

A Success Story

Refuge La Piaule Drummondville, Quebec

A welcoming shelter

In Drummondville, La Piaule, which literally means “pad,” is more than a house with a free and informal atmosphere, as the name suggests. It is now 21 years old, like many of the young people who visit, and has become a hangout where young people are part of the action, feel welcome and can indulge in multidisciplinary art forms.

The Refuge La Piaule appeared on the Drummondville scene in 1984, following a diocesan summit on suicide among young people. It started out as a giant project with plans to include shelter, a day centre and a whole gamut of services. “We finally decided to ask the people involved what they wanted,” remembers Jean-Marie Richard, Co-ordinator of La Piaule, who has been there from the beginning. Paying close attention to the needs of 18- to 30-year-olds is what the shelter is all about, and while it has evolved and grown, it has never lost sight of its original mission of listening to young people.

At the time, young people would hang out in large groups, often in the parks, bars and public places. That’s where the people from La Piaule would approach them. “We didn’t know at the time that what we were doing was street work,” says Jean-Marie Richard. “We had space in an attic, but our real workplace was the gathering places of young people.”

A place where people can make art

But young people change and so do their needs. In the 1990s, La Piaule took a fresh look at the needs of its clients, who said they wanted a place where they could express themselves artistically. La Piaule found new premises and transformed them into studios where young people create educational comic strips and make music. The premises will eventually be expanded to include space for a street newspaper and rehearsal rooms for the musicians. “By enabling them to use their abilities, we manage to help young people picture themselves off the street,” says Jean-Marie Richard. La Piaule’s range of services was broadened in 1998 with the opening of Caf’Art, a successful café that has helped reintegrate young people into the workplace.

A top-notch multi-art centre

As we neared the new millennium, the dynamic of young people in Central Quebec changed: intravenous drugs, including heroin, appeared on the scene, and young people at risk of becoming homeless needed more than just help getting back into the job market. For La Piaule, it was again time to take stock. “That’s when the SCPI* came to our rescue and helped us buy the building that now houses our multi-art centre,” explains Mr. Richard. In addition to support from community organizations such as the Rotary Club, which helps locate donors, the \$190,000 government contribution has made it possible to buy and renovate a building across the street from La Piaule, in the downtown area. Support from local business people, especially the building’s former owner, who sold the building to La Piaule for a very fair price, and the local Canadian Tire owner, who donated \$50,000, will help pay for renovations. To carry out this ambitious project, the organization has also been able to rely on support from a team of advisors, including architects, engineers, notaries, financial advisors and construction contractors.

Today, the centre houses a gym and a space for circus arts, which was created in conjunction with Cirque du Soleil's Cirque du monde project, a computer lab, a video workshop, a small library, a theatre and a mini incubator for start-up businesses. Several of these services enable young people to earn a living.

A one-of-a-kind multi-art centre in Canada

Today, some 300 young people visit La Piaule every year. More than 20 years later, many young people rescued from the street have become facilitators, drop into the centre or visit the team. Although La Piaule has spent over 20 years working with people on the fringes of society, it is completely integrated into the local community: "Our youth are quite attached to this place. We are proud of what many of them have achieved. In many cases, we were the only people who spent any time with them; we are a part of their lives." Jean-Marie remembers a young girl from the street who managed to change her fate and become a nurse. He also remembers with emotion how proud one of his young protégés was when he came and showed him his new-born son.

Since September 2004, La Piaule has been working on Phase II of the renovations to the building it purchased in 2000. Once again, the SCPI* has provided a \$192,725 contribution, which will help with construction of a theatre. The curtain will rise for the first time in late 2005. That calls for a standing ovation!

By Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

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*SCPI: Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative