

Building a sense of belonging

RENOVATION OF NORTH POINT DOUGLAS APARTMENTS WILL ACCOMMODATE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE TRANSITIONING FROM CFS CARE

By: Ben Waldman

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Last spring, the Noble Court Apartments on Alfred Avenue were in shambles. The North End block's windows were cracked, brick walls were spattered with graffiti, and there was evidence everywhere of a fire that nearly destroyed the building a half-decade earlier.

The 107-year-old block had seen better days.



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Shawenim Abinoojii Inc. manager Brandy Kowal (right) with executive director Victoria Fisher outside the overhauled building at 126 Alfred Ave. The Indigenous-led, not-for-profit service organization purchased the apartment building last year and oversaw a massive renovation of the once-dilapidated property.

One year later, it's fair to say the old apartments have better days ahead.

Shawenim Abinoojii Inc., an Indigenous-led, not-for-profit service organization, purchased the building in 2021, and began overseeing a massive renovation of the once-dilapidated property in the city's North End. The vision was to transform the building into a housing hub for as many as 24 southeast First Nations youth transitioning out of child and family services, while also housing on-site programming, support services and office space.

With occupancy granted April 19, the renovation is officially complete, and that vision is now a reality. All that's left is for people to pull up in front with moving trucks, ready to settle into their new homes.

"How do I even describe this feeling?" asked Victoria Fisher, the newly installed executive director of Shawenim Abinoojii. "I feel very excited about the kind of environment these young people will have the opportunity to live in. I'm blown away."

Contrary to the derelict nature of the building prior to the renovation, the refurbished



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The block, which has been gifted the name Nenookaasiins, meaning 'Little Hummingbird,' will also house on-site programming, support services and office space.

version of 126 Alfred is bright, peaceful, clean and calm. The design by Winnipeg's Bridgman Collaborative Architecture emphasizes natural light, bright splashes of colour, and natural materials like wood. It's exactly what the organization needed, Fisher said.

The project aims to address a strong correlation between transitioning out of CFS care and homelessness, Fisher said. Quite often, people in that position are left on their own without needed supports, which can result in a lack of stable housing or homelessness.

According to the 2018 Winnipeg Street Census, a moment-in-time tallying and analysis of the city's homeless population, the most common age when people first experience homelessness is 18 years old. Of those who experienced homelessness for 10 or more years, 62 per cent first experienced it when they were 18 or younger.



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About half of all people who were experiencing homelessness at the time of the census had been in CFS care at one point in their lives. Almost two-thirds of those who were formerly in CFS care experienced homelessness within one year of leaving care.

Two in three people experiencing homelessness during the street census were Indigenous. Three in four young people experiencing homelessness at the time of the census were Indigenous. (An interim census was taken in 2021, with the first full street census scheduled to take place on **May 25**).

Fisher said the building at 126 Alfred — which has been gifted the name Nenookaasiins, meaning ‘Little Hummingbird,’ by elder Wally Chartrand — is a small but important step to addressing and responding to that issue, with a focus on promoting long-term wellness through culturally based programming and strategies. It provides a blueprint for other projects like it to get off the ground.



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"It's a part of the overall goal of (our organization) to instil a sense of identity, belonging and purpose," said Fisher, who oversaw Shawenim Abinoojii's foster care program for several years prior to her appointment as executive director.

Inside the building, there will be 18 units, with some two-bedroom units to support young parents or siblings. There will also be on-site programming space for the organization's Memengwaa program for transition supports for other community members leaving CFS care. Staff offices, basic resources and a teaching kitchen for life-skills education are also found inside. A highlight is the circular cultural programming space, which feels calm and inviting, Fisher said. The window screens on the first floor incorporate the image of a turtle, and in the morning sun, a shadow of the turtle marks the passage of time, said architect Wins Bridgman.

"No built from scratch apartment for transitional housing could have been afforded



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The building has been transformed into a housing hub for as many as 24 southeast First Nations youth transitioning out of child and family services.

such spacious units containing windows facing river ravine views," said Bridgman.

"Few sites in the city afford the opportunity for Indigenous youth to be part of a supportive housing project, have access to resources and ceremony within the project and then step out the front door into the beauty of the Red River bank and trails.

"The renovated building and the vision of Shawenim Abinoojii is a win for the adaptive reuse of an abandoned heritage building, a win for the North Point Douglas neighbourhood, a win for the economics and political design of the Rapid Housing Initiative and most importantly a win for the indigenous youth and staff who will live and work on this property," he added.

"Many of us felt that our work on this project and similar projects are acts of shared reconciliation," Bridgman added. "I, for one, feel very grateful to be part of this project."



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The project will focus on promoting long-term wellness through culturally based programming and strategies.

The project was funded by the federal Rapid Housing Initiative and End Homelessness Winnipeg, and will provide direct support to youth from eight southeast First Nations: Black River, Berens River, Brokenhead Ojibway, Poplar River, Hollow Water, Pauingassi, Bloodvein and Little Grand Rapids. Bridgman Collaborative Architecture led the design, while Bockstael Construction handled the contracting.

Fisher said the support from the community has been immense, and that it's clear Nenookaasiins is already having a positive impact. Young people in Shawenim Abinoojii's programming have already been on site, and have started to take ownership over the building.

"This is their space," she said.

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Ben Waldman covers a little bit of everything for the Free Press.