

WINTER 2024

# PORTFOLIO



## Canadian Arab Friendship Association (CAFA) A community gathering place

"CAFA is like a comfort zone for newcomers," says Yazan Haymour.

Now, as the president of the Canadian Arab Friendship Association (CAFA), he works hard to further develop that sense of belonging, and help every community member get the support they need to thrive.

"It bridges gaps and at the same time assists people and helps the transition from one culture to another culture. We help with people who want to maintain their language, their religion... we try to help in every area as possible." That role has become even more effective now that the organization has ownership of its own facility.

Over the past four decades, Haymour has seen a lot of changes in Edmonton's Arab community. Since moving to the city in

1976, he's watched the community grow both in size, and in its sense of community spirit.

Haymour was introduced to CAFA almost immediately after he arrived in Edmonton. The association was involved in the Heritage Festival, and Haymour saw it as a welcoming landing pad to help him adjust to life in this new city.

"That was the first experience for me at the Heritage Festival, so I joined CAFA because I found there is a need to assist and help immigrant people to become productive citizens of Canada," he says.

Since 1965, CAFA has been supporting the Arab community in Edmonton, offering services for newcomers and well-established families alike. It's an important community service provider, offering everything from ►



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### Money on a mission.

Put simply, the Social Enterprise Fund (SEF) is a loan fund. We invest in social entrepreneurs who want to make things better in the community and in the world. We provide patient capital at reasonable rates to help put dreams to work.



translation and interpretation support to passport and immigration application assistance, to language and life skills training. CAFA even offers an early childhood development program to over 200 children, which routinely has a waitlist of 30 to 40 more.

"These services make CAFA more valuable because, people, they find CAFA is like a way to become Canadian," he says.

"Our mandate is to be there to help and assist anyone who's in a situation that comes to us. Our minds, our hearts, our doors are open for them. We're here to help and assist in any way we can."

From early childhood development programs to language classes or social supports, all of CAFA's services are offered out of an unassuming 7,500 square-foot space in a north Edmonton strip mall. The Dickinsfield Mall has housed CAFA throughout most of its history, and as a result, has become a landmark for many newcomers in the Arab community.

"This location in particular, Dickinsfield Mall, it becomes known to every newcomer from the Middle East. The minute you say

CAFA, they know where it is," he says.

For many years, CAFA rented its space in the strip mall, but when the building's owner announced plans to sell the property, CAFA's board of directors saw an opportunity. Rather than search for a new home, it was time to firmly root the association's long-term operations there.

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— Yazan Haymour

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"Most newcomers, lots of them they don't have a car, so they just walk. In Dickinsfield Mall, it's easy for them to walk into CAFA's office and receive their services, and for us to help them with whatever they need," he says.

"So the board decided that the mall will be the most appropriate site for CAFA to keep."

Thanks to financing help from SEF, CAFA was able to purchase the strip mall, securing a long-term home for the association. As an added bonus, the property could also provide a long-term revenue stream through rental income.

But the adjustment from tenant to landlord hasn't been without its bumps.

"There's been a big learning curve," laughs Abulghani Haymour, who works as the onsite manager for the property. He says CAFA's passion and vision for the future has spurred them on.

"We see this as an opportunity of a lifetime for the purposes that CAFA seeks to achieve," he says.

"We don't want CAFA to be something that serves the community only in our lifetimes. We want it to be a self-sufficient and perpetual entity that can be here after we're gone. Purchasing the mall could help achieve that. That's what made this a very important move that we had to work for." □



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# Rapid Fire Theatre

## Hold the phone – we're home at last

A giant eye keeps watch from its perch above the bar in the lounge of the Rapid Fire Exchange. Laughter drifts from the 160-seat theatre, and it's clear that this is a fitting home for Edmonton's longest-running improvised theatre company, Rapid Fire Theatre.

"Welcome to our home," says Matt Schuurman, artistic director for the company, with a laugh.

With a history dating back more than forty years, the Rapid Fire Theatre improv group is a cornerstone of Edmonton's arts and cultural scene. It has put on countless shows over the years, including Theatresports, Improvaganza and Die-Nasty, a live improvised soap opera. But throughout its history, the group has never had a permanent home base, operating instead out of theatres across the city, from the Citadel and the Varscona to the old Roxy, just to name a few.

That all changed in the spring of 2023, when the long-anticipated Rapid Fire Exchange building opened its doors.

"Getting into this space just felt like such an important milestone for us," says Schuurman.

Like the theatre company, the Rapid Fire Exchange building also has a long and storied history in Edmonton. It dates back to the early 1900s, when it was used as a telephone exchange — think rooms full of switchboards and wires used to connect calls — but as the technology used to connect phones grew smaller and smaller, the building was no longer needed for its intended purpose. Eventually, it came to house the Telephone Historical Information Centre, a museum dedicated to the history of telecommunications. After the museum relocated in 2004, the space sat largely unused, save for a few weeks every year when it acted as a venue during the Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival.

Although the building's interior was dated and in need of

renovation, its potential as a venue piqued the interest of the theatre company.

"We've been searching for a home to call our own for quite some time. And the proximity here to the Fringe grounds as well as to our old home of the old Varscona Theatre just a block away, was perfect for us," says Schuurman.

But as perfect as the location was, financing renovations to modernize the space proved to be difficult.

"Being a not-for-profit with no equity, banks just run us through a calculator and the answer is always 'No,'" says Schuurman.

"So for an organization like SEF that understands the cultural capital we have to offer and understand the success of our 40 years of business, they did see the merit in that and worked with us to do that loan. And that has provided absolutely vital bridge financing to make this happen."

After signing a long-term lease with Telus — the building's owner — in 2021, work began to turn the gutted-out museum into a theatre.

But the exchange is still a work in progress. Phase one of the project involved rejuvenating most of the public-facing areas: the lounge and lobby, the theatre space and the gender-neutral washrooms on the main floor. Phase two, which has not yet begun, involves renovating the basement to create workshop, rehearsal and classroom spaces.

There's a lot to be done, but much like the giant eye, Schuurman has a vision for what could be.

"Everything you see here today — we designed and built new. There's some big unknowns still in terms of what the next steps are and whether or not we go full steam ahead," he says. "But so far, it's been going great." □



# Glass Bookshop

There's the books, but it is also all about community

Looking back on the pandemic years, Jason Purcell has a kind of calm appreciation for the chaos and stress they've experienced. As one of the co-founders of Edmonton-based independent bookstore Glass Bookshop, they spent much of the pandemic period adapting to meet the ever-changing demands of trying to keep a small business alive.

"In retrospect, things always work out the way that they ought to. It seems that's true," says Purcell. "But there were certainly bumps along the way."

The 'bumps' Purcell is referring to could mean any number of challenges Glass Bookshop has overcome during the past few years: changes in location, changes in business model, even changes in ownership. But through it all, the shop has remained steadfast in its commitment to community. Now, at last, it has put down roots with a location in Richie.

Founded in 2018, Glass Bookshop is an independent bookstore focused on supporting emerging Canadian writers, with special attention paid to those in the 2SLGBTQIA+ and BIPOC communities. When it opened, Purcell says, the goal was more than just to sell books. It was to create a gathering place.

"We saw that there was a need in bookselling and in gathering spaces in the city, so we were really invested in making space for folks who weren't represented. Where do we gather and where do we go that is explicitly built for people like us or people who are marginalized in ways that are different than us?" says Purcell.

"We needed an indie bookstore that serves all people."

Over the years, Glass Bookshop has seen many iterations. At first, it operated through a series of pop-up shops in Edmonton's downtown core. Eventually, it opened as a brick-and-mortar location in a downtown mall, but when the pandemic hit, the shop moved to largely online sales with home delivery, based out of a basement storage unit.

While the shift to online sales wasn't what Purcell had envisioned



when opening the shop as a community gathering space, the change still reinforced the importance of community.

"It was uncomfortable because it was underground, it was a small space, books all over, boxes everywhere. But it was also exciting because we were really well supported in that moment," they say.

"There was just such a real reinvestment in the local economy at that point. We really saw that, and we really felt that."

The shift to home delivery also shone a light on other elements of inclusivity and accessibility in Glass Bookshop's business model. It's part of why the shop still offers free delivery to homes in the Edmonton area.

"I realized that there were all types of accessibility barriers in place when you expect people to come to you all the time," says Purcell.

"There are very well likely to be people out there who are disabled or have mobility issues, or who can't leave home for other reasons, who would rather support indie than Amazon, but didn't have the choice before. So suddenly now they have the choice. That's not something we want to turn our backs on."







Eventually, as restrictions eased and people began moving towards in-person shopping again, Purcell returned to the idea of opening a brick-and-mortar location for the store. It was time for the next chapter: a long-term home.

"Glass Bookshop has been through so many transitions in terms of location, in terms of those who are running the show, everything," says Purcell.

"It feels like we've never been on stable ground. We've never really had a foundation upon which to build. It's always just sort of been survival mode. How do we survive this? How do we survive that? How do we survive the next thing?"

But after years of changes and adaptations, Glass Bookshop finally found solid ground, and a place to put down roots. Thanks to financing from SEF, the shop was able to secure a space in Ritchie, and has

finally established itself as a community gathering place.

"We have become part of people's daily lives, like 4:00 p.m. rolls around, and people are like, a lot of them still seem to work from home, so they kind of trudge out of their houses and they do a little browsing, and you get to know these people in a really different way, which is so nice," they say.

The shop continues to focus on Canadian authors, with a focus on the 2SLGBTQIA+ and BIPOC communities. Those commitments, says Purcell, will never change.

"I think there's something really powerful and radical about there being a space from the very start, 'Actually this is for queer people and racialized people and disabled people,' and has those investments and those priorities in mind at every step of decision making and execution."

As for the future of Glass Bookshop, Purcell is optimistic. They don't have any plans for any more major changes to their business model. For now, it's time to build on the foundation SEF helped them to establish.

"My hope is that this can be a period in which we are putting down roots and really just connecting with the neighborhood, building on those commitments to community and inclusivity." ■

## Rhythm Rhythm Rhythm

### It's a whole new world

For more than a decade, Lucas Coffey has been helping students across Alberta learn about and experience music as a method to build community. Soon, he hopes to expand that reach to bring music to students worldwide.

Coffey first came to SEF in 2012 for financing to purchase drumming equipment that would allow him to expand his in-school music residency program, Rhythm Rhythm Rhythm. The financial support made a difference, and Coffey quickly committed to paying back the loan and joining SEF's "paid in full club."

But after paying off the first loan, Coffey saw more opportunities for growth. Rhythm Rhythm Rhythm had seen success in schools across Alberta, but he wanted to expand even further, helping to empower students across Canada — and someday, even worldwide — through music.

"We've always had more work than we can handle, and I've also wanted to start to get my own content out there," says Coffey. "I just realized that if I was ever going to move things forward, I needed to hire some people to help me out so that I could get more into developing training materials."

**Rhythm Rhythm Rhythm had seen success in schools across Alberta, but he wanted to expand even further, helping to empower students across Canada — and someday, even worldwide — through music.**

Coffey returned to SEF with a plan of how to expand from delivering Rhythm Rhythm Rhythm to training teachers to deliver the program. He continued to offer the program through an in-school residency, but began looking at ways to build capacity.

Then, the pandemic hit.

With restrictions placed on who was able to enter schools, and a move to online learning, Coffey had to pivot. Although teachers and students still wanted to take part in the program, in-school residencies were no longer an option. Coffey quickly began experimenting with online learning tools.

"I'm not really a tech person, so it was a giant learning curve," he says.

"But I have a young family, and because the business is small, it wouldn't have survived if I had just done nothing. So part ►

of it wasn't really a choice, it was just like you got to do something to make it work.”

Coffey spent the summer of 2020 — the first summer of the pandemic — testing and retesting online platforms, and come September 2020, began offering the program through video calls. Encouraging students to practice body percussion, or jam out on their desks, he worked to rebuild the experience that Rhythm Rhythm Rhythm had delivered in person before.

“We were able to survive for one and a half years without going into any schools, which if you think about it is really amazing,” says Coffey.

Although the pandemic presented many challenges, it also gave Coffey the chance to develop new skills and build on some of the features the program had had in pre-pandemic times.

“A huge part of our residency was always having everybody gathering in the gym for a finale. So I learned video editing skills, and our finale became these little montage videos of the schools, learning different songs and rhythms, and then giving that to the parents as a form of finale.”

At the height of the pandemic, Coffey also launched the Around the World Rhythm Residency program. Through virtual platforms, he brought music to nearly 2,000 students in schools across Canada. What made the program even more enriching was the musicians who joined in for the sessions



from around the world.

“We got eight artists from different countries — from Brazil, from Turkey, from Japan — to livestream to all of these different schools and teach them about different cultural rhythms. So that opened up the program in a pretty big way,” says Coffey.

Eventually, as restrictions eased and classes began to return to some level of normalcy, Coffey returned to thoughts of expanding Rhythm Rhythm Rhythm by training others to deliver the program. In the first eleven years of operations, Coffey’s programs introduced more than 120,000 students to the value of music as a form of community. The only limitation, he says, was the limit of his own schedule. By training others, he could help more students understand the connecting power of music.

“The hope is that we can train teachers to do this drum circle programming in their schools and reach way more in the future,” he says.

So far, Coffey has made progress. He’s set to launch the training materials in spring 2024, after which point he’ll begin to offer them to teachers worldwide.

“I have been working on a ton of it for the last five or six years, but a lot of it is getting it down on paper and organized enough to present,” he says. “So it’s lots of work, but it’ll be worth it.” □



# Myra House — Buffalo Keeper Nehiyaw Centre

## A home for new beginnings

**M**yra's House offers supportive transitional housing for men on statutory release, which occurs when an inmate is released from custody to serve the last year of their sentence in the community. It's the latest venture by Brad Seneca, who has spent a lifetime helping First Nation's youth, families and adults gain skills and cultural knowledge.

Seneca and his wife (and business partner), Candace Seneca, both have experience working in corrections, and saw an opportunity to help men coming out of the justice system to reintegrate into society.

"We just wanted to do something. We saw a need for these guys coming out and decided it would be great if we could get a house for them," he says.

Seneca had the idea of opening a supportive transitional housing facility. He wanted to create a home where individuals looking to re-enter society could live while they adjusted to life outside of prison. All he needed to do was find the right property, and a way to finance the purchase.

He heard about the Social Enterprise Fund through contacts in the community. And although plans for Myra House were still in their nascent stages, he reached out.

"I took a chance on calling Jane. I didn't know where it would go and I just thought, 'I'll give her a call and see,'" he says. "As soon as I started talking to her, I just thought, 'Okay, we might actually be able to do this.'"

Unfortunately, the purchase of the first house Seneca had his eye on didn't go through. But he didn't let that stop him.

"I just kept persevering on. I had already written the proposal for SEF, so I kept in touch with Jane, and she was very patient with me while we were looking," he says.

Finally, after about a year, Seneca

*The house offers supportive transitional housing for men on statutory release, which occurs when an inmate is released from custody to serve the last year of their sentence in the community*

found another option: A house in Norwood which would allow space for six residents.

This time, the deal went through. The purchase closed in July 2023, and less than a month later, Myra's House opened its doors to the first residents.

"It was only maybe, a week and a half, two weeks later and we had three guys in there," he says. "There was almost no down time."

Those who want to live in Myra House have to apply for a spot, and complete an interview in order to be accepted. Once there, they're able to get the building blocks in place for their life

outside of prison, by finding work or getting involved in the community. They're able to stay for up to a year — as long as they follow some basic ground rules.

"We have to have some rules like no gangs, no gang colors, a curfew and things like that. There's no smoking, no drugs, no alcohol. As long as they go by the rules, they're fine,"

The house is named for his wife's mother, Myra.

"Candace wanted to do something with beading and making cradleboards and stuff she had learned from her mother," he says. "And we work with a lot of inmates, so when this came along, I asked Candace, 'If we can get a house to help them, what do you think about naming the ►"



house after Myra? To help support our guys that are coming out of prison.”

The house has become a point of pride for Candace, who visits several times a week. She’s even helped to decorate the home with lamps beaded by members of her reserve community, in Poundmaker, Saskatchewan.

“She just loves it and she takes care of that house like it’s her baby,” he says.

Each resident is also given a quilted blanket during their time at Myra House, donated by a local church. The quilts add to the comforts of home for residents, and are theirs to keep when they move out.

Since opening its doors in August 2023, Myra House quickly got to full capacity. Some residents have stayed as short as eight days, while others have settled in for the long haul.

“It’s working out really well,” says Seneca. 



## Contributors



Paul Swanson is an Edmonton based photographer specializing in editorial, commercial and sports photography. When he’s not taking photographs for the NHL or other clients in the city, he can probably be found in the river valley walking his dog. Paul has recently started photographing SEF’s clients, including Kemet and Growing Greener for this Portfolio.



Lisa Catterall is an Edmonton-based freelance writer and editor. Over the past decade, her writing has appeared in magazines like *Edify*, *WHERE* and *The Tomato*. When she’s not feverishly clacking away at a keyboard, she can be found enjoying many of our city’s culinary gems. Lisa has been a special member of the SEF team for several years, and has written almost every story ever published in Portfolio.

## Partnerships make impact investing possible

Social enterprises, like any small businesses, require access to capital to grow. Given their sometimes unusual structure or business sphere, social enterprises often face challenges finding the financing they need through traditional sources. SEF acts as a patient lender, working with these enterprises to meet their financing needs, whether through a big or small loan. Loans are repayable with interest — and in this way, the funds can go on to assist other social entrepreneurs.

SEF was established in 2008 through a unique collaboration between the Edmonton Community Foundation and the City of Edmonton. Other contributors to the fund have included the United Way, the Alberta Real Estate Foundation and several private contributors. So far, the fund has invested over \$85 million in more than 90 projects. More than \$20 million has been paid back, ready to do more good in the community as new loans.

**Jane Bisbee**  
Executive Director  
[jane@socialenterprisefund.ca](mailto:jane@socialenterprisefund.ca)

**Gail Yakemchuk**  
Business Affairs & Operations Associate  
[gail@socialenterprisefund.ca](mailto:gail@socialenterprisefund.ca)