



*Strengthening Canada's Communities / Des communautés plus fortes au Canada*

## Youth in Community Economic Development

# Storytellers Foundation; The Learning Shop

*This profile is one of fifteen stories examining youth involvement in community economic development (CED). The profiles have been produced as part of the Canadian CED Network's efforts to encourage effective practices in youth leadership and engagement to enhance the social and economic conditions of Canada's communities.*

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*"The region where we live is abundant in natural resources and the human resource is fully integrated in to this natural system. People here want to be connected to the land and they want to work in connection to the land."*

Storytellers' Foundation is based in the upper Skeena River region in northwest BC. The region is home to 14 distinct communities all located on the traditional territories of the Gitksan First Nation approximately 300 kilometres inland from Prince Rupert on BC's northwest coast. About 6,500 people live in two municipalities (Hazelton and New Hazelton), seven reserves, two non-incorporated settlements and three valleys.

### **Context**

These communities are all situated in the 30,000 square kilometres of area known as the Upper Skeena. The Gitksan First Nation makes up over 70% of the population with most of the remainder of Western European descent.

The communities of the Upper Skeena are set in a land of lush, temperate rainforests, snow-capped mountains, salmon-bearing rivers and abundant natural resources. The diverse and distinct communities create a sense of belonging and give the local people a sense of identity and pride. There is a deep and inherent relationship between people, based on kin, and between people and the land. These relationships have evolved from a more than 10,000-year history of Gitksan living on the territories and from a strong, century-old, Settler history which includes a culture of

belonging to place.

Traditional economies based on bartering, trading and reciprocity were dominant until very recently in the Upper Skeena. The new economies, founded on an industrial model of large-scale resource

extraction and cash remuneration, are less than five decades old. The combined effects of colonialism, industrialization and corporatism have culminated in widespread impoverishment in the communities of the Upper Skeena. The current socioeconomic indicators are some of the worst in BC and include extreme unemployment rates (more than 90% in some communities with a 60% overall rate), a failed formal education system (28% have less than high school graduation – almost twice the provincial average), deteriorating infrastructure (32% of houses in need of major repair, quadruple the BC average), and a health care and wellness crisis (residents four times as likely to die from medically treatable diseases as in a standard population). Demographically, the Upper Skeena contains a very high youth population with 70% under the age of 30, which is twice the provincial average.

Despite such dire socioeconomic indicators, the resiliency of the local population stemming from connection to the land and connection to kin is apparent. The people of the Upper Skeena expressed a need to learn to work together and a need to support the youth population – areas that community members were worried were being lost compared to historical practice due to the recent socioeconomic influences.

## **History**

Storytellers' Foundation was created in 1994. The founders had witnessed the lack of results from external sources investing millions of dollars into conventional approaches to human and economic development and believed there must be a better way based on systems rooted in Gitksan and Settler cultures.

Over the years Storytellers' staff had observed and experienced that informal learning was flourishing in the Upper Skeena and supporting it was the local answer to a better approach for human and economic development. The informal

learning structures were well-organized based on the relationship to the land.

In the mid to late 1990's, Storytellers' Foundation carried out community research to allow the people living in the Upper Skeena communities to articulate their values and to express a collaborative vision for their socioeconomic future. Much of this research was in anticipation of the collapse of the already fragile forest extraction industry. Many in the communities understood the cyclical nature of this industry and understood that a final collapse was soon to happen leaving mass unemployment. As Storytellers' undertook this research, they discovered several key pieces of knowledge about the communities to which they belong:

The region where we live is abundant in natural resources and the human resource is fully integrated in to this natural system. People here want to be connected to the land and they want to work in connection to the land.

The region where we live is built on connection and relationship between people, and between people and the land. People here know how to live in one place. People know how to work together and they know how to work with the land to live a sustenance lifestyle. Our most recent socioeconomic history has created the current disconnect with this knowledge and daily practice.

People are fully aware they must work together for survival of this lifestyle. People want to learn how to work together and yet remain autonomous and diverse. Our communities are unique and diverse. People are fiercely proud of where they live. It is what unites us and separates us at the same time.

Even when the resource industry is booming we have a high unemployment rate. Many in our population are jobless and impoverished. Jobs alone will not create change. We believe that long-term oppression means long-term capacity and mobilization development to change this socioeconomic reality.

These discoveries allowed Storytellers' to create community learning strategies to begin to address the deeper, underpinning reasons that prevent Upper Skeena communities from flourishing in this pristine natural environment. They designed an Integrating Approach to health and literacy based on the values and principles heard from local people. Their practices are rooted to the values and ways of learning of both the Gitksan and Settler populations of the Upper Skeena.

The work of Storytellers' is first and foremost about being citizens and is place based. It situates CED in an ecological framework that recognizes that diversity is essential for survival and that connectedness of people to the land they live on is a cornerstone of sustainability.

## **Activities in CED and Youth**

### **1. Rural Roots Regional Peer Learning Network**

The goal of creating vibrant communities for all citizens, with a particular focus on youth, resonated with other community members in northwest BC. The result of this desire of people to work together was the catalyst for the Rural Roots Community Learning Network. The network has an active membership within, and between, the communities of the Upper Skeena, Smithers and Houston. The network addresses members' needs in five areas:

- Create opportunities for members to come together and share experiences, tools and resources.
- Design strategies for members to process their work and better comprehend the injustices they see in their learners/participants and neighbours daily life.
- Facilitate sessions where members organize themselves in articulating unified messages to external audiences such as funders, government, and academics.
- Offer peer and professional development that builds skills, knowledge and collegiality in ways that are relevant to remote, rural and aboriginal communities.
- Organize ourselves within and between communities to address social and economic issues in a more comprehensive manner.

The network has identified its members under three categories – health-literacy practitioner, NGO manager, young practitioner. Because the network supports practitioners in remote-rural and/or aboriginal communities, often one person falls under the three categories. Often, the members engage in activities without separating into a category but when deemed necessary members will organize themselves to explore issues and opportunities exclusive to one category.

Right now the work in supporting young practitioners includes mobilizing in the region. Through network activities over the past year, younger practitioners have resonated with the needs of other members but they also have articulated some unique needs. Recent work has involved a series of focus groups being facilitated throughout the region. These reflective sessions help to build relationships and create space for younger network members to describe, process and explore the challenges and opportunities in their practice. Themes emerging from these reflective sessions have led to a series of young practitioners skill-building workshops and the themes

are helping to guide the network in how best to support the unique needs of younger practitioners.

Other work supporting young practitioners involves providing training opportunities for young facilitators (in animation and action learning), supporting and facilitating reflection-on action with younger practitioners, and fostering mentoring relationships in the region.

## **2. The Learning Shop**

Storytellers' has a storefront informal education centre known as, The Learning Shop. The Learning Shop was created in response to past community action research where people of the Upper Skeena expressed a need to learn to work together and a need to support the youth population.

Learning Shop staff use the practices of informal education to support children and youth, and those practitioners (adult and youth) who work around youth, to develop attitudes, skills and knowledge for youth to engage in community economic development. Learning Shop staff applies an integrating cycle to create opportunities for youth to address the impacts of joblessness and impoverishment. This approach emphasizes relationship building, fostering community conditions and supporting others to work together for the common good. The integrating cycle involves mobilizing, community organizing, capacity building and community building. Current Learning Shop activities include:

### **Peer Health-Literacy Educators**

Each year the Learning Shop hires between 3-6 peer educators. These young practitioners are mentored to use informal education strategies to mobilize youth, support youth to voice opinions and ideas about community issues and opportunities, and help youth turn these ideas into action that creates change that is sustainable. Peer educators are

mentored by Learning Shop staff as well as through activities of the Rural Roots Learning Network. Reflective Practice and popular education methods are integrated into all components of the Peer Educators' work.

### **Upper Skeena Food Action Coalition**

The newly emerging Food Action Coalition involves 15 members working together to support young people to create and maintain work within a grassroots healthy eating/ active living sector. The network currently offers service-learning programming in agriculture, a good food box service, youth run kitchens, community gardens, and healthy eating/ active living education camps. Network members are currently developing programming in greenhouse building, trail construction, and family-run, raised garden beds. The Learning Shop is the hub for the network and coordinates activities, builds relationships and formal partnerships between the membership, and highlights the learning and growth that is taking place.

### **Community Learning Lens**

Storytellers' Foundation uses a community-learning lens. This means that learning is recognized as a product and outcome from the work. Its purpose is for social and political change as defined by local people.

Relationship Building is central to the work. Learning Shop staff work to foster conditions in the environment, and develop a set of relationships, for people to learn to care for each other in order to build a civil society. In a community where people have historic reasons for mistrust, learning how to work together is a key focus of the work.

As Storytellers' staff build relationships with others, they also work alongside fellow residents to shape community. They join them in making sense of themselves and of their world. By using a variety of animation tools (mapping,

drama, art, adventure challenge), the groups Storytellers' work with are given space to explore and discover their own passions and interests, to examine their realities and to explore the conditions that surround them. Storytellers' staff animate with the ultimate goal that others are inspired to act.

As Storytellers' supports others to act, they also pull out, and highlight, the learning. Using a series of evaluative feedback loops, staff sort through and explore the different elements of the work. As Storytellers' evaluates programming, they track how community members are learning more about assets and issues within the local socioeconomic context, individual and collective capacity as practitioners and participants, and how this impacts program content.

Finally, Storytellers' Foundation staff take time at the end of any project to look at important learning that has come from the project, and to share this learning with an identified audience in the community. By telling the collective story through print media, journal articles, art, theatre, dialogue, advocacy, and networking, Storytellers' invites others to join in exploring the contextual issues that community members are trying to change.

A recent example of community learning was demonstrated through the Food Action Coalition. Through relationship building and collaborative action in the Upper Skeena Service Learning Agriculture Project, numerous community partners worked together to support local youth undertaking food action initiatives. Throughout the program, partners explored the need for continued mentoring of youth, capacity building of local organizations and the continued building of our local food distribution sector. At the same time, the Learning Shop staff are exploring deeper issues that emerge as projects are implemented. Currently, staff are exploring the impacts of joblessness on youth and the differences between participation and engagement. This deeper thinking is then

published and shared among partners and others in the region supporting young people.

## **Outcomes and Evaluation**

Storytellers' started with a community visioning session to guide their plans. They anticipate a ten-year visioning cycle. However, they plan annually. Within this plan, immediate, mid-term and long-term outcomes are set. Every three months a quarterly evaluation follows an analysis framework to assess how programming activities have helped Storytellers' learn more about context, content and capacity. Within each program activity, participatory evaluation methods are used to measure project successes, challenges and discoveries. This method follows standard participatory evaluation process. The evaluation from each program activity is then fed in to the analysis feedback loop. At an annual staff focus session, Storytellers' staff chart how programming evaluation is impacting the immediate, mid-term and long-term outcomes. Their analysis then informs goals for the next year.

By following a comprehensive analysis, they have been able to identify what programming is efficient in changing contextual realities and what programming may create immediate change but is not long-lasting. By using this approach their programming has increasingly realized success in shifting community awareness and changing current realities. The most recent comprehensive analysis has identified joblessness as a key barrier to a healthy youth sector in local society. With generations of unemployment locally, and no history of work in families, many youth lack the set of expectations that comes from having a job. The impact of growing up in an impoverished and jobless society is often a sense of despair and dependency which manifests into unhealthy and destructive social patterns. Storytellers' has also found that when youth are supported to develop literacy (personal and political power), positive

change begins to happen. When youth are given opportunity to engage in community issues, lead ideas about these issues into action, and have a facilitated space to process and find meaning from their experience, there is a shift in perspective about connecting with, and contributing to, community. Youth begin to develop ownership which in turn, begins relationship development; an interest and willingness to develop new skill sets; and a value and set of expectations on what they do and how they do what they do.

As a result, programming has been created that has led to an increase in the number of youth jobs in the community, the creation of small-scale industry in community food systems, the development of a pool of peer educators; and the extension of partnerships between agencies and organizations who have not traditionally worked together. This analysis continues to inform Storytellers', and their partner organizations, that if one organization is not central to the relationship building and community organizing, then individual agencies return to working in "silos" and effectiveness diminishes.

### **Success Factors and Lessons Learned**

Storytellers' staff agrees that one of their key successes has been the extensive relationship building they have undertaken in the region. Gaining trust and respect of the community is a crucial component to their work, and they have found that the relationships they have built have lasted beyond the original project and enabled them to continue working with the community and building on those relationships. A main challenge for Storytellers' has been the gap between the community's needs and government policies that are supportive or responsive to those needs. From Storytellers' perspective, current government policy does not reflect an understanding that community members are most knowledgeable regarding their living conditions and the best approaches to address those conditions. They also

perceive a lack of cultural competence by government with regard to realities of life in rural, remote, and Aboriginal communities.

Accessing secure funding has also been a challenge. There is a lack of government support for the time and process required to effectively mobilize a community, and short-term funding cycles do not effectively support the work they do in supporting the community to move from readiness into action. The potential for staff and volunteer 'burnout' is very high, and Storytellers' sees a significant gap between the work they do to empower community members to change adverse socio-economic conditions and the government's responsibility to support those changes. However, longer-term funding programs, such as the Office of Learning Technologies' Learning Communities initiative, have been supportive of their work and enabled them to reach some of their longer-term goals.

### **Policy and Future Directions**

Storytellers' continues to reflect and evolve according to their communities' social and economic conditions and emergent needs. Melanie Sondergaard is enthusiastic about the growing impacts and outcomes of youth involvement in participatory research and its impact on their communities. Storytellers' has just completed a website by youth called "Living in Diversity" which focuses on youth perspectives on relationships between Gitksan and Settler culture. This website is now available at the following test URL

[www.upperskeena.ca/storytellers](http://www.upperskeena.ca/storytellers).

A new focus of the work is publishing research and findings, broadening networks and educating others about the integrating approach. This has begun over the past year with the Rural Roots Regional Peer Learning Network. Storytellers' has advocated for policy change, as they have found that current

government policy does not appear to recognize local knowledge or local ways of working.

Storytellers' has had challenges securing secure funding and their reliance on short-term funding cycles does not effectively support the community development processes that are at the heart of their work. The organization's long-term plans are guided by their action research and commitment to maintaining a reflexive community practice rooted in place. The integrating approach transforms the current learning into the next year's work plans and concrete actions. This process enables Storytellers' to remain clear with their long-term goals and outcomes, even

though project funding and activities may change over time.

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