



Life in a Coop Working Together

BY ISABELLE RIVEST

When Chantal Martin, a young nurse in her thirties, chose to live in a housing cooperative in 1989, she didn't expect to stay more than a year. While she felt attracted to community living, she was afraid of getting herself into something a little too involved. Now, five years later, there is no way she would go back to being a tenant in a regular apartment building.

What she enjoys most is being able to participate in the decision-making process. Do all these meetings and chores take much of her time? "Only for those on the Board of Directors. To compensate, we exempt them from other tasks, like cleaning. For the rest of us, I would say it takes about four hours a month."

Things haven't always been perfect since Chantal moved into the

coop. "At the start, we were a group of six friends who shared the same interests. We wanted to create a community life, organize parties and all kind of other activities. But many of the faces have changed and the general mood is different. Recently, for instance, we decided to turn the community room into a fitness centre."

Community living is not always easy. Inevitably, conflicts arise between individuals. "Some people are more progressive, others function in a more militaristic way. At times, this situation creates really interesting debates," she says.

Most importantly, Chantal discovered she has a sense of leadership she didn't know existed. Would she advise everyone to try coop living? "Yes, absolutely," she says without any hesitation at all. ♦

Housing cooperatives

A School for Democracy

BY ISABELLE RIVEST

Montréal's first housing cooperative was built in 1974, in Pointe-St-Charles. Its members were trying to protect themselves from rocketing rents due to speculation in the private market.

Twenty years later, the cooperative formula is still very much appreciated. Françoise Thériault has worked at the Fédération des coopératives d'habitation de l'île de Montréal (FÉCHIM) since 1983. She believes one of the main difficulties for new members is learning to live by democratic rules. In a cooperative, decisions are taken by all members. People have to defend their ideas, but also make compromises.

"One of the difficulties of living in a coop is maintenance. If you give all the work to professional contractors, rents will go up," explains Françoise. This is a primary difference between a cooperative and a public housing project. In public housing, the administration of the building is taken care of by the city. The tenants have only to keep up their own apartment. "But people who like an active life could get bored in a public project!" says Françoise.

In a housing cooperative, people have to take care of all aspects of ownership by participating on committees. The general assembly elects members to the Board of Directors to manage the coop's day-to-day affairs. But they are subject to the will of the general assembly, and can be quickly re-

moved from the board by a majority vote. Many cooperatives have a conflict resolution group, to intervene when problems arise between members, for instance, when one doesn't respect the rules.

Today, most government subsidy programmes for cooperative housing no longer exist. Still, Françoise is convinced that cooperatives play an important role in society, because they provide good quality apartments at a lower price. "Poverty creates all kinds of social problems, like crime, school dropouts, prostitution. A secure place to live is necessary to allow a person's energy to be put to uses other than immediate survival. Society as a whole benefits from that." ♦

Cuisiner en groupe

Vous êtes intéressées à cuisiner en groupe afin d'économiser, de bien vous alimenter et de créer des liens d'amitié? Inscrivez-vous dès maintenant à un de nos différents groupes : cuisine végétarienne, ethnique ou autre. Contactez le Centre des Femmes de Montréal, au 842-4780 et demander Julie Dionne.

Cooking together

Interested in joining a cooking group, to save money while eating well and making friends? The Women's Centre of Montréal offers vegetarian, ethnic and other cooking clubs that you can join. Contact Julie Dionne at the Women's Centre, 842-4780.

BANDE DESSINÉE par Jean Paul Eid

