

'FIRST HOUSE' OF MANY



As the small plane's propellers wound down, I caught a glimpse of the landscape that surrounded. The stories I'd heard about short term visitors to the Yukon settling in for a lifetime were beginning to make sense.

As we were driven to the nearby Yukon Inn, we passed the province's Legislature and were told about a tent city protest that sprung up on its front lawn last summer, only a few months before the notorious Occupy protests swept across countless other cities.

What was being protested in the Yukon, though, had nothing to do with inequality or a lack of jobs. The tent city occupants were there because of the city's lack of affordable places for them to live. For this reason, they claimed the tents were a necessity as much as a protest.

In addition to the stunning landscape, the Yukon continues to attract a steady flow of new temporary and permanent residents each year with something that many other Canadian cities lack – vast job opportunities. With construction not keeping up with the expanding demand brought by this increase in workers, housing costs have increased to a level that is unaffordable for many.

Like the Whitehorse tent city, this was the reason for my presence. But the issue reaches much farther than the borders of Whitehorse or the Yukon. When looking at Canada's North more broadly, we find an incidence of core housing need that is 93

percent greater than the rest of Canada. We also find that over half of the population is of Aboriginal descent.

These stats come amidst a national Aboriginal housing crisis, highlighted earlier this year by the deplorable living conditions in Attawapiskat, Ontario. Nationwide, the federal government estimates a housing shortfall on First Nations settlements and reserves of up to 35,000 units, while National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations and Habitat National Leadership Council member, Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, estimates the shortfall closer to 85,000.

With this in mind, Habitat for Humanity Canada launched its Aboriginal Housing Program in 2007 to better understand and serve the needs of Canada's Aboriginal peoples. While the program continues to serve families in and near urban centres, another key focus is expanding the availability of Habitat homeownership to serve more low-income Aboriginal families in rural areas, and on Aboriginal settlements and reserves.

Years of progress has led to my arrival in the Yukon. It was not the first of the program's successes, but the most meaningful to date, as myself and members of Habitat for Humanity Canada's National Leadership Council came together to work side-by-side with the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations to raise walls on the first Habitat project on First Nations settlement land.

Jayshree Thakar
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'First House' on First Nations Land

Aboriginal peoples have a deep spiritual, physical, social and cultural connection to their land, so building homes within Aboriginal communities must be undertaken with widespread support.

On April 19, Habitat for Humanity Yukon signed a partnership agreement with the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations to make affordable homeownership available to more families on their settlement land. Since, ground has been broken on a triplex affordable housing development in Takhini River, 50 kilometres west of Whitehorse.

A milestone project, this is Habitat for Humanity's first build on First Nations settlement land in Canada. By Spring 2013, it will make homeownership possible for three low-income First Nations families identified by the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations and that meet Habitat's normal partner family selection criteria.

Habitat for Humanity Canada hopes this project will lead to many more partnerships being formed and houses being built with Canada's Aboriginal peoples.



Shawn Atleo, Assembly of First Nations National Chief, overseeing the work being completed on the Habitat home.

Leadership Build Week

Beginning September 9, members of Habitat for Humanity Canada's National Leadership Council, including Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, joined Habitat volunteers and Champagne and Aishihik First Nations leaders and community members to work side-by-side on the Takhini River 'First House'. In addition to bringing the project nearer to completion, the event served to raise awareness of affordable housing need among Aboriginal Canadians and how through partnership and collaboration, the Habitat homeownership model can be part of the overall solution.

The Champagne and Aishihik First Nations

With over 1,200 members, the self-governing Champagne and Aishihik First Nations (CAFN) are one of the largest of the Yukon's 14 First Nations. Their traditional territory covers over 41,000 square kilometres – 29,000 in southwest Yukon and 12,000 in northern British Columbia. CAFN ties to their land reach back over 8,000 years.

As of February 1995, CAFN's right to the Yukon portion of its traditional lands and resources was confirmed with the signing of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations Final Agreement. The Agreement provided ownership for 2,427 square kilometres of land, allowing the CAFN to begin exploring progressive homeownership models to help improve the shelter conditions of families on their settlement land.



Three Champagne and Aishihik community members who lent a hand while building their skill in construction techniques.



Brett Marchand, Habitat National Leadership Council Chair, eyes a board to be used in the construction of the home.

Check habitat.ca/ahp for news and updates on Habitat's Aboriginal Housing Program, or to make a donation to help build brighter futures for Canadian Aboriginal families

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