

Daphne Bramham: A house of healing for young aboriginal women closes

The Young Wolves Lodge offered transitional housing and support

BY DAPHNE BRAMHAM, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST MARCH 30, 2015 6:14 AM



A homeless person sleeps on the steps of the St. James Anglican Church, where the idea for the Young Wolves Lodge first arose more than a decade ago. The lodge is closing Tuesday. File photo.

Photograph by: Mark van Manen, PNG

For 12 years, aboriginal girls with no other place to go in Vancouver found safe haven at Young Wolves Lodge.

The lodge was unique. It took them in off the street, gave them beds to sleep in, food to eat and the support they needed to put their lives on a better path.

The Young Wolves Lodge closes Tuesday.

Against the backdrop of repeated calls for a national inquiry into murdered and missing women and a mass of statistics outlining the desperate lives too many girls lead, the federal government couldn't guarantee its 26-per-cent share of the lodge's operating costs for another 12 months.

For the few housing dollars that the federal government does provide, the focus has shifted from transitional to permanent housing.

And without federal funding, the Urban Native Youth Association faced a \$7,000-a-month deficit after March until money could be found elsewhere.

It was a risk that executive director Dena Klashinsky felt she couldn't take.

"I had a lot of sleepless nights when I thought maybe I would get some money. But without the government funding, I wasn't confident that the lodge could provide the safety and quality of service that is needed ... It feels like such a regression."

The lodge had its roots in a listening circle organized in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside by St. James Anglican Church to determine where the biggest gap was in the services provided.

Transitional housing for aboriginal girls and young women recovering from alcohol and drug addictions was the resounding answer. There was none. With the lodge's closure, once again there will be none.

Linda Adams was part of the listening circle and helped found the Coming Home Society along with other church members. The society has always been the lodge's primary funder. It formed a partnership with UNYA, which owns the house and operated the programs.

"It doesn't make sense to us," Adams says of the closure. "Among the donors, there is an overwhelming sadness and there's anger too."

"Permanent housing is great, but you can't just put youth in a house and make it a home."

Aboriginal children face incredible challenges in British Columbia. They account for more than half of all children in foster care.

They're four times more likely to grow up in homes without enough food to eat; more likely to live in substandard housing; and six times more likely to not finish high school.

Aboriginal women aged 15 and older are three-and-a-half times more likely to experience violence than other Canadian women. According to Statistics Canada's most recent data, 54 per cent had experienced severe forms of family violence with 44 per cent fearing for their lives because of that violence.

And, aboriginal people in urban centres are eight times more likely than others to be homeless.

The young women who transitioned through Young Wolves Lodge were the faces behind those statistics.

Many had problems with addiction, had seen or experienced violence and had lives so complicated that they'd never had a chance to learn the basic skills needed for everyday life.

During their four months at the lodge, they were finally given a chance.

The lodge had beds for five young women with priority given to those who were pregnant or had children in government care or living with other relatives.

Over the years, more than 100 young women have lived there, supported by 24-hour staff. They have learned about their cultural heritage as well as the practicalities of life and parenting.

After the four months was up, support workers from the lodge continued to help the young women with housing, school and navigating urban life.

Some have gone on to college. Many have found jobs and been reunited with parents and children.

But the lodge was more than that.

"The genius of Young Wolves Lodge is that it has done a lot in the way of truth and reconciliation before we even started using that language," says Adams. "A lot of church groups have been able to make a connection with these girls ... And in return, the church has learned a lot about aboriginal culture and spirituality."

Ten days before the lodge's closing date, the residents, staff, past residents, donors and special guests including retired bishop Michael Ingham, Archdeacon Douglas Fenton and Wes Nahanni from the Squamish First Nation gathered for a final ceremony to mark what had been accomplished.

They prayed together. Staff and current residents took part in a blanketing ceremony.

They closed with drumming and singing the Women's Warrior Song.

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