

# “In the business of changing lives”: Examining the activist knowledge-practices of consumer businesses

## WHY WOULD A COURIER COMPANY TAKE ACTION TO SUPPORT A CLEANING BUSINESS?

In the summer of 2009, Diana Capponi sat down for a filmed interview with David Reville, then a professor at Ryerson University and a long-time consumer/survivor community organizer. At the time of the interview, Diana was the Employment Works! coordinator at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). Previously, Diana had co-founded the Ontario Council of Alternative Businesses,<sup>1</sup> an organization representing small businesses run entirely by people who have been diagnosed as and labelled “mentally ill.” Sitting in the sunshine garden at CAMH that summer day, the two old friends spoke at length about mad people and work.<sup>2</sup> During the interview, Diana described a grassroots action taken by workers at a courier company, A-WAY Express, in response to a threat by the Ontario Ministry of Health to revoke some base funding from a business called Fresh Start Cleaning and Maintenance. Both were consumer/survivor businesses that followed a community economic development model, which meant they relied on government funding. They had a shared interest. The funding that was at risk of being withdrawn was essential for providing employment opportunities to consumers/survivors at Fresh Start. In solidarity with Fresh Start, workers at A-WAY Express Couriers responded by spending a full day hand-delivering letters to the minister of health’s office, one every half an hour. Diana laughs as she recounts how the receptionist at the minister’s office grew irritated by the end of day. But that action, in tandem with other complaints and actions coordinated through a psychiatric survivor listserv,

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was successful in restoring much-needed funding for Fresh Start’s operations.

## WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH MAD STUDIES?

This interview snippet offers one example of mad people expressing a community-based politics of solidarity through their involvement in these businesses. Upon hearing stories such as this, I am struck by three things: (1) how workers in consumer/survivor businesses engaged in activist knowledge-practices during the 1990s; (2) the lack of empirical research, particularly within Mad Studies, focused on consumer/survivor businesses as sites of community organizing; and (3) the risk of losing our activist histories as leaders in the consumer/

survivor/ex-patient (c/s/x) movement such as Diana Capponi pass on. Over the last decade, there have been a handful of studies of consumer/survivor businesses in Ontario (e.g., Buhariwala et al., 2015; Corbiere et al., 2019; Hall & Wilton, 2011; Kidd et al., 2015), but none have considered the kinds of *political* practices described in the narrative above.

As an emerging Mad scholar and a PhD candidate in sociology at York University, I aim in my doctoral research to uncover how consumer/survivor businesses were sites for producing and mobilizing activist knowledges and how those knowledges were significant for their employees and for the c/s/x movement generally. Applying an “ethnographic sensibility” (Schatz, 2009) amid the COVID-19 pandemic, this sociological study draws on archival data and interviews to pose critical questions about activist knowledge-practices within these sites (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008). In doing so, this study aims to contribute to a rethinking of the significance of consumer/survivor businesses, to uncover a piece of our activist history that has not been given its due.

## “IN THE BUSINESS OF CHANGING LIVES”

Distinct from earlier models of vocational rehabilitation, sheltered workshops, or other psychiatric service provider-led programming, consumer/survivor businesses are noteworthy for their egalitarian approach, grassroots origins, and being survivor-led at all levels of the organization. Consumer/survivor businesses are unique to Ontario. They were not created with the primary intent of being therapeutic, or to simply put a few dollars in community members’ pockets (though they do help to sustain a

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few people within the community), so to evaluate them solely on the basis of these criteria overlooks what motivated the establishment of these businesses in the first place. I argue that in order to fully comprehend the establishment of consumer/survivor businesses, we need to understand local c/s/x organizing and history. These businesses emerged during a time of significant change. At the beginning of the 1990s, the c/s/x movement needed to adapt to sustain itself through a recession and, specific to Ontario, under a conservative provincial government. In the early stages, these businesses were a means to an end for c/s/x organizers. Survivor leaders such as the late Diana Capponi, who took it upon themselves to manage and lead these businesses, were in fact “in the business of changing lives” (K. Church, personal communication, 2020). From within these businesses, survivor leaders would rally community members and organize around pressing issues facing their community. For example, one primary concern of the local c/s/x movement during the late 1990s was to fight incoming provincial legislation around community treatment orders (CTOs) (Fabris, 2011).

## MAD ARCHIVAL WORK IS POLITICAL

Studies seeking to evaluate the effectiveness of these businesses either as therapeutic intervention or as social entrepreneurship overlook a significant piece of Mad history. Bridging the sociology of social movements, the sociology of knowledge, and Mad Studies, my research aims to pose critical questions about generating, molding, and mobilizing activist knowledges. Doing so requires thoughtful reflection on the preservation of community-based knowledges and the ever-present risks of depoliticizing or co-opting c/s/x activist knowledges within academic spaces (McWade, 2020).

By “Mad archival work,” I am referring to the formal kinds of work undertaken to assemble and affirm our collective history as one worth preserving. As Mel

Starkman described in a 2009 interview, a psychiatric survivor archive “is the living heritage of the people who had been in the movement.”<sup>3</sup> By Mad archival work, I am also referring to the informal collecting and digging through our material history: the newspaper clippings, photographs, VHS tapes, and newsletters saved in personal collections. This work involves dusting off and fleshing out the stuff of the movement, in order to produce the archives. As with much c/s/x movement history, the documentation chronicling this history is fragmented and requires preservation. What’s more, in the last few years, we have lost a number of Toronto-based early c/s/x movement leaders, including Diana Capponi (1953–2014), Pat Capponi (1947–2019), Mel Starkman (1942–2019), and Bonnie Burstow (1945–2020). This history is also about all of the people who have been part of this movement whom we don’t yet know about. Honouring their contributions to our movement means bringing their work to light and preserving it in ways that ensure Mad community access to these knowledges. 🍁

## NOTES

1. The Ontario Council of Alternative Businesses is now known as Working for Change ([workingforchange.ca](http://workingforchange.ca)).
2. Excerpts of this interview are featured in a short web-based documentary. The full interview can be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDy6gROJ-w>.
3. This filmed interview with Mel Starkman from 2009 is available on the *Madness Canada* website at <https://madnesscanada.com/resources/video/toronto-activists-project/description/>.

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