

## CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

COMMUNITIES

## Sowing the seeds of compassion

Executives given a first-hand look at social agencies in action, with the hope that emotional commitment follows

BY TERENCE BELFORD

Lloyd Craig, president of Coast Capital Savings, the second-largest credit union in Canada, vividly remembers the day he led a dozen senior executives through a Surrey, B.C., agency dedicated to helping the homeless.

It was part of a program called Seeing Is Believing, launched by Canadian Business for Social Responsibility (CBSR), a not-for-profit Toronto-based group that helps companies put good intentions into practice. The program's goal is to sensitize business leaders to social issues by taking them right to the front lines.

For many, including Mr. Craig, a single morning spent with social agencies and their clients proves to be almost an epiphany.

"There was one guy who really stood out," he recalls. "He was in his early 30s and had drifted to B.C. from Ontario. I asked if there was anything we could do for him and he said forget about him. The agency did good work; it helped a lot of people. But in his case it might be four months, it might be six months, it might be a year but he would wind up dead.

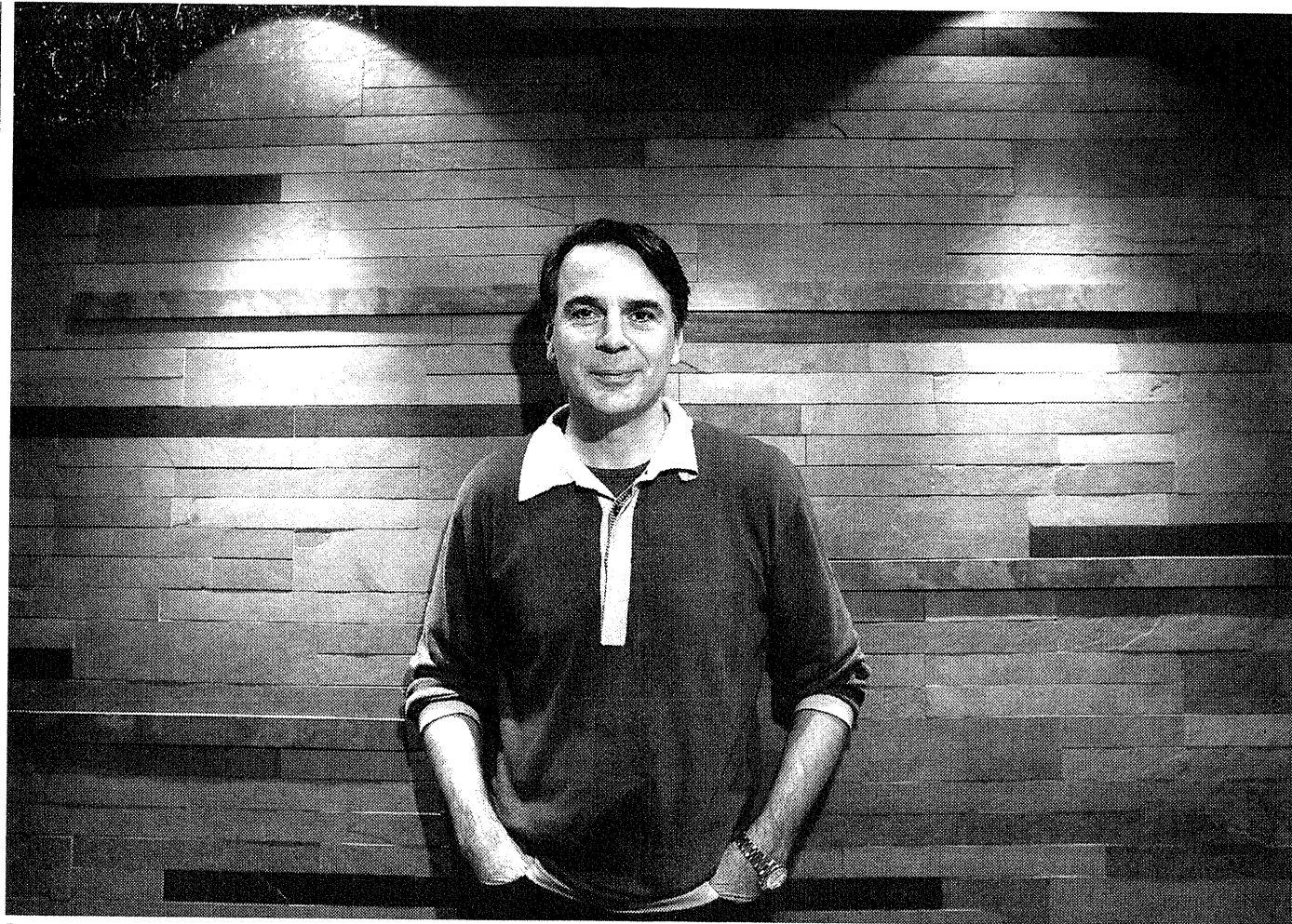
"That really stuck with me," Mr. Craig says. "It drove home the desperate need for business executives like me to get behind social change."

**SENIOR EXECS 'ISOLATED'**

For Rupert Duchesne, president of Montreal-based Groupe Aeroplan Inc., the moment came in early November when he joined a Seeing Is Believing tour of Toronto groups dedicated to helping disadvantaged women re-establish themselves in the work force.

For Rory Armes, the Vancouver-based senior vice-president and general manager of video-game maker Electronic Arts Inc., the commitment began with a four-hour tour of social agencies in his city's Downtown Eastside, and led to immediate efforts to help aboriginal youth and street kids break the cycle of poverty.

"Senior executives lead essentially isolated lives," says Mr. Duchesne. "The Seeing Is Believing program breaks



Rory Armes, senior vice-president and general manager of Electronic Arts Inc., took a four-hour tour of social agencies in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, which led to efforts to help aboriginal youth and street kids break the cycle of poverty. LAURA LEYSHON FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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those barriers. It gives a real feeling of what is happening at street level."

Acquainting business leaders with pressing social issues in the hope that they will become committed to helping resolve them is what Seeing Is Believing is all about, says Wendy Campbell, director of programs at CBSR.

"Too often CEOs and senior executives have no first-hand understanding of major issues such as poverty, homelessness, employment challenges, at-risk youth or the environment," says Ms. Campbell. "They may be engaged intellectually, but at a remove."

**TOURS ARE JUST A START**

The goal for Seeing Is Believing is to make that emotional link, she says.

"We believe an emotionally committed CEO will be the driving force throughout the entire corporation to see that

its social responsibility programs are effective," Ms. Campbell says.

The tours - there have been five since the program was brought over from Britain in 2005, one each in Vancouver, Surrey, Burnaby, Victoria and Toronto - are just the beginning. CBSR's goal is to help corporations identify agencies they can support with money and volunteer bodies.

"We have found Seeing Is Believing is one of the best programs to date for mobilizing resources," says Ms. Campbell.

So far, the organization has taken more than 100 executives to visit 25 community groups, planting the seeds of a growing coalition among social agencies, government and business, says Mr. Craig, who is chair of the advisory board of Seeing Is Believing.

"The way I explain what we face is a situation much like

World War II," he says. "To defeat huge national issues like poverty, homelessness, at-risk youth, we will have to all join together in a concerted effort.

"The first step is seeing the effects of what we face, of meeting those most affected and asking what it is they need," he says.

**NEEDS MET IMMEDIATELY**

For Mr. Armes, a commitment to help Vancouver's at-risk youth seemed like a natural fit. His company, based in Redwood City, Calif., makes wildly popular video games such as Need for Speed, Spore, Battlefield, and the Sims. His mid-October tour took him to the Potluck Cafe, the Urban Native Youth Association, PLEA Community Services Society of B.C., and Directions Youth Services.

"It drove a point home," says Mr. Armes. "Most of us have teenaged children and we

could identify with the problems faced by the kids we met. In our case we could see an immediate fit between what they need and what we can provide."

That fit included making the Potluck Cafe a sort of unofficial caterer to Electronic Arts, and donating used computer equipment and software to Directions Youth Services.

"They told us they needed things that would help boost the self-esteem of the kids they dealt with," Mr. Armes says.

"So we are now giving them computers we no longer need and software like Photo Shop and recording equipment for a studio.

"We are also offering paid time off through the week to any of our people who might want to spend the hours from, say, two to four teaching these kids how to operate the software," he adds.

**PLANTING THE SEEDS**

CBSR hopes the Seeing Is Believing program will duplicate the British version launched in 1990 by Prince Charles as a way to involve business in finding solutions to social issues.

Since its inception, more than 5,000 British business leaders have visited more than 400 social agencies.

"We were the initial sponsor in 2005," says Coast Capital's Mr. Craig.

"We saw it as a fabulous program, and when CBSR came to us we cut them a cheque for about \$40,000 to get the ball rolling. Since then I have led three tours myself, the two in Vancouver and the one in Victoria," he says.

Mr. Craig likens those tours to planting the seeds for what may become a national forest. It is a reasonable analogy, says Mr. Duchesne of Aeroplan, whose interest lies in helping women enter or re-enter the work force.

"The tour was a real eye opener," he says. "What we have to do now is create ways to make best use of our existing resources to support worthwhile existing organizations.

"It is going to require considerable thought."

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