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# How the Vancouver mayor's BFF Joel Solomon is changing the way people do business



By [Kate Webb](#) Metro



Kate Webb/Metro: Hollyhock board chair Joel Solomon and his wife, Hollyhock CEO Dana

Bass Solomon are on a mission to foster businesses that think about more than just their bottom line.

Lounging on a cushion of pillows upstairs at the [Hollyhock](#) centre on Cortes Island, multimillionaire investor [Joel Solomon](#) holds court, offering a series of one-on-one business strategy consultations to as many eager entrepreneurs as he can manage.

It is the second-last day of summer and 150 small enterprise leaders and venture capitalists have gathered at the windswept beach retreat for the 18th annual [Social Venture Institute](#) (SVI), which is like sleep-away camp for grown ups who want to change the world through business, charities, and non-profits.

“There have always been business people who were caring, good citizens and they did things like hand out jackets in the winter and give to charity,” Solomon explains, in between bites of a vegetarian lunch yielded by the sprawling gardens outside.

“What’s new is a focused effort to bring more values back into the business equation, and bring more enterprise skill sets into the non-profit equation.”

This “hybrid zone,” as he calls it, has been gaining momentum for the last 30 years, and hinges on the concept of the triple bottom line (3BL). 3BL organizations prioritize “people, planet and profit.” That means that in addition to balancing their books they also consider the social and environmental costs of doing business so that they don’t get passed on to the rest of society.

For example, if a corporation shows a monetary profit, but their asbestos mine causes hundreds of deaths from asbestosis, and their uranium mine pollutes a river and lowers land values, the government might end up spending millions on health care and river clean-up.

Triple bottom line businesses must yield to such externalities. 3BL businesses and non-profits might mitigate their impacts by finding ways to eliminate toxic byproducts, reducing carbon emissions, paying employees a living wage or creating jobs for people with barriers to employment.



Vancouver's Fresh Roots Urban Farm co-founders Ilana Labow and Marc Schutzbank listen to audience feedback after presenting their non-profit as a case study. Kate Webb/Metro





## **The politics of Hollyhock**

Solomon, who built his fortune by investing in natural and organic food companies after inheriting just over \$3 million as a young adult, was among left-of-centre Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson's earliest and most important financial backers in his first successful run for City Hall in 2008. He also supported Robertson's successful nomination in 2004 to represent the B.C. NDP in Victoria.

As such, he has had no shortage of political detractors.

The Tennessee native is a well-known supporter of both the federal and provincial NDP. He and the so-called "Hollyhock mafia" — as his associates were dubbed in 2010 by conservative pundit Mike Klassen — pooled and fundraised about \$300,000, or 20 per cent, of Robertson's total campaign budget for his first mayoral run, but only a fraction of that for his second run in 2011.

A front-page [feature](#) in the National Post in 2010 took aim at Solomon's ties to the social and environmental [Tides Foundation](#), and SVI's more rabble-rousing cousin, Hollyhock's Social Change Institute, which provides networking opportunities for activists.

Blogger Alex Tsakumis wrote at the time that the "Tides Foundation has some very long, strong tentacles into all sorts of businesses that all support [Robertson's] Vision Vancouver [party]," but repeated audits of Tides by the Canada Revenue Agency have found no evidence of financial misconduct.

## **Cross-partisan pollination**

Solomon, 57, has been a close friend of Robertson, a former NDP MLA, for 15 years. He readily admits that Hollyhock, where he and the mayor have been known to hang out, tends to attract a more progressive crowd, but insists that social ventures appeal to people across the political spectrum.

"Credibility is growing. There's real business here," he says. "Conservatives care about people, too."



[Dominic Mishio](#), a young card-carrying member of the federal Conservative Party who was mentored by Preston Manning, travelled to Hollyhock from Leduc, Alta., where he is a two-term city councillor.



Mishio says triple bottom line (3BL) accounting could help further the Conservative agenda in many ways, for example by undermining the conditions that spur unions. He argues if corporations voluntarily paid fair wages, offered good benefits and were environmentally responsible, unions wouldn't have much to fight for.

“Imagine that,” he says, “if Walmart was the one leading the charge on what a minimum wage should be... I think it would be far better if that was lead through corporations rather than the government.”

Alabama native and hotel magnate [Julian MacQueen](#) owns a U.S. chain with half a billion dollars in assets and flew into SVI in his private vintage plane.



Prior to 2010 he says he would have described himself as an apathetic independent who had voted both Republican and Democrat — but that was before the BP oil spill wreaked havoc on several of his beachfront Florida properties.

“I saw 35 years of building a company up with lots of employees just die overnight,” says the CEO of Innisfree Hotels. “That was a pivotal moment and now we’ve adopted a triple bottom line philosophy and we’ve brought in trainers to help us understand what that means and how we can be good stewards of that.”

### **SVI: The social venture incubator**

There can be no question that SVI and Hollyhock are as much about social bonding as they are lectures, meetings and workshops.

SVI has a reputation for wild parties and hot tubs. There is a trampoline. There was an engagement this year. The lines get very blurred between where the socializing ends and the business dealings begin.

Solomon, who is slight, bespectacled, animated and full of energy, is described by one participant as a “social conductor.” He flits from room to room, matching people up with experts and potential allies, and helping to make everyone feel comfortable.

Morning and afternoon sessions centre around case studies in which selected social entrepreneurs present their biggest challenges in an atmosphere of strict confidentiality and brutal honesty.



Over the course of five days career paths change, ambitious projects are conceived, and sometimes multimillion-dollar deals are forged.

[Jayne Stoyles](#), an Ottawa lawyer who helps survivors of torture prosecute their persecutors, got the idea at SVI five years ago to found a legal training business to

help other lawyers prosecute war criminals, which she is launching this fall.

Last year, representatives of credit union Vancity met Karen Joseph at SVI, and ended up co-founding [Reconciliation Canada](#), the non-profit of which Joseph is now executive director.

Vancity has since contributed three quarters of a million dollars to the organization, which holds events designed to engage British Columbians in the reconciliation process with aboriginal survivors of residential schools — including the Walk for Reconciliation on Sept. 21 that drew [70,000 people](#) in Vancouver.

### Changing minds

[Cory LePage](#), one of the expert panelists at SVI, made his fortune in engineering and design consulting for the steel fabrication industry. He was working in Alberta for companies linked to oil sands and mining giants such as Suncor, Syncrude, and Shell.



But when the financial crisis hit in 2008 and all his contracts dried up he had to let his entire staff go. That was when he started digging deep and reassessing his life, and eventually started taking courses to become a life coach.

The Green Party supporter says he first heard of the term “triple bottom line” at Hollyhock in 2011, and now believes it is a concept every business and entrepreneur

should adopt, or risk falling behind.

“The holistic human, no matter what their political spectrum, they all kind of want the same things. Community and connection is a huge one,” he says.

“That’s what this offers, and it’s from that connected place that you have an opportunity for people to change their minds and broaden their view of things.”

Tory supporter Mishio, 28, says in his view the social venture movement is primed to become increasingly influential in diverse business circles across the country.

He is currently the Canadian director for the [Global Poverty Project](#), which aims to end extreme global poverty within a generation.

“The greatest victory for social venture is when it’s just called venture and you don’t need to add that extra ‘social venture’ side,” he says.

“The more success that they have and the more that they become the norm and the mainstream, the more that corporations are going to act like this and think that it’s a positive, good result for the world.”



### **History of Hollyhock**

Hollyhock was founded on the grounds of the former Cold Mountain Institute in 1982 by a group of activists from Greenpeace and the Humanistic Psychology Association, led by Rex Weyler and Shivon Robinsong.

Their vision was to educate visitors


holistically so they would become better people, creating better organizations and a better world.

Joel Solomon became a partner in 1984 and in 1997 he met his wife, Dana Bass Solomon there. She became the CEO in 2000 and they married in 2003.

Eventually all of the 30 owners donated their shares of the property and in 2010 Hollyhock’s Leadership Institute became a registered charity.

Programs currently being offered include culinary arts, dance, health and healing, indigenous wisdom, leadership, meditation, music, writing, photography, personal development, relationships, and science and spirituality.

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