

Native Youth Centre dream closer to reality

By Heike Killian
Contributing writer

LYNDA GRAY leans over a model of a modern-looking building that will one day occupy the corner of Hastings Street and Commercial Drive. Walls of cedar, she explains, will give the proposed Native Youth Centre a warm air, and huge windows along the front will intensify the impression of a welcoming, friendly place.

"This is all glass, too," says Gray, her finger pointing to the glazed ceiling covering a long passage that runs the length of the building.

Melanie Mark, a 29-year-old member of the board of directors of the Urban Native Youth Association (UNYA), echoes Gray's enthusiasm for the project.

"We've commitment and determination, and we're going to make it happen," says Mark.

Mark and Gray have come together with UNYA's Executive Director Jerry Adams and Chris Beaton—Gray's partner in Cedar Consulting, a company that specializes in helping aboriginal communities move their development projects forward—to discuss the project they have embarked on: the construction and operation of a 65,000-square-foot facility that will house 30 different youth programs. When the facility opens in early 2008 it will be the first purpose-built aboriginal youth centre in North America.

The project had its genesis three years ago, when UNYA surveyed Native youth to determine their needs. "They wanted a place to call home and wanted it to be a one-stop shop," Gray says.

"We're the fastest growing demographic in Canada, and 50 percent of aboriginals are in the city," Mark points out. However,

many aboriginal kids live in single-parent households with an income of less than \$10,000 per year. For many, completing high school is difficult, as is avoiding involvement with criminal activity.

"A lot of it is about poverty and not having a space to be engaged," explains Mark.

UNYA want to give Native youth a place to develop and learn skills. With a carving studio, gym, library, theatre, computer lab, sweat lodge, café and facilities for child-care and second-stage housing, the

new facility will allow UNYA to expand the number of programs it runs from 16 to 30. The new centre will also give the youth a chance discover their cultural identity.

"Many young people [have to] go back home to smaller communities to access their culture," explains Beaton. "With over half the aboriginal community in urban centres it makes sense to have these resources in the urban setting as well."

The project has just launched a capital campaign to raise \$30 million for construction and equipment for the centre.

Right from the start, the federal, provincial and municipal governments came on board.

"On the advisory committee you see governments, community and youth working together," says Beaton. "All of them were there from day one and understand the vision. The provincial government committed \$1 million to the project, and the City of Vancouver is purchasing the building that we are in, [which is] valued at \$2 million."

The city's contribution brought UNYA a step closer to realizing a dream: to have the centre built on the site UNYA's office currently occupies. Mark says the location is key, since the community is one in which a



Urban Native Youth Centre Director Jerry Adams and board member Melanie Mark look over a model of the new youth centre that will one day occupy the corner of Hastings Street and Commercial Drive.

photo Dan Toulgoet

number of Natives live.

Corporations have also come on board. Petro Canada donated the empty lot beside the UNYA building, valued at \$1.2 million. Together with a third lot that UNYA has purchased, the site for the new centre will cover two-thirds of the block.

UNYA has managed to woo other corporate sponsors, including CIBC and the Bank of Montreal. Safeway is providing a venue for shoppers to add a donation to their grocery bill. Individual supporters and patrons include ex-BC Lions player James Taras and CBC's Peter Mansbridge.

"We're trying now to work with people

like VanCity so that people will be able to make donations at any branch," says Beaton.

Project members believe that the community will profit from the centre. "I think the Native Youth Centre will be good for small business in this neck of Commercial Drive," says Mark.

There is no doubt the large building of glass and wood will be an architectural landmark in the neighbourhood.

"It may seem massive now," Mark says, "but in 10 years from now, people are going to ask, 'How were we surviving without this space?'"

For more information on the project or to donate, go to www.nativeyouthcentre.ca.