



## *Roots and Wings: The Fort Smith Youth Centre*

### *Introduction*

Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories is a town of 2,500 people, about 60 percent of whom are of aboriginal descent. In 1998, community members were concerned that although the town had a recreation centre, young people did not seem to make good use of the facility and take care of its ‘teen room.’

At a community meeting in October 1998, it became clear that many teenagers did not feel welcome in the recreation centre. Youth who were having problems at home felt that they had nowhere to go. It was evident that teenagers, in particular, needed a place that they could call their own, where their voices would be heard.

Gary Adkins of the Fort Smith Métis Council spearheaded a proposal to the National Crime

Prevention Centre for funding to establish a youth centre where all teenagers would feel welcome. The Town of Fort Smith and Salt River First Nations #195 signed on as partners in the proposal, which was called Roots and Wings to emphasize how community and cultural roots are vital to help young people ‘find their wings.’

The proposal was accepted, and the Métis Council received \$50,000 on behalf of the partners to hire a coordinator and establish the youth centre. The Town of Fort Smith had planned to contribute a building for the centre. The building required renovations and the idea was that youth would be hired to do some of the work. However, it soon became obvious that the building needed much more extensive renovations than could be paid for with the available funding. The search began for another building.

The managers of Uncle Gabe’s Friendship Centre solved the dilemma by offering to donate space in the friendship centre. For a youth centre, the location was ideal – right across the street from the local high school. A coordinator, Edna Hamilton, was hired and the Fort Smith Youth Centre officially opened in May 1999.

*The Caledon Institute is collaborating with the National Crime Prevention Centre’s Community Mobilization Program to create the Crime Prevention series. The goal of this series is to document initiatives that build safe communities. The series seeks to enhance public awareness of and support for community-based partnerships on crime prevention through social development.*

*For youth, by youth*

At the core of the Roots and Wings concept is the involvement of youth in decision-making for the centre and its programs. As the original proposal for the centre noted: “Many youth feel they are not responsible for their actions and try to place blame elsewhere. If youth have an active role in making the decisions, they will have to be responsible for their outcome.”

Building this involvement and sense of responsibility takes time, but it lays a strong foundation for the future. Throughout the summer of 1999, coordinator Edna Hamilton worked to build awareness of the centre. She was assisted by several young people who were hired with summer employment funding donated by Uncle Gabe’s Friendship Centre. A part-time counsellor was hired with funding from Human Resources Development Canada.

Edna also began working to form a board of directors for the centre that would include youth representatives from each of the major partner organizations (the Métis Council, the Town of Fort Smith and the Salt River First Nations). This board is not yet complete, but by encouraging young people who come to the centre, and making presentations in local schools, Edna hopes to get more young people interested in taking a leadership role in the centre. “I want to hear their voice,” she maintains. “I don’t want to be pushing things down their throats.”

*A safe place*

During the summer of 1999, the student workers sought donations of furniture and equipment for the youth centre and the teen room of the recreation centre. The community responded generously and both locations are now comfortable and welcoming.



*Chaperone Julie Beaver, facilitator Travis Dugas in traditional regalia, and Edna Hamilton at the Hay River youth conference.*

Gradually, the youth of Fort Smith have been coming to their centre. On average, about 15 young people visit the centre each day. They do homework, play basketball in the gym of Uncle Gabe’s Friendship Centre, socialize or talk with the coordinator about things that are bothering them. The centre also organizes social events such as teen dances.

Many of the same young people visit the centre regularly. “Most of the kids who come to the centre are the ones that the community looked down on,” says Edna. “Now they have somewhere to go. I think they really feel comfortable here, so they’re not going out and doing what they were.”

In keeping with the emphasis on responsibility and initiative, the young people are encouraged to volunteer to look after the youth centre and to take care of the teen room at the recreational centre. When bake sales are planned to raise money for youth centre activities, some of the teenagers join Edna in the Friendship Centre’s kitchen and help out, learning to bake at the same time.

### *A return to values*

The partners in the youth centre envision a number of programs to promote self-worth and independence among young people and reinforce traditional aboriginal values of generosity, belonging, mastery and responsibility. The value of generosity, for example, may be taught by involving youth in making positive contributions to the community, such as assisting elders in their homes, or participating in events at the senior citizens' complex. A sense of belonging may be built by teaching cultural history and activities. Activities that challenge youth can help them see that they are capable of success.

With the aid of the summer students, Edna Hamilton started developing a roster of adult community members who would be willing to lead workshops and act as mentors for the young people. Artists, craftspeople, businesspeople and others have expressed interest in helping out.

In September, 1999, 13 youths from Fort Smith attended a two-day youth conference in Hay River. About 100 young people from the Northwest Territories attended the conference, which included intensive workshops on alcohol

and drugs, self-esteem, and childhood traumas. The youth centre received some funding from the Town of Fort Smith and the Salt River First Nations to pay for the cost of this trip, but the rest was raised through bake sales, an auction of donated crafts at the annual general meeting of Uncle Gabe's Friendship Centre, a raffle and other fundraising events, and donations from community members.

Events like these reinforce the value of helping out at the centre and participating in fundraising and other activities. Another project involved raising funds to send a young person to the annual Dream Catchers youth conference in Edmonton. Edna Hamilton told local youth that the person with the most volunteer hours logged for the centre would be the one to attend the conference. When an opportunity arises, she notes, "We're not going to hand it to them on a silver platter. We're saying, 'give something to the youth centre and you'll get something in return.'" She also hopes to encourage youth to get involved in other community activities.

Gary Adkins reiterates the emphasis on responsibility and initiative. He mentions talking with a teen who was complaining that he didn't



*The thirteen youth and three chaperones from Fort Smith who attended the youth conference in Hay River.*

like the name of the centre. “I said, ‘it’s your centre – if you don’t like something, change it! Get on the board. Don’t just sit on a bench and complain.’”

### *More to come*

A number of activities are planned for the youth centre in the future. In partnership with the RCMP, organizers hope to hold workshops for high-risk youth through the DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program. They would like to work with the Department of Education to carry out educational workshops. Edna Hamilton would like to do more workshops and activities that build self-esteem, and Gary Adkins hopes to run suicide prevention workshops. “Right now,” he notes, “we’re just trying to get the youth in.”

Through cultural programs, Roots and Wings aims to open channels of communication between aboriginal youth and elders. It is hoped that talking with elders can help young people understand and put into perspective the roots of their problems, so that they can begin to heal and make positive changes in their lives.

### *Evaluating impacts*

A strong evaluation component has been built into the youth centre project. An independent consultant will collect baseline data for the year prior to the operation of the centre, and then on a quarterly basis throughout the first year of operation. These data include statistics on youth court activity; RCMP youth crime reports and investigations; Social Service interventions involving youth; school truancy rates, dropout rates and numbers of dropouts who return to school; and participation rates of youth in various community programs. On a quarterly basis, the consultant also will survey agencies involved

with youth (e.g., schools, RCMP, Social Services, the town Recreation Department) and local businesses regarding their views of the impact of the initiative.

Quarterly reports on the youth centre’s activities and impact will be prepared for the Roots and Wings board and the National Crime Prevention Centre. Organizers hope gradually to see less truancy and negative behaviour, and more youth returning to school to complete their education.

### *An open door*

Although it is too soon to tell the extent of the centre’s impact on the youth of Fort Smith, there is no doubt that the existence of a safe, values-based place for young people is a positive force in the community. Its message is one of inclusiveness and hope, and the door is open to all. “It doesn’t matter what colour you are,” says Edna Hamilton. “If you’re aboriginal or white, whether you’re rich or poor – this centre is for you.”

*Ann Simpson*

*Ann Simpson works on the **community stories** series for the Caledon Institute.*

*For more information about the Fort Smith Youth Centre, contact Edna Hamilton at (867) 872-4648.*

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1600 Scott Street, Suite 620  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
K1Y 4N7  
phone: (613) 729-3340 fax: (613) 729-3896  
e-mail: [caledon@caledoninst.org](mailto:caledon@caledoninst.org)  
website: <http://www.caledoninst.org>