
Social Investment

Tough times make historic new project a welcome relief

TORONTO - The time for investment in Canada's social future has never been better. On Wednesday January 21, at 80 Woodlawn Ave. East at 10 a.m., YWCA Toronto will unveil plans for a major new \$80 million affordable and supportive housing development called the YWCA Elm Centre. The complex will take up a city block in downtown Toronto and feature 300 permanent affordable apartments for women and their families.

In support of the project, the YWCA has received a record breaking \$5 million gift from the estates of the late Ken Thomson and the late Audrey Campbell in memory of their sister Irma Brydson, who predeceased them. "This gift, which is believed to be the largest gift ever to a social service organization in Canada's history, leads the way, both in terms of this important resource in Toronto, and of investment in Canada's social infrastructure", says YWCA Toronto CEO Heather McGregor.

Especially pleased to be partnering with Wigwamen Incorporated and the Jean Tweed Centre, YWCA's ambitious new development will provide permanent homes for women and their families and ensure that, once housed, women have the staff support to turn their lives around.

In response to a public call for proposals in 2006, YWCA Toronto and its partners were selected by the City of Toronto to develop the city block bordered by Edward, Elm, Chestnut, and Elizabeth Streets. The complex will consist of three buildings and will provide 150 affordable apartments for single women and women-led families, 100 apartments for women living with mental health issues, and 50 apartments for people of Aboriginal ancestry, including 10 designated for Aboriginal women fleeing violence. Fifteen percent of all apartments will be designated for women over 50 years old.

The main 17 story tower on Elm Street will be named Irma Brydson Place in recognition of the 5 million dollar gift in her memory. Irma Brydson was born in Toronto, a stone's throw from what will become the YWCA Elm Centre. The middle child in a close and loving family, Irma was a strong and vivacious woman who had deep compassion for those less fortunate. A young teen during the Depression, Irma witnessed her mother feeding the hungry and unemployed who came to their door. This example greatly influenced Irma's life.

"Everyone benefits when our most vulnerable citizens have a safe and stable place to live. Philanthropy has an important role in addressing the root causes of poverty and homelessness and needs to be a top priority, especially in tough economic times," said Sherry Brydson, the daughter of Irma Brydson. Sherry has been involved in the business community of Elm Street since 1979, when she acquired 18 Elm Street, YWCA's original headquarters, and turned it into the Elmwood Spa. "My mother would be proud that her brother and sister chose to preserve her memory by helping others in such a positive and meaningful way, and we are thrilled to cement the bond with the YWCA even further with this donation."

The YWCA Elm Centre is set to become a hub in the downtown core, also featuring several public venues including: a 200 seat auditorium, meeting rooms, a reception hall, a women's Resource Centre, retail space, and a restaurant. YWCA Toronto's administrative headquarters will relocate to the YWCA Elm Centre, which will also become the new home of YWCA Canada.

The YWCA has also incorporated many "green" features in the complex. Being built to LEED Silver standards, the YWCA Elm Centre will incorporate geo-thermal, radiant in-slab heating and cooling, five green roofs, a rooftop garden, EnergyStar-rated appliances throughout, as well as a tri-sorter garbage disposal system for the tenants. Hilditch Architect and regionalArchitects have teamed up for the project and Bondfield Construction has been selected as the General Contractor. Construction will begin in February 2009 with completion expected by early 2011.

Since 1873, YWCA Toronto has offered women supportive, affordable well maintained housing. Currently the largest association by, for, and about women and girls in the city, YWCA Toronto provides a range of housing options for women and their families - from emergency shelter and transitional housing to permanent apartments. In 2007, 1,331 individuals (women and their families) called the YWCA home.