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## Work Hard in Pittsburgh the Cooperative Way!

By Ron Gaydos

Can a company be profitable enough to influence the economy and still be devoted to its employees, its community, and its environment? About 50 men and women working out of a storefront office in Allentown think so.

Never willing to dismiss the potential for good of some well-aimed cash, Work Hard Pittsburgh co-founder Josh Lucas says "progressives don't do a good enough job of amassing wealth to make social change. We can't fight this battle with one hand tied behind our back, and that's the hand trying to reach the wallet!"

Sounds good, but doesn't that also present the danger of sweeping you into the whirlpool of value-extracting capitalism? His answer is that "organizations with the most resources get to communicate and influence the structure of the economy".



Walking that tightrope of money, power, and social equity, being smaller and community-oriented, WHP is building that influence. As member Kelauni Cook said, "I would hope as the co-op continues to grow, we can involve more people directly from the community - of all races, economic levels and backgrounds - who could benefit from the [same] services, support, and friendship that I receive from Work Hard every day!"

Photo: Work Hard Pittsburgh

Neighborhood Allies, an organization dedicated to inclusive, innovative, and equitable community development, gave WHP a grant to work with a lawyer to develop a practical model for cooperative ownership and governance.

On October 1, the co-working company owned by Josh Lucas and Jason Phillips became a 50-member producer and investment cooperative. It maintains a facility for professionals to operate their one or two person businesses in a homemade but functional environment. But now those members own the facility, the common equipment, the responsibility of maintaining everything, and the opportunity to pool assets to invest in promising business opportunities together.

*Full disclosure:* I'm a member of the Work Hard Cooperative and Work Hard is a member of the organization I co-founded and run, the Pittsburgh Chamber of Cooperatives. The Chamber has also advised Work Hard on integrating the cooperative principles into its governance and member operating agreement.

Thanks to a \$250,000 grant from the Allegheny County Community Infrastructure and Tourism Fund Grant, the WHP is able to start off in control of its facility and use that asset as a base for future investment in the area's cooperative economy.

In other articles, we discussed the various meanings – nurturing to nefarious – of wealth. With a triple bottom line approach (benefit people, nurture the planet, and make a fair profit), a company can make wealth work for social and economic progress.

Why do it this way rather than as a regular top-down company? Josh can tell you how hard it is to gradually relinquish control of his “baby” to a larger group of co-owners, but “it’s for wealth building for people traditionally locked out of opportunities to build wealth themselves.” Gradually, members are starting to share responsibilities and taking initiative in the cooperative’s real estate development and management, membership policies, and sales and marketing.

Work Hard is already providing wealth building opportunities that include people traditionally locked out of profitable business opportunities themselves. Then members will own and share the wealth they generate to inspire and make economic justice and influence the community good.



“We need wealthy, prosperous organizations to take the lead, to advocate for and demonstrate the viability of doing business while supporting the rights of workers and addressing community needs, and applying political pressure for government to do the right thing,” declares Mr. Lucas. “We live in the system we live in,” so we have to work within it to some extent to be relevant, and the cooperative model is a good way to accomplish these goals.

Photo: Work Hard Pittsburgh

Putting this into practice, WHP has a co-op owned digital services subsidiary based on the producer cooperative model where independent member businesses collaborate on professional engagements for mutual benefit. “I dig the idea,” says Buzzy Torek, Work Hard member and owner of the Epicast Network, a media engineering company, “it’s an important idea and a cool opportunity. Now I have more reasons to collaborate and more motivation to be successful myself because we all have a stake in it.”

It has also established Pittsburgh Academy, a coding boot-camp-style school where graduates pay a tuition fee only once they attain full-time employment in the field. Academy grads are also welcomed into the Work Hard world to stay as long as they like to work on their careers or business ideas.

"It's given me a great network of people who can plug me into the resources and opportunities I need to further my career as a software developer," says Academy graduate Kelauni Cook.

Many members started out there just to get into the co-working space, and have appreciated Work Hard's larger aspirations to help transform the economic landscape. "I joined Work Hard because I was looking for affordable, shared office space to work alongside like-minded people," says member Anthony Stewart, founder of environmental consulting firm DECO Resources, "Work Hard has been like a family. My time here so far has provided one of the most amazing experiences of my life."

Can Work Hard influence the economic culture in the region and beyond? Yes, according to member Brian Conway, a freelance writer and reporter, "I think that Work Hard Pittsburgh is just beginning to realize the tremendous amount of potential and talent we hold in-house and I am excited to see if together we can make a positive impact in Allentown, the Hilltop area and Pittsburgh as a whole."

*Ron Gaydos is a consultant in inclusive economic development, entrepreneurship, and organizational strategy. Ron is a Co-Founder of the Pittsburgh Chamber of Cooperatives. ([www.PittsburghChamber.coop](http://www.PittsburghChamber.coop)), which grew out of the Thomas Merton Center's New Economy Campaign.*



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