

# Carved with Courage, Moved with Care

## First United's totem pole moved to a new location before demolition

In our parking garage at 320 East Hastings, a team of Indigenous carvers worked under cover. From the 12-foot log in front of them, shipped from Haida Gwaii, the image of the thunderbird, the killer whale, the mighty bear, and grandmother moon emerged.

Many of the carvers didn't have a roof of their own to sleep under. Some battled addiction. Inter-generational trauma. Poverty. Fourteen of them worked in shifts under the supervision of master carver Bernie Williams (Skundaal) of the Haida Gwaii Nation, the first woman to apprentice under the well-known Haida artist, sculptor, and activist Bill Reid.

It was January 2010. First United had been an overnight shelter for just shy of a year. The pole was a gift in the spirit of reconciliation, in memory of murdered and missing Indigenous women, and in recognition of the diversity of the Downtown Eastside community; a dedication to those who are houseless on this land that is their home.

### **And it carried a message: "Together we are one."**

On January 10, 2010, the pole was raised in our dining hall and unveiled by Elders and Chiefs of the Coast Salish Territory and of the Haida Gwaii Nation. Twelve years later, on May 20, 2022, Bernie Williams helped guide us in taking it down before the building at 320 East Hastings is demolished.

Surrounded by a circle of staff, shelter residents, and members of her family, Bernie shared memories of the work done all those years ago. Her nephew John drummed and sang the Coast Salish anthem, a song taught to him by his father. Bernie then called on staff to take the totem pole to its new, temporary location.



Unbolting the pole from its stand, staff members, led by John, formed a human ramp and gently lowered the pole onto six wood planks. Staff members lined up on each side. "Lift with your legs!" someone coached as the pole was hoisted into the air and carried out of the building, into the sunlight.

As the procession moved along Gore Street, staff with free hands move ahead to block traffic. Pedestrians stopped to watch. Motorists and bus drivers peered curiously through windshields. Looking over her shoulder, Bernie remarked, "The way they're moving it. That's the traditional way."

Three blocks later, the totem pole reached its destination: the garage of First United's administrative office. Echoing the past, the garage will be converted into a temporary workshop where the totem pole will be refurbished by Bernie and her team. It will be returned to the main floor of the new First United when construction is complete in a ceremony presided over by Elders and Hereditary Chiefs.

# Staying focused on our mission

Dear Friends,

I'm honoured to write to you in this issue of First Things First. I'm nearing the end of my time as Acting Executive Director, with Carmen returning from her sabbatical later this month. It's been an incredible experience to help hold the reins at such a formative point in First United's history, and I'm grateful for the opportunity. So much of what's been happening at FIRST has centered on the redevelopment: construction, permits, inspections, moving, and of course fundraising. But it bears mentioning that all of this has happened on top of the work our staff carry out every day.

I am in awe of the perseverance of my teammates and their commitment, above all else, to our mission. They've had to problem solve around a constantly changing landscape, a building held together by a thread and a prayer, and a global pandemic. And they

kept serving the community. They kept providing meals, sheltering those who needed it, filing taxes, providing access to justice and legal support, getting people housed, and saving lives.

I am in awe. The redevelopment is our future. But thank goodness for the incredible humans who remain focused on the present, meeting the most essential needs of our neighbours in the Downtown Eastside. As I part ways with you as Acting Executive Director, I want to thank our Board, Cabinet, Communities of Faith, consultants, committees, supporters, volunteers and staff for your ongoing care and guidance while I was in this role. Please also join me in acknowledging the tremendous work of our team, and thanking them for never losing sight of the mission.

**Amanda Burrows**  
**Acting Executive Director**



## A Fond Farewell to 320 East Hastings

### Communities of Faith gather to say good-bye as we move First Forward

On May 20, nearly 40 members of our Communities of Faith gathered at 320 East Hastings to help us decommission the building with a thoughtful remembrance of the work that took place within the walls about to be dismantled. Led by the Rev. Bob Burrows, the assemblage included former FIRST ministers, board members, volunteers, and congregants.

Bob opened the floor by speaking to FIRST's long history of engagement with social service in the Downtown Eastside, and our evolution as an organization. First Forward Cabinet Co-chair Rev. Cari Copeman-Haynes then shared reflections on her time at FIRST as an intern and some thoughts on the value of our work, the immeasurable importance of reconciliation, and our shared responsibility to stand tall as "trees of integrity."

Attendees were invited to share their own memories of their time with FIRST. In closing, Cari joined Pacific Mountain Regional Council President Rev. Blair Odney to lead the assemblage through a liturgy, sharing final remembrances and thanks.

We are humbled by the depth of knowledge and memories shared, the warmth of generosity and commitment shown to our community, and the tremendous support that our Communities of Faith have for our work and redevelopment.

As we approached the start of demolition work at 320 East Hastings, we invited Communities of Faith in the Lower Mainland to join us in raising \$750,000 towards our First Forward Building Connections Campaign. With a target date of June 30, ten congregations joined the team fundraising effort.

To date, they have raised over \$450,000. For any Communities of Faith that would still like to participate—no problem! Third-party fundraisers can continue past June 30.

Visit the First Forward section of [firstunited.ca](https://firstunited.ca) for more information or contact Campaign Manager Trista Baldwin at [tbaldwin@firstunited.ca](mailto:tbaldwin@firstunited.ca) to set up a team.



# The 100-Year Dream for Advocacy

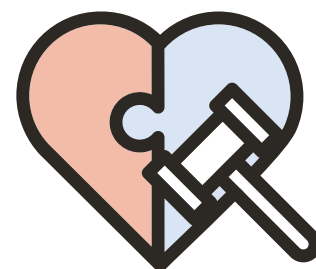
Next year, the FIRST UNITED Legal Advocacy program will turn 50 years old. Only our Meal program and community drop-in pre-date the Advocacy program. It goes to show: people need to be fed, need a safe place to be, and need their rights upheld.

Today, the Advocacy program is in high demand, especially for tenancy issues. Each year our legal advocates manage upward of 1500 cases. Advocacy Manager Didi Dufresne has been with FIRST for 12 years and has worked in the Downtown Eastside for even longer. Didi has a big, easy smile and is sharp as a tack. When I ask them what their vision is for the Advocacy department at FIRST they chuckle and say “to become useless! We want to put ourselves out of business.” This may sound alarming, but it would mean that we’ve solved the legal challenges that our neighbours face, and there’s simply no longer a demand for our services.

But, Didi knows that the work we’ve done up until this point, as vital and important as it is, doesn’t actually get to that root. “We help people avoid eviction and stay in their homes, and even if it’s just for a few months, that’s great. But we’re moving away from a purely harm reduction approach. It’s important, but it doesn’t create a more equitable society.”

In early 2022, Sarah Marsden joined the team as Staff Lawyer. Sarah’s scope is to take on law reform at the provincial level, specifically around tenancy and evictions. Law reform is slow moving—much slower than individual case management—but does have the potential to improve justice and equity. For example, right now, we have a law that says if you lose an eviction hearing, you have to vacate the premises in two days. Could you pack up your entire home, arrange movers and trucks, perhaps storage, and find a new place to stay in 48 hours? In the Vancouver market, no less!

Didi explains: “I tell people, ‘You have a good case, you have a winnable case, but if you lose you don’t have a home in two days.’ It becomes more about risk tolerance rather than justice. This is just one example of how FIRST could get involved in law reform: by advocating to change the two-day limit to something more reasonable and realistic that won’t leave people stranded and homeless. The point is to help many people by improving the laws and systems we’re all bound by. That’s how we make a more equitable society. Maybe on the eve of the 100th anniversary of the Legal Advocacy program we’ll announce that the program is coming to a close because we achieved our goal of a strong, equitable society that respects the rights of all.



**The point is to help many people by improving the laws and systems we’re all bound by.**



# FIRST UNITED

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*Located on unceded Xʷməθkʷəy̓əm  
(Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish),  
& Səlílwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) lands.*



## Become a Frontline Monthly Donor

What if you could help provide life-saving and life-affirming services in your local community, for less than your Netflix subscription? By becoming a Frontline Monthly Donor you can. This growing group of individuals helps us provide immediate and essential services in the Downtown Eastside year-round. Join them today: [firstunited.ca/donate-now](https://firstunited.ca/donate-now) or call 604.336.3047



## Email updates

We have a lot of news, updates, and events coming up that you won't want to miss! Subscribe to our emails to stay in touch and to help us save paper! You can sign up at [firstunited.ca](https://firstunited.ca).



## Imagine Canada Accreditation

Earlier this year we became accredited under the Imagine Canada Standards Program. This accreditation recognizes FIRST as a charity demonstrating excellence in board governance, financial accountability and transparency, fundraising, staff management, and volunteer involvement. This is a tremendous accomplishment and indication of not only our commitment to the Downtown Eastside, but to our donors and partners as well.



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