



**CHANGING OUR EMPLOYMENT MINDSET:  
Raising our Expectations  
Colleen Cann MacKenzie**

***“Dawg Tired on an Island of Opportunity:  
Creating a Thriving Employment World Within Your Clubhouse”***

**Colleen Cann MacKenzie, Crossroads Cape Breton, Canada**

**Our Island Life**

Dawg tired..... If you had asked me how we felt about our employment program about 5 years ago, that would have been my answer. We were ***dawg tired***. Not just tired in the usual sense of the word, but deep down, shaken to the bone tired.

My name is Colleen Mackenzie and I am the Director of a small clubhouse on the eastern edge of Canada called Crossroads Cape Breton. I would like you to meet my colleagues – Lloyd “Superman” Willett, Warren “Dawg Tired” Rose & Kim “Denver Baby!” MacMullin. I am thankful for each of you, your insights and your support.

Crossroads is located in a small city of 31,000. We are 4,000 square miles of mountains, lakes and forests surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean - rated by National Geographic as the second most beautiful island in the world. Abandoned railroads and coal mines litter the once industrial towns. We are home to many immigrants and the only Gaelic speaking people in the world outside of the British Isles.

Like many islands – there is a “flow” to our lives and beliefs that we hold close. Music, dance, community, family, hardship and perseverance mark our island culture. Paired with beauty and a relaxed way of life are loss, grief and struggle. Much like mental illness is woven in and throughout us as individuals, we are made up of many qualities that are often at odds with one another. The unemployment rate on Cape Breton Island has floated between 15 and 18% over the past three years.

A dear colleague of mine used to talk about the need for people at the clubhouse to shed the pattern of surviving... surviving mental illness, substance use, the limitations of living on social benefits and the shame of living in poverty. He felt that surviving at times becomes a way of not just living but of “being” and it can wear away at your sense of self. He believed that we needed to push one another to thrive not just survive. That in thriving, we find true meaning and joy in life. That in thriving – we practice courage and shed some of the profound fear that often accompanies mental illness.

**At a Crossroads**

Crossroads Cape Breton was not thriving 5 years ago; especially in relation to our employment efforts. Our 2010 accreditation report described us as having “diminished energy and vibrancy” and “diverted from our primary goal of

providing a strong and accessible employment function.” When we first received this feedback, we were not impressed! We ranted about being misunderstood; the consultants weren’t given us any credit! We were poised to write an article “30 Excuses Not To Do TE” (not just 10). At the Initial Findings Meeting the message was clear... our clubhouse was DAWG TIRED in our employment efforts and something had to change if we wanted our clubhouse to really thrive. We will forever be grateful to Jo & Gord, our Faculty Accreditation team, who told us what we so needed to hear.

And so we started the scary job, as the author Robert Quinn says, of building the bridge as we walked on it....frightened, unsure, shaky at best but holding hands and keeping our sight set on the horizon. And on that horizon was a vision of people working and thriving in accepting, healthy communities. We began the process of transforming our community and ourselves.

### **Raising Expectations**

When we were asked to do this plenary on raising employment expectations – our club reflected on our growth & transformation over the past few years.

We “**Rediscovered our Club**” in 2012. We were having an identity crisis! Were we a true clubhouse? Were we collectively committed to the promises found in our International Standards? Did we believe that the work-ordered day could help members transform their lives? Luckily, Crossroads Cape Breton answered with a resounding “YES!” From this day of re-discover, we committed to creating a vibrant WOD, minimizing distractions from our true purpose and creating space for members to feel wanted, needed, and respected. New leaders within our community emerged with intent and pride.

We **got real with ourselves**. The days of accepting and buying into excuses for why we weren’t succeeding with our employment attempts were behind us. We committed to training and to attending the Employment Symposium hosted by Fountain House. We surrounded ourselves with people in the clubhouse world who deeply understood the restorative power of work. Goals from action plans on training led to employment work being based in the units rather than a separate employment area.

We **adjusted our attitude**, moving from a place of “We can’t do this” to “We must try and see where it takes us”. Billy, our colleague, recently said “Our new attitude is empowering to members”.

We decided to “**go big or stay home**”. Some of the largest employers in our local community became our target. Crossroads branded ourselves with T-shirts, slogans, logos, engaged in social media and claimed our place in the community in a larger than life way... No more quietly sitting in the corner for us! In 2014, we hosted a day-long **Free Your Mind Wellness Fair & Talent Festival** which brought our club into contact with literally thousands of people.

We **modeled the way**. As quoted in *Building the Bridge as You Walk On It*, “In our self-transformation, we became a living symbol of change”. In our willingness and desire to transform ourselves as a clubhouse – we invited and encouraged colleagues to do so. We started **building our own bridge** as we walked on it. We knew where we needed to go and we started moving in that direction. One step at a time, not knowing where the step might lead us, but believing that the process of moving would bring us somewhere closer to our vision.

We **raised our expectations** of our clubhouse, of what we could achieve, and of one another as colleagues. And with all of this, “**Hope came**”. Thanks to Kim for this simple and profound comment.

### **Getting ‘er Done**

Crossroads Cape Breton has changed our reality. Our accreditation report from August, 2015 states:

- *Despite the very high unemployment rate, Crossroads has developed 5 new TEPs*
- *The Clubhouse exceeds the Clubhouse International Employment Guidelines benchmarks for members employed in supported and independent employment.*

Crossroads now has 11 TEPs and 3 Group Placements; 52 members worked last year. We have hired a Career Coordinator to further members career aspirations; we have weekly, club-wide employment & education meetings and our EE Dinners are our most spectacular and popular evening program. Our employment agenda has top billing in our clubhouse. We celebrate members' efforts *everywhere*....

Crossroads now connects with groups of people who are in positions to make decisions: presidents, directors, government officials, etc. We no longer talk quietly and modestly about our mission of employment. We let employers know that if they want work done well – if they like to partner with a strong, grounded organization that will help their business and serve a critical social purpose – that Crossroads is the answer. Waiting to be invited to the table is in our past; when we see something happening that may result in great opportunities for the club and hence members – we move.

Members are supported with starting businesses. When a group of young adults started talking about creating a video development company, we said “Neat idea! We don’t have a clue how to do that, but we are here and we will help”... Now ***Galactic Crossroads*** is becoming incorporated as a non-profit cooperative. In November, we will be launching a web portal showcasing members’ artwork that can be purchased. We advocate for members to be paid fair compensation for first voice speaking engagements. Crossroads works with government agencies to improve their approach with people on social benefits who wish to return to work on more than a part-time basis.

When we were asked to present at the 18<sup>th</sup> International Seminar on employment, we were excited, nervous and a bit confused.

You see... we still have so much farther to go! Could we inspire other clubhouses into action and success when we are still struggling along, trying to figure things out and pushing ourselves further? We still have to shed the cloak of low expectations that sit deep within us at times, to talk more about careers and less about jobs. We still have so far to go but isn’t that the nature of clubhouse? As said by colleagues before me... isn’t the absolute magic of clubhouse to be found in the fact that our work is never finished? That we need and rely on one another to continue the work? That just as we wish one colleague good luck on their new job and plead for them to keep in touch with us - we turn to welcome a new member into our community, already looking for the many talents that lie quiet beneath the surface?

This is our hope for every clubhouse... that we will breathe deeply, recognize that opportunity surrounds and sustains us and walk forward, with our fear and courage simultaneously in hand. Our hope is that we will be true to ourselves and be a community of people sometimes leading, sometimes following, sometimes leaping...but ***always*** walking beside one another along the way.

Clubhouses have to do what needs to be done. Do not underestimate the power of friendship and the transformative power of work to be found in your clubhouse! We cannot afford to underestimate our role in the recovery members are experiencing. When we are struggling, we convince ourselves that employment is a luxury in our clubhouse - this could not be farther from the truth. Members working in jobs and careers that value them as individuals are the life blood of a clubhouse. Clubhouse International puts targets in place to make sure we remember how vital employment is to all of us.

We need to be brave enough to do the real hard work involved in changing the way we think and act in relation to members and employment. Creativity and determination, as well as strong partnerships are required. Clubhouses have

a truly unique opportunity to act as a catalyst for people who want to expect more. Whatever uncertainty is facing our clubhouse, we must set the pace and lead by example. How can we expect members to risk the security of social benefits if our club is not willing to take sizable risks as well? We must refuse to accept the way things have always been and raise our expectations within our clubhouse. Then like a powerful cold that takes hold of you in a Canadian autumn, it catches and spreads within ourselves and among our colleagues.

I challenge each of you to not just survive but to thrive! I do this to honor my dear friends and colleagues who have blessed my clubhouse life. Working on raising our employment expectations is an act of true courage and faith and at its core – it is an act of love.

If employment is one of the biggest struggles in your clubhouse (and for most of us it is...), do not sit by and accept the way things are. Aim not to survive but to *thrive*. Lead by example and build the bridge as you walk on it. Place one foot in front of the other, look into each other's eyes, grab a hold of each other's arm and move!

*This speech is dedicated in memory of our dear colleague Trevor*