

THE BUILDING

Concrete hope

YWCA Toronto's Elm Centre will provide housing to a diverse community, including low-income women and those fleeing violence

BY NAOMI CARNIOL

On a sunny afternoon in downtown Toronto, a giant crane hoists steel rods to the fifth floor of a building under construction. Six men wearing hard hats walk around the fourth floor. A cement truck is parked below.

Over the years, assistant superintendent Greg Fizzard has helped renovate banks and build shopping plazas. This project is more personal.

The construction site looks like any other condo popping up in the city's core, but the light-filled complex between Elm, Elizabeth, Edward and Chestnut streets will not be a condo. Residents won't be determined by how deep their pockets are, but by what their needs are.

Welcome to the YWCA Elm Centre. Owned and operated by YWCA Toronto, the centre's three residential towers will provide permanent affordable housing to a diverse community, including low-income women, women with mental health and addiction issues, women fleeing violence, individuals of Aboriginal ancestry and single mothers.

"I was raised by a single mom," Mr. Fizzard says. His mother worked nights as a cashier at a grocery store. "It was hard to make ends meet." That's why Mr. Fizzard, who works for Bondfield Construction, is happy to help build the centre.

The \$80-million complex received, in total, \$38-million from three levels of government and a \$37-million mortgage from Infrastructure Ontario. YWCA Toronto is required to fundraise about \$15-million. So far, it's raised \$12.6-million.

The centre's 300 apartments will be mostly one-bedroom units but there will also be two- and three-bedroom suites for mothers and children. The 150 units for low-income women will have rent set at 80 per cent of the aver-



Assistant superintendent Greg Fizzard looks over the construction site. KEVIN VAN PAASEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

age market rent.

One hundred supportive units, with rent linked to income, are reserved for women with mental health and addiction issues. Women who live in these units will be matched with case workers who can provide one-on-one support. Staff will run group programs, such as ones focused on relapse prevention. The Jean Tweed Centre, Ontario's largest treatment centre for women with substance abuse and gambling issues, is a partner in the Elm Centre and helping develop programs for these residents.

At the south end of the complex, a five-storey tower will have 50 apartments, with rent-g geared-to-income, for people of Aboriginal descent. Residents will be referred by Wigwamen, Ontario's largest Aboriginal housing provider, which is a partner in the Elm Centre.

Mr. Fizzard walks to the west side of the construction

site. From here the complex looks like a C. In the middle, where a 19-storey crane stands, is an open space that will become a courtyard with a playground and a basketball court.

"When you think of where do you want to put a place to help women, this is a great spot," Mr. Fizzard says. Hospitals, shopping, public transit, government buildings and employment opportunities are all within walking distance.

"The location of the building is wonderful," says Joan White, YWCA Toronto's director of housing, support and development. "Often one of the huge stresses in life for low-wage earners is that they're working in an urban centre and having to commute two or three hours a day because they can't afford to live in downtown Toronto."

In one of the residential towers, Mr. Fizzard steps into a one-bedroom suite. Large

windows invite the afternoon sun inside. By the time residents move in, the concrete floor will be covered with light-coloured laminate. Stylish cabinets will be installed in the kitchen and walls will be painted with non-toxic paints.

Designed to meet LEED silver standards, the YWCA Elm Centre will be heated and cooled by a geothermal system thanks to over 80 wells 550 feet beneath the complex. The centre will also have three green roofs and two rooftop gardens.

Being surrounded by natural light and greenery will benefit residents, says Jennie McKnight, YWCA Toronto's manager of clinical services. "When people live in beautiful spaces, that has a very positive impact on well-being."

Residents will have access to an onsite yoga studio, computer room and 200-seat auditorium, which is current-

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Joan White, YWCA Toronto's director of housing

ly covered in scaffolding. A tenant council will help select programs for residents such as movie nights, cultural celebrations and arts programs. The goal is to offer a range "of activities or experiences that create a vibrant community," Ms. McKnight says.

Along with residential towers, the centre will have a building for YWCA Toronto's and YWCA Canada's head offices as well as a restaurant, boutique and women's resource centre.

The building will have a historic front. Dating from 1848, the yellow brick wall – and its gothic doorway – belonged to a building on the same site that was Upper Canada's first House of Industry, a shelter.

On another historic note, the centre will be two blocks from the red-brick building on Elm Street that was YWCA Toronto's founding location in 1892. "We call it a homecoming," Ms. White says.

Future residents of the YWCA Elm Centre might agree. "It has the potential to be incredibly transforming for everyone, whether you are a baby that's born at Elm or a woman who has struggled for a big part of your life with various kinds of obstacles and you finally have a place you can call home, where you can feel connected, safe, and ... have a voice in how things happen in your community," Ms. McKnight says.

In a trailer at the north end of the site, Mr. Fizzard describes how he tries to help the men building the centre understand its importance.

"I try to remind them, 'Some of these residents could have been your sister, your ex or somebody else you know.'"

Growing up, if Mr. Fizzard's grandparents hadn't helped his mother in tough times, "my brother and I and my mom would have been perfect candidates."

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Ryerson University congratulates Rona Abramovitch, Ryerson's Advisor on Outreach and Access, founder of Spanning the Gaps and the 2010 YWCA Woman of Distinction for Education.

Congratulations to each of the 2010 YWCA Women of Distinction and to the YWCA for advancing and honouring the achievements of women in our community.