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Centre hopes to develop city through social justice

By [SARA McCLEARY](#)

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Those looking to expand their leadership skills, or help make the community welcoming, can contact the Centre for Social Justice and Good Works.

Christina Coutu, executive director said the centre hopes to promote the city's growth by building "an inclusive, welcoming community in which people are inspired, empowered, and supported, to work together to transform society for the greater good through works of service and social justice."

She believes the community is willing and the centre can provide the leadership needed "to teach people how to increase their economic prosperity while adding to the community social growth."

A group of like-minded citizens, spearheaded by Frank Sarlo, chair of the centre board, Mary Anne Amadio, Fr. Hamish Currie and businessman Joe Ruscio envisioned the centre in 2014, says the centre's website.

"The group discussed issues with a variety of organizations to identify the needs in the community," Coutu said.

"With grant assistance from the Bishop Carter Foundation and the District Sault Ste. Marie Social Services Administration Board, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and numerous community partners, the centre opened the doors in August 2015."

The centre determined that development of local leaders topped the list of community needs.

“The Centre’s leadership training program encourages youth to create employment opportunities through acts of good works by starting businesses (including social enterprises), and working for or starting non-profit organizations,” said Coutu.

“The program uses an encouraging environment, creating opportunities that assist to help youth grow into healthy and productive adults who are able to manage stress, adapt to change, and develop healthy relationships.”

The Centre enlisted several local leaders as guest speakers, including MP Terry Sheehan, the mayor, and the Chief of Police, as part of the training program’s curriculum.

The curriculum has a more hands-on component as well.

“Youth leaders organize free recreation programs as the project component of the training,” said Coutu.

“Recreation programming was identified by the Sault Ste. Marie Innovation Centre as being a good way of combating the health problems faced by some of the children of our community who have been identified as being among those having the worst health in Ontario.”

Youth leaders fundraised for the recreation programs and “numerous community partners got on board.”

One of the programs, “Go For Gold,” offers children’s activities at The Tech three nights a week, with the participation fee only being “the promise of doing Good Deeds.”

Others, besides youth, can benefit from the centre’s training programs.

“The second stream of training that the centre provides focuses on entrepreneurship,” said Coutu.

“The centre’s mentorship training program has proven extremely successful and has assisted five entrepreneurs and recipients of Ontario Works to write business plans, apply for grant funding, and maintain business growth with the assistance of dedicated business professionals who act as mentors.

“These businesses continue to operate today and the entrepreneurs have increased their income and standard of living immensely,” she said.

Another four people received entrepreneurship training, which assisted them to gain employment.

The centre describes itself as non-denominational and ecumenical, though the website explains that it does “hold a close relationship with Precious Blood parishioners and The Islamic Association of Sault Ste. Marie.

“If it was not for the individuals that attend Precious Blood and The Islamic Association of Sault Ste. Marie, Centre for Social Justice and Good Works would have never become a reality,” the site explains.

Funding for the organization comes from various groups including DSSAB, Bishop Carter Foundation, and the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

“The centre continues to apply for grant funding and should have some direction in fall,” Coutu said. “In addition, partnerships are being solidified with other funding agencies that have committed funds to the centre’s programs.”

Individuals and groups help the centre in other ways as well.

“The centre has an amazing board of directors and numerous community partners who are willing to help in any way they can,” said Coutu.

While many board members were on the original steering committee, “Others were recruited for their expertise and chosen by the board,” she said.

Board members are Sarlo, Ruscio, Norm Jaehrling, Amadio, Currie, Jennifer Sarlo, Kathryn Elliott, Emily Coccimiglio, and Sister Pat Carter.

Coutu said she was motivated to take up her position with the centre by the prospect of working with one board member in particular.

“Frank S. Sarlo is a community mobilizer who has successfully implemented numerous projects that have helped Sault Ste. Marie grow economically, socially, and culturally,” she said.

“The opportunity to work with someone who demonstrates integrity, passion and focuses on the positive side of life, is exactly the kind of mentor and friend I was looking for.”

Anyone else looking to get involved in the centre’s activities is invited to reach out to explore volunteer opportunities.

“Anybody can volunteer. Particularly, the centre is looking for people interested in assisting with the recreation programs,” Coutu said.