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# FAST FACTS

**October 6, 2009**

## Building a Community of Opportunity and Hope

**R**ecent events in Gilbert Park have cast Winnipeg’s North End public housing complexes in a negative light. An opposition politician has called Gilbert Park a “ghetto” and “crime incubator”. Some poverty ‘experts’, in statements attributed to them by the media, have implied that conditions in public housing are so bad they cannot be improved.

As tragic as recent events in Gilbert Park have been, and as pessimistic and defeatist as some authorities are about public housing, very real gains are being made in Winnipeg’s North End public housing complexes.

Evidence of what is possible can be found in Lord Selkirk Park.

Lord Selkirk Park is a large, North End public housing complex and one of Winnipeg’s lowest-income neighbourhoods. According to Census Canada data the median household income in 2006 was \$15,552, less than one-third of Winnipeg’s \$49,790. The proportion of households below the Statistics Canada Low-Income Cut Off was 82.3 percent, more than four times Winnipeg’s 20.2 percent.

Such data and related problems lead some to write public housing and their residents off as hopeless cases, as “ghettos”, as danger zones that breed crime and disorder and ought to be bulldozed.

A better way of viewing public housing is to emphasize its strengths and to build on these. That is what the North End Community Renewal Corporation (NECRC) has been doing in Lord Selkirk Park. The good quality, low-cost housing is seen as an asset, especially given the desperate shortage of such housing in Winnipeg. The people who live there, with their various abilities and potential, are also seen as assets. From this conceptual starting point NECRC has embarked upon a strategy they call “Rebuilding from Within”. It emphasizes creating opportunities and providing supports that enable residents to develop their capabilities.

Gains to date have been impressive, and include: a Community Advisory Committee that meets monthly to coordinate the work of all government and social agencies, and that includes growing numbers of residents; a Resource Centre, created because residents said this was needed, that has become a meeting place attracting growing numbers of residents and promoting various rebuilding activities; an on-site Adult Learning Centre, created because residents wanted more educational opportunities and called Kaakiyow Li Moond Likol, a Michif name meaning All-People’s School, that offers the mature grade 12 certificate, that doubled its enrolment from 15 to 28 in its second year in 2008-2009, and that



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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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last June, 2009, celebrated the graduation of its first 7 adult students; an associated adult literacy program operating three half-days per week to prepare low-literacy adults for Kaakiyow; an on-site university-level program in Community Recreation and Active Living (CRAL), the first course in which was successfully offered to 14 young Aboriginal adults in May-June 2009; and the establishment in the Spring of 2009 of a Pathways to Education Canada program, a branch of the highly successful high school support program developed in 2001 in Canada's largest public housing complex, Toronto's Regent Park, and which has dramatically cut high school drop-out rates and increased high school graduation rates in that public housing complex previously infamous for poor educational outcomes and high levels of crime. NECRC is currently working on the establishment of an on-site, 47 space combined Childcare/Resource Centre, to be operated on a hub model basis and which will enable more single moms to get their grade 12, for which it is believed the Province is close to approving funding.

The overall strategy is to increase educational and employment opportunities for residents of Lord Selkirk Park, two-thirds of whom are Aboriginal, and thus to create the conditions in which residents can and will improve their own living conditions.

As of the third week of September, 34 adults were registered in Kaakiyow, working to earn their grade 12. This is not easy for people who struggle with poverty and single parenthood and may have only grade 9 or 10 when they start, but many are seizing the opportunity and succeeding. It is expected that 15-20 young Aboriginal people will take the second, university-level CRAL course this Fall. The City is supporting CRAL, hoping to hire more Aboriginal people trained in sport and recreation for work in North End community centres. The provincial government's investment of fiscal stimulus money in renovations of public

housing units, and their commitment to hiring locally, has meant that Lord Selkirk Park is now buzzing with the sound of construction work being done by local people, about 20 from Lord Selkirk Park, who have jumped at the chance to work. The establishment of the Childcare/Resource Centre is expected to create about 24 jobs, the commitment is to hire locally, and local people with the appropriate credentials are already submitting resumes.

The net result will be that more people in Lord Selkirk Park will be in school or in the labour force, or both; more youngsters in public housing will be succeeding in school because their parents are going to school and because they have the support of Pathways to Education; and more adults will be improving their literacy skills. Some residents have recently come forward to form a Resident Planning Group, showing that the community is becoming increasingly engaged in this transformative process.

Far from being a "ghetto", Lord Selkirk Park is becoming a hotbed of transformative educational and employment initiatives. Similar initiatives are underway in Gilbert Park.

These communities will not be turned around overnight, and there will be more setbacks along the way. But creating educational and employment opportunities and the supports needed to take advantage of them is building in Lord Selkirk Park not the "ghetto" seen by uninformed observers, but rather a community of opportunity and hope in which residents are struggling, with steadily growing success, to build a better future.

*Jim Silver is a Professor in the Department of Politics at the University of Winnipeg, and has been working with NECRC in Lord Selkirk Park for the past four years.*



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