CHAPTER 5

Café au Play
Creating a Family-Centered Social Space in Portland, Oregon

Charles Heying
Associate Professor, Nohad A. Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning, Portland State University

THE PROBLEM

When Kristin Heying moved to Portland, Oregon with her toddler daughter, she was in the process of becoming a single mom. Recognizing the need to build relationships in their new community, Kristin and her daughter began participating in Parks and Recreation classes, one of the few affordable options for child-centered activities. Through these classes, Kristin became close friends with two other mothers. But when they tried to get together outside class, they discovered that few cafés or coffee shops were designed to accommodate moms with active kids in tow.

THE INNOVATION

Kristin and her friends began discussing what could be done to change the situation. One of the moms, who had worked as a barista, suggested they start a family-friendly coffee shop; another suggested a membership-based play space. But they soon realized that they were looking for something more than a traditional business with a nice play area. They had a larger vision for a place where caregivers could find community and support while their children played together. They envisioned a drop-in gathering place, open regular hours,
that offered interactive children's activities like daily story times, live music, or puppet plays. For adults, they imagined volunteers providing classes on a variety of topics from parenting challenges to nutrition and health. While such a community center model would fit less well within a for-profit framework, they believed it might work as a nonprofit where the coffee shop would generate revenues while also providing a reason for caregivers to get together. As this model was taking shape, Kristin began graduate study in nonprofit management at Portland State University and assembled a board of directors who laid the groundwork for the organization. Because of my professional interest in the project, I was invited to join the board. In December, 2004, the first Café au Play organizational meeting was held.

A formative influence in our early board discussions was Ray Oldenburg's (1999) *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. Ultimately, the concept of a third place that Oldenburg develops in his book, provided an important frame for the mission of Café au Play that was evolving from the experiences of Kristin and her friends. Oldenburg joined other critics (Bellah, 1986; Jacobs, 1961; Putnam, 2000) who decried the loss of community, declining sense of place, and the excessive privatization of American life. Oldenburg focused particularly on the loss of local hangouts operated and patronized by people who lived in a neighborhood. For Oldenburg, these third places were the glue that held communities together. These were places where you could drop in to meet the regulars, to establish connections outside home and work. The open unscheduled characteristic of third places was especially appealing to these young mothers who found the play-date model clumsy and cliquish. They valued the flexibility of a drop-in space, the potential to enjoy programs and learn about resources, and the possibility of broadening their network of friends. Creating a third place, a community anchor welcoming for all ages but especially for children and caregivers, became the defining mission of Café au Play.

Over the next 2 years, the now expanded board began to build community support for the Café au Play idea. Volunteers provided information and solicited support through community workshops and street fairs. By spring 2005, we completed our first major fundraiser, *A Love Affair with Chocolate*, a desert and wine extravaganza held in an upscale gallery that netted close to $2,000 and some substantial media recognition. Café au Play also began to build its online presence and brand identity, soliciting members for our listserv and posting online notices of activities. We also recruited a graphic arts student to design our first logo and launch a basic website with a coherent graphic identity.

On the procedural side, the board secured fiscal sponsorship from Southeast Uplift, one of Portland's official Neighborhood Coalitions, so Café au Play could accept tax deductible donations (Southeast Uplift, 2014). Bylaws were adopted and an official board recruitment process developed. The board also began the process of applying for 501(c)(3) status, obtaining final approval in 2007. During this formative period, the board developed a long-term strategic plan, including a detailed timeline that, in hindsight, was wildly optimistic.

By late summer 2006, with confidence growing in our ability to stage events, the board determined that our next step was to develop a pilot program to demonstrate the kind of

---

2 I continue to serve as a board member and active volunteer.
experiences we hoped to offer families year round. Over the next 6 months, *On the Road with Café au Play* held events at six local coffee shops and community spaces (Cermak & Thomas, 2006). We mobilized dozens of artists, entertainers, and family resource providers to offer patrons a taste of the Café au Play experience. The response to *On the Road* was tremendous. Several events attracted over 100 participants. Our most attended event, at Haven Coffeehouse, was covered by a full-page article in *The Oregonian* (Williams, 2006), the state’s largest newspaper.

**A PARTNERSHIP IS FORMED**

Café au Play now inhabits the former Drive Thru Wake-Up Deli site on 57th and Division Street. The location is roughly central to Inner Southeast Portland, bordering both Mount Tabor and South Tabor neighborhoods and across from Atkinson Elementary School. The Deli site, now called Tabor Commons, consisted of a nondescript 1,000 sq. ft. building surrounded by a 13,000 sq. ft. asphalt parking lot. The site was infamous in the neighborhood with a long and checkered history including drug dealing, laundering of food stamps, gang violence, and vandalism. The one-time gas station had also been a used car dealership, a convenience store, and most recently a deli that was seized by the federal government for the owner’s role in selling ingredients to local methamphetamine makers (De Sousa, 2012).

In June 2006, U.S. Marshals transferred the property to the Southeast Uplift Neighborhood Coalition on behalf of the Tabor Commons partners consisting of the Mount Tabor and South Tabor Neighborhood Associations and the Atkinson PTA. It had taken 3 years of hard work by community members to obtain the property. Paul Leistner, a community activist who lives next to the site, was the prime mover in effecting the changes. In addition to negotiating federal, state, and local regulations and paperwork, he helped raise nearly $50,000 to cover the costs of acquiring the property and to begin its transformation from a brownfield to a community space (De Sousa, 2012).

The property was transferred to the Tabor Commons partners under a new U.S. Justice Department program, Operation Goodwill, that encouraged drug-seized properties to be turned over to nonprofit groups who could demonstrate a community serving function. To build support for their application, Leistner organized a series of well-attended community meetings where the future use of the Tabor Commons site was considered (Ashton, 2006). In the first of these meetings, Café au Play presented its vision for a nonprofit family-oriented coffee shop to a receptive audience. By the third meeting, a design charrette, Café au Play was identified as the tenant in Opsis Architect’s animated video of how the site could be built out (Cermak & Thomas, 2006). The partnership with Tabor Commons was solidified when Café au Play was invited to join the Tabor Commons board.

After obtaining control of the property, Leistner worked closely with local, state, and federal partners to creatively package a cluster of grants that funded (a) the removal of the buried oil tanks and over 200 tons of contaminated soil, and (b) a green job curriculum that supported the nonprofit Women in the Trades program to deconstruct the interior of the building, remove and recycle the parking lot asphalt, and begin the reconstruction of the building (De Sousa, 2012).
As the process of remediation and reconstruction was under way, Café au Play, now assured that it would be the Tabor Commons tenant, continued its efforts to raise startup funds to outfit the coffee shop. But Café au Play was also being drawn into the process of redeveloping the building and site, something that was technically the responsibility of the Tabor Commons partners. This was the beginning of the blurring of roles that has continued to the present.

Café au Play and Tabor Commons were joined by necessity, shared goals, and personal trust to work with each other and merge our efforts. Leistner, whose Tabor Commons partnership essentially ceased to meet after the property was transferred, continued to be personally effective in articulating the vision of Tabor Commons, attracting resources to the project, and steadfastly volunteering throughout project development. Kristin Heying of Café au Play brought the resources of a strong and growing organization with diverse linkages among a younger cohort interested in the Café au Play concept. Café au Play board members, spouses, and volunteers became deeply involved in renovating both the building and site. For example, all the electrical wiring services were donated by Café au Play board member Tracy Sullivan, a union electrician. Other board members or spouses with professional skills built the interior cabinetry, poured and polished the concrete coffee bar, and tiled the bathroom.

Café au Play and Tabor Commons jointly applied for grants for site renovations and build out. Josh Lighthipe, civil engineer and current Café au Play board president, worked with Leistner to secure grants for our award winning sustainable design features such as rainwater swales, a permeable parking lot, and ecoroofs (Homolak, 2012). Café au Play took a lead role in securing funds for building materials and working with professional muralists, John Early and Laura Bender, to obtain a Regional Arts Council grant for the exterior mural (Ashton, 2008).

With a level of perseverance that, in retrospect, seems remarkable, by summer 2010, Café au Play at Tabor Commons held its Grand Opening Celebration. Café au Play’s goal had been to open debt free with a functional landscape, renovated building, a fully outfitted coffee shop, no-cost lease, and a reserve fund to carry us through the first year. We did all that. But it would take another summer before we were able to redo the parking lot with permeable pavers, and the summer after that for the new street frontage sidewalks to be installed with bike racks and a curb bump-out at the school crossing. And our patrons would endure dripping condensation for a year before we used the last of the Tabor Commons fund to insulate the roof.

By fall of 2010, we had completed our soft opening and were fully operational. The 1,000 sq. ft. Café au Play building, once a nondescript white box, now boldly displayed a wraparound mural. The site, once a wall-to-wall parking lot of crumbling asphalt was now lush with plants, trees, and rain gardens studded with basalt rock outcroppings. A faux stone sidewalk bordered the building on two sides with an all-glass garage door opening to the back patio. The deli, with its disreputable activities, was now replaced with a family-friendly community space (Griffin, 2010).

**FIRST CRISIS**

No organization succeeds without encountering both minor and major crises. A resilient organization manages the crises and learns from them; a brittle organization will stumble and possibly fail. Café au Play has encountered two major crises: the first was an event that
precipitated a change in board procedures; the second has been an ongoing financial struggle that became a full-blown crisis in the summer of 2012. From the second crisis, we learned the limits of our revenue model and the need, even for a social enterprise, for effective fundraising strategies that build on organizational strengths. The challenges of both crises have demonstrated the resilience of Café au Play and the strengths of the social enterprise model.

In the fall of 2006, Café au Play was wrapping up its On the Road with Café Play tour where we presented our vision to the community of what Café au Play could become. Simultaneously, we were promoting that vision in the community meetings that would determine the use of the Tabor Commons site. As we participated in these events, we began planning on our first auction with the intention of making a significant dent in our fundraising goal of $70,000. We staged the auction by late November, and it was both a major success and a crushing failure.

On the surface, the auction appeared to go extremely well, raising nearly $12,000, but it revealed deep fractures in our organization. The clash of working styles and the pressure to get everyone to follow through on commitments led to a falling out, with half the board leaving in the weeks after the event. It was not Café au Play’s finest hour. With the demise of the board following the event, the remaining members reconsidered the method of recruiting board members. Before the event, the pressure to grow the board led to an open-door policy. Anyone who expressed an interest was invited to join the board. While we did utilize all the traditional vetting procedures, forms, and interviews, these turned out to be of little use in helping potential board members know what they were getting into or helping the existing board understand what level of commitment the potential board member was bringing.

The solution to the crisis seems to have worked well. We dropped all the formal application procedures, no more forms, interviews, or recommendations. These all seemed cumbersome and unhelpful. Instead we created a new board role for potential board members. For the first 6 months, the potential board member served as an ad hoc participant, attending meetings, and doing everything a working board member would do. After 6 months, the board and the candidate mutually decided whether to proceed to full board status.

The first 6 months are eye opening for some candidates who have good intentions but are unaware of the considerable commitment required. It is also helpful for the existing board to understand the motivations, capacity, and follow through of the potential recruit. Over time, we have learned to live with a variety of working styles, but the real determinant is whether the board member can work effectively in the organization. As a result, we have seen quite a number of board candidates come and go during the probationary period. What seems to influence some of them to leave is coming to terms with the tenuous financial situation of Café au Play and what that means regarding fundraising.

Each board meeting begins with an update of the finances and an estimate of how many months our reserve will last. It is a surprise to new recruits that the café is not self-supporting and may never be. Being so open may seem a strange way to recruit board members, but financial honesty plus the recognition that we have a well-earned reputation for resourcefulness in meeting our financial goals seems to help. Openness effectively discourages the casual volunteer who is not deeply committed to the mission of the organization, those who realize they do not have the time to give, or those who are coming with their own personal agenda.
On the downside of the Café au Play model of honesty and high work expectations is that it limits our ability to recruit professionals with links to corporate and foundation funding. These professionals come with a different model of board engagement, usually involving the donation of pro bono work, offering policy advice or fiduciary oversight, or simply serving as a link to corporate donations. With some exceptions, potential board members with these expectations are usually unable or unwilling to engage in the real nitty-gritty of keeping a social enterprise afloat.

SECOND CRISIS

In the process of raising start-up funds, Café au Play seemed to try everything: an auction, children's clothing sales, a yard sale, hazardous material collections, revenue partnerships, holiday parties, and so on. All were successful financially and, with the exception of the auction, all contributed to enhancing board commitment and building organizational competence. It was through these experiments that we discovered the holiday tree sale, which has become our signature event and bread-and-butter fundraiser. Our willingness to experiment and our competence in staging events would serve us well when we encountered our second major crisis, a funding shortfall in the summer of 2012 that threatened our continued operation.

When we opened in September 2010, we knew that we did not have adequate financial reserves, but we trusted that the holiday tree sale, to commence 3 months after our opening, would help us get through the first year. Unfortunately, we did not expect that the café would be so costly to sustain for so long. Over the first 5 years, we estimated that on average we lost about $2,000 per month. Our location is ideal, our construction phase is now largely behind us, we have adequate parking, we are very busy, we have daily events that produce standing-room-only audiences, we are a fixture in the community, and yet we lose money. Hard to explain unless you have attempted to launch a social enterprise and, in particular, have run a coffee shop that caters to families.

There are good reasons why we lost money. Of course, there is the expected steep learning curve of the first years of operation, a uniquely challenging task for a manager/executive director who must not only run a traditional business but also integrate the mission and sustain a nonprofit organization. On the business side, we soon discovered that we had some intractable structural issues. While our outdoor space is expansive and inviting, our indoor space is small, with a seating area less than 500 sq. ft. Our dedicated play area effectively reduces this even more. Add to that a show like that given by Red Yarn, a popular red-bearded performer of children’s songs, and it becomes standing room only. In essence, we have created a space that is not appealing to the typical coffee shop patron. While parents and kids seem to like the hang-out ambience, to nonparents, it is noisy, crowded, and messy.

And parents do not buy their coffee and go. With all the energy expended to transport and settle children, parents are not about to get up and leave. This is their adult moment to sip their latte, visit with a friend, or just kick back. If things are going well, they could be there for hours. Café au Play should be thrilled; it’s become the great third place we had
imagined. Except it’s hard to make money on that model, as we eventually learned. In addition, kids and families establish a unique rhythm for the shop—slow early morning, busy from 9:30 AM to 1:00 PM, slow during nap time, with some pick up again from 2:30 PM to 5:00 PM. It is difficult to schedule efficiently for this routine.

Given these structural limitations, it’s surprising that Café au Play did not hit the financial wall sooner than we did. Our $20,000 reserve and revenue from our holiday tree sale sustained us through our first year and into the spring of 2011. But the writing was on the wall that something more would be needed. Our solution was to develop a Farmers Market to be rolled out in the summer of 2011. The Market seemed to have good synergies with our site, operation, and community mission. Although we were behind the curve launching our first Market season, our success was sufficient to encourage us to try again. We made a real commitment to the 2012 season, but it proved less successful that the first.

Timing and construction did us in. We opened our Farmers Market at a time when it was difficult to secure reliable vendors. New markets were opening all over Portland, and we were competing with several within our retail trade area that had more experience, space, and foot traffic. Hopes for a better second season were dashed when construction to replace our frontage curb and sidewalk, which was planned to be completed before market season, dragged on for 2 months into the summer. Construction fencing blocked visual access, restricted pedestrian flow, and eliminated side and front parking.

By mid-summer 2012, it was obvious that the Market would not provide the revenues needed to sustain operational shortfalls. Kristin Heying alerted the board that without a substantial fundraising effort, Café au Play would not make payroll within 2 months. As a stopgap measure, the board decided to reactivate the annual appeal we had initiated the previous summer. Its original purpose was to build a repeat donor base from the families who most benefited from our services. Despite our recognition that first year results were limited, we hoped that a more organized effort would produce better results. We rolled out our campaign, added a phone-a-thon, and encouraged board members to make personal appeals to people they knew.

The results were not encouraging, but the process taught us something about ourselves, our clientele, and the limits of this type of appeal. We learned that the art of the direct ask is something we do not excel in. Our organizational history, where we solicited hands-on community support and built partnerships with other organizations, did not prepare us for the very different type of relationship building it takes to establish a committed donor base. We also discovered the obvious; our board is not well connected to those with deep pockets in the community and ultimately our “big donors” turned out to be ourselves, family, and friends. We also learned the limits of our ability to tap into the young families who use our services. They are cash strapped and have not yet developed the habit of giving nor matured in their understanding that they are the adults responsible for organizational survival. And we discovered a generational lesson. Younger people have now experienced a lifetime of intrusive solicitation through every available media, so it is difficult to break the barrier of inattention and negativity such an approach generates.

Despite the less than overwhelming success of our several fundraising efforts, the revenue they produced added up to something substantial enough to keep us afloat and opened a space to try something else. And that something else, turned out to be a real winner.
Strange enough, given the crisis that followed our first attempt, it was an auction. It didn’t start out that way. It started off as a Harvest Sunday Supper that would raise money through ticket sales. Cory Schriber, a neighbor, former owner and chef of the Wildwood, one of Portland’s pioneer locavore restaurants, and now an instructor at Portland’s Culinary Institute, agreed to help organize the event. Not only would he be chef, but he would also enroll his students to cater the Harvest Supper as their final project. This meant that they would provide all the food and preparation on site. Schriber’s contacts in the spirits industry also helped us obtain substantial wine and beer donations (Ashton, 2012).

With such a boost in support, we were free to be creative with the rest of the event. And the board responded. Beginning with the idea of having a small silent auction, it grew organically to include over 90 items. We added a raffle, a professional to host the event, performers, and music groups, including an amazing Irish traditional ensemble founded by one of our baristas. Using funds from anonymous donors, we were able to distribute free tickets to the long list of donors and volunteers who had supported us over the years. If we were going to fail, we would at least end with a grand gesture to our community.

The day was perfect, the music inspiring, the spirits flowed freely, and the food was beyond excellent. There was an authentic essence of appreciation and celebration. And it worked, the nearly $9,000 we netted from the event got us through the summer to our best ever holiday tree sale. Our crisis was averted, and our organization was stronger and more committed.

FINDING THAT RELIABLE FUNDRAISER

Only time will tell if the Harvest Sunday Supper becomes an annual event. Our many years of experimentation taught us that successful fundraising strategies draw on resources and connections in our networks, fit our organizational strengths, and are responsive to preferences and capacity of our base. The Harvest Supper seems to be a good fit, but it is also possible the stars came into alignment just this one time. In any case, our fundraising experiments reminded us of how dependent Café au Play has become on our signature fundraiser, the holiday tree sale.

Without our experience operating the tree sale prior to opening Café au Play and without the revenues it produced, Café au Play would not have survived. In 2008, our first year running the sale, we netted $6,000; by 2012, our fifth year, we had nearly tripled that to $16,000. The tree sale provided over $18,000 toward startup funding and, since Café au Play has opened, has provided $43,000 to cover operating losses.

It is nearly an ideal fundraiser for us. We have plentiful outdoor space and adequate street and lot parking. The trees are an amenity during the holiday season, increasing café revenues on the weekends. Café au Play benefits from our location on Division Street, a narrow arterial with pedestrian-friendly design that provides bike and pedestrian access to both Mount Tabor and South Tabor neighborhoods.

Besides our location, the holiday tree sale works very well for episodic volunteers. Many of our volunteers return every year just for this event. We have also developed a good
working relationship with Warner Pacific College, four blocks east of Café au Play, and with Hands Around Greater Portland, an organization whose purpose is to connect volunteers with nonprofit organizations.

Over the years, we have routinized most of our activity and volunteers pick up skills quickly and seem to enjoy it. Many who buy trees are neighbors and repeat customers who see this as an opportunity to get a great tree, excellent service, and contribute to a community-oriented nonprofit. Trees leave the lot by auto, stroller, wagon, bike, and wheelbarrow. It is a great bonding event with the community.

WINDS OF CHANGE, TIES THAT BIND, SUPPORT THAT STAYS

Winds of Change: In trying to identify why some social enterprises are successful, it seems clear that the organization must operate within the context of its environment. Café au Play was started on the cusp of the move to Portland by young people who were attracted by the urban vibe and later decided that the city rather than the suburbs was the right place to raise families. Café au Play identified a mission niche that served this client base. The Café au Play and Tabor Commons partnership has been remarkably successful in obtaining grants for building and infrastructure improvements. We caught the wind of Portland’s tack toward pedestrian-friendly neighborhood design, sustainable development, and bioremediation. We also benefitted from a new Justice Department initiative, Operation Goodwill, that encouraged the U.S. Marshall service to turn over drug-seized properties to community groups and nonprofits. Our timing was also right with the election of Mayor Tom Potter, who initiated a citywide visioning exercise that identified support for local neighborhood serving enterprises as a priority and then supported this initiative with neighborhood Vision into Action Grants from which we secured $12,000 in building funds.

Ties That Bind: Every successful business, nonprofit, or social enterprise knows that their survival depends on their personal and organizational networks that can be mobilized for information and support. We have learned that the embeddedness of an organization in these networks increases with the number of times they are activated and the trust that is built from successful engagement and visible accomplishment (Granovetter, 1985). We have learned that the most powerful relationships are those that evolve over time into multistranded linkages of mutual support. In previous sections, I described how some of these networks are activated as board members drew their family, friends, and affiliates into our projects. What follows are several more examples that show the dimensionality and activation of these networks.

Paul Leistner, the neighborhood activist who created the Tabor Commons project, lives next to Café au Play. He received his PhD in from the Nohad A. Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning, where I am a faculty member and served on his dissertation committee. We have jointly served on the Southeast Uplift Board of Directors, which was the fiscal sponsor for Café au Play as well as the titular owner of Tabor Commons. Leistner was former president and board member of the Mount Tabor Neighborhood Association, was one of the three key Tabor Commons partners. The Mount Tabor Neighborhood
association donated over $8,000 toward building renovation of Tabor Commons and Café au Play. Leistner also recruited Master of Urban and Regional Planning students from the Toulan School to undertake their Planning Workshop project for Tabor Commons (Buckley, Henry, Shane, & Wolter, 2005). The students developed a consultant report that outlined the resources for brownfield remediation. Clark Henry, a student member of that Planning Workshop team, was also the City of Portland, Brownfield administrator at the time. He was instrumental in securing the local, city, and state funds for removing the buried storage tanks on the site.

Multistranded relationships can grow from professional affiliations as well. Josh Lighthipe, who lived in the neighborhood and was a parent of a toddler, learned of the Café au Play project through a neighbor and professional colleague involved in the master planning of Tabor Commons. Lighthipe, a civil engineer whose expertise is green infrastructure design, volunteered at Tabor Commons because of the opportunity to do hands-on work in bioremediation. Through involvement with Café au Play board members on these work parties, Lighthipe was eventually recruited to serve on the Café au Play board and later became its president. Lighthipe’s professional affiliations were beneficial in identifying and securing the green infrastructure grants for site renovation (KPFF Stormwater Cinema, 2013).

Kristin Heying maintains linkages to other entrepreneurs who were involved in similar ventures. During the development of Café au Play, Heying worked with the owner of Bipartisan Café who provided insights on startups, marketing, and management. Later he helped Heying and Charlotte Krayenbull, our volunteer designer, outline the café layout and function.

Anyone who has worked in nonprofits will recognize the pattern; nonprofits are built and survive based on these relationships. The more connected you are, the more resilient will be your organization. Relationships wax and wane, but connections always remain to be reactivated both intentionally and serendipitously. But there are distinct types of networks—people travel in different circles representing different access and resources. Café au Play seems connected to supportive friends and neighbors, many of whom are connected to professional and entrepreneurial networks. However, we are not connected to networks of those with deep pockets or those who have access to foundation and corporate networks.

Support That Stays: With the many events and construction projects we engage in, we have ample opportunities to work with volunteers. We have developed a working style that seems to help us retain volunteers and develop long-term relationships with organizations like Warner Pacific College that encourage a culture of civic engagement in their students. We model behavior, provide training and direction, give responsibility, expect performance, engage in activities that lead to a sense of accomplishment, and give back through incentives and recognition.

During our tree sale, at least one board member must be present for every shift during the 4 weeks of the sale. This is a real commitment, but it pays off. Volunteers who see us working for hours in the ever-present Portland rain till we are bone weary and soaked through are more willing to do their part. For all work parties, board members work
alongside volunteers. Our mode of operation has been to provide good direction, hand off responsibility, and expect performance. Working at Café au Play is never a casual outing, and there is a certain respect for that. Volunteers leave with a sense of something being accomplished, some visible progress being made, and something of worth they can feel a part of.

We also reciprocate in small and symbolic ways. As an incentive, we provide free drinks and sandwiches for all volunteers. At the end of the work period, we personally thank them for their work and recognize their contributions by posting photos and affiliations on our social media sites. All this creates a sense of ownership that further embeds our organization in the local community.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE SOCIAL ENTERPRISE MODEL

When the founding board first envisioned a social enterprise, it seemed a close fit with mission and need. The coffee shop would be a family-friendly third place and a revenue generating operation that, after a few lean years, would be self-sustaining. But reality suggests otherwise. Not only has our major fundraiser been used to backfill substantial revenue shortfalls, but we also have needed to experiment with other funding schemes to save the organization from what seems an ever-present threat of closing our doors.

Why did it not work out as we expected? Part of it was our blissful ignorance of what it would take to create and sustain an organization, much less a new and innovative one. In our optimism, we focused more on the potential strengths of the social enterprise model rather than the weaknesses.

High on the list of potential weaknesses is the unrealistic expectations of leadership. The executive director of an earned income social enterprise like Café au Play must excel in two realms. She or he must be skilled in the usual nonprofit kitbag from event planning and fundraising to board and volunteer engagement. But she or he must also be an excellent business manager, skilled in personnel management, intimately aware of cost leakages and revenue opportunities as well of new industry service trends. The list of expected competences is long indeed, especially in a new enterprise where resources are severely constrained.

Another potential weakness is public perception. For newcomers and some regulars there is a lack of understanding that Café au Play is a nonprofit service organization. On the surface it looks like a successful business, so they are likely to treat it as such, unaware of the significant community investment it takes to sustain it.

Café au Play is also disadvantaged regarding our ability to seek external support for our programming. Since we generate a revenue stream and our mission is not considered a critical social need, we have a more difficult task selling ourselves to grant-giving organizations. While we believe we provide a critical and valued service, it is not so viewed by foundations and government agencies whose mission and funding sources often constrain their grants to organizations that serve the most marginalized citizens. Because the list of funders willing to consider smaller organizations operating outside mainstream social service models is short, we have so far been unsuccessful in obtaining program grants.
But the social enterprise may have provided important advantages, given that we are succeeding where nearly all for-profit family-centered establishments have failed. In the years that Café au Play has been in development, we have seen six for-profit family-friendly coffeehouses either close (4) or substantially rebrand their operation away from a family-centric focus (2). Because we can fundraise and solicit support from the community in a way that a private for-profit venture cannot, we can operate at a loss and still fulfill our community-serving mission. There is no question that we are constrained by market logic, but we are not bound by it. And because we have a profit side, we can share the overhead costs between the revenue generating and mission-oriented sides of our enterprise.

IS CAFÉ AU PLAY A SOCIAL INNOVATION?

In many ways, Café au Play fits the criteria for social innovation identified by Cnaan and Vinokur-Kaplan in this volume. Café au Play was transformative for its community—supporting the visioning process that led to its partnership with Tabor Commons, building collaborations with other nonprofit organizations, and combining diverse sources of funding with volunteer initiative to transform a former drug house into a community institution.

Café au Play developed a novel solution to social problems encountered by its entrepreneurial founder and her friends—the isolation of parenting and the lack of public spaces that welcomed children and families. Café au Play provides a place to go for parents, grandparents, and caretakers to be in the presence of others—a simple act that helps them overcome the isolation of caring for children in the private space of home. At Café au Play, caregivers can have some adult time while their children interact in a creative and social play environment. It sets the stage for casual interactions that can lead to networks of friendship and support.

Café au Play also developed an innovative revenue model. Because it wanted to be a resource open to all families, we rejected the pay-to-play model of kids clubs and play spaces. Instead, we developed a hybrid model that combined coffee shop revenues with nonprofit fundraising and volunteer support. Our social enterprise approach seems to be more resilient, succeeding where for-profit ventures failed.

Café au Play has taken an innovative approach to the design of our outdoor spaces. By using high tolerance greenscaping, creekbed-type water runnels, and basalt boulder outcroppings, we combined the latest techniques in green infrastructure design with the best models for natural play areas.

Café au Play has also changed the ecology of social spaces for children and families in Portland by creating an audience for new performance occupations and family service providers. Magicians, puppeteers, and artists have all found a home at Café au Play. Two of our regular performers, Red Yarn and Oliver Rootbeer and Dingo, now make their livings from free-will donations on a kids-performance circuit anchored by Café au Play. Café au Play has also created a new space for educators and therapists to introduce services to clients. We regularly provide outreach in family health, breast feeding, healthy eating, natural healing, and nearly any topic that has someone willing to promote it without a fee. Sam Stevens, a family therapist who offers a monthly New Fathers Meet Up Group, was recently featured in an *Oregonian* (Muldoon, 2013) article on the mental health needs of new dads.
CONCLUSION

Is the Café au Play replicable? Yes, something like it will be done elsewhere, but the particular form it takes will depend on its ability to tack with the winds of change that drive it, the degree to which it becomes deeply embedded in the network of ties that bind, and the skill of its entrepreneurial founder and board to engender support that stays. While all these will alter form and outcomes, there is only one constant that will ultimately determine success—sheer dogged persistence, a persistence first generated by adventure, then vestedness, and finally a sense of responsibility to staff, families, and community who depend on the service you provide.

When we developed our timeline in the formative years of organizational founding, we estimated that we would open in 2 years. We substantially missed that target, but given where we started, with no money, an inexperienced board, a challenging site, and a grand vision, our delay seems understandable and our survival surprising. Café au Play proceeded with the implicit understanding that we would get this done when it got done, and that we would move no faster than the community that supported us.

That support has carried us forward to a more optimistic present. Our average daily revenues are closing in on breaking even. We have increased staff wages and overlap coverage. We have begun to produce our own line of baked goods. Our barista training program, which is so popular among high schoolers we cannot meet demand, may soon open Night Grounds, an evening coffee shop for teens. Our last major construction project, the canopy over our back patio, is complete, essentially doubling our three-season seating capacity. Our loyal patrons, who have tolerated a crowded space, repeated construction events, and the missteps of our first years, continue to support us and spread the word. It’s a hopeful sign.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Café au Play has succeeded where for-profit enterprises with similar missions did not. To what extent was this attributable to Café au Play being a social enterprise? What other factors were important to its success?

2. Café au Play began with the vision that coffee shop revenues would eventually allow the organization to be self-sustaining. However, Café au Play founders soon learned that traditional nonprofit revenue strategies (fundraisers, grants, donations) would be critical to its survival. What does this reveal about the strengths and weaknesses of the social enterprise model?

3. The social enterprise model puts heavy demand on its leadership because it requires entrepreneurial vision as well as excellence in both business and nonprofit arenas. What are the implications for Café au Play as it transitions to a second generation of leaders and managers? Given its small size, unique history, and mixed revenue stream, will it be able to find people with the appropriate vision and skills to carry the organization forward? How should Café au Play plan for this transition? What aspects of this situation are unique to social enterprise organizations, and what are universal for all organizations during periods of transition?
4. Café au Play actively developed partnerships with other organizations and individuals. While most were successful, all involved tensions and risks. Was Café au Play strategic, opportunistic, or simply lucky in the partnerships it formed? Drawing on your own organizational experience, discuss how you have negotiated the potential problems of partnerships and whether the benefits of collaboration outweigh the risks. Consider how this calculus changes with the vision, developmental stage, and resources of an organization.

5. Café au Play was very successful getting grants for green infrastructure (rain gardens, permeable pavers, ecoroofs) and other capital improvements, but it has not been successful in getting programming grants. This experience is contrary to that of many small nonprofit social service organizations that are more successful obtaining grants for innovative programs. What lessons did Café au Play leaders take from their experience? Do you think their assessment of the situation was accurate? Should they have been more persistent in pursuing programming grants, or did they use their resources efficiently by seeking grants in areas of past success? In what way did the grants jointly pursued by Tabor Commons and Café au Play shape Café au Play’s development?

6. Café au Play has a foundational myth—a single mom with limited resources discovers there are few restaurants or coffee shops that are welcoming to children and families. With the help of friends and community partners, she leads an effort to transform a former deli with a history of disreputable activities into a self-sustaining community space where adults can interact while their children play. Discuss the role and importance of foundational myths. How important are they in attracting volunteers, media attention, and other resources? To what extent did Café au Play’s foundational myth help it define its mission and promote its goals? Can a foundational myth prevent an organization from pursuing new areas of development, or is it an important touchstone preventing mission drift? Does a foundational myth distort the real story of how an organization learns and succeeds?

7. At the outset, the founders of Café au Play were wildly optimistic about how quickly they would become operational and self-sustaining. Is this typical of innovative enterprises, or were the founders particularly conservative in moving the project along? Do you think that organizational founders are typically aware of the commitment it takes to get a new organization off the ground? Is this blissful ignorance a good thing? Have you started a new organization that required more time and resources than expected? If you had known what a commitment it would take, would you do it again?

8. Café au Play managed several crisis situations that could have led to organizational failure. How would you evaluate their responses? Is there a one-best-way to respond to an organizational crisis or does the response shape the organization in a way that makes it seem appropriate in retrospect? What general attitudes did Café au Play leaders bring to the situation that allowed them to respond in a way that helped the organization move forward? Can organizational leaders be taught crisis management, or is it something learned by doing? Does crisis management depend on a skill set, or does it derive from a deeper knowledge of human behavior?
CHAPTER 5: Café au Play

9. In the section “Ties That Bind,” the author comments on the different types of networks in which organizations and their leaders are embedded and the benefits and limitations of these network affiliations. Did the author's description resonate with your experience? Describe the network affiliations of an organization you know. How do they affect the organization?

10. As Café au Play begins its third year of operation, it seems to have proven its ability to survive and thrive. Its major building projects are complete, it is debt free, has a stable revenue base, good leadership, an active board, and strong community support. Most important, it is fulfilling its mission of being an accessible third place for children and families. Why did it succeed? Was it luck, pluck, the right idea at the right time, or something else entirely? Identify five possible reasons for its success and discuss which you think was most critical. If you were on the board of Café au Play, what are some future opportunities and threats it should be anticipating and what recommendations would you make for action?

REFERENCES


**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**Café au Play social media**

Website blog: http://www.cafeauplay.org
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/Cafeauplay
Picassa web album: http://picasaweb.google.com/cafeauplay.photos

**Café au Play videos**

*Story of Café au Play, Tabor Commons and On the Road with Café au Play.*
