

Research for communities

Building a Community of Opportunity and Hope

The Promise of Adult Learning in the Lord Selkirk Park Housing Developments

As the result of an intense year of effort by many in the community, an adult learning centre opened in September 2007, in the Lord Selkirk Developments at Turtle Island Neighbourhood Centre. Tailored to the needs and circumstances of local residents, it is offering a mature Grade 12 diploma.

The opening is one of the first steps in what residents project as a multi-year process of transformation from within. The story behind the establishment of this process is told in detail by Jim Silver in the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba publication *State of the Inner City-2007*. It is summarized in this brief publication.

POVERTY IN LORD SELKIRK PARK

Located in the area bounded by Dufferin, King, Stella and Robinson, a block west of North Main and two blocks south of Selkirk Avenue, Lord Selkirk Park, called by many in the area 'the Developments,' has all of the indicators of, and problems associated with, spatially concentrated racialized poverty. Census Canada data for 2001 show that

- 87.8 percent of households, almost nine in every ten, had incomes below the Low-Income Cut Off, sometimes called the poverty line
- just over two-thirds of adults 20 years of age and older had less than a high school education
- just under half of all households were lone-parent families
- just over half of all individuals were Aboriginal.

SEEING COMMUNITY STRENGTHS

These statistics, which focus on the community weaknesses, fail to capture many of its strengths. It ignores the fact that many who live there are living strong and stable lives, and want more opportunities for themselves and their children and grandchildren. Many have specifically made it known that they would like to improve their education but are not able to further

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their education because the barriers to their doing so are too great. Many are single parents, and the problems of transport and childcare, given their low incomes, are too difficult to surmount.

The establishment of the adult learning centre is one of the steps taken to assist people in furthering their education and overcoming the barriers they face.

STARTING TO BUILD A NEIGHBOURHOOD OF OPPORTUNITY

The current round of changes in Lord Selkirk Park began about 1997 when the Lord Selkirk Park Neighbourhood Council began to develop a strategic plan for the area. Following a process of public consultation and public meetings, a strategic plan was adopted in mid-1998. Two important themes run through that plan: one was the need for organizations and individuals in the neighbourhood to work in partnership rather than isolation; the other was the need for residents to be involved in the decision-making process, in keeping with the principles of community development.

In 2002 the North End Community Renewal Corporation sent in a community organizer to lay the groundwork for a community revitalization strategy, as part of a comprehensive community initiative (CCI) for which funding had been received. A CCI seeks to work at community revitalization in a way that is holistic, and that involves all of the community. As a result of his and other peoples' efforts, a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) was formed in April 2004. In early 2006 the Lord Selkirk Park Resource Centre opened its doors in a unit in the Developments.

The Lord Selkirk Park Resource Centre has been a roaring success. Staffed by two Aboriginal women with historic and family links to the Developments, the place is now a hotbed of activity. Many residents drop by regularly to use the free laundry facilities or the clothing exchange, or to sit and talk over a cup of tea. When people in the area made it known that they would like to be able to have access to a counselor about various personal problems, Mount Carmel Clinic made a qualified Aboriginal counselor

available on a half-time basis to work out of the Resource Centre. A 'best yard contest' was organized in each of the past two years; with topsoil and bedding plants made available free of charge for tenants to use in their yards, and this has been a huge success. People have taken advantage of

The first class in the Lord Selkirk Park Adult Learning Centre, with teachers and support staff, on opening day.

Photo by David Henry.



the opportunity and have felt good about being able to make their homes look better.

THE ADULT LEARNING CENTRE

In-depth interviews with women in the Developments identified interest among many in achieving their Grade 12. This led the Community Advisory Committee to consider the possibility of adult education. The particular barriers identified, particularly in relation to transport and childcare, led a Committee of the CAC to consider the need to locate the adult education facility right in Lord Selkirk Park.

Adult learning centres have been shown to be effective in working with precisely the kinds of people who live in the Developments. A study, based on interviews with 75 Aboriginal learners in adult learning centres in Manitoba, found that Aboriginal adults feel comfortable and welcome in ALCs, and that many are achieving their mature Grade 12.

The ALCs offer a holistic approach to education, in a warm and welcoming environment. They are non-hierarchical, supportive, respectful and personalized, and teachers 'go the extra mile' for their students. An adult learning centre does not look or operate like a traditional school; its approach to education is tailored to the circumstances and needs of low-income adults.

Locating the Centre in the Developments is an example of tailoring the project to the needs and realities of the community. There is a wealth of evidence that for a variety of reasons—not least of which is the pervasive racism and stereotyping to

which many public-housing residents are subjected—the residents of public housing projects are often reluctant to move far away from home. A recent study of women in Lord Selkirk Park found that this is the case in the Developments as well: many barriers, tangible and intangible, serve to confine many in Lord Selkirk Park to that small geographic space and immediate environs. As the result of negotiations with the City of Winnipeg, facilitated by a City of Winnipeg community development worker who has been a part of this project from the beginning, the ALC is housed in two rooms in the Turtle Island Neighbourhood Centre.

Another part of tailoring the project to the realities of the community is the creation of an Aboriginal-friendly environment. In interviews, residents said repeatedly that they consider this important. The absence of an Aboriginal-friendly environment has been shown to be an important reason why Aboriginal students leave inner-city high schools before completion. Adult learning centres that provide an Aboriginal-friendly environment do especially well. Therefore money has been included in the budget to have an Aboriginal elder on site on a part-time basis; a Native Studies course will be a central part of the curriculum; the Aboriginal counselor provided by Mount Carmel Clinic will be available to students; and the adult learning centre will be named in a naming ceremony by the Elder in residence. These important elements of the strategy are examples of how the adult learning centre will be tailored to meet the circumstances and needs of these particular adult learners.

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The full *State of the Inner City 2007* report is available from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives—Manitoba.

Another example of this tailoring are the hours of operation. Classes run from 9:30-11:30 in the morning, and 1:30-3:30 in the afternoon. This enables adult learners who are parents to walk their children to David Livingstone School or a nearby childcare centre in the morning, and then come to class; to take their children home for lunch; and to pick them up after school in the afternoon, without missing any of their class time.

This kind of adult learning centre, located right in the Developments and tailored to the needs of the people who live there, will be a major factor in revitalizing the community. It will lead to:

- an increase in the number of people will complete their Grade 12;
- an improvement in the sense of self-confidence and self-esteem felt by those attending the ALC;
- employment for those who graduate or improve their educational standing;
- a retention of community resources;
- improved school performance by the children of adults attending the ALC;
- the emergence of a culture of achievement and a better life in the community;
- the likelihood that people attending the ALC will network and act collectively in their interests and the neighbourhood's benefit;
- and an improvement in the safety and security in the Developments as a new sense of purpose and of hope emerges.

THE ADULT LEARNING CENTRE AS PART OF A HOLISTIC STRATEGY

The ALC is a central part of the Comprehensive Community Initiative (CCI) now being undertaken in Lord Selkirk Park by the North End Community Renewal Corporation. The adult learning centre is not an isolated, stand-alone project, but rather is a central part of a holistic strategy that involves the community. In coming years there are plans to provide childcare, a variety of additional educational supports that will weave together a range of community resources.

In the case of Lord Selkirk Park, the hope is that many of those who benefit from the ALC will choose to stay in the Developments because the housing is affordable and comfortable. The character of the community will change as a result, with a growing proportion of those living in the Developments being in the labour force. As the educational levels and labour force attachment of residents rises, a wide range of benefits will accrue to their families and the community. Lord Selkirk Park will become a place where people want to live, not leave; a community less of poverty and despair than of opportunity and hope.