

Winter 2023

NEWSLETTER



**“THEY’RE ALL
IMPORTANT”**

“This is affordable housing for our knowledge keepers and individuals who can help us maintain our language. These seniors probably went through the most trauma and it’s important to give back to them.”

(403) 270-7379

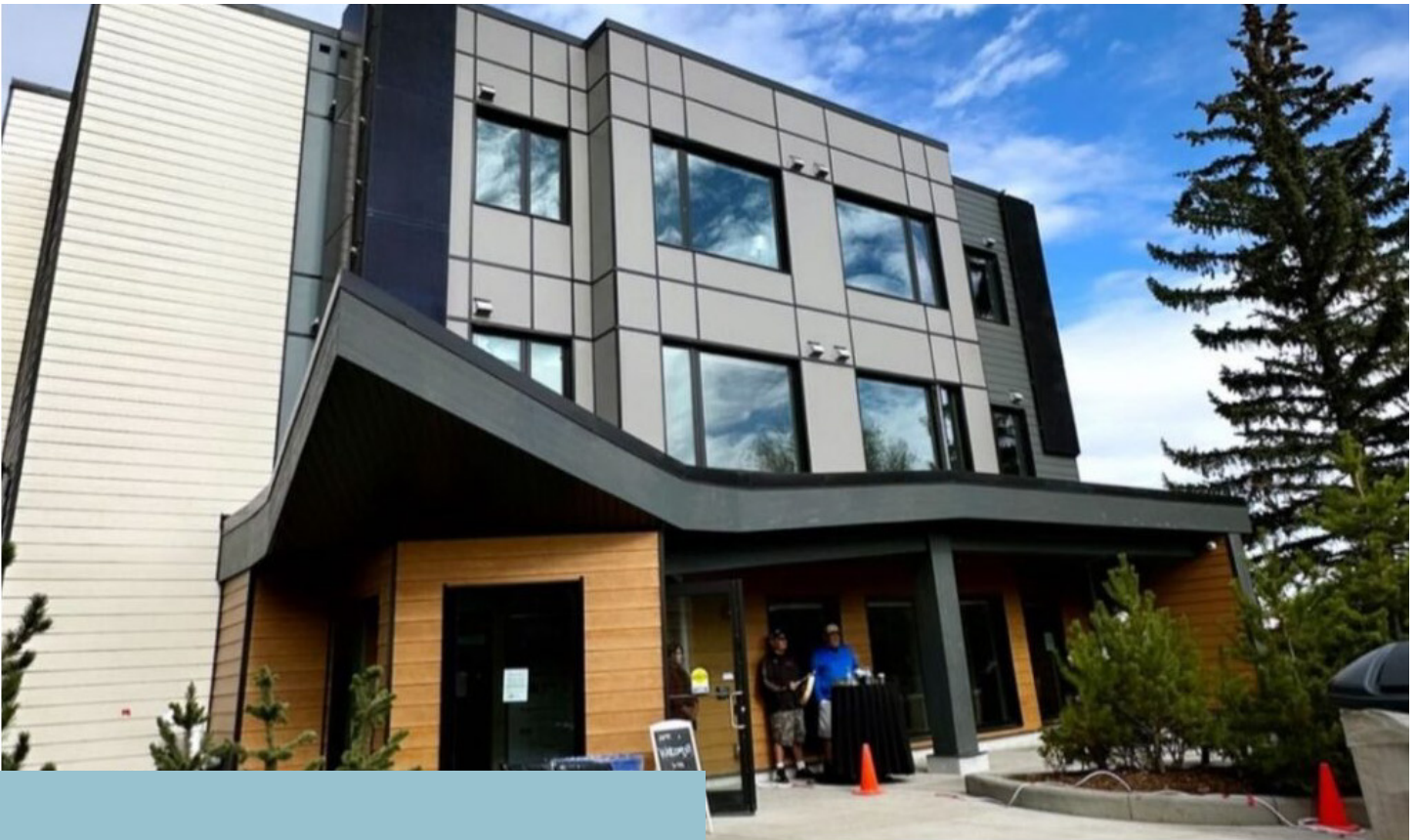
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**ABORIGINAL
FRIENDSHIP
CENTRE OF CALGARY**
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Urban Indigenous Seniors Facility

A SAFE SPACE

Elders' Lodge Grand Opening

The Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary (AFCC) welcomed future residents and guests to the grand opening of its new Urban Indigenous Seniors Facility October 2, 2023. The six-million-dollar building, in the Highland Park neighbourhood of northwest Calgary, features 12 affordable housing units and is a welcoming place for seniors to socially connect and access support that will improve their lives.

"This will not just be a building, but a safe space for Indigenous seniors who are 'vulnerable' or 'at-risk' and have likely experienced discrimination, abuse, exclusion, and hardship. The facility will provide cultural gathering spaces for residents to practice land-based teachings, hold ceremonies, and promote healing."

Shane Gauthier, AFCC CEO



Funders and partners came together in a shared vision to create this one-of-a-kind best practice model for other jurisdictions. Funding was provided by the Government of Alberta, Calgary Homeless Foundation, Calgary Foundation, and Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation. The City of Calgary provided integral support for the project by selling land below market value through their non-market land sale program.

Blackfoot Elder Jackie Bromley describes the Elders' Lodge as "a safe space to live for Elders to build communication, explore language and reconnect with culture."

AFCC describes the facility as a legacy project and an example of collaboration and commitment between partners to support Indigenous led housing projects. The Elders lodge for Indigenous seniors is the first of its kind in Calgary.

Calgary Mayor Jyoti Gondek attended the grand opening



"Ensuring that Elders can age with dignity and grace while remaining connected to their cultural roots is a milestone in our journey towards a more harmonious and inclusive Calgary."

Jyoti Gondek, Calgary Mayor

All Friends Place

GRAND OPENING



Friends and partners came out in force for the grand opening

Indigenous seniors are enjoying a safe place to connect with others, participate in ceremony, and enjoy some homestyle cooking. The Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary opened "All Friends Place", or "Kanakaa'tsinom" in Blackfoot, earlier this year at 4630 16th avenue NW in Calgary.

The beautiful and colourful drop-in centre is decorated with bright colours and Indigenous artwork. It has a ceremonial room, meeting space, and a community kitchen for seniors coming together in friendship.

Friends and partners came out in force for the grand opening including Inuk artist and President of the Arctic Rose Foundation, Susan Aglukark. Susan called it a privilege to be celebrating a safe space where Elders can drop-in. Métis fiddler Alex Kustoruk entertained those in attendance while a few guests practiced their jigging.

Other dignitaries included Alberta's Lieutenant Governor, Salma Lakhani, Calgary Mayor Joyti Gondek, Amber Spence from the Board of the Calgary Homeless Foundation and Eva Frieson, CEO and President of the Calgary Foundation. Elders Reg and Rose Crowshoe provided prayers for the new space.

Kanakaa'tsinom came about because Elders advised the friendship centre they needed a safe space to gather. AFCC continues to take direction from the Elders regarding their needs and how AFCC can best support Indigenous seniors.

"Everything changes when you are no longer a guest and it's your space. This is their space, their home and we are guests in it."

*Eugene Wilk, Program Manager
CJWE'S Trent Agecutay*

For more information on upcoming events, contact the Elder's Drop-in Centre Kanakaa'tsinom "All Friends Place" at 403-270-7379



ART SMITH AWARD

for Project of the Year

Ceremony of Art Smith Award

The Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary (AFCC) is thrilled to announce that our Elders' Lodge project has been honored with the Art Smith Award for Project of the Year. AFCC's Elders' Lodge stood out among the nominees, showcasing the impactful work undertaken to make a positive difference in the lives of Calgary's most vulnerable populations.

AFCC's CEO, Shane Gauthier, along with Terran Shepard and Krista White, proudly accepted the Art Smith Award on behalf of the AFCC Board and staff. The recognition is a testament to the dedication, compassion, and innovation that AFCC brings to the forefront in addressing the critical issue of homelessness.



Elders' Lodge project which was honored with the Art Smith Award

This prestigious accolade, presented by the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF), recognizes outstanding initiatives and front-line efforts in providing housing with support to individuals at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Calgary.

The Art Smith Awards, named after the CHF founder, aim to celebrate, and commend the remarkable contributions of organizations and individuals dedicated to addressing homelessness in our community.

The Elders' Lodge project, which embodies AFCC's commitment to providing meaningful support to the community, has not only transformed lives but has also garnered the attention and appreciation of the broader community.

As we celebrate this remarkable achievement, AFCC remains dedicated to our mission of fostering friendship, understanding, and support within the community. We look forward to continuing our collaborative efforts to create positive change and improve the well-being of those we serve.

**The award serves
as a symbol of the
collective efforts
made by AFCC and
its partners to
create positive
change.**

Early Childhood Experiences and

THE DEVELOPING BRAIN

Brains are built based on our experiences and children need a strong brain foundation to deal with the many challenges they will face through their lives. Positive childhood interactions build the brain architecture and make us more resilient in our adult years. AFCC's "Honoring the Bonds" program takes on the importance of the developing brain through traditional parenting practices and integrating Western approaches to early childhood development.

The Alberta Family Wellness Initiative, in partnership with the Harvard Centre on the Developing Child and the Frameworks Institute developed the Brain Story, which explains the science behind how our brains are built. Caregivers who consistently interact with babies through song, touch, storytelling, eye contact, and games like peekaboo contribute to the development of healthy building blocks in a young child's brain.

"Honoring the Bonds" program facilitator Mayra Majore says storytelling is a key element through which oral traditions, values and spiritual beliefs are passed creating a bond between caregivers and children and community. "Stories are simple, creative, and engaging creating a sacred time between the caregiver and the children," says Mayra. "The caregiver has the full attention of the child and is opening up conversations to learn about Indigenous values and personal reflection and this way, caregivers and children honour their bonds."

Stress, on the other hand, can have a negative impact on the developing brain. The kind of stress the scientists are referring to is toxic stress. Children who are exposed to abuse, neglect, abandonment, and parental addictions, and have no other caregivers who can support them, experience disruption in the development of their brain. This can lead to developmental issues, health problems, addiction and difficulty developing parenting skills.

For example, in "Honoring the Bonds" different Elders share their experiences at residential schools and how those traumatic experiences affected the way they parented and the way they were parented. These sessions are powerful and sad at the same time. Parents in the program understand why they may not have received affection they needed growing up and how the trauma has been passed on generation after generation.

"Honoring the Bonds" aims to break the cycle of trauma through education and development and by working with families to build nurturing relationships. For more information on the program contact Mayra at mmajore@afccalgary.org.



Cultural teachings of AFCC's Honouring Life Program

Building Families

HONOURING LIFE

Indigenous youth are building healthy relationships and creating family as they immerse themselves in the cultural teachings of AFCC's Honouring Life Program funded by Alberta Health Services. The program, led by coordinators Brett Bairstow and Tawny Zerkee, is open to youth in grades seven through grade 12 and participation is growing.

Tawny and Brett say they run the program in circles where they smudge and check in with the students according to the medicine wheel. "We start by building relationships with the kids," says Brett. "We're the new people that will be consistent in their lives."

He notes kids are eager to get involved, but a lot of the youth didn't grow up with traditional ceremony and culture. They aren't sure where they fit in and can be

hesitant. Other students are more proactive in terms of connecting to culture outside the program. Ultimately Brett and Tawny want to create a space of belonging and community.

The students learn about the seven sacred teachings and in the summer the program focuses on land-based teachings. Elders Erne Poundmaker and Rod Hunter lead the teachings.

Brett describes a camping trip this summer where Elder Rod shared teachings about the resiliency of buffalo and how they weather the storm and protect their young. Following the teaching the group walked to a clearing where one of the teachers, with roots in the theatre, had arranged for paper mache buffalo heads, fully lit up, to dance in the field.



"We're working with six schools right now. Teachers move to other schools and encourage administration to start a program in their new school."

Tawny Zerkee, Program Coordinator



"It's word of mouth. The teachers we work with are dedicated and committed to having this type of programming in their school."

Brett Bairstow, Program Coordinator

“Some of the kids got emotional, in a good way. It was raining, and we still stayed out there for an hour and a half.”

Brett Bairstow, Program Coordinator

Connecting to culture is helping the youth navigate through challenges of mental health, addiction, isolation, and unhealthy relationships. Tawny says, “the program provides them with a safe space to build healthy relationships.” She says the youth build a family with other like-minded teens, their teachers, and the coordinators.

Brett says, “when they’re talking with elders, they’re recognizing parts of themselves and getting connected to their culture is helping them build their self-esteem and their autonomy.”

Brett says the program brings hope for the future as the students take those teachings into their own hands. He says the youth will continue to learn on their life journey and pass teachings down to their own children rekindling the importance of culture.



Board President Kirk Poitras

GIVING BACK

A downturn in the Alberta economy 13 years ago found Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary (AFCC) Board President Kirk Poitras with some time on his hands and a desire to do more for his community. While volunteering with the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3, the chemical engineer was asked to apply for a board position at AFCC.

Born in northern California, Kirk has roots in Chippewa, Ojibway territory in North Dakota and Calgary, where his mom is from. His father is from Winnipeg and Kirk identifies as Métis.

Kirk says it's tough to single out any one program or service AFCC delivers. "They're all important," he says. "Our people come to Calgary for a better life, but once they're here they feel they don't fit in and now they are disconnected from their culture. They need a safe place to come to."

He spoke about the recent opening of the AFCC operated Elders lodge in northwest Calgary. "This is affordable housing for our knowledge keepers and individuals who can help us maintain our language," he says. "These seniors probably went through the most trauma and it's important to give back to them."

Kirk praises the work of Chief Executive Officer, Shane Gauthier and the AFCC team. "Shane and the staff are so dedicated," he says. "They work hard because they love it and they're doing good things for urban Indigenous people every day."

Kirk says AFCC is proactive and great at developing partnerships citing the Indigenous Urban Immunization Clinic as an example. The clinic saw AFCC, Siksika Health Services and OKAKI to



"I thought I live in an urban area, and I'd love to get down to the grassroots and do what I can to support urban Indigenous people,"

Kirk Poitras, AFCC Board President, President & CEO of Apeiron Resources in Calgary

deliver the first immunization clinic specifically for urban Indigenous people in Canada.

As with all non-profits, funding is always a concern. That's why Kirk says the board and Shane are initiating projects that will make them less reliant on government funding. "Getting into affordable housing creates revenue for AFCC that we can use to create foundational building blocks for the organization," he says.

The vision doesn't stop there. Kirk says they want to create a stable funding model that can be replicated in other communities. "It's not just about us," he says. "Once we have those foundations in place, we need to share it."

Kirk Poitras is also President and CEO of Apeiron Resources in Calgary.

“We have success stories. A husband and wife were able to find housing and they came back and gave me a beautiful ribbon skirt and moss bags for my grandchildren.”

Dione Buffalo, Staff Member

She says it's still rewarding when asked why she does it.

Winter is Here

**DONATIONS
ARE NEEDED**

Every day, the staff on the Outreach team at the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary search through their limited donations to try and support their most vulnerable community members. Dione Buffalo and two other dedicated staff members work with the rough sleepers in Calgary, those who choose to live outside because they don't feel safe in the shelters.

Dione says the need has never been greater. “We are capped at serving 80 food hampers per day, because our funding needs to last,” she says. “We used to be able to provide 90 to 150 food hampers per day, but we don't have the funding or the donations to provide that level of support anymore. Food Security is an emergent need across the sector”.

Agencies like AFCC were well supported during the darkest days of COVID with governments loosening the purse strings to help people get through the crisis, but those days are over. The housing crisis, a toxic drug supply and an influx of newcomers to Calgary has increased the need and stretched the ability of staff to help.

Dione says the team focuses on basic needs like clothing, shoes, outerwear, underwear, socks, feminine hygiene products and food when it's available. Right now, AFCC is in dire need of warm clothing, winter coats, and boots. If anyone has camping gear to donate, they'll happily accept that too, along with monetary donations and gift cards.

The team experiences heart break every day. “A community member came in yesterday looking for shoes,” says Dione. “He had no shoes on and had spent the night outside.” They're also starting to see families who are homeless and others who may still have jobs but are living out of their vehicles.

“I connect with these people, and we develop relationships,” Dione says. “Sometimes they come to me when they're having a bad day just to talk when emotions around being homeless and destitute become too much.”

All donations are welcome. Please contact Martin 587-575-2028 if you can help.



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