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No place like home for Shawenim Abinoojii

'It feels good being here, it feels good being together'



By: [Joshua Frey-Sam](#)

Posted: 6:00 AM CDT Monday, Oct. 23, 2023

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Hey there, time traveller!

This article was published **22/10/2023** (185 days ago), so information in it may no longer be current.

Shawenim Abinoojii has spent its first 18 years helping Indigenous youth find a place to call home. Now, the Indigenous-led non-profit has a home of its own.

Shawenim Abinoojii unveiled its new office on 865 Main St. on Tuesday.

A retrofit of the 31,000-square-foot building was completed this summer and the organization moved into its new digs in September, the first time its 100 employees have worked under the same roof.





MIKAELA MACKENZIE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Not only does the move to 865 Main St. allow Shawenim Abinoojii to consolidate all departments under one roof, says executive director Victoria Fisher, but there's also room for the organization's independent high school.

"It's a relief," said Victoria Fisher, executive director for Shawenim Abinoojii. "I think it's a good feeling for the organization and I hear that from a number of the staff that it feels good being here, it feels good being together."

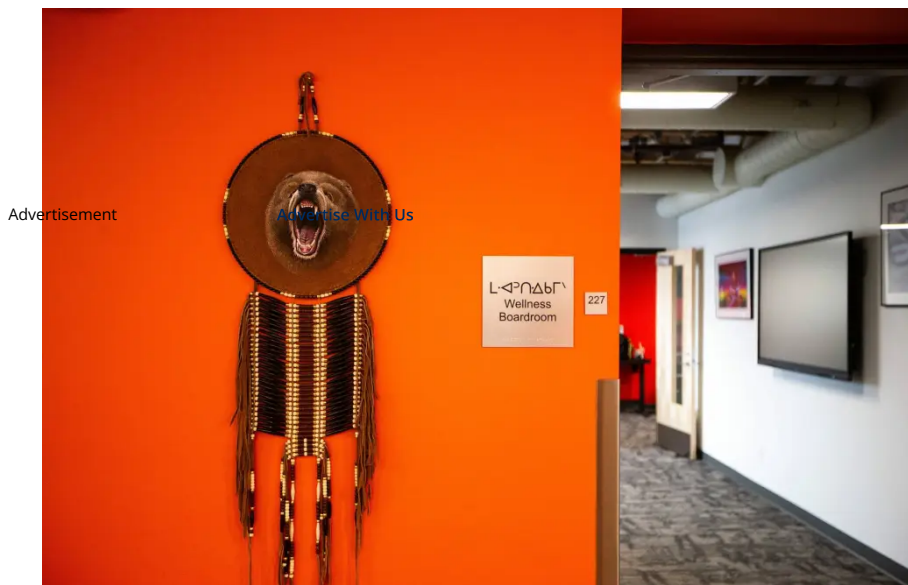
Shawenim Abinoojii previously worked out of five locations, each department scattered across the North End — 650 Dufferin Ave., 1386 Main St., 1344 Main St., 1970 Main St. and 181 Higgins Ave.

"I think naturally between departments, groups get siloed. When you're physically in different spaces, it was hard to help us work collaboratively," Fisher said. "With moving into this space, just even over the last month, you hear so much more interdepartmental collaboration, sorting out issues, problem-solving and even just have that type of relationship so it helps the wheels turn a little bit more efficiently here."

Shawenim Abinoojii has worked with children in Child and Family Services and Southeast First Nations communities to offer transitional housing and schooling in Winnipeg, and care homes within First Nations communities to support children while keeping them close to their families.

The idea to centralize its office was initially tabled in 2019, and it took until last year to find their match.





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Shawenim Abinoojii previously worked out of five locations, each department scattered across the North End.

The building has previously served as a grocery store, restaurant, gallery space and, most recently, the Neechi Commons for five years. The Neechi Commons, which hosted business and social events for North Enders, was forced to close in 2018 due to \$3.9 million of debt owed to Assiniboine Credit Union.

For years it sat as a vacant space until the Southeast Resource Development Council purchased the building in July 2022 and immediately leased it to Shawenim Abinoojii.

"I think we've naturally just become a neighbour in the community," Fisher said of the organization choosing the building. "A lot of us drove by this building on a regular basis going to work and we saw the building for periods of time being vacant and we thought, 'We have this need of bringing our teams together, this is a space in the neighbourhood where we're already operating, this building has opportunity— why not bring that together?'"

Shawenim Abinoojii's new office has several features for its employees — including a tipi-shaped elder room for ceremonies and meetings — but perhaps its biggest attention grabber is the Shawenim Abinoojii School.

The independent high school, which opened in 2019, caters to Indigenous youth who have struggled or dropped out of standard high schools. It's the only Indigenous-led independent school in the province, with 25-30 students enrolled at a time. Students range from Grade 9 through Grade 12 and mature students.





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Victoria Fisher says the move to 865 Main St. 'helps the wheels turn a little bit more efficiently.'

The school is module-based, allowing students to work at their own pace. It's a benefit for many, as students can be known to come and go from the program.

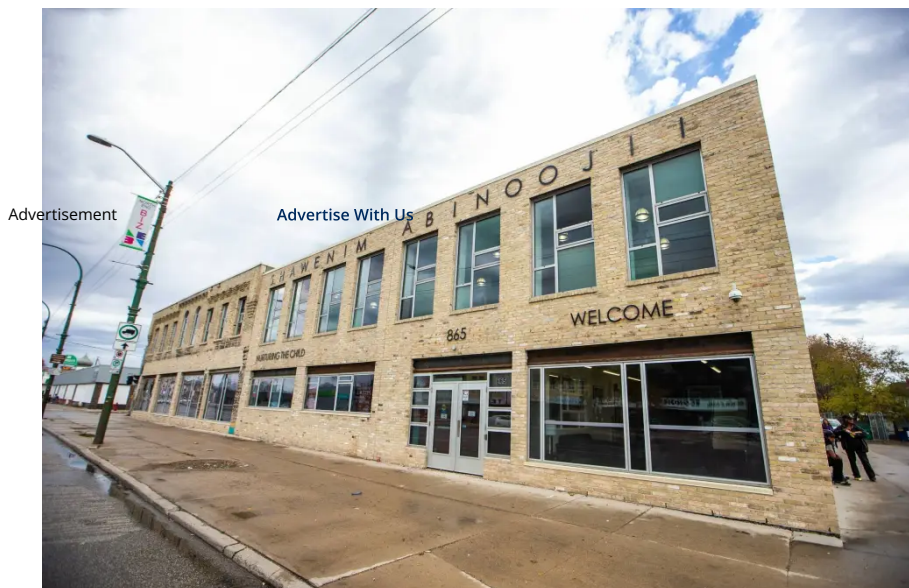
"The reason why I come to work every day is because I know that we're a school that is focusing not only on the Manitoba curriculum but we're also bringing in our cultural values and beliefs and we're exercising them every day," said Darcie Cote, acting principal and teacher.

"So we're able to create an identity for the students and they're able to come into a comfortable environment and be themselves."

Added teacher Tanisha Chartrand: "We don't really use the Western approach in terms of hierarchy. We're all people here, and I think that's really important because a lot of the students when they come from the main schools, they struggle in that area and they feel comfortable here.

"We do want to help kids succeed and (for) some kids, it's a transitional school. They come for a little while and we get them back into main schools. Other kids, will be here for all of high school, which is great. And then there are other kids who are growing here."





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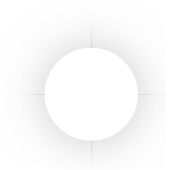
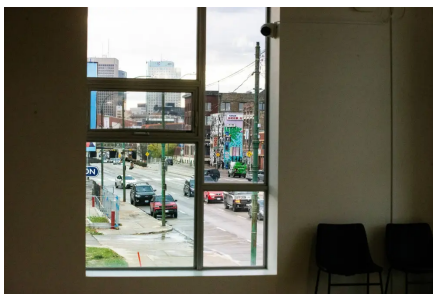
Shawenim Abinoojii's new office is in the space that formerly housed Neechi Commons.

A wellness program, language services and elders who help teach cultural activities are available on-site for students. With many of their students in CFS care, Cote and Chartrand are focused on building a rapport with each person to understand their needs as learners and help them work through any trauma that could be holding them back.

"Even if their academics are labouring a little bit, at least they're coming. Where other schools, they don't even want to go, and I think a big part of that is having Indigenous mentors, Indigenous teachers, I think," Cote said. That really helps them build a strong identity and feel like they belong."

"Everybody's (under the same roof) and we're able to communicate with them and get on top of things that need to be dealt with."

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Joshua Frey-Sam

Reporter

Joshua Frey-Sam happily welcomes a spirited sports debate any day of the week.

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