

25 YEARS!
(2012 September 14)

Honoured guests and fellow Co-op members – welcome – and thanks for coming!

25 Years! We have survived for a quarter century! And we don't just have the history of the Co-op behind us – we have some of the “historians” who have lived through the evolution of the Co-op – we have 3 of the original members still with us – and with us here tonight! Hazel Herriot, Ligita Gulens and Maija Moeck – a special congratulations to you! You have seen it all!

The Co-op doors opened in July 1987 with 13 artists, representing pottery work, painting, fabric arts and woodworking. These art forms are still represented – and we vastly expanded those, and we now include photography, drawing, glasswork, basketry, card-making, metalwork, stonework, calligraphy, millinery, puppetry and jewellery – and we are always open to new art forms that come along.

Instead of going over the history of our evolution, which you can check out on-line, I wanted to briefly explore another aspect of the Co-op's history.

Why has the Co-op been so successful? What is it that allows us to be able to survive, when, in the hard times, many others don't?

Besides location, location and location(!) - I think that, first of all – and above all – we insist on **quality work**, no matter what the art form. All our work is juried when first entering the Co-op – and we stand behind our work. We are continually taking workshops, to improve our skills and expertise – and it has paid off – we have a number of artisans who have been recognized for their quality workmanship and originality – locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

We have also lasted a long time because of our **commitment** – we are all committed to making this Co-op work. The Co-op has come through some pretty hard times, when individuals have reached deep into their own pockets to pay the rent. We all share the work that has to be done – on display committees, maintenance committees, supplies committees, publicity, webmaster work, shifts at the store, and the list goes on – all done

on a volunteer basis – we are a not-for-profit organization. We work by consensus and co-operation even if we don't always agree, and the meetings are all about “taking care of business” – and with a treasurer who keeps us on track.

Essential, too, is that we have a **willingness to change with the times** – we have to – to survive. In the early days, the Co-op went through a major restructuring – to insist that everyone must be full, paying members, and not associates (because the associates do not carry the full volunteer workload). We have had, more recently, a Big Picture committee, who oversaw our make-over – a new logo, new signs, new flags – and our advertising entered the age of computers. We have to look – and be – business-savvy in this day and age!

I think that a final part of the formula for success has to be the **passion** that we bring to our work. Art matters to us, and we are not just passionate about doing our own work – we have also tried to take that expertise, and share it with others. In fact, we have made this a part of our mandate and our vision statement. The Valley Artisans Co-op has been very active in the local community – donating countless hours over the years for instructional workshops and demonstrations. We take on co-op students from the high school and give them instruction, and we offer an annual bursary, so that budding artists can continue their pursuit of the arts.

But none of this would matter, without our customers and community coming back to us. And because they are so important to us, we are now open every day of the week, all year long – except for only one or two days off a year.

We have survived for 25 years – and we should all be proud of this achievement – well done, Co-operators!

I would like to propose a toast – to the Co-op – may we continue to have a long and prosperous association with our customers and our community, without whom we could not have survived. To another 25 years – and beyond!

By Mary Lynn Benz
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