

A Good Place To Live

CED by & for women in south-central Montréal

BY JULIE RABY

The Centre d'Éducation et d'Action des Femmes has been at work in Montréal's south-central district for nearly 35 years. When it started in 1972, it was called *Service aux familles*. A support group for neighbourhood families, it focussed its energies on conscientisation and on enabling the families themselves to take action on socio-economic problems.

Over the years, the family as we once knew it imploded, and a variety of new types appeared. Women frequently found themselves at the head of single-parent families, or facing problems of conjugal violence with few or no resources. Gradually, problems specific to women came to dominate the group's agenda. So the transition from a community group to a Women's Centre in 1982 was practically seamless.

Open to all women regardless of age, marital status, nationality or sexual orientation, CÉAF is a friendly, welcoming and stimulating place. About 2000 women a year make use of the centre; their average age is 42. The majority are living on social assistance. They have little education. Wrestling with physical and mental health problems, with violence and with hunger, they are isolated and low in self-esteem.

The Centre's principal objectives are to break this isolation, to develop their independence socially, economically and emotionally, and to encourage them to get involved in their community.

There are three components to the project: the provision of services, educational activities, and collective action. CÉAF offers women in difficulty access to telephone consultations and in-person services without an appointment. It also refers women to other support services and activities that are available at the Centre. Breaking down the women's isolation means that the educational component is a big part of the project and collective action is strongly encouraged.

So CÉAF is a local resource that offers neighbourhood women a place to belong. It is very versatile. It doesn't focus on any one problem but addresses the feminine condition in its entirety (poverty, mental health, single motherhood, drug addiction, the return to the workplace, etc.). It favours a global approach towards women's problems that intervenes at every level of their lives, emphasizing the women's individual and collective experiences and perceptions.

In a political context in which the state treats community organizations as subcontractors of public services, groups that want to intervene by means of popular education are under pressure. Regardless, the CÉAF is now, more than ever, an agent of development in its community. This article is about what, over the years, CÉAF's leadership has accomplished in terms of local development – and how CÉAF has come to do Community Economic Development with and for women using a popular education approach.

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CÉAF & its Community

Historically, the socio-economic development of south-central Montréal has been split in two by the construction of the Jacques Cartier Bridge. Subsequently, proximity to the downtown led to greater development of the western part (Saint-Jacques) to the detriment of the eastern part (Sainte-Marie). Moreover, this particularly disadvantaged sector is the most populated area of the Ville Marie borough, housing 45% of its population.

Once a working class bastion, Sainte-Marie has gone, bit by bit, into an economic and demographic decline which has slowed commercial activity and increased vacancy rates. Socio-demographically, a number of things set Sainte-Marie's population

UN QUARTIER OU IL FAIT BON VIVRE SERAIT

(right) A collage of the hopes and dreams of Sainte-Marie residents for their neighbourhood. Photo: CÉAF.

apart: the majority of households are low income, there is a high level of unemployment, a large percentage of young single mothers (58%), and a significant number of seniors.

What's more, living conditions are characteristically urban. Green space is deteriorating. The crime rate is twice that of the Montréal Urban Community as a whole. There is also a large concentration of complex social problems, such as prostitution and drug addiction, which only adds to the residents' ever-increasing feelings of insecurity.

It's in this area that CÉAF decided to concentrate its efforts. In Sainte-Marie's socio-economic reality CÉAF recognized fertile ground for initiatives in revitalization. The challenges were great, needs were diverse, and numerous avenues for social and economic development presented themselves. Given the realities of women's lives there, given the organization's mission to favour the development and social and economic autonomy of women, CÉAF chose in 2003 to forge ahead with revitalizing the neighbourhood.

Strategic Prelude

CÉAF's change of course came through planning with the women themselves. Shortly after the World Women's March 2000 (an event in which CÉAF was deeply involved), staff made it clear that it was time to take stock of how far we had come, and where we were going. So CÉAF, its board, and its membership launched a strategic planning process.

The aim was to clarify and define the Centre's strategic options, taking into account the situation in the neighbourhood and the women living there. How best to connect with the women and act in response to their reality? By this means, CÉAF hoped to identify strategic objectives for the next three years.



It was a very enriching experience, from start to finish. Sharing similar visions, the workers, administrators, and members arrived at mutually supportive hypotheses and conclusions. In addition to strengthening the bond between staff and board, the process demonstrated CÉAF's leadership role in the community. CÉAF reclaimed control of its history and began to realize that, through its many projects, it had been practicing CED for some time.

Essentially, CÉAF's leadership role is that of a *catalyst* of development with and for women. In the course of its evolution it thus has been the instigator of many consultative bodies, among them the Quebec Coalition of Women's Centres and the Regional Roundtable of Montréal Women's Centres. It is a founding member of the Women's Committee for Urban Security that was instrumental in the "Between Stops" program offered by the Montréal Urban Community Transportation Corporation to enable women to travel safely by public transit at night. It is also an active member of the Neighbourhood

LA DÉCLARATION CITOYENNE DES FEMMES DE STE-MARIE

Afin de faire de Ste-Marie, un quartier où il fait bon vivre en tant que femmes nous voulons ce qui suit:

1.



Roundtable *Alerte Centre-Sud*, and a founding member of the *Poussons-Poussettes* daycare centre.

Having firmly rooted itself, CÉAF's dreams of the future began to take on a distinctive hue – that of CED. In hopes of increasing women's engagement in the life and development of their neighbourhood, CÉAF proposed to undertake two projects: one in local revitalization and the other in social economy.

A Feminist Take on Local Revitalization

In the meantime, development projects affecting Ville Marie had left its residents feeling powerless. Indeed, with its many vacant lots, the neighbourhood had attracted the attention of developers in the past two years. It was the construction of some condominiums that got people really concerned.

An area long understood only in terms of its problems was now suddenly of interest. This rapid transformation worried the women of CÉAF. What form was this revitalization going to take? Would residential renewal mean the departure of many of Saint Marie's long-established families? What with the new municipal structure and new powers granted to the boroughs, what say and which arena of power and influence remained accessible to them? It was in response to these fundamental concerns that CÉAF wanted to take action with the women.

CÉAF chose to support the women in ways that would strengthen their capacity to participate in the development of their community. The idea was to back the efforts of a local action committee with a strategy of popular education that would return power to the women, reinforce it, and develop new skills.

It was a 3-year project that aimed to

- reinforce the women's ability to take part in local development by training them in municipal life and democracy.
- equip the CÉAF with a women's declaration defining the type of revitalization that these citizens want.
- train the women in the principles of local revitalization from a feminist perspective.

A Meeting of Hearts & Minds

In September 2003, a special meeting of the membership mandated the 6-member local action committee to define the characteristics of a neighbourhood in which women would want to live. The committee had a 3-year time frame. The first step was to develop a women's declaration that would serve as a frame of reference.

During the meeting, members were invited to create a collective collage that would depict what a good neighbourhood would look like. The subsequent discussion would then provide raw material for the committee's work.

The committee drew inspiration from the European Charter for Women in the City developed by a European collective in 1995. By means of a presentation of the Charter and the feminist vision on which it is based, the women came to understand the application of a gender-based analysis to municipal policies. They grasped the ramifications of such a document for urban development and the steps necessary to bring about significant change.

Taking the points raised during the collage exercise, the facilitator suggested grouping them according to themes inspired by the European Charter. For each theme, the committee created a portrait of what the neighbourhood had, what it lacked, and how it should be improved. Each time, the facilitator reformulated ideas from the floor as draft principles. Step by step, the Women's Declaration was constructed from the vision contributed by each individual. Personal experiences and everyday lives were the basis upon which the exercises and discussions brought to light the obstacles faced by women in the neighbourhood. With this in hand, solutions began to take shape.

The draft Declaration was then put before the CÉAF membership for discussion. Ten percent responded and gave it their support.

On to the Municipal Elections

On June 3, 2004, the committee was received in the Mayor's chambers of the borough of Ville-Marie, and presented to him the Declaration of the Women of Sainte-Marie. Four of the six

original members took turns reading aloud the principles elaborated in each section. The Mayor's very positive reception hardened the women's resolve.

With the official launch of the Declaration at a neighbourhood festival, the local action committee brought to a close their work for 2003-2004. They collected nearly 150 signatures of support from neighbourhood residents.

The task of promoting the Declaration goes on. The committee members have determined what should take priority in their approach to decision-makers. Going door to door, the women continue to garner support and encouragement in the neighbourhood. They are also collaborating with CÉAF's theatre project team, who have created a production that will make the Declaration come alive for people in yet another way. Theatre acts as an icebreaker for the women's neighbourhood discussions.

Municipal elections will be held in the fall of 2005 and women from CÉAF will be watching the race very closely. They will not be alone. Since the drafting of the Women's Declaration, other women's centres in Montréal have come on-side. They too will soon present citizen's declarations of what makes a neighbourhood a good place for women to live in.

A social economy enterprise – that's another way that CÉAF could develop women's economic & emotional autonomy & support their local engagement. So the Centre elected to assist CED initiatives carried out by & for neighbourhood women.

Taillissimo's feminist vision

Insidiously, prejudice against large women and poor people undermines their capacity to act and to develop their full potential. *Taillissimo* wants to foster the esteem and pride of women dealing with both weight and budgetary problems. Specialized shops are rare; their prices are exorbitant. Our second-hand boutique therefore attaches great importance to an inviting ambiance and customer service.

In partnership with CÉAF, the boutique wishes to make popular education part of its repertoire. Events and on-site educational materials could broach themes of body image, images of women in fashion, advertising, health, nutrition, diets, etc.

In collaboration with the women of Sainte-Marie, *Taillissimo* wants to organize an annual fashion show. Public personalities could act as patrons of the event. The activity would draw attention to beauty in all its forms.

CÉAF & the social economy: *Taillissimo*

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A second-hand clothing store just for plus-size women was the brainchild of Ms. Claire Poirier, a 20-year resident of Sainte-Marie. Ms. Poirier has been a CÉAF member for as long as she's lived in the area, and has been the Centre's administrator for the past five years. Like many women, she'd seen her weight fluctuate over the years; so she knew what it's like to dress in plus sizes. She also knew the economic situation of women in Sainte-Marie, and rallied CÉAF to the cause. Her slogan said it all: "We may be poor – but we're proud!"

After a feasibility study demonstrated both the practicality of the undertaking and its innovative character, the AGM in June 2004 mandated the CÉAF to launch the project. And so begins the story of *Taillissimo*.

CÉAF established a CED committee to see the project through. By and large the whole task has been a collective effort, as has been each decision made along the way. The committee designed the survey for the market study and designed the distribution strategy. CÉAF's networks in the women's and community movements lent their assistance. Thanks to them (especially women's centres in adjacent neighbourhoods), 63 women responded to the survey.

Under the direction of the project co-ordinator the business plan was gradually completed with input from committee members. Meeting by meeting – about working conditions, the division of workload, customer service policy, the marketing plan, pricing, and other managerial issues – the project took shape.

***Taillissimo* & the revitalization of Sainte-Marie**

Note that *Taillissimo* is more than a response to consumer demand in a particular sector. It's part of an effort, issuing from the 2002 conference "Neighbourhood Projects," to stimulate the economy of Sainte-Marie through the development of local business. Retail business development in Sainte-Marie is a priority specified by the local community development corporation, the CDÉC Centre-Sud/Plateau Mont-Royal. The gamble was that other new businesses would follow the boutique's lead and thereby contribute to the revitalization of commercial arteries, as projected by the district's Integrated Urban Revitalization Plan. In this way, *Taillissimo's* potential ramifications could benefit all neighbourhood residents.

Fostering employability is a priority for numerous local actors. If the quality of life in Saint-Marie is to improve,

employment opportunities and assistance for many of the area's jobless are imperative. *Taillissimo* will make a start by creating three permanent jobs that will re-connect women to the job market. Better-than-minimum wage, training opportunities, and a democratic environment make the boutique a special workplace where local women can take control of their own lives.

Taillissimo directly addresses the poverty of local women by offering them the chance to dress well at low cost. One of our most basic needs, clothing also speaks to a certain social status. This project allows women to dress as they please.


What's more, the promotion of recycled clothing is part of a strategy of sustainable development that targets new ways of consuming. Apart from its financial benefits, the new trend towards responsible consumerism puts ecologically responsible action within the customer's reach.

The shop plans to offer fashion accessories and craft items, such as jewellery. This will give some much-needed profile to numerous local craftspeople who lack local visibility. Ultimately, *Taillissimo* also wants to partner with the local technical school in order that the upcoming generation has a role in the boutique's development and success.

In light of all this, *Taillissimo* certainly embodies a multidimensional vision of development, as defined by the Association of Women's Groups in the region Québec-Portneuf-Charlevoix:*

"Development must be *inclusive and just* in its dedication to eliminate inequalities; *endogenous and community-based, democratic and ethical* in its support for the vitality of the local community and in its *sustainable* social utility, that responds to immediate needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to respond to theirs."

Taillissimo is expected to open in autumn 2005. Its innovative character has already attracted notice: *Taillissimo* won first prize in the "Social Economy" category in the local division of Québec's entrepreneurship competition. This award is a source of great pride to the women of CÉAF who have been following the project closely and are anxiously awaiting the launch. As for Claire Poirier, *Taillissimo's* originator, this adventure has helped her to spread her wings.

Thus, CÉAF actions correspond to the principal criteria for CED (see sidebar, this page). The comprehensive approach taken in CÉAF projects confirm that it is a development agent that acts upon the quality of life of the women of the area. 

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"La Déclaration citoyenne des femmes de Ste-Marie" is available in *.pdf at the website www.cedworks.com.

* "Les femmes dans l'espace régional de Québec : Solidaire dans le développement" (Québec: Université Laval, 1998).

Principle criteria of CED

Favreau and Lévesque define community economic development as a global approach to the economic and social revitalization of local communities that encompasses four dimensions:

1. Undertaking an array of activities relating to the production and sale of goods and services. This is the *economic dimension* of CED.
2. Enhancement of resources within a given area through a partnership process that engages the community's principle components and brings external resources to bear on local needs. This is the *local dimension* of CED.
3. Revitalization of an area economically and socially, and the repossession of its economic and social future by the resident population. This is the *social and political dimension* of CED.
4. Community, as a place where people choose to live together, is the point of departure, the destination, and the primary collaborative device for revitalization. This is the *community dimension* of CED.

Source: Louis Favreau and Benoît Lévesque, *Développement économique communautaire. Économie sociale et intervention* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1996), pp. xviii -xix.



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