

Fernwood launches free university

January 30, 2012 by Dylan Wilks - staff writer

Despite the projector and the seating, it's not quite a classroom; it's still a cafe. But for a couple hours every Tuesday night, the Cornerstone Cafe in Fernwood becomes a university. A university with free tuition.

Fernwood University, sometimes known as Fernwood U, is the latest inspiration from the Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group (NRG).



Fernwood University's Lee Herrin presents to his "students" (photo by Dylan Wilks/Nexus).

Herrin said at a recent Fernwood U presentation, to a room full of mostly Fernwood residents. "It's fundamental. You can't just sprinkle it on top."

After telling a story about how the City of Victoria fought the NRG a few times as the organization evolved, Herrin added that "control isn't given. It's taken."

"To me, what the neighbourhood represents is an idea of self-determination," he says. "It's that kind of ideal that is, of course, never achieved, but it's what gets me up in the morning: how can we get ourselves further toward that goal?"

Fernwood U is just a 10-to-11-week course. It's still in its infancy; it hasn't got major plans in place for growth. But it offers free education to those who are interested in it, and if the last few weeks are any indication, many are.

"I really think that the model of higher education that puts students in debt slavery for the rest of their lives is bankrupt," says Herrin. "People can learn a lot from listening to people who have something to say, and if we can provide a venue for that I think that's awesome."

"We are hoping to use this to seed a broader conversation," says Fernwood NRG executive director Lee Herrin. "Now it's a question of how to carry on that conversation."

The conversation starts with a topic related to the NRG's founding principles. And while that may seem like it could be too regional-specific, Herrin says topics reach further than just the borders of one Victorian community. His presentation focused on neighbourhood empowerment and control.

"Control has to be baked into the cake,"