

Report on the 2004 Building Co-operative Futures Conference

By Julia Smith

As a member of the planning committee I am happy to report that the 2004 Building Co-operative Futures Conference was a success. The conference, hosted by the Rural Education and Development Association (REDA), was held at the University of Calgary, in Calgary, Alberta May 14 to 18, 2004. Approximately eighty people from Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States attended. The conference schedule was similar to last year's, consisting of True Stories (case studies of co-operatives and co-operative activities), Workshops (developing co-operative skills and knowledge), and Breakout Sessions (group activities). Participants stayed in the new university dormitories and they were able to enjoy the university's facilities and beautiful grounds.

The conference began with registration on Friday evening, followed by the game "Who Wants to Be a Co-operator" hosted by Niki Boyle from the Co-operative College, which is located in Manchester, England. The following morning during a breakfast served at the Den (the university bar we converted to our dining room and gathering place), Brett Fairbairn, Director of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan, provided an informative crash-course in Co-op Basics. True Stories showcasing a number of different accounts of co-operative activities ran throughout the day. After lunch a few hours were spent getting to know each other better with an interactive session led by Peter Bruckmann, Youth Program Director at the BC Co-operative Association. Participants attempted to untie their own human knots and, in a large circle, managed to have everybody sitting on somebody else's lap!

The second and third days consisted of interactive and challenging workshops on topics such as Internships, New Generation Co-operatives, and Comparing Co-op Models. Niki Boyle introduced participants to the impressive interactive training modules created by the Co-operative College. Dominique Machefert from the Servants Anonymous Foundation of Canada (SAF), a co-operatively run organisation that provides housing and education for people who have been sexually exploited, gave a presentation on how the organisation applies co-operative tenets, such as self-help, to assist in providing social services. For the field trip participants toured three of Calgary Co-op's stores, which indeed are impressive in size and facilities that include childminding, travel agencies, cafés, and liquor stores. Calgary Co-op and its staff also generously hosted a barbeque for the participants.

Throughout the conference participants had free time to enjoy the university grounds, see the sights of Calgary and socialise with each other. Since the local national hockey league team, the Calgary Flames, was vying for a place in the Stanley Cup playoffs the city's nightlife was in full swing.

Russell Wolf, chair of the board of directors of REDA, hosted the farewell brunch Tuesday morning. During the brunch Samantha Sherrington gave a presentation about her experience as a young board member of United Co-operatives, the UK's largest regional co-operative society. Ian MacPherson, BCICS Director wrapped up the conference with an interactive session entitled "Where Do We Go From Here?"

Participants were excited to hear that the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives will host the 3rd Building Co-operative Futures Conference in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

in the spring of 2005 and that the Co-operative College plans to host the 2006 conference in Manchester, England.

Thank you to REDA for organising a great conference, and to partner and sponsor organisations for making the conference possible.