



FAST FACTS



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To Help One Another: The Story of Ma Mawi

This month marks the twentieth anniversary of one of Winnipeg's most successful and innovative Aboriginal organizations. Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre was established in June, 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, rooted in and responding to the needs of the Aboriginal community. 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, leading some to describe the child welfare system as the modern day equivalent of 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 members were caring and they 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 serve.

In 1997, some Ma Mawi workers began to realize that the organization had become so bureaucratic that it had lost touch with the community.

At the Annual General Meeting of 1997 Ma Mawi began an intense process of consultations with members of the Aboriginal community. What they found first of all was that, 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, and to understand and work directly with the community. As a result, Ma Mawi dramatically changed the way that it does business.

This is a remarkable phenomenon. It is a case of a relatively big, bureaucratic organization re-imagining itself and then 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, and to work with the community to build upon existing strengths and to work to build the capacity of the community to solve its own problems. The organization shifted from a



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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 the strengths in a community. 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 on Broadway was relocated to several sites in the inner city, where they were more 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. A new focus on building leadership in the community and in the organization itself was adopted. 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.

For example, each of the 30 or so programs at Ma Mawi is now delivered by a staff person, and a community person who him/herself has gone through the program. Ma Mawi is no longer the expert but rather a helper to the community. 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 new approach is that the community-based, capacity-building work that it does is all rooted in Aboriginal culture. 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, and an Aboriginal scouts program, and promotes traditional teachings and the learning of traditional ceremonies. Support groups are organized for women, and men, and children. There is a young fathers program, as well as a mentoring program for young women. Workshops are run regularly on leadership training and capacity building. 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 more than 120 people. All are Aboriginal. All twelve 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

Jim Silver is the Chairperson of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba.

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