

With a **Little Help** from **My Friends**



Co-op Business as the New Wave

by Judi Burton

Ever worked for a big, faceless corporation or huge national franchise and been micro-managed into feeling like just one of the sheep? Every time you came up with an excellent idea, a huge corporate boot with army treads squashed it like a bug; you needed 100 “gold stars” to make up for one lousy mistake; and your “all” was never good enough.

And another workplace reality of today is that many people with advanced education are working in service jobs in stores and restaurants. They do menial work for “corporate suits” who may be less educated than their staff. I actually met a rocket scientist delivering pizza for Domino’s—true story.

Thankfully, a new trend of co-op business is on the rise in America, and it’s gaining momentum. It puts talented people to work, doing what they do best, but without the expense of going it alone. Most people think of health food when they hear “co-op,” but in fact, you can have housing co-ops, utility co-ops, art co-ops, spa co-ops, fitness co-ops, wellness co-ops, and so on. According to online encyclopedia Wikipedia, a co-op is “a business organization owned and operated by a group of individuals for their mutual benefit.” The definition sounds pretty bland. What does it really mean, and how does it actually work?

Ovis Hill Farms CSA

Farm co-ops are becoming increasingly common, and CSA

co-ops are the wave of the future. In a CSA, or Community Supported Agriculture program, customers pay a fixed share price from their grocery budget at the beginning of the season and are given packed boxes of fresh food each week as it is harvested, generally at better quality and lower cost than in stores. This system advances the money the farmer needs to plant crops and clears the question of how much to grow. This type of co-op works especially well with multiple farms involved, as it broadens the selection of harvested products offered. There is, of course, some risk for the paying CSA member, as one can never predict crop success, harvest timing or weather. But it’s a smorgasbord of yummy farm-fresh goodness.

Charlie Caldwell owns Ovis Hill Farms, which specializes in pasture-raised meat, such as lamb and beef, but he also works cooperatively with several other farms that produce organic or free-range chicken, eggs, milk, cheese, produce, honey, grits, pickled veggies, and more. When you have several farmers who can share the work of selling each other’s products at markets around the state, this gives each farmer more time to actually farm and less time burdened with sales duties. Today’s farmer has to advertise, market, sell, find places to distribute products, transport, store, and manage farm tours for school programs, in addition to managing crops and livestock. This makes it hard to find time to sit in a rocker on the porch watching the grandkids catch fireflies in the evenings.

Along with the CSA deliveries, the farmers share the work of selling at the community farmers' markets, and divide the profits. Splendid isn't it? "If you share a common goal with like minds, while appreciating each other's strengths and making up for each other's weaknesses, it could be a great thing," Caldwell mused.

The Yoga Room Co-op

The Yoga Room is the longest running yoga center on the Grand Strand. Before Donna Stead turned it into a co-op, she was struggling to manage and pay all the bills by herself. Sometimes a church rented the space, and there were scheduled yoga and Tai chi classes, but that just wasn't enough, and expenses continued to rise.

Now, she has nine co-op members, at last count, who rent the studio space from a shared calendar online. The rent is low enough—\$25 to \$40 per hour, depending on peak or off-peak times—that these practitioners can come in and use the space for paying students and clients at the hourly rate without having to go into debt taking care of their own buildings. Members meet to decide what to change or improve and take part in any awesome new ideas they may have that would further the growth of the co-op. There is no muddy corporate boot stifling their creativity, telling them how they must run their business.

"The new energy here right now is the free community events," Stead said. "If a teacher wants to come in and do a free event, I will donate the space." The Yoga Room hosts many community-building events, such as the Hafla Party, an all-women belly dancing gathering; open mic poetry readings; Kirtan, call and response singing; drum circles; and other creative functions. The positive energy that courses through The Yoga Room comes from years of amazing souls who have passed through its doors, brandishing their tools for wisdom and well-being. "Now that it is a co-op, it feels as if the positivity is being catalyzed, and the space has now become a magnet for like-minded individuals with a set goal in mind."

Ebb & Flow Art Co-op

Creative, artsy people are not always the most business-oriented folks. This is why your dad told you to "get your head out of the clouds and find a real job" when you said to him you wanted to be an artist. The words "starving" and "artist" sadly go together way too often. So, you would think four artsy, non-business-oriented people getting together would be a disaster; but in fact, it has turned into an explosion of creative awesomeness. Ebb & Flow Art Co-op in Murrells Inlet has withstood the barrage of "they'll-never-make-it" comments for three years and going. They're still around because they all share in the responsibility for running the co-op. The funny part is they all say, "We have no leader," and with a smile add, "but we want one." Yet, none of the four will step up and take the reins.

So, how does it work? Well, they share the space, sell coffee, invite people in for free Wi-Fi, and each member works at the gallery one day a week. When you stop in,

you might find Lee Arthur working on his driftwood animal sculptures that he churns out like a hen laying eggs. Or you might find Keels Sweeny and her pretty Weimaraner dog creating a work of art from a reclaimed piece of wood. Gaston Locklear is there once a week pouring his heart into a waterscape masterpiece. And, of course, Ted Watts will give you a warm hug, if he's not working on a beautifully decorated chair or dresser. Ebb & Flow also provides free gallery space to around 15 other artists, but takes a fee when something is sold. "I can make a living," said Arthur. When asked if he showcases anywhere else, he let out a maniacal laugh and said, "Yes, in my car."

Alternative Health Clinic

While Alternative Health Clinic is owned by Dr. Jin Li Dong, many of the offices are rented by other like-minded doctors, psychotherapists, massage therapists, licensed colonic hydrotherapy practitioners, and acupuncturists who all operate cooperatively by the same code of wholistic wellness. It is not enough to simply treat the symptom or the ailment; the goal should be to bring the body and life into balance. This means that every patient is not just examined and asked where it hurts or how much, but also questioned gently about emotions, diet, activities and other elements of context that offer clues to what has caused the symptoms or "dis-ease." Patients become part of the Alternative Health Clinic extended family, and become more aware and more sensitive to what supports their healing and wellness. We've all been to hospitals, clinics and doctors' offices where we've sat naked on the butcher paper under fluorescent lights, shivering and feeling meek, while the primary care doctor poked at us and asked the same routine questions about symptoms. With Alternative Health Clinic, there is a more cooperative and nurturing environment in which practitioners communicate with patients and with each other as a team to provide a comprehensive wellness program. Peter Dong, office manager and son of Dr. Dong, stated: "Our patients really are our champions in the community. If a patient is happy with our care, then they are going to talk about it. As of now, over half our patients come from referrals."

So, the next time you hear that voice in your head whispering, "Wouldn't it be great to be my own boss?" consider the possibilities of a co-op. What is it that you want to do? Now that you know what a co-op is, why don't you try to start one? Have a lot of friends? Have a trade? Have a burning desire to succeed and to love what you do? It's possible, my friend, and may be easier than you think.

For more info on Ovis Hill Farms CSA, visit OvisHillFarm.com, and see ad, page 5. For more info on The Yoga Room Co-op, visit MyrtleBeachYogaRoom.com and see ad, page 19. For more info on Ebb & Flow Art Co-op, visit EbbandFlowArtCo-op.com. For more info on Alternative Health Clinic, visit AlternativeHealthClinicMB.com and see ad, page 21.