

**WINNIPEG, MANITOBA**

PHONE: 204-947-9411

# SISTARS Community Economic Development Co-op Inc.

**D**reams become reality when motivated individuals join together to address shared needs, and multiple benefits result when a comprehensive approach is taken with community-led development.

At least this was the case for SISTARS Community Economic Development Co-op Inc. SISTARS stands for Sisters Initiating Steps Towards a Renewed Society, and was formed in October 2004 (incorporated in 2005) by a small group of 16 women who were seeking a change for themselves and others in the Point Douglas neighbourhood.

Recognizing that any community development efforts must be grounded in local knowledge and that engaging the community in collectively identifying what really matters to them will create a much stronger and cohesive neighbourhood vision, the women went door-to-door to interview 225 families about their priorities. Among the long list of needs and ideas that were generated, access to affordable day care was raised repeatedly, as well as education and training opportunities for adults in the community to help them get off social as-

sistance and into better jobs.

The women of SISTARS agreed that these two issues were linked together, and that a multi-faceted response would generate the greatest results. They understood that to obtain employment that would provide a reasonable income for their families, they needed better education. But to attend schools or training centres to receive this education, they needed childcare for their children.

With perseverance and government assistance, Eagle Wing Daycare was opened a few short months later, and a two-year license was obtained for the →



→ daycare with spaces for forty children ranging in age from twelve weeks to twelve years. While this is a major accomplishment, 176 children were on the waiting list, which speaks to the volume of demand for this important community service.

As a result of the integrated strategy of SISTARS, they were also able to meet the second need that they were working to address; education and training opportunities. They did so in tandem with the childcare strategy. SISTARS was able to obtain funding to provide two years of education and two years of career training for the women to become certified childcare workers. Recognizing that transportation was a barrier to these women, they arranged for Red River Community College to deliver the training on site. In addition, a non-profit housing co-operative was also formed to purchase and rent local housing to the residents that are part of the program.

While SISTARS has been quick, innovative, and determined in piecing together this CED initiative, they have also had to be flexible with the daycare's location. It began in the Church of the Open Door on Euclid Avenue and is currently located in the basement of the Filipino Hall. However, plans are currently moving forward to build the new, 'best practice' daycare centre at the historic Barber House site, which was destroyed by fire several years ago. Plans for this building, which is designed to accommodate 12 infants and 32 preschool children, have been made together with a nearby architectural firm. Construction began in the spring of 2010.

In addition, a newly formed seniors group (North Point Douglas Seniors Association) has approached SISTARS for the privilege of becoming permanent tenants of the new Barber House. The interior of the refurbished house will be a large open area, suitable for a senior drop-in centre and also available for small meetings or receptions for the community. Not to be constrained in their broad vision of community renewal, and continually looking to build on the results of their community survey, their original vision for the Barber House site also included a Laundromat, cafe, and art studio, which may be incorporated into a different phase of the project.

SISTARS works with over 40 active volunteer members, who meet on a regular basis. This volunteer involvement, driven with passion and commitment, and supported with grant money has enabled SISTARS to build this vision and achieve these early results. And while SISTARS is primarily a volunteer organization, they did recently manage to hire a program manager in 2009. Staff at the daycare are paid through regular government subsidies and parent fees.

When a SISTARS member was asked what drives the group she answered, "We have dreaming sessions, and we want to make the projects close to the dreams of our residents." Because of the work of SISTARS, these dreams (and jobs, training opportunities, community services, locally led plans, safety, and housing options) are within reach and close to home.