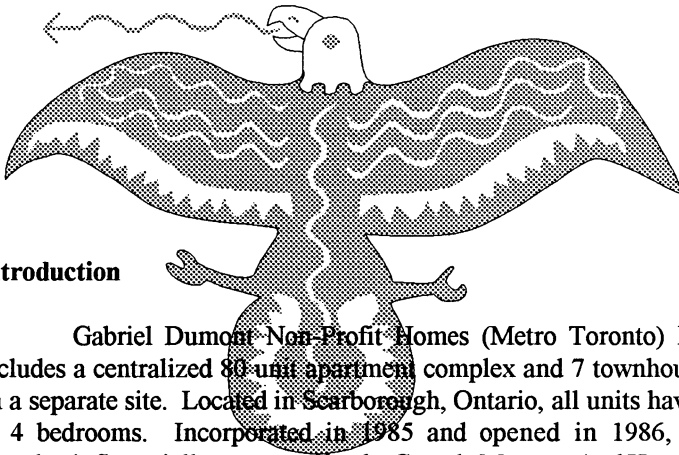


Mino-Yaa-Daa: An Urban Community-Based Approach

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Introduction

Gabriel Dumont Non-Profit Homes (Metro Toronto) Inc. includes a centralized 80-unit apartment complex and 7 townhouses on a separate site. Located in Scarborough, Ontario, all units have 3 or 4 bedrooms. Incorporated in 1985 and opened in 1986, the complex is financially sponsored by the Canada Mortgage And Housing Corporation. Geared to income housing is offered on a monthly rent-g geared-to-income basis. The majority of families in the complex are headed by single mothers.

The property is under the supervision of a Property Manager. A Tenant Counsellor is employed to assist tenants with their needs and concerns and act as a liaison between the management and tenants. This person is also responsible for the supervision of all Gabriel Dumont programs. The Board of Directors, the majority of whom are aboriginal, are volunteers comprised of tenants and other community people.

The objectives of Gabriel Dumont Non-Profit Homes are as follows:

- To provide affordable housing for Aboriginal people (Metis, Status, Non-Status, Inuit) in an urban setting;
- To build user and community involvement in the activities of the corporation;
- To encourage and promote a better understanding of Aboriginal people and to contribute to the betterment of the community at large.

In the beginning, the organization did not build in any on-site programming to assist the community with its needs and problem areas. The Tenant Counsellor was assigned the overwhelming task of dealing with the issues of 86 families through one-on-one counselling and referrals. The majority of Gabriel Dumont's families did not make use of Aboriginal social service agencies due to the lengthy travel downtown nor did they access mainstream Scarborough agencies because of cultural differences.

Over the years, community problems such as domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, alcohol and drug related community violence and harassment escalated. As a result, community members did not have a safe place to live, and Gabriel Dumont's reputation within both the Aboriginal and Scarborough communities became one of a violent, "party place", where no one wanted to live or work.

In 1994, a new Tenant Counsellor was hired at Gabriel Dumont. Concerned community members approached the Tenant Counsellor to demand that something be done about the conditions of the community situation. With an understanding of community development, and a culture-based approach to life, the Tenant Counsellor, with the support of Elders, the Board of Directors, Property Manager and concerned community members, began an initiative of on-site programming for Gabriel Dumont Non-Profit Homes.

The Tenant Counsellor's vision and Gabriel Dumont's firm stand over the past year and a half have changed the circumstances and reputation of the community. Over the spring and summer of 1995, three Gabriel Dumont on-site programs were begun. These programs are:

- The Community Watch Program
- The Choosing Our Path Youth Initiative Program
- The Mino-Yaa-Daa Program

Gabriel Dumont Non-Profit Homes is now becoming a safer and healthier place to live. A community controlled culture-based foundation is being built. It has attracted well-respected and committed staff and Elders to work within the programs. It is bringing in community members who have much to offer and who are making use of the programs.

Mino-Yaa-Daa's Beginning:

In response to the community's concerns, Gabriel Dumont Non-Profit Homes chose to develop and implement a culture-based healing program. This program was designed to address the concerns around issues of family violence and substance abuse.

Funding was secured in 1995 for a five year period through the Government of Ontario's Aboriginal Healing And Wellness Strategy (A.H.W.S.). A.H.W.S. was specifically set up to fund Aboriginal programs designed around education, prevention and healing of issues related to family violence and substance abuse.

"Family violence" refers to psychological, physical, spiritual and emotional abuse. It includes wife assault, sexual assault, issues of power and control over women, physical and sexual abuse of children, child neglect and issues related to adult survivors of childhood abuse.

"Substance abuse" refers to the use of alcohol and drugs to the point where it causes consistent problems for the self, family and community. From a cultural perspective, the emphasis is not on the amount or number of times a person uses, but on its effects.

The program takes a holistic approach, thereby offering services to the individual, family and community. Thus, services were developed for children according to age groups, as well as women and men. As the program is a part-time one due to limited funding, staff chose to begin services for women and children in response to the community's request. These services began in May 1995. Services for men began in October 1995.

As the program is a culture-based community approach, Elders' and Teachers' involvement was built in from the beginning. Two Elders committed to assisting the program on a regular basis by

providing direction and support to staff, developing the values and approach of services and by conducting ceremonies and traditional teachings for community members.

Early in service implementation, women and children attended a circle together to give the program an Aboriginal name. As most of the community members who attended were Ojibway, a name was chosen in this language -- "Mino-Yaa-Daa" -- which means "Healing Together".

Culture-based Approach:

The Mino-Yaa-Daa Program emphasizes a culture-based approach in all of its services. All staff of the program are Aboriginal. They must live violence and substance abuse free lifestyles, act as role models to the community and continuously engage in both learning more about aboriginal culture and taking care of themselves. They believe that they cannot help anyone to go past the level they have achieved in their own learning and healing. They never offer services which they do not participate in themselves.

Services of the program are offered to all community members of Gabriel Dumont Non-Profit Homes -- children, women and men. The emphasis is not on individuals, but on families and the community. Although staff occasionally meet individually with community members upon request, the focus is on bringing people together in groups. Therefore, services emphasize circles and ceremonies which bring children, women and men together. In this way the clients learn the culture-based approach which centres on knowing that one is not alone, that support and learning comes not only from staff, and which creates a relationship that grows naturally.

Everyone in the community is invited to make use of any of the Mino-Yaa-Daa services. Some members attend the circles, but not the ceremonies and vice versa. Everything is offered, but never pushed. Each person has control over what they wish to participate in and make their own choices. This is extended into the circles where participants again have control over what activities they wish to participate in and whether or not they want to talk. It is accepted that anyone may pass when in a circle.

Not only is the community seen in a holistic way, but so is the individual. People do not live isolated lives, they live in families. Whatever one family member does or learns affects everyone else in

the family. In addition, there are four parts to each person's being: the psychological, physical, spiritual and emotional. In keeping with these realities, ceremonies, teachings and circles respond to the whole person and to the questions and concerns people bring with them.

The Children's Circle:

The Mino-Yaa-Daa Program offers services to children on a rotating basis according to age. In its first year of implementation, the program delivered an eight month service for children aged nine to eleven years old.

Providing services to children according to age groups is necessary because of developmental or life stages. Children's cognitive and emotional development progresses as they grow older. Generally, children who are in a specific developmental stage will all have approximately the same cognitive and emotional abilities. In other words, how they learn, access thoughts and feelings and express themselves is similar.

Staff who work with children must have an understanding of life stages and be able to develop and implement activities that are appropriate to each particular stage.

It is important that children feel special. Workers need to be supportive and encouraging. This is why work with children must include activities such as learning the responsibilities of caring for sacred objects, lighting the fire and smudging, which help them feel good about themselves as Aboriginal people.

The relationship between children and workers is also important. Developing trust, security and a safe environment are major principles. Children also require firm, but caring and consistent guide-lines in order to feel safe and be able to set appropriate boundaries with others.

Respect for the needs of children and their ownership of the circle is another major principle of the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program. Thus, the children themselves, rather than the workers, set most of the boundaries or rules for the circle and the consequences for breaking them. Because of this, throughout the entire eight month period of the first children's circle, all that was needed from time to time were reminders of the boundaries: no consequences were ever necessary.

All of these factors create an accepting, non-judgmental atmosphere where children can share their stories and feelings about

their experiences of family violence, knowing that what is said in the circle, stays in the circle. In doing so, they learn that they are not alone, that they are not the cause of their parents' actions and that breaking the silence frees them and helps to change how they feel about themselves.

Activities for the children's circles were developed around the goals and objectives of the program. For the nine to eleven year olds activities emphasized:

- Development of self-esteem and positive Aboriginal identity
- Appropriate expression of feelings
- Safety in the home and community
- Letting go of self-blaming attitudes around issues related to family violence
- Healthy ways of coping with problematic situations
- Resolving conflicts without violence
- Incorporating traditional teachings, values and practices in their lives
- Effective communication

Other components of the services for children include:

- Elders' teachings
- Spiritual ceremonies such as the Sweat Lodge and Full Moon Ceremony
- Cultural responsibilities such as fire keeping and preparing medicines
- Individual crisis counselling when requested
- Case conferencing with other agencies when requested
- Contact with parents
- Participation of children and parents in an evaluation of the program services

The Women's Circle:

A major purpose of the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program's services for women is to bring the community's women together. Only through women joining together can the disempowering silence around issues

related to family violence be broken. By coming together in a circle, women learn that they are not alone and that their situations and feelings are similar to others'. They learn how to trust, take risks and both give and receive support, thereby building relationships and a community of empowered women. This can only be achieved by coming together in a circle; it cannot happen through individual counselling.

As with children, women need a safe environment of their own in order to express their needs and concerns and begin the healing process. Therefore, the women negotiated their own boundaries for the circle to suit their needs of safety and comfort. The most important boundary for the circle is confidentiality, which is respected by both staff and participants. Women's commitment to this has never been in question, for in the first year of service implementation, confidentiality has never been breached.

The circle implements both culture-based and mainstream healing practices (as long as these are compatible with the values of Aboriginal culture). Medicines for smudging, sacred objects for holding and traditional teachings on the topics raised in the circle are always available, but never pushed on anyone. They are offered, but the choice of picking them up is left to each individual women.

All community women are invited and welcomed into the circle. There are no prerequisites: one does not have to abstain from alcohol and drugs, one does not have to currently be in an abusive relationship, one does not have to live a traditional lifestyle, in order to attend. Women simply have to commit to respecting the circle's boundaries for their safety and that of the others. No one even has to talk if they don't want to!

Within the circle, staff and participants address the following areas:

- Self-esteem and a positive identity as Aboriginal women
- Healthy relationships with partners, children and community members based on non-victimization
- Identification, expression and release of feelings
- Healthy, empowering coping behaviours
- Self-care
- Removal of stigmas and labels

- Letting go of past experiences which interfere with today
- Conflict resolution
- Values, beliefs and healing practices of Aboriginal culture
- Decision-making and planning for future
- Role-modelling

Two important elements are emphasized in the women's circles. The first is a focus on tools that women can learn in the circle and then take with them to help in their daily lives. This is important because what is learned in the circle must have value to women in practical ways. The other is the need for women to support each other and develop friendships outside of the program. This is important to create the Aboriginal culture's value of inter-dependency, rather than dependency, which emphasizes how everyone has gifts and resources inside of them and the natural ability to help others.

Other services offered to women by the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program include:

- Sweat Lodge Ceremonies
- Elders' teaching circles
- Full Moon Ceremonies
- Individual crisis intervention sessions as requested
- Telephone crisis intervention access as requested

Incorporated into all program services for women is the Aboriginal culture's belief in the healing powers of laughter. We have fun!

The Men's Circle:

To date, the components of the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program for men have been in place for five months. In addition to the circles, all of the other services that are offered to children and women are also offered to the community's men.

In order to fulfill the program's goals and objectives of a community, culture-based approach, it was crucial to implement an educational and healing process for the men of Gabriel Dumont Non-Profit Homes.

The principles and values of the circles for children and women, such as confidentiality, ownership and the negotiation of boundaries are extended to the men's circles as well.

The facilitators of the men's circles are a man and a woman. This is important to the message and role modelling that the program emphasizes. The staff symbolize equality and respect between the genders. There is recognition of roles and responsibilities of men and women according to Aboriginal culture and respect for the views of each gender.

The female facilitator is often asked by participants to discuss circle topics from the perspective of an Aboriginal woman. In addition, participants value the building of a relationship with a strong woman who usually takes the lead in circle facilitation and confronts them on inappropriate behaviour.

Both facilitators participate in the men's sweats and Elders' teaching circles. The Elder for the men's component of the program is also a woman, again emphasizing the building of a relationship with, and learning from, a female.

All of these valuable teachings and experiences would not be possible without the involvement of women working with the men.

Two principles underlie the program's services for men: non-judgment and accountability. In order for men to understand and change abusive behaviours, they must feel safe enough to open up about them. Although abusive actions are seen as wrong, men are never viewed as "bad people". The program emphasizes that violence is learned behaviour which can, therefore, be unlearned.

The second principle stresses that circle participants are responsible for their actions and accountable to those they have hurt, their families and the community. This is in keeping with the Aboriginal culture's view of justice.

Within the circle, staff and participants address the areas that are covered in the women's circles as well as the following:

- Substance abuse
- Appropriate ways of dealing with anger
- Identification of physical, psychological, spiritual and emotional abuse
- Roles and responsibilities as men according to Aboriginal culture

- Making amends to their partners, families and community for abusive behaviour
- Attitudes around controlling and abusive behaviour
- Origins of family violence
- Breaking the cycle of violence
- Power and control

Program Evaluation:

In order to assess the impact of the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program on its participants, an evaluation process was built into the development of the program.

Evaluation goals included assessment of the following:

- Attitudes around issues of family violence
- Responses to specific services, topics and activities
- Cognitive and behavioural changes in relating to others and coping with problem situations
- Recommendations for changes in future services

The methodologies of the evaluation included:

- A questionnaire on attitudes around issues of family violence, to be completed by each participant at the beginning and end of service implementation
- Weekly reports to be completed by program staff on each service area
- Evaluation form on degree of satisfaction with services and activities to be individually completed by participants
- Interviews with participants by an independent researcher
- Interviews with family member of participant by an independent researcher

A summary of the evaluation results on program participants' changes in relating to others and coping with problem situations is included here. Assessment of this evaluation goal was conducted through the interviews with participants by the independent researcher.

In responding to questions on these topics, children focused on safety and violence. They indicated that they learned how to solve problems from attending the circle and that they "made up the rules of the circle".

All of the children indicated that they now know what to do to be safer. They explained that they "learned what to do when a person approached [them] to try to take [them] away" and what to do when parents are fighting. They pointed out that in the circle they talked about thinking it was their fault when parents are fighting.

Children explained during the interview that when a violent incident occurs "even though some people tell [them] not to call the police, [they] know it is best to call them". They also explained that they now know to leave the violent situation and go to another adult's place, preferably an adult who is nearby and whom they know. One child recommended that "it helps to stay calm [in such situations] and go get someone that can help".

This evaluation goal was also addressed by the researcher in the interviews with parents.

All of the parents reported positive changes in their children including how their children relate to them and deal with problem situations. They described their children as "now being more mature", "able to teach others about the medicines", "more confident", "feeling special", "more outgoing", "able to talk more", "having a greater interest in the culture and traditions" and "proud of who they are".

Some parents noted specific changes in how their children are relating and dealing with feelings and problems. These changes include "closer relationships" with parents, "expressing their feeling honestly" to them, "suggesting ways to work out situations at home" and "speaking up about what [they] want".

One parent remarked that her child used to throw things and hit others when angry, but now this behaviour has stopped, and the child is more calm and deals with anger appropriately.

Parents added that they are receptive to these changes in their children because they have a positive effect on family relationships. Some commented that they are "able to correct unfair responsibilities placed on children", that they are "smudging together as a family", that their children "speak to [them] and other adults with respect" and that they "problem solve any difficulties at home as a family".

A participant in the women's programming expressed in the interview that attending an Elders' teaching circle provided by the

program helped her to relate the traditional teachings to her life and thereby understand a difficult situation she was going through.

Another woman explained how the program has helped her to clarify her values and beliefs, so that she is better able to provide direction to her children.

A third woman spoke about how she has grown much closer to family members and has been able to "deal with a lot of hard issues" with them because of what she has learned in the circles.

Other comments made by participants of the women's circle included that the program has helped them to work through issues with their partners, to be able to talk more openly, to set clear boundaries with other people, to unlock issues connected to their past, be more assertive and deal with confrontation in healthy ways.

All participants of the men's programming indicated that they were able to give and receive support within the circle. Two related that they have supported participants outside of the circle. All indicated that they believe they will be able to offer support to other men in the community in the future.

When asked to address what participants of the men's circle do now to deal with their anger rather than becoming violent, all provided examples of "expressing it in a healing way, so I won't hurt someone or myself". Examples included "loud screams in a pillow", "hitting a pillow or a punching bag", "talking to someone", "going for a walk", "exercising", "smudging", "deep breathing", and "crying because sometimes after the anger, there's sadness".

Men's circle participants stated that they use what they have learned in the circle in their lives. One participant related that he incorporates the techniques and teachings from the circle "all the time and it works daily". Another reported that if he did not use what he had learned, "I wouldn't even be able to handle getting to the bus stop". A third related that he is "making a punching bag" similar to the one used in the circles. Another indicated that he thinks issues over carefully now incorporating what he has learned from the circle and then he talks to his partner. A fifth participant indicated that "I'm a very angry person, so I have to use what I learned quite frequently. To heal, you have to apply it, work on it [all the time]".

Four participants in the men's circle commented that attendance in the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program has helped them in their relationships with partners. They stated that they work more with their partners in recognizing exactly what the problems they have are

and in how to deal with them, they talk more with their partners and they spend more time at home with their families. They generally described their relationships with their families as "improved", "better" and "more healthy". One participant indicated that family members have begun to tell him that they see positive changes in him.

Our Future:

In April 1996, the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program began its second year of service implementation. Funding only allows the program to continue to deliver its services on a part-time basis. This will be carried out in a financially effective manner while responding to the community's needs through the continuance of culture-based programming for children, women and men.

The staff of the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program are honoured to be a part of the remarkable, healthy changes that have occurred at Gabriel Dumont Non-Profit Homes over such a short time period. We look forward to being a part of the community's future.

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