FROM BEAN TO BAR: CULTURAL ESTEEM AND HEALING THROUGH CHOCOLATE

By Dan Small, Shelley Bolton, Sarah Zwaryck, Danielle Turone, and Belrina Hanuse

Abstract

In this paper, we describe a business with cultural purpose. East Vancouver Roasters (EVR) engages women recovering from addiction and trauma in the creation of chocolate from raw cocoa beans in Canada's most demonized community: Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The initiative has a number of goals. First, it is designed to reach a population with innovative, low-barrier employment. Second, it seeks to create a viable business with social conscience (a social enterprise). Third, its wider cultural goal is to generate social and economic capital intended to bolster community esteem. Finally, EVR presents opportunities to learn from women with psycho-spiritual pain about the meaning of work and barriers to employment. We share our stories here to describe a social enterprise from the perspective of social actors involved in its creation and operation.

Key words: public anthropology, sociology of work, zones of acceptance

Introduction

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) community was once described as "*Our 4 Blocks of Hell*" on the cover of the local newspaper. The DTES has remained an epicenter of demonization for almost a century. The public perception of this area focusses on how it has been home to some of the city's most marginalized for generations: the unemployed, mentally ill, addicted, homeless, and individuals in the survival sex trade. Like many communities subjected to negative characterization, it has become "a zone of abandonment" (Biehl 2013) in the public eye without attention to the strengths and assets that exist there. We hope our collective stories illustrate a rival space, a "zone of acceptance," where women seeking to heal from psychosocial wounds stand together on the threshold of successful lives. Our stories offer narratives about dignity, vocation, and community esteem.

Historical Context

The DTES was once home to Vancouver's first City Hall, hotel industry, business and financial sector. Despite marking the beginning of the city, this history has been largely forgotten. Today, many of the century-old hotels are dilapidated, and their tiny rooms with shared bathrooms offer substandard stop-gap housing for the poor. The monthly rents ($375) mirror the government shelter allowance. The DTES has been characterized by the general public as without hope. In the years leading up to the establishment of East Vancouver Roasters (EVR), buildings near its eventual site were so stigmatized that postal workers refused to deliver mail, and even the most dedicated mental health workers would not enter some of them. The real estate prices were so low that entire hotels and significant heritage buildings could be purchased for less than the price of a single-family dwelling elsewhere in the city. By the 1990s, injection drug use, overdoses, and the HIV rate had reached epidemic levels. Public understandings of the area did not include any attention to the assets or strengths that existed within this community.

Figure 1. Old Hotels

Low Barrier Employment: Work Without Borders

Article author Dan Small (DS) worked in the development of health care, housing, and psychosocial rehabilitative programs from 1996-2014 (e.g., supervised injection, housing for active drug addicts, needle exchange, and a drug users resource center). The people served by these programs were often socially compromised by ideas in the wider public about addiction that characterized them as blameworthy (Goffman 1986 (1963); Small 2004).

It was within this context that DS began to develop low-barrier employment for people with multiple barriers (e.g., homelessness, addiction, mental illness) so they could attend a job meeting in the morning, work in the afternoon distributing clean syringes, and be paid in cash the same day, and work without identification, résumés, or experience with interviews. In contrast to traditional vocational rehabilitation programs that try to "*get people ready to work*" (e.g., prevocational skills training, volunteering, and résumé production), DS developed initiatives to "*give people work to get them ready*."

As participants in these programs began to heal and manage the chaos in their lives, they could progress from

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Figure 2. EVR Alley

Figure 3. EVR Chocolate Corridor

Figure 4. Rainier Hotel

short-time jobs offered on a day-by-day basis to making a commitment to a particular day, which became their weekly position. In time, individuals would be able to graduate into full-time, supervisory roles, where they had health benefits and received bi-weekly paychecks (rather than cash payment required by people living at the edge of survival).

Traditional employment programs at the time deployed a rehabilitative model employing people with barriers in precarious jobs like janitorial, garbage removal, or dishwashing. The programs were comprised of jobs, not dreams, and the idea that people in need could seek a vocation as well as employment was unfamiliar. While the wider public considered this to be a kind of "dirty work," it was clear that different positions garnered symbolic capital for the participants (Hughes et al. 2017). We use the notion of symbolic capital here to refer to reputation, distinction, or prominence held by individuals "in proportion to the recognition they receive from a group" (Bourdieu 1995). Rather than simply having a job, such as mopping in a housing project, there was symbolic capital in work in needle exchange or supervised injection by virtue of the dignity associated with saving lives.

In this realm, DS imagined a social enterprise where employment would be a doorway to something more psychosocially relevant than work; it would be a vocation. It could be invested with dignity and be a place where anyone would want to work. The idea of EVR was born—a place where women enrolled in an addiction recovery program would work in the production of high-quality bean to bar chocolate and coffee roasting.

Ethnographic Picture

EVR is located on the same block as Vancouver's Pigeon Park. The park has been a focal point of judgment and a symbolic center of under-privilege for 100 years. After the great depression, it was a grassy area where the unemployed congregated. Successive city governments attempted to address perceived social problems in the park, such as public drinking, in various ways, including trying to make it inhospitable by removing the benches and paving over the grass. The park has endured, along with the area around it, as a vibrant and eccentrically populated community. Today, while still called Pigeon Park by locals, it is a concrete triangle with a few benches and cement planters where the poor meet in a kind of outdoor living room.

Coming in from this humble streetscape, EVR offers a homelike and welcoming alternative. Though tiny, it is infused with social magic at every turn. The smell of freshly made chocolate wafts through the air, in sharp contrast to the acrid olfactory sensations of the adjacent tumble-down alleyway. The entry is lined with a glass wall behind, which the inner workings of the chocolate factory can be observed. Beyond this delightful corridor is a hot-spot of barista activity where EVR's house roasted coffees can be savored along with fresh chocolate and caramels in a cozy café. Adjacent to the café is another glass wall looking into the cacao and coffee roasting area where the winnowing of cacao beans can be observed. Distinctions between staff and clients are blurred. It is people, not participants, that are engaged in this chocolate-scape.

Work and Meaning

We created EVR with the belief that meaning is at the heart of engagement in work. While work allows people to gain income by selling their labor, a vocation connects them to a larger sense of purpose:

> We acknowledge the possibility that considerations of calling and vocation may be perceived as irrelevant for individuals for whom basic survival needs are not met. However, it also is plausible that a calling or vocation is most needed in such circumstances, and in fact, some may perceive as prejudicial the assertion that only the privileged are able to experience a sense of meaningfulness and purpose in life or in the work role. (Dik and Duffy 2009)

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Figure 5. EVR Bên Tre, Vietnam

Figure 6. Community Coffee

Figure 7. Honey Toffee

EVR was founded on the idea that reflections about vocation are not only possible for the most wounded but necessary for their healing.

Social Capital

Every element of EVR has been designed to be infused with social capital. While there is significant discourse about social capital that does not fall within the bounds of this essay (for a critical analysis of the concept, which we do not engage here, see (Goode and O'Brien 2006), we see social capital in relation to positive characterizations of the DTES and its residents:

> Social capital—understood roughly as the goodwill that is engendered by the fabric of social relations and that can be mobilized to facilitate action…. (Adler and Kwon 2002).

Social capital can have an effect on ideas about community and the pride that participants feel about being involved in EVR. EVR is not *just* a coffee shop. It has the best equipment (e.g., a state of the art *Kestrel* coffee roaster with extremely low emissions and carbon footprint), it was among the first to roast cocoa in a Kestrel, and at the time of its purchase, industry leaders were not sure whether cacao could be roasted in a coffee roaster. EVR demonstrated that this adaptation was possible.

We have developed connections between EVR and other communities by sourcing cacao beans from small scale farmers in communities such as Bên Tre, Vietnam. In Bên Tre, once the cacao pods are harvested, their beans are removed from the translucent fruit that surrounds them and dried on mats. DS travelled to a Bên Tre farm and brought EVR's first cocoa beans back by motorcycle to Ho Chi Minh, where they were imported as airplane luggage. Today, in the spirit of this cacao from Vietnam, beans are ethically sourced from communities around the world (see Figure 6).

EVR makes connections with other social enterprises, such as Hives for Humanity (HFH), which produces local honey from hives placed on the rooftops of housing projects. We use this honey to make toffee infused with freshly roasted cacao nibs (see Figure 7).

Psychosocial Goals

The central goal of EVR is to engage women who are attempting to overcome psychosocial obstacles, such as addiction, in the production of chocolate from cacao beans. Most chocolate that is made locally is already processed before it arrives on the continent. EVR produces chocolate directly from unroasted cacao beans. The creation of bean to bar chocolate involves roasting, winnowing (removing the cacao shell), and grinding (mélange) on granite wheels. EVR is now widely recognized and has earned four international chocolate awards (see Figure 10).

EVR has engaged people that have never had a conventional job (who begin by winnowing cacao beans by hand) and some have become supervisors in chocolate production.

EVR has also endeavored to build capacity through partnership. The BC Housing Management Commission acquired and renovated the Rainier, a single room occupancy hotel, to provide a home for women in recovery above the chocolate shop. BC Housing assisted with a base renovation of the space that

Figure 8. Chocolate Lab

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Figure 9. Mélange

provides a home for EVR. The PHS Community Services Society (PHS) designed the Rainier recovery program. Equipment purchases and initial operating capital was acquired through private finance. DS was able to acquire funding for training positions for women enrolled in the program through the MAC AIDS Fund.

The program also aims to create narratives about opportunity and hopefulness for the DTES community. With respect to this effort to bolster community esteem, EVR is now a key stop on a locally famous coffee crawl, has been celebrated as a key company with women leadership, and enjoyed recognition in local, national, and international media (Watkins 2014).

The final goal of EVR has been to learn from the women involved. We collected the stories that follow as part of that learning process through collaborative open-ended discussions between those directly involved in EVR so that a community-based paper exploring key features of the program could be co-written.

Belrina's Story

Belrina is of Aboriginal ancestry and originally from Bella Bella First Nation on the central coast of British Columbia. Belrina joined EVR five years ago as a resident in the Rainier:

> I always felt because I'm not so great with the public or a lot of people, I decided to stay in the background so I've learned a lot of things, the main thing I really enjoyed learning is about how chocolate is made…. I did not realize that chocolate is made from a bean. I had to learn how to say "cacao"…and it's a bean that comes in a pod…work means being with people…I enjoy working especially here because I've gotten to work with people where we've connected and where we've become very close friends. It's more like a family. (Interview, January 2018)

Today, Belrina has her own bachelor's suite apartment.

Figure 10. EVR Award

Susanne's Story

Susanne also joined EVR through the Rainier. She has lived with depression for most of her life stemming from a traumatic event that resulted in a close friend passing away and a long hospitalization:

> I was in my addiction for a really long time. I was really motivated to get clean right around the time I was about to start working here because I have an 8-year-old daughter, and at the time, she must have been three or four, and it was freaking me out because when I was in my addiction I was so out of it that I wasn't really picturing her growing up. I was still thinking I had all this time in the world to do whatever I was doing and when I was at the detox before moving into the Rainier I was allowed to have a phone call with her and I was expecting this "go-go-gah-gah," and she was like "hi mom." It was a big moment where I realized I had to get myself together.

Figure 11. EVR Chocolate Bars

At this point, Susanne entered treatment, and the director of EVR promised to keep a job open for her:

> …[T]hat just made a world of difference. This place [EVR] was the cornerstone of my recovery… it was like a family…being an addict you feel like shit all the time. I think addiction is centered around shame. It's like everybody in society is shaming you all the time and it's like you're not going to get better but EVR was like the Rainier in that it meets people where they're at they are so not judgmental and you have the opportunity to work and its employment where you

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> can respect yourself for working in here, like you're proud of yourself, you feel good about yourself, it's an accomplishment. You can tell your family: I have a job, a legitimate, nice job and you enjoy it. It's all women here so it's a super comfortable environment. Everybody's had similar struggles…it's like a family…you instantly have a support network. It was the first time that I ever stayed clean afterwards.

Susanne discusses barriers to employment:

> I think it's a lot of little things…stability, not having stable housing… not having a résumé, not having ID…. You have to have your basic needs met first before you can apply for work…. A lot of people are so judgmental: "hey get a job." It's not that easy. A homeless guy can't just get up, walk-in and ask for a job… its competitive to get any type of job no matter who you are and people aren't very nice sometimes and you need to have your basic needs met which a lot of people down here don't have and you also need to have certain skills that a lot of people haven't had the opportunity to get, like experience…legitimate jobs… like a phone, people skills, interview skills…. If you do have mental health or other issues it can be very difficult even if you're lucky enough to get a job, how do you keep a job?

Susanne has worked at EVR for five years, has her own apartment, and gained custody of her daughter. She describes the meaning of work:

> What you spend your life doing because you work for a long time. Whenever you meet somebody that's one of the first things they ask you. Hopefully it's something you enjoy and that you believe in and you're proud to be a part of, something you can be happy about waking up every day and going to.

Her description illustrates the importance of work that helped her.

Sarah's Story

Sarah, aka Myztic Sister, is a local hip-hop and freestyle rap artist. She became involved in EVR through her friendship with another mother from East Vancouver with ties to the Latin community. She was on income assistance for six years. Due to lack of support and an ongoing custody battle, she faced many barriers to employment, such as the stress and anxiety of her situation exasperated by pre-existing health problems. She started out in a peer position as a Barista and eventually transitioned into full-time work. She describes the meaning of her work:

> EVR is a special space, unlike most employment, a lot of our work is centered around building relationships with the women that work here. I have been through an intense schooling in my time here. I have learned how to attend to vulnerable people, working on my compassion and empathy skills and meeting individuals where they are at. It has changed the way I approach my life because I have been in a position where I have had to work through a lot of my own prejudice, I've had the honor of learning to listen and being humbled countless times. I started as a peer so I can relate very much to the challenges of integrating back into work at my own speed. Now being in a managerial position I have the opportunity to support others through their unique process of growing into the workspace at a comfortable pace. I feel very blessed to have created solid relationships with these very special people.

Today, she is the EVR packager and, beyond the program, is involved in building community through hip-hop. She has nurtured a strong social conscience that has helped her establish a collective of women who host cyphers to practice the art of freestyle rap as an outlet to express and heal trauma. Sarah is dedicated to supporting and inspiring people through her words.

Changing Public Space

The DTES has been increasingly imperiled by gentrification. Gentrification takes the form of development that displaces longtime owners and renters and locally owned businesses with condominiums and corporatized retail. Within this context, the program might be perceived as an instrument of gentrification that simply draws affluent people into a beleaguered community to purchase elite coffee and chocolate. However, EVR places a social housing project, recovery program, and social enterprise on the landscape (rather than a condominium).

While EVR cannot stem the tide of development, it has done its part to

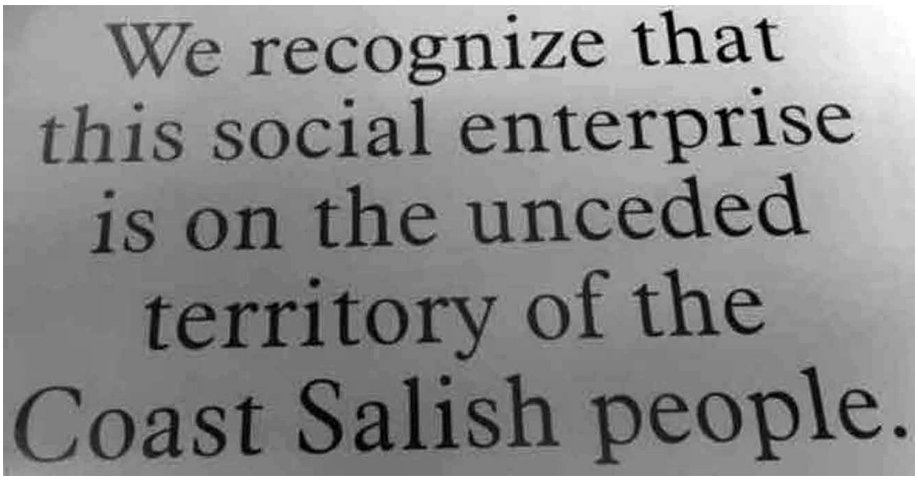

Figure 12. Unceded Territory of the Coast Salish Peoples

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Figure 13. EVR Window

Figure 14. DTES

Figure 15. EVR Chocolate

preserve inclusive social space. People who work at EVR come from the neighborhood and participate in creating a space where everyone is welcome including those who cannot pay. Unlike many businesses in the area, everyone regardless of appearance or needs are welcome at EVR. EVR staff keep an overdose kit (including naloxone) on hand with the knowledge that some of the patrons are active addicts with nowhere to go. There have been overdoses adjacent to the chocolate shop. Many patrons, especially those that visit again, do so with the full knowledge this is a place with a social purpose.

There are further opportunities for kindnesses here, such as the suspended coffee and drinking chocolate program where customers purchase coffee or chocolate in advance for someone else. A regular bevy of low-income community members enter the shop each day, check the status of the suspended contributions, and then settle in for a cup of coffee or chocolate.

The economic conditions of DTES have sometimes been viewed as the fault of marginalized residents (particularly injection drug users). This perspective ignores the overarching process by which local businesses that once thrived in communities have been undermined by corporatization and the proliferation of "big box" stores (for a fuller examination, see (Alexander 2011).

Aboriginal Peoples

There are 1,673,785 Aboriginal individuals (First Nations, Métis, Inuit) in Canada (Statistics Canada 2017). This represents 4.9 percent of the population. Approximately 14,000 (2.6%) Vancouverites identify as Aboriginal (Johnston 2017). Of the 17,000 DTES residents, persons of Aboriginal identity represent 10 percent (City of Vancouver 2013). EVR welcomes everyone, with particular respect paid to Aboriginal peoples. Since its inception, 25 percent of those involved have been of Aboriginal ancestry. This figure is 2.5 times the percentage of Aboriginal people residing in the DTES and nearly ten times the percentage of Aboriginal people living in Vancouver.

The first and current director of the program, Shelley Bolton, is of Aboriginal ancestry (Kwantlen and Squamish: *Sḵwx̱wú7mesh* Úxwumixw). She considers EVR to be an Aboriginal program and sees her contributions here as an extension of her earlier work with the Esemkwu ("wrapped in a blanket" in the Squamish language) Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Society located on the Squamish First Nation. Everyone entering EVR is greeted by a sign recognizing the ancestral territory of the Coast Salish people.

Authorship and Collaboration

This community-based paper began with open-ended, participant-driven discussions exploring the experiences of people in EVR. DS recorded and transcribed the discussions to provide first-person impressions to help collaboratively tell our story. A vision for the paper began to unfold through this process that attempted to articulate key points of meaning associated with EVR. All authors read, edited, and interpreted drafts of the paper and interviews. While DS took the lead in drafting this article, it is a mutually-authored story that we collaboratively forged.

Conclusion

We have attempted to draw on lived experience, as individuals engaged in a social initiative, to highlight the creation of community esteem and healing through chocolate. We have tried to illustrate how work can be more than work and that a sense of higher purpose is important for everyone. This is perhaps especially the case for those most in need of it, who have been relegated to the borderland of structural inequity, fallen, but not forgotten, into the "cracks" of society. More than anything, we wish to convey that the EVR chocolate shop is an intentional cultural space, *a zone of acceptance*, where chocolate is more than candy; it is a symbolic representation of healing and community esteem.

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Dan Small *(dansmall@mail.ubc.ca), Ph.D., M.Phil, is a medical anthropologist and Research Associate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. He has developed and operated a range of health care, supports, housing, and social enterprises for marginalized populations, including: North America's first supervised injection facility (Insite), a chocolate shop, grocery store, inner city bank, art gallery, syringe distribution, intravenous antibiotic treatment, and a drug users resource center, detox, dental clinic, and recovery programs. He has been involved in medical regulation and medical student assessment through the College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC (2000-2014) and Medical Council of Canada (2007-2014).*

Shelley Bolton *(Shelley.Bolton@eastvanroasters.com) began working with PHSCS in 2001 producing community events, aimed at fostering connections between local business groups and the Downtown Eastside drug user community. In 2011, Shelley was recruited as Director of Social Enterprise for the PHSCS and launched two peer employment programs—The Window Community Art Shop and East Van Roasters. Before beginning with EVR in 2011, she worked as a Project Director at Esemkwu Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Society (located on the Squamish First Nation). She is of Aboriginal (Kwantlen and Squamish:* Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw*), Hawaiian, and European ancestry.*

Sarah Zwaryck *(myzticsister@gmail.com), aka Myztic Sister, is a Vancouver hip-hop and freestyle rap artist. She began at EVR in a peer position in 2014 as a barista before transitioning into her full-time role in charge of packaging and order fulfillment. Sarah is actively involved in her community as an artist and parent.*

Danielle Turone *(dturone3@gmail.com) has been a barista at EVR since 2013 and is also involved in order fulfillment and coffee packaging for toll roasting clients. Danielle lives with her daughter and enjoys spending time with her in the beautiful City of Vancouver.*

Belrina Hanuse *(bellapronto@yahoo.com) has been involved with EVR for five years. She originally joined the program when she was a resident of the Rainier alcohol and drug treatment program. She is of Aboriginal ancestry and is from Bella Bella First Nation on the central coast of British Columbia. Belrina is a proud mother of four children, ten grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. Belrina really enjoys her work (especially wrapping caramels) and the comradery of her coworkers at EVR.* ■

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