



Living Wage Employers Share Their Experience

“I remember getting paid \$4 an hour washing dishes,” Helmi Ansari shared at a Living Wage Employers Breakfast in Waterloo Region.

Ansari is not a low-paid worker today. In fact, he is co-owner of Grosche International a Cambridge, Ontario company that designs and sells French press coffee makers and other tea and coffee accessories. His personal experience helped underline the value Grosche places on creating good work that pays a living wage.

More than thirty people listened to Ansari and John Neufeld, Executive Director of House of Friendship, as they described their experiences implementing living wage in their respective organizations.

Grosche International and House of Friendship are two of the sixteen organizations in Waterloo Region which are recognized Living Wage Employers.



It is ultimately about values

Both Ansari and Neufeld emphasized that values and vision are the starting place for living wage.

House of Friendship’s vision is for a healthy community where all can belong and thrive. As a multi-service community agency, House of Friendship provides programs in supportive housing and shelter, addictions treatment, food security, and community development.



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Neufeld said that a challenge in the community service sector is the assumption that people working in that field are expected to make sacrifices, particularly in terms of pay. That creates a moral dilemma for an organization like House of Friendship. “How do you live out your own values if you are paying staff so little that they need to rely on services you provide, like the food hamper.”

“People are not motivated by money,” said Neufeld. “But they need to earn enough so that they do not need to worry about money.” And when people are paid enough, they can do their job and do it well.

For House of Friendship, the commitment to paying a living wage was part of solving the problem of high turnover. The costs of re-hiring and training were a drain on resources.

The commitment to make the living wage -- \$16 an hour in Waterloo Region in 2015 – the floor for their salary grid was actually the culmination of a six year process of reviewing House of Friendship’s organizational strategy and human resource policies. It did mean not running as many programs. “We asked ourselves why we were doing some things we were not good at or that other organizations in the community did better,” said Neufeld.

When the new salary structure was rolled out, there were some challenges. Due to limited resources, those at the bottom of the pay grid, including new employees, saw more significant increases percentage wise than long-term employees.

Neufeld explained that House of Friendship desired to be an excellent employer. Why? “If we really care about the people in our community, we have to treat the people who work for us well. And they can do their jobs well.”

Communication is critical

When Ansari and his wife Mehreen Sait decided to start Grosche International, Ansari brought years of experience as Director of Sustainability and Productivity at PepsiCO Canada. Ansari and Sait shared a conviction that business should do good as well as doing well. Grosche’s mission is “To be a source of joy in the world.” He explained Grosche does that through four commitments: to customers and consumers by offering “products we would be happy to receive ourselves;” by being stewards of society and the planet both through sustainable production practices and by investing their time and revenue in social development in the local community and internationally; through their company culture, “being a great place to work together for a common cause;” and by “growing at a pace that ensures our culture and focus remains true to our mission.”

Paying a living wage fit into Grosche’s commitment to being a great place to work. It meant increasing the pay and benefits of 40% of staff.

Ansari explained that communication is essential. He had one on one meetings with each staff member. One of the challenges is around equity. As with House of Friendship, not all staff saw a proportional increase. “If I had to do something differently,” Ansari said, “it would be over-communicating the change, talking with staff in advance about living wage.”

Neufeld emphasized the same point. “Open communication with all staff and board around values and financial realities” was critical to implementing change at House of Friendship.

-- Greg deGroot-Maggetti, Program Manager, Living Wage Waterloo Region -- livingwagewr.org

October 8, 2015

Please join us for the **2015 Living Wage Employer Recognition Evening** Thursday, November 5, 2015 from 5:00-7:00. The event will be held at the Cambridge Conference Centre, 700 Hespeler Road, Cambridge, ON. Please RSVP at <http://bit.ly/1LzrJN9>