



SASKATCHEWAN'S FRIENDSHIP CENTRE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

FREE

2014 EDITION



Clockwise from top left: AFCS executive director Gwen Bear chatting with staff members Sussha Weflan and Brad Bird; delegates brainstorming at the 2014 provincial strategic planning session; elders sharing at an elders' forum in Yorkton; laughs at the youth leadership symposium.

Who are we?

We are a group of 11 organizations with a common goal of meeting the needs of Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan's urban centres.

Every friendship centre may look different, but each one is responding to the needs we see, extending a literal hand of friendship and saying, "You are not alone. We are walking with you."

From west to east, you will find us in:

- La Loche** - La Loche Friendship Centre
- Buffalo Narrows** - Buffalo Narrows Friendship Centre
- Île-à-la-Crosse** - Île-à-la-Crosse Friendship Centre
- Meadow Lake** - North West Friendship Centre
- North Battleford** - Battlefords Indian & Metis Friendship Centre
- La Ronge** - Kikinahk Friendship Centre
- Prince Albert** - Indian and Metis Friendship Centre of Prince Albert
- Saskatoon** - Saskatoon Indian & Metis Friendship Centre
- Regina** - Newo Yotina Friendship Centre
- Fort Qu'Appelle** - Qu'Appelle Valley Friendship Centre
- Yorkton** - Yorkton Friendship Centre

Pulling the centres together

The Aboriginal Friendship Centres of Saskatchewan (AFCS) is the umbrella organization to which all of our centres belong.

The AFCS advocates for and represents us on a provincial level, and also administers the funding that our centres receive from various levels of government.

"I love working here because it's non-partisan, non-political, but it's all-inclusive," said AFCS executive director Gwen Bear, who works under the direction of an elected board made up of Metis, First Nations and non-Aboriginal people, with a youth rep and an appointed senator, who serves as an advisor.

"The government has nicely divided us into... 'you Metis people belong over there', 'you non-status belong over there', but the friend-

ship centres pull us all together."

Since their inception in the early 1960s, Saskatchewan's friendship centres have been a gathering place for Aboriginal people in urban areas.

The centres pinpoint where the gaps are – whether that is a simple wish to be with someone who knows

you and cares, or something more complex – and step in to meet those needs.

"We want to help the people to live life in a good way in the city," Bear said.

"We help to eliminate racism. We help to eliminate poverty. We help to eliminate people dying on the street, addictions – showing them where to go for the right services as well."

Many Aboriginal people, especially those living in urban areas, either feel ashamed of

their Aboriginal identity or don't even know what it means to be an Aboriginal person.

"We're the only people that the (Canadian) government tried to take culture away from," Bear said. "So now, these places are a safe place where you can learn about your culture and go in and feel a part of. That's what I believe a friendship centre is: a safe place."

One major role for the AFCS is to create opportunities for the staff in our centres to share ideas and experiences with one another, in hopes of helping one another find solutions to local challenges. Every three months, the executive directors of all 11 centres meet in Saskatoon for just that purpose.

"The great thing about friendship centres is the ability to tailor programming to the needs of the community (they serve)," said Brad Bird, the AFCS's Aboriginal cultural coordinator and a board mem-

ber for the Saskatoon friendship centre.

At the provincial level, a director may find someone who has a similar issue to deal with, and he or she can "get a feel for what they do (at the other centre), and build off that," Bird said.

"It's a support system.... If people really work together, we can become stronger."

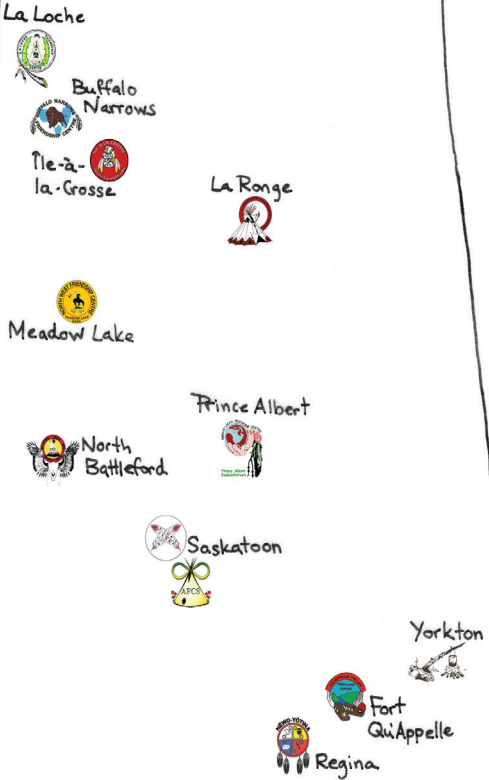
This also applies to Saskatchewan's Aboriginal youth and elders, both of whom the AFCS is working to equip as leaders and advisors.

In March, the AFCS held a week-long youth leadership development symposium. The symposium's goal was to equip budding leaders with skills they can take back to their communities, while also connecting them to other young people from across the province.

The AFCS is also developing a provincial elders' council, to provide the organization with guidance going forward.

Friendship centres help Aboriginal people living in urban areas pull together.

ABORIGINAL FRIENDSHIP CENTRES OF SASKATCHEWAN





LA LOCHE

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Releasing the angel



Cyclists and skateboarders enjoy the recreation site built next to the La Loche Friendship Centre through a community partnership.

"I saw the angel in the marble, and carved until I set it free."
- Michelangelo

Most people look at La Loche, a small, remote village in northern Saskatchewan, and see a hunk of rock. Leonard Montgrand sees the angel.

"I have a strong belief that every day, we chip away at the social problems within our community, and eventually we'll get to the inner beauty," said Montgrand, director of the La Loche Friendship Centre.

"It's a long, long, hard road, and there's not many of us in the community that have made that commitment. But there are people out there that work hard, and are passionate about what they do."

When Montgrand was first hired in 2004, the board of directors was troubled by the direction their friendship centre was headed. Very few people in town could even say where the centre was located, and according to Montgrand, the centre's funding was being mis-managed.

"The board was concerned. They had some direction from the AFCS to try and get this friendship centre a little more visible, out in the community, and start doing more things that are related to the friendship centre movement," Montgrand said.

Within a year, the centre had moved out of its rented office space and into its own building. "I learned things along the way, and built contacts with a lot of government officials and funding agen-

cies.... We started acquiring more programs. However, we reached a roadblock, because of the fact that we had no more room to increase capacity in our centre," Montgrand said. "We needed a (bigger) building, so that's the phase we're working on now."

Over the last 10 years, Montgrand has worked to make the friendship centre not only more visible, but an integral part of his community, and that work has not gone unnoticed.

"I believe that it's a very important agency in the community, (and) that it'd be a setback (for the community) if La Loche Friendship Centre did not exist," said the village's mayor, Georgina Jolibois.

"With the population growing in the community, infrastructure has not (kept up). We need the friendship centre, and the new building, to bring in other required programs to help the residents of the community."

The friendship centre is currently housed in a small, one-storey building, with several of its programs operating out of another building. Montgrand's vision is to see all of his staff housed under one roof.

"Our intent is to create a base to bring all the other programs back to the friendship centre," he said. "There are programs out there that we've been approached to take on, but we have to step back and say, 'We don't have the infrastructure right now to house these people?... We've just outgrown ourselves.'"

The new building will have offices on the upper level, with more offices, a computer room, a foyer, a stage area with seating, and a commercial kitchen on the lower level, for youth programs and community events.

The kitchen will be set up cafeteria-style, so that the friendship centre can serve hot meals for kids, and potentially offer a daily soup-and-sandwich lunch for community members.

"We don't want to create a restaurant within the com-

learn from... and be young," he said.

The friendship centre has raised the estimated \$700,000 they will need for their new building, but finding contractors to do the work has become the biggest hurdle to overcome. Montgrand remains hopeful that construction will be underway by this fall.

In the meantime, he and his staff are not sitting idle. In 2004, the friendship centre's program budget was approximately \$200,000. Today, it is closer to \$1.2 million, and still climbing.

"I'm proud that we went from a pilot program into running our own program, and going from a deficit into the black.... That's 'wow!'," St. Pierre said. "A lot of that is because of the good work that Leonard and the group do here."

For his part, Montgrand takes pride in the impact that good financial management has had on his friendship centre's reputation. Earlier this year, the La Loche Friendship Centre was one of 16 applicants chosen by Crime Prevention Canada to receive funding for a five-year, \$3-million project called Strengthening Families. They beat out more than 100

cludes informal family practice time and group leader coaching.

Montgrand said his goal with this program is to see the parent-child bond rebuilt in La Loche.

"I'd like to give the child back to the parents, instead of the community looking after the child," he said. "We've got to try to get the parents involved again. We've got to teach them proper parenting skills, so that we break the cycle."

The Strengthening Families funding will pay for four staff – three in La Loche and one on the Clearwater River Dene Nation's nearby reserve – as well as covering the cost of meals, childcare, and a financial incentive for participants to proceed through the program to completion, Montgrand said.

The federal government initially intended to run the program exclusively in the municipality, but Montgrand urged them to consider the fact that many families are split between the reserve and La Loche proper, and government officials finally agreed.

Montgrand has also applied for funding from Status of Women Canada for a program to help women get into business for themselves, as well as funding renewal for their existing women's wellness program.

The wellness program is intended to provide advice and resources to help women deal with violence, either at home or in the workplace, but it is also a way for women to connect with one another and learn something about themselves, whether through an exercise group or a painting class.

"Some people have a mind full of distractions, thinking too much. Painting can help ease their minds, and they can create art," said women's wellness co-ordinator Leanna Janvier.

"They can express (emotions) through painting, they can do stuff through sewing, working out, exercising, to help their well-being.... The best way to help anybody is (providing ways) for them to grow, (in their) mind, spiritually, and with their body – to get in touch with themselves."

In addition to encouraging women to express themselves, the friendship centre



La Loche is a proud Dene community, and the friendship centre strives to honour that heritage through its seasonal festivals.

munity, but we want to have some place that people go and have basic food, and if somebody wants to start up a kitchen (operation) in there, well, maybe that's the next step," Montgrand said.

Board chair Robert St. Pierre is eager to see the building completed so that the friendship centre can offer structured programs for youth. Once the new building is in place, "they can rely on that, that they have a place to

other applicants for the contract.

The initiative, which is already in use in other countries, is aimed at building healthy family practices and lifestyles, Montgrand said.

Parents and their children, ages 3 to 16, participate together in 14 two-hour intensive workshops, learning parenting skills, children's life skills, and family life skills. Before each session, participants share a meal, which in-

is also helping women gain more of a public platform.

“We started up a women and young girls’ committee that deals with social problems in the community,” Montgrand said. “It’s another belief I have, that if a person becomes active and engaged, they’ll slowly, eventually, start to become self-dependent. (Then) they don’t really need people to make their lives better – they can start living (well) by themselves.”

The women’s wellness program works hand-in-hand with the centre’s family support workers, who are also trying to effect social change through helping people improve their lives.

The family support program, funded through Saskatchewan’s Ministry of Social Services, helps parents whose children have been (or are at risk of being) apprehended.

“We work in the home, working with the family dynamics of whatever the problem seems to be,” said in-home support worker Melinda Lemaigre. “If an individual has addictions, we would do a referral with addictions (services), and then we would teach them about the dynamics of alcohol abuse – how alcohol affects your family lifestyle or

assists young offenders who have been released from custody and are trying to adjust to life back in the community. The co-ordinator’s role is to connect clients to community resources, such as addiction treatment services or anger management programs.

“We try to build a good relationship between the youth and myself, and try to have that trust level. That way, I can talk to them at any time,” said co-ordinator Shawn Montgrand.

The trust is critical, because Montgrand can’t force a youth to go into treatment or start attending school, for example, unless it is mandated by the courts. “All I can do is try to ease them into it, try to give them reasons why it’s something good that they can benefit from,” he said.

Montgrand helps his clients build safety plans, which outlines steps they can take to make their re-adjustment time easier and more productive.

He also provides informal counselling, and if one of his clients ends up back in court, he goes with them – sometimes to translate, as English is a second language for many of his clients, but mainly “just so they don’t feel like they’re there alone.”

“That’s our claim to fame here,” Montgrand said. “We had a sudden explosion in the population, and it’s continued on.... Between the reserve and La Loche, we’re about the lower 4,000s, which is a fairly large number for a community at the road’s end. Services and infrastructure are very low – we’re lacking in a lot of things.”

“They’re young, which has special challenges, (including) just finding enough adults to run programming,” said Dene High School principal Stephen King. “There’s a lot of those organizational issues that the community is faced with.”

In response, the schools, the municipality and the friendship centre frequently partner up to provide what’s missing, with the friendship centre taking the organizational lead.

“La Loche requires a lot of services and support systems for its residents and (those living in) surrounding communities. La Loche Friendship Centre is organized and respected... (and as such is) an organization that the Northern Village of La Loche can reach out to,” said Mayor Jolibois. “If we are writing a proposal or seeking funding... it can take on the funding and the program for us.”

state-of-the-art outdoor skating rink and a skateboard park, complete with asphalt, lighting and monitoring cameras, both adjacent to the friendship centre. The third installment, a splash park, will be constructed once the friendship centre’s new

happen,” King said. “It’s not like we have a large pool of volunteers to draw on. We don’t have a huge corporate presence in our community.... This is an important part of life in the community, and (its goal is) making people come together instead of



After years of fundraising and advocacy, a much larger building will soon be going up next to the friendship centre’s current home.

building is completed. The new recreation site is also being used for community events, so that the downtown thoroughfare doesn’t have to be blocked off during these events.

The SRC acquired a grant to hire a co-ordinator, but the funders required them to find someone with certification in either recreation or business management. When the SRC’s search came up empty, Montgrand agreed to put on yet another hat.

“Leonard has dual roles,” said King, who serves on the SRC board. “It’s seamless in that fashion, that we work that closely together.... They’re so parallel, it’s hard to separate which one is which.”

“We do have a fairly high unemployment rate, and a number of people who don’t have a lot of activity in their life, so... opportunities for people to do things that occupy their time in a positive fashion, are really, really important,” King said.

Thanks to the friendship centre and the SRC, summers in La Loche include a big Canada Day celebration with live entertainment and amusement rides, a visiting circus, a spiritual pilgrimage to Lac St. Anne, a community fair with amusement rides, a youth arts and culture camp, and a voyageur canoe trip to Batoche.

The biggest event of the year is Yanessa Days, a four-day festival which showcases Dene artisans, and offers recreational, cultural and sporting events.

In the fall and winter, there are haunted houses, hockey tournaments, seasonal festivals, and trapper skill competitions.

“If we didn’t have that organization doing its piece to organize and support activities in the community, some of these events just wouldn’t

finding things to drive people apart.”

“I find it very impressive that it can actually provide so much,” said Shawn Montgrand. “It brings so much unity within the community.”

The friendship centre also has a small business venture, Dene Music Trackers, which owns bouncy castles, a generator, and machines to make cotton candy, popcorn, and sno-cones. These are used for the Canada Day celebrations, and are also rented out for parties.

“We’re self-sufficient. We don’t need anybody now (for events),” Leonard Montgrand said. “We don’t make a lot – maybe \$25,000 a year on it – but it provides a service to the community.”

The business venture fits neatly into Montgrand’s philosophy for the friendship centre.

“A lot of people in our community are dependent on the welfare system,” he said.

“We try to take them away from it. We try to make people understand that only you can change your life; we’re not going to change your life for you.

“We want to get away from the philosophy of giving handouts – instead, we want to give them a hand up.”

“This friendship centre’s forever under scrutiny... (but) we stand for what we believe in, and we just move forward, and people start to see us progress,” said board chair St. Pierre.

“(Look at) how many people we’re employing, and how many community members we’ve benefited. That’s just amazing, when you look at the time span.”

And maybe, if people look very closely, they might just see a wing jutting out of that rock.



La Loche’s Yanessa Days are an opportunity for the community to re-connect to (and have fun with) their history.

your self-esteem... (or) if they don’t know how to budget, we would teach them.”

“We bring in a lot of information about stress, because some families don’t really know how to cope with the stress,” Lemaigre added. “They turn to alcohol and drugs, and it brings the families down.”

Some of Lemaigre’s clients are living in over-crowded homes, which causes additional problems for families, so she and her colleague write referral letters to local housing organizations. “The more support they get, the quicker they get into the unit,” she explained.

The friendship centre’s youth intervention program

“You are working with troubled youth, but even if I can help one, that’s my magic number,” Montgrand said. “If I can at least help save one life, that’s good enough for me.”

“I’ve seen people that were in the gangs before, get out of the gangs, because we’ve given (them) that step up, tried to show a more positive lifestyle, and they’ve taken advantage (of that help),” added Leonard Montgrand.

Helping young people is critically important in La Loche, where approximately 60 per cent of the population is under 35. In the late 1970s, La Loche was in the Guinness Book of World Records for most births per capita.

A key collaboration has been the La Loche Sports and Recreation Committee (SRC), a body made up of two village councillors, two people from the school system, two from the friendship centre, and two from the community at large.

“I put it together for them so that we quit duplicating services, and we get the best bang for our buck,” Montgrand said. A consultant was brought in to help the SRC set its direction and focus, which included organizing community events, and building a recreation site.

After working with a team of landscape architects and raising the required \$500,000, the SRC put in a



BUFFALO NARROWS

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A place to call home

They're a bit obsessed with marbles in Buffalo Narrows.

More specifically, that's marbles placed strategically around a hand-carved wooden board, with each two-person team's objective being to get their own marbles "home" while knocking off the other team's with a well-timed bump.

Don't go comparing it to "Sorry" – you'll be quickly informed that the board game manufacturers stole the concept from their game, which they call "doshka", the Ukrainian word for board.

Starting the morning off with some healthy competition, served up alongside a steaming hot cup of free coffee – that's one reason why the Buffalo Narrows Friendship Centre is the hub of community life in its northern Metis village.

Stop in at the centre any weekday, 9 to 5, and you'll soon have your hands wrapped around a mug and yourself seated in a chair, with a hand of playing cards.

"People are coming and going out of here steady, playing pool, playing crib, playing cards, or they just come in, sit down and have coffee, visit with their friends," said director Brenda Chartier.

This is where the community of Buffalo Narrows comes together, and "if somebody comes from out of town... they'll stop here," Chartier said. "Everybody knows everybody, because all the communities around here are small."

A lot of community services are also housed at the friendship centre, including the family support worker, KidsFirst North, and the Cultural Connections for Ab-



The friendship centre (above) is a meeting place for the northern Metis community. Anyone who stops by is welcomed with a friendly handshake, a coffee, and an offer to play one of the village's favourite pastimes: a card and marble game they call doshka (below left). The centre is also a place for cultural learning, such as the fine art of making bannock, taught by programmer Eric Hartley (below right).

original Youth (CCAY) program. The centre also does the administration for Apisci Mos Tosis ("Small Buffalo"), the local Aboriginal Head Start preschool.

"There's a lot of services that we offer just in this building alone, and instead of them running to each agency, they can come here and get it," Chartier said.

If someone in Buffalo Narrows is struggling, or just needs a helping hand, they are likely to find what they need at the friendship centre. Services such as phone calls, faxing, Internet access, tax filing and resume prepa-

ration are all offered free of charge. The staff will even advocate for someone who needs help with, for example, a housing situation, Chartier said.

"A lot of our single parents in our community are (school) drop-outs. They don't know how to speak on their (own) behalf. There's times they'll get a letter, they don't understand it, so they'll bring it here, and somebody always helps. It's the same thing with our elders."

Many community elders are regulars at the friendship centre, and their needs are catered to with activi-

ties such as weekend doshka or crib tournaments, berry-picking and religious pilgrimages to sites such as Lac St. Anne, Alberta.

The elders work with core programmer Eric Hartley to raise money for these trips, holding fundraising barbecues or selling 50/50 tickets. In the summers, people relax and visit on the front deck.

The friendship centre has a foosball table, an air hockey game, a pool table, two TVs, and an Xbox, all of which are popular with the older kids.

Little kids are catered to with glasses of juice, colouring books, and crayons.

In addition to their own game tournaments and movie nights, the friendship centre helps organize many of the events held in Buffalo Narrows.

These include parades, a Christmas supper, dances at the community hall, fish derbies, cultural camps, hockey tournaments, and summer and winter festivals.

The centre's biggest event of the year is Palmbere Days, which draws upwards of 500 people from around the north for a summertime weekend of camping, dances, bingos, and games such as horseshoes and tug of war.



“The (purpose of the) friendship centre is to bring community members together to fellowship and to enjoy each other’s company,” Hartley said. “It’s a place for people to gather.”

That assessment is music to board president Dennis Shatilla’s ears. In 1983, Shatilla took inspiration from Saskatoon’s friendship centre to help establish a similar one in his hometown, and 30-plus years later, it’s still going strong.

“A lot of the centres are into business; we’re not. We’re more into the drop-in (approach),” Shatilla said. “We’re status-blind – doors are open, programs are open to all people, and we try to do whatever’s missing,” he said.

As Shatilla sees it, two of the friendship centre’s major contributions to the health of his community are education about Aboriginal culture and customs, and strengthened relationships between generations. In his mind, these two contributions are closely inter-connected.

“We try to get the seniors working with the youth, trying to teach them... because you find a lot of the young people watch TV and outside influences, and they forget all that, the respect (for elders),” Shatilla said.

“We have (elders) teaching (youth) how to do the traditional things like fishing, setting nets, trapping, that sort of stuff, just to give them a taste of what their culture actually is.”

Over the last three decades, the friendship centre has had a big impact on the youth of Buffalo Narrows, Shatilla said. “We see as they grow older, they’re more into our culture and our way of life.... They’re starting to get a better grounding.”

However, the centre now faces challenges that didn’t exist in Buffalo Narrows 30 years ago. “There’s so many pressures.... Right now, we have kids out there, 12-, 13-year-olds, experimenting with drinking,” Shatilla said.

“We do a lot of things so that we can educate the kids on the alcohol, the drugs, what it can do to you, what it will do to you.”

In addition to bringing in experts to teach youth about the dangers of addictions, the friendship centre is also trying to re-focus kids’ attention toward healthier activities – especially ones that celebrate their Aboriginal heritage.

In March, the CCAY staff worked with Twin Lakes Community School to hold two weekend-long cultural camps.

The youth learned about trapping, fishing, preparing furs, fish scale art and more, and a counsellor from the lo-

cal health region spoke about drugs and suicide.

Similar skills and knowledge were shared in the weekday afternoons and evenings, through the CCAY program. Now, former CCAY co-ordinator Rhoda Misponas worries about what will happen if funding for her program is not restored, especially as the pool of teachers begins to disappear.



Youth participating in a cultural camp learned all about fish: how to cut it (left), how to use the scales to make art (bottom right - held here by director Brenda Chartier), and even how to imitate a fish’s expression. The centre stresses the importance of passing traditions on to the next generation.

“In the last few years, we’ve lost a lot of elders,” Misponas said. “I was lucky, my mom actually taught me how to do this (traditional Aboriginal) stuff, so I got to pass it down to these kids.”

“If you want to know how to make fried bannock, go on the Internet,” she said. “But how many kids actually go on the Internet for something like that? They’d rather go on there for games or for talking to their friends.

“Kids seem to learn more when it’s hands-on – like, they actually get to make the stuff, take something home with them to say to their parents, ‘Look, Mom, what I made – try it!’”

Misponas said she faces similar challenges with her own kids. When she wanted to teach her youngest daughter how to build a fire, “I had to take her phone away for a while,” she said.

“They don’t want to take that time to get off Facebook... to actually learn this stuff, but once they actually do get into it, they’re really into it.”

“The elders have a lot of wisdom. (Once) they’re gone, it’s gone with them,” Shatilla said. “A lot of the kids are really interested. The elders feel good about that.”

“Even my own grandkids, they ask me what kind of Xbox I had when I was growing up, and I tell them, ‘I had the woodbox.’ We were out hauling water,” Shatilla said. “And they can’t believe that!”

As the community support worker for KidsFirst North, Shatilla’s daughter, Rosie, shares her father’s passion for strengthening inter-generational relationships.

While her colleague Angel Chartier focuses on direct in-home parent support and education, Shatilla runs classes and organizes group activities to strengthen families, in a territory that covers La Loche, Turnor Lake and St. George’s Hill, as well as Buffalo Narrows. “Our main focus is on getting families doing things together,” the younger Shatilla said. “Parents are the

first teachers, and the early years are the most important. That’s when a lot of their learning is taking place.”

Additions – both to drugs and alcohol and to technology – damage that relationship, Shatilla added. “(It’s) an easy babysitter – you can give (your) baby an iPad or turn on the TV... and then they don’t have that (parent-child) interaction.”

Shatilla teaches parenting skills, cooking, budgeting, and craft- and toy-making. Along with the local early years committee, she also helps run a Mom and Tot Time program, with activities such as crafts, gym nights, and, in the winter-time, sliding parties.

“I have clients from eight years ago that still come and talk to me, tell me about their kids... and they say, ‘Yeah, remember when you showed

me how to do that, and I still do it,’ and that makes a person feel happy,” she said. “And the big reward is seeing the parent-child relationships, and the changes in them, with more interaction.”

Preschool director Bev Norton also has the pleasure of seeing changes in kids and their parents. She and her staff of six – four teachers, a cook and a bus driver – have

up to 48 preschoolers under their care at Apisci Mos Tosis, which means, Norton said jokingly, that they have no time for playing doshka.

Apisci Mos Tosis is one of the three Aboriginal Head Start preschools operated by a Saskatchewan friendship centre. Norton said her school’s success is a tribute to the friendship centre board that, 17 years ago, recognized the need for such a program in Buffalo Narrows, and successfully applied for the funding.

Norton also appreciates the preschool’s partnership with Twin Lakes Community School, which employs one of the preschool’s teachers and assists with the small graduates’ transition to kindergarten. Come mid-June, the five-year-olds spend two weeks at “the big school”. Before they go, the preschool staff bring over the children’s shoe baskets, so the little ones see something familiar when they arrive.

“They get introduced to the program there, so when they come back in the fall, they know (what to expect),” Norton said. “That way, they’re not so scared.”

Norton’s staff put a lot of effort into building family literacy, so every month, parents can order books through the Scholastic book program. The money goes toward purchasing more materials for the preschool’s library.

This creates a win-win situation, especially since there

is nowhere to buy books in Buffalo Narrows. “We wanted to give the parents an opportunity to have books at home,” Norton said.

Accordingly, the school sends home a book from that library every day, for the parents to read to their child, then send back the next day. The titles read are recorded at the school, and at the end of the year, for the school presents small gifts to the families that participate.

Each student also gets a book to keep, along with a yearbook with photos of each of the graduates and their future ambitions.

Birthdays are celebrated monthly, and the school invites the parents to attend. Parents also participate in fundraising activities, family meals, and the yearly graduation ceremony.

The school also offers a monthly parents’ education night, with topics such as parenting, speech/language development, nutrition and dental care.

As part of the Aboriginal Head Start program, the school makes an effort to include Aboriginal culture in their classes. For example, they might teach Michif (the Metis language) words and numbers, do jigging, make moose hide mitts, go berry-picking, or have an elder come in to speak.

“It’s a beautiful program,” Norton said. “They love to come to preschool, and then when they’re here for the first year, (they say), ‘When can I go to the big school?’ So they’re enjoying school, they’re wanting to learn.”

Overall, the friendship centre and its programs set a welcoming tone. Alcohol is not permitted on the premises, and since taking over as director in 2010, Chartier has set a policy that anyone who comes must be sober, with no requests for money or harassment allowed.

“More people come here (now), and they say that the atmosphere is better, it’s more positive,” Chartier said.

“They don’t have to worry people bothering them. And basically, it’s their home away from home.”

“You’re one of the family when you walk in the door,” agreed Hartley. “Honest. Everybody, no matter who they are, one of the family you walk in the door. Sit down, have a coffee, relax, have a game of cards.

“You ever played doshka? Well, you should have one game before you go,” Hartley said. “You take it home to your other people over there, get them playing doshka. You want some lessons? Call us. We’ll come down to teach ya’s!”



ÎLE-À-LA-CROSSE

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Partnering for success



Clockwise from top left: The friendship centre helps support a new community pool; youth learn how to make blueberry pie; elders enjoy an exhilarating boat ride; packing up Good Food Boxes.

The Île-à-la-Crosse Friendship Centre was ranked in 2013 as one of the top five centres in Canada – and it is easy to see why.

Director Myra Malboeuf marks the award of excellence – given by the National Association of Friendship Centres at their annual general meeting in North Battleford – as one of the highlights of her tenure. But the award is really only a recognition of the innovation, financial accountability and community-oriented approach the 22-year-old friendship centre is noted for.

For example, when the northern village decided to open a community pool, the friendship centre offered to give up their building and built a new one. The Jocelyn Chandler Aquatic and Fitness Centre – which includes a large indoor pool, a hot tub, a sauna, and a workout room, and has trained lifeguards on staff – opened two years ago, as did the friendship centre's new office building. The centre continues to offer in-kind services, helping with supervision of the pool and ensuring it is kept up to standards.

The friendship centre frequently partners with other organizations in Île-à-la-Crosse to accomplish things that wouldn't otherwise be feasible – both in their own community and beyond.

"Whenever we're called upon from the other organizations, we're always there to lend a hand," said board

chair Donny Favel, highlighting cost-sharing examples such as this year's National Aboriginal curling championships, fish derbies and a recent visit from the Bell of Batoche. "We're all here for the same reason – to better our community – so why not all partner instead of competing?"

Through a financial partnership with the Northern Village, the centre currently employs two full-time co-ordinators for community events, minor sports and elders' support initiatives.

As a Metis community, Île-à-la-Crosse celebrates both Louis Riel Day and National Aboriginal Day in style. The community also has week-end-long festivals every quarter – spring, summer, fall and winter – with activities for all ages, such as family and youth dances, cabarets, scavenger hunts, bouncy castles, relay races, jigging contests, baby pageants and sports tournaments.

The community recreation staff also put on first aid, CPR, and food safety courses, car seat clinics, bike rodeos, and sports coaching programs.

The friendship centre also assists the community in practical ways, such as co-sponsoring a Monday morning hot breakfast program at the local high school, and organizing bingos for medical trips and family emergencies.

Through the friendship centre's partnership with a

local elders' group, elders in the community receive assistance with the cost of groceries (via the centre's Good Food Box program) and with heating their homes. For those who burn wood, the elders' support staff will gather wood, chop it, and provide it to elders. Those who use fuel oil or propane receive an allowance to pay for those fuels.

"If we didn't have the partnerships, the end result is we wouldn't be where we are today," Malboeuf said.

The friendship centre's main office houses several government-funded programs. Three are for families – a prenatal nutrition program, Kids First North, and a parent mentoring program – and two are for people who have gotten into trouble with the law – the youth re-integration program (which mentors and supervises youth as they reconnect with their families and home environments during their probation) and the northwest region's Aboriginal court worker program.

The centre also handles the staffing and administration for the off-site Sakitawak Youth Centre and the community's Aboriginal Head Start preschool program.

"We offer these services to the community, otherwise those services wouldn't be here," said Malboeuf, who started with the friendship centre in 1999 as a youth centre employee, then moved to the preschool as director for

six years before becoming executive director.

"I worked my way up," she said. "So my passion's all been with the friendship centre, because of what we offer to the community."

In addition to last year's national award, the Île-à-la-Crosse Friendship Centre has been honoured by the province for its contribution to northern Saskatchewan's health and well-being. The centre has also been recognized for its solid financial management.

Favel has been approached about helping Beauval set up their own youth centre. "It goes to show our recognition's not only in our community, but north-wide," Favel said.

The Île-à-la-Crosse Friendship Centre also bears the distinction of housing the only parent mentoring program in northern Saskatchewan. Volunteer mentors are matched with expectant moms or parents of kids up to five years old, becoming the parenting role models, friends and confidantes that the parents had previously lacked.

community kitchen, baby showers, and cooking, baking and crafting classes.

In every case, the goal is to give new parents a chance to share with one another, learn to communicate more effectively, and gain a set of skills.

"I love working with families," Pelletier said. "If I can make a difference in their lives, I'll help them in any way."

One way she is achieving that goal is through the Good Food Box program, which she introduced to the community several years ago. Every month, a transport truck delivers large quantities of fresh fruits, grains and vegetables to the friendship centre's storage area, and the food is sorted by staff and volunteers into anywhere from 100 to 150 boxes. The boxes are then delivered by volunteers to expectant mothers and elders, and the other boxes are picked up by people who order them.

The prenatal and elders' programs subsidize boxes for their clients, and anyone who helps pack or deliver boxes gets a \$5 voucher off their next box.



Kids sample wild blueberries in the preschool's log cabin.

"Our mission is to strengthen families by providing support, encouragement and information," said co-ordinator Sandra Pelletier.

Pelletier's role is to train new mentors and match them with clients, and to offer classes and workshops on topics such as becoming a parent, healthy lifestyles, and child behaviour. She also works with the friendship centre's other family-focused programs to offer special events such as Mother's Day and Father's Day barbecues, beach parties, family campouts, swim outings, a com-

"Learning how to use vegetables is important.... Some of them I don't think have ever had a turnip (before receiving a Good Food Box)," said Barb Flett, local co-ordinator for the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program.

The cost of fresh food and the convenience of processed meals often sways Flett's clients to choose the less healthy pre-made food, so supporting Pelletier's program makes sense for the prenatal program.

The local Northern Store has been very accommodating to the Good Food Box program, not only bringing

in the goods they request, but also supplying egg boxes for packing orders, and delivering the food right to the centre.

Like Pelletier, Flett is dedicated to ensuring that entire families are thriving. Her prenatal clients receive breastfeeding support and parenting education, and Flett also offers clients one-

to not see that, because they live in lower socio-economic (conditions) and they think that they can't go beyond where they're at. And it's just getting them to see that there is more and they have that potential," Flett added. "A lot of them have really gone above and beyond where they might have ended up."

Over at the preschool, di-

ther," said teacher Melodie Bouvier.

Michif is used regularly in the classrooms, and activities such as making blueberry jam, doing fish scale art, and learning how to snare rabbits are popular.

The preschool has its own log cabin – complete with a wood cook stove and coal oil lamps – in the back yard,

"We cut costs in some (other) areas, because there was no way we were going to shut down our youth centre," Malboeuf said. "I had to let go of my assistant here, and we had to let go of our caretaker, in order to compensate for costs for the one employee to stay there (at the youth centre), and a casual to come in when he's not there."

Raffles and food sales are among the fundraisers Malboeuf has planned for the youth centre, but her board chair is dreaming even bigger: he is planning a benefit concert. There are four musical groups in Île-à-la-Crosse, including Favel's own, and all of them have been approached about performing at the concert.

"Our community is known for our strong partnerships and many different organizers," Favel said. "Why can't we give back?"

A concert is an especially appropriate fundraiser for the youth centre, which was tailored as a venue for the performing arts. The designers included \$60,000 worth of top-of-the-line lighting and sound equipment, a TV and computer lounge, and a stage for performances, with a live feed to the local radio and TV station. Kids gather for jam sessions or karaoke, and on weekends there are dj'ed dances or performances by local musicians.

"There are a lot of natu-

winter week nights from 7 to 9 p.m.

Under Corrigan's leadership, Monday was cultural night, with beading, jigging and square dancing; Tuesday was for karaoke and jamming; Wednesday the youth learned cooking skills and prepared a meal together; and Thursday was guitar lessons. If there were no big plans for the weekend, there would be a dj spinning tunes or a movie night.

Weekends and summertime were for fundraising projects, youth conferences, out-of-town trips, and most often, canoeing and camping trips.

"It's just nice to get out; they don't have any pressure in the bush... and they gotta take responsibility too, because they have to cook, they have to clean, they have to set up their camp," Corrigan said. "So they have to actually be responsible for themselves. Of course we're there chaperoning, but they still have to take a lot of responsibility. So that's a good life lesson."

The youth centre is officially under the control of the Sakitawak Aboriginal Youth Council, made up of eight to 12 community youth. "They were the ones that would throw the (programming) ideas out there, and they would assist with organizing and even running the programs," Corrigan said. "So it's a nice learning tool for youth,



The Sakitawak Youth Centre gives budding local musicians a showcase for their talents.

on-one counsel. Whenever one of her moms is struggling, Flett is there for them. "That's what a person needs – somebody listening to their story and just showing them empathy."

The program also offers activities designed to get moms out into the community, so that they can connect with others in a healthy way. There have been vegetable gardens (with everyone helping to plant, weed and harvest the produce), community kitchens, classes on family dynamics and traditional Aboriginal parenting, and scrapbooking get-togethers.

When their clients' babies are born, Flett and her staff take photos of the babies and display them on their office walls. They also bring the new mothers baskets full of gifts intended to pamper them.

"Sometimes after baby's born, everybody focuses on baby and forgets about mom," Flett said. "So we're trying to make it more equal, so moms can be appreciated too."

After 19 years with the program, Flett values the impact it has, as women learn to nurture themselves and their children, and live a healthier life, both emotionally and physically.

"The goal is getting them to learn how to take care of themselves in their prenatal period, and then knowing that there's a young person in there that they're responsible for," Flett said.

"People have so much potential, and in small communities, sometimes they tend

rector Nora Corrigan and her teaching staff have their hands – and their heartstrings – tugged on regularly, with 45 children under their charge, four days a week.

"It's good to see the little ones have something to do, somewhere to go. They get really upset when there's no school or they can't come," said Corrigan. "It's something they look forward to.... (Parents) want the kids to start as soon as they turn three."

Fortunately for the parents, that's not a problem – kids are admitted at any time during the school year, and there is no waiting list. For children who are too young or not toilet-trained, there is also an at-home program. Scissors and crayons are sent to these homes at the beginning of the school year, and staff will prepare activities for them to do with their parents, such as puzzles, stories and recipes. The children are also welcome at any school events.

"When they (parents) bring them, that encourages them to potty-train ASAP, because they want to come to school. Or to come because there's friends here," Corrigan said.

Although Île-à-la-Crosse is a predominantly Metis community, there is no distinction made at the school between Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal – everyone learns the same material.

"We have a young girl here; she's from South Africa. She speaks a totally different (first) language, but she'll go home and speak Michif (the Metis language) to her fa-

ther," said teacher Melodie Bouvier.

"We really enjoy using (the cabin). They'll do little crafts in there, or they'll go and bake something," Corrigan said. "There's no power there, no water hook-up.... It's just to show them the way the Metis used to live before power and water, the modern stuff."

One of the friendship centre's biggest achievements is the Sakitawak Youth Centre, which re-opened in 2011 in a much larger space. A revamped youth centre was one of the major recommendations emerging out of a community-wide meeting, held after a rash of suicides and suicide attempts in Île-à-la-Crosse, and the community delivered.

"(It's) a place where people come and feel safe. There are some youth that come and hang out there that have – not the greatest lifestyles at home... and they were just there for that comfort, for some structure," said David Corrigan, who served as the youth centre's director for two years.

"They wanted a bigger facility with more variety of programming – just a place to call their own, and a place where they can hang with their peers," Corrigan said.

The youth centre is so important to the community that when the friendship centre's federal youth funding was cut, Malboeuf refused to close Sakitawak's doors. Instead of being open seven days a week, the centre is now closed on Wednesdays.



Even after funding cuts, the youth centre has stayed open six days a week for floor hockey and other recreational activities.

rally-gifted artists (in Île-à-la-Crosse), and they just didn't have the venue or the capacity to do it," Corrigan said. With the new stage and equipment, "they have the opportunity to go and showcase their talents."

The lower level includes a large open area for concert or theatrical seating, or for LAN video gaming nights or a quick game of floor hockey. There is also a kitchen, a pool table and a ping pong table, and the upstairs mezzanine has couches and computers.

The loss of funding has reduced some of the programming available at the youth centre, but when it is at full capacity, there is a full schedule of activities running on

because they get to see how it is to sit on boards, and (see) that the decisions that they make are what's happening."

While job security has – for the time being – pulled Corrigan away from the youth centre, he is still passionate about its mandate to serve the tweens, teens and young adults of Île-à-la-Crosse.

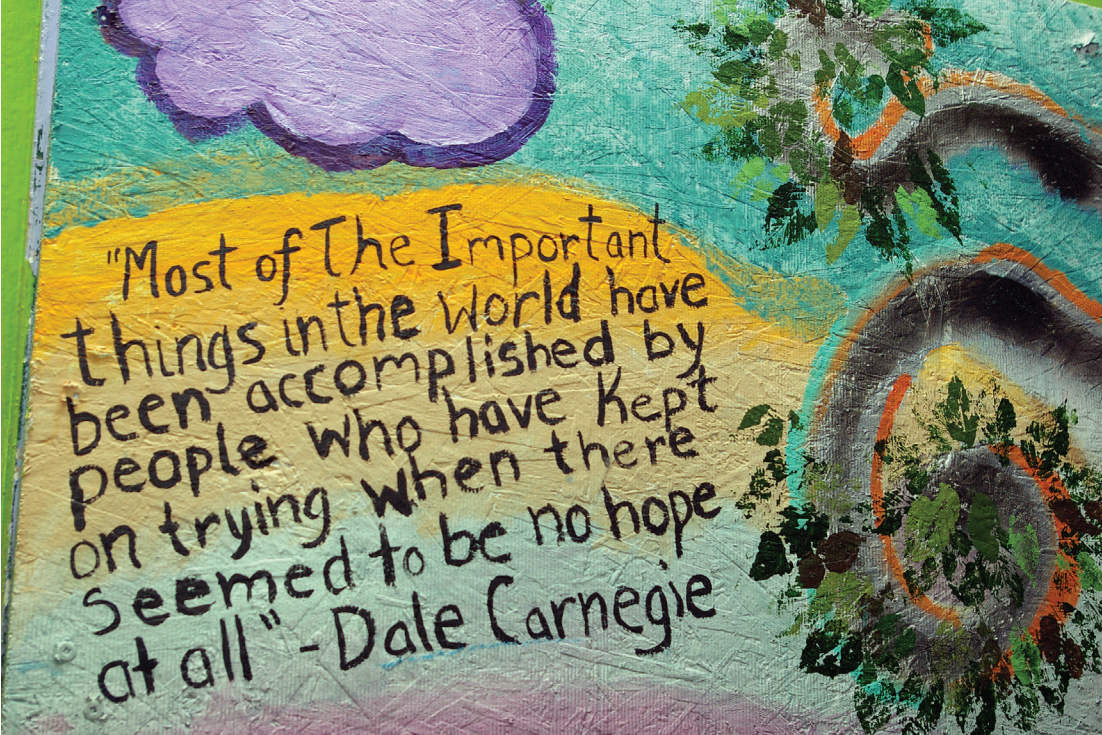
"Most program dollars out there – they don't really target this age group," he said. "Our youth centre's there to offer different programs, (and be) a place to hang out.... It's a place to call their own. That's the biggest thing, it's *their* youth centre. It's what they wanted, and it's there for them to utilize."



NORTH WEST

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A wealth of services



This painting, done by a youth from Meadow Lake, hangs at The Other Side youth centre.

Call it one-stop shopping.

If someone needs a helping hand in the Meadow Lake area, the North West Friendship Centre is the place to go, according to director Gladys Joseph.

"We help lots with the community. One time, we had an elder that came in here, and he said, 'Geez, I like coming to the friendship centre, because it's just like a mini mall,'" recalled Joseph.

"We are a service organization, to serve people coming into the centre, and (help through) all the programs we have," said Joseph, who has worked at the centre for 39 of its 43 years in Meadow Lake. "I see it as such a credible organization."

The North West Friendship Centre's core services include income tax preparation (a free supplement to the work done by H&R Block, which rents part of the building owned by the friendship centre), faxing, resume preparation, referrals to other community organizations, lists of local rental accommodations, and assistance with forms, such as Canada Pension Plan applications.

Also amongst the "storefronts" at the friendship centre are the prenatal nutrition program, the in-home family support program, the family violence prevention program, and the court worker program. There is also a free-standing youth centre, called The Other Side, temporarily closed as of this spring until funding issues are resolved.

The Other Side: a safe hang-out for local youth

The Other Side – named by the youth themselves, in reference to many of them being from "the other side of the tracks" or a rougher background – has taken on the friendship centre's initial role as a drop-in centre, though its focus is on teens. When it is operational, it is open from after school until 10 p.m.

"It's to keep the kids out of trouble – give them some place safe to go," said co-ordinator Robert Paul, a 14-year employee at the youth centre. "Just to keep them off the streets, and guide them in the right direction, because there's a lot of crime – a lot of youth getting into trouble here in town."

While at the The Other Side, youth could hang out and play games, go on the computers, or visit with buddies – which included the staff, Paul noted. "The ones that came every day, we could talk to them, and became pretty close friends with them."

Those regulars that Paul has seen since the centre closed on March 31 are all still in school, but some of the other teens have been picked up by police for breaking into vehicles. "When school's out, they've got nowhere to go," Paul said.

Every month, there was a "cook and eat" time, with

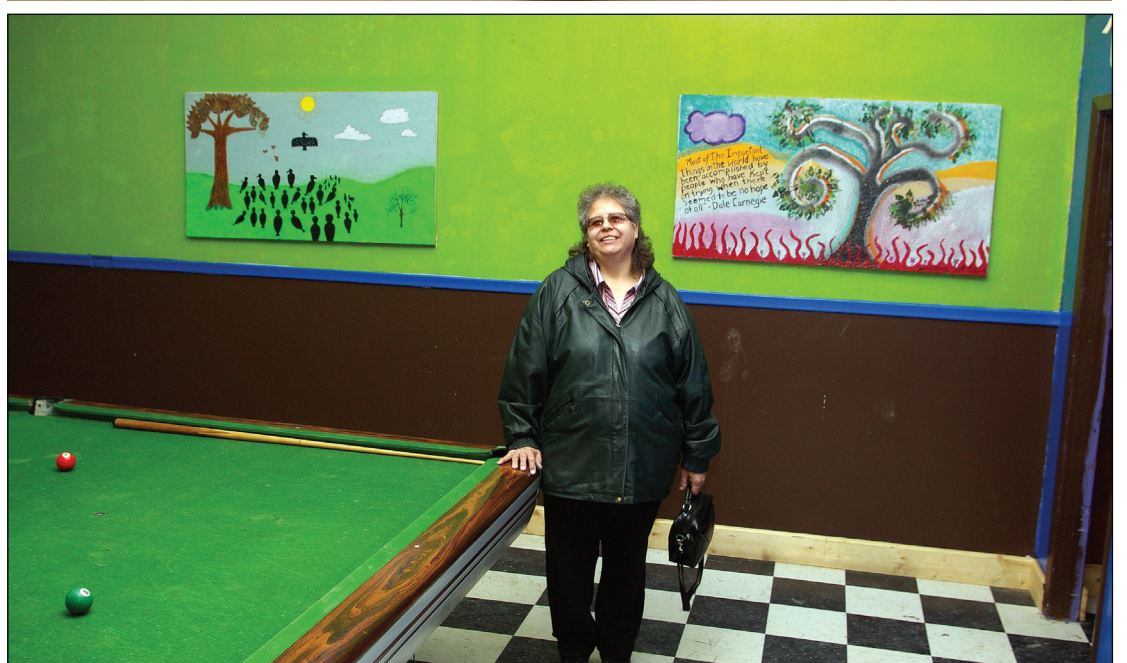
the groceries supplied by the staff and the meal prepared by the youth. The centre also offered a snack program, funded through the Prairie North Health Region. "A lot of these kids would come from when we opened right until we closed, so they weren't going home for supper, so this was just a healthy snack for them to eat," Paul explained.

The staff would also take the teens to an elementary school gym for exercise, to the movies and to special events like powwows. Sometimes an elder would come in to talk about when they were young, and how to respect the land, which the youth appreciated.

If and when The Other Side re-opens, Paul is eager to take the kids on more out-of-town trips, especially to an outdoor setting. "They're more or less stuck in the city," he said. "It would be good to let them see an actual lake, instead of a swimming pool."

Top right: The Other Side's name was chosen by Meadow Lake youth who see themselves as being from "the other side of the tracks".

Bottom right: North West Friendship Centre executive director inside the youth centre. The paintings were all done by the youth, who hung out at the centre as late as 10 p.m.



Prenatal nutrition worker helps families start well

Making sure kids are properly fed and nurtured is a big part of Marilyn Mannix's role.

As coordinator for the friendship centre's Healthy Babies Right from the Start prenatal nutrition program, Mannix provides vitamins, milk, fruit and vegetables for new moms, through their pregnancies and then up to six months after their babies are born.

When clients come to see her, she will have them do a 24-hour food recall, in which they list everything they eaten and drunk in the last day. If the recall suggests a risk for gestational diabetes or a need for healthy meal plans, she will work with a local dietician to provide help.

Mannix also weighs her clients' babies, to see if they are gaining weight at a healthy rate.

Once a month, she offers cooking classes, teaching mothers how to prepare healthy food for themselves and their children.

While there is prenatal help offered through the health region, "there's so many people that are intimi-

dated (by the health care system)," Mannix said.

"I don't judge you. If you come in and you say to me, 'Marilyn, I drank three beer today,' it's like, 'Do you want help? If you want the help I can get you help,'" she said.

"You're not going to want to see me if I'm snarling at you and snapping at you, or looking down at you because you're dressed this way, or it's like, 'Ack, that's your sixth kid?!' Well, I'm sorry, things happen. You don't turn people away."

With the friendship centre located downtown, right across from the medical clinic, some clients come to Mannix immediately after learning they are pregnant. She also gets referrals from the sexual health clinic, or word-of-mouth, with women enrolled in the program telling their friends about her services.

"We're stereotyped that, 'Oh, that's just a welfare program'... (but) we don't care if you're white, pink, green or orange," Mannix said. "If you need help and you walk through that door, we'll help you as much as we can help



Marilyn Mannix teaches expectant and new parents how to nourish themselves and their babies, as their children grow. Mothers receive fresh produce and milk, and also a listening ear.

you, or point you in the right direction."

Some of the moms Mannix works with are couch-surfers, girls who've been staying with family, but then left and ended up essentially home-

less. Sometimes they are bunking in and others in the house drink the milk and eat the fresh food Mannix's program intends for the mom.

Even when it's just the mom and her own children

in the house, food security can be a big issue, Mannix said.

"You can go buy a big box of pasta for \$5 and feed your family for how many meals.... Some of the health professionals will look at it and say, 'How come they're not eating better?' Well, I'm sorry, when you're living on a budget and you want to eat fresh vegetables... that all costs money."

Many of the program's clients are single parents, which is a story Mannix knows well – she and her two brothers were raised by their father, at a time when a man raising children alone was not a social norm.

"I know they struggle, and sometimes, some of these people just need a friendly face. They just need somebody to listen to them, smile at them, and I always have a little joke, tease them a little, and we always have a laugh before they leave," she said.

"I absolutely love people. Some days, it's really draining, but at the end of the day, if you helped somebody, you got a smile out of them or sent them in the right direction, it's rewarding."

Family support, court workers help in trying times

Like her colleague Marilyn Mannix, Wanda Lantz knows the feeling of reward that comes from helping someone pull themselves out of difficulties.

Her in-home family support program, funded through the Ministry of Social Services, helps parents whose children have been (or are at risk of being) taken into custody because of problems in their homes. The staff work with the parents until they gain the skills that will help them be the parents their children need.

Lantz said her first priority with a client is to build a relationship, "to try and build that rapport with that family," and they start that process with a family tree.

"A lot of people have in the (psychological) toolbox some learned behaviours... from previous generations. So by putting that on paper, it gives them a visual of 'it's not *all* my fault,'" Lantz said.

"Right now they're feeling like a failure as a parent because they have an open child protection file, but (our job is) to let them know, 'You were only doing with what you know how, but we're willing to teach you new ways.'"

Lantz and her three staff currently have about 30 families on their caseload. A handful are self-referrals, and in these cases, the clients

themselves are setting the goals they want to achieve as parents.

However, even with the Social Services-mandated cases, Lantz asks clients what their challenges are, and what they want to change – from effective discipline to housekeeping skills.

"We have that conversation about what (the client) would like to see, because I think that people who have power, the power to 'drive the car', travel further than someone who's being *told* how to drive the car," Lantz said.

Lantz herself became a mom at age 15, and after she chose to keep her daughter, her parents babysat for her while she continued attending school. "But the minute I got home from school, it was my baby.... They instilled in me that that's my responsibility, and that nobody can take that away from me," she said. "Walking that walk brings me compassion."

Lantz's experience also gives her insight into the challenges that other family support staff and supervisors face.

Accordingly, she now mentors the program's co-ordinators in Sandy Bay, Cumberland House, La Ronge, Pinehouse, La Loche and Buffalo Narrows. Her goal is to visit each location twice



Family support supervisor Wanda Lantz (left) reviews a case with one of her staff.

a year, and do training for staff on topics such as case documentation.

Lantz's goal in this new role is to alleviate the sense of isolation that workers can face, just as her staff do for parents on their caseload.

Lantz appreciates the case conferences, where she gets to see how a client has matured and witness the 'aha!' moments. She also likes the discernment process of matching workers to clients, such as an orphaned teen mom who needed a parent figure.

When a new case worker comes on, "I don't want someone who 'knows' what they (clients) need to do to

change.... If we listen, and we give them the time, they know what they want and what they need," she said.

Four days a week, court worker Dora Buxton is on the road by 8:30 a.m., heading to court in Meadow Lake, Big Island or Pierceland.

Once in court, she is available to assist anyone who needs help working through the complexities of the legal system – primarily First Nations and Metis people, but Buxton says she doesn't discriminate based on race.

"If they can't afford a lawyer or are not eligible for legal aid referrals, we take them, and we basically do what a lawyer does, as long as it's

summary conviction (ie. offenses with a maximum penalty of six months in jail)."

Buxton will help her clients understand the charges against them, help them enter pleas, deal with adjournments, review information that is disclosed by either side in the case, and basically be by their side throughout the process.

"People need us (court workers). Too many people fall through the cracks," Buxton said.

"If there wasn't the Aboriginal court worker program, there would be so many people going through the (legal) system that are not knowing what they're doing. It's a need."



BATTLEFORDS

Director: Jackie Kennedy
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Building into lives



Friendship centre director Jackie Kennedy shares a laugh with Alan, one of the men who spends winter nights sleeping at the centre's homeless shelter -- one of the ways the centre meets community needs. Below: Elder Margaret Ruda assists a youth to smudge, a traditional practice honoured at the centre.

A former lumber warehouse in North Battleford is now being used to build up people instead.

Once used to store building supplies, the downtown building owned by the Battlefords Area Indian & Metis Friendship Centre (BAIMFC) now serves a much nobler purpose: for many people, it is truly "home".

"I'm so grateful. It's truly a friendship centre," said Margaret Ruda, who has been involved with the BAIMFC since its inception in 1969, and now serves as the centre's official elder.

"It doesn't matter who you are, what religion you are, what colour your skin is or what clothing you're wearing -- you're welcome here."

As a Metis girl growing up in North Battleford, Ruda faced constant harassment. "The white people called us Indians, and our Indian people from the reserves called us 'white trash' in Cree. So we didn't fit anywhere," she recalled.

Determined that her children would not have to suffer the way she did, she joined the budding Metis rights movement, and she was there when local Metis people purchased a building that became the city's first friendship centre. The Metis invited their First Nations neighbours -- both status and non-status -- to join them, and the centre soon became a place where any Aborigi-

nal person could come and feel accepted, celebrate their identity, and receive any help and support they needed.

"We finally had a sense of belonging and some pride in who we were," Ruda recalled. "Those three (groups) got together -- we've become friends.... We basically made a pact among us that we were going to be together."

Today, that hand of friendship is being extended even further. "This is a place where you can come and there's no discrimination here. You could be black, native, white, don't matter, you're welcome," Ruda said.

"I'm not going to quit being involved with the friendship centre, because that's what kept me going on, before. It's a place you can be accepted."

Meeting practical needs

"This is the place to come, if you need some help. We'll help you with anything possible, within our means," said executive director Jackie Kennedy.

After many years of working with the centre -- 13 for Kennedy, who came on as director after several years on the board, and 9 for program director Kathy Whitford -- the core staff see their clients as family.

"We know these people," Kennedy said, and it is that personal connection that has resulted in several of the pro-

grams the centre now offers. For example, both she and Whitford have taken a course to become tax preparers, and between them they do upwards of 400 income tax submissions every year.

"It helps all the low-income people that can't afford that 70 bucks to go and file (through a professional tax service)," such as people relying on social services or elders living in a nearby high-rise building, Whitford said.



"We didn't go out there and say, 'Oh, who needs their taxes done?'," Kennedy added. "It was the clients coming to us, saying, 'We haven't done our taxes in four or five years (because of the cost).'"

The weekday breakfast program was another response to a felt need.

"That was something else we noticed -- people weren't eating. We had a lot of diabetic people out on the street," Kennedy said.

"This kickstarts their day. No one has to go hungry if they choose to come here."

The centre also offers a food bank every Friday, supplementing -- with help from the local Co-op grocery store, which donates supplies -- the services offered by the main downtown food bank.

Kids who were short on school supplies also got help this past fall, when the RBC Royal Eagles, an Aboriginal employee resource group at the Royal Bank, chose North Battleford as one of 12 friendship centres to receive funds for backpacks filled with grade-appropriate school supplies.

Through the winter months, from November to March -- or even April, if the cold weather lasts as long as it did this year -- the BAIMFC is open seven nights a week as a homeless shelter.

Four years ago, Kennedy recalled, the friendship centre staff learned that some of their clients were sleeping outdoors, in tents, or in cars. "It red-flagged us, 'Hey, these people need a place to sleep in the wintertime.'"

"It was a struggle (financially)," she admits. "We had no money (to operate the shelter), so we just developed it, and through the help of some community people and some grants, we were able to open it the first year. And (then) the need was still there.... Our clients love it here, and we get more and more staying. There's a high need here (in North Battleford) for shelter."

"I don't have no place to go.... It's really hard to find a place to stay," agreed Alan, one of the shelter's regulars. Both he and Kennedy sadly recalled another man who had stayed at the shelter, and had been found dead outdoors in mid-March, likely from the cold.

Shelter workers such as Terry Flamond arrive at the centre about 15 minutes before the 10 p.m. opening to unlock the doors and get ready. They log clients in, get bedding ready, prepare and serve a small meal, such as sandwiches or Kraft Dinner, and get people settled for the night -- men on one side of the gym, women on the other. The staff monitor the clients through the night to ensure they are not choking or suffering any other physi-

cal problems, and then in the morning, wake them up and serve a hot breakfast.

"A lot of these people, they might die -- freeze -- especially in the winter months. And a lot of times, when I feed them, that's the only meal they're getting, at night and in the morning," Flamond said. The shelter is normally locked through the night, unless the local police call about bringing in someone they have found wandering around. "That happens a lot. Transients too.... It's about keeping them safe, fed, warm."

The shelter also gives homeless people a chance to relax, watch a movie, have coffee and socialize with friends, make phone calls, go on the computer, and even have a hot shower and have their laundry washed -- basically, "make sure they're good for the next day," Kennedy said.

"Maybe they're going to be job-searching, so everything will be clean, they can be presentable... (and) feel good about themselves."

While the friendship centre doesn't allow alcohol on the premises, and Kennedy has an abstinence policy for her staff, they do allow inebriated people to stay at the shelter. This can cause issues for the staff, which is why they always have at least two workers on, on any given night.

"A lot of these people won't go in to mental health or addictions services," Kennedy said. "Our dream is that we have an addiction counsellor that comes into our centre and does intakes. We're hoping."

"They appreciate it," Flamond said. "I'll get the odd one that's disrespectful and I'll have to remove (that person), but the majority of them... they respect me, I respect them."

Meeting social and cultural needs

From its earliest days, North Battleford's friendship centre has been a meeting place, not just for the city's Aboriginal community but for anyone who wants to spend time with others -- for a meal, a concert, a movie night, a round dance or other cultural celebrations. Admission is always free.

Community meals are served on special occasions – Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas. At last year’s Mother’s Day event, a 13-year-old boy who’d been taking guitar lessons at the centre performed a Johnny Cash song for his mom. There is an annual children’s Christmas party, with hot dogs, sleigh rides, and hundreds of gifts.

On Tuesdays, anyone who wants to can go swimming

A new addition to the centre is an elders’ room, which includes a small library, comfortable couches, artwork and a TV. “We were so focused on our youth that we were forgetting about elders,” Kennedy admitted.

“So we developed this room they can take pride in. They can come relax. A lot of elders raise their grandchildren, so if they need time out, this is their room.... If they want to smudge, they

they wanted to experience what the round dances were actually about,” Lennie said, noting that for the last social, they hosted a group of 30 new immigrants, getting their first taste of Aboriginal culture.

The round dance co-ordinator “would smudge the drum, and people that wanted to have a blessing, with the sage,” Lennie said. “He would also explain the importance of the drum – where it came

“We deal with a lot of high-risk youth. We don’t have the people that got all their stuff together (coming in to use the centre). We’ve got the people that are in need.”

Through the youth program, BAIMFC was able to hire two adults and two older teens to organize outings and activities, keep the youth room going, and serve as a listening ear for kids who came to hang out at the centre.

“I had a few of my youth come up to me and ask why they were shutting down (the youth program), and I didn’t really have an answer for them,” Lennie said.

“And they asked me, ‘Where are we going to go to escape?’... They knew when they would come to the centre, they would interact with peers, they would have myself and my co-workers to talk to, and basically give them a sense of belonging. They knew when they were here, they belonged to the friendship centre.”

“They should put it (funding) back, because it helps teens really lots,” said Peeaychew. “They (government) say that they don’t want the teens involved in crime and gangs.

“Well, really, if you take this place away from us, then we’re going to have nothing to look up to, nothing to look forward to, and we’re just going to end up in bad situations again. The crime rate, I think, is just going to go up, because here, it’s safe. They give you a lot of opportunities here. And we never exclude anybody.”

Why do it?

Despite the challenges, none of the staff are ready to let go of their commitment to the friendship centre.

Whitford remembers coming to the centre as a child to watch boxing (and even slip on the gloves for a round with her sister), or, as a teen, to help out at a dance.

Today, it’s the rapport with clients that she values most, as well as the same “open door policy” that drew her to the friendship centre in the first place.

“And you know, some people don’t even know about the friendship centre, so it’s sad,” Whitford said. “So when they do come in there, (their reaction is), ‘Wow! You guys offer all this!’”

“I love the people – I have a passion for them,” said Kennedy. “I believe that you go to a friendship centre and they make you feel welcome. It’s home,” Whitford said.

“They become your family – like, these clients, our regular clients, they’re my family now. I know them intimately. I know how they’ve lived, why they are where they are,” Kennedy said.

“When you see somebody grow, how they’ve come so far – there’s lots of positive things that come out of friendship centres,” Kennedy added.

“A lot of centres, they mentor a person, and they’re out there now, they’ve gotten a good job, and they started off in the friendship centres.”



Left: Mementos from the 50-year history of the All-Native Hockey Tournament. Right: A youth lines up a shot in the friendship centre’s archery range.

at a city leisure centre, with the friendship centre picking up the tab. “Families need activities,” said Kennedy. “They need good, healthy things to do.”

In April, the BAIMFC held its 50th annual All-Native Hockey Tournament, which drew teams from across the province to compete in the contact and “legends” (35+) divisions for \$20,000 in prizes. The tournament serves as a fundraiser for the friendship centre, but also as a way for players and fans alike to have fun and take pride in being part of an event with a long, proud history – several past competitors have gone on to play for the National Hockey League, including former Chicago Blackhawks player Fred Sasakamoose.

Two of program director Whitford’s sons played in the tournament as kids, and all five of her children have benefited from involvement in sports. “It keeps them busy, and it keeps them motivated. Self-esteem builds,” Whitford said.

In her previous role as youth co-ordinator, Whitford brought in as much sports programming as she could, including soccer, boxing, fencing and archery.

With help from grants, a storage area was converted into an archery range, and volunteers helped teach archery skills.

Several youth from the centre have since won medals at provincial archery competitions.

can smudge. That room is for them.”

Smudging, and other traditional Aboriginal cultural practices, are honoured at the friendship centre, as are Aboriginal languages. Youth have gone on medicine walks, where they picked sage and learned about the ways these plants are used ceremonially. “Even though they’re Aboriginal – First Nations, Metis – they weren’t really taught that,” said Phyllis Lennie, who worked with the centre’s youth program.

“When we tap into the cultural components here... we’re trying to give them back something that may have been lost,” Lennie said.

“If you give these kids back a positive sense of culture, keep them steady within themselves, they’re going to have a seed that’s planted. And it may not help them at that time, but somewhere along their journey of life, they’re going to look back at that, and they’re going to see this is a more positive way to do stuff.”

Until the end of March, with the Cultural Connections for Aboriginal Youth funding was cut, Thursday nights were for the round dance socials. A small group of boys began drumming together on hand drums, and it grew into a weekly event that drew not only youth but also community members from outside the friendship centre.

“We even had non-Aboriginals attend, just because

from, what it meant, and he told it any time... because we always had newcomers.”

A safe place for youth

The loss of the federal youth funding was a major blow for North Battleford and area youth, because those dollars paid for the centre’s youth workers, who kept the centre running from 5 to 10 p.m. every Monday to Friday.



Program director Kathy Whitford points out a detail in one of the paintings done by youth at the centre.

While kids and teens will never be turned away from the centre, Whitford worries about what will happen to their regulars, now that the centre is no longer there for them in the evenings.

They had movie nights, trips (such as to leisure centres or round dances) and fencing and archery lessons, and talks by Straight Up, a group of former gang members. They cooked meals together, and the girls got together to do one another’s eyebrows, hair and nails.

Every year, a special “Honouring Our Youth” round

dance was held for the community at large.

However, how they spent their time together mattered less than what this place meant to the youth who frequented the centre.



KIKINAHK

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The community's centre

Kikinahk, noun. Cree origin. Our home.

For executive director Ron Woytowich, the name of his friendship centre is also the mindset he brings to every aspect of the centre's operations.

While located in La Ronge, Kikinahk Friendship Centre also provides services for the residents of neighbouring Air Ronge and members of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band. Woytowich's goal is to bring everyone under one roof.

"Kikinahk's for everybody," Woytowich said. "First and foremost... (it) is an Aboriginal organization, but it has become very intertwined with a majority of things that happen to La Ronge. And we try to be the community centre the town never had to put up."

That means that when there is a community meeting or a conference to be held, a wedding banquet to be catered, an election needing polling stations or a theatre group wanting to put on a free show, they turn to Kikinahk.

The friendship centre also provides cultural, social, educational, health, and recreation programming for the communities it serves. Woytowich has become well-known for his ability to acquire grants, and the centre currently runs programs funded by the federal and provincial governments and Northern Lights School Division #113.

"We've got lots of services... plus we're always either losing one or getting one," Woytowich said. "We have a strategic plan, and goals and objectives that try to represent the community."

The current roster includes Kids First North, Aboriginal Head Start, the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program, youth extra-judicial sanctions and mediation, restitution, and Stop Lift.

Despite the loss of federal youth funding, Kikinahk continues to run an after-school program and serve as the community's youth centre.

Kikinahk staff also offer assistance with housing/rental applications, child tax, social insurance numbers, birth certificates, debt counselling and referrals to government programs.

"If it was as twice as big (the centre) would still be as busy," Woytowich said.

"Besides the programs we provide for the people in poverty or (who are) homeless, we also have a wonderful Head Start (preschool)

program that includes everybody in town – you can be white, black, brown, we don't care. We can have a dance here... and you have all these other (community) people coming in," he said. "It's so nice to be able to provide services to that group of people that really need it, but also to provide other services that the whole community can use."

The friendship centre also partners with smaller organizations that are in line with the centre's mandate, such as NorthSask Special Needs, an outreach program for the people who are homeless and dealing with addictions, the Jim Brady Metis local; and La Ronge's Community Mobilization HUB, which is a crime reduction initiative. The staff for each organization are officially Kikinahk employees, but each organization has its own board to which those employees report.

Through these partnerships, the friendship centre expands its reach into the community, and at the same time, enables smaller organizations to accomplish their goals without having to set up an entire administrative structure.

With this arrangement, "they don't need that. They just need (money) for operations," Woytowich said. "And government loves that, because you're not duplicating (structures)."

Woytowich takes great pride in his staff members, whom he appreciates for their dependability and their consistently strong work ethic.

For example, youth program co-ordinator Rory Ballentyne has become Woytowich's right arm, the centre's "go to guy" for any activities happening at the centre be-



Kids of all ages find Kikinahk a safe and happy place to be.

tween 3 and 10:30 p.m. Ballentyne's role is constantly changing, depending on the need – setting up projectors, organizing the gym for a conference or workshop, supervising fine option workers, or doing janitorial work.

He is also responsible for the centre's programming for school-aged kids and teens.

"I do anything within my power that I can do to help them," Ballentyne said. "I know their lives. I'm not just like, 'Hey, random kid.'... You get to know them."

While the centre has always attracted kids, the nearby construction of new student apartments for one of the local colleges has brought in even more people wanting recreational options, Woytowich said.

"You suddenly had families going to school, and the families are younger... Suddenly you had all these young mothers wanting a night to play volleyball," he said. "They bring their children, and the children are sleeping on the sides (of the gym) while the mothers are playing."

The shifting neighbourhood demographics have also brought even more kids to Ballentyne's after-school program. That program has been a blessing for local parents, Woytowich noted.

"They want their kids to have a place to go at 3:30.... The kids have to be safe, and the parents are either working or at school. So they come here."

Kids are welcome to come in any time after school to do crafts or homework, have snacks, play Xbox games, strum a guitar, get help developing a resume or searching for a job, learn beading

or moccasin-making, play a game of basketball or floor hockey, or just hang out with their friends.

Over the years, Ballentyne has organized dances, hip-hop and comedy shows, and motivational talks. People with "rough

pasts" are especially popular, as "they seem to touch base with the kids." He has also taken youth to North American Indigenous Games tryouts, youth conferences, and outdoor excursions, to name a few.

"With the budget we've got, we just try to expand as far as we can (in terms of programming options)," Ballentyne said. "If it helps them, makes them feel better, why not?"

"If we were closed, I think the kids would be out there more doing negative things

would probably do this for the rest of my life if I got paid enough!"

Kikinahk's Aboriginal Head Start director Jean Badger is also in it for the long haul. After more than 15 years as a teacher at the preschool, Badger moved to the administrative side for the 2013-14 school year, and she admits she's found it a struggle.

"This past year has honestly been torture on me, because I'm in the office and it's hard for me to stay out of the classroom," Badger said.

"It's the kids – we just fall in love with them. You get to see them when they start school, and you watch them grow throughout the year."

"It's just amazing how three- and four-year-olds are really capable of learning, and that's what grabs me – by the end of the year, to see how much they've grown, and how much they've learned," Badger added. "And when it's time for me to say 'bye' and let them move on – that's my job accomplished, and that always gets me in the end. So because of that, I'm never



Kikinahk's gym hosts everything from volleyball games to elections and wedding banquets.

– like drinking, drugs," he added. "Because honestly, for young kids, there's nothing to do in La Ronge.... This is an option to be off the street. They can come here and have a safe place."

And fortunately for the youth who have come to depend on him, Ballentyne isn't going anywhere any time soon.

"If I worked in an office setting, I'd probably quit. It'd be so boring.... (With this job) I don't ever come to work and feel like, 'Man, I gotta be here today.' It feels like a second home," Ballentyne said. "I

able to leave."

Badger's program has two classrooms at Kikinahk, with up to 60 children, attending mornings or afternoons, four days a week. Northern Lights School Division #113 funds one of the teaching positions at Kikinahk, and also has their own preschool classroom at Pre-Cam School.

As part of the Aboriginal Head Start initiative, the preschool focuses on Aboriginal culture and language, education, health promotion, nutrition, social support, and parental/family involvement. A child's typical day might

include practicing the Cree words for different colours, enjoying a healthy snack (and brushing teeth afterwards), making a seasonal craft, throwing balls in in the gym, touring local businesses, and/or listening to stories.

Badger feels that introducing the preschoolers to Aboriginal culture, in a respectful, positive way, is very important, especially since many local families are losing their connection to that culture.

"They learn the Cree words (at the preschool), and they go home and they know the colours, they count in Cree, but when they go off to the big (elementary) school, they lose it," Badger said.

In order to compensate for that, her program includes not only language instruction but Aboriginal food preparation, music, games and stories. Elder Ida Tremblay shows the kids how to do beading and explains about hunting and preparing hides, while elder Henry Roberts comes in to tell legends, play his harmonica and teach Cree songs, and do animal calls.

"The kids don't really see or hear the animals (any more), and he does the call of the moose and... what a duck really sounds like, not just 'quack quack!' And he shows them that, and gets them to try," Badger said.

One of Badger's former students returned to Kikinahk this past school year, to show off her skills as a jingle dress dancer.

"She does dancing with the kids, and shows them that (part of Aboriginal culture)," said Badger, noting that the girl also performed for the parents at this year's graduation ceremony. "It's good to have an old student actually come back and try to teach the younger kids."

Badger feels very fortunate that her preschool is housed at the friendship centre, because of the wide range of services and facilities it offers families.

"This is just a good place in case parents need other support, and I can help refer them over," she said.

One of those supports is the prenatal nutrition program, run by Flora Roberts, with assistance from Maureen McKay.

Through this program, expectant and new moms get cans of fruit, vegetables, and fish, and coupons to purchase milk at local stores, as well as parenting education and support. Since there is no public transportation in La Ronge, staff will give rides as needed to their programs, as well as to prenatal and infant immunization appointments.

Every two months, there is a series of weekly hour-long classes: introduction to pregnancy, nutrition and oral health, labour and delivery, and breastfeeding and post-partum care. The program staff also provide their clients with information about smoking, alcohol and family violence.

Support people – such as spouses, parents and friends – are encouraged to attend



Elder Henry Roberts shows kids how to do an animal call - one of many ways Kikinahk's preschool honours Aboriginal culture.

the workshops with the expectant moms.

Moms can stop by the friendship centre twice a month to do crafts and sewing projects. The prenatal staff also organize a yearly baby shower, giving anyone involved with Kikinahk's family programs a chance to relax and spend time with other parents, as well as show off their new arrivals.

The program also offers cooking classes, showing the new moms how to make good use of the milk and canned foods they receive to make healthy meals for themselves and their families. These classes have proved educational on several levels.

"I've noticed that while they're cooking, they're talking about how they parent, or what kind of food they cook, and what kind of foods they can't cook because they're so expensive to buy," Roberts said. "They don't realize they're sharing, because they're so busy working with their hands.... They're still passing knowledge, but it's not like someone standing in front and telling them what to do – they're actually teaching everybody, including us."

Many of the babies born to Roberts' clients are enrolled at Kikinahk's preschool a few years later, in part because parents quickly learn that the friendship centre offers families a lot of support.

"They're (often) limited by (lack of) transportation. They're isolated from their families or even from the community," Roberts said of her clients. "They're not afraid of coming to the centre."

"This is more of a relaxed setting," McKay added. "It's really trying to help, right from babies all the way up....

It's a helping organization that can really benefit families."

The Kikinahk prenatal program staff works closely with staff from the Mamawetan Churchill River Health Region, the Northern Saskatchewan Population Health Unit, Kids First North, and the Lac La Ronge Indian Band's on-reserve Jeannie Bird Clinic, on everything from individual

skills that will help them understand, discipline and communicate better with their children.

"We're not telling (parents) what to do, but we'll guide," said Delaney's supervisor, Shirley Disain.

Parents graduate from the program once the key issues have been resolved, and the home visitors use a curriculum designed to develop specific skills. For example, to help a parent understand their child's emotional needs, the home visitor will use a doll wrapped in layers of cloth. The layers symbolize the security and comfort a child gains from a parent's supportive words and actions.

"They're very positive ways of working with your child and helping them grow," Delaney said.

The home visitors also make a point of encouraging and supporting the parents they work with.

"Every parent has their downfalls, their down times... because parenting is hard," Delaney said.

Ultimately, the program's goal is to help parents focus less on their own issues and more on what their children need, from emotional support to effective discipline.

"I've always been very child-focused, and (directed towards) having children reaching their best potential, and that starts with the homes and the parents," Plante said.

Harmony Johnson-Harder's programs help people who have run into trouble with the law.

Johnson-Harder divides her time between three programs: Stop Lift, restitution, and extra-judicial sanctions, also known as the youth alternative measures program.

Stop Lift re-educates kids who have been caught shoplifting. After a youth is referred to her, either through mediation or the courts, Johnson-Harder explains to them that shoplifters are not modern-day Robin Hoods stealing from the rich.

"I love the Co-op because we get (member equity) cheques at the end of the year, and so my question is... 'Do you know that at the end of the year, because I have a Co-op number, I get a cheque from the Co-op, based on their profits? So when you steal from the Co-op, you're stealing from me, or your mom or your dad, whoever you know that has a Co-op number?' They're kind of quiet after that."

When youth are ordered by the courts or the mediation program to pay money to those their actions have hurt, Johnson-Harder finds short-term jobs for them to do that.

"Kids work for me, and I pay the victim," she explained. "The relationship is removed – this is them owing money."

Johnson-Harder supervises the youth while they are working – doing tasks such as mowing lawns or shoveling snow – and insurance and worker's compensation are handled through the program, so there are no liability issues.

Through the program, individuals or businesses get work done, the youth pay their fines, and the victims get cash. "The youth also benefits by learning work skills, because I tell them if they want, they can put me down as a reference," Johnson-Harder said.

"They learn teamwork. They learn how to make decisions."

Through alternative measures, youth accused or convicted of first-time or lesser offences can work with the victim to find an alternative to jail time that still addresses the consequences of their actions. Johnson-Harder brings together the offender, the victim(s), the youth's parents and others who have a stake in the youth's life.

"We all discuss and decide what's going on in the youth's life, what they need to show that they're responsible, and how they're going to show it.... We write a contract, and... if the youth does everything that they agreed to, the charges get withdrawn."

With both the restitution and the alternative measures programs, Johnson-Harder makes it clear to the youth that they are responsible for their actions and the resulting consequences. Failing to follow through means the matter goes back to court. She also tries to help victims see that there are benefits to them, not just the youth.

"We hear quite often about alternative measures or mediation programs being just a slap on the wrist – 'Oh, they got it easy, they got off.... They just gotta do the hours.' In this program, when the victim participates and that young person has to become responsible and accountable to *that* victim, it makes the program 10 times harder, because even as adults, we have a hard time apologizing to somebody that we hurt," Johnson-Harder said.

"It (also) gives that victim the opportunity to say what they need, to say what they want to come out of this," she said.

"(With crime) there's no face.... They don't really understand who they're hurting, or how they're hurting them. And it's until you put a face and a story behind it, that's when the impact is there."



Bras (free for the taking) were tied around telephone poles in La Ronge, to raise awareness about breastfeeding.

seven left."

Another resource for families is Kids First North.

"The Kids First North program is to help families in the community stay on a more positive path (in terms of raising kids)," explained Kris Delaney, one of the program's home visitors.

Delaney and her colleague Kimberly Plante are each assigned to several families, each of whom has been referred to the program as being "at risk". The home visitors work closely with each family, helping parents learn



PRINCE ALBERT

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Finding a sanctuary

"Many souls, like me, had their share of sorrow and pain / I tell myself there's only love and strength we can all gain / And like me they came for peace, curiosity, and hope / Which we have found in abundance and substantial in scope... / This is our home, our sanctuary." - from a poem about the PAIMFC by Florence S. McLeod

Janet Carriere looks past the damage, and sees the person within.

"We work with clients that no one else in the community will work with or accept... (and) we do that in a way that the clients can leave with their pride and dignity intact," said Carriere, executive director of the Prince Albert Indian & Metis Friendship Centre (PAIMFC).

Incorporated in 1963, the PAIMFC is the oldest friendship centre in Saskatchewan, with deep and lasting ties to the city's most vulnerable populations.

"I see the clients differently than other people may see them – that's why I've been here as long as I have, because they're human beings that are so broken, some of them, and they just need such little care to help them," Carriere said.

"Some of our clients struggle with addictions – alcohol or drug addictions – and we accept them regardless. There's a certain standard of conduct that they must follow when they're here, but they're welcomed within our doors, and they've felt like they matter, and that we care."

"(We) always let them know that we are here, should they decide that they want to deal with their addictions and get into treatment.... but we try not to pressure them to do that," she added.

"We like to gently nudge rather than full-force push, because our thinking is that eventually, with enough kindness and enough acceptance, they (will) see the lifestyle that a lot of the staff here lead, and other clients lead, and eventually they'll want to live that lifestyle as well."

The Prince Albert friendship centre's primary goal is to help its clients address their most pressing needs – anything from making a long-distance call to re-connect with family members, to

escaping from an abusive relationship. Carriere is grateful that her staff and their board of governors all share that goal.

"I feel that the board and I will work together well, because we're all wanting to go in the same direction," said Carriere, who moved into the centre's senior leadership role in March. She is especially appreciative of board chair George Sayese, who brings his experience as both a friendship centre client and an employee to the boardroom table – not always an easy mix to get.

A client may come in for help because they don't have a place to live and need help finding housing, but the staff then discover that part of the problem is that they got into some legal trouble and are running from that, and they also don't have any food. With such complicated cases, all of the staff at the friendship centre may end up working with the same client in some way, Carriere explained.

"The work that we do here is very heavy, very hard, when you're working with the poorest of the poor and there's so many things going wrong in their lives.... You're



PAIMFC director Janet Carriere is always ready to chat with anyone who comes through the friendship centre's doors.

helping and you're helping them, but you don't realize the sadness that you absorb. A lot of sadness comes into this building, a lot of despair, and so we try to continue bonding with each other, because we need to be a team."

That may mean having staff potluck lunches or retreats, or just shutting the centre early on a Friday to hear from a guest speaker or even do a cleaning bee. "It's just that we all do something together," Carriere said.

Staff from all departments also work together



Two young men take a moment to relax at the Prince Albert Indian & Metis Friendship Centre. The PAIMFC is a safe haven for many of the city's most vulnerable people.

when there is a special event happening, be it Prince Albert's city-wide National Aboriginal Day celebration, which the centre co-hosts every year, or a conference for residential school survivors, organized by the PAIMFC's resolution health support workers. Sometimes even the clients themselves get involved behind the scenes.

"We have staff here that are comfortable (with) and are known by all the local people in our inner city, and it really helps when our staff

entele is mainly Aboriginal people. That being the case, the centre is very intentional about honouring Aboriginal values, such as a high level of respect for elders.

"In my world, you start with the elders and it trickles down. You need elders for balance, and for wisdom, for guidance – and (that's) whether they're a spiritual elder or just an elder period," Carriere said.

Elders come every month for a "tea party", where they enjoy a lunch of sandwiches, dainties and Jello, and of course tea – or coffee if that's preferred – and play bingo together. They also each receive a small gift. "They really enjoy it. It's an outing, and it gets them to socialize," Carriere said.

A group of older women also come in regularly to do crafts, such as beading and sewing, and Carriere is hoping to offer more road trips and bring in speakers on topics of interest to elders, such as a lawyer who can explain about power of attorney, wills and estates.

The centre also organizes an annual overnight retreat, with the elders staying in cabins, doing art projects, learning from guest speakers, and generally just relaxing and being pampered.

The PAIMFC's youth program has a spiritual elder, Stuart Amyotte, and his influence has been very good for the youth, El-Ezaby said.

"The youth are really showing an interest now in going to sweats and getting some of that other (cultural) support, which has really

been beneficial to them. You see changes right away," she said.

"They just feel a good sense of who they are, where they came from – a real good connection with their own Creator and knowing that that's everybody's (Creator).... (They pick up) skills, protocol, expectations, and they seem to be able to understand and be able to make sense of why rules are rules, and that they are necessary.... They seem to come to that on their own, with some cultural influence."

Participation in cultural activities – including the round dances and feasts held at the friendship centre to mark each change of season – is not mandatory by any means, but Carriere wants to give people the option.

"We try to give opportunities for Aboriginal people to experience their culture again, and to make the decision as to whether they want to embrace it or not, but we do not push them to their culture," she said.

As in all Aboriginal cultures, children are also very important at the PAIMFC. Every summer, the centre partners with the Gabriel Dumont Institute to offer a program for children from low-income households.

"A lot of our kids don't even get out of the city, so (we include) going to the lake, going to the waterslides here within the city, going on a picnic, going on a nature walk – just the little things that so many children can take for granted," Carriere said. There will also be longer trips, such as

to the Batoche or Wanuskewin heritage sites, with a stop at a powwow along the way.

Many of these children in the program are being raised by grandparents, and as Carriere explained, "when you're bringing up your own family, you don't get money for it. So Kohkum's trying to do it all on her pension, and it's tough."

Kids can also enjoy themselves at the friendship centre's annual National Aboriginal Day celebration, with face painting, bouncy castles, and a free lunch of burgers and watermelon. The festivities start with a pipe ceremony, with entertainment throughout the day by both Metis and First Nations performers, and then end with fireworks.

"It's a huge celebration – hundreds of people, if not thousands, come through for the day.... It is an awesome day, and people of all cultures come to experience it, so that's the great thing of it too," Carriere said.

While National Aboriginal Day is the PAIMFC's biggest seasonal celebration, it is certainly not the only one. There is always a Christmas party for the kids, and another for the elders. They also serve a turkey dinner to anyone who doesn't have a home to go for Easter or Thanksgiving, and do another one in January, since there are several other places in town that serve a Christmas meal.

All of these events and programs are free, although the PAIMFC does ask participants to purchase an annual membership for \$2. That fee

ers or the free legal clinic we have here. If they have children in (foster) care, we try to work with them towards reuniting with their children." Other supports may include transportation to medical appointments, a chance to wash clothes in the centre's laundry facilities, or referrals to the local food bank.

People are drawn to Prince Albert for many reasons – schooling, health care, jobs, or simply a new environment. "One thing I'm hearing (as a reason) is gang activity on some of the reserves," Carriere said. "People just want to get away, so they move to the city. But it's so hard to survive in the city, compared to on the reserve, financially."

Another big reason that people come is because of the jails. Prince Albert has not only a provincial correctional centre, but also the province's only women's prison and the federal penitentiary. Inmate work crews have helped out at the friendship centre, and even made lanyards in recognition of the centre's 50th anniversary in 2013.

"The inmates (are) very well-behaved here, very comfortable here," Carriere said. "We get a lot of labour from them, and they feel good because they're giving something back to the community... and it's good for them to give, because it gives them empathy and compassion, and then it's harder to commit (further crimes)."

However, the jails don't just bring prisoners to the city – they also bring the inmates' families, some of whom have no ties to the

housing agencies or detox and addiction services – or to programs within the centre.

"I do it because I have compassion and empathy for

paperwork, preparing pleas, helping people find legal representation, and generally supporting clients through the process.



Family wellness worker Rhoda Peekeekoot helps an elder with her income taxes - one of many free services offered at the centre.

people, and I know how I've been helped, so I want to give back into the community," she said. "What I enjoy doing is empowering people to get on their feet and make good life choices, healthy life choices."

Grywacheski is also the centre's family law court worker. Her role is primarily to assist Aboriginal families that have had their children apprehended and are having to go through the court system, ensuring that they have legal representation, understand what is happening in court, and find ways to resolve the issues that led to the apprehension.

She also works on improving communication and building trust between her clients and the court personnel, and helps clients other areas of family law, such as separation and divorce, child custody or child support maintenance.

Grywacheski frequently refers her clients to the free legal clinic offered every Wednesday afternoon, by lawyers volunteering their time through Pro Bono Law Saskatchewan. Since many of her clients can't afford a lawyer but aren't eligible for legal aid, this is a very useful service.

Another service the centre offers for those dealing with the legal system is the Aboriginal court worker program. The three court workers – Natalie Hawkeswood, Bertha Birdsall, and Frank Carriere – are at the courthouse every day, offering their assistance to anyone who has been arrested, Aboriginal or not. As trained legal professionals, they serve as their clients' guides through the legal system – not providing advice as a lawyer would, but explaining legal jargon, helping with

what was passed down to me (about wellness) – being healthy, mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, the most important (aspect)."

Some of Peekeekoot's work involves helping women get out of a violent situation; a lot of it is working on the underlying causes. "The biggest thing I teach them is to listen to themselves. We all have little (internal) alarm systems, and if we ignore that... then we're not going to see that these people are walking all over us," she said.

Over the last nine years, Peekeekoot has helped many girls and women escape from an abusive partner, only to see them return to their abuser again and again. She holds on to the rare happy ending, like the girl who got herself and her kids away, and managed to not only finish high school but go on to university and succeed.

Sometimes she will see a woman who is in a good relationship, but is unconsciously trying to sabotage it because abuse is all she's ever known. "It's amazing what our minds do to ourselves," Peekeekoot said.

That's why she sees her primary role as that of a teacher – educating girls and women about the tricks we can play on ourselves, the cycle of abuse, and ways to deal with the issues in their lives and move forward. She also shares the medicine wheel teachings, and compares the past experiences of Aboriginal people to what is happening today.

"When I interviewed elders, I asked them, 'Do you remember the punishment that was done to someone that was very abusive?,' she said. "A lot of them couldn't answer, (because) they didn't know of abusive behaviour (back then)."

Elsewhere in the centre, people are learning other important skills. this spring, a man volunteered to help students prepare for their high school equivalency exams. Meanwhile, youth program participants were picking up skills for the workforce, either through doing work placements at the centre, or learning how to navigate a job interview.

"Interviewing has almost become a bad word in society – it causes a lot of anxiety, so I prefer to call it a 'meet and greet,'" El-Ezaby said. "If we think of it that way... they seem to do better."

The youth also acquired life skills, such as cooking a healthy meal, and even doing their own laundry.

"I won't take it from them do it, because it defeats the purpose," El-Ezaby laughed. "So I say, come on, I'll show you how – this is easy!"



There is always time for laughter and games.

has never gone up, in the centre's 50-year history, and a parent's membership covers all of their kids as well. "We try to keep things manageable," Carriere said.

Through both their core services and the programs the friendship centre chooses to apply for, the emphasis is always on compassion and genuine support.

"We show that by joking with them, laughing with them, and trying to help them – depending on what their needs," Carriere said. "We help them get their taxes done. If they have legal issues, we will try to help them get those dealt with, whether it be through the court work-

area, and they may seek help from the friendship centre. "It's hard (enough) when you have connections to the community, but when you have no connections, it's even harder," Carriere said.

The front-line workers for new clients is often family worker Sharon Grywacheski, whose role is provide emotional support and find out what services they need.

"They come in my office and bare their hearts," Grywacheski said. "I don't counsel, but I do support and let them know that there's help, and what we can do to help."

That might include referrals to outside agencies – such as the food bank,



SASKATOON

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Building connections

In a lot of ways, what happens to a newcomer at the Saskatoon Indian & Metis Friendship Centre is like the construction of a massive jigsaw puzzle: the door opens, and a new piece is added to the jumble of colourful pieces on the table. With gentle guidance, the newcomer searches for where they fit. Eventually, something clicks, and they become an integral part of the whole picture.

"If people moving off-reserve were lost in the urban environment, with no idea what social supports are there for them, no idea how to connect in the community, and (if they were to) lose their connection to their culture, (that could) be a very negative experience," said Bill Mintram, the SIMFC's executive director. "But when they have those supports, it can be a positive experience.... So (our goal is) to pave a way for that in the community."

Connecting with practical help

It begins in the lobby – a big, high-ceilinged area that for some has become their only real home. There's always a pot of coffee on, and a display of community announcements, and there are tables and chairs for people to relax and chat with one another, maybe watch the news, or the soaps, or a Riders game on the big-screen TV.

"We have one lady who'll regularly be in the lobby... and if she can't make it, she'll call in sick. Sometimes she's better than my staff," Mintram laughed.

The lobby is a warm and safe retreat for people who have no place else to go, and the friendship centre caters to them with a hot supper twice a week, on Monday and Wednesday night. Other community organizations were providing breakfasts and lunches, but no one was doing suppers – so the centre stepped in to fill the gap.

Mintram often has lobby regulars stopping by his office with suggestions or comments, and he's always willing to listen.

"The really cool thing about working within the Aboriginal community... is that there's not the same type of class structure (as in the mainstream society). The

idea of kinship, and the community being (all) one – it doesn't matter whether you have a full-time job or you're living on the street, you're all willing to sit at the same table and chat," he said. "That allows us to be a very relevant community centre for the whole community."



Coffee and conversation in the SIMFC's lobby.

Often, the first employee a new arrival connects with is one of the family workers – either Emma Mantee or Jacquie Bouvier. The family workers' role is to help clients resolve pressing issues, through referrals to community supports, advocacy, one-on-one and family counseling, and hands-on practical assistance – such as arranging for a client to make a long-distance call to their reserve, helping to fill out an application for detox services, or reviewing a list of housing agencies.

Through their work for the Ministry of Social Services, the family workers also do home visits and provide support to households in which a grandparent or other non-parental relative is raising a child removed from his or her parents' home by ministry staff.

Connecting with friends and honing new skills

Just off the lobby is the youth centre, where teens and young adults can check their e-mail or Facebook, get help with preparing their resumes, search for jobs, or even hone their shooting skills on the new PlayStation 4's – they'll be all ready in case of a zombie apocalypse, joked youth liaison worker Sanford Strongarm.

The youth centre is open seven days a week over the fall and winter months, from 4 to 8:30 p.m. Monday to Fri-

day, and noon to 8 p.m. on weekends, and then weekdays only through the spring and summer.

Youth also spend time in the multi-purpose room, where they can play games and make crafts, or in the gymnasium, either during open gym times, or in one

of the organized sports programs – Zumba fitness classes and drop-in volleyball and basketball are all available, and open to adults as well. They can even learn how to prepare a nutritious meal in a cooking class.

The centre also offers piano, guitar, voice, and fiddle lessons – the latter taught by celebrated Metis fiddler John Arcand – and certificate courses in CPR and first aid, and the youth centre is often an entry point into these and other programs.

It can also be a refuge. "Especially in the wintertime, it keeps them off of the street... (and away from) resorting to bad things for survival," said youth liaison worker Tyler Sayese.

"This gives them a place to have a warm environment, give them something wholesome to do, educate them on things they could be doing as opposed to being a member of a gang... (and) give them the tools they can use to better their lives."

Sayese has become especially fond of one of the regulars, a young man who had had a rough time before finding his way to the youth centre.

"Once you see that there are people here to encourage you, it really gives you a sense of self-worth," he said. "There's this glow to him now, as opposed to before, (when) he was hesitant.... You start to value yourself more, and want to put yourself out

there more as a productive member of society."

Connecting with "all your relations"

The friendship centre hosts celebrations throughout the year – an elders' Easter lunch, a Mother's Day tea, Thanksgiving and Christmas suppers for elders, Halloween and Christmas parties for the kids – but one of the biggest events on the calendar is the Native Graduation Recognition Night.

All of the Aboriginal students graduating from a Saskatoon high school are invited to attend the annual ceremony and banquet. Thirty years ago, at the first grad night, there were six graduates honoured; in 2013, there were 131 grads, and over 700 people gathered to celebrate their achievements.

"The Aboriginal community has much stronger kinship ties (than the mainstream) – a much stronger relationship, and that relationship isn't always (with) just your direct family, it's all your relations," Mintram said. "We as an Aboriginal community want to be able to say, 'We're behind you. We're right here with you.'"

Knowing there will be a special night to honour them gives Aboriginal students – who typically have a lower high school completion rate than their non-Aboriginal peers – an extra incentive to succeed, as does the possibility of earning one or more of the 20-plus scholarships available, Mintram said. The friendship centre is also very intentional about learning about each grad's goals and passions, so that each one can be recognized individually.

The centre is also intentional about honouring elders. A recognized spiritual elder serves on the 13-member board as an advisor, "as well as to allow for that balance, the sharing of knowledge," Mintram said. Elders also serve as valued supporters for former residential school students receiving help from the Resolution Health Support program.

Dustin Strongarm, co-ordinator for the centre's Youth Works program, makes sure to connect his kids with elders as often as possible. The youth assigned to Strongarm

are young offenders who have been ordered to pay restitution for their crimes, and they work off their fines by doing work under Strongarm's direction – anything from cleaning up alleyways and removing graffiti, to doing yardwork or snow removal.

Rather than just putting them to work, though, Strongarm works alongside them, and he spends much of his time mentoring them, in order to re-direct their thinking and attitudes. Like many of the kids he works with, he grew up in inner-city Saskatoon, but his parents – who raised 16 kids, only five of whom were their own children – were strong role models for him.

"These kids need to know how it was back in the day... So what we do is we take them to the elder's house, we make them do snow removal, and... the elder comes out and spends some time with us, give us some stories, sometimes gives them treats," Strongarm said.

"A lot of these kids, they're lost. They don't really get treated with respect, or give respect... (so we are) letting them know that respect, that traditional respect aspect of



Dustin Strongarm makes a statement about his proteges.

going out and helping people, instead of taking it all for yourself."

The message of hard work and taking responsibility seems to be getting through: at the 2013 Native Graduation Night, the valedictorian was a graduate of Strongarm's program.

Connecting to cultural identity

Metis sash weaving workshops, jigging competitions, powwow dance, singing, and regalia classes – the friendship centre offers many opportunities to learn about Aboriginal cultural tradi-

tions. Despite the high cost of supplies, the centre continues to invest in its highly popular beading classes, which not only teach people how to make beaded items

“I approach it (language instruction) in a very holistic way, a very cultural way. I teach it through stories; I teach it through songs,” Chamakese said. “In univer-



An artist showcases beadwork at the Folkfest pavilion.

such as earrings and medallions, but explains the varied historical traditions behind the techniques.

“It’s always helpful when you have instructors that are knowledgeable culturally – then you’re not just going in and learning something that doesn’t connect to you,” Mintram said. “Within different beading techniques are different nations’ practices (and) designs, and being able to understand that can give you a greater understanding of who you and your family are.”

In addition to offering the beading classes, the friendship centre has also purchased display tables at local events so that students can showcase and sell their wares, gaining some entrepreneurial experience in addition to their newfound cultural knowledge.

Traditional parenting classes, which teaches parents about deeply-rooted Aboriginal concepts of self-image, kinship, marriage and parenthood, have been very well-received.

“It’s going through what makes a family whole, (and) what can be done by the parent to make sure they are putting the needs of the child first,” said the centre’s program co-ordinator, Sharon Sullivan.

The SIMFC has hired a Cree language instructor, Darryl Chamakese, to teach classes both at the centre and at a public library and the White Buffalo Healing Lodge, with the goal of not only introducing students to basic language concepts but also the history and cultural concepts rooted within the language.

“We want to engage people with the opportunity to learn... because language is something that within the First Nations communities across Canada is being lost, unless something happens to allow it to still be relevant,” Mintram said.

sity, they’ll teach you things like ‘the cup is on top of the table’... but in reality, when is a person ever going to say that? I’d rather teach things to young people, or to (any) people that are wanting to know my language... about our worldview, our basic core beliefs.”

“The bottom line of why I chose the friendship centre (as a place to teach) is because... who would benefit more – the student that’s just taking the university class for a credit, or the person that’s coming here and genuinely wanting to know who they are, and want to know their language as their identity?,” Chamakese added. “And for me, it’s no contest.”

Family violence worker Vernon Linklater draws on his deep-rooted knowledge

“(There is) the victim, who will steal a sandwich and eat for the day, (and) the survivor, who will steal a loaf of bread and eat for a week. But the champion will settle down, have a good full-time job, and feed himself for the rest of his life. You’ve got to be that champion,” Linklater said.

“I’m their coach – I’m encouraging them,” he said. Instead of blaming their current problems on their past experiences, he said, “they come to realize, who owes anybody anything? Nobody.... You’re a victim? Bluntly, (I say), ‘get over it.’ You’re a survivor? Okay, well, take the next step. Work harder to be the champion.”

Connecting to the wider community

The friendship centre’s youth committee is responsible for organizing an annual round dance – this year, even on a day with a windchill of -40, over 200 people showed up.

The centre also co-hosts Saskatoon’s National Aboriginal Day celebration in Friendship Park. This year, the event coincided with the Saskatchewan Jazz Festival, and the festival gave the friendship centre and its community partners use of their stage and equipment for the day. The festivities kicked off with a grand entry by veterans, elders and dignitaries, followed by a free meal and musical performances.

The Indian and Metis pavilion for Folkfest, Sas-

interpreters use the objects to teach visitors about Aboriginal cultures.

There are also jigging and hoop dance lessons, drum and tipi teachings done inside a tipi, live entertainment, and a wide array of foods, sourced as locally as possible. “There are some people that come just for the bannock – actually, a lot of people who come just for the bannock!”, Mintram laughed.

While the big events help introduce the rest of Saskatoon to the friendship centre, the centre also helps its own people become better acquainted with what Saskatoon has to offer.

Their six-week summer camp offers up to 50 kids a chance to participate in activities or travel to places most of them would otherwise never otherwise experience, such as the Fun Factory, the Western Development Museum, the Shaw Centre and the Mendel Art Gallery. They also go to Batoche and do an overnight camp-out at Pike Lake.

The centre’s bi-monthly networking lunch brings together representatives from Saskatoon’s Aboriginal service delivery organizations – including law enforcement and prisoner advocacy groups, the university and technical colleges, the Saskatoon Tribal Council, the City of Saskatoon, an AIDS outreach centre, and a downtown youth centre – to update one another about their services and recent activities. The lunches generally draw about 70 people, and every-

partnership (and) collaboration,” Mintram said.

Connecting to the future

The friendship centre also creates opportunities through its work certification programs. Teens can take the Red Cross babysitting course or the young worker readiness course, while adults are drawn to the bobcat and forklift operator courses, as well as the Safety Construction Orientation Training (SCOT) and Workplace Hazardous Materials Information Systems (WH-MIS) certificate programs.

Mintram and his board are also very deliberate about nurturing young leaders. For example, in early March, the board had five youth from the friendship centre participate in their strategic planning session. The day before, Mintram took the youth on a tour of the Saskatchewan Legislature, and explained the concept of strategic planning and the role they would play.

The goal was “to give them an understanding of who they are, and the voice that they have in giving relevant insights... and how their leadership and their choices today will impact their community,” Mintram said.

Tyler Sayese, who in addition to his work at the friendship centre also serves as the AFCS board’s youth representative, shares Mintram’s passion for giving youth a bigger role in shaping the future of Saskatchewan’s friendship centres.

“You’re not going to have a friendship centre in your community (in the future), if you don’t get your youth involved,” Sayese said.

While he admits that, growing up, he didn’t understand the passion his father – AFCS president George Sayese – had for the friendship centre movement, he has since come to share it.

“You see these people come off of the street, and it makes your heart break. And you see that the friendship centre is just putting themselves out there to help these people get back on their feet, help them find housing, assist them in getting their children back if their children have been taken away, help them get their certification, get them back into school – and just encourage them to be the best people they can be, in a very oppressed world... where they’re being very pushed down because of their culture and their identity,” Sayese said.

“That’s what I’m passionate about, is their value of helping (people) achieve a better quality of life for themselves, and not just pushing them aside.”



Clockwise from left: A Metis sash hangs in an office overlooking the lobby; powwow regalia and drumming are traditions worth introducing to the next generation.

of Aboriginal spiritual traditions and his own healing journey to help men with a history of domestic violence.

Linklater, who overcame an abusive childhood and alcoholism to become a four-time Canadian amateur boxing champion and an elder’s helper, tells his clients that there are three people inside each of us.

katoon’s annual multi-cultural showcase, is another friendship centre initiative. “It’s busloads of people flowing through our building, throughout the day, every day, for three days,” Mintram said. They set up a display of cultural artifacts – ribbon skirts, drums, blankets, beadwork, beaver pelts and more – and then historical

one gets a chance to share, with one person also asked to give a 10-minute showcase presentation.

“That’s a really important event that we do, that is good for keeping our community in communication (with one another) and understanding what each other are doing, and opening up doors for



NEWO YOTINA

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Winds of change



Newo Yotina Friendship Centre's cultural co-ordinator, Chasity Delorme, leads a youth workshop.

This is a season of expansion for Saskatchewan's newest friendship centre.

After operating for its first four years out of an office in downtown Regina, the Newo Yotina Friendship Centre has relocated into much larger digs.

Their new space, located in the Regina Food Bank's complex on the north end of Winnipeg St., is not only twice as big as their previous one, it is actually costing them less – resulting in a deal that was too good to pass up, according to director David Bighead.

Newo Yotina has, for the last few years, been the Regina Food Bank's largest drop-off point for food orders, but it wasn't until this spring that a partnership was formed between the two organizations. Food bank staff approached Bighead in March, offering to not only rent Newo Yotina a 4,000 sq. ft. space on the upper floor of their building, but to also furnish it, renovate the kitchen, provide new public access computers, and provide food for their programs – all for no extra charge.

With the monthly rent on the friendship centre's old space having doubled since the centre opened in late 2009, and the food bank's deal including not only all the extras, but the added savings of no property tax and the offer of free rent until the centre's existing lease agreement expired, Bighead and his board were very excited by the possibility.

"They (food bank staff) just want to help," Bighead

said. "It's good to see that there's organizations out there that are willing to do this, and they see that we are an important organization to a lot of people in this city.... If they can help in any way, they're willing to do it."

"They really enjoy having us here," added program manager Kim Wenger. "They said the space was open for a while because they didn't want just any business in here; they wanted like-minded folks in here so that we could serve our population better."

Even so, there was a reason for hesitation – many of the friendship centre's clients had come to rely on the downtown location, not only for food drop-offs but for the ease of getting there from anywhere in the city. The food bank is considerably farther north, making it a long trek for many clients.

Ultimately, the decision came down to the opportunities the new space offers – not only lower costs and the chance to partner with a long-established and well-respected community organization, but also room to expand the services they can provide for clients.

"Given our limitations of space (in the old location), I think that it's a good move.... There's just so many opportunities to do whatever we want," Bighead said.

While the centre's day-to-day traffic has slowed down, and some clients have been upset about the move, they are starting to come around – both literally and figuratively. Two weeks after the move,

the friendship centre staff rented a van, and Wenger spent three hours driving clients from the old location to the new one for their National Aboriginal Day barbecue.

"Once people get here and actually see the space, they're like, 'Wow, yeah, good move, guys,'" said Wenger.

"We (still) have a couple of our same faces (on staff), so they come here and... they still feel like it's the friendship centre, and they still feel like they have a sense of belonging to it.... They just have to come here first, and give it a chance."

At its core, Newo Yotina is a drop-in centre – a place for people to come when they are lonely, hungry, tired, or needing help, and come away feeling revitalized.

"They feel safe here. They feel comfortable. They're not judged, they're not marginalized. It's a place for them to come in and feel like they belong," Bighead said. "That's the atmosphere we try to create, (that)... you'll be part of a bigger family here."

Some of the centre's clients are long-time residents of the city; others are brand-new, coming from every direction the four winds – "newo yotina", in Plains Cree – may blow.

Right from the start, the centre has offered coffee and toast every morning. With the move to the new space, which includes a full kitchen, they are now also able to prepare a hot breakfast on Friday mornings.

The public access computer lab has expanded, but it is

still serves the same primary purpose – a way for people to check e-mail or Facebook ("a lot of people don't have telephones, so in order to keep in touch with family and friends, it's the medium out there," Bighead said), prepare their resumes, and look for jobs or housing. Wenger envisions offering classes – basic computer usage, Microsoft Word, Excel.

The bathrooms both come equipped with showers, and the kitchen can be used for more than just breakfasts. One room has been set up with a TV, a couch, and a recliner, and there is an afghan blanket, toys, and a small Disney Princess chair as well.

"We had people that are maybe in transition, or don't have housing, that come here during the day," Wenger said. "The shelters in this city, you have to leave at 8 in the morning, and you don't come back till 5 to get a space. So they have that whole day to find somewhere (to go).... Having the TV (area is intended) to give people a sense of calmness for a while."

Wenger has plans for a youth rec room, and another area for making crafts or playing games. A high-ceilinged area could be made into a fitness centre, with big mirrors and murals painted by local artists, while the roof access has potential to be a

continuing to shake off the dust of the past. In mid-2006, the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) yanked funding from Newo Yotina's predecessor, the Regina Indian & Metis Friendship Centre. The centre then closed abruptly a year-and-a-half later, amidst a police investigation into various financial irregularities.

In 2009, the NAFC decided that Regina has (and attracts) too large an Aboriginal population to not have a friendship centre. Bighead, a former policy analyst with Indian and Northern Affairs who was then working for Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Regulators, was interested in a career change, and the match was made. Newo Yotina was officially incorporated on April 16, 2010.

But right from the start, Bighead and Wenger had an uphill battle to prove that the new friendship centre was, in fact, entirely new.

When Newo Yotina opened, people came in to express pleasure that they were "back", and ask where the old centre's director was.

"They were a huge part of the community... (and) they were a multi-million dollar organization before they fell from grace," Bighead said.

While some people were excited to see the "return" of the friendship centre, others



community garden and an outdoor area where people could sit and enjoy the sun.

"A lot of people will look for a friendship centre (when they arrive in the city), and then come," Wenger said. "That's where people feel comfortable to come and ask for help, and then when they're pointed in the right directions, then they're comfortable that way as well."

As Newo Yotina settles into its new space, it is also

were very hesitant – even once reassured that Newo Yotina was indeed a brand-new organization.

"That was huge for us – gaining back the trust, not only the community's but other organizations, and of course our funders," Bighead said.

The numbers help tell the tale: in 2010, Newo Yotina had 30 people buy memberships, and the centre brought in \$15,000 in grant money.

Three years later, they had 300 members and close to \$200,000 in grants.

The number of partnerships is also steadily climbing, in part because of Bighead's past work experience.

"I had partnerships with various government organizations, and I think that they (the hiring committee) saw that a lot of those could be useful going forward, as far as securing funding.... I've been there, and I know how the bureaucracy works," Bighead said.

The Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region offers traditional parenting and diabetes workshops, and brings nurses in twice a year to do medical consultations, while the Regina Work Preparation Centre offers a course called SMART Recovery to people adjusting to life after addictions.

Several organizations have paid students to work summers at the friendship centre, where they get on-the-job training.

"A lot of them, when they come to us, they've never worked in a professional setting before," Bighead said. "It's good experience for them just to be in a professional environment, and dealing with the public."

It is also a boon for Newo Yotina, where extra hands are always welcome.

"You're so stretched when you only have two people on staff. There's so many things that come up during the day that you've got to attend to, and then you've got to find time for grant-writing, and then running the program," Wenger said.

"But we're only four-and-a-half years in. We've done a lot since we started, and getting this space is another big success. You've just got to be calm and really start building."

Chasity Delorme – who serves as the centre's cultural co-ordinator – says her goal is find other organizations willing to help heal and nurture Aboriginal people, both within and outside the Aboriginal community.

"I always use the term 'finding who our friends are,'" Delorme said. "A lot of the broken relationships come from that inter-generational damage, (this idea) that non-Aboriginal people are only out to harm and create bad relationships with Aboriginal people, and I believe that the friendship centre is a good platform for me to seek out those people."

Two months after moving day, the space – while filled with sunlight streaming in from all the big windows – is still quite sparse. As Wenger put it, it's hard to focus on interior design when you are

scrambling to keep yourself employed.

When the friendship centres' core funding ran out this spring, Newo Yotina didn't have enough in reserves to keep paying their staff, so the centre closed for about six weeks. In May, the board felt they could re-open three days a week, and eventually resume full operations in early June.



Left to right: The powwow program includes regalia design; a child learns about hoop dancing at the friendship centre's family fun day; dancers and drummers gather to honour elder Lily Daniels.

With the new funding agreement, friendship centres have to be running at least two programs not funded by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, so Wenger has been busy writing proposals.

"It's tough, because we're so new – for some centres, this is a piece of cake; they've got plenty of programs running, but for us... we just need a little bit more time," she said.

Fortunately, all that creativity-boosting sunlight seems to be helping – her latest application, to the Office of the Provincial Interlocutor for First Nations and Metis Relations, has been funded.

That program, Preparing Our Youth, was first run last fall, and a rep from the Interlocutor's Office sat in.

"This past year, our focus – aligning with government priorities – has been... developing programming that enables our kids to get ready for the workforce," Bighead said.

The Interlocutor's office also interested in Newo Yotina's financial literacy program. Wenger worked with Dr. Bettina Schneider from the First Nations University of Canada to tailor the curriculum to meet the needs of urban Aboriginals. Their version was test run by the friendship centre last year.

One major take-away was that just telling people about using money isn't sufficient, Wenger said.

"What kind of lifestyle you're living really affects your finances, so teaching

someone to budget also means teaching them a lot of other things as well."

The friendship centre has also received funding to hire two Resolution Health Support workers, as well as several elders, who will assist residential school survivors.

"Whenever there's a hearing, the victims of the school need support... so that's what the front-line workers will



do, what the elders will do, is spend time with those victims before, during, and after these hearings," Bighead said.

As a new organization in a large urban centre, the friendship centre has to be cautious about not duplicating services.

"When we did our strategic plan last year, that was our big focus, was to ensure that our programming was unique for our clientele," Bighead said. "We've had to really narrow our focus."

That's not to say that if another organization is already offering services – such as handing out donated clothing – that they won't do so, Wenger added. "Maybe we are a good place to offer some things that are going on (elsewhere), because people are comfortable with us."

Aboriginal cultural content has been woven into many of the friendship centre's programs, both past and present.

For example, Delorme facilitated a program that brought youth out once a week to learn a specific skill from an elder, such as baking bannock or making dreamcatchers, and the centre's peer support training included a component on Native spirituality and the medicine wheel. She and her daughters, Jordynn and Jayda, also teach beading classes.

"Most recently, because they've moved into the new centre... we had (an elder) come in and do a pipe ceremony... which is really im-

portant (when you're) starting over," Delorme said.

Newo Yotina's signature program, which will start its fourth season in September, is So You Think You Can Powwow. Delorme and Lance Ironchild teach the various forms of dance, while Jeff Capo teaches drumming and singing. Winona Daniels helps parents make regalia for their kids, using material

said. "They come in very shy and withdrawn, and once they've been exposed, you can tell that there's a new light.... I believe as Aboriginal people, we are naturally born with our ancestors' bloodline... and now they have this opportunity to feel like they can re-connect to an identity that feels right."

Bighead's plan was to spend two years getting the friendship centre up and running, and then leave. Four years later, he is still here.

"The hardest thing about this job is the hardship you see," he said. "But other times, like being at the powwow, that makes it all worthwhile," he said. "Just the happiness on the faces of the kids, the joy they have, and the satisfaction that you've developed a good program, something that the community loves."

Wenger grew up in Regina's North Central neighbourhood, struggling with some of the same barriers her clients face. She envisioned working at a facility for troubled youth, but when a practicum landed her at Newo Yotina, she realized that she had found her place.

"I like the creative aspect to it, where you can really try and help (with) people's needs, and build relationships with people, and try and inspire some sort of hope in them, and motivation to do whatever they need to do."

She and Bighead are also inspiring the next generation of leaders.

After attending the youth empowerment event "We Day" in Saskatoon last November, a group of teens had Wenger bring in a governance trainer. In January, they elected the friendship centre's first youth council. Jordynn Delorme, Chasity's 15-year-old daughter, was elected as president.

Along with encouraging the friendship centre to develop more youth programs, the council is developing a project they plan to pitch to SaskTel's "I Am Stronger" anti-bullying initiative.

"We had so many good ideas, and one of them was to build a confidence campaign," Delorme said. "Being a teenager, there's a lot of pressure to 'be this' or 'look like this'.... (We want) to show the younger ones – let's say Grade 4 to 8 – that that's not what regular girls look like."

Delorme is excited to see what's ahead, both for the centre and for its clients.

"There's so many people that come into the centre that just want to change their lives," she said. "It gives me an adrenaline rush... knowing that I could help create that change."



Jordynn Delorme

ter of having them exposed to the music and the drums and jumping around. They will develop their own style, and with that, we can coach them," Delorme said.

Even if children just want to run, Delorme is happy to have them, in order to expose them to the music and the dancing.

"Connecting them to their culture has built self-esteem for a lot of the students," she



QU'APPELLE VALLEY

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Feeding body, mind & soul

Fort Qu'Appelle's friendship centre may be located in a valley, but director Rob Donison prefers to see it as a beacon on a hill.

"We see the friendship centre like a lighthouse, in a way; we're just a place to bring hope to people, where they can be accepted regardless of what they believe or what they're going through, and loved unconditionally," said Donison, who has worked for the Qu'Appelle Valley Friendship Centre for nearly 30 years.

"There's lots (of people) that comes here that rely on us, and we do the best we can to provide true friendship to them."

For Donison, doing the best for his clients means addressing the whole person – body, mind, and soul – and that is a mindset he inherited from the centre's first director, Peter Dubois. Dubois was a Baptist theological student who switched career paths from the pulpit to First Nations politics. After serving as chief of the Muscowpetung First Nation, he became a vice-chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations.

In the late 1970s, Dubois joined a grassroots movement to start a friendship centre in the Fort Qu'Appelle area, and in 1983, he became the centre's first executive director. He held this position until 2000, just two years before his death. Donison, who Dubois hired in 1985 as a criminal conflict mediator and program manager, succeeded him in 2002.

"The individuals that started the friendship centre in Fort Qu'Appelle were a mix of races – they were Native, they were non-Native – and they wanted to emphasize harmony among the cultures, among the races," Donison said. "That was something that he (Dubois) and the other individuals wanted to be a central part of the friendship centre, that anyone would feel welcome."

The friendship centre's current space was built in 1991, after Dubois secured capital grant dollars from the federal government. The original plan was to use it as an administration building, with adjacent land purchased for a multi-purpose facility. The funds to construct a larger facility never

materialized, so the building gradually evolved into a community centre, expanded through a series of grants.

In addition to offices and a public area with computers, bulletin boards and the ever-present friendship centre staple – a full coffee pot – the building now includes a large kitchen and a dining room, a community recreation room, a workout room, and an outdoor basketball court.

"We found out where to apply to with the federal government for that expansion, and we applied, we prayed, and succeeded again in acquiring funding," Donison said. "Also, we had a board that was praying and being very selfless – no honorariums, just strictly volunteer – and through strong financial management, we were able to purchase a 15-passenger van."

Building up bodies

That van comes in handy for the centre's youth staff, who use it for outings. After the Cultural Connections for Aboriginal Youth (CCAY) funding was cut this spring, Donison obtained a grant for promoting physical activity.

So, this year, kids at the friendship centre have enjoyed going for hikes, camping, fishing, playing football, kickball, and dodge ball, and swimming at the Lawson Aquatic Centre in Regina. "You're having them up and moving, rather than doing nothing," Donison said of his rationale for acquiring the grant.

It also fits in neatly with the "holistic health and lifestyle" focus the centre adopted for its CCAY-funded programs, such as teachings from an elder on the medicinal uses for herbs and plants, classes on preparing healthy meals and snacks, and prevention-focused workshops on sexual health and drunk driving.

In addition to an Xbox machine and the foosball and ping-pong tables in the community room, the centre has its own fully-equipped workout room. Donison has brought in a fitness consultant to teach youth how to stretch properly before a workout, and how to lift weights safely.

Youth also enjoy using the centre's outdoor basketball



The Qu'Appelle Valley Friendship Centre's basketball court gives local youth a chance to burn off some extra energy while connecting with their peers.

court, which overlooks the Qu'Appelle Valley. "It's the best outdoor court in the region, and extremely popular for the teens and young adults, right from spring till fall," Donison said, noting that the court's exterior lighting allows games to go on well into the night.

"It's lucky that Rob got that (physical activity grant), because otherwise the youth wouldn't have a place to go after school," said youth worker Justin Wesequate.

"I think they really need that – a place where they can hang out.... Otherwise they would be at home, or else they would be out getting into trouble."



Veggies are a popular snack.

Helping kids is a cause near and dear to Donison's heart. "Our focus is on trying to help people of all ages, but with our population demographic being what it is, where we have a lot of young families, youth, and children in the community, developing preventative program-

ming for that client group is important," he said.

As a result, one thing you won't hear at the friendship centre is the growl of an empty belly – at least, not for long. "Next to prayer, diet is the most important thing," said Donison, who delights in seeing every afternoon's tray of raw veggies emptied out by hungry kids.

"The kids slaughter it," he laughed. "When we first started doing this, years ago, people thought I was crazy – you know, 'Vegetables? For kids?' – but it was a hit. We've gotten kids used to eating vegetables, and loving eating vegetables."

Working in partnership with the local health region, the friendship centre helps teach children and youth about proper nutrition.

Since many of the kids who come after school tend to linger, the friendship centre serves suppers in the dining room, as resources have allowed.

"I believe there was a need, a big need, especially for healthy food," said elder Brenda Kinnon, who is in charge of planning and preparing the suppers.

"We know a lot of them don't have vegetables and fruit at home, so we offer stuff like that. With every meal we have, there's a salad that goes along with it, and some kind of dessert.... Anybody that comes here – if they're hungry, they can eat."

After hearing a presentation from Donison, the Ministry of Education offered

him \$10,000, which he used to set up a nutrition station. The friendship centre's kitchen is now equipped with high-end juicers and blenders, which can be used for making veggie drinks, fruit smoothies, almond butter, and even spaghetti.

"We cut the coffee for a while, because sugar and coffee and all this stuff (aren't as healthy)," Donison said. "We re-introduced coffee during the daytime, but we (also) have the purified water and tea that people can drink. We try to focus on holistic health."

Reaching hearts and minds

The centre also has a "clothing depot", with used clothing and household goods available for anyone who needs them. Right next to the shelves full of clothes is a "literacy depot" – a collection of books, primarily for younger children, and stuffed animals. All of the items have been donated, and are free for the taking.

"A lot of (clients) are after clothes, and then they'll see the other area, and they'll gravitate over there," Donison said. "When kids see the stuffed animals at the literacy depot, those go fairly quickly. (Then) they'll see books, and you'll see kids taking books, and parents taking books with the family."

Donison's hope is to eventually have elders come in to read with kids, or help kids with literacy problems.

Elder Brenda Kinnon would also like to work one-on-one with youth, particularly those who are struggling and need advice, resources and encouragement.

“We’re planning on having our own room, for the kids if they want to come and talk to us and ask questions. If we can help them in any way, that’s what we want to do,” said Kinnon, a retired teacher who has also raised her grandchildren and now looks after her great-grandson.

The friendship centre sees a lot of foot traffic – so much so, in fact, that the Ministry of Highways has reduced the speed limit for the stretch of road closest to the centre. The doors are open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., Monday to Thursday, and as late as midnight on Fridays, and people stop in for a wide range of reasons.

“The drop-in element of our program is one of the biggest, most important parts of it,” Donison said. The first things a visitor sees when arriving at the centre are a bulletin board with information about community resources, a bank of computers, comfortable chairs, a coffee pot, and a smiling face at the reception desk, offering directions on who to go to for help.

People may come in with questions about dealing with the justice system, social services, or the police, or with resolving a human rights issue. They may ask for help with finding a job or further education, or with finding a place to live. They may have come to get their resume typed up, or to have their taxes done. They may need a referral to alcohol or substance abuse counseling and treatment options.

And sometimes, what they really need is just a place to rest, or maybe a bite to eat. As there is no food bank in Fort Qu’Appelle, the friendship centre has an emergency food program, through which staff can provide an occasional food hamper for a family in need, or offer sandwiches to a hungry transient.

“We’ve always tried to hire people that have a real compassionate heart, and that really want to help other people, regardless of the program that they’re in.... People that come here to work seem to want to work here for a long time, and they have a lot of love in their hearts, and a lot of caring to share with the clients.”

That is certainly true for the friendship centre’s community justice workers, Shelly Ward and Debbie Horne. Both carry a caseload for alternative measures, with Ward managing cases three days a week in Indian Head, and Horne working with clients in Fort Qu’Appelle and Southey. Horne

is also responsible for the friendship centre’s fine option and community service order (CSO) programs.

As Ward sees it, the key to success in these roles is to be non-judgmental – to see yourself as the bridge between those who have caused harm and those who have been hurt, and give both sides an opportunity to be heard.

“Basically, we’re the go-between people,” Ward said. “Everyone gets a voice. No one is interrupted... and then we come up with an outcome that’s best going to suit both victims and offenders.”



A shelf full of books awaits eager readers in the literacy depot.

“The reason, I think, that alternative measures is successful is because the offender and the victim are in the same room.... If you were in a court of law, lawyers (would) decide what’s going to happen,” she said.

Ward spends a lot of her time building a rapport with victims, so that they feel they can trust her and the process, and not be unintentionally re-victimized. She also works closely with offenders so that she understands their story too.

“What every single one of us needs is someone to believe in us,” Ward said.

“(Offenders) may say in the beginning, ‘I accept responsibility’... but by the end of the meeting, there may have been some tears shed,” she said. “They feel, ‘Wow, a weight’s been lifted off my shoulders. I understand.’ And I can almost guaranteed that when you see that within young people, and adults as well, they’re probably not going to offend again. That sticks.”

“Shelly and I always celebrate after a file,” Horne said. “We do have a good success rate, and we don’t have many ‘repeaters’.... I think there’s good in all of us, especially kids – you’ve just sometimes got to find it.”

Horne previously served as the friendship centre’s youth worker, before moving into her current roles, and she has had a lot of experience with finding diamonds within the most resistant of rocks – the kids many people would give up on.

“One of the models that I’ve always had with the kids here is I would never say anything to you or call you anything that I wouldn’t (say) to my own children,” Horne said. “Sometimes you’ve got to yell at them, because they are out of control, but I can yell at any kid here and they’d still have respect for me.”

Horne also draws respect for her ability to get to the root of a problem, and then devise a creative solution. For example, when one of her teenage clients repeatedly failed to show up to do his community service hours, she brought him and his

grandmother in for a meeting. She discovered that the boy was staying up all night watching movies and playing video games, and advised the grandmother to turn the power off for the boy’s devices, since she was the one paying the power bill.

“Next thing you know, that kid was in here, and he was doing his community service, he’s attending school,” Horne said. “The kid himself has come back to see me,

His goal to have one person to supervise people doing service hours, and another to serve as a job skills coach, with hours spent in the classroom counting toward clients’ service hours. Ministry of Justice staff have approved this approach with young offenders, and is considering it for adult offenders.

“A lot of them don’t have very good job skills, and (they have) poor work ethics,” Donison said, explaining that this problem has left Horne with few options for placing her clients. This way, “they’ll have supervision, and a coach that will help them stay focused and learn essential job skills.”

The centre also has a full-time Aboriginal youth employment development co-ordinator, who helps young adults find jobs.

Through the CCAY program, the friendship centre offered educational workshops for youth, on topics such as bullying and gangs, as well as instruction on local Aboriginal languages. While funding issues have put a temporary halt to the workshops, the education continues.

“We try to teach the kids to respect each other, respect their space, and to love each other, really just to be sensitive to each other’s needs,” Donison said.

Nourishing souls

While Donison is a Christian, he is also sensitive to the beliefs and practices of others, especially Native spirituality.

“There is spiritual diversi-

provide information about people who conduct sweats, while Christians may also be directed toward local church services or group Bible studies.

“There’s a lot of agencies in the Fort that provide traditional spiritual supports, and we’ll refer them to those supports, and we have volunteers that provide some spiritual programming,” Donison said.

“Many First Nations Christians don’t belong to a specific denomination, so First Nations ministers often provide their own support to their own people.”

For example, Kinnon co-leads an evening Bible study at the centre once a week, taking turns with one of her sisters. One of the reasons she moved back to the Fort Qu’Appelle area after teaching in Alberta for many years was to attend the local Full Gospel Indian Bible School.

“I wanted to learn about the Bible, and I wanted to teach it,” said Kinnon. She also prays before each of the suppers she serves on week-nights, believing that this way, she can feed people spiritually as well as physically.

The friendship centre’s board is also working on establishing a Christian-based halfway house, and have support from federal correctional staff.

“There are many (inmates) in the system that believe in Jesus Christ for their spiritual support, but there are no halfway houses for Aboriginal people that have a Christian emphasis,” Donison explained.

Whether that project goes



Elder Brenda Kinnon sees the suppers she prepares as a way of nourishing both bodies and souls.

(and said) ‘Thank you, Debbie, for giving me that push.’”

Right now, the friendship centre simply matches up their fine option and CSO clients with non-profits or individuals needing work done, but Donison’s hope is to expand the program even further, providing funding can be found.

ty, and that’s really what we recognize... and you can’t separate spirituality from culture, so we provide spiritual supports based on the belief of the individuals, or links to those spiritual supports in the community,” Donison said.

So, for those who seeking to follow traditional Native practices, the staff will

ahead or not, Donison is grateful that the friendship centre is already meeting so many needs for the people they serve.

“The staff here just feel blessed to be alive, and to be in a position to help. We don’t turn off a certain time,” he said. “We get strength from Almighty God the Creator, and we just keep going on.”



YORKTON

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Filling gaps in Yorkton

The Yorkton Friendship Centre is all about fixing the leaks.

This year, the centre will be partnering with two local, Aboriginal-focused training schools – the Gabriel Dumont Institute and the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technology – on a carpentry program. Once they complete their initial training, the students will embark on their main practical project: fixing the friendship centre's leaky roof.

After close to four years of buckets, tarps and mops, YFC director Darlene Langan is eagerly awaiting the students' arrival. But in the meantime, Langan and family worker Vicky Wapemoose are working hard to plug some even bigger "leaks" – problems like child hunger, a lack of clothing or furniture, and housing shortages.

Through another community partnership, the centre planned to offer lunches to neighbourhood kids, filling a summertime gap.

"The schools are shut down and the kids have got nowhere to go for lunch. They're not guaranteed a good, healthy lunch – or breakfast, or

"If she can make these kids feel that good, that safe, that they'd come to her home when they need help... she's obviously doing something right."

- Darlene Langan

supper, or anything," Langan said. "We've seen some of our youth digging in garbage bins by McDonald's – they're trying to get food."

After their youth program was shut down at the end of March, due to funding cuts, many of the YFC's regulars were left adrift, and one of the workers even had kids showing up at her house, hoping for a kind word and a bite to eat. Langan, who happened to be visiting her former employee at the time, was struck by the bond between this worker and the children.

"I was thinking, if she can make these kids feel that good, that safe, that they'd come to her home when they need help... obviously she's doing something right," Langan said.

While the program was running, the friendship centre was a place for children and teens to hang out with friends, learn about their

own (or their friends') Aboriginal heritage, get some exercise, and gain a sense of both security and belonging.

Langan shared the story of a girl who, while attending the local fair, was conned into getting into an older man's car. The girl managed to get out of the car and run away from her abductor, and the man was arrested and charged, but the girl went through a lot of trauma, and she got the support she needed at the friendship centre.

"When she was here at the centre, it was where she was safe," Langan said. "She knew nothing like that was going to happen (again). She was in a safe place."

The centre's clothing and furniture "bank" receives bags and boxes of donated items, which are offered free of charge to anyone. Items are spread out on tables, and after a month or so, anything left over is taken to the local thrift stores. Winter jackets and boots are popular, as are both kids' and adults' clothing, but furniture is always the first thing to go, Langan said.

Local businesses will call the friendship centre when they are replacing furnishings, and donations such as used televisions, bedspreads, blankets and pillows from hotel guest rooms – are snapped up quickly.

"A lot of the people that we work with are below the poverty line, so they can't afford this kind of stuff," Langan said. "They (businesses) call us – 'we have this, would you like it?' – and of course we'll say 'yes!' But then we're scampering, trying to get people with trucks, because it's up to us to pick it up. We don't want to lose out on this (offer of goods), because we know the people in the community could really use them. ... The words spreads really quickly, and we have tons of people coming in and grabbing this stuff up."

As with all of Saskatchewan's friendship centres, the YFC is closely tied in with the local Aboriginal population. While the cost of operating a large building – particularly one with a leaky roof – has



Director Darlene Langan and family worker Vicky Wapemoose discuss one of the friendship centre's initiatives for meeting social needs in the city of Yorkton.

been a financial strain, Langan's board has opted to keep their building because it is used so regularly by Aboriginal families holding traditional wakes and funerals.

"There's just nowhere else in town... where they can sit up all night, 24/7," Langan said. "There's got to be somebody in the building at all times (during a wake), and with the First Nations, they have a fire going outside... and that's something we allow here."

While rent is charged for events such as baby showers, weddings and birthday parties, or for training institutions using the space to teach classes, families can use the friendship centre free of charge for wakes and funerals. The centre even halts their usual programs when the building is being used for one of those purposes.

"Funerals do have number one priority here at the centre, simply because people have nowhere else to go," Langan said.

"They (staff) just pick up the slack on other days... We've never had a problem with any of the programs (in regards to) closing the door for two or three days to allow people to come in here and grieve."

The YFC's main hall is also used to host community events organized by the friendship centre staff, including weekly lunches to raise funds for building repairs, Halloween and Christmas parties, winter carnivals, Thanksgiving sup-

pers, and special events for seniors.

A room at the back has been set up as a free legal clinic, where every other Thursday, lawyers from a charitable group called Pro Bono Law Saskatchewan volunteer their services in areas such as labour and employment, landlord/tenant dis-

er of a Curves gym franchise. The only cost is an occasional donation to the loonie jar, which helps pay for the bottled water available in the workout room.

YFC also serves as a resource and referral centre, particularly for the Aboriginal population, but really for anyone who needs informa-



Elders from Yorkton meet with a facilitator from AFCS to explore ways that their voices can be heard on the provincial level. The leaky roof fortunately did not cause problems during the forum.

putes, real estate, wills and estates, injury and insurance law.

"They won't go to court for you, but they help you. We have all our appointments used up," said family worker Vicky Wapemoose.

"There's people that fall between the cracks. They make just a little bit too much (income) to go through legal aid, and they don't make enough to afford a (private) lawyer. So that's where pro bono steps in."

Another room in the back offers women a place to work out, using fitness equipment donated by the former own-

tion or a helping hand.

The staff will help clients book appointments to see a counsellor or get into addictions treatment. They will do someone's income taxes (Wapemoose is one of only three volunteer tax preparers in Saskatchewan who will do the paperwork year-round), help with government forms and other paperwork, attend legal hearings or parent/teacher meetings as a support person, or even pray for someone, if asked to do so.

"If I can help them in any way, I'm there for them," Wapemoose said.

With the funding challenges facing the friendship centre, Wapemoose and Langan are the only staff currently working, so they are picking up extra duties such as running the fine option program, answering phones, and doing the accounting.

However, even when the centre is fully staffed, “we all help each other. We don’t stick to our job description – we’re more than willing to fill in for somebody,” Wapemoose said. “We don’t consider ourselves co-workers any more, we’re family.”

That willingness to go beyond the job description applies to the help offered to clients, as well. Both Langan and Wapemoose feel the biggest problem facing their clients is the lack of housing that is both safe and affordable. A business group has purchased many of the low-cost apartment buildings in Yorkton, and the YFC staff have heard reports of mold, pest infestations, and renters going without water or heat for up to three weeks in winter, from clients who can not afford to rent anywhere else.

When clients run into difficulties with housing – such as one man who was threatened with eviction, after the landlord learned he had lodged a complaint with the rentalsman – Wapemoose will do what she can to help, from making phone calls to attending hearings with clients.

“You have rights as a renter... but people are scared, and the sad part is, I can see why they’re scared, because if they get booted out of there, where do you go?” Wapemoose said.

“A lot of our people have a lot of stumbling blocks on the way,” she added, “and if I can’t personally help them, I will lead them in the right direction, and I will go with them if need be, and we will get help.”

One Friday, a young community college student with an infant and a toddler came to Wapemoose’s door, asking for help, because she had had a dispute with the person she was paying for room and board, and had been kicked out. After phoning Social Services and being told they



Supporting one another is a major focus at the Yorkton Friendship Centre. These kids enjoyed some summer fun through one of the friendship centre’s youth initiatives.

could not help, Wapemoose took the woman and her children to the ministry’s office, and insisted on seeing an emergency worker.

After a lengthy wait, during which several healthy-looking 20-something men came and picked up welfare cheques, Wapemoose informed the startled clerk that she was not leaving the building until Social Services provided emergency help for her client, even if she had to stage a “sit-in” and call the media.

Left: A youth works on a traditional beading project, during one of the friendship centre’s Cultural Connections for Aboriginal Youth (CCAY) programs. The centre has had to shut down its youth programs this year, due to a lack of funding. Through CCAY, Yorkton area youth learned about Aboriginal cultural traditions, including crafts, snaring, berry-picking, sucker fishing and mud-and-straw wall plastering.

Right: An excited child sports a headdress on-board the centre’s parade float.

She continued to press the matter with both the emergency worker and the worker’s supervisor, challenging them on issuing welfare to



employable men while leaving a paid-up renter homeless.

Eventually, the ministry agreed to put the family up for a weekend at a motel, and provided financial help until the end of the month, by

which point the woman had found a new place to live.

“If I have to go beyond the call of duty, I will, because I don’t like it when people are (bureaucratic) like that. If they need the help, they need the help,” Wapemoose said.

“I will go the extra mile if I have to, so that they know there’s somebody there, that’s going to give them the support and the guidance.”

Despite the financial challenges her centre has faced over the last few years, Langan is determined to keep the doors open.

“Where would some of these people go, what would they do, without the friendship centres? I don’t know,” Langan said.

“There’s been so many times I’ve just wanted to throw my hands up and say, ‘I’ve had enough,’ but still I don’t. ... When you see some of the people we’ve helped and how thankful they are, it just makes you want to keep going on,” Langan added.

“We are really making a difference in people’s lives, and that’s the most important thing.”



A student from the Gabriel Dumont Institute’s General Equivalency Degree program reviews material with his instructor, during an exam prep session. The friendship centre rents out space to and also runs programs in conjunction with local colleges.



Two women test out their nail-pounding skills during the friendship centre’s winter carnival. There will be a lot of construction-related skill development happening at the centre this summer, as the roof repairs get underway.



Staff and board members from Saskatchewan's 11 friendship centres and the AFCS gathered at the Saskatoon Indian & Metis Friendship Centre for our 2014 annual general meeting.

GREETINGS FROM OUR PARTNERS

Government of Canada

As Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, I am proud that our Government continues to make it a priority to find innovative ways to support urban Aboriginal people through the Government of Canada's improved Urban Aboriginal Strategy.

Friendship centres offer valuable services to First Nation and Métis people in Saskatchewan, and across Canada. The centres serve as cultural centres, offering culture-based programs and services to a growing urban Aboriginal population across Canada.

Saskatchewan's friendship centres are making a difference by supporting Aboriginal youths, elders, families and individuals living in urban areas across the province. I thank the program staff, supporters and administrators for their important contributions to these vital organizations.

Friendship centres have consistently been an important component of the Gov-

ernment of Canada's Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS), a comprehensive approach dedicated to helping urban Aboriginal people.

Earlier this year, I announced new improvements to the Strategy, including the consolidation of four programs into two with the National Association of Friendship Centre (NAFC) supporting the delivery of the programs.

The new UAS approach was developed following a series of engagement sessions over the past year, where we heard clearly that friendship Centres are well placed to do the important work of encouraging partnerships and collaboration to help increase the participation of urban Aboriginal people in the economy.

Improvements to the UAS will also focus on collaboration with the National Association of Friendship Centres to streamline support and reduce administrative burdens. These savings will be reinvested to support community projects, initiatives and programs dedicated to increasing the participation of urban Aboriginal peoples in Canada's economy.

I am proud to continue to support Sas-

katchewan's friendship centre movement, and encourage you to take advantage of the numerous services available to you in your community.

*Sincerely,
Bernard Valcourt,
Minister of Aboriginal
Affairs and Northern
Development*



Government of Saskatchewan

I am pleased to have the opportunity to participate in this publication and thank the Aboriginal Friendship Centres of Saskatchewan for the valuable services they provide.

The many programs delivered by the friendship centres, including Kids First, Aboriginal Headstart

program, prenatal nutrition classes and the young parenting programming, help to

build stronger families and communities and improve the quality of life for Aboriginal people across our province.

The Government of Saskatchewan was pleased to partner with the Aboriginal Friendship Centres of Saskatchewan in the delivery of the first annual Aboriginal Youth Leadership Capacity Building Symposium, earlier this year. The 17 Aboriginal youths who participated in the symposium

have gained leadership skills that will serve them well in their future careers.

On behalf of Premier Brad Wall and the Government of Saskatchewan, I would like to congratulate the Aboriginal Friendship Centres of Saskatchewan for the important work they do every day.

*Jim Reiter
Minister of Government
Relations and Minister
Responsible for First
Nations, Metis and
Northern Affairs*



A friendship centre lifer

Pay attention to that little boy clinging to his mother's hand, as they walk through the door of your friendship centre – one day, he may be president of your provincial organization.

Four decades ago, George Sayese first set foot in the Prince Albert Indian & Metis Friendship Centre. Today, he is a husband, a father of three adult children, and the three-time president of the Aboriginal Friendship Centres of Saskatchewan.

As a tot, Sayese saw the friendship centre as a place to play. His mother was a widow on social assistance, and for her, the centre provided a place to receive practical help, and, on occasion, free childcare.

"It gave my mom a break, because she had nine kids," Sayese said. "We'd do little arts and crafts, or learn to sing powwow."

Sayese's most vivid memory is of the boxing program, which he joined along with his cousin Grant Carriere. "He'd never want to spar one-on-one, but then every so often, he'd punch me in the face with a boxing glove. We were on the Exhibition float, and he did that, and I floored him!... Good times," he laughed.



The kids would go on outings, such as attending powwows at the nearby Muskoday reserve, picking sweetgrass, roasting hot dogs, or going tobogganing. "We'd show up with a crazy carpet or a piece of plastic of some sort, and away you go."

As a teenager, Sayese took a six-week job readiness course at the friendship centre. "It was quite a commitment for a young guy... so I was quite proud (to complete it)," he said. He also remembers bike marathons, floor hockey, and a trip through the Rocky Mountains.

Sayese eventually moved away for three years, but when he and his girlfriend Stephanie – now his wife of 20 years – moved back to Prince Albert, he got a job back at the friendship centre, working in maintenance.

"I had a very understanding boss. He took me under his wing, because I showed him that... I'm not a lazy guy, I'm willing to learn, I want to learn," Sayese said. "He got me to go to upgrading, so I could get my Grade 12."

The friendship centre then paid for Sayese to attend SIAT, where he earned certificates in carpentry and hot air boiler and furnace operation. "It did benefit them, but it did (also) benefit me, later on," Sayese said, noting that these skills earned him his current job with P.A. Community Housing.

During his years as a friendship centre employee, Sayese gained a deeper understanding and appreciation for Aboriginal culture – both his own Metis heritage and that of his First Nations relatives and friends.

"I was taught a lot of what I know now (about being Aboriginal) through working here.... I was given the opportunity to re-find my culture," Sayese said. "We had powwow singing, we had regalia-making, we had powwow teachings, medicine wheel culture – the meaning of the eagle feathers. Basically, it was just about a powwow culture here."

In the wake of some conflict, Sayese left his job at the friendship centre in 1997. However, he kept in touch with former colleagues, and he was eventually approached about joining the centre's board of directors.

After some time, his board asked him to go to the AFCS annual general meeting, and he was elected to the provincial board. After some shake-up within the organization – including a period under third-party management – the organization got itself back on solid footing.

"(The new board) really helped bring us out of trouble, and brought us back to some respectability," Sayese said. "They helped bring this organization from being looked down upon by the government, to now we are partnering with the government. We have organizations throughout Saskatchewan that are phoning us now to partner."

Over his years with the friendship centres, Sayese has had many mentors. A stand-out is his late sister Bernice, a tireless community leader and advocate for youth in Prince Albert.

"She always had a big heart," Sayese said. "The question she'd always pose to me (in tough times) was, 'Well, what can we do about this?'"

"When I was just a little baby on the board of directors here, not really knowing what I got myself into, we sat many a night at her table, and we talked things through. She taught me how to become an effective board member."

SASKATCHEWAN'S FRIENDSHIP CENTRE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS - 2014 EDITION

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