunteer or need food assistance will feel comfortable and accepted as they are.

The volunteers at Food Central do reflect the NDG demographics to a large part: they are young and old, of all ethnic backgrounds, colours and speaking a variety of mother languages. They share a desire to belong to the community and to give back to the community what they can, usually in the form of their labour. Often this caring reciprocity, once begun at Food Central continues outside of it too. While it is normal to have volunteers who come and go in a short span of time – what Teri calls, “the cycle of volunteerism,” – Food Central has a core group of persons who are the “regulars” and who generally can be depended upon during the food service days. It is their efforts and labour that attract new volunteers due to the strong sense of camaraderie and community that is palpable within the walls of Food Central.

#### **THE NECESSITY OF VOLUNTEERISM:**

There is great appreciation for the value of the volunteers’ labour, not only those at Food Central, but in all the community organizations because there is not enough funding available to maintain their operations. When discussing volunteerism at Food Central itself, Teri tells me, “If I didn’t have volunteers, I – [Teri starts laughing loudly at the thought] I wouldn’t be able to do it all; it would be impossible.” In order for the

service days to run efficiently and smoothly, there need to be at least eight volunteers during service and a similar number on non-service days to prepare for the next service, bagging the bulk items and putting the eggs in cartons. This underscores the under valuation of unpaid labour, done mostly by women, by state economists who do not include it in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Waring 2002; Pietilä 2007).

One time I said to Teri, “There’s a lot of work here and I don’t think many people realize how much work it is,” Teri says, “No, I don’t think they realize how much. I think that sometimes people who use the service are a little bit demanding because they just don’t realize that the majority of the people doing the work are volunteers; they are people just like them. I don’t think it would be a bad idea for people to know more information about the whole operation.” Teri is very protective of her volunteers and takes various actions to make their work atmosphere safe, pleasant and fun. Like many of the paid workers, the volunteer burnout rate is fairly high because of the great demand put on them; it is hard work, both physically and emotionally.

Most of the core volunteers, the ones who come regularly, are also clients of Food Central. But, Teri tells me; “We have students doing credits, sometimes it’s Christian service credits, and some of them it’s just community service credits: they have to get credits in all the high schools, the kids have to serve in an organization as part of their curriculum and they get a credit for that. We have people doing community service, through the courts, to pay off debts – mostly it’s parking tickets. We have youths who have to do service to pay a fine – it’s mostly for minor infractions – you know, they break a curfew in a park, that sort of thing. Periodically we have a few seniors who don’t want to be so isolated so they come in and volunteer. There are groups who come in from

different places [youths from Katimavik volunteered for the December food drive and recently a group from a university came up from the University of Michigan as part of an alternative spring break program] and some companies allow their employees to do community service – encourage them to do community service and so sometimes they come in as a group. They have come in and painted the walls for us, or they come and count the items after our food drives or they organize food drives.”

Professor of Social Work, Louis Blais (1998) who has undertaken an extensive study of women living on social assistance in Quebec has found that most volunteer for the pleasure it gives them. Blais (1998:142) cites R.M. Titmuss (1970)<sup>21</sup> who wrote that to give is a condition of liberty and further, humans have a biological and social need to give. By depriving people the ability to give is equal to taking away one’s freedom and breaks the ties of reciprocity (Blais 1998:142). Community solidarity depends on reciprocal transactions that validate an individual as being a valued part of a greater entity. The ethics of care is a human value that needs expression.

When I ask Teri why Food Central clients volunteer, she replies; “That’s part of the comments we get; they feel that they need to pay back. They need to feel that they are at least breaking even and not receiving charity. You know, when they are on welfare and not doing anything else, and they come in and volunteer they feel that they are earning that, you know, helping their community. So that is the largest reason for volunteers, here.” Teri says that it also helps re-integrate people who may have a criminal record, “We don’t do a police check here so some of the people couldn’t volunteer anywhere else because in most cases when you are dealing directly with

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<sup>21</sup> Titmuss, R.M. 1970. *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.



people, not in such an open environment, require a police check. So some people, if they have a minor infraction, they are afraid to get a police check or might have gone to get a police check and can't volunteer."

Teri states her belief that volunteering "should be beneficial to all parties. We need the volunteers to work, and I believe that the volunteers should get something out of their work whether it is just to break the isolation, to learn a skill, to be able to say that they have some job experience, have a place to be during the day, but not as a drop-in centre. In the end, most want to be doing something: some volunteers are here for one hour, some two hours, some come for four hours and some are here for the duration of the day. Some come every day and some come once a week and some come on a "call as needed" basis. There is a whole variation: there is a whole variation of skill levels [of the volunteers] and jobs [requiring different levels of skill] and so we can match the person with the task."

The women in Blais' study cited not only their feelings of responsibility and obligation toward "l'autre anonyme" or "the anonymous other" and a sense of gratification in volunteering but the women also felt that by giving their time and labour, they were in effect, earning their government cheques (1998:110-112). The female volunteers at Food Central feel no differently than their sisters in Blais' study.

#### **FINDING AND BUILDING COMMUNITIES:**

The National Council of Welfare reports; "The poverty rate for women in 2003 was 17.1 percent, higher than the rate of 14.7 percent for men. This was mainly driven by the higher poverty rates for unattached women and single-parent mothers. Unattached

women had a poverty rate of 42.1 percent in 2003, eight percentage points higher than the rate for unattached men. The poverty rate for single-parent mothers was 48.9 percent in 2003, the highest rate for any family type” (NCW 2006). Since the 1980s Canada’s policies have cut social spending which have most severely affected women with low-incomes whether working or social assistance (Jensen 2009; Dobrowolsky 2009; Kingfisher 2002). Neo-liberalism with its focus on individualism and self reliance at the expense of the collective has further impoverished women who were already living on the margins of survival. Jensen writes that Quebec welfare rates have dropped by 8% for a single employable person and while making a less drastic cut to benefits received by single mothers, it was still 4% less than before 2005 (2009:33, 36). Because the cost of living has risen since 2005 – most sharply since summer 2008 – the real income of a person living on income assistance is not commensurate to expenditures on basic needs. As women are being left behind and on their own to make ends meet, their dependency on organizations such as Food Central grows. Many women are rejecting the push toward individualism by turning to volunteerism, to give back to their communities the only thing they have to give – their labour.

Most of Food Central’s volunteers are women. Most of the women are single, though most have been married or partnered. Most of the women are mothers; many with young children still at home. Many are struggling with health issues: physical or psychological. Most are on social assistance, disability or are low-income wage earners and are Food Central clients. If asked, most would say that they did not envision a future of poverty when they were young women. Harman states that many young women have accepted the myth that women have achieved equality; that if they study hard at school,

they can choose a great career that will ensure they never have to become economically dependent on a man and so will avoid poverty (2006:199). In 1996, 58% of all Canadian adults living in poverty were women and “[at] every stage of their lives, women are more likely to be poor, and are more likely to be trapped in a life of poverty (Harman 2006:199).

Unlike the claims made by economic theorists, neo-liberalism has not brought prosperity to everyone as the rising number of impoverished women attests. Following Smith, Kingfisher writes, “[ ]...that the existence of poverty challenges the basic assumptions of liberal society, among which are included individual autonomy and self-sufficiency (2002:15). The liberal society embraces the ideology of neo-liberalism which has become embedded in Canada’s gender-neutral social policies. These have been framed as “social investment” which means that the social welfare system is focused on child poverty and excluding the word “women” thereby rendering women and the work they do, invisible (Waring 2006; Kingfisher 2002; Dobrowolsky 2009; Jensen 2009). By erasing gender, the policies devalue the unpaid, yet productive, work women do in the informal sector although this labour saves the governments and the economic market sector enormous sums of money. According to Kingfisher (2002:48) and Isabella Bakker (2002:235), women’s unpaid and reproductive work subsidizes the state and industries.

The stories presented below give a glimpse into the lives of a few of the many women who are productive through volunteerism though their work is not counted by market economists and is performed in spite of the obstacles they face.

**MAMA B:**

The amount of work and time Mama B donates to Food Central preparing bags for food service days ahead of time and during food service and assisting Teri in an attempt to keep track of the perpetual inventory as best she can, makes her a fixture at Food Central. Food Central staff depend on her as they would a paid worker and sometimes, Mama B is counted on to replace Teri when she takes time off. There is ensuing chaos if Mama B is unable to attend a food service day because generally nothing has been prepped, brought out of the fridges such as eggs, fresh fruit and vegetables, bread or other perishables, or set out for easy and quick access as the service begins, bringing its own frenetic activities. The hours of unpaid labour Mama B has provided Food Central since she began volunteering two years ago is one of the reasons that she is highly valued and respected by the staff at Food Central. Another reason she is appreciated is that Mama B has worked hard to achieve the level of autonomy, empowerment and self-respect she has so far accomplished. The women at Food Central are very supportive of those who struggle to improve their situations. They offer encouragement and understanding when a woman suffers a set-back, such as a bout of depression which can lead to social withdrawal. When one of the volunteers fails to show up without calling, often someone will call out of concern for that person. Most of the volunteers have experienced economic or relational difficulties but they continue in their efforts to make a difference in both their lives and the lives of others who share their plight. Mama B has not had an easy life, like most volunteers, but she focuses most often on the positive aspects.

Mama B was born in Little Burgundy in 1960 and was the youngest of eleven children: she has five sisters and five brothers. “Yep, I was the baby of the family and it

was a good life,” she tells me. When she was seven, she was run over by two cars consecutively and consequently spent six months hospitalized and in a coma for much of that time. She recovered consciousness and was well enough to convalesce at home where her physical rehabilitation continued and she was able to regain full mobility. Six months after Mama B had returned home, her mother died leaving Mama B with few memories of her mother: something that has impacted Mama B to this day: “I miss my mother – I think of my mother every single day.” She tells me that her three eldest sisters quit school to help their father by caring for their siblings and the household after their mother died. “After my mother died, my father took on that big job; three of my sisters had to stop school to take care of us all and I was still so young.” One of her older sisters directly took over the care for Mama B because she was still recuperating from her car accident. This enabled Mama B’s father to continue working at [a] hospital to support his large family. Mama B says of this sister, “She was like my second mother so I was shocked when she got married and left home. I said to her, are you really going to leave me here alone with Dad?” Not too many years later, when she was seventeen, Mama B returned to live with this sister after the death of her father. Upon finishing high school, Mama B got a job and moved out into her own apartment and enjoyed herself like most young persons do before marrying and settling down.

At twenty-three, Mama B was pregnant with the first of her three sons who are now 25, 22, and 19 years old. Mama B also had two daughters, who are aged 16 and 15, with her husband Theo before separating from him a few years ago. Because her ex-husband spent a number of years in prison in a small town outside of Montréal, Mama B moved away from the city to that town to be closer to visit him. Not long after her

separation from Theo in 2004, she returned to Montréal with her daughters, leaving her two younger sons with their father as mutually agreed.

In Montréal, Mama B found an apartment in NDG rather than in the more familiar Little Burgundy quarter. Not having close friends in NDG, Mama B became introverted which is uncharacteristic, choosing to remain housebound existing on social assistance and child benefits. Mama B explains; “I was in NDG for a year and for that first year I didn’t go out of my house. I wouldn’t even go across the street to a store. That’s how bad it was. I didn’t go out of the house for a year because I didn’t know the streets, didn’t know the people – I didn’t want no part of it, like you know? The second year I was here I was getting a bit better – you know, in the new year, I just started sitting outside again on my front steps. I’d sit there. I did that for four months then I just started walking around.” The breakthrough from her isolation happened when one of her daughters came home with a brochure from Food Central’s Pre-Employability project (BiL), encouraging her mother to commit to attending the workshops. “One day my daughter came home with this paper for Marshall’s and Devora’s thing [BiL project] saying, like, if you’d like to get out of the house; if you want to, like, try to find a job and become something and you can get paid through the welfare.<sup>22</sup> So I decided, well, why not? So I went down and see what’s going on and then—Marshall and Devora, I think they fell in love the first day with me. It’s funny because when I seen Devora, it was like I had known her for years and years. You know? Like I had seen her in another life somewhere.”

Often it seems to be the children who are the impetus for women to pull themselves out of the debilitating depression that is not unusual for those in low-income

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<sup>22</sup> It is paid through funding from Emploi Quebec, not social assistance.

situations. It was at this point, two years ago that Mama B became involved with Food Central, first as part of her practicum, then on an ongoing basis as a major part of Food Central community as well as the community at large. It is not only Marshall and Devora who immediately took to Mama B; so many people at Food Central have come to love her too. She is down to earth, practical and loves to laugh.

Every one of the volunteers has a specific segment of community that feeds their activism; for Mama B, it is youth. Mama B's home is known to many teenagers in the community as a "safe" house. Her "open door" policy has many of the community youth dropping by her home, knowing that no matter what their family life, they have an adult who is willing to listen to them and accept who they are, with a good measure of straight, honest, non-judgemental, yet caring, directional talk from Mama B. often using reference to the "Good Book" without preaching. Mama B is so well known for her compassion towards the young adults and teenage youth in NDG that it is common for a young person to come into Food Central requesting her by name only to find out when we seek her out, that Mama B has never personally met that person. It is Mama B's love for her own children that carries on to those of others. She has contempt for parents who bring children into the world only to abandon them for drugs or alcohol. She does not appear to view addictions as a symptom or expression of systemic social dysfunction.

It is parental abandonment Mama B cites as the cause for youth gangs, teen prostitution, youth drug abuse and increasing gun violence. Mama B has known most of the youth who have been shot, killed or imprisoned because of the prevalence of guns in NDG's rougher areas. She names them and their fates enumerating on the fingers of her two hands; it's a long and tragic list. Having garnered their respect, Mama B talks to the

youth about guns and killing: “I tell them I don’t want anyone else to die that way because it’s wrong. When your Mama brought you into the world, did you all come in with weapons or did you come in with legs and arms—and a head—with a brain? So what’s wrong with that? [Using your brain] You know, I might be old school but I know what I’m talking to you people about. You people are actually carrying metal and steel and you guys want to be killing people which is wrong ‘cuz you see this shit on TV, but when it’s on TV it’s not reality. In reality, there’s kids out there – that are mine, like – you can’t do that. And I says, you know, I’ll tell you something else. You know this Black on Black and White on White and Black and White and Green—it’s all got to stop to live in peace.” How much of an impact Mama B’s lectures have on these young persons is unknown, but she does what she can to turn those who wish it around to positive goals.

Mama B also thinks that it is the sense of community that is lacking in NDG, especially in safety issues, both for adults and children. She tells me when she grew up in Little Burgundy, the whole block knew each other because they were family and long time family friends from the parents’ youth. “Everyone kept track of the kids. You so didn’t want to do anything that would get you in trouble with your parents. But when I was growing up, I always had somewhere to go. I always had something to do and my father knew where I was all the time. Everything was close knit and they helped each other. Everybody had everybody’s back, and it was nice.” Now, everybody has to lock their doors and there are no after school activities [spontaneous] like playing in the park without adult supervision or being able to walk alone to a community centre. Everyone keeps their doors locked “because you just never know who is going to bang on your



door and you fight with your neighbour for nothing. You walk the streets and no one smiles. But you know I like NDG. It's a nice place but you know, people have to work together and that's all." Mama B's love of community is apparent when she volunteers nearly daily at Food Central in between her two work shifts as a caregiver.

It is through her association with Food Central that Mama B has found paid work with Natasha from the Community Council as a home care giver. This work has enabled Mama B to disengage from social assistance as she so longed to do. Although it pays only slightly over 800 \$ a month, it is still more than social assistance would pay and allows Mama B control over her income and her autonomy over how she spends her money beyond rent, bills and food. "I was on welfare for 23 years and I was really getting tired of it. I was tired of the fact that if the kids wanted something, I'd have to say, can you wait 'til the first or the 20<sup>th</sup> and then not having any money in between that. And that really, really, really got to me and so, when I got the chance to get the job with Natasha, I took it." Often, Mama B swears that she will never go back on social assistance saying "it is such a good feeling to spend a couple of bucks on a lottery ticket without feeling guilty or looking over your shoulder to see if anyone is watching or to open a second bank account without wondering if it's okay and according to 'the rules'."

Considering her scheduled hours with Natasha – a couple of hours assisting her wash and dress early in the morning before Natasha goes to work and a couple of hours late evening to prepare Natasha for bed after assisting in the housework – it is not easy work for Mama B. Up early, working before coming to Food Central to volunteer on a nearly daily basis to making sure that her own housework is done and her children fed before finishing up her day, again working outside of home before she, herself, can think

of going to bed at night, makes not only a long day for Mama B, but long weeks with few weekends off.

Mama B is not yet fifty years of age, but the stress of living has taken a toll on her body and she complains of bone spurs in her feet from the years of working on her feet as a mother, wife, roommate, volunteer and labourer. Sometimes the pain is so great that she can not come into Food Central, saving her energy for her paid work and at times, she has no choice but to leave before the end of a food service day because she can no longer tolerate the pain of being on her feet. Mama B has tried everything from comfortable shoes to spongy slippers to help alleviate her condition but her need for constant motion and her work ethic often work against her physical disability. Because of the cost of transit, Mama B walks everywhere, often long distances and when the snow is deep or it is icy, she finds those conditions worsen her mobility. At times Mama B despairs that she will, at some point in time, be forced to submit to the “system” – as social assistance and disability assistance is known – once again after years of freedom from it. This knowledge often leads to periods of time when Mama B will remove herself from Food Central until her despondency has passed and once again she throws herself into her volunteerism and community activism.

At times, the reason Mama B stays away from Food Central is because of the politics of the place. She dislikes the rumours and gossip that occasionally cause disruptions at Food Central: “I don’t mind being here, but like I said to Teri, listen, if you want me here every day, I’ll be here every day it’s just that some days with the talk. Some people have too much information and they shouldn’t have that information that they use [against others]. So when I come here after being away, it’s [the gossip] about

my roommate or about my daughter. I didn't come back for that. I can't stand them but, I put up with those people [who spread rumours] because I have to, I put up with them to get the job done. So yeah—I love Teri. I love Teri with all my heart. I would do anything for Teri, I would do anything for Charli. You know, I would do anything for you, and for Jasmine, but those others, no. I don't how people can talk about me or my kids because I go to Natasha's then I go to Food Central, then I go home. I don't talk to anybody except my kids and my sisters. I don't even talk to my roommate.” Like most workplaces, Food Central has disruptions and internal political tensions, but Rufus and Teri try to keep peace by threatening to dismiss any of those who persist in spreading pernicious gossip.

The staff at Food Central, especially Teri, tries to find Mama B tasks that would not be so hard on her, but Mama B has her niche at Food Central where she feels most comfortable, needed and appreciated. She is not particularly interested in screening even though she would be able to be sitting down; she is much more interested in being a big part of the physical action where she feels adept and in control. Should she finally achieve her goal of travelling and spending time in living in different provinces in Canada, Mama B's presence at Food Central will be missed and not only because of the services she provides, but because of the person she is.

**JASMINE:**

Like Mama B, Jasmine is a graduate of the BiL project who continued volunteering at Food Central after her practicum ended two years ago. She works with Charli helping her organize the Good Food Box baskets every week, answering phones

and explaining the program to Food Central clients. Jasmine is fifty-eight, petite, energetic, generous and usually high spirited; she loves to make jokes and has an excellent sense of humour. When I first met Jasmine, I was impressed by her ebullient nature and her obvious affection for the other volunteers and staff at Food Central. That affection is returned by all at Food Central and Jasmine is truly missed when she is absent. Jasmine is courteous and patient with the volunteers from the group homes and with clients of Food Central and the Good Food Box, listening to their problems and issues, encouraging the dialogues and providing any advice or support she feels able to give. She is often in charge of answering the phones of both organizations and taking messages which she does in a professional manner utilizing skills learned from years of clerical experience, always with calm respect for the caller. Jasmine gives her full attention to people setting aside her personal issues to assist others.

Jasmine's physical health is precarious; she suffered a heart attack in 2001 and her present chronic pain from ongoing sciatica<sup>23</sup> diminishes her ability to participate as fully as she would like and at times causes her to become withdrawn. However, Jasmine told me that "the BiL project and the people at Food Central saved my life!" The events in Jasmine's recent past not only affected her physical ability but also left her with a debilitating depression leading at one point, to complete withdrawal from the outside world.

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<sup>23</sup> According to an online medical magazine, MedicineNet:

Sciatica is pain resulting from irritation of the sciatic nerve. Sciatica pain is typically felt from the low back to behind the thigh and radiating down below the knee. The sciatic nerve is the largest nerve in the body and begins from nerve roots in the lumbar spinal cord in the low back and extends through the buttock area to send nerve endings down the lower limb. Sciatica causes pain, burning sensation, numbness, or tingling radiating from the lower back and upper buttock down the back of the thigh to the back of the leg. Severe sciatica can make walking difficult if not impossible. (Shiel 2009).

Again, like Mama B, it was her daughter who provided the impetus to pull herself towards social reintegration. “My daughter sent me a registered letter. In the letter she told me how she felt and was not impressed with how I was dealing with life and everything else and pretty much told me to get a life. To get out, get a job, just do something. I don’t know what motivated me: maybe the thought that I had lost her completely and I couldn’t take any more loss after that [the loss of her marriage and job]. Losing my daughter was the worst thing ever, ever. What I did have to come to terms with was that I was not doing this for my daughter – I mean the goal was to do this for her, but I really needed to do this for myself. I needed to find somebody to talk to, just somebody to talk to.” There are still times when Jasmine becomes overwhelmed and she cannot make herself get out of bed.

After one period of absence, thinking that it was her sciatica that prevented her mobility, I asked Jasmine how her back was and did the medications still work well. Jasmine responded in the affirmative and continued, “The problem with them is that when I take them in the morning, they put me to sleep and so I sleep all day, then I stay awake all night.” “It’s shifting your schedule, then?” Jasmine nodded and said, “Everybody here is so good to me. I don’t know how Charli or Teri put up with me. I’ve missed so much time but I can’t seem to get myself out of bed to get here in the morning and some days, I just can’t make myself get out of bed at all. It is so much easier just to lay there under the covers.” To this I answered, “Yeah, the pain gets to you like that, eh?” “It’s not always just the pain, sometimes I just think it would be easier to stay in bed. The past three days, that’s all I did; stayed in bed all day watching TV. It just doesn’t seem to be worthwhile to get up.” Surprised to hear Jasmine talk like this

because of her outgoing nature, I asked her why she feels that way. She just looked very sad and told me, “Why not? I get tired of getting up, doing things then getting slammed in the face, you know? Even the ones you love most, they just slam you in the face. What’s the use, I’m tired of it.”

While this may seem like a defeatist attitude, it is not unusual for people who have had to negotiate the maze of social security networks, including disability assistance programs like that which is now Jasmine’s source of income. It is only slightly more money than social assistance provides, but disability assistance is no less intrusive into personal history, nor is it a less controlling system. As such, people who have been used to working for most of their lives before needing to depend on assistance programs seem to be more psychologically affected by this dependency. Most of my collaborators have expressed feeling a loss of control over their lives after going on an assistance program.

Jasmine immigrated to Canada from Italy with her parents and older brother as a child and was educated in Montréal’s English school system. Jasmine says she did not completely finish high school due to her rebellious nature as a young woman. Both Jasmine’s parents worked hard, earned a good living, bought a home and raised their three children in modest comfort. Her mother is a deeply religious Catholic woman who held her children to high moral standards, a strong work ethic and a lasting sense of guilt that Jasmine ascribes to her mother’s Catholicism.

Although she had not completed high school, Jasmine found a job working in various offices, starting as a file clerk and eventually, working her way up to becoming an account clerk through practical on-the-job training rather than through secretarial school. Later, Jasmine found work at a hospital in NDG where she worked for years

before being laid off during a fiscal restructuring in the late 1990's. This was one of the life events that was to deeply impact on Jasmine's health, both physically and psychologically. Jasmine managed to get other jobs but none that lasted very long which left her and her daughter financially insecure though Jasmine did have the child support payments from her ex-husband until he died in 2005.

Married in 1978, Jasmine had a good solid future ahead of her. Jasmine showed me her wedding photos in which she and her husband looked so very happy and in love, surrounded with family and friends. Naturally outgoing and friendly she and her new husband, an electronic engineer, enjoyed going out with their friends and socializing, while delaying having children until in their late thirties when their daughter was born in 1987. Jasmine says this was the beginning of the end of her marriage. Jasmine explains that her late ex-husband was not an involved father and he distanced himself from them through various means. Jasmine states that he became more heavily involved in drinking and cocaine use as well as conducting a long term extramarital affair which he had previously managed to keep hidden from her. Jasmine and Tony separated when Danica, who is now twenty-one, was eight years old. Jasmine's slow spiral into depression continued after their divorce in 2000 which "took two years to get through the courts; it was mind boggling."

Also in 2000, Jasmine was once again unemployed which proved to be the breaking point that did send her into a deep depression. "It was wrongful dismissal so I sued and I actually got some funding. It wasn't a great settlement, but it was something but other than that, I was in something like a state of depression; no, more like shock. I think for a number of years I was in a state of shock and even looking back on it, I still

am shocked about everything that's happened. It's really been since 1998, but it still feels as fresh as yesterday. After losing my job and all that, I tried to financially take care of my daughter which was almost impossible; I couldn't get myself out of bed for a very long, long time. I didn't function well as a human being; I didn't function well at home; I didn't function well as a parent. I really knew that I was neglecting my daughter and much as I knew that I was neglecting her I kept putting her on the backburner to deal with when I had time to catch up with her. I didn't realize the harm that I was doing to her. While I tried to keep people from hurting her and myself, I was the one who ended up hurting her the most. My poor daughter did get left in the back – emotionally. I kind of left her behind. I was devastated when I realized that I had mentally abandoned this child to manage on her own for so long.”

Jasmine regrets trying to alienate her daughter from her father at this time because ultimately, it was she who would be alienated from her daughter. “I had no idea that the actions, it was my actions that were harsher than my words because I would tell her that I loved her and I would never let anyone hurt her. So to let her know what was happening around her, I made sure that I told her the truth. But I told her too much; way, way too much about her father but I wanted her to hate him, I wanted her to hate him as much as I did and to keep her from wanting to see him.” After her father's death, Jasmine's daughter became very angry with her because she had not had a relationship with her father. Jasmine recalls thinking “the day that my daughter was born was the day I lost my husband. So isn't it ironic that the day he died was the day I lost my daughter.” Jasmine's daughter left home as soon as possible after she turned eighteen.



Now alone, Jasmine tells me; “After dealing with my daughter leaving home and having not been alone since I was twenty-five, it took a lot of getting used to. And, many, many days were spent under the blanket. I didn’t want to hear, I didn’t want to see. I didn’t want to know. TV helped get me through the night. It was always on and it’s still always on. I think that I was in that state for about a year and starting enjoying my toking. It just felt good not to have to cry. Smoking seemed to take the tears away and make the pain not feel as intense as it did.”

With no job or income, Jasmine went on social assistance; a big downfall from her previously comfortable life style. “While I was not dealing with the situation well, I didn’t care about going to work so I ended up on welfare because of course after the husband died, I had no child support coming in; I wouldn’t have anyway by the time my daughter turned eighteen. But the point is that I didn’t care: I didn’t care if I ate, slept, shampooed, washed, or whatever. I really needed to make a big difference in the way that I thought. So I did, I ended up going to the Royal Vic<sup>24</sup> and ended up seeing the chief psychiatrist, the head of the department apparently.”

In order to determine if Jasmine could be accepted for treatment and payment through medical services an examination was required. “A team of five doctors assessed me and found that I was in shock; that I was in grave depression: the loss of the marriage, the loss of the job, one compiled on top of the other all within one year was hard on me. So the decision was made that yes, I needed help.” Jasmine relates the once a week sessions with the psychiatrist as highly unhelpful, calling the doctor “the worst bitch I have ever, ever had to deal with.” The doctor, says Jasmine, had no sense of compassion whatsoever, no understanding or interest in Jasmine’s case nor did the doctor take her

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<sup>24</sup> The Royal Victoria Hospital in Montréal

seriously. She left every session crying and feeling less and less deserving. “I don’t know why I let her torture me for a whole year. Maybe I felt that I deserved to be beaten down. Finally, I said enough of this. I had had enough and I didn’t want people beating me down. I will not allow any person – in word or deed – beat me down anymore.”

Jasmine decided that she had to get off “the smoke” so she placed herself in a detoxification clinic as an outpatient. There she found the counsellors far more helpful and empathetic which improved her self-confidence and helped her deal with her depression while quitting marijuana.

While on social assistance, Jasmine, like many others, needed assistance in food provisioning and so was a client at Food Central. After finishing her helpful sessions at the detoxification clinic, Jasmine decided to enrol in the BiL project and was in the same workshop session as Mama B. Someone mentioned the project to her and she relates “that sparked something in me and I talked to the Emploi Quebec project coordinator and I somehow managed to get in. The program was for women with children – women with children of school age – a category which was required but which I didn’t meet because I wasn’t the right age and I didn’t have a child at home. But I got in, came and met Marshall and Devora and it just felt right. I knew that my life was going to be different. I have been embraced by so many, so many people here. I was allowed to pick my “stage” [internship], I was allowed to pick whatever vocation I wanted to do my stage, and I chose to do my stage with Charli. Something clicked between Charli and I. I don’t know if it was the give and take sarcasm or whatever it was – she can give as good as she gets – and I think that I can too. And it was just a case that I didn’t have to explain myself to anyone; nobody carried a grudge or talked to me angrily. I was tolerated; I was

accepted; I felt like a human being. I felt that people treated me like I think I hadn't been treated in a very long time. I think it took me a very long time to grasp that I am a human being and what it felt like to be treated like a human being: given the respect and the care—I just don't what to say: just the acceptance by everybody and I have no qualms getting hugs from everyone here.” Jasmine appreciates that she is accorded decision-making powers at Food Central and if necessary to use her judgement in making executive decisions. “It's amazing because it has given me a sense of confidence—it has—it makes you stand a little taller. I can stand in front of a mirror again and say, I think I like who I am. I can see a future in this for me where I couldn't see a future for a very long time.” Jasmine has come a long way from not caring for herself in the deepest of her depression.

She has learned to adjust to her low income status through constant frugality though it sometimes frustrates her. Like most people, Jasmine likes to dress nicely, eat well and enjoys social outings with her friends. Because she pays over sixty percent of her income on rent for a small 3.5 apartment<sup>25</sup> alone, Jasmine tells me that she must forego much of what she enjoys most like “buying meat, maybe a really good steak.” Jasmine still expresses great anger toward her ex-husband [who died three years ago], blaming him for contributing toward her current situation, beyond the fiscal aspects. She also believes that had he not been a philanderer, an unacceptable behaviour for Jasmine that led to their divorce, she would not have alienated her daughter through her own behaviour. However, Jasmine is determined to battle her depression, knowing that she has a supportive network at Food Central and that she and her daughter are in the process of renegotiating their relationship. Such is the reciprocal nature of community

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<sup>25</sup> A three and a half apartment is a one bedroom apartment in the rest of Canada.

volunteerism: much as the volunteers give, they receive by way of strong community bonds and relationships that extend into their personal lives.

**ANNIE:**

Her soft voice barely heard over the din of the crowd, Annie greets the clients as they come in for food assistance on service days. As Food Central greeter, Annie hands out the numbered cards to the clients as they come in and if it is their first visit, she documents their personal information on the intake sheets used by the screeners for data entry. She is in a frontline position which often necessitates putting people at ease when they face a situation where they feel themselves to be supplicants and the stigma they feel in needing to ask. Sometimes Annie does this well and at other times, she displays mere tolerance or impatience toward the clients. Her physical health is seldom optimal, so the variation in her attitude generally reflects this, but Annie does her best to remain positive in her interactions with the clients. Because of Annie's earnest demeanour and genuine empathy for most of Food Central's clients, she often has clients conversing not only with her, but with other clients who wish to participate in their discussions. It is not uncommon for some clients to receive their food bags and remain afterwards to continue the conversation. Annie is eccentric, but she is one of those people who has a knack for "collecting" other people, often those who are marginalized. However, should she take a disliking to a person, she makes it quite plain that a friendly discussion is out of the question.

Annie is attractive with the "classical" British features one often sees in old British movies: tall with a well proportioned physique, fair complexioned and blond. She

attributes her looks to her parents whose ancestry was English. Born into an affluent family, Annie grew up with two brothers and an older sister in Chateauguay on the South Shore of Montréal. Her mother taught English and her father was a successful artist. Annie describes them both as functioning alcoholics when she was young but whose drinking escalated. Annie stated that her mother was “unable to fulfill her role as a mother because she would fall asleep after a number of scotches.” When she was fourteen, her mother told Annie that she could no longer afford to send her for riding lessons. Horses were Annie’s passion and she still evinces anger when talking about being cut off. Annie’s sister left home “at sixteen because she could no longer put up with the situation at home.” This left Annie to care for her mother during her high school and early years at McGill where she was majoring in theology with the goal of becoming a minister. Annie finally left home before completing university studies “because I couldn’t completely concentrate on my studying while constantly being vigilant knowing that my mother would often fall asleep downstairs while smoking a cigarette.”

Annie started working at a record store after leaving home and quitting her studies. She was married for a short five months to “a cocaine-addicted homosexual” [Annie is not homophobic and has a number of gay friends] after which she gravitated toward the Montréal social scene, partying until she met a Quebecois man with whom she was engaged for four years until that relationship dissolved. After that she dated casually and continued going out with her circle of friends until she had a disabling accident while horseback riding during one outing. Annie said that she had had a particularly bad argument with her boyfriend of the time and in a fit of anger, she brought the horse to a full gallop on uneven terrain. The horse lost its footing, fell and rolled over with Annie

still in the saddle. Since that time, Annie has had chronic pain in her back, left shoulder, hip and leg, leaving her unable to work and on disability benefits. In 2001, Annie developed a numbness and loss of feeling in the fingers of her left hand which she alleges the physician treating her misdiagnosed.

Annie explained that due to the physician's misdiagnosis, she was "institutionalized and given psychotropic drugs" she calls "the equivalent of a chemical lobotomy." Annie averred it was "my strong belief in God that made me strong enough to pull myself out from the effects of the drugs and to get out of that hospital. Everyone, even my aunts thought that I was lost, but I came out of it." She stated, "God is love, goodness and He has given everyone the power to heal themselves." Since that time, Annie refuses to take prescribed medications, even antibiotics, unless absolutely necessary saying that she is "healing my body by mind over my pain." To this end, Annie walks a lot which she says keeps the pain at a minimum. Sitting down for long periods of time worsens the pain and makes her stiff.

Annie's beliefs are a mixture of New Age and traditional Christian beliefs though at times, she describes herself as a Mormon. She does belong to two Protestant churches and sings in their choirs and participates in church events where she has befriended many others. When I was walking with her both in NDG and in Montréal proper, Annie was constantly hailed by people she knew from various venues, some secular, but mostly from other members of her churches. Annie tells me that her friends are more like family but they also provide an economic support network: her women friends make sure she has food and her male friends assist her financially when needed. Her religious community and her commitment to it play a very large role in Annie's life, now and in

her future plans. Annie intends to keep working with community organizations and continues to work toward becoming a minister.

### **QUEENIE:**

As the main screener, Queenie plays an integral role in the functioning of food distribution days. Queenie ensures the screening office is well stocked with the “packing” [order] slips for the day, the computer is on and the database readied for client intake, the pens and the books are set out for the manual intake and that the second screener is aware of any food “specials” being offered during service. Her favourite activity is organizing the “office” and she is constantly rearranging the setup and placement of various items in it. Contrary to her intentions, this constant reorganizing sometimes leads to a very tidy, but inefficient arrangement.

As a single mother of two young children, seven and five, Queenie looks and acts far younger than her actual thirty-seven years of age. Queenie has volunteered at Food Central for six years now, nearly as long as her mother, Teri, has worked as the volunteer coordinator. Teri told me that she made Queenie come in with her on a regular basis to set an example for her grandchildren. She did not want Queenie’s children to fall into the “welfare cycle” that often happens to children whose parents are long term welfare recipients. Queenie’s volunteering helps her keep a regular schedule and to assume responsibility and self discipline; qualities that Queenie lacks through some quirk of nature. Understanding that her daughter lacks the ability for long term planning, Teri is very involved with her grandchildren and consequently, keeps a tight control over the structuring of Queenie’s daily life to make sure that they are provided for. It takes a toll

on Teri too, as she tells me that she would have “cut Queenie loose to fend for herself a number of years ago, but then Queenie got pregnant.” It was her concern for the child-to-be, her granddaughter, that stopped her from doing so. Queenie does not resent her mother’s control over her affairs, knowing that both she and her children are benefiting greatly from the assistance her mother gives her. The only times that Queenie does mind is when she would like to go out and party with her friends on the weekend and needs money to do so but Teri holds her bankcard, only giving it to Queenie when bills need to be paid and groceries bought. Teri gives Queenie an “allowance” [Queenie’s term] for personal expenses from what is left over after all the monthly expenses have been met including her rent for the apartment in the triplex her mother’s partner owns. Teri and her partner also live in the building.

Queenie has had a number of emotional setbacks stemming from her biological father’s rejection of her when she was in her adolescence. While she often pretends that it does not affect her, Queenie cannot hide the bitterness and anger when she reaches out to him through email correspondence and receives no response. His rejection has also coloured her relationships with men. As Queenie describes some of the men she has lived with and how they have treated her, it is obvious that she needs to have someone who will care for her without abusing the trust and love she freely gives them.

Queenie is naturally a very loving, generous and caring person. She suffers serious mood swings that can at times intimidate some at Food Central making one ask her if she is angry at them for some reason because she will bark at anyone when she is in a bad mood. Sometimes at the beginning of a service day, Queenie would tell me, “I am in a bitchy mood today, so watch out people! I am not going to be nice to any of them



[the clients] and heaven help them if they are on their third visit!” Then Queenie will get up from the desk, get my cup from its hiding place where she keeps it so “no one will take it” and gets me a coffee. Then she will start talking about what she and her children did the previous evening. She loves talking about her children to whom she is totally devoted, bringing in their report cards, their accomplishments and pictures of them to show to everyone. After Queenie calls in the first client, her resolve to be “bitchy” melts away. She cannot help but be nice to most of the clients and when there is a client she personally cannot tolerate, she steps away “for a break” and lets the second screener take that person’s information. Whenever Queenie is not present for a food distribution day, many of the clients ask after her, some of the clients bring her little treats like candies, and one elderly woman never fails to bring Queenie something that she has baked for her “and the kiddies, eh?” Queenie is well loved by most of the regular pensioners and many of the younger regulars too and this provides Queenie with a sense of being valued not only for her contributions to Food Central overall, but for herself as well.

**ALIA:**

Alia, a McGill student, volunteers consistently on Fridays as part of her Community Development/Social Work internship requirement. For the required 20 hours of the practicum portion of her university program, Alia interns 16 hours a week at the Montréal Urban Community Sustainment (MUCS) organization in NDG and 4 hours at the InfoCentral because MUCS is affiliated with both Food Central and the Community Council.

Before coming to Montréal to study, Alia lived in Edmonton where she worked in a women's shelter. Her ultimate goal is to continue working with women who have suffered abuse and rape. Alia is energetic and creative. She is dedicated to community activism and building solidarity networks especially through collective gardening. She has been impressed by the community gardens operating in the Montréal area and feels that there is potential in viewing gardening as a therapeutic agent for women who have been abused and marginalized. Knowing that it may sound like an essentialist argument, Alia nonetheless believes that gardening may provide a means for women to heal through working with the soil and growing plants; helping to alleviate food insecurity issues is another benefit.

While Alia is presently living as students mostly do, on a small budget, she tells me that she is fully aware that she is a child of privilege whose family is financially well-off. Nonetheless, Alia is proud that she has worked all the time she was an undergraduate student at University of Alberta and paid her own way throughout. She has been able to extend her limited budget by eating at MUCS and by preparing her own vegetarian lunches to eat between her classes. Although Alia can be described as having an elfin build, she has a healthy appetite, so being able to save money by eating at MUCS is a good strategy as is sharing an apartment with two roommates.

In our many conversations, Alia confirms many of the observations I have made regarding Food Central clients. One comment that we hear very often made by attendees on their first visit for food assistance is that they are used to being in the position to donate to – not receive from – Food Central. “The stigma shows in many different ways but I think that it is hard for a lot of people. Going by what people tell me, I remember a

woman telling me: 'I used to volunteer at places like this and now I'm here using the service.' I think it's, like, such a hard thing for people. Then there was this other man who came up to me and said, 'You know, I'm fifty-eight years old and now I am here. This isn't where I thought I would be at this age.' When he found out that I was a student, he started encouraging me [to complete her studies] saying, 'you don't want to end up like me.' That was so sweet of him but is hard to hear."

Alia finds that learning about the various resources in NDG in order to impart this knowledge to Food Central clients is a little difficult, but not only because she is not a native of Montréal. It is the idea of being "the expert" when she has never needed to use the kinds of resources that the clients need. She often feels that the clients have information about the resources that she doesn't have. Apart from that Alia says "there is a power dynamic in social work that I like being really conscious of." From working at the InfoCentral and learning about the various resources available to NDG residents, Alia finds "there are some amazing things happening here. There's so much more going on here in terms of community building. There is a lot of activism in Edmonton, but community building is not as strong." Community building, for Alia, means issues surrounding food security and the linkages between different community organizations where they can use each other to accomplish things together using a hands-on approach.

Alia finds that when she recommends clients to various resources, there is no person's name included in the contact information and so when she talks to the clients, she warns them to be patient when finding exactly who to speak to. "I will usually give a bit of a heads up: okay, this is what is going on right now for you; this is an issue for you. I have a few numbers to give you...so I warn people that there may be a little calling

around and not to get discouraged because you see this is like a revolving door. You get sent here but then find out that you would be better served there so you get referred there and then referred elsewhere. But in terms of calling “so-and-so” at Project Genesis<sup>26</sup> that would be excellent and I hope that it will be offered. So far, I think it is only the staff at the Community Council who will offer that they have specific knowledge of an issue.” Alia would like to make contact with the various agencies and organizations so she can attach a name to the phone number “so I can refer people to *someone*.” It is a personalizing tactic that helps people connect rather than being shunted around the frustrating, impersonal system.

Alia enjoys the sense of community at Food Central during the food service hours. She realizes that they “are struggling, but you really do feel a sense of community. Like, I have gotten to know a lot of people and it’s so nice seeing them and chatting with them and finding out how things are going. Most of the people are really in good moods and they’re chatty but then there are other times when they are struggling and I can see that on them. I can *feel* that in them. It can feel desperate sometimes. I have to ground myself before going in sometimes because there is that “vibe.” It is tough and people are struggling.”

Rental issues and the cost of renting is one of the things Alia finds most people are having difficulty with. “If you are spending  $\frac{3}{4}$  of your income on one basic need, it doesn’t cut it. You have all these other basic needs.” Another point Alia makes is the ages of the buildings – many have inadequate insulation and that jacks up the family’s cost in the winter and the family income is not enough to pay the utilities and pay the

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<sup>26</sup> Project Genesis is an organization that assists clients dealing with housing issues and with the different social services agencies. It is situated in CDN.

rent. Health issues do arise sometimes and Alia will be asked about exercise programs for the disabled, questions regarding where to find clinics to assist refugees deal with their traumatic dislocations, about where to find culturally specific food or at times needing more food assistance beyond what is available at Food Central. Alia often refers the clients out to the food provisioning sites that are open to all Montréal residents. Like Natasha, Alia believes that empowerment is more productive than merely providing a service. The InfoCentral, as part of the services provided within Food Central works towards that goal like the other programs offered at the site. There is a definite commitment towards community building as one of the foundations to counter inequity in the community.

**MIA:**

Mia is part of the group of adults who have mental challenges and who volunteer at Food Central every Tuesday and Thursday as part of a social integration project. Bussing herself with a number of tasks at Food Central keeps Mia in the thick of the action where she can interact with other Food Central volunteers. Mia is almost always very cheerful and her laughter is heard throughout the commons room. A good listener and concerned participant, Mia finds herself in a mothering position, especially with her group members who seek her approval or her comfort. The group leader, who is an employee of The Westmount Centre for Reintegration, depends heavily on Mia because of her skills, both in maintaining order and in her kitchen skills. The group meets at Food Central every Friday to enhance their cooking skills which boost their ability to become autonomous and live independently. Each member is supposed to contribute to the

preparation and clean up of their meal. In return for the use of the communal kitchen, the group makes enough food for the volunteers at Food Central as well. Some meals are outstanding while some, not quite so popular with the volunteers. Mia is instrumental in making sure that the atmosphere remains harmonious while she also does much of the food preparation.

When she is not needed in the kitchen, Mia will take the initiative and assist in the food service on Fridays. Tuesdays she will often carton the eggs in preparation for the next service day. Because she is outgoing, Mia likes this opportunity to talk with the volunteers who are not part of her group. She likes the banter and the double entendres that make up a lot of the convivial chatting amongst the volunteers. Everyone wonders why she is living in a group home since she certainly is capable and adept and seems in control of her affairs, unlike some of the members of the group who are not high functioning individuals.

Mia has not always lived in a group home. She is a widow and is the mother of two children, a son of twenty and a daughter who is thirteen, neither of whom lives with her. Mia's husband died from the effects of a series of debilitating strokes when in his early fifties. While he was alive, it was he who managed the household finances and Mia tells me that he often did not let her go visit her friends for coffee nor did he let her go out to shop alone. When I asked Mia if she felt resentful of his control, she said yes.

Mia feels very sad when asked about her children so I have not had the heart to ask her why she was separated from them after the death of her husband. I asked Teri and she said that Mia was unable to manage the household and finances on her own. Out of concern for the children's well-being, the social welfare agents placed her children,

then sixteen and ten, in a foster home and found a group home for Mia. Mia is such a gentle and loving person, no one wishes to upset her so we skirt around the issue and continue to accept who she is without intrusion.

### **RECIPROCITY, SOLIDARITY AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT:**

There are more volunteers – women and men – who are integral to Food Central, each in their own way and their stories are equally interesting. But these are the stories of those with whom I have had most contact and who wished to be part of the telling. Each individual becomes part of the unique community within Food Central, each giving what they can in return for the assistance they receive. It is within such community organizations that the seeds for solidarity economy can be found and nurtured to extend out into the community at large.

Through volunteering, the women gain a sense of confidence in their capabilities and, because of the way Teri operates, a sense of “owning” their work. Here, their work is valued and their efforts rewarded through reciprocal arrangements whether through a letter of recommendation for a job or with food supplementation. The volunteers create new bonds of friendship and solidarity that often extend outside Food Central. The women share a sense of commitment to build a better community. As they share stories about their lives, they find they have much in common and are able to aid each other to surmount the issues they face. Food Central is a safe space with no tolerance for abuse or discrimination and where the most marginalized are treated with dignity and respect.

By learning to trust others and by meeting new people, the women and men who volunteer lose the sense of isolation and the stigma that neo-liberalism fosters when

individuals are unable to provide for themselves and their families. The women know that their work is valuable and that they are providing a much-needed service to the community. As they learn to make this space their own the women are commanding other public spaces through their networks with other community organizations.

The women may not know that they are utilizing the ethics of care that underlie solidarity economy but this is where the foundations have been laid for its spread into the wider NDG community.



## CHAPTER 6

### FOOD CENTRAL CLIENTS

*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [herself] and of [her] his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his [her] control (Article 25, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948).*

### CARLA'S STORY:

Sitting at the screener's desk with its computer to one side, I called the next client's number. The woman came in with two grade school aged children and sat in the chair facing the desk, setting down her number card and then handing me a new intake<sup>27</sup> form. It was her first visit and she seemed very distraught. As I usually do, I started by making small talk asking her how she was and if she was new to the community. She replied, "No, but now I have no choice, I have no food at home." "We'll take care of that today, Carla, no problem," I responded. Then as I was entering Carla's information into the database I asked if it was a PD<sup>28</sup> day at her children's school. Carla looked away and steadying her voice, said, "No, it isn't. It's just that I had to keep them home from school today because I don't have anything to put in their lunches. I feel so awful! I don't know why I can't make it this month. I didn't think that I'd ever need to come here and *take*. I usually *give* a little to the Food Bank when I can." Trying to reassure her that there was nothing shameful about needing to use the services I answered, "You know Carla, we've all been there at one point or another. You're not alone. It's okay. That's why we're here."

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<sup>27</sup> This form contains the client's basic information such as name, address, source of income, number of family members and their age and gender.

<sup>28</sup> Professional Development day for teachers.

I had now finished entering the information and the computer had generated her file number which I wrote down on a slip of paper with Food Central's address, hours of service, and phone number. I said, "Here is your Food Central file number. Keep it and bring it, along with your IDs, next time you need to come in. Now we get to the food part. Just give me a minute, okay?" I stood up and leaned over the cabinet separating the food preparation area from the screening/intake<sup>29</sup> office and called loudly over the din of the music blaring from the ever-present radio, to Greta who was getting the items together for one of the previous clients. Once I had her attention, I asked her to give me a few of the granola bars that we had for inclusion in this day's bags. I gave the bars to Carla and the children indicating they eat now while I went to find the coordinator. I guessed, rightly, that they hadn't had breakfast either. It must have been really difficult for her to come in today, just as it is for so many others. I went and found Teri, told her Carla's story and asked her if could we give her a double order today to make sure they had enough food for the rest of the week and the weekend. Teri seldom says no when children are involved and in fact, Teri went to fill the bags herself to give to Carla.

I went back to the screening area to Carla and her children. I showed her what normally is provided in a bag for three persons: "You get two bags of rice, two macaroni and cheese or a pasta, five bags of powdered milk, two cans of beans, two cans of tuna, a dozen eggs, a large can of tomatoes, three cans of fruits and vegetables (except today we have fresh and you always get fresh instead when we have it), a can of soup and whatever bread we've been donated. I think it's bagels today<sup>30</sup>." Carla nodded her head and I

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<sup>29</sup> The intake process is sometimes called screening because the client's are screened for their number of visits in the month and any possible changes in their pertinent personal information such as address changes.

<sup>30</sup> This is what constitutes two and a half days worth of food for a family of three.

continued, "So you eat everything?" "Yes" "We also have extras that we put in all bags when we have them, plus, you can ask for extras like cereal or peanut butter or juice for the children." Carla said, "Cereal please, and juice for their lunches if you can...anything for their lunches would be good, please?" "No problem, Carla. Teri also said she would give you a double order today so that you would be okay for a couple more days. I've written it on the slip, see? Teri will take care of you and make sure that you have lots of good stuff. You can also come back next week, because you're allowed two visits per month, okay?" Carla protested, saying, "Oh I should be okay next week, my cheque comes in and I should be okay. But thank you!" I smile at her and tell her once again, "No problem...we're here for you and if you find you need to, please, do come in and see us, okay?"

In his theory of the hierarchy of needs Sociologist A.H. Maslow places food as the most basic human need. Maslow argues that when a person is hungry, all the other basic needs to survive are secondary [shelter] and tertiary [love and friendship]. It is once the body is satiated that the other needs can be fulfilled (Maslow 1970). Teri tells me, "Without good nutrition, people can't think, and when they can't think, they can't work, and when they can't work, they start pulling themselves away from the community and society, bit by bit, until they find themselves isolated and alone. Then their self worth is gone and it is hard for them to regain it. We work hard at bringing people out of isolation and back into the community. We try to treat them with dignity and respect. This is why we have set up Food Central the way it is. We want it to be inclusive. We want it to be a place where people feel accepted and safe."

Teri describes the people who come to Food Central for assistance in food provisioning; “All people with a low-income: that could be people working full-time with minimum wage or just a little bit more than minimum wage; students who are on student loans; people on disability; people receiving welfare-social assistance. It can sometimes be people with no incomes at all; new arrivals who have no income except the savings they have which usually covers their rent and, with the high rents, it leaves them a little short for food. We ask people what their source of income is and we never turn people away, but I would say that the majority of the service users are welfare recipients. However, like I said, many of them have jobs, part-time, full-time, low wage, men women and children and oh yes, seniors.”

For some clients, it is a lack of budgeting, especially for those who had recently lost their jobs for one reason or another. Many still have the debts accrued while having a steady income: credit cards, car payments, insurance policies and other obligations. The biggest problem, however, is less budgetary mismanagement for most clients: it is the fact that social assistance income is lower than the HRDC Market Basket Measure (MBM) which only allows for rent, food and utilities but is not sufficient for expenditures that promote social inclusion (NCW 2008).

Clothing can be a visual measure of poverty and hence, further isolate one living under the poverty line. Another problem with the MBM as the National Council on Welfare reports is that it does not regularly keep up with inflation that continues to rise compounding the difficulties faced by low-income individuals (NCW 2008). This is understood by the workers, yet it is difficult for Food Central to continue to supply the

growing demand during this economic recession and hence the frustration of trying to work with minimum fiscal input and the dependence on food and money donations from a community that is suffering an economic recession itself.

Some only avail themselves of Food Central services irregularly like when a child maintenance cheque is late or missed but more often than not, the food assistance becomes an integral part of budgeting for survival. Teri argues, “[it’s] a chronic emergency...because they don’t have enough money to eat properly without Food Central.” When Food Central was designed, it was only supposed to be for emergencies. Teri continues, “the definition of emergency was different, like maybe twice in a year you had an emergency when you had too many bills like at the end of the winter. So you would pay your bill off and then you wouldn’t have food money or you were sick and had to pay for medication and then you didn’t have food money. It may have happened to you a couple of times in the year and that was the definition of emergency. The definition of emergency has changed for food banks and I really think it has to be revisited. The way things are now with the cost of living, it’s a chronic emergency [for many].” When such a high number of people have to supplement their food budgets, the underlying cause must be addressed. Food Central sees an average of 100 new applicants per month and maybe only ten to twenty percent of those need assistance only the once.

These numbers are alarming because many are women who have resisted seeking aid previously. Many have been on social assistance for a duration so why the overwhelming need at this time? Blais enumerates some of the reasoning women use for not seeking aid: pride of making it on ones own, shame in asking for aid, the negative associations toward aid seekers, keeping ones problems private and the loss of a self-

perceived autonomy and control (1998:117-126). In other words, it is a public admittance of failure to provide for their families to a society that increasingly declares “you are on your own” through its attitudes and social policies.

Food Central works diligently buffering against the stigma attached to needing aid through non-judgmental attitudes and the preservation of individual dignity. This is not possible without first acknowledging the resourcefulness displayed by many of the clients whose creativity and innovation has enabled these women to fend for themselves and their families to the best of their individual abilities before asking for help in meeting their needs. Mostly, those who avail themselves of the services offered by Food Central show an inordinately strong resilience to their adverse conditions.

Once the women feel less wary of, or more at ease with, asking for assistance, they often see Food Central as a base for communal and social interactions that help foster stronger social connections and a stronger sense of community solidarity through sharing their stories, their hopes, their feelings, their successes and their failures, even their recipes and cost saving strategies to get more from less. The clients’ openly voiced sense of being respected as equals when they are economically disadvantaged and in need of asking for aid is the strength of Food Central as a grassroots communal base for social integration and solidarity.

### **WOMEN’S NARRATIVES OF RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE:**

As previously noted, women have an 84% chance of living without a man at some time in their lives and are, therefore, at greater risk than men are of losing economic status (Harman 2006:199). Most women in Canada find it difficult to believe that they

will ever be living in a low-income situation, especially if they have post-secondary education and are married. Education and marriage are considered to be the two main factors in determining a woman's economic status, especially when they are conjoined but these determinants are variable. Of the women who remain married, the National Council of Welfare has found that 10% will find themselves living under the income cut-off or below the poverty line (2004, 2007). "At any stage of their lives, women are more likely to be poor, and are more likely to be trapped in a life of poverty" (Harman 2006:199).

Even women who do work full-time earn less than their male counter-parts. In 1996, women earned 73.4 percent of what men earned in nearly every field and this figure had not much improved as of 2007 (Harman 2006; Townson 2009). Women are more likely to be employed part-time or in low paying service sector jobs with little chance of advancement or employment benefits such as employment insurance, medical insurance or pensions. I present two women, Faye and Lucy, who have been affected by economic inequities most often visited upon women and who have been obliged to turn to Food Central's assistance to supplement their food needs.

Having always lived with economic security, Faye has become one of the women who fit in this category [part-time employment and one of 10% married women on low-income] and she still finds it difficult to accept that she is now in a position that requires that she and her husband apply for social assistance. Living well within the family income and being married has not assured independence or economic security for her.

In contrast, Lucy has lived in a situation of economic insecurity since leaving home at sixteen and is familiar with the privations associated with living under the

poverty line as a former single mother and now as a middle aged woman. She turned to the underground economy used to circumvent those privations when she was younger but now needs to avail herself of the assistance programs to provide for herself.

**FAYE:**

With a look of disbelief on her face, Faye exclaims, “But I did everything right. I had three months’ worth of living expenses saved like they say to do, but it is all gone now. Raymond still hasn’t found a job and I don’t know what we are going to live on now.”

Just coming in to Food Central was difficult for Faye, “It took all I had to stop my feet from turning around and walking away.” Faye is the one who handles all the financial affairs and purchasing in her household that consists of her husband, her daughter and her mother. So it is she who comes to Food Central for food assistance. Faye dreads the thought of applying for social assistance, but her husband, Raymond, optimistically believes that he will find a job soon though none of his job applications have resulted in work. Her mother, Adina, has lived with them for 19 years and has never contributed any money toward her accommodations and Faye refuses to ask her for any financial aid to ward off her mother’s recriminations and protestations of personal poverty.

When I visit, I cannot avoid seeing the stack of unopened bills on the freezer near the door where it grows monthly. Faye has calculated the amounts owed and abashedly admits to over a thousand dollars is owed to HydroQuebec; the phone, internet and cable are disconnected, and they are three months behind in rent. Faye cannot sleep due to her



worrying about their economic situation and I can see that she is losing weight though she describes this as a perk. Faye's life has had ups and downs, frustrations and challenges, but she was never in a financial predicament such as this.

Born and raised in a medium sized town in Jamaica by her grandmother, Faye's early childhood seems idyllic though Faye stresses that she and her young aunts and uncles did have chores to do everyday before school. Her mother and father had divorced when Faye and her brother were very young and, rather than raise the children on her own, Faye's mother left her son with their father and Faye with her maternal grandmother and sought a single life in Kingston, Jamaica. Faye was brought up with her mother's younger siblings, the youngest being only a few years older than Faye. When Faye was in her later teenage years, she moved to Kingston to live with her mother and took a vocational diploma in bookkeeping. Faye says that she did not complete the diploma because her mother refused to fund her education after Faye had run out of her own savings six months before graduating, telling Faye that she would have to find work to pay for it.

Eighteen and unable to complete her studies, Faye and a couple of girlfriends decided to go to Cuba to find work in Havana. While there, Faye was trained as an electrician through a hands-on job training program and she remembers her time in Havana fondly. She remembers buying goods that were prohibited to the Cubans when friends would ask her to do so, not worried at all at the time that, had she been caught, she would have been deported. After a couple of years, Faye and her friends returned to Jamaica and from there, she decided to accept an aunt's invitation to move in with her family in Montréal to provide childcare to Faye's young cousins while her aunt, a nurse,

worked. Three years afterward, Faye moved out into her own apartment having found work in an office where she met friends and had an active social life before meeting her husband. Faye met Raymond through her aunt and uncle and she says that he pursued her “enthusiastically” finally winning her over. They have now been married for over twenty-seven years and are the parents of twenty-one year old Amanda who is blind, but who has just been accepted into university since completing CEGEP. Faye proudly asserts that never did she or her family ever depend on social assistance; they have always been self-sufficient.

Until May, 2008, Raymond had had steady employment for various courier companies which afforded them a comfortable lifestyle even after Faye was laid-off a number of years ago. Raymond’s salary was sufficient because of Faye’s careful budgeting that met all their needs and allowed for savings as well. Faye decided to stay at home while Amanda went to CEGEP. Faye was and still is concerned about her daughter’s safety using the public transportation system so she accompanies Amanda to and from her college. In the meantime, Faye continues to work as a lunchroom monitor in a nearby school which she has done for a number of years.

Raymond lost his job when the company he worked for was bought out by another company which required a police security check and is a normal procedure for many companies that hire “bondable”<sup>31</sup> employees. Had Raymond always lived in Canada, this would have taken less than a month. However, because he is from Jamaica, the paperwork took months longer and the company was not willing to wait that long and terminated his contract. Since Amanda was nearly finished CEGEP, Faye had begun to

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<sup>31</sup> “Bonding” means that the company assures its clients that its employees are trustworthy when handling the clients’ goods.

contemplate returning to full-time work and Raymond's inability to find permanent work throughout the summer, made it imperative she did so. Faye had finally completed the bookkeeping diploma she had so wanted in early 2000 and so she has focused only on that job sector and she has been disappointed by the limited opportunities. So Faye decided to enrol in the eleven week pre-employability program at Food Central to prepare to return to the work force, but still determined to work as a bookkeeper.

Faye is a very proud woman determined not to ask for aid so it was only after a few weeks of being in the program that she finally broke down and took advantage of the food assistance from Food Central. The fact that nearly all of the eleven other women enrolled in the program also registered for food assistance muted the discomfort Faye felt at requesting that aid. It was more like one of the benefits of taking the workshops much akin to the small stipend the women received from Emploi Quebec which sponsors the project. Having acquired computer skills as part of her bookkeeping courses, Faye opted for the French skills lessons [little more than acquiring survival skills in the French language] where I got to know her better. Going to her family's apartment once a week to listen to her repeat the lessons from her old French workbook acquired from previously having taken French language lessons ended up mostly listening to Faye talk about her life, her extensive family, her daughter's accomplishments and her growing fears for the family's financial security. Like many underemployed workers, Raymond was working as vacation relief for a delivery company, but that was due to end after only a couple of months with less than the necessary hours for unemployment insurance. The unpaid bills were mounting and credit cards starting to be used far more than ever. Faye's abundant

budgeting skills were challenged and provisions from Food Central became part of the monthly grocery tally.

Cooking is Faye's passion and she is good at improvising to come up with some pretty unusual baked goods. No one ever comes to visit without a cup of tea and something Faye baked to accompany it, and so I have tasted some unique banana breads, muffins and "puddings." Her Caribbean style homemade soups are excellent and very nutritious though made with inexpensive vegetables and legumes. Faye always serves herself last after Raymond, Amanda [and me] usually with the smallest piece, claiming no appetite. Faye's mother, Adina, fends for herself.

Adina spends most of her time in her room watching television or on the phone with her friends and Faye makes no effort to include her in the family's daily events. Faye has no qualms at expressing her ongoing anger and resentment toward her mother from years of neglect and rejection when she was a child and later as a young woman. Her present situation does nothing to ameliorate Faye's animosity when dealing with her mother. She claims that she "just ignores her" but when her mother comes out of her room, Faye says "it's like sweeping under the bed and finding that old pair of shoes you forgot was there." In reality, Faye is highly aware that Adina is there and is bitter about the extra financial pressure she puts on their fragile income. This is very apparent when Faye recounts Adina's constant nagging to get the telephone reconnected when paying off the outstanding bill would take away from her ability to buy groceries. There are many other instances when Faye displays her antagonism such as when Adina decides to do some cooking. Faye considers Adina's presence in the kitchen as an invasion into her personal space so she retreats into her own bedroom to avoid confrontation.

Asked about her health, Faye admits to stress and despondency, chronic lower back pain and increasingly painful tendonitis that leaves her right hand fingers so overly sensitive that kneading dough is like kneading sand yet there is an incomprehensible numbness as well. Faye says she feels unable to see herself finding a job which is not unusual for women in her age group. She relates to me her repeating dream of being trapped in a room with no doors or windows from which to escape nor even “bars like in a prison where at least sunlight can come in.”

Though Faye has a large extended family and is in constant communication with her brother, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews, she does not confide in them her present difficulties nor does she seek help from them. She has never had a big circle of friends and says that she has been avoiding interactions with the women she works with at her elementary school monitoring job. In the meantime, Faye determinedly does what she can to provide for her family with the assistance of Food Central and with her talent for frugality.

Faye finds herself in a situation that most middle aged women who have been out of the workforce for a number of years face. As Waring argues, women, married or not, are penalized by a “human capital depreciation” or in effect a “child penalty” for each year she is not employed in the labour market (2006:224). Getting back into the labour force after having a child or even when not a mother is very difficult when newspapers and articles about job finding suggest that older persons are being looked over in favour of young employees. Both Harman (2006) and Waring (2006) are in agreement that technical skills are lost and so need upgrading constantly which is not always possible for women who find themselves living with a low-income. Student loans may be available

for retraining courses and few women wish to gamble on having a good paying job afterwards to pay off the loan especially when in doing so forces them to continue living in a low-income situation.

### **LUCY:**

Lucy's life has been completely different from Faye's and she, unlike Faye, has had no security in her life to lose. She was born into a low-income family and has had inconsistent incomes since then depending on the work she did – most of it in the underground economy. She presently lives on a disability income which pays the rent and her bills but very little else after her transportation costs for medical treatment. She shares her apartment with a male roommate whose income, when he finds odd jobs, goes toward the groceries and any necessary extras. When he does not find work, Lucy depends on Food Central to supplement their groceries.

Lucy is quite proud of the fact that she owes nothing, owns everything in her home, regardless that it is all second hand. She says that she does the housework and the cooking in her sparsely furnished but tidy apartment as part of the sharing agreement between her roommate and Lucy. The only feature that seems at odds with the spartan nature of Lucy's apartment is the huge number of stuffed toy animals, birds and fish. When she caught me looking at them, Lucy admits to having a fondness for stuffed animals most of which have been given to her. She says "it's my way of experiencing the childhood I never had."

Lucy's life is scheduled and orderly while working around her disabilities which leave her unable to physically function after the evening meal. Besides having diabetes

and cancerous polyps that grow in her throat and need constant monitoring and excising, Lucy has a debilitating neurovascular disease that is slowly shutting down the blood supply to her feet and now to her hands and chest where resulting rashes develop into open sores. Her feet have no feeling in them whatsoever, and the lack of blood circulation is causing them to blacken. As she shows me the effects of the disease Lucy tells me that she knows that her feet will eventually have to be amputated. She is coping with this fact like she managed other devastating events in her life, including the suicide of David, her only child, at the age of twenty-nine, seven years ago: Lucy thoroughly analyses and processes the information until she can calmly accept it. Lucy is angry with the length of time she must wait to see specialists because “while I wait to get something treated, it gets worse and spreads to other parts and is more difficult to clear up. I don’t think that I would have to wait so long if I wasn’t on disability and had money.”

Born the second child and eldest daughter of six children, four boys and two girls, Lucy was abused by her parents from her earliest memory until she left home. She was sexually abused by her father from infancy and shut away from the rest of the family for most of the first nine years of her life “in a cupboard.” She cannot tell me how her parents were able to hide her away when it came time for her to start school because she doesn’t know. When she was seven years old, Lucy says that her maternal grandfather decided to step in and forced her father to leave her mother which left Lucy’s mother very bitter toward Lucy for “breaking up the family.” This is when Lucy started her sporadic schooling when she was allowed to go. Lucy’s mother continued the abuse of her daughter by treating her like a servant, keeping her from school and separating her

siblings from Lucy by telling them what an evil person she was. Her grandfather had died when Lucy was nine so she was left without a defender at all.

Lucy was further sexually abused by many of her mother's boyfriends and other men with her mother's knowledge and active encouragement. Lucy tells me that her mother used to inject her with heroin to keep her submissive and under control. She finally tried to run away from home when she was thirteen but was returned to her family, a process which continued until finally leaving shortly before her seventeenth birthday after becoming pregnant and marrying. That marriage only lasted five months because her husband was physically abusive and she had had enough abuse without being further subjected to violence from her partner. Sardonicly, Lucy claims, "at least it got me away from home without my mother sending cops after me to bring me home."

Now pregnant and on her own, Lucy lived on social assistance and tried to go back to school to finish an uneven education from her earlier years since she was prevented from formal and consistent education as a child. "It's difficult to go to school when you live in a cupboard," Lucy tells me. After the birth of her son, Lucy gave up trying to get her education because then in the late 1960s, the welfare system was even less responsive to the needs of single mothers and daycare centres were not prevalent. There was there no extra money for hiring private babysitters during the day.

At the time, Lucy was eighteen, living on 60\$ a month "with no parenting skills" after living in such a dysfunctional home as a child. She remarks, "I didn't exactly have any role model did I?" It was at this time Lucy turned to prostitution to support herself, her son and her growing drug addiction. The first time Lucy prostituted herself, "I was offered a thousand dollars to sleep with this guy, so I did. What would you do if you



were living on 60\$ a month, wondering where to get the money to buy your kid's milk?" Lucy does take pride in the fact that she never prostituted herself in exchange for drugs from the drug dealers; she always paid cash so that the dealers never had control over her and neither could they "pimp her out." Looking at me like she didn't think I would believe her, Lucy says "I used to be very pretty you know. I had no problem attracting men." While time and her illnesses have taken a toll on her, I can certainly believe her.

Lucy remembers her son to have been an angry young boy who was difficult to control and who was always in trouble in school. She believes that his anger stemmed from being born to an angry young woman who was not ready to be a mother. Lucy did the best she could for her son, taking him to counselling and seeking help in raising him because she did not have the tools to deal with a troubled child at that time. Regardless of her efforts, David spent much of his adolescence and young adulthood in and out of jail for various crimes. He too was addicted to drugs and alcohol.

Lucy finally decided to get clean of drugs when in her early thirties. Her decision to do so came one day when she was in the shower and "lit a pipe [to smoke crack cocaine] and my hair caught fire – I had really long hair then – and I was just standing there trying to get high." It shocked her into making her decision to rehabilitate. Lucy says that her son was in juvenile detention at the time and therefore, she relinquished her apartment, furnishings and all and put herself into a rehabilitation centre in Ottawa. Lucy tells me that she stuck it through the program for over a year, coming out clean and determined to stay so. After Lucy ended her rehabilitation, she returned to NDG against the advice of her counsellors who felt such a move would lead to a relapse. It did not and Lucy stayed clean for over fifteen years when she had a short relapse as a means to cope

after her son's suicide. Because she had worked so hard to overcome her addiction, Lucy quit again and has not touched heroin or crack cocaine since. Her sobriety, Lucy believes worsened her relationship with her son who was out of detention and living with her again. Dryly, Lucy tells me, "Apparently a straight mother is not as much fun as a drugged out one."

After coming out of rehabilitation, Lucy started working as a domestic labourer/nanny, to families in Westmount where she came to learn quite quickly that rich families could be as dysfunctional as poor ones. She finally stopped working for Westmount families after she had been falsely accused of theft. The daughter of the family had been stealing her mother's jewellery but Lucy was the one accused and let go without the money the family owed her. Lucy did not let it go without a fight and threatened to take the family to court. The family did not believe her because she was working "under the table" and would have been cut off from social assistance. This did not deter Lucy and when she persisted in her claims that the child had taken the jewellery and she still intended to sue. The family relented after their daughter confessed. Lucy was exonerated and was paid for her time worked. Lucy takes great pride in her honesty and integrity which is one of the character traits that she respects in others and so demands of herself. Lucy cites the dishonesty and theft by others caused her to quit her volunteerism at Food Central [Teri "fired" those volunteers she found abusing the trust placed in them by stealing food when she first started working there].

Lucy states that because she had so few role models in her early life she learned to adapt the traits she admired in people she met and she says this has served her well through hardships. Lucy claims that she would not change her past if she could because

she says the best education she received was living through some really hard times. I ask her when she learned how to laugh considering her history and Lucy says, “the same day I learned how to cry. I was twenty-five and was seeing a psychologist who taught me how to do both.”

She has no time for people who feel sorry for themselves and how hard done by they may be. Lucy says that so many women are in denial and so go from situation to situation in “a sort of soap operatic drama, never stopping to analyse themselves and the things they do.” She derides the women living in their comfortable suburban homes with all the luxuries surrounding them who do not stop to truly think about their lives as they busy themselves with the trappings of “middle class society” and the “hypocrisy” that enfolds them. All things considered, one cannot fault her for feeling as she does. For young women, single mothers living with low-incomes and social assistance, Lucy’s assessment is equally brutal. “If you are living on welfare and want to buy something, you just have to face it: you can’t have it.”

Discussing young women, I ask Lucy how they so easily seem to get caught up in drugs and the cycle of poverty that often follows. Lucy talks about the mystique of the drug trade and that it is the glamour that attracts the young women. I ask what is so glamorous about doing drugs, Lucy says “it is the excitement, the money, the fast way of living. When they get caught up, they go to parties, go out to fancy restaurants ride in fast cars and it is all exciting. They don’t think about the consequences, the abuse and the violence until it is too late.”

As we talk together, Lucy analyses the world events, history, political events, policies and leaders and the economy with an informed knowledge. Her passion for life

and learning surpasses that of most, yet she sees dim prospects for the global future in our self absorption and hyper-individualism and readiness for wars and violence. Lucy believes in respecting nature, other people, other lands and returning to a simpler way of life with greater equality for all living things. Because she does not see that happening in her lifetime, Lucy is content to live out her life with her “little comforts,” her dog and cat, and the few acquaintances she respects. She is not ashamed of the choices she made in order to survive. Lucy’s is a story of resilience and resistance in the face of systemic neglect and abuse.

Anti-violence activist and member of a Vancouver women’s shelter and rape relief collective, Lee Lakeman (2006:383) who was herself a single mother argues, “Any welfare granted currently is so inadequate and insecure as to force women into subsidizing it with an informal economy: house work for others, childcare for others, personal health care for others, food preparation and production for others, drug sales, and/or prostitution.” Lucy is not alone in having resorted to the informal or underground economy. Many women resort to extra-legal activities in order to boost the limited funding provided by social assistance because if they do claim any income, it is deducted from their government cheques. As Lakeman suggests, because they may resort to non-reporting or illegal activities to supplement their cheques, women place themselves in vulnerable positions for abuse at the hands of those they deal with. Adequate incomes allow women to leave violent partners without economically tying them to the men who have abused them (2006:384).

Prostitution and the allure of drugs begins early with “homeless girls with homes.” The term is used by volunteers who work with female teens to connote girls

who have homes but prefer to avoid going home for a number of reasons, often sexual abuse or incest. Some young women are even resorting to prostitution in exchange for as little as a hamburger and a place to sleep for a night. Women who volunteer in the organizations targeting teenage girls have confirmed this as fact as have some of my Food Central respondents. Lakeman writes that women “do not choose prostitution except as a highly available way to survive” (2006:386). She further argues that welfare for women was fought for and legislated before the Second World War and “was a basis on which to build one’s self-respect...[and] declared that everyone in Canada was entitled to at least this minimal share in the community and in the commonwealth” (2006:386). Lakeman’s recommendation is to reform social assistance so that it reflects adequate income and to deconstruct the notion of “worthy and unworthy poor” as well as reversing the “disassociation of child poverty” from the mothers who care for them (2006:387).

#### **EMBODIMENT OF THE CHALLENGES:**

There are many women’s stories told at Food Central. Many women need food assistance after their relationships fail leaving them without a second income or with no income until their social assistance applications are approved. The relationships end for various reasons. Abandonment and often violence by their partners seem to be the two predominant reasons followed by partner addictions.

One young mother wished to return to work when her daughter was around eight months old. She had waited tables before having the child and was able to find a job at a fast food franchise quite easily. Her partner, the child’s father was not working so Josie

thought that she would be able to depend on him to care for his child whenever her mother, who also worked, was unable to mind the baby. Things seemed to be going well for Josie until the baby got very sick. The father refused to care for his daughter and Josie's mother's shifts did not coincide with hers so that she had no choice but to phone in and cancel her shifts which led to her being fired. Josie and her partner argued and he assaulted her injuring Josie badly. Josie left her partner [had him and his belongings removed] and was obliged to reapply for social assistance necessitating the same wait period as an original claim. However, not being a quitter, Josie is determined to get back on her feet. While not all young mothers are physically assaulted, many lose their jobs because of a sick child and lack of childcare.

Brittany is a bubbly, happy young single mother of three girls who migrated to Montréal from Ottawa. She wanted to become a nurse practitioner, had researched the costs of post-secondary schooling and daycare and found that it would be most cost-effective to take the university courses in Quebec. She was approved with conditions [that she takes high school chemistry and upgrades her maths] and so started applying for a place for her youngest, a two year old in the government sponsored daycares. She was told that it would be three years before an opening would come up. Brittany appreciated the irony of the situation when she said, "three years, by then she will be in school full-time just like her sisters!" The school that her older daughters attend provides after school programmes so she would not need the daycare centre. In the meantime, while she waits for her daughter to get older, Brittany will be taking the courses she needs and will continue to manage on her social assistance that was finally approved.

Two sisters, Hilda and Gloria, come in regularly with their young babies and a couple of toddlers. Hilda breastfeeds her baby like most new mothers at Food Central do because it saves money if not because that is their wish. Gloria is unable to breastfeed but cannot always afford formula, nor does Food Central always have it donated. In order to make sure that Gloria's baby is well nourished, Hilda regularly also breastfeeds her at the same time she nurses her own. Both women are sociable and genial and often assist with keeping other young children amused while their parent is being processed by the screeners. They add to the conviviality of Food Central through their conversations, infectious laughter and interactions. In contrast, sometimes rather than coming in together, friends or siblings will take turns caring for the other's children to give each an outing with time away from parenting. The woman whose turn it is to go out alone then also picks up the food allocation for the other bringing the proper documentation to do so.

Térèse is in her forties and comes in to Food Central for assistance for both her elderly mother and herself. She always looks grey and defeated as she slumps in her chair and may be on some kind of anti-depressant. As usual, she asks for soft foods so that her mother can eat it and she asks for the adult diapers her mother needs. The only time I ever saw a spark in her eyes was once when she burst out in anger saying "Ce n'était pas toujours comme ça! J'étais secrétaire tu sais." [It was not always like this! I was a secretary you know.] Her mother died shortly afterwards and Térèse appeared even more dispirited than before.

Angeline is a calmly dignified mother of five and also in her forties. She is battling cancer and therefore, is highly susceptible to any viruses or germs that are common in winter in a room full of people. We would process her as quickly as we

could so that she would not need to wait long. The first time she came in, she was undergoing chemotherapy which sapped her energy making her look very pale under her brown skin and she had a shunt placed into her breast to drain any seepage from an infection. She comes in weekly instead of the regular two times a month because of the extra need. After Angeline's chemo treatments were terminated it was determined that they had had no effect and so she then underwent radiation. She showed me the black burns on her skin above her breast from the radiation. After a few weeks of radiation, her doctor had her back on chemotherapy. They were giving Angeline aggressive treatment for her equally aggressive cancer. When I asked her how she could keep on going through this, Angeline raised her hands and simply said, "Pour mes enfants. Il faut que je vive pour mes enfants."

Marda, who over eighty, came to Food Central when her husband was taken away and placed in a residence. She seemed disoriented and slightly confused but obviously needed help – she said she had no food except some flour and oil, no tissues or toilet paper and she had a bad cold. She was unable to access their joint account because she did not have power of attorney and so had only a small stipend from the government agency which took over the couple's financial affairs and her old age pension which was not a great sum. With help from Food Central, her case was referred to Natasha from the Community Council who then passed it on to the NDG ombudsman to look into. The government agency had deemed that she was unable to handle the couple's finances since her husband had always taken care of the bills and that is why they had taken control. It was they who paid for the care home and paid her rent. While not too common these



days, it is certainly not unknown for elderly women to be inexperienced in dealing with family finances.

Many clients are students, Canadian and International, from the universities, often unable to afford the costs of schooling, rent and food. Many clients are immigrants from a number of different countries and some are refugees, most often sent by their families to get away from the “drug wars” being fought in Latin American countries. Some Food Central clients are drug addicts, some alcoholics though proportionally, there are more men in this category. There are women who have been laid off for various reasons such as downsizing, back injuries, knee injuries, or the closure of work places and there are some women who simply do not earn enough to support themselves from their low wage jobs with less than full time hours and even some with full time jobs. Many are pensioners and widows living on their old age pensions and not much else.

The prevalence of health-related problems, the chronic need for assistance in food provisioning and the high cost of rental units, utilities and transit and the difficulty in affording post-secondary education are foremost amongst many concerns faced by women who are economically marginalized. All the women I met, workers, volunteers and clients agreed that the system was broken and the resulting increase in the demand for assistance in providing the basic necessities was proof of the failure of the globalized corporate economy and the policies of individual responsibility it fosters.

The most visible effect of punitive social policy measures is women’s embodiment of economic inequity. There are a disproportionate number of women living with low-incomes who suffer from impaired health, whether physical or psychological. Cut-backs in transfer payments for health-care costs to the provincial governments from

the federal government has meant the reduction of or discontinuation of services previously covered by Medicare such as physiotherapy in Quebec. Women earning minimum wage or on social assistance have not the means to pay for rehabilitative programs and therefore live with the resulting chronic pain of injuries acquired through physical labour; many of them are former healthcare workers, eldercare workers, janitors or domestic labourers. Many female clients and volunteers, like Jasmine, Lucy and Mama B, are plagued with physical disabilities which limit both their mobility and their ability to work. As Natasha explained, not all needed medications or therapeutic care services are covered through Quebec's program, especially affecting those who are on disability incomes.

Those who are on social assistance or who work at low wage jobs do not have dental coverage even though dental hygiene through regular cleanings, immediate correction of caries and proper gum care promotes physical and mental health. When asked about missing teeth, women explain how they could not afford timely dental care much less preventative care and so waited until an abscessed tooth became a medical issue (covered under medicare) requiring antibiotics and extraction. Besides prolonging the pain of an infected tooth, women risk blood poisoning by delaying treatment. Once a tooth is, or teeth are extracted, dental prosthetics are not covered and so often women who lose front teeth feel less attractive which lowers self-esteem and confidence. Should a woman have a gum disease requiring the extraction of all her teeth, she will have to do battle with the system, like Lucy did, in order to get dental plates.

Many women are affected by long-term malnutrition. A high percentage of women who access the services at Food Central are diabetic or have weight problems

(over and under) or have chronic digestive ailments, often the product of consuming cheaper carbohydrate laden foods or overly processed foods. One client who is also in the BiL project, confided to me that her nutritionist keeps nagging her to eat more fruits and vegetables to regulate her blood sugar levels. It is not that she does not like fresh salads, Zoe tells me, “it’s that I can’t afford them and the children need more filling foods.” The consequence is that Zoe depends more and more on medical insulin to regulate her blood sugar. This is a very common occurrence for the women who require food assistance only a regular basis because of erratic eating patterns.

It is not uncommon for women to have food intolerances such as lactose or gluten intolerances. Unless the woman is pregnant, lactose intolerance can be worked around in providing nutritional foods but gluten intolerance which seems quite widespread is difficult. Many, if not most, of the non perishable food items include gluten; even canned tomato sauces and beans, two of the basic foods included in the food baskets. For some of the women, the low levels in these products are digestible causing little discomfort and they eschew pastas and bread substituting them with soy products whenever available. Other women have fatally low tolerance to gluten and this is problematic when needing food assistance from food distribution centres. One young woman came to Food Central after spending nearly a month in hospital recovering from such a severe reaction to gluten. Food insecurity and food allergies are a bad combination since specialty foods are very expensive and therefore, seldom donated and these women often face chronic malnourishment.

Vitamins are also costly and, therefore, few women on low-incomes are able to supplement a nutrient poor diet leaving them prone to other diseases by lowering their

body's immune system and bone density. While most women with babies will breastfeed, they have difficulties in acquiring the necessary nutrients to maintain both their health and their baby's even if they subscribe to the community health clinics' prenatal dietary supplements programmes. Women with toddlers and young children often joke about the "mother's diet" meaning that they feed their children first and then whatever is left over after the children eat is the mother's portion. This may work for a while without affecting a woman's health, but over time as she ages, the "snowball" effect can be debilitating. According to Firth Murray (2008:203); "[T]he health of older women often reflects the cumulative impact of poor diets. Years of child bearing, heavy physical labour, and sacrificing her own nutrition to that of her family leaves the older woman with chronic anaemia and general malnutrition." What the government may save in the short term through cuts in social spending will cost them in the long term as women on low-incomes age.

Mental health problems are created or aggravated by poverty. Having a low-income means that women are always planning around a tight budget so that the necessities are covered first. Rent and utilities are prioritized but when subjected to annual increases, more has to be cut from food, clothing and transit budgets. For women with school aged children, it means not being able to afford some of the technical tools such as computers or even scientific calculators that would assist their children keep up to their more affluent schoolmates. With fewer after-school programs, these children are at a disadvantage educationally and socially – many, if not most, of their peers have all the latest technical gadgets provided by their families – leaving these less well off students with a sense of being outsiders.

When the cost of living rises and their incomes do not, the increased stress can become debilitating and ultimately when chronic can lead to other health problems. Many of the women I met in the field are subject to periods of varying degrees of depression or demoralization that may lead to further isolating themselves from family, friends and neighbours. The stigma and sense of shame in needing social assistance, even as a supplement to earned wages, erodes self-confidence and self-esteem and often leaves women unable to move forward and out of the poverty cycle. Continuous stress is disempowering.

Many of those who have mental health issues and have sought medical assistance for depression tend to be subjected to the “quick fix” of anti-depressants or other pharmaceutical interventions rather than a more holistic approach of mind/body connections. There were many female clients who told me they had refused such treatment because they felt, like Annie, to have been chemically “lobotomized” when prescribed psychotropic drugs. These women understood that their lives were difficult and sometimes overwhelmingly so but they did not wish to experience the “numbness” of not feeling at all.

Though some women are less resilient in meeting the challenges of poverty, most of the women are determined to make the best of the bad situation drawing on the support of friends and family to do so. These women may not have much in material goods, but their lives are rich with nurturing relationships and a sense of community built on mutual reciprocity, exchanges of services and support based on networks of caring. Blais calls these elements of survival “resistance” (1998:145). She notes that though the strategies seldom result in collective actions to counter the privatization of social housing, the lack

of daycare resources, or to engage in combating the “politiques d’aide sociale,” they are none-the-less, acts of resistance. Blais argues,

Celle-ci se manifeste de multiples façons à travers des gestes qui relevant tantôt d’une rationalité instrumentale, tantôt d’une rationalité des valeurs... Mais on peut aussi entendre la résistance dans le sens de “ne pas se laisser casser,” de “se débrouiller avec ce qu’on a,” de “faire avec.” C’est en ce sens qu’il faut interpréter les multiples gestes posés, à travers des contraintes extrêmes, pour rendre la vie “vivable,” pour y trouver quelques plaisirs et plages de bonheur... (1998:145).

That, Blais notes, is not to naively suggest that all women survive unscathed by their experiences but that most demonstrate a functional rationale based on values to resist being broken and to make do with what the women have at hand to make life liveable. It is what allows them to live with dignity in a situation where they are required to seek assistance in a society where independence is valued over communal interdependence.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION:

*Social movements are important because they constitute, in the conflictive terrain of social life, public arenas in which conflicts gain visibility and collective actors become valid spokespersons (Paoli and Telles 1998 quoted in Yúdice 2003).*

In the context of Québec's social and cultural past in general and Montréal specifically, a solid case can be made that its history has laid the foundation for present day activism in the province. The strong influence of Roman Catholicism, Liberation Theology and the ethic of Liberté, Égalité et Fraternité adopted by the French Québécois in conjunction with a reasonably politically engaged segment of society has made a difference in Québécois attitudes toward social justice. There is still a highly energized network of social justice advocates seeking equity for all marginalized peoples and this is seen in the high numbers of organizations advocating for social housing, economic justice or anti-poverty groups, food security, women's and children's rights, immigrant rights, anti-racism activism, mental and physical health rights, anti-corporate groups, and increasingly, advocates of food and economic localism.

The effect is Montréal's recent creation of the "Partenariat en économie sociale pour un développement durable et solidaire," a department in the municipal government promoting the development of collective enterprises in economic, social and cultural sectors (Ville de Montréal 2009). In a "brown bag" meeting March 23, 2009 with Concordia University's Global Futures Forum, spokesperson for the City of Montréal's Advisory Committee for Social Economy, Mme. Johanne Lavoie outlined some of the goals the committee were working towards to foster social economy in the city. The stress was placed on economic development, ecological sustainability, leisure, tourism,

culture through private/public entrepreneurial cooperatives. Housing was mentioned, not in the context of increasing social housing but ecologically sustainable housing cooperatives priced out of reach of low-income families. There was no mention at all of initiatives to alleviate food insecurity. Lavoie spoke of plans for economic and technological innovations in the partnerships but innovative social initiatives were not part of the considerations towards a more equitable society through the inclusion of those with no financial resources to create member cooperatives that would alleviate the dependence on social assistance. Anti-poverty activists need to inform all the public of resources that could be made available to initiate member cooperatives and collectives. Social justice advocates for women must apply pressure on the city to allocate more funding for women who desire to form member cooperatives and collectives. Many low-income women are quite innovative and do have entrepreneurial skills but no means to actuate their goals and apply them. Of the number of women I met, many of them would be eager to do work at home that would allow them to earn an income while still having the ability to care for their young at home.

Following in the steps of a number of European cities, Montréal is the first Canadian city<sup>32</sup> to write and implement a Charter of Rights and Responsibilities which came into effect in January of 2006. The city's website announces that the Charter states "The rights and responsibilities are established in broad municipal intervention spectrums: (1) democratic life, (2) economic and social life, (3) cultural life, (4) leisure,

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<sup>32</sup> So far, it appears to be the only city in North America that has a full legal Charter. Brazil appears to be the only South American country with a Charter, the Brazil City Statute of 2001. New York City and San Francisco (<http://www.equalityrights.org/cera/docs/Municipal%20Charter%20Report%20Final.pdf>) have initiatives proposed by grassroots movements but no other cities have a legally binding Charter of Rights and Responsibilities though many are working towards the recognition of social rights in a number of cities according to my online research. (See also: UN/UNESCO, Habitat International Coalition at <http://www.hic-net.org/document.php?pid=3129>).



physical activity and sports, (5) environment and sustainable development, (6) security and (7) municipal services” (Ville de Montréal 2009). Considering the activism in Montréal, it is not surprising that it has now a Charter though it seldom is mentioned or used as a tool when lobbying against poverty, for social housing or to promote food security by the various organizations. Having written a Charter to delineate its citizens’ rights, the city should be obliged to follow through and make sure that all its peoples are accorded a life of dignity and due respect.

Researching women’s community activism as a counter to rising economic adversity affecting low-income women and exploring their potential in providing a space for the growth of solidarity economies in a North American urban setting has shed light on the underlying failures of Canada’s public policies since the adoption of neo-liberal practices. The understanding of public policies is necessary because these are at the root of “the conflictive terrain of social life” (Paoli and Telles 1998) experienced by so many of the women I met in the field and act as a deterrence to re-establishing a more just economic system and reversing the growing disparities between the rich and the poor.

The women who work at Food Central and its satellite programs are working to ameliorate the inequities magnified by neo-liberal policies or what Gibson-Graham call “breaking the social contract” (2006:32-33). Food Central’s activists provide assistance in food provisioning. While doing so the women are creating a space where a transformative and participatory social movement could arise through their outreach to the most disenfranchised sectors of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. They go further than bandaging the symptoms of economic inequities by building networks with other

organizations and seeking creative solutions by fostering community cohesion and involvement.

Like all organizations working toward social justice there are obstacles set in place limiting their efficacy in dealing with the inequities that pervade modern urban communities. The greatest challenge is working around the legal limitation for advocacy by charity organizations now set at no more than ten percent of their charitable work. Not-for-profit organizations not registered as charities such as Project Genesis<sup>33</sup> have more freedom to advocate for political purposes but still less than grassroots, self-funded organizations. The second is the obligation to fulfil its mandate within the scope set when applying for licensing and funding. There is a fine line between educating the public and advocacy and Food Central tends toward the safer side of the ten percent restriction. Part of this is to avoid the loss of its license and the other is the lack of resources to inform its clients regarding their choices to improve their circumstances. The necessity of working within the limitations are similar to those Phillips and Cole (2009) illustrated in a study comparing Ecuadorian and Brazilian UN supported programs to grassroots collectives. However, as Phillips and Cole found, through their everyday lives and interactions the women are able to weave the reality of necessity (providing food) while building a base for social transformation.

Because the biggest obstacles the women community activists work to overcome in building strong community ties lie beyond the local, their collective voices are necessary to advocate for improved social policies. Their voices must be made louder by those of the people who are most directly and adversely affected by state decisions.

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<sup>33</sup> This is a legal advocacy group situated in Côte-des-Neiges which specializes in tenant rights and assisting those with landlord disputes but will also provide advice for other legal issues.

Women on social assistance must be re-enfranchised in order to effect the transitioning from the highly unjust global economy to the far more democratic solidarity economy. Without the space to air their grievances or to participate in forums designed for participatory inclusion in seeking solutions, women feel further disenfranchised and alienated from civil society. Blais' (1998) study shows the human need to belong and to give which translates into the sense of freedom and the mental health benefit for the women. The state institutions must be pressured so low-income women can have equal opportunity to fully participate in their community as paid or unpaid contributors to the whole and thus, to ameliorate their own situations.

Public policies must reflect the acknowledgement that women's unpaid labour is valuable and productive because it does enrich the state by providing services not included when tallying the GDP. As noted previously, Waring (2006) makes clear by putting a monetary value to the caring labour of women how much unpaid work profits the country. Certainly, this contribution towards society's health and growth has earned women a space at the table when discussing public policies without being marginalized by being named a "special interest" group as our present government has done under Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his advisors (Dobrowolsky 2009:207). By declaring women "equal" and by cutting funding to women's advocacy groups the Harper government has effectively shut out any further discussions regarding the ongoing inequities that continue to be experienced by women, especially racialized women. Dobrowolsky argues, "[t]his de-legitimizing discourse was useful to the promoters of neo-liberalism who wanted to stream-line the state and silence voices that called for political and constitutional equality, since such redress would require the kind of political

and legal activism staunchly opposed by the right” (2009:207). Women are not a special interest group: they are over half the Canadian citizenry and should be fairly represented in the legislature and social policy-making through inclusionary policies that recognize the contributions women have made towards societal well-being and wealth. Women are being denied their rights as equal citizens and their grievances are delegitimized.

In acknowledging the value of women’s unpaid labour openly through policies that reflect an appreciation of women’s contributions, the state would be obliged to “decriminalize” women on social assistance and legitimize them as the “productive” citizens whose work effectively lowers the cost of labour for corporations and increases the wealth of the country. This acknowledgement may create the space to finally address the ongoing “feminization of poverty” that has alarmingly increased rather than decreased in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (NWC 2006). Acknowledging women’s reproductive labour as a valuable “resource” for the future labour force allowing mothers to choose to stay at home as full-time carers without economic penalty, for example, would eliminate the paradox found in popular discourse. Women are often admonished for leaving children in daycares when they should remain at home and provide the children with a secure home environment. By criminalizing single mothers as “undeserving poor” for being on social assistance and hence raising children, the “deserving poor,” in poverty these women cannot win. Either way, working outside the home or staying home, they are “bad mothers.”

The present policies that are predicated on dual parent households (Dobrowolsky, Jensen, Brodie et al 2009) must become more cognizant of the many kinds of households and acknowledg the high number of female headed families. Single mothers require the

ability to raise their children in as economically equitable a situation as those of married couples with a good single income. Child poverty must be re-linked to their mother's poverty so that both can be addressed as the single issue that they are. As Kingfisher (2002) argues, policy focusing on child poverty without taking into account those who care for them is bound to fail and, indeed, has failed. The proportion of women with children needing food assistance at Food Central is high according to the organizations records<sup>34</sup>. Well over 35% of persons fed per service day were children. Although the number of single fathers is growing, more than 80% of child care is still very much women's responsibility. Societies do not have a functional or sustainable future without commonwealth raising children into healthy and well educated adult citizens and parents cannot reasonably fulfil their roles without an income that will allow them to provide adequately for their children's needs in the context of what North American society considers is necessary to live decently (Galbraith 1958).

In my observations of the female clients, more women do seem fairly resilient in negotiating the obstacles they face while living on social assistance and its fiscal inequities. Those who best coped with their indigence were the women who had developed and maintained strong social networks many of which were family networks, either blood kinship or fictive kinship arrangements and oftentimes, a mixture of both. While Blais (1998) suggests that women are less likely to depend on close relationships for aid because those persons tend to be in a similar economic situation, I found that there was a sharing of resources however limited they were. Food items were pooled to create a meal for all; phones and cable costs were shared with equal access; many got together for movie nights or games nights with all the children; and, groups of women would

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<sup>34</sup> Calculated from all recorded visits to Food Central beginning March 2008 to February 2009.

gather to exchange children's clothing as they were outgrown. A number of retired women joined with young adult women to share accommodations. I was introduced to ingenious uses for paper clips: paper clip plumbing to reconnect the chain and the plug in a toilet tank, paper clip hinge repair and paper clip eyeglass repair to hold the arm to the lens frame in lieu of the screw. Of course, duct tape is a necessity in every home for various repairs. Because they share a common struggle, get along well and find strength in groups, many women did seek out those close to them.

Single women with children at home had more social networks than those whose children had left home and women pensioners had the smallest networks. It appeared that as a woman aged, she had fewer non-family social interactions than younger women who had children as a common bond and therefore, the former were more likely to become socially isolated. In all age categories, some women tended towards withdrawal rather than participation and of those who did so, most were raised in families where personal problems were not aired publicly much like Lucy's, Faye's and Jasmine's families' values.

My observations also led me to conclude that of the women who volunteered, whether at Food Central or elsewhere, it was a combination of resisting social isolation and a desire to help others that prompted them to offer their services. While volunteering at Food Central means being allowed a few extras in food supplementation, most women told me they volunteered because they enjoyed doing so. These women found themselves part of a caring community and a growing sense of accomplishment, self-confidence, self-satisfaction and pride which are personally rewarding. Volunteers may not express their positive feelings as rewards, but the improvement in their mental health

is implicitly if not overtly expressed in their conversations with me like those of Mama B and Jasmine. These findings accord with those of Blais (1998) in her study of the correlation between poverty and mental health of Quebecoise women living on social assistance and the sense of enfranchisement helping others gives the donors. These women who spanned the age spectrum knew that they were making a difference and it made them happy and appreciative of being part of a non-censorious network where they counted. It did not take an extraordinary amount of time at Food Central where respect and non-judgemental acceptance was the over-arching goal of the organization for female volunteers to feel welcome and valued as part of the community.

Gibson-Graham's observation that women are less attached to the formal economy and therefore more amenable to the concept of solidarity economies, reciprocal interactions and the necessity of the unpaid caring labour they provide is born out in my research. Careers and jobs do not define low-income women's identities in the same way they do men's. Most women define themselves through their relationships with others, but primarily as parents and care providers for their children (Blais 1998). Their inability to properly provide materially for their children in a consumer focused urban milieu of mixed economic classes where appearances have an impact on both their children's and their self-esteem causes distress to the whole family.

In these cases, having strong communal ties with those in their networks is advantageous in many ways beyond emotional support. The ties and alliances create networks for bartering and trading goods and services, for sharing ideas and innovative problem-solving as well as sharing resources connecting them to broader interconnecting resource services. As Gudeman (2001) suggests, local economies tend to come back to

the forefront and regain importance in communities where neo-liberal economies have failed to provide stability. Women are particularly good at creating a system of solidarity networks when needed because it is, in effect, an expansion of the household economy (Pietilä 2007, 1997). The valuation of women's ability to utilize a non-monetized economy for sustainable survival reverses their loss of dignity, disempowerment and loss of self-valuation that produces a lower quality of life (Pietilä 2007, 1997). The return to more local control of their economies leads to a social re-integration and strengthening of the bonds that hold communities together as women unite in solidarity with their base. Solidarity economies are inclusive by nature and have sustained human cultures for millennia before profit-driven market economies. Being able to utilize solidarity-based economies empowers women through the valuation of their unpaid labour as contributing to the well-being of their communities. While women have always had agency to make decisions, it is not always empowered agency and most often their decisions are limited to the least bad choice.

Food Central eases some of the food insecurity issues for women, but not all women whose families are food insecure use the service because many are unaware of it or because the stigma of asking for aid is too humiliating. The ideology of individualism has been internalized through media repetition of responsibility for self or "you are on your own." However, the satellite organizations situated in Food Central could become the focus to draw these women in so that they do not feel they are on their own. The BiL project has been a successful program that has pulled together women who have found common ground and bonded across colour and ethnicity and many of those friendships continue to thrive. Having a sister programme to discuss economic alternatives such as group buying, setting up cooperatives and collectives based on their talents may draw in



women who would not otherwise visit Food Central and would serve as a basis for widening networks.

The links to community organizations provided by InfoCentral can be expanded through outreach projects centred on the community kitchen. While the idea of intergenerational exchange of talents was admirable though not entirely successful, bringing women together to cook and show off their skills at turning the basic foods received from Food Central into palatable meals would create a space for commonalities to be discussed and creative ideas to surface. By inviting women of different ethnicities to participate in creating meals based on foods normally consumed in their households, cross-cultural bonds could be strengthened. It would also increase women's knowledge of how to cook inexpensive but strange food items. Food has always been a catalyst for unifying people and building alliances between people disregarding differences through the sharing of a communal meal.

MUCS utilizes its much larger community kitchen and a zero food waste programme as a means to unify its members and to attract others. Action Communiterre has a series of collectively worked community gardens that attract a number of low-income volunteers who share in the harvest for their work. The women I met who volunteered at either organization were enthusiastic about their engagement and also the sense of belonging they experienced by working with other community members. Both programmes need to have more exposure through InfoCentral or direct workshops conducted at Food Central. Women have often complained to me that they were unaware of these opportunities to engage in communal activities and programmes.

As described in Chapter 5, there is a strong correlation between volunteerism and positive mental health because of the human need to express an ethics of care which is the foundation of solidarity economies. The BiL programme includes a six week practicum where the women volunteer for various organizations such as Women on the Rise, the YMCA, seniors' nursing homes and many other places including Food Central. The women have nearly unanimously enjoyed their volunteer experience and for some, it has continued as a means to gain confidence in their abilities. Volunteerism has enormous value and many women who come to Food Central ask if they can volunteer. Instead of placing these women on a list where they seldom get a call back, there are many other places where the women's abilities would be appreciated. One of the benefits of volunteerism is the possibility of paid employment. Most women who have found paid work at the organizations started out as volunteers.

Input and support from the various levels of government is inadequate. It starts with not acknowledging the benefits accrued by women's unpaid labour both in the home and in the communities they live in. Though Québec does not have a Ministry of Solidarity Economy like Brazil, it does have a Bureau de l'économie social attached to the Ministère du Développement économique, de l'Innovation et de l'Exportation and works closely with the Ministère de l'Emploi et Solidarité Sociale. It does not seem to be widely known by those who would benefit from its assistance in building an alternative to neo-liberal capitalism. If women's unpaid labour was to be valued and remunerated through various programmes that instruct them on how to create cooperatives, local economies would prosper.

According to Mendell (2003, 2006), of all the cooperatives operating in Quebec, over a third of them are daycares. There certainly is a need for more daycares but not all women have the desire to provide daycare; many would like to start other projects that utilize other talents and creativity. Other options chosen by women should be supported through start-up grants.

The governments have a responsibility to ensure their citizens have appropriate shelter and food security and the adequate means for all to live with dignity and respect for person. It needs political will which is presently lacking. Women need to be able to raise their children with adequate means of support and if this cannot be accomplished through raising wages and social assistance minimums, the state must provide alternative resources.

In conclusion, the field study I have conducted at Food Central supports Mendell's and Gibson-Graham's observations that women are integral for building successful solidarity networks and economies. Solidarity economy is the basis for their survival through their networks. The concept is familiar because it mirrors household economies. Family has a different meaning for women because it is easily extended to friends and the organizations they belong to and they depend on these close affiliations to survive living with low incomes. The social movements and organizations need to draw more low-income women into their orbit to effect the transformation to a solidarity based community that can provide an alternative discourse to that of the dominant neo-liberal economy.

Like Neamtan (2002), Mendell (2003, 2006) and Gibson-Graham (2006) all emphasize, building and maintaining solidarity economies needs continuous effort and

time. Solidarity economy is a never-ending process and therefore, not strictly bounded by dogmatic theories like neo-liberal capitalism. Solidarity economies have fluidity and flexibility to be moulded to the needs of the community. It is a living practice embedded in human interactions and transactions throughout our history and as Gudeman (2001) argues, it is the natural fallback when formal capitalist economies fail.

In NDG, and not unlikely all of Montréal's boroughs, solidarity economies can work. The foundation is set in the community organizations and social movements which display the characteristics of solidarity economies through their actions. The talent, creativity and innovation necessary to actuate it is found in low-income women who are used to working outside the formal market economy because their caring duties so often take them out of that realm. There is a need for both the women and the organizations they work with to become more conscious of the economic systems they use daily without being aware. The informal economy is so familiar as to go unnoticed and unacknowledged just like women's unpaid labour and ethics of care which are part of solidarity economies (Gudeman 2001, Gibson-Graham 2006, et al). The neo-liberal globalized economic model has failed and an alternative is necessary to replace it and local communities are best positioned to encourage awareness and support for the growth of solidarity economies.

Building strong community ties encourages enfranchisement of all the citizens within and empowers them to engage in participatory actions which promote perpetuation of highly democratic systems. The success of Brazil's community councils and participatory democracy is based on the people's self-identifying as citizens with knowledge of their rights and responsibilities (Baiocchi 2005). This is what has evolved

through the rise in solidarity economies in Latin America in response to the austerity programmes that have increased impoverishment. It would appear that as people have reclaimed control over their immediate economy, democracy has flourished alongside. What better for Montréal's women than to have the means to empower themselves through democratic and politicized agency where their labour will not be an unacknowledged externality but central to a strong, inclusive democratic society which values their contributions. Adopting solidarity economic values into everyday urban life would assist in reducing fiscal and gender imbalances and inequities resulting in a more egalitarian and democratic state where both paid and unpaid labour are held in high esteem.

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