



# Sharon Hapton, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers

## An Inspiring Case Study in the Rise of Social Enterprise and Social Entrepreneurship

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What business entrepreneurs are to the economy, social entrepreneurs are to social change. David Bornstein, who wrote the bible on social entrepreneurship, **How to Change the World, Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas**, describes social entrepreneurs as “driven, creative individuals who question the status quo, exploit new opportunities, refuse to give up, and indeed remake the world for the better.” Sharon Hapton, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers (“Soup Sisters,”) a Canadian not-for-profit charitable social enterprise that provides comfort to women, children and youth through the making, sharing and donating of soup, is definitively one of them.

Founded in Calgary, Alberta, in March 2009, Soup Sisters was the inspirational vision of the driven and dynamic Sharon Hapton. A private sector entrepreneur and a soup maker for all of her life, the concept she developed was simple, which is a core element of its success. Organized by local volunteers and hosted by a local celebrity chef, each Soup Sister/Broth Brother event features individuals or groups who have registered to participate in a soup making evening at a local culinary school. These events are charged at \$55 per person to cover the cost of all ingredients, kitchen facilities, chef-facilitator, kitchen staff, and the food and wine at the event. Although the enterprise began with a group of women, the engagement of men as volunteers and soup makers, the “Broth Brothers,” quickly followed. Within a couple of hours, from chopping to bottling,

these soup making events provide a highly rewarding and immediately tangible hands-on, communal volunteer experience and an opportunity to raise awareness about family violence and youth homelessness. In an engaging event, involving thousands of people every year, it’s one small way to tackle the issue of violence against women and children, while giving youth at risk a chance.

Since its inception, Soup Sisters has delivered nearly half a million servings of soup to over 25 recipient shelters in Canada. Local volunteer led chapters are popping up across the country with new interest daily. Soup Sisters operates over 25 events in 20 cities across Canada, every month. Over 10,000 bowls of soup are made and donated to women’s shelters and youth on a monthly basis. **The Soup Sisters Cookbook**, a spectacular collection of many of the celebrity chef recipes immediately became a Canadian best seller, and is now in its 6th Random House printing. A second cookbook, **The Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers Cookbook**, with recipes from celebrity chefs around the world, was released October 7, 2014, and is already number one in its category. Soup Sisters has also recently launched its first US chapter in Los Angeles, California and it too has become an immediate success. Plans for Soup Sister soups sold in grocery stores, and further expansion throughout North America, are quickly unfolding. Like the recent ALS Ice Bucket Challenge that went viral on both sides of the border this summer, Soup Sisters has struck a chord and has resonated profoundly

with thousands of volunteers at soup making events which are booked and sold out into 2015, coast-to-coast. As its first point of entry in the US and with its first chapter now booming in Los Angeles, Soup Sisters is now at the tipping point of growing North American wide.

This social enterprise is an exceptional example of private sector strategy and planning combined with meaning and purpose. Key to Soup Sisters success is that it is a triple win proposition for all involved. Volunteers, celebrity chefs and culinary schools across Canada are able to actively participate in an event that is both meaningful and fun through a simple but tangible gesture: the making and sharing of a bowl of soup.

For the ultimate soup recipient, in addition to receiving “a hug in a bowl,” it provides the moral support and nurturing message that they are not alone. For the recipient shelter, the soups Soup Sisters provide cut the shelter’s operating costs by 18-20%, while freeing those resources for much needed additional counselling and programming support for families and children.

Under the guidance of the chef, the volunteer teams make large quantities of soup that are packaged, hand labelled and then delivered to a local shelter. It also provides a forum to educate and awareness about important societal issues, domestic abuse, family violence and youth living in crisis, while providing an opportunity to contribute in an immediate and meaningful way.

*The culinary schools have their food expenses covered and are introduced to a developing group of volunteer chefs; the celebrity chefs donate their time and recipes to a cause that matters to them and to a cookbook that has sold out around the country; and the volunteer chapter leads and participant soup makers see in a few short hours the results of their efforts. All in, it's a feel good, do good experience.*

*Sharon Hapton has been selected as one of Chatelaine's and CityTV's Women of the Year and as a Woman of Vision by Global Television and the YWCA. She lives with her husband Garry in Calgary, Alberta, and has two grown children, Dan and Blaire. Sharon believes that wherever there is a shelter for women and children fleeing domestic abuse, or a program for youth in crisis, there should be a Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers chapter.*

*Ms. Hapton has simply and powerfully demonstrated that a community of people coming together to make soup is not only about providing meals to those who need them, but is also a strong, united voice against family violence and domestic abuse. In so doing, she has created a vibrant social enterprise that actually works. What makes this business story so compelling and refreshing to Women of Influence, and particularly in light of this winter's magazine edition focused on the theme of excellence, is the unique combination of private sector business savvy, entrepreneurial vision and a collaborative leadership style that, together, is key to the success of effective social enterprise.*

**Lisa:** David Bornstein defines a social entrepreneur as “a person who has both a powerful idea to cause a positive social change and the creativity, skills, determination and drive to transform that idea into reality. They combine the savvy, opportunism, optimism and resourcefulness of business entrepreneurs, but they devote themselves to pursuing social change or ‘social profit,’ rather than financial profit. They are people with new ideas for solving problems, who build new kinds of organizations to implement those ideas, who will not take ‘no’ for an answer, and who will not give up until they have spread their ideas as far as they possibly can.” Sound like anyone you know, Sharon?

**Sharon:** *(Laughing)*, Yes, it does. Initially, it certainly took some doing to obtain the recipes from the celebrity chefs. Chefs are people who truly understand taking care of people through food, but they are also some of the busiest people on the planet. In the early years, I was somewhat relentless: “Hey! I’m a Soup Sister, you have to give us your recipe.” I went after them tenaciously, but sure enough they soon stepped forward, and then they also started showing up for us at our events. A few of the celebrity chefs who have donated their time to launch in various cities and have shown their support by providing their favourite soup recipes include: **Christine Cushing, Michael Allemeier, Elizabeth Baird, Lynn Crawford, Michael Stadlander, Andrea Carlson, Massimo Capra, Anna Olson, Bonnie Stern, Rose Reisman, Michael Bonacini, Jamie Kennedy, Yotam Ottolenghi, Matt Abergel, Vikram Vij, Curtis Stone, Lidia Bastianich, Anthony Walsh, Rob Feenie, Susur Lee, Michael Smith, and Mark McEwan** among many others. It’s been an amazing journey, with such incredible people participating. Once they each understood the cause and the

business, it got easier. Now other celebrity chefs are coming to us, and we are incredibly grateful for their support, because it matters.

**Lisa:** Can you share the adventure of how Soup Sisters began?

**Sharon:** I am, and have always been, a soup maker. For most of my adult life, I have taken care of family and friends with soup. I knew that this simple gesture had the power to influence their day, and in the process of making it, I could in my own way, let them know how much I cared. The whole exchange, the soup making, the delivery, the warm comfort it provided and the appreciation I received, created a fulfilling cycle of giving.

On my 50th birthday, I decided to have a different kind of celebration with my friends. Instead of the usual dinner party with a few couples, I invited 30 girlfriends to a local cooking school to make a large batch of soup, which we donated to a women’s emergency shelter in Calgary. To say that something completely magical took place in the room that night is an understatement. I knew immediately we were onto something, but could not have imagined that a few years later I would be at the helm of Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers, a thriving international organization.

**Lisa:** It speaks to the power of soup, but also about the power of shared experiences and communal giving. Can you tell us more about what a Soup Sisters event is like?

**Sharon:** Making soup for someone is a simple gesture, but sometimes the smallest gestures at the right time can have the most profound impact. For women and children subjected to domestic abuse and forced to flee their homes, comfort and safety are in short supply. The warmth of a bowl of soup made by hand by those who care has done wonders for these women and their families. They feel supported and nourished and not completely alone. It sends the message that “we care and stand with you against domestic abuse.”

For our volunteer leaders and soup making participants, it provides an evening to be together and an opportunity to give back to the community in a fun and engaging way. The combination of camaraderie and cooking is infectious. I’ve learned that busy people are hungry for a hands-on way to contribute to social solutions when they are given a purpose, a project and a manageable time frame in which to do it. The experience leaves a lasting impression that often entices their friends and family to come back and join us too.

At our events, the volunteer chapter leads welcome participants and then a representative from the local shelter shares the story of their organization and how Soup Sisters is impacting the lives of the recipients and the work at the shelter. At this point, you can often hear a pin drop as everyone realizes how meaningful their chopping and stirring will be. It’s moving to know that it’s not just about the soup but that someone has taken the time to prepare it. We connect our soup makers to the cause, provide them with some sobering statistics right up front, then the participants break into soup making groups and get working. The sound of knives quickly chopping permeates the room and the sense of purposeful collaboration becomes the mission of the group. They truly pour

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Sharon Hapton, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers

their main ingredient of love into the soup and that’s why we call it a “hug in a bowl.” The energy is high and there is a sense that we’re doing something good, and making a difference, together.

**Lisa:** This past fall there was a terrific release launch for your new *Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers Cookbook* with chefs Susur Lee and Bonnie Stern in Toronto. Can we talk about the celebrity chef component of your business? How did these relationships develop and become a core part of Soup Sisters success?

**Sharon:** I realized there was a chef notoriety to be woven into our business when we launched our first chapter in Toronto in 2010 and I was asked: Who is going to be the celebrity chef? That hadn’t even been on my radar up until then, but I thought it was interesting, so I did some cold calling and Christine Cushing stepped up immediately. Throughout our evolution, I have remained open to new ideas whenever I hear them, and that nimbleness has been important for our growth.

Cityline then did their very own Soup Sisters show and it was really Toronto, a year after we launched, that put us on the map and made our business go viral nationally. The day that the Cityline show aired and their host, Sandy Pittana, said, “There is no reason that everybody on the planet shouldn’t be doing Soup Sisters in their own city,” an extraordinary thing happened. Literally as Sandy was saying this, I could hear my computer in the other room going off and 300 emails came in that day from around the country asking how they could get involved with Soup Sisters in their own community.

Before our Toronto launch, I kept our business plans very quiet for the first year, quite intentionally. I wanted to be operationally ready for growth with the prototype method set before expanding into other markets. I could see on a smaller level within six months in Calgary, that this venture had legs, as it had already taken off simply by word of mouth and networking. Events were quickly sold out. Soup Sisters grew based on something very real, without social media exposure at that point, our growth really came about from people loving the experience of doing something so genuine and hands-on. They talked about it, and they talked about it a lot.

As this was underway, I spent a lot of time creating our business plan and our formula, as it was important to be able to effectively replicate what we do, so that we could roll out our enterprise nationally. When the Toronto launch and media press blew us out of the water, I was ready. I had written a guidebook for our chapter volunteers, clearly outlining every step of our social enterprise from mission and vision to each and every detail of operating the business. At the time, I was creating something very formulaic that would eventually become a social enterprise franchise. The guidebook was intended as a detailed roadmap. I knew that there needed to be continuity, not just in the quality of how we did things, but also in the collaborative way that we approached our valued partners, which included the cooking schools and the shelter recipients.

**Lisa:** Let’s talk about your winning formula, your underlying philosophy of the business and the importance of the connection of Soup Sisters with the culinary schools. The genius of this enterprise is that you have minimal overhead as you don’t own or operate a corporate kitchen or office.

**Sharon:** That’s a really big piece, Soup Sisters has no bricks and mortar, so I can really lead this from anywhere, I just need to have my computer with me. As a social enterprise, we have minimal overhead, and all of our generated revenue is reinvested back into the business. A critical component of our success is Soup Sisters’ collaboration with certified cooking schools across the country. That is also essential from the shelter recipient’s perspective. A Soup Sisters event doesn’t take place in a community hall or in a church kitchen, it’s an event, and that’s the key word. People come to these events as corporate groups or book clubs or for a birthday party, and we collaborate with the cooking school to provide both the venue and the equipment. They have everything we need: knives, chopping boards, equipment, the venue, and the beautiful part of this is, it’s really great for their own business as well.

Dish Cooking Studio in Toronto was our 2nd culinary partner in Canada and what’s interesting about them is that they came to us, as they saw an opportunity to work effectively together. Our fundamental operating principle is to be collaborative, and to stay collaborative. I believe we have found the right blend of socializing, philanthropy, partnership and action. Our business is based on the philosophy that everyone benefits, and also that we keep it really simple.

The business model is that we basically operate on a break-even cost recovery, and pay the cooking schools that work with us. The \$55 entry fee to come to our events is a differentiator from most charities. People are getting used to the concept of paying to volunteer. And it costs money to do what we do well. Our soups are exceptionally good. Fresh delivery is the expectation, and our soup is made only with the very finest ingredients, because that’s what we believe our recipients deserve.

Our events are dynamic on every level, and the social engagement of our volunteers and soup makers is also a huge piece of our success. I think what’s also made Soup Sisters a phenomenon, is that it is a very scalable organization. When you bring together people who have shared values in business, a socially responsible business mandate, and a straightforward process to execute on that vision, anything is possible.

**Lisa:** Social enterprise as a solution to community issues is a relatively new concept, but it is swiftly taking off. Social entrepreneurs are demonstrating that problems can, in fact, be solved—they are providing new ways to do business, to engage and lead teams, and to address a whole wealth of social problems. What do you attribute to this new wave of doing business? Why do you think social enterprise is on the rise?

**Sharon:** I can see from our experience at Soup Sisters that we have reinvigorated the role of not-for-profits as a catalyst for social change, with a private sector mindset implemented in a very simple and meaningful way. I think social enterprise is resonating as many people are disenchanted with government as a sole solution provider to our community issues. Also the explosion of information and social media has made it possible for millions of people around the world to unleash their creativity in new directions. People are better informed about social issues, and they have both the desire and the ability to solve them. When a good idea hits, or a creative solution is offered, social media can quickly spread the message.

Social entrepreneurship allows people to align what they enjoy doing, what they are good at, and what matters most to them while having a real impact. This is a very fulfilling and rewarding way to work and live. I see a huge growth in this area especially with the younger generation. They don't want to simply engage in profit making ventures. They want to solve problems and impact the world they live in and they are approaching these issues with a creative, strategic and business mind set.

Engaging our youth in social enterprise is now core to our business. One of the terrific programs that we piloted last summer is called Summer Stock. Kids at summer camps are now making soup for shelters in their own communities. We piloted the program in the summer of 2013 at one camp and this past summer we went to 12 camps, by next summer we will probably be in about 30 camps nationwide. It's an opportunity for campers and counselors to learn

cooking skills, while becoming young volunteers and philanthropists in a fun, hands-on and important way. So many kids I know are interested in social innovation, enterprise and becoming a social entrepreneur. The Soup Sisters Summer Stock program is a way to ignite that flame early on in their lives.

**Lisa:** Developing the necessary skill set to become a leader of “teams of teams” seems key to the future growth of Soup Sisters. This too is a new leadership style and one that is specifically attributed to social entrepreneurs. At the core of it, effective leadership in this sector requires the ability to inspirationally lead collaborations, not just organizations.

**Sharon:** That's exactly right. Becoming a leader of “teams of teams” is a great way to describe what I do on a daily basis. My job as CEO is to provide clarity, vision and support to an incredibly talented group of chapter volunteers across the country. I truly feel that I haven't done my job unless the business becomes theirs as well and that ingrained sense of accountability is key to our success. This is demonstrated by the fact that our volunteers never leave Soup Sisters without replacing themselves, which is incredible, if you think about it. I also know that our volunteers have their own stories to tell, and I think that's really important too. The truth is, domestic abuse is something that affects one in three people, and one in three children in our classrooms will witness some form of family violence. It has touched many lives in our communities.



**Chef Susur Lee, Chef Bonnie Stern, Sharon Hapton, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers, and Lisa Heidman, Senior Client Partner, The Bedford Consulting Group. Photo taken at All The Best Fine Foods, Toronto, Canada.**

**Lisa:** Can you share your strategic plans, next steps, and plans for expansion into the US and globally?

**Sharon:** We launched in Los Angeles in May 2014. The US has definitely been on my mind for a long time. Currently we have monthly events in LA, and we are partnering with two cooking schools, one in Culver City and one in Santa Monica. We're already bursting at the seams there, but I'm intentionally exercising the same discipline as I did in our first year of business in Canada. I understand and appreciate how important it is to lay the effective groundwork before you expand across the country. We want to maintain our brand and integrity at every touch point. Right now, I am focused on ensuring significant growth, but balancing that with an eye to long-term sustainability.

I see many opportunities ahead. We are planning to have Soup Sisters soups available in grocery stores and online where you can ship Soup Sisters soup as a gift to your friends and family across the country and have it show up within 24 hours. I also love the idea of a Soup It Forward truck, to deliver our soup to the marketplace and directly to the consumer, as we are often asked: Where can I buy your soup? It's all about taking what we do to the next level and doing more of it. These are our natural next steps and the kinds of for-profit pieces that I see supporting the not-for-profit side of Soup Sisters. The focus on developing collaborative relationships including corporate partnerships will contribute to our growth and expansion. Can Soup Sisters go global? Absolutely, it is just a matter of attracting the right kind of people to get involved. Our partners will continue to be social entrepreneurs, business entrepreneurs and corporations that want to do good and be good in the world, all at the same time.

**Lisa:** Perhaps the most inspiring thing about social entrepreneurs is that they, like you Sharon, have taken great initiative. They run their enterprises like a business, they listen to their instincts and they take action. Above all, they begin. There are millions of people who could bring important changes to their corners of the world and who would find great fulfillment doing so, if they just started. What leadership competencies do you think are required to succeed as a social entrepreneur and which of your own abilities do you think have contributed to Soup Sisters' success? What have you learned along this journey?

**Sharon:** The ability to start and get things moving and off the ground, with drive and tenacity; passion, a vision and an unwavering belief that we were going to succeed; the ability to effectively communicate and inspire key stakeholders and supporters; and the confidence to trust one's own business instincts intuitively, are all essential.

One of the other things I've also learned is that you can't underestimate all of the things you've been in your life at different times and how each of these experiences can come together and support you later in life. I understand and appreciate that my prior entrepreneurial background, private sector experience and skill sets have been invaluable to the Soup Sisters business and I have drawn on them many times to find creative solutions. I think we either knowingly or unknowingly accumulate talent and experience in our lives that can be applied in new ways and for new purposes.

I reached a point on my 50th birthday when I knew that I wanted to embark on something new and for a bigger purpose. It was a turning point for me when I realized that I didn't need to fear failure or success. Had that event on my birthday never been anything more than this great night with my friends that produced and delivered 300 containers of soup to our local shelter, that would have been ok, but I knew that very evening that wasn't ever going to be where I stopped. Sometimes it's just as important to recognize these moments in life and within them, all of their inherent opportunities. And then yes, it's important to just begin.

**Lisa:** Thank you, Sharon, for sharing your Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers story. May it inspire many more social entrepreneurs to change the world! 🍲



Sharon Hapton, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers. Photo taken at All The Best Fine Foods, Toronto, Canada.

Photography: Celine Kim

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