

Qarmaapik House: A multi-use and safe place for families in Kangiqsualujjuaq

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Qarmaapik House, located in Kangiqsualujjuaq, Nunavik, was established as a non-profit organization with a mission to have a place where parents or guardians are supported to meet their children's needs better; to improve the bond within their family, and to instill traditional Inuit family values in the community. Qarmaapik House is one of this year's recipients of the prestigious Arctic Inspiration Prize, an annual award dedicated to supporting innovative community projects in the Canadian Arctic.

The community of Kangiqsualujjuaq (formerly George River) began as a small village in the early 1960s after the first cooperative was established by Inuit of the area. Prior to the 1975 signing of the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA)*, life for Nunavik Inuit consisted mainly of hunting, fishing and trapping pursuits. Like many Northern communities, Kangiqsualujjuaq lacked all but the most rudimentary services. In 1980, the village was legally established as a municipality. The people had to adapt to a modern way of life and, within a very short span of time, to an expanded wage-based economy. Today the population of Kangiqsualujjuaq is close to 1,000 people. The community faces many of the same challenges experienced by other Nunavik communities as a result of these rapid changes to social and economic life.

Generally speaking, Nunavik's population is young, with close to 60% of people under the age of 30. Teen pregnancy is four times higher among girls aged 14-17 than in other parts of Quebec, and life expectancy for both men and women is much lower. Unemployment rates are high in Nunavik. Close to 70% of Nunavik households (2,450 families) earn less than \$32,480 annually, and 37.5% of Nunavik Inuit households live in poverty. Overcrowding in Nunavik homes has reached an alarming rate of 68%, and recent statistics show that there is close to a 90% drop-out rate between kindergarten and high school graduation.

There are no roads linking the region's communities to one another, or with southern Quebec. Food and other consumer goods are transported to com-

munity by air and an annual summer sealift, making the cost of living extremely high. For example, the cost of food is close to 50% higher than elsewhere in Quebec. Roughly 44% of annual income is directed to food by Nunavik households, compared with 12% elsewhere in Quebec. Meanwhile the cost of household items is 97% higher than elsewhere in Quebec.

Locally, people depend on snowmobiles, ATVs and motorboats for their hunting, fishing and trapping activities. Considering the very high unemployment and the high cost of goods, the essential equipment required for these important land based activities and travel is not easily accessible to most families.

These social and economic stresses and the historical context of the 20th century has ruptured the ability of many Inuit to transmit their own model for the proper education, protection and support of their children. Psychosocial problems, coupled with post-traumatic stress, depression, addiction and even incarceration, prevent some parents from appropriately fulfilling their role vis-à-vis their children.

In many Nunavik communities, Youth Protection is thoroughly overwhelmed by the number, severity, and scope of the cases being reported. At the same time, there is an enduring mistrust of outside institutions – a legacy of negative historical experiences. As a result, Youth Protection has been unable to deliver appropriate services and programs to parents, families, and youth in difficulty. Staff turnover is high among both Inuit and non-Inuit personnel, which does not help with building trusting relationships between social workers and community members. It is feared that the repercussions of the large number of interventions by Youth Protection, and the temporary or longer-term placement rates for youth in difficulty will be as severe for Inuit society as were residential schools.

Qarmaapik House: A Community-Based Alternative

The idea for Qarmaapik House developed out of several events over a five-year period.

The first was the 2007 report by the *Commission*



Qarmaapik House.

des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse du Quebec detailing an investigation into Quebec’s youth protection services. This report noted that Nunavik Inuit face an identity crisis reflected in the scope of their social problems. The report highlighted that family violence is 10 times higher in Nunavik than in the rest of Canada, and that Nunavik has the highest suicide rate in the country. Lack of sufficient and adequate housing and high rates of poverty do not provide families with optimal conditions for exercising their role, and children are often the first victims. The Commission included a statement from judges of the Court of Quebec who noted that: “most of the files brought before them include neglect as a factor, connected to chronic alcohol and drug abuse” (Commission, 2007, p.17). The Commission made an urgent call for front-line and preventative services in Nunavik. It is important to note that for many years Nunavimmiut had clearly voiced their concerns about the existing youth protection system. The 2007 report shares many of these concerns.

The second event was a three-day crime prevention conference “Inuusitta Makijjuumigiaqninga” (Take our lives into our hands), that took place in Kuujjuaq, Nunavik in October 2012. Local front line workers and community leaders from all 14 communities participated in this event. The conference highlighted the actual situation of the more than 400 foster

children in the region. At the time of the conference, an alarming number of 27 children from Kangiqsualujjuaq (population 900 at the time) were reported to be under the care of Youth Protection Services. Nancy Etok, then Student Councilor and now Vice-Principal of Ulluriaq School of Kangiqsualujjuaq, gave her impressions: “These numbers clearly mean we are facing an almost impossible mission. We must absolutely try something new. They also show that police services and the Youth Protection will not be able to solve these problems on their own.” Following this conference, Nancy Etok and Hilda Snowball, then a community wellness worker and now Mayor of Kangiqsualujjuaq, were determined to find alternatives to address this dilemma and its causes.

Shortly afterwards, a series of consultations known as Regional Parnasimautik¹ took place in each Nunavik community to identify the elements of a comprehensive vision for regional development according to Inuit culture, identity, language and traditional way of life. Following the consultations, it was expected that each community would continue discussions amongst themselves. Starting in June 2013, the community of Kangiqsualujjuaq began to host local Parnasimautik gatherings four times a year. These three four-day workshops focus on the fundamental issues affecting the daily lives of its residents. Discussions are broadcast live on the local FM

radio so that everyone can express their views. This open and inclusive process provides stakeholders with accessible and concrete opportunities to discuss community issues and to collaborate in the search for solutions. It also empowers and gives responsibility to the local organizations and participants. During the initial community discussions, youth protection was raised as a main issue, and community members clearly expressed and identified the need to find a real solution and a community-driven service with culturally-appropriate support for families and youth. Through these discussions, the concept of the Qarmaapik House was developed:

We have decided to build a Family House for our community. When it is up and running, we want to support families who are in crisis. We want to have teen discussions and we want to provide counseling for the families in order for them to keep their children in the community. The house will allow us to teach our young parents the correct way of bringing up our kids. We, as a community will need to work together in order for the project to be successful.²

Qarmaapik's first Board of Directors was elected locally in 2013 consisting of seven members, followed by the hiring of a coordinator. These founding Board members – Jobie Annanack, Sophie Mary Annanack, Alice Unatweenuk, Alice Baron, Norman Snowball and Tommy George Etok – stayed on for four years to ensure that Qarmaapik had a strong start as a non-profit organization. Over the course of their term, the Board sought funding to renovate a building, which took almost two years; established Board protocols and procedures; set up training and workshops for employees; secured funding for operations from the Nunavik Regional Board of Health & Social Services; and successfully negotiated a Collaboration Agreement between Ungava Tullatavik Health Centre Hospital (UTHC)'s Youth Protection, its CLSC (the local community health centre) Social Services and the Nunavik Regional Board of Health & Social Services, signed in January 2017.

The Qarmaapik Board believed it was essential to have a written understanding with the Youth Protection Services and the Social Services so that all parties would understand and work with the same protocols and procedures. There has never been a formal collaboration agreement or memorandum of understanding between an Inuit community driven organization like the Qarmaapik House and the Youth Protection in the past. It took almost a year to develop and negotiate the collaboration agreement between the three parties: Qarmaapik, Ungava Tullatavik Health Centre (UTHC)'s Youth

Protection (DYP) and its CLSC Social Services, and the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services.³ The Collaboration Agreement is currently operating as a pilot project. It will be reviewed in June 2018. Representatives from each organization meet monthly to make sure things are running as planned. There are two components to the Collaboration Agreement: Prevention and Safe House. The prevention component runs during regular working hours (9am to 5pm) and the safe house component is a 24-hour service.

Since 2013, the Qarmaapik team has grown significantly. Current Board members include: Alice Unatweenuk, Francine Emudluk, Roddy Stewart, Johnny Sam Annanack, Nancy Etok, Maggie Emudluk and Alice Baron. The organization now has 15 employees, consisting of a coordinator, assistant coordinator, counsellor, assistant counsellor, secretary, cook, baby book coordinator, drop in daycare staff, two janitors and six security guards.

Qarmaapik is a much-needed alternative for children aged 0 to 17 who find themselves in crisis situations that would normally require the intervention of the provincial youth protection system. However, solely offering this alternative form of shelter and support only remedies situations for brief periods of time, and may create the impression for some people that things are being taken care of. Therefore, Qarmaapik aims to go further to assist families in learning and improving their capacity to be responsible and capable parents. Programming will help parents to learn the fundamentals of handling and responding to crisis situations without major conflict or violence, and to avoid having no choice but falling into the social services system. Parents must understand that only they can bring peace to their home and to their own children, and that institutions will never be able to replace them.

In addition, Qarmaapik House will work with a multidisciplinary team (health services, social services, Director of Youth Protection [DYP], CLSC – local community services centres, the parents, Elders, Kativik Regional Police Force, Ulluriaq School, and Nunavik Child and Wellness Network) to address the underlying causes of family conflict and family breakdown.

Qarmaapik offers prevention support services for parents, children and youth, a drop-in centre and temporary lodging for families, as well as on-land excursions and cultural activities. There is also space for a pediatrician to provide medical check-ups, vaccinations, and perinatal services to 0-5 year old. Counselling services will be offered to parents, youth and families; and a public health/wellness coordinator will organize awareness and prevention



The Qarmaapik House logo.

activities for the public.

Qarmaapik has started offering courses in cooking, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, sexual abuse, traditional skills with the local cultural committee and Elders, both on-site and during excursions for on the land after school activities. In time, Qarmaapik will also offer more training programs for parents, women, men, youth/children such as: parenting courses based on traditional Inuit values, conflict resolution, family budgeting, early childhood development, dealing with adolescents, baby book making, time management, employment support, and a young parents play group. It will also offer a men's program in collaboration with the local men's group to strengthen father-son relationships and awareness workshops to educate the community about topics such as youth protection and procedures, the court systems and services of the justice committee.

Qarmaapik's main goal is to prevent children from being placed in foster families and/or sent to another community by the Youth Protection Services. It aims to empower families with concrete tools and support, to empower community members and strengthen the link between them, to strengthen traditional knowledge and Inuit values as well as the role and use of Elders, to break the cycle of child maltreatment, and to enhance parents' skills and capacity to be responsible and capable parents.

In December 2016 Qarmaapik House won a prestigious Arctic Inspiration Prize Award (AIP) of \$700,000! The community is very honoured and proud of its Qarmaapik House to receive such an award. With the AIP, Qarmaapik House has secured

the remaining amount needed to implement its full mandate and mission to offer a space where parents or guardians are supported to better meet their children's needs, to improve the bond within their family, and to instill traditional Inuit family values in the community. The funding received through the AIP will assist the community in taking the next steps to put in place historic and innovative services for Kangiqsualujuaq. This AIP Award also serves as seed money for Qarmaapik's future. The organization will be able to use the AIP award to secure other funds to continue its work, and will ensure that current funders remain onboard.

The community is responding very well to the services, and the collaboration between families and Qarmaapik is showing positive results. Families have been willing to take the steps needed to reach a healthier and more positive lifestyle. Qarmaapik is ensuring that the parties to the Collaboration Agreement are respectful and committed to their obligations. Qarmaapik is committed and will work very hard to help families in need of support and assistance in a culturally appropriate manner. ●

Maggie Emudluk is a board member of Qarmaapik House and a municipal councilor in Kangiqsualujuaq, Nunavik.

Endnotes

- 1 For more information, see: <http://www.makivik.org/parnasimautik/>
- 2 An excerpt from the June 2013 local Parnasimautik workshop.
- 3 In addition to the three parties to the Agreement, the Kativik Regional Police Force (KRPf) and the Ulluriaq School acted as interveners.