

VISIT TO CANADA TO STUDY COMMUNITY FOOD CENTRE CANADA PANTRY MODELS **by Jackie Bogart**

THE LOCAL, Stratford, ON

We arrived at The Local around 5:00 p.m. When we got there, we saw a lot of people sitting at tables in a big room. Everyone was chatting and appeared to be comfortable. Children were coloring, others doing crosswords, while many of them just chatted with each other. We could see the beautiful large new-looking kitchen which was very busy with several people preparing food. The smell in the air was amazing.



Jackie Bogart, a Food Bank Speakers Bureau advocate, shares her story of food insecurity with supporters at a Food Bank event.

The people from the kitchen actually served every single person in that room, almost as if we were a restaurant. We spoke with members of The Local as we ate. They told me of a man who had been addicted to drugs, and came to The Local and got the help he needed and is now off drugs and doing well. One couple said they had been coming for years and that they were appreciative of the sense of community they felt there. They said no one was ever turned away and no matter what the need, it always seemed to be met. I was impressed.

Being a pantry user myself, I immediately noticed some differences between The Local and the pantries I'd been to back home. The atmosphere felt so positive. I felt like I belonged. Not only am I not from their town, but a whole other country!

Before I knew it, I found myself having to cut the conversation short to get on with the tour. I could have stayed and talked with them for much longer! I was told to leave my plate there at the table because those same

people (who served us) cleared our tables for us!

We then went to see the Good Food Market. The fruits and vegetables we saw in the room were available for members to buy at a very low cost. If the food was given to them at no charge, that food was offered for free. Almost all those people we saw working so hard in that kitchen were volunteers. Most of those volunteers were also members. There are around 8 paid employees and over 100 volunteers!

The Local does not accept any canned food donations. Everything they serve or share is healthy. They receive donated meat, and their only cost is having the animal butchered. They sell some of the meat at a very low price. We were told that a pack of 6 pork chops can be bought for as little as \$2. They use the rest of the meat to cook their dinners with. In fact, they use all fresh vegetables when they cook. Some of them are grown in their on-site greenhouse.

The greenhouse was a large space, but was full of growing fruits and vegetables. They had raised beds that they are able to grow and maintain year-round because, during the winter, the raised beds are brought inside to the greenhouse where they can continue to thrive.

The Local offers a 12-week Advocacy Training, then hires two of those people to advocate for fellow members throughout the year. They have cooking classes for men, single mothers, and even school-aged children who come by bus after school on the days the class is offered. There is a weekly Wellness Breakfast and Senior's Lunch, and a Social Justice Club called Empowering People in Communities, or EPIC. I really liked that there is no "once a month" policy for people needing food. If they need it, they can come in and get it, as often as needed.

As we were getting ready to leave, I noticed that most of the members were now gone, but one of the gentlemen I had eaten with was at a different table with other members, playing cards. The Local is usually open from 9 a.m. until 9 p.m., and members are welcome all day long- even if just for companionship. I left The Local with a new understanding of what our

pantries have the capability to become, and a little frustrated wondering how could it all be implemented.

THE STOP, Toronto, ON

Our next visit was at The Stop, the very first of these kinds of pantries. The Stop is in Toronto, which is a large city, and has a more diverse group of members. We saw their Good Food Market which was very impressive. The fruits and vegetables looked amazing and were set up like a quality store, for people to come through and pick what they wanted to buy (at a very low price).

The Stop also has a community garden, advocacy training and many programs for members. Advocacy training, just like at The Local. They offered Spanish-speaking cooking classes. Cooking classes for men. Community action training. She also mentioned that their site had a "once a month" rule. I was sorry to hear that. She seemed a bit more stressed running The Stop, than Debra did running The Local. It seemed to be a great place, but the space didn't feel as welcoming. I did get the feeling that they tried very hard at The Stop, to offer a sense of community to their members, but they are facing some barriers and this proves to be more difficult.

THE COMMUNITY FOOD CENTER OF CANADA OFFICES, Toronto, ON

Next, we went to talk with employees about CFCC practices, how they implemented changes, and any other information and advice we might get. We were greeted and taken to a room with a big table and chairs, where we would eat lunch while we talked.

Then Nick Saul, co-founder and President and CEO of CFCC entered the room. This was the man who started it all! What an honor it was to meet him! He spoke and shared some of his views with us. He talked about how no one should be made to feel ashamed for coming into a center to get the food they need. As he was speaking, I thought about the times I had visited a pantry and the person helping me had made me feel less-than for being there. As if I should be ashamed of my disgusting self. I remembered how hard it was for me to go back, because I didn't want to feel that way again.

And here was this guy who didn't know me personally, but knew all too well of my experiences. He changed that for so many people, and is still working to change it for even more. He IS the action most people only talk about. I teared up, taking this all in and thinking of the change that we need in our community, desperately. I started tearing up, and I just wanted to jump up, hug him and say, "Thank you!" But I didn't. I sat there, quietly, not wanting to be a disruption to everyone else who was clearly appreciating everything he had to say as well.

After Nick left the room, the conversation continued. There was talk on how they started to refuse bad, or unhealthy, foods. It took a while for everyone to adjust and now it is the "norm." They have changed their vocabulary, omitting negative statistics and replacing them with more positive ones. For example, they don't ever mention how many people are living with food insecurity, instead, how many people they have helped to feed. According to the CFCC 2016 Annual Report, "93% of people surveyed say their CFC provides an important source of healthy food." I think that changing the way they offer stats may help to create a shift in mindset for everyone involved. We were advised to go about making changes one step at a time. This last meeting concluded our trip to Canada, and we set off to return home.

REFLECTIONS

I've had three days to think about everything I had seen and heard in Canada. This was a lot to think about. It IS a lot to think about. Where would a model like CFCC's fit here in Tioga County? Who would run it? If we found a local pantry willing to adapt to these changes, what comes first? Where do I start, as an individual? These questions, it seems, can only be answered through much more thought and conversation. Wherever we start, this will prove to be a long

and hard road. Mistakes are sure to be made. Only through trial and error will we find out what works well and what doesn't.

I do know the answer to that last question, though. I will start by going over to my local pantry, Tioga County Rural Ministry (TCRM) and asking to become a volunteer.