

Helping youth cycle away from poverty

Courier company with a social mission gives those struggling on welfare a chance to change their lives

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Neither sleet, nor snow, nor hail stops single mom Rhode Yowart as she weaves her trusty two-wheeler through downtown Toronto traffic on streets slick with slush.

The city's top bankers, accountants and lawyers are counting on the wiry 25-year-old bicycle courier to deliver their urgent packages intact — on time.

And Yowart delivers. "It's a great job," she says proudly after picking up about 30 envelopes from the Front St. W. offices of RBC Dominion Securities. "People know me and like my work. And I like being able to give them great service."

Eighteen months ago Yowart was on welfare and wondering about her future.

At the time, her son's father was working at TurnAround Couriers bringing home \$80 to \$100 a day. It was a far cry from welfare. And the hours — pretty much 9 to 5 — would make it easy to juggle daycare drop-off and pickup, she recalls thinking.

The clincher was the company's hiring policy. Priority is given to

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SINGLE MOM

struggling youth from the shelters and welfare rolls. She couldn't lose.

Today, Yowart supports herself and 3-year-old Manell on her courier earnings and relies on welfare only for health benefits.

"I like the freedom. I love riding my bike. And it's really given me confidence," says Yowart, who left home when she was 16 and has been in and out of youth shelters since then. Now she is hoping to turn her new-found self-esteem into a job with the Toronto Police Service and eventually realize her dream of becoming a member of the Emergency Task Force.

"I'm in top physical shape, which they tell me is important," she says. "And I know how to keep my cool when dealing with the public."

It is stories like Yowart's that has kept TurnAround's founder and general manager Richard Derham going through some pretty lean years since he started the company in 2002 as a for-profit business with a social mission.

"I know we're making a difference in these kids' lives and we're doing it while offering our clients the best service in the city," he says from the company's two-room office above a Cabbagetown eatery at the corner of Parliament and Carlton Sts.

"I just wish we could get more business so we could hire more kids."

He might just get his wish. The province's poverty reduction strategy released last month highlights the importance of social enterprise as a way to get business involved. Although the company isn't mentioned by name, the report says the children and youth services ministry will be conducting a pilot project in 2009 with a "local courier" as part of the government's larger plan to ensure the goods and services it buys are both environmentally and socially sound.

"Social enterprise is aligned with our government's poverty reduction strategy and TurnAround Couriers is a great example of this," said Laura Dougan, a spokesperson for Children's Minister Deb Matthews, the government's lead minister on the poverty file.

The government services ministry has been meeting with a variety of groups — social enterprise, business and others — to try to get feed-

back on the current procurement process and how government might be able to better respond to socially and environmentally conscious businesses, she added.

Derham hopes the province gives TurnAround a chance early in the New Year. "All we're asking is for one division of the AG (attorney general) or finance (ministry) to make us their main downtown courier," he says. "We'll show them."

The 40-year-old British lawyer with an MBA, who came to Canada in 2000 to work as a management consultant, always knew he wanted to start his own business some day. A chance meeting with Bill Young from Social Capital Partners, a firm that invests in businesses with a social mission, was the turning point, Derham says.

While pounding the pavement for clients in 2003 — a task that continues to this day — Derham crossed paths with now-retired Royal Bank vice-president Charlie Coffey, who introduced TurnAround to the lucrative financial services sector.

The Royal Bank was the big break the company needed to win the confidence — and the business — of other big Bay St. clients, Derham says. TurnAround is now the courier of choice for the entire bank.

The banker was also impressed with the kids themselves.

"I spoke to a number of the couriers and what I saw was the confidence," Coffey says. "They were appreciated. They were somebody. When they came into the bank they strode in with a sense of confidence in their voice and in their stride. I'm sure they had issues finding enough money to pay the rent and whatever, but I thought it was a huge confidence-building exercise among other things."

Joanne Norris, director of social returns for Social Capital Partners, figures the business has saved taxpayers \$1.4 million since 2002 by offering jobs to kids in shelters and on welfare.

To date, about 100 so-called "at-risk" youth have worked at the company recruited from youth shelters and job development programs. About 40 per cent come directly from the hostel system and about 65 per cent are on welfare when they start, she says.



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

Rhode Yowart, 25, works downtown for TurnAround Couriers. The job has helped the single mom get off welfare and live independently.

Couriers, who are paid 50 per cent commission for the first three months, rising to 60 per cent after that, are given helmets, locks and satchels and offered bicycles, which they pay off over time. The average length of employment has grown from about six months to 18 months. Youth have moved on to other jobs in the courier industry, mail rooms, window cleaning and school. One alumni has just started officer training at the Royal Military College in Kingston.

Today, the company, which has eight bicycle couriers and two trans-

sit couriers, is one of the largest in the city.

Derham's objective for 2009 is to become the city's biggest bicycle courier firm and for TurnAround to be known as the best and the friendliest.

"Our pitch is fairly simple," he says. "We provide excellent service at a competitive price. We're fast — about half of our deliveries are for one hour or less. Our staff are among the most courteous and polite. And by the way, we're helping young people turn their lives around."