

The Canadian CED Network
Le Réseau canadien de DÉC



BC Member Profile - LifeCycles



HISTORY

In 1992, a group of people got together with the intention of creating a community garden. They began to see food as a connecting force in dire social, environmental, health, and economic issues, though, and expanded their mission accordingly. Adopting a wider focus that includes finding easy access to local food; educating the community about food-related issues; getting more people involved in urban agriculture and the production of food; and, overall, sparking community interest in food systems, LifeCycles has become not only an organization but a movement for social change.

ACTIVITIES

LifeCycles is a youth-driven, non-profit organization devoted to urban sustainability and food security. All of LifeCycles' programs accentuate the organization's drive to create a healthier community. Two programs that are currently running are YouthCore and Growing Schools, which embody the LifeCycles' philosophy that youth engagement is vital to social transformation.

Many youth feel like their opinions aren't taken seriously because of their age but YouthCore is working to change this feeling. Connecting directly with an average of three hundred youth a year through grants, conferences, workshops, and volunteer and training opportunities, YouthCore is dedicated to helping youth have a say about what goes on in their communities. The organizational structure of YouthCore is consistent with the objective of youth empowerment, since many of the members are under the age of 30.

Growing Schools works with schools and the District Facilities Department to get youth and teachers involved in food knowledge and production. From working in their school's on-site organic garden, students learn about food security, the environment, urban agriculture, and health. The projects that the students work on through Growing Schools tie in with their school's curriculum, enabling the garden to serve as an outdoor classroom.

The organization's popular Fruit Tree Project has recently started up again, having been first introduced in 2000. In the Fruit Tree Project, volunteers pick the trees of people with surplus fruit. The harvested fruit, that would have otherwise been left to rot, is then split up into portions for the owner, the volunteers, food banks and community organizations in Victoria, and LifeCycles. With its share, LifeCycles makes items such as jams and wines and then sells them, putting the profits back into the program.

SUCCESS FACTORS AND LESSONS LEARNED

A lot of the success that LifeCycles has had can be attributed to the people involved with the organization, whether they are members or volunteers, and the commitment they put towards creating change in the world. For Katie Shaw, the program manager of LifeCycles, achievement comes from positive feedback about the organization's projects and events and from witnessing community members adopt the quest for space for urban agricultural and food security purposes.

The biggest challenge that LifeCycles encounters is skepticism from funding and the community regarding the relevance of urban agriculture, food security, and youth engagement to community health. Policy and system challenges also exist that the organization has to negotiate with in order to help get their more innovative programs off the ground. Even though they still impact LifeCycles' work, the barriers do appear to be weakening in response to a culture shift that is happening in society, according to Shaw.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite those stubborn barriers, LifeCycles is going to keep undertaking incredible projects. Funding has just come in for the LifeCycles' headquarters to have its very own roof top garden. Under the supervision of Urban Agricultural Learning Coordinator Danielle Stevenson, the upstairs patio is to be adorned with soil-laden containers.

YouthCore is keeping busy with the Sparks Grants program, which offers funding for people under 25 with innovative ideas for their community. Grants have just been presented to five youth-led projects that coordinator Caitlin Schwarz will be helping to launch by March 2010.

Another huge project that is soon to start is the building of a demonstration greenhouse. A chance for the community to learn and develop capacity around urban agriculture, the greenhouse should be finished by early autumn.

STRENGTHENING CED

"The Canadian CED Network is a really valuable resource for LifeCycles not only in the resources and expertise that their numerous members provide but also in modeling leadership in community capacity building and the importance of Community Economic Development. Some of the important aspects that being a member provides our organization are the numerous allies and champions that see the benefit and importance of our work. The ability to reach out to members and learn from members around CED and the opportunities this philosophy provides for our organization is a key reason that we engage with CCEDNet."

- Katie Shaw, Acting Operations Manager