

Thursday, July 13th, 2006

## **Attacking crime at the roots**

### **Prevention programs get \$2-million boost**

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By Bruce Owen

DAYS after 11-year-old Kathleen Beardy hung herself from a North End backyard tree last October, Michelle Boivin asked herself if there was more Winnipeg's aboriginal community could do to help its children.

Boivin, who runs her own communications company, came up with Empowering Our Little Sisters. It's a mentoring program that pairs successful aboriginal women with aboriginal girls, mostly from the North End.

Boivin said its goal is to show these girls the possibilities they have in life if they make the right decisions.

"This is about serving the kids," Boivin said. "It's mentorship plus."

Yesterday, Empowering Our Little Sisters and 27 other Manitoba crime prevention programs got a total of \$2 million in federal funding to start or continue their programming. The money was announced at a news conference by Federal Justice Minister Vic Toews.

For Boivin, it means over the next two years Empowering Our Little Sisters will get \$90,000 from Ottawa.

With that, more than 50 children will participate in the mentorship program, which is run in conjunction with the Needs Centre For War Affected Children and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Winnipeg, Big Brother Big Sisters executive director Michelle Harrison said.

"It's about people from the same background showing these children how successful they can be and understanding the possibilities," Harrison said.

Boivin said the group is now looking for volunteer mentors

([www.empoweringsisters.com](http://www.empoweringsisters.com)) to help teach kids everything from aboriginal culture, bullying to teen pregnancy.

Toews said the funding, made available through the National Crime Prevention Centre, is part of his government's commitment to reduce crime in Canada by attacking its roots, not just through proposed tougher sentencing guidelines for convicted criminals.

"I stress that attacking justice issues is two-track," Toews said. "But we're not backing off the gunmen and the drug dealers. We don't think they should be on the street."

The Harper government tabled legislation in May proposing mandatory minimum sentences for offenders convicted of gun crimes.

Other groups that received funding include Manitoba First Nation communities, after-school drop-in centres, and groups that counsel families on domestic violence and substance abuse.

Included is the Needs Centre For War Effected Children.

Manager Margaret von Lau said it will get about \$180,000 in funding over two years to work with 45 children who've recently come to Canada as war refugees.

The goal of the program is to teach these children, also through mentors, about Canadian culture, the importance of staying in school and getting employment training so they don't fall prey to the "easy money" offered by drug gangs.

The need for the program followed the August 2004 gang-related shooting death of 14-year-old Sirak Okbazion.

Okbazion's father fled his war-torn African country of Eritrea in 1996 and moved his wife and two children to Canada about four years later. At the time of his son's death he said he couldn't control his son's behavior as he had fallen in with a group of youths who sold drugs.

A 20-year-old man was sentenced to 88 months in prison in May for killing Okbazion.

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