

# Montreal's Hidden "Jem"

## Independence and good business sense

By Joel Ceausu  
The Suburban

Today it's a backpack filled with wipes, diapers and various balms for rashes and other things that ail babies. Tomorrow it may be aluminum siding, or mascara.

It doesn't really matter what it is; what's most important is the bottom line and at Montreal's hidden gem of a factory workshop, that means jobs for its employees, profit for its clients.

The JEM Workshop Inc., is a Snowdon-based atelier, where for more than half a century, adults from all backgrounds with special needs have found a place to be productive and earn a living, while providing a valuable and highly competitive service for Montreal businesses in all sectors, including food products, electronics, garments,

hardware, cosmetics and medical supplies.

The 84 employees, aged 21-67, are paid by Emploi-Québec as the organization keeps them off welfare while boosting their social skills, self-esteem and helping them reach their full potential while satisfying the business world's profit motive, says Managing Director Danny Kay.

"Just about anything a company needs we can do here" he says, touring the clean and structured 21,000-square-foot facility on Mountain Sights near de la Savane. The medley of laughter and conversation blend with the din of reversing tractor-trailers and scores of merchandise-laden pallets being unloaded.

### Perfect product

Some of the jobs they do include shrink-wrapping, labelling and blister packaging.



Workshop employee Ronnie Abonyi with managing director Danny Kay. A variety of skill sets and ultra-competitive.

For example, a container full of small appliances shipped from China are mislabelled. "Is the customer going to send them back? Call the insurance company? Will they lose all that time ordering a new load? No way, you send them to us," says Kay. "We unpack, re-label, re-pack and out they go to your customers," he says, gesturing to a shipping dock where the constant flow of 18-wheelers brings in more loads of clothing, cosmetics, household items and more.

The employees – some mentally challenged from birth with limited mobility, and some with post-graduate educations and speaking multiple languages yet can't function in a normal work setting – are highly supervised and very motivated in this sheltered workshop, which has earned the respect and business of

many Montreal firms. Despite the challenges they face, the employees turn out perfect product with rigid quality control in a clean, safe, organized and highly positive work environment.

Whether its assembling a sample card for a home finishing product, folding cartons of small makeup displays or applying corrective decals to boatloads of dollar store items with glaring omissions on the packaging, the process is the same, says Kay.

"We look at the product, the job, and break it down into the smallest single steps," he explains. "We have a variety of skill sets here and we determine how many steps and who should perform them." A cardboard mascara box for example, can require a couple of folds, a sticker and an insert, whereas a swatch ring can entail hole punching, colour

coding and assembly. "We take it to the most minute level and build it up. But that's not our customers' concern," he says, explaining why the workshop is so popular. "Because we are a non-profit organization, we are just covering our basics to keep these people working so the price is always right."

### Plain Good Business

It's that combination of impeccable, flexible service and highly competitive rates that make JEM a popular choice as sub-contractor for companies large and small, says the workshop's sole sales rep Doreen Kerner.

"We are far more than just a wonderful place that does good for a vulnerable group of people: We're also a solid business consideration." Of course there is the pride, self-esteem and independence that comes with work, as many would live in complete isolation and dependence without this place. "But the truth is this is a great business story because our process and therefore prices are lower: We follow the same stringent regulations, meet and exceed all standards and yet are extremely flexible. The big difference is our motive: It's not profit, our workers simply need the ability to earn."

Most companies now have a mission she says. "Everyone wants to 'give back,' and here we see them put corporate citizenship money where their mouth is, helping the community, empowering individuals without handouts. No one feels bad for anyone here. It's all just plain good business." ■

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## COHEN

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youngest generation in the driver's seat helping them to develop their understanding and appreciation of giving

**REMEMBERING ALLAN:** Former Suburban Newspaper sales executive **Allan Sobel** passed away last week. Allan was a born salesman, but he had never done so for newspapers until I suggested to another local community paper that they give him a try. He took to it immediately, doubling the paper in size and constantly bringing in accounts none of his colleagues thought were possible. He soon

moved on to The Suburban, reaching the same impeccable level of sales until health problems forced him to retire. Our sympathies to his wife Louise and the rest of the family.

**COHEN CHATTER:** I am happy for 92.5 The Beat FM's **Donna Saker**, who has finally been relieved of the longest shift in daytime radio. She is now on the air from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. instead of until 4 p.m. **Christine Jerome** (a.k.a. CJ) now has her own program from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., leading into Cousin Vinny's drive with **Shaun McMahon** stepping in as his sidekick...Filming on the Bobby Fischer biopic *Pawn Sacrifice*, starring **Toby Maguire**, picked up its

pace last week with shooting around Saint Louis Square, Île Saint-Hélène, Mirabel Airport and a hotel in Granby. ..With no ill intent towards regular Montreal Canadiens anthem singer Charles Prévoist Linton, it was so nice Saturday to see the crowd asked by PA announcer **Michel Lacroix** to sing O Canada together. The 21,000 plus fans belted it out beautifully, indeed not music to the ears of PQ Premier **Pauline Marois**.

*Have something to share? Email me at [mcohen@thesuburban.com](mailto:mcohen@thesuburban.com) or leave a message at 514-484-9203, ext. 307. Follow me on Twitter @mikecohensl and at <http://blog.thesuburban.com>.*

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