

Unflagging energy

How one woman raised the banner for a great social enterprise

By Kelly S. Thompson



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— Susan Braverman

SUSAN BRAVERMAN’S VIVACIOUS personality matches her curly red hair: both are uncontainable. Well known in Vancouver, Susan is almost as recognizable as the banners, pennants, signage, tablecloths and emblems she manufactures and sells at The Flag Shop, the successful business she owns. The enterprise has done so well, 12 franchises are flourishing across the country.

Her mother started the store in 1975, so Susan says she grew up in the flag industry and has been there ever since, except for a hiatus between 1998 and 2006. On her return, she modernized production by introducing timely new techniques such as digital printing. She says she was fully prepared to take risks if it meant keeping up with changes in the market. “I just thought, go big or go home. I threw myself into it and I got it right,” Susan says.

That’s Susan motto, it would seem. A hardworking dynamo, she is also known for her contribution to the efforts of Common Thread, a nonprofit marketing cooperative that operates sewing training for newcomers to Canada, people living with mental illness and others who do best under flexible working conditions. The co-op uses secondhand cloth and sells the tote bags and other goods members make once their skills are up to speed. That money is then used to pay them for their work.

When Susan heard about Common Thread in 2009, she quickly became its champion. She set up and provided rent-free sewing workstations inside The Flag Shop for Common Thread workers and eventually established a retail outlet for the social enterprise at no cost to the cooperative.

As if that isn’t enough, Susan serves as a volunteer director on Common Thread’s board, where she’s been a business mentor, bringing her extensive knowledge of sales and production techniques to the group. She’s the co-op’s go-to person when it comes to marketing advice.



The Flag Shop Vancouver at 1615 Powell Street

“Working together with Common Thread seemed like a perfect fit,” she says now. “I saw it as an ideal opportunity to support local people with employment challenges.”

Common Thread also has an environmental aspect: The cooperative reclaims street banner material that would otherwise go into the landfill. Susan lets all her banner-purchasing clients know about Common Thread, encouraging them to repurpose their used materials when their events are over. Her biggest coup, perhaps, took place after the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games. The city was awash in banners celebrating the Games – and The Flag Shop and Common Thread couldn’t wait to put them to use. In the end, Common Thread sold more than \$100,000 worth of products made of Olympic fabric and banners. As well, the effort provided work to more than 16 people when production was at its peak.

As part of her commitment to Common Thread, Susan helped the enterprise market delegate bags for the 2012 International Year of the Cooperatives, then helped distribute this marketing package to co-ops and credit

unions across Canada. Her generosity didn’t stop there: Susan then donated \$5,000 to the Canadian Cooperative Association.

“Anyone who knows Susan appreciates her exuberance, her optimism and her generosity,” says Melanie Conn, cofounder of Common Thread.

Impressed with Susan’s dedication to giving back, in 2013 Melanie nominated Susan for the Social Enterprise Top Hero Award, bestowed by Social Enterprise British Columbia, an organization that uses commercial strategies to improve human and environmental well-being. Susan won – and for good reason. On top of her work with Common Thread, Susan and The Flag Shop contribute to the community by donating banners, flags and awareness to causes she and her staff are passionate about. These include projects such as One Epic Journey, a community-based group of volunteers whose mission is to eradicate cancer, Love World Run, an organization seeking to conquer anxiety and depression and Burnaby Youth Sustainability Network, a student-led organization that promotes sustainable practices within its community. “It’s easy to give,” Susan says enthusiastically, “Don’t we all want to do that?”

When she isn’t busy with philanthropic ventures, Susan serves as president of the Kitsilano 4th Avenue Business Improvement Association. Add to that her volunteer work as a mentor with the Canadian Youth Business Foundation, where she counsels female entrepreneurs and donates her time to several other groups. Just listening to Susan rattle off her list of commitments can exhaust a normal person, but she seems to possess tireless energy for work, volunteering and giving in any way she can.

“Everything I do is so that I can give back,” Susan says. “Give back and give genuinely, because it feels good.” E