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(From left:) Samantha Bradley, Clinton Mark, Conrad Mark and Maya Cowpa-Mark are looking forward to a new youth centre to be built on East Hastings.

A haven for young natives

New \$30-million centre will put their youth programs all under one roof

BY DARAH HANSEN
VANCOUVER SUN

VANCOUVER | Where most people see urban decay in the aging commercial buildings and abandoned lots stretching along the south side of the 1600-block of East Hastings, Melanie Mark sees only promise.

By 2008, this dismal space is to be transformed into a \$30-million centre to benefit Vancouver's growing young urban native population. It will provide a place to learn traditional skills — such as carving, dancing and visual arts — play basketball, access child care, or look for a job or somewhere to live.

"It will be the first of its kind in

North America," said Mark, president of the Urban Native Youth Association, the organization that launched the youth centre initiative three years ago.

"This is all about prevention and capacity building," she said.

The project was expected to take a major step forward today with an announcement by federal Minister of Western Economic Diversification Stephen Owen, B.C.'s Minister of Children and Family Development Stan Hagen and Vancouver Mayor Larry Campbell of the joint purchase of the land on which the centre will be built, and funding for the architectural planning and design phase.

Petro-Canada has also stepped up

to support the project, donating its empty lot at 1670 E. Hastings to the building site.

The centre — which will be 65,000 square feet and three storeys high — will focus all the programs currently available to Vancouver's native youth under one roof, as well as provide a host of new cultural, spiritual, educational and recreational options.

"For the urban youth, it's their dream," said Campbell in an interview Sunday. "There's a real willingness to move forward, but, right now, they don't really have a place to do that."

Said Owen: "The real logic and power of this announcement [today] is that everything will be in one loca-

tion.

"It's going to be a centre of gravity for native youth in the city."

Under the agreement, the federal government has committed \$1 million toward the land purchase, while the City of Vancouver will pay \$550,000 plus closing costs. The provincial government will contribute a further \$1 million toward the planning phase of the centre.

"Our goal for aboriginal people is that they fully share in the province's successes," said Hagen.

Currently, Vancouver is home to approximately 15,000 aboriginal people, representing a variety of bands.

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'I feel a sense of belonging'

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Increasingly, that urban community is represented by young people under 29 years old.

But life in Vancouver isn't easy for aboriginal people. According to statistics provided by the Urban Native Youth Association, 40 per cent of street kids in Vancouver are native, as are up to 60 per cent of the men and women involved in the sex trade, and more than half of native youth live in single-parent households that get by on less than \$10,000 a year.

Mark, 30, grew up in Vancouver feeling isolated from her aboriginal culture and had to endure the taunts and jeers of schoolmates.

"I used to be called a 'chug' or a 'wagon-burner' . . . It was hard to stand up and say I'm proud," she said. She was almost 20 years old before she reconnected with her culture through the Native Friendship Centre.

Today, a mom to two-year-old Maya, and a Simon Fraser University graduate with a degree in political science and sociology, she credits that connection

with much of her success.

"I feel a sense of belonging. I have a sense of pride and empowerment that I didn't have in the first two decades of my life," she said.

Mark said the youth centre is designed to reach out to the new generation of aboriginal people, encouraging leadership, respect, positiveness and mentoring in an effort to combat the devastating statistics that have long dogged the community.

"People only hear about the negative statistics of our community; our [foster] care rates, our suicide rates, our unemployment rates, our fetal-alcohol rates. . . What we're not hearing about are our successes, that we are also university graduates and leaders," she said.

The remaining funding for the completion of the centre has not yet been secured, but Owen and Hagen said they are confident it will be built by 2008. The association has been asked by the three governments to come up with a business plan, and to seek more corporate sponsorship.

Mark said she's encouraged by the recent financial backing and expects the centre to be built by 2008.

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