

# The Story of Friends Housing

## The Early Years: From the 1980s to 1990

It all began in the early 1980s. Changes were taking place in the health care system - one major change being the shift from institutionalizing people with health issues (including those with mental health illnesses) to having them live in the community with supports. This was of great concern to a group of parents (about 5 or 6 families) whose young adult children were patients in the extended treatment unit of the Grace Hospital, which had just opened in 1980 for those with longterm mental health illness. And though applauding the “de-institutionalizing” approach, wanting their children to live as independently as possible, they were acutely aware of the extreme shortage of clean, safe, affordable housing in Winnipeg.

At the same time, these same parents were members of the of Manitoba Friends of Schizophrenics (whose name was later changed to Manitoba Schizophrenia Society or MSS), a non-profit support group, established in 1979, for family members of individuals with schizophrenia. Given MSS’ lack of capacity and resources to oversee or operate any housing/residential project, this informal, “Grace Friends” parents’ group - with the blessing of MSS - went on to form a new, non-profit organization in 1986 - Grace Housing Cooperative, its name referencing the locale of those early discussions.

Its goal was clear: to get an apartment building built in Winnipeg, where adults with chronic mental health issues could live independently yet have easy access to support if/as needed, thus allowing them to live their best lives possible.

Two members, Helga Berger and Don Plummer assumed the leadership role. Both professionals - she a social worker and he an educator/administrator/founder and past president of the Manitoba Friends of Schizophrenics - helped the group determine exactly what was needed. It was to be a cooperative, a type of rental housing where membership is required, involving an application process and membership fee and members participating in helping run the building. As well, a second - and very bold - decision was made, ie. that it be based on a new, innovative, well-researched supportive housing model - one shown to not only help prevent relapses, but also foster an atmosphere that encouraged empowerment and recovery, and successful integration within the broader community. Truly pioneers, given there was no such facility like it in Canada at the time, Grace Housing Cooperative embarked on an unmarked journey. It subsequently became a forerunner in this specialized housing type in Canada and beyond and garnered the respect and admiration of many - including former Manitoba Premier and Governor General Ed Schreyer. And even well over a decade later, communities were still holding up the organization and its housing as a model example.

At the same time, on its shoestring budget (with Helga Berger as the volunteer Manager and “go to” person for whatever was needed), Grace Housing Cooperative established itself as a non-profit organization with the required infrastructure, bylaws, policies, procedures, etc.

Then their efforts fully focused on the next steps. They acquired a 1.4 acre plot of land at 890 Sturgeon Road from the City of Winnipeg. They negotiated funding to construct the building (Manitoba Housing took out a 30-year mortgage for close to \$3.3 million). They hired a project manager, ie. Winnipeg-based developer, Dynasty Group to oversee its construction. They acquired mental health programs/services - including staffing from the Manitoba Department of Health and Community Services. Along the way too, a few minor issues arose (eg. “ghettoizing” concerns by some) and were promptly resolved.

At the time the land was given, the City was very interested in increasing its low income housing stock, and so a condition was put on the land agreement, ie. that the land would be shared with a new, yet-to-be-built townhouse complex with Grace Housing Cooperative playing an an integral part in

overseeing its construction and other responsibilities. This was readily accepted as Grace Housing Cooperative saw merit for ALL residents in what would now be a more mixed housing community.

Construction began in 1989 with a budget of \$2.75 million. Wayne Kinrade, Project Manager (and head of Dynasty Group's division specializing in not-for-profit projects) hired two local firms - Andrew Wach Architects Inc and Concord Projects Ltd (general contractor/builder), as well as worked with the the City of Winnipeg on some engineering work. Limited funds kept the focus on "function first; design/aesthetics second."

The result: a 6-building, mixed housing complex which consisted of:

- 1) 1, 4-storey Apartment Building - which included 28 apartments (ie. 22, 1-bedroom and 6, 2-bedroom ones) as well as office space and a large Common Room (with TV/Lounge area, kitchen and washroom) on the main floor, plus a laundry room on each floor
- 2) 5, 2-storey Townhouse Buildings (ie. 15 townhouses - some 2-bedroom; some 3-bedroom)
- 3) A shared central landscaped outdoor common space - and shared parking lot

Note: The apartments were designated for adults with chronic mental illness; the townhouses were designated for low-income families.

In early 1990, the first apartment building residents moved in and very quickly, it was fully occupied. Many others were on the long waiting list. The first townhouse residents began moving in a little later that year.

When built, the apartment building was staffed by a full-time Executive Director (Helga Berger) and its Board Chair was Zivey Feldman. Soon afterward was added a 1/2-time Housing Manager and a Residence Counsellor, the latter providing tenant support and activities/programs.

### **The Years Since: From 1990 to Now**

Many changes have taken place over the past many years. Times, in general, have changed. Our name was changed - to Friends Housing Inc - deemed more fitting. Many people (board members, staff, other volunteers, business/government staff members, residents) have come and gone. Staff positions, organizational policies, procedures, regulations - of ours and of our government partners - have changed. The properties have undergone renovations and retrofitting to, in some cases, better meet residents' needs and in other cases, to preserve and protect our investment.

Many things too have remained the same. We continue to be unable to meet the demand for housing for adults with chronic mental illness - a lengthy wait list has existed since before we opened in 1990. Staffing and volunteer challenges continue. Revenue, funding and fundraising concerns, amid rising costs, persist. Ever-changing technology creates added pressures.

Yet, one overriding constant throughout the years, one positive force has remained unchanged for more than three decades... Friends Housing's unwavering commitment to its mission, ie. "to provide safe, affordable and supportive housing for persons who have a chronic mental illness and low income families within our community." This is what propels us forward into the future. The Friends Housing Story continues.

**"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."**

**Margaret Mead, American cultural anthropologist**

## Friends Housing Inc. - Key Milestones

Early-mid 1986	Grace Housing Cooperative formed; shares are sold (\$1/share); preliminary Residents' List begins to be formed.
Early-mid1989	Construction of the apartment/townhouse complex begins.
July 1, 1989	Operating Agreement with Manitoba Housing is signed.
July 19, 1989	Grace Housing Cooperative gets title to land at 890 Sturgeon Road.
November 29, 1989	Name officially changes to Friends Housing Cooperative Ltd.
Early 1990	First residents move into the apartment building; a years' long wait list exists. Townhouse residents move in shortly after.
March 1, 1990	A mortgage of close to \$3.3 million is taken out. It will be fully amortized July 2024. Manitoba Housing becomes key funder.
Early 1990	Manitoba Dept of Health and Community Services agreement with Friends Housing is in place for provision of health services/programming - including staffing.
Early 1990s	Tenant Council for apartment building is established - a liaison between Board and tenants; and help plan tenants' activities.
November 16, 1990	Official opening of Friends Housing takes place.
October 4, 1991	Friends Housing is incorporated; is now Friends Housing Inc.
October 10, 1991	Friends Housing bylaws are enacted.
April 1, 1992	Registered charitable status is obtained.
April 3, 1993	Assets, liabilities and equity of Friends Housing Cooperative Ltd. are transferred over.
June 1997	Conversion of 4 parking stalls to 2 Activity Rooms, ie. Fitness Room and an Art/Craft Room in apartment building.
Spring 2008	Repairs to apartment building's envelope (masonry reinforcement; window replacement).
Summer 2009	Repairs to townhouses (foundation, exterior stairs); construction of patio/sitting area, 2 gazebos and garden area in central common area.

Note: Every effort was made to ensure the information herein is accurate and as complete as possible. However, viewed as somewhat a "work in progress," it will be revised if/when new information comes to light.

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