

How Santropol Roulant came to be



Reflections by Chris Godsall, one of the founders of Santropol Roulant

In April of 1994, I drove to Toronto to interview for a position with The Evergreen Foundation. I was twenty-four, and it seemed like the right place and the right time for meaningful work.

A few days after returning to Montreal, I received news that the job in Toronto was mine if I wanted it. There were no real job prospects for me in Montreal, the economy was in the tank, and my 75-word French vocabulary was not bound to open doors of great opportunity. At the Café Santropol, where I waited 3½ days a week, there were at least a dozen people with no realistic expectation of using their university education. Moving to Toronto was the sensible thing to do.

But, as we all know, life in Montreal is rarely governed by logic. To live in Montreal is to experience a constant subtle passion. To leave Montreal is to experience the pain of loss – the kind reserved for lost love. I believe Montreal - with its coursing contradictions and intense beauty - is one of the only fully formed places in North America. I've been spoiled and have traveled to Paris, Jerusalem, New York, Saigon, Athens, Bangkok, London, San Francisco...The corner of Duluth and St. Urbain is the most interesting place I've even been. Why would I want to leave that? So I stayed – with the condition that I find (or create) work as meaningful as the work I was turning down in Toronto. I gave myself 12 months.

The roots of Santropol Roulant are connected to the culture of Montreal.

That summer I heard about Youth Service Canada, and learned that community groups were receiving up to \$200,000 for youth employment projects. Maybe the Café Santropol could act as sponsor for one of these projects? In the fall, the idea of young people delivering Meals-on-Wheels suddenly appeared. I remember hurrying down to the Café on a cool November morning and announcing to Keith that we were going into the Meals-on-Wheels business together. Keith was rushing back and forth seating customers, and managing the mayhem of the Café. "Great!" he said. And he meant it.

Two weeks later, the weather had turned bitterly cold. Keith and I called Kevin Cohallen, from the Volunteer Bureau of Montreal, and asked if we could visit him to talk about Meals-on-Wheels. Kevin suggested that we tag along with a *Popote Roulante* group in East Montreal. A few days later, Keith and I arrived at a community center in Rosemont. There were about eight women, all between the age of 50 and 75, preparing meals and packaging food in tinfoil containers. We were each assigned a route and a delivery partner, and then we gathered up about twenty meals in thermal bags and headed out for deliveries.

My first delivery was to a woman obviously suffering from some kind of lung disease. I walked down into the basement apartment, and was struck by a feeling of uneasiness. Everything was so foreign. The apartment was dank, musty and depressing. My delivery partner was so comfortable and friendly, despite the palpable atmosphere of despair. I was intimidated, said almost nothing, and quickly left the meal on the dirty kitchen counter. Afterward, my delivery partner graciously told me that these visits are sometimes the only contact that their clients get all day, so we try to make the most of them.

After a few deliveries, I thought I was getting the hang of things. Then we descended into another basement apartment. There was no natural light, and once again the smell of despair and neglect was overwhelming. I announced my presence and walked toward an ancient woman sitting in the shadows of a tiny cluttered living room. She was blind and groped for the arms of her chair and pushed herself up in obvious pain. Once the

pain subsided and her breath returned, she began to beam a beautiful smile at me, then reached her hands out.

The simple experience of delivering meals to seniors can change the way young people see the world. This is one of the founding ideas behind Santropol Roulant.

I took her hands. They were freezing and rough. “Merci. Merci, Monsieur.” She said. I’d never experienced so much gratitude in exchange for such a simple gesture.

On the way back to the car, my delivery partner said: “I’ve been delivering meals to her for two years and I’ve never seen her get out that chair!” “Wow.” I said. “I wonder why she stood up today?” “Because a young man was in her house, of course!” said my partner.

I was floored. We have to do this every day, I thought to myself.

That night, Keith and I swapped stories and planned Santropol Roulant over beers at the Sergeant Recruiter on St.Laurent Blvd. Among other things, we talked about the logistics of funding, specifically how we could pass off the idea that the Café Santropol was the host organization of a youth-driven Meals-on-Wheels project. Jim Solkin, Garth Gilker, and Jennifer Luczynski, owners of the Café, were all busy people. Too busy to start a community organization. But they were also deeply committed to their community.

As we hashed away at ideas, there was something that began to emerge as a central part of *who* we were and *what* we were doing. The desire to impact and protect our community was an impulse we’d learned from the owners of the Café. They had committed their lives to social justice, expressing their commitment through beautiful and healthy food. The sense of belonging and the feelings of trust that enveloped our daily lives were primarily the result of being a member of the Café Santropol community. Reflecting on the impact this had on our designs for Santropol Roulant, it’s clear that we were trying to package the warmth and love of the Café, and deliver it to people who were isolated from their own community.

The process of working at the Café Santropol shaped our vision of youth engagement. Young people came and went. They passed through the Café, experiencing it – were changed by it. And all the while the Café seemed to stay the same, a constant community structure thriving within transient youth-culture.

Before Christmas, Keith and I wrote a proposal for the Café, outlining their minor responsibilities in this new venture we would call Santropol Roulant. Jimmy thought it was a nice idea, but was skeptical of the government buying in. But he said if they did, he was on board. He also said that we could take over the juice bar across the street and use it as our kitchen, and that the Café would donate the equipment in the juice bar to our fledgling community organization. (This was the kind of off-the-cuff generosity that made the Café so integral to the unlikely creation of SR.)

We worked through January 1995 on a proposal for Youth Service Canada. When the funding was approved in April, Keith and I scrambled to create the non-profit entity required to accept funding from the government. HRDC viewed the Café as a *security* partner. They made the unusual decision to sponsor a new organization, so long as the Café oversaw the administration of the project. Suddenly we required board members and incorporation appears. My friend John Sypnowich did the legal work for free and agreed to join the board, as did Jimmy. In May 1995, Santropol Roulant Inc. was legally born.

