

Building inner-city hope one vital job at a time

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2/05/2009 6:47 PM |



PHIL HOSSACK / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS Marty Donkervoort and crew refurbish a former convent in the West End into a social services centre.

THE contractor working on a \$1.5-million conversion of an old convent beside St. Edwards Church on Arlington Street into a social services centre is having its best year ever.

Last year, this company beat out Manitoba Public Insurance as the employer of the year by the Manitoba Apprenticeship Council and will be able to pay workers a bonus for the first year ever.

"You'd never know there was an economic downturn," Marty Donkervoort, general manager of the renovation company, said.

It may be surprising that the company -- Inner City Renovation -- was started as an experiment in 2002 that many believed would not last, let alone become an award-winning enterprise.

The convent project is one of ICR's biggest, but it has also built the last two Assiniboine Credit Union branches as well as Bridgman Collaborative Architecture's office conversion of a former bank at Main Street and Higgins Avenue.

ICR's mandate is to help alleviate poverty in the inner city by creating quality jobs for low-income people.

In addition to the financial profit ICR generated last year, it has been so successful in its other bottom lines that Donkervoort, who was also ICR's founder, has been invited to make a presentation at the Social Enterprise World Forum in Melbourne, Australia, in October.

The operating entity is "owned" 50-50, but is a charitable foundation that was formed with support from the Crocus Investment Fund and by Social Capital Partners, a Toronto-based social finance organization run by Bill Young, an entrepreneur who made millions in the technology business at the beginning of this decade.

As important as its financial sustainability and profitability are, ICR's social mandate is equally important.

The company employs about 20 people, virtually all of whom reside in the inner city. About half are aboriginal.

Donkervoort said ICR does not go out of its way to hire aboriginal people, but it happens to be the demographic of its constituency.

"We do go out of our way to create opportunities for people who might otherwise not be employed," he said.

As far as Peter Squires is concerned, they also do good work.

Squires, an executive with Winnipeg Realtors Association, is also president of Housing Opportunities Partnership (HOP), the realtors' non-profit housing renewal enterprise.

Over the last 10 years, HOP has purchased, renovated, and built about 70 homes in the West End. For the last three years, ICR has been the prime contractor for HOP.

"Their work comes in on a timely basis with good accounting for each job which is sometimes a challenge on projects like this with so many different inputs," Squires said.

While ICR fits nicely into the realtors' attempt to provide a social housing component, it would not work if those homes didn't hold their value

But Squires said not only is the quality of work up to standards, but the work has inspired other homeowners to do upgrades.

Dennis Lewycky, an official with the Canadian Union of Public Employees, is chairman of the ICR board. He said he's proud to be associated with ICR because of its positive impact in the community. He spent his vacation working with ICR crews a couple of years ago and heard the testimony from Selkirk Avenue merchants about how the ripple effect of improving dilapidated housing drives out drug dealers. "I understand it's difficult to describe what we do because there are so many objectives at once," Lewycky said. "We're trying to make money, which is realistic. We're trying to help people, which is idealistic and we are trying to do it on a self-sustaining, independent basis, which some people say is naive."

Donkervoort is retiring in a year. His successor must have a rare mix of skills that might be tough to find.

"We won't limit our search locally, but I'm not worried," Lewycky said. "We'll find someone."

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Renovating the inner city

Annual revenue -- averages more than \$1.5 million a year.

Additional charitable revenue -- ICR has raised about \$4 million over the years from the likes of the Winnipeg Foundation, the Winnipeg Partnership Agreement and Co-operators Insurance company.

Ongoing funding -- In addition to its commercial revenue, ICR raises about \$100,000 a year from charitable donations to cover training and some social-assistance costs for employees.