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FAST FACTS

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We All Work Together To Help One Another: The Story of Ma Mawi

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of one of Winnipeg's most successful and innovative Aboriginal organizations. Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre was established in 1984 as the result of the efforts of Aboriginal people, primarily Aboriginal women, working through Aboriginal women's organizations. Since 1997, Ma Mawi has undergone a remarkable transformation, re-creating itself as a genuinely Aboriginal organization. What was a strong and important organization from the outset has developed into an exceptional agency, whose mission is to provide culturally relevant preventative and supportive programs and services for Aboriginal families.

The immediate spark for the creation of Ma Mawi was the bathtub drowning of an 18 month-old Aboriginal child in a non-Aboriginal foster home that was overcrowded and did not meet provincial standards. The broader concern was the number of Aboriginal children that were involved in the child welfare system. Aboriginal children continue to comprise 70-80 percent of children in care in Manitoba. In fact, more Aboriginal children have passed through the child welfare system than ever went through the residential school system.

The Shift to a Community-Based Approach:

By the mid-1990s, Ma Mawi was organized much like any other relatively large social service

organization. The staff worked hard to help Aboriginal families, but the organization itself was structured as a bureaucracy. It conceived of its work as 'professionals' tending to the needs of 'clients'. The agency was located on Broadway, amidst the insurance companies and government offices, far removed from those it sought to support.

In 1997 some Ma Mawi workers began to realize that the organization had become so bureaucratic that it had lost touch with the community. The Annual General Meeting of 1997 began an intense process of consultations with members of the Aboriginal community. As current Executive Director Josie Hill puts it, "most people didn't even know Ma Mawi existed".

In the three years of consultation with the Aboriginal community that followed, Ma Mawi found that many expected the organization to become more connected to and visible within the community. As a result, Ma Mawi dramatically changed the way it does business.

This is a remarkable phenomenon. It is a case of a relatively big, bureaucratic organization re-constructing itself on the basis of what its constituents said they wanted.

The concept at the root of the change is community. Ma Mawi sought to re-connect with the urban Aboriginal community, to work with the



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community to build upon existing strengths, and to build the capacity of the community to solve its own problems. The organization shifted from a deficit approach, which focuses on ‘fixing’ what is wrong in a community, to an asset-based approach to community development, which seeks to identify and build upon strengths. The underlying premise is that it is not professionals and experts that will solve Aboriginal people’s problems; it is Aboriginal people themselves, and Ma Mawi’s role is to help the community to do so.

The office was relocated to several sites in the inner city, where they were easily accessible to those Ma Mawi sought to work with. The organization shifted from delivering 90 percent of its services in the form of responses to crises, to a new capacity-building approach, oriented to prevention and supports to families and communities, and accountable to the Aboriginal community. Ma Mawi became a learning organization, providing supports to staff to develop the leadership skills within the organization. Programs were developed to build leadership and capacity in the community—people in the community were no longer ‘clients’, but now became partners.

This is consistent with Ma Mawi’s name, which translated into English means: “we all work together to help one another”.

Building on the Strengths of Aboriginal Culture:

A crucial part of Ma Mawi’s approach is that the community-based, capacity-building work that it does is all rooted in Aboriginal cultures. Programs are intended to promote healing in the community, in large part by re-developing pride in what it is to be Aboriginal. Ma Mawi runs Pow Wow Clubs for Aboriginal youth, an Aboriginal cubs and scouts program, PACE (Positive Athletic Cultural Experience) programs, and promotes traditional teachings and the learning of traditional ceremonies. Support groups are organized for women, and men, and children. A young fathers

program is run, as well as a mentoring program for young women. Workshops are run regularly on leadership training and capacity building. Neighbourhood Care Sites run community-building and skill-building programs at inner-city sites; the new Windy Hill Community Learning Resource Centre is a beautiful out-of-town facility that hosts a wide variety of initiatives; and Ma Mawi runs a growing number of supported residential facilities for women and families. Numerous programs exist to support young families, and to promote healthy relationships and healthy lifestyles. These are all culturally relevant, preventative and supportive services and programs.

The objective is to strengthen families, and to strengthen communities, by building on and further developing the already existing strengths in the Aboriginal community, and to do so in a way that honours what it is to be Aboriginal, and develops a sense of pride in being Aboriginal.

Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata now employs some 200 people. Staff and Board members are Aboriginal. The way of working is Aboriginal.

There are growing numbers of successful Aboriginal organizations in Winnipeg. Ma Mawi is but one, albeit an important one. They are pointing the way to Winnipeg’s future. They are re-shaping the way things are done, by responding creatively to the demands of the community.

The Aboriginal share of this city’s population is going to continue to grow, and to grow rapidly, into the foreseeable future. This creates many exciting opportunities for all of us. To seize these opportunities, we will need to be open to new and innovative ways of doing things. The Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre is showing the way.

Jim Silver is a Professor of Politics at the University of Winnipeg and a CCPA-Mb Board member.

We are re-releasing this updated Fast Facts in honour of Ma Mawi’s twenty-fifth anniversary.



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