



Telling the Story of Ageing to Sageing



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EDMONTON

AGEING TO SAGEING





People often say that seniors built this city, but at Sage Seniors Association, we know that they're still building, and we strive to find ways to help inspire and support them.

We also know, from nearly five decades in this city, that there are organizations and seniors all over Edmonton with wonderful notions and passions they haven't quite managed to bring to life.

And we knew how to find them. The trick was to help and encourage people who perhaps didn't know quite how to begin exploring these possibilities.



It started by creating welcoming spaces where seniors and their allies could come together and talk about their hopes, wants, needs, and abilities to support their communities.

We invited people to come together in conversation, and we went to school gyms and community halls, to share meals with bannock and pyrogies and BBQ hot dogs. Our community animators would arrive, grab a plate or a seat, and listen.

We asked questions and laughed and cried and heard stories about what seniors wanted to accomplish in their own communities: little dreams and huge aspirations.

Some Edmontonians wanted to make something: a cookbook full of recipes from the Middle East, or a star blanket that connected them to their Cree culture. Others wanted to mentor schoolchildren with trauma, to help them heal and smile and feel safe. Others wanted to create a place to connect and socialize with others going through the same sorts of changes in their own lives.

They just needed a little nudge to help make it happen.

When it was time, with the support of Sage Seniors Association, we watched with awe and wonder as their ideas and passions grew and flourished.

It's a community development model that builds on what we've done in Edmonton for almost 50 years: creating programs and partnerships that are driven by what seniors tell us they need. And we're proud to share, in this little volume, what became of some of our neighbours' little dreams and huge aspirations.

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For nearly seven decades, Shirley Sayer was unconnected to her Cree culture.

She was raised in a small farming community, surrounded by Mennonites and raised by parents who didn't talk much about traditional ways. She became a registered nurse at the Royal Alexandra Hospital and had a remarkable 45-year career. She raised a family.

"I just had no exposure to the culture, not growing up and not during my time as a nurse," says Shirley, now 70.

One of Shirley's daughters, an Indigenous child and youth worker, invited her mom to a round dance and powwow. It awakened something in Shirley, but she wasn't immediately sure what.

"Then I lost my sister and I needed SOMETHING. And I started to come here."

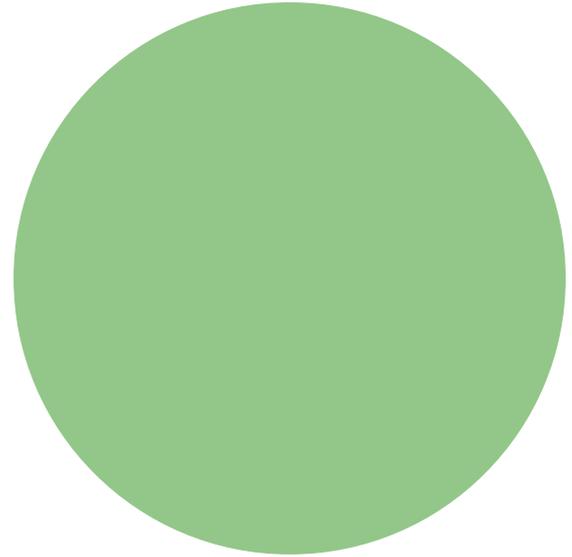
"Here" is the main room of the Edmonton Indigenous Seniors' Centre, a northside organization that, among many things, teaches seniors sewing and traditional crafts and gives them space to create.

After a soup-and-bannock lunch at the centre and a few meetings, it became clear that the craft program could use some additional funds to keep their program accessible. Sage Seniors Association helped to purchase materials, and is exploring whether it can expand into a free transportation program to shuttle participants like Shirley to the centre.

Shirley has just made a vibrant ribbon skirt for one of the centre's staff; the young woman intends to wear it to a Truth and Reconciliation event downtown.

"I started by making a star blanket. I didn't know the significance of these things, but I was attracted to their beauty. And I found that when I created, I felt serenity," Shirley says.

“When I come here, I make something beautiful.”

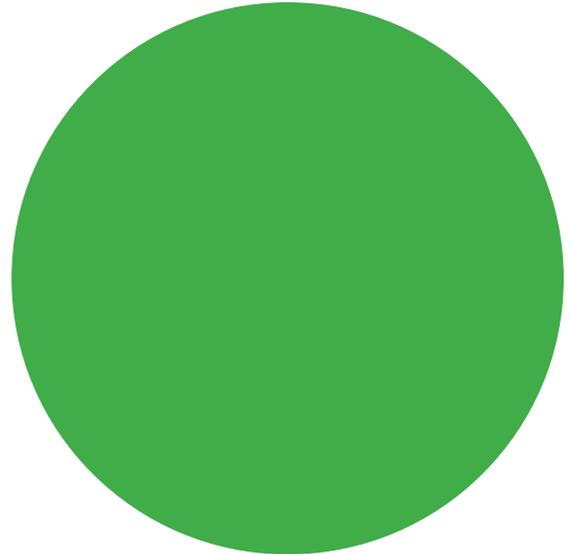


Across one of the centre's tables is Lorraine Beattie, a retired teacher who creates beadwork, dreamcatchers, fish-scale art, and other objects that mix beading with crochet. Lorraine quickly points out something interesting to a visitor: she isn't Indigenous.

“Everybody is so welcoming here, friendly and accepting. I think people understand that I'm exploring the beauty of this traditional art,” says Lorraine, also 70. “We sit together, we talk all afternoon. We learn about each other. I'm a teacher. It's important to learn, your whole life.”

Betsy Jackson has a simpler mission: find a way stay active in a big new place that can seem anonymous and isolating. Betsy recently moved to Edmonton to live with her daughter and grandkids after her house burned down in Goodfish Lake.

“My daughter said: ‘What do you want to do?’ I said: ‘I don't know! What is there?’”



At the centre, Betsy re-discovered something she used to do as a young girl with her aunt at Goodfish Lake: moccasins. Today, her 77-year-old hands shaking just slightly, she finesses light blue and yellow beads into the shape of an eagle.

"It's so hard on my fingers," she says. "I don't know how long I'll be able to do it, but I'm doing it now, and I feel every day like I've accomplished something."

Shirley Sayer knows what Betsy means. "When I come here, I make something beautiful."



RESPECTFUL + SAFE





“It started as a concept,” says Ron Nichol, recently retired after a career as a leader in City of Edmonton recreation centres. “We didn’t really know what form it was going to take. We just knew, several of us knew, that we wanted to help. And that we COULD help because we had so much to offer.”

The weekly visits started with books and board games in the school’s mental health resource room. Seniors gradually added on guitar music, piano, gardening, science, early literacy. Sage Seniors Association helped to purchase books by authors of Indigenous and multicultural heritage, to reflect the student mix.

Audrey Pelletier drove school buses in Calgary for 45 years before retiring and moving to Edmonton. She found the combination of retirement and a new city unsettling. A friend pointed her to Abbott School.

“I was very lonely. I missed the kids so much. And this seemed like such a nice fit,” says Audrey, whose weekly gift to Abbott’s students is crochet lessons delivered with gentle calm.

“My first meeting with the kids really hit me like a hammer. Some of them have challenges learning. Even something fundamental as getting their hands to work in unison at the same time is hard.”



“And for me?
It’s simple. My
life is fuller.”

“But I wasn’t discouraged. You’re patient. A little girl says: ‘I want to make a CAPE!’ And you start her with a dishcloth, and whoa! you see the smiles and pride when she’s done.”

Bob Henning, a former Fort Saskatchewan junior high principal, is known in the Abbott halls as “Mr. Bob” and a source of big bear hugs.

“I had a void when I left teaching and this has filled it and then some,” says Bob. “They’re such wonderful little guys and girls. You walk in and one will come over and take your hand, snuggle up. They know they don’t have to worry here, that we’ll never point out the things they ‘can’t’ do.”

Results at Abbott School are so encouraging that the Alberta government is consulting Ron Nichol and school nurse Mardi Bernard for advice on how to mould intergenerational programs across the province.

For Audrey, the rewards remain more personal, more local.

“It helps the kids know that they’re not alone, that there are seniors who are willing to come in and enjoy them as a child, that there’s a whole community of people who care about them beyond their parents,” she says.

“And for me? It’s simple. My life is fuller.”



Kristine Nutting remembers the moment when Selma Karout, a worshipper at Canada's oldest mosque, learned that her long-held dream would come true.

Selma wanted to collect recipes from her friends, many of whom had come to Canada from the Middle East, and print them, before all of the ingredients and methods and history faded with memory.

"We had heard about Selma's dream from a PhD nursing student who knew the community at Al Rashid Mosque," says Kristine, a Sage Seniors Association community animator.

"We met and listened and talked about a way Sage Seniors Association might help. It seemed we could. Perhaps a micro-grant could give money to the women of the mosque to pay for ingredients and test the recipes out. When Selma realized at the end of one meeting that it was starting to happen, tears filled her eyes.

"It was a tiny grant, but it's really built and blossomed into other areas."

Youth from the mosque took a film storytelling course from celebrated Edmonton filmmaker Eva Colmers; one young man is making a film about the recipe-book project.

An Edmonton Arts Council grant will ultimately fund the short film about the cookbook's story.

The momentum and mechanics of the project has amazed Kristine, but so has the connections and camaraderie Al Rashid's senior women have made through food.

Zakie Issa, an Al Rashid congregant, has a notebook full of handwritten recipes from the Lebanon hill country where she grew up. There weren't a lot of vegetables in those high elevations, so Zakie has exotic combinations of ground wheat, walnuts, chickpeas and lamb.

She's not sure which recipes will make the final book. More important to her is how 10-year-old granddaughter Jenna, here today holding tightly to her grandmother's arm, has watched as the women talk about food and their shared history.

For more information on Ageing to Sageing visit: www.mysage.ca



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