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Sorella fills critical need for women-only housing

BY SUZANNE FOURNIER, THE PROVINCE MARCH 8, 2011

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Atira executive director Janice Abbott tours Sorella on Monday. Photograph by: Gerry Kahrmann -PNG, The Province

The sunny apartment with a panoramic view from the North Shore to Mt. Baker will be home not to a millionaire, but to a low-income, underhoused single mom.

The two-bedroom unit is on the top floor of the Sorella, a 108-unit apartment building at the corner of Abbott and Pender that is among the first of 14 affordable housing projects under development by the city and B.C. Housing.

Today it's a busy construction site, but move-in day at Sorella is May 1 and the Atira Women's Resource Society began taking housing applications on March 1.

Sorella will help fill a deep need for safe women-only housing on the Downtown Eastside, to help women get out of shelters and reclaim their kids from foster care.

"It's brand, spanking new and it will be an awesome home for women who really need it," says Janice Abbott, Atira executive director, giving a

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hard hat tour of the new building Monday.

On International Women's Day today, Atira will celebrate Sorella's opening at its fifth annual Strong Women Strong Music concert with top jazz musicians Karin Plato, Jennifer Scott, Laura Crema and Karen Graves at Ironworks.

Sorella will have 92 350-squarefoot studio apartments for single women and 12 850-sq.-ft. twobedroom apartments for women who are pregnant or have a child under two and are "involved" with the Ministry of Children and Families.

"We know there will be many more applicants than we can take because there is such an urgent need for affordable housing for women," says Abbott.

"The social system is broken, so until we fix the root causes of homelessness and violence against women and children, we will always have women who are homeless and [there will be] a need for both emergency shelters and affordable housing."

Sorella, which means sister, is a new construction on city-owned land and includes a safe, secondfloor-level enclosed outdoor play space for children.

Atira runs a dozen women-only housing projects as well as the Bridge Emergency Shelter.

Next to open will be Imouto House, which will house 18 young women aged 11 to 19 who may have been sex-trade workers or are homeless or living in unsafe housing. Many of them will have endured huge challenges, such as violence or abuse, addiction, racism, poverty, unplanned pregnancy and health issues.

Imouto, Japanese for sister, will be located at 120 Jackson St. inside a renovated former brothel.

The joint City of Vancouver/B.C. housing venture has six more affordable housing projects that will be finished this year and eight under development.

sfournier@theprovince.com

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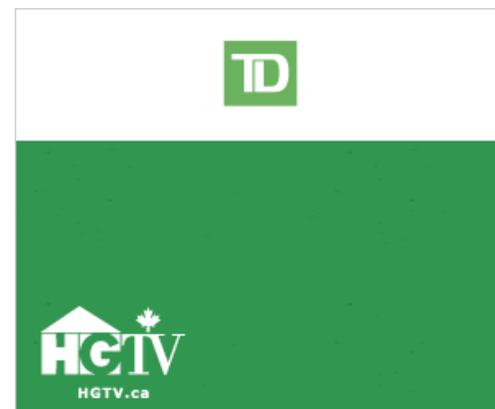
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