

The Marketplace

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2019

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gets down to business

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Composting as a business

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MEDA



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Cover photo of Bruce Taylor by Kamil Ahmed

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Business with a purpose at Canadian Mennonite University

Campus-based co-working space supports social entrepreneurs

Winnipeg — James Magnus-Johnston has had a close-up view of many of the things that can go wrong in business.

Now as the director of Canadian Mennonite University's Centre for Resilience, he gets to mentor and nurture emerging social enterprises for the benefit of the broader community.

"The centre is really trying to incubate nascent projects that have impact," he said.

"The challenge is being really intentional with what we're hosting, and how those opportunities also present learning opportunities for students."

The coworking lab and experiential learning hub, which opened in spring 2018, occupies 6,000 square feet on the fourth floor of the Founder's Hall building on the CMU campus.

It houses a range of businesses and non-profit organizations.

Tenants are called entrepreneurs in residence. Occupancy is done on a month to month basis, allowing flexibility for both the centre and the entrepreneurs. "I know how quickly cash flow can ebb and wane."

Earlier this decade, Magnus-Johnston, 37, was working in business restructuring, articling to become a trustee in bankruptcy. During his financial counseling and work with cash flow, he realized he wanted to apply those skills in his own business.

Five years ago, as he began teaching at CMU, he joined with four partners to start Fools & Horses, a Winnipeg coffee shop that takes a triple-bottom-line approach to benefiting people and planet as well as profit. Working across the street from where the first location opened, he wondered: "Wouldn't it be nice to have an independent gathering spot in this neighborhood?"

Wanting to test a business model that aligned with his values, he discovered a project that was "a whole other Ph.D. (degree) for me."

"These are all people who are taking risks to improve society in some way."

He has also been involved with several other start-ups.

Fools & Horses was committed to paying its employees a living wage (which was about \$14 an hour in Winnipeg in 2014 when the business opened), even when the owners couldn't pay themselves. They also committed to using local suppliers and limiting or eliminating waste as much as possible.

Magnus-Johnston exited that business in January due to work and study commitments. Fools & Horses

now has two locations, and could soon have three or four, he said. Two of the original founders are still involved in the company.

Finding a balance between local suppliers and customers who expect things like avocado toast was challenging, he said. The coffee shop needed to push the edges to discover if "folks who have concerns about equality and the environment, whether or not they are willing to pay for those values."

Commitment to the environment is a core value at the centre. Part of the renovation project prior to its opening included super-insulating the ceiling and installing triple-pane windows to increase the energy efficiency of the entire building, while maintaining its heritage designation.

Much of the centre's office furniture was made in Manitoba, and wood from reclaimed ash trees was used in doorframes.

The site lends itself to quiet reflection and contemplation, and some residents enjoy taking breaks walking in the woods adjacent to the building.

The mixture of old and new allows Magnus-Johnston to quip that residents enjoy "contemporary office space, at the top of a castle, next to a forest."

Susan Kuz is a positive psychology consultant who is one of the residents at the centre. Her firm, Being Pukka, moved into the space in June

2018. She investigated several other co-op working spaces in Winnipeg, but found they “didn’t have the same vibe, sense of relationship and community.”

Kuz is impressed both by the healthy environment the centre offers, and the types of organizations Magnus-Johnston has attracted to the space. “There’s a lot that appealed to me. Everyone is so friendly, helpful and respectful of each other.”

Entrepreneurs connected with the Centre for Resilience have found it through a variety of circumstances. Some live near the campus, are connected to area Mennonite churches, are current or former members of the CMU community or know Magnus-Johnston, who is Anglican.

“Since it’s based at CMU, it must fit CMU’s orientation and mission,” while being welcoming to people who aren’t motivated by a faith orientation, he said.

About half of the entrepreneurs at the centre have an explicit connection to a faith community, he said.

Working at determining “who it is that wants to be here, and why” is an ongoing discernment piece for Magnus-Johnston.

There are about 20 people representing 21 different social enterprises currently working out of the centre. Another eight are interested in joining, either when they are ready or when space is available.

The Centre for Resilience shouldn’t be thought of in the same way as co-working space providers such as We Work, or a half dozen other business incubators that oper-



James Magnus-Johnston believes in social enterprises as a means to improve society.

ate in Winnipeg’s downtown core, he said. “We’re not trying to become a loud incubator. We’re trying to become a quiet, high-focused, library-like environment that enables people to get work done.”

Entrepreneurs in residence at the centre include a wide range of social enterprises.

They include: an architect working towards his accreditation who is interested in social impact; two lawyers who specialize in workplace-related harassment claims; a firm that works to reduce consumption of chemicals through the use of eco-friendly technologies; an entrepreneur who does workplace coaching; the Manitoba arm of A Rocha, a national environmen-

tal charity; a magazine that focuses on amateur sports in the province, and others.

A future entrepreneur-in-residence is working on a plan to provide housing for former gang members, using shipping containers.

Many of these entrepreneurs, “solo-prepreneurs” who work alone, are doing cutting edge work that doesn’t fit within the norms of their industries, Magnus-Johnston said.

“These are all people who are taking risks to improve society in some way.”

Magnus-Johnston has designed a Social Innovation Lab course in which students test ideas on behalf of the entrepreneurs who are resident in the centre. That effort focuses on design thinking, process-oriented outcomes and finding a safe space to try new things.

Success for the centre will appear in many ways, he said. “If we’re nurturing nimble, adaptable but grounded students, that will be successful from an institutional perspective. Also, on the other side, having some kind of impact.”

He will take a two-year leave from CMU starting this fall to work on doctoral studies in Montreal in the area of economics for the Anthropocene (a proposed era dating from the commencement of significant human impact on the Earth’s geology and ecosystems).

During those studies, he will maintain a part-time connection with the centre, providing leadership from a distance while day-to-day issues are handled by a co-ordinator who will be hired soon. ♦



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