

'There's lots of racism in Victoria'

BY JUDITH LAVOIE, TIMES COLONIST FEBRUARY 12, 2009



Debra Bell-Seysener, who supplements her widow's pension making and selling healing scarves, says she feels secure in her townhouse run by the M'Akola Group of Societies because she can pay rent according to her income.

Photograph by: Darren Stone, Times Colonist

Carefully picking her way through piles of multicolored material, boxes of buttons and aboriginal designs for scarves and purses, Debra Bell-Seysener lowers her considerable bulk into the chair in front of her sewing machine.

"This is the place I make my money to feed my kid," she says. "And I also cook in here," she adds with a wide, self-deprecating smile as she looks around the crowded kitchen, filled more with sewing materials than food or dishes.

Bell, 55, a member of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nation from northern Vancouver Island, has lived in the 990-square-foot townhouse on North Park Street in Victoria since 1987. She moved into the home, run by off-reserve aboriginal housing agency M'Akola Group of Societies, one month before the birth of her first son, Robbie.

"I feel safe here. They [M'Akola] have heart," said Bell-Seysener, who in 1998, had to cope with Robbie's death, followed by the death of her husband, Robin, in 2003.

Now Bell-Seysener -- who has a degree in social work from the University of Victoria, but says she has not been able to find work in the field since Robbie's death -- lives with her younger son, 15-year-old Riel, and supplements her widow's pension by making and selling healing scarves.

Having a home allows Riel to grow up in a good neighbourhood and supportive environment, she said.

Secure housing also meant the family did not have to worry during the years of travelling to hospital in Vancouver, where Robbie was treated for the heart ailment that eventually killed him. M'Akola charges rent according to income -- typically 25 to 30 per cent of tenants' gross income.

"We spent a lot of time in Vancouver and, if it weren't for M'Akola, who could go with the ebb and flow of our income, I don't know what we would have done. It was the one steady thing," Bell-Seysener said.

Before moving into the small townhouse complex, Bell-Seysener had a hard time finding a place to live. "I am visibly aboriginal and there's lots of racism in Victoria," she said. "When you'd go and look at a place, it would suddenly be unavailable."

The glowing testament to M'Akola is no surprise to Kevin Albers, chief executive of M'Akola Housing Group.

The agency, the biggest aboriginal housing group outside Quebec, and the only one on Vancouver Island, has 867 family units, most of them townhouses, in centres such as Victoria, Duncan, Nanaimo, Campbell River and Courtenay.

"Two months ago, the waiting list in Victoria was 353 families. If every family moved out, we would immediately have them all filled," Albers said. "What are these people doing for those three or four years on the waiting list? That's what scares us."

But why have off-reserve housing specifically for First Nations? "There needs to be recognition of some of the issues that aboriginal people face when seeking appropriate affordable housing," Albers said.

Those include discrimination, the need for larger-than-normal units for extended families or those offering foster care, and the recognition that many are moving to cities from small, isolated reserves. M'Akola support workers help tenants with issues like finding transportation, and provide counselling referrals for problems such as substance abuse.

M'Akola receives funding from B.C. Housing to operate the units. It acquires housing either by building according to government proposals, or buying housing and converting it. The agency pays its mortgages on the buildings via rent collected from tenants.

Currently, M'Akola is focusing its efforts in the West Shore because Langford has waived some fees, and Colwood has indicated a desire to work closely with the agency.

Albers notes that on- and off-reserve housing are inextricably linked, and says while on-reserve housing is a federal responsibility, the province has a vested interest in taking a greater role. "If an on-reserve family can't find housing, they move off reserve and become a provincial responsibility."

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