

## **5 Questions on Innovation with Brent Harris, Saint John Tool Library & DIY Centre:**

### **1. How do you encourage innovation in your organization?**

Our business model itself is innovative – the Saint John Tool Library & DIY Centre is the first of its kind in the Maritimes. We have married the tool library to a co-operative woodworking shop, makerspace and training centre. In the past, if Saint Johners wanted to fix up their home, tackle a project, or just learn basics, they either needed existing access to tools – a friend with the tools – or had to fork out lots of money to either rent or buy those tools. Those days are over. Now for the cost of a cordless drill set, our residents can become SJTL members and borrow what they need from our large inventory of tools. We are also providing classes to members and non-members alike to learn all things DIY. For a few dollars more, our residents can purchase our premium memberships which grant them access to our fully equipped shop for their projects. We believe this is a crucial culture shift and an innovation that will help us revitalize our city, especially our priority neighbourhoods.

### **2. What are some of the biggest barriers to innovation?**

Imagination.

I live in the south end, one of our five priority neighbourhoods. Although Saint John has some beautiful properties, my own neighborhood is sadly run-down. Research tells us that architecture is powerful at shaping our narrative of community and self. When we live in run-down neighbourhoods, it damages our ability to imagine good and healthy futures. This is why we think SJTL is so important for Saint John; it is aimed at inspiring people and equipping them to take action where they live.

### **3. Why do you think innovation is important for Saint John and the province?**

Saint John has a major place in history as Canada's first city and was one of the world's top five shipbuilding port cities at one time. When we lost our shipbuilding industry, we entered an identity crisis from which we have not recovered. Innovation is important because it provides people with hope about our future and pushes our residents to challenge the stifling status quo. That's why our innovators are so important! When they take big risks and come out successful they prove to people that risk can be good.

#### **4. What are some simple things you've done to drive change?**

I have been in the social development and non-profit sector long enough to know that real change doesn't come any other way than from within. So, my wife, Cassie, and son Jubal chose to move into the south end on Mecklenburg Street. Living here is a first step to create change. As I walked the streets, met neighbours, and learned the rhythms of the street, I saw that the community didn't need another great program or non-profit from outside, it needed an entrepreneur from within the community to show others that change is possible. I don't think I'm going to save the city by starting SJTL, but I do think it is an important shift.

To see change, happen, I also let go. At first, I didn't want anyone to touch the idea for fear they would ruin it. But as Dakota Lutes and the Venture Validation team from Enterprise Saint John walked alongside me and offered some great coaching, I realized that letting go and partnering with other keen leaders would increase SJTL's chances of survival and sustainability. I think this is a crucial piece of leadership and entrepreneurship.

#### **5. What success have you had with innovation in your organization?**

We've adopted a strong online presence that allows our members to see our entire inventory at any time. Traditional tool rental outfits have a very haphazard online presence that doesn't allow people to see what's in stock or the price. With our model you can see what's in and when it is due back if it's out. You can even check out your tools online, so they are reserved for you if you can't get there right away.

We have also developed an innovative membership structure a bit like Netflix for tools. The idea that people would subscribe to access something rather than own it or rent it is not new, but it is new to this industry.

By partnering with community-based non-profits, contractors, and a growing pool of volunteers, we have pitched an innovative approach to neighbourhood revitalization. Our belief is that architecture either damages or invigorates our sense of place and our personal narrative. By offering people the opportunity and tools needed to come together and fix up their own home or their neighbour's, we are like modern-day barn-raisers!