

Rebuilding Community



BENJAMIN MOORE

As the executive director of the Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group (NRG), Roberta Martell is overflowing with energy . . . which is surprising when you

consider the length of her to-do list. For the past 15 months she and NRG have been hard at work renovating their new Cornerstone building at the corner of Gladstone and Fernwood, and now the doors are finally open. *Monday* caught up with Martel to see what's really behind the facelift, and what that's going to mean for the community.

Monday: Describe Fernwood as it was when you took over.

RM: One of the things I had to do to become executive director was write an essay on the public's perception of Fernwood, and I found an article that had been published where people had been complaining about blood on the walls of the community centre and needles flushed down the toilets. So that's what I inherited, that was pretty much the community I felt I was entering into. Since then I've seen a big change and it's been a pretty amazing process to watch and be a part of.

Monday: What future do you see for Fernwood?

RM: Having only been here three years I've taken a lot of guidance and history from the seniors that we work with . . . and they say it used to be like a little Europe, but had since fallen to disrepair. So my biggest hope is that we can use some of the great bones and great energy and great people who live here to touch it up so it's got that quaint and quirky feel, rather than the funky and junky feel. So it's artistic, bohemian, innovative, passionate and strong.

Monday: What kind of businesses are you hoping to draw into the Cornerstone Building's storefronts?

RM: The whole building is filled already. We've got a kilt store at one end, and that's great because he's a Fernwoodian. He's created a lot of employment and it's a sustainable business because it's centered around manufacturing. And then we have a lease signed for a wine and tapas bar for the middle two suites, which is also a local Fernwood couple, so that'll be exciting. And then of course we're opening the coffee shop—the Cornerstone Café—which will create employment (we've hired about eight baristas), allow for Vic High kids to do their CAP hours and act as a resource center letting people know about the programs and services that are in the neighbourhood for them. It'll also act as an interface for neighbourhood living so people can meet and learn about the neighbourhood.

Monday: Can you think of any other community that already has what you're after? Is there a model?

RM: No. For me, it's a matter of taking pieces from what I've seen in other projects, whether its renewable energy, affordable housing, or social ventures such as the café. We've got community economic development, crime prevention, environmental design, decision-making, enterprising non-profits . . . so there are a whole bunch of different facets that not only have sustainability as a goal, but have it as the means by which we attain that goal.

Monday: Do you have any plans to take this model somewhere else?

RM: Every question has a different answer, and I think the danger is in believing that you've come up with a single model that you can export everywhere. So when I go into a community—and this is maybe the fourth community I've been in—the first thing I do is sit and watch and figure out where we are by hearing from the residents. Then you help them move from where they are to where they want to be in the most sustainable and respectful way possible. So I wouldn't presuppose that I could go anywhere else and do exactly this.

—Benjamin Moore