Healthy Homes:
Arlene Hache & Frances Wolki

Arlene Hache, outgoing Executive Director of the Centre for Northern Families, spoke with housing advocate Frances Wolki about how social media is giving rise to a new generation of activists.

Arlene Hache (AH): I think I'd start by saying that the Facebook page is totally amazing. The page that you created, and the Facebook page in Nunavut that talks about food security, are the first two community rooted responses that I've ever seen where everybody in the community has a voice. So, what made you think of the Facebook page?

Frances Wolki (FW): I thought of our housing issues a lot and how it affected our health as families. How it affected us poverty-wise – families not having enough to eat, trying to juggle their bills with their rent, and families not getting to sustain themselves to the end of the month, especially those that are on income support.

With housing there were a lot of issues with the mold, and it just did not seem like anyone was listening to us. I don't know if Yellowknife is hearing about this at all, or if any of our concerns were being raised and being responded to. I was hesitant at first [to start the page], because I know a lot of people and a lot of people know me. I wasn't sure how I was going to respond to animosity or members attacking each other on the Facebook group. Then I thought to myself that the objective was to address housing issues in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Not only that, we use the Minister responsible for housing's phone number or the Environmental Health Officer's phone number, we tell people how they could contact them and for what reasons. It basically became a site where we would be able to help people to have a voice.

I wasn't sure how it would turn out and then when I first started it I was like, "oh geez, I got this started, now what?" I was kind of getting scared at first and I started thinking, "there is no reason to be scared." A lot of the time people wanted to speak up, but then they were afraid of being evicted. That was one of their concerns was being evicted [because of] the arrears. People felt really hopeless. [Government] started blaming the people for some of the damage that accumulated from water damage and mold. That just wasn't right. People were getting really frustrated and it just didn't seem like we were getting anywhere with any of our concerns.

Under our rights, [the Crown] has a fiduciary responsibility to Aboriginal people and it is through the land claims that the Inuvialuit have an agreement with the federal government and that's to ensure that the programs and services are adequate. You do not see that in my community – just a lot of frustration, a lot of heartache. It affects the whole family. It affects the kids. Then for you to see them overcrowded after their families were evicted and they didn't feel like they had anywhere to go. They didn't feel like they had anybody to speak for them. It was getting really, really hard.

AH: What is your story?

FW: At one point, when I had gone to college in Inuvik, we had a high amount of arrears. At first, it came to $96,000 in arrears. I was scared to get evicted. Not having a home, I thought of my children and it was very hard. I had gone to college just to try to get out of that housing system because it wasn't working. People were really getting into arrears. Before I went to Inuvik, I compiled all of the stuff that [the Housing Corporation] gave me—like copies of the tenant ledgers and income subsidy reports. I was going through them and I was trying to explain to the Minister and our MLA that these numbers do not reflect each other. We submitted our income and then when you look at our tenant ledger it should have shown that we do not owe economic rent for that month. That's how it started piling up. It just kept piling up until it got to $96,000. I was trying to
stress that to the Minister by letters and by phone calls. I just wasn’t getting any results whatsoever or any responses that I was content with.

When I went back to Paulatuk, I couldn’t move into a housing unit because of our arrears. I was so stressed. I just really felt hopeless. What are we going to do? I did not believe that we owed $96,000 in reality. I managed to get them to get those balances straightened out and then we actually only ended up owing about $5,000. I started sharing some of the tenant ledgers with my MLA and I guess that’s when they started trying to push for my arrears to be cut down.

When we first got home we couldn’t live in a housing unit and it was very frustrating because we ended up living with family members. There were four of us in one bedroom. It was just so hard, I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t handle it and I couldn’t deal with it.

My dad had a house and when he passed on, we were able to move in. It was worn down and it wasn’t maintained and there were pipes that were leaking underneath, and there was a lot of mold under the kitchen cupboards and under the bathtub. We cut a piece of the drywall and we didn’t realize how black it was under there. We had no choice but to live in there because we couldn’t live with people—it was very hard and very trying. When the winter came, the fuel stove couldn’t keep us warm when we had strong blizzards. It was scary because you would smell really strong fumes and fuel in the home. That was scary because you think of fires. Then we had bought an electric heater, but that did not help either.

We all ended up sleeping in the living room and we had to use hooded sweaters underneath the blankets— it was that cold.

I was really frustrated and I would cry a lot of the time. It was very painful for me because I would think of my children’s health over mine first. That was why I didn’t believe it was right for anybody to live like that and to have your children exposed to that kind of health hazard. It was really unhealthy emotionally, mentally, and physically.

Then my daughter started having nosebleeds from the allergic reaction to the mold and that’s when I really couldn’t take it anymore. I contacted the community health representative and I asked her to take pictures [of the mold] for me and send them to the Environmental Health Officer. She did that on my behalf. The Environmental Health Officer pushed for a application, because we had been making payments for about seven months and they said that once you were consistent for six months of payments we would be eligible to move back into a hous-

Frances Wolki speaking with Arlene Hache at the Northern Governance and Economy Conference, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories.
ing unit. While we were waiting for that our Hamlet Council was nice enough to move us into their staff duplex for Christmas for two months. Boy, we felt so rich. It felt so good so good to have a home again—a healthy home.

AH: Now, how many people are on the Facebook page?

FW: When I checked there were 300 and there’s been more joining ever since this conference started up. I’m really hoping that we’ll get the attention of the people. We need the right people, the proper authorities—to deal with these problems.

AH: Three hundred is quite a few people.

FW: Yes, almost the population of my community!

AH: And there’s quite a mix of people. What kinds of people are you noticing on the Facebook page?

FW: Well, besides yourself, there’s Dennis Bevington, Ethel Blondin Andrew, and I have some of the CBC reporters and others.

AH: So, there's reporters, leaders, advocates. Who else?

FW: A lot of people who are having similar issues with housing—with the mold. They come from Inuvik and they come from smaller communities north of here. Even from Nunavut. There was a woman who just joined from Labrador. So I guess it’s really getting the news around. I’m really hoping something good will come of this, especially with devolution and with revenues coming in you know they have to really make healthy families.

AH: It was interesting hearing the talk about devolution this morning because the territorial government representative was saying that Northerners want the federal government to transfer money and responsibilities to the territorial government so Northerners can have a voice. In my experience, Northerners don’t have a voice in the territorial government. What do you make of that?

FW: It’s frustrating. It’s like, why does industry take everything out? Why haven’t they started giving some royalties back to the communities so we can have healthy homes and families?

When I found out I was coming here to this conference I was kind of scared. The Facebook group is a big thing, and things are happening all at once. It's that colonization mentality—it's kind of hard to break away from it. We teach our youth to go back to school, to step away from poverty. All we can try to do is to make our families healthier, and to get the help that they need, especially with the housing. There are a lot of issues.

Everyday since I came to this conference, I’ve been trying to keep everyone informed on the Facebook page, just to let them know that their voices are being heard. We’re just hoping right now, you know? You have to keep hopeful—that’s all we can do.

AH: What was the thing that surprised you the most: about the page, about you, about people’s response to you?

FW: At first I was kind of scared because I went to school in Grollier Hall and I knew a lot of people in all the other communities. I was scared to mediate situations on the page at first and I started thinking “geez this is really negative”. Sometimes, group members were attacking staff members of the Housing Association. That wasn’t what I wanted for the group and I had to keep reminding people the purpose of the group is not to attack people. I kept reminding people that Housing Corporation staff are just following policies, and if they don’t follow policies, they will be terminated or fired. I have seen that happen.

That tells you how much is not happening; how much is not right and right now they have terminated the housing manager so we haven’t had a housing manager for several months now, and we haven’t had a housing foreman for a year or two. The maintenance guy moved back East. Right now they have a local guy doing maintenance but he has another full-time job. These are a lot of the things we’re dealing with right now.

AH: When you were paying market rent in your community, how much was market rent?

FW: Depends on what size of home it is. Ours was $3400 a month for a three-bedroom unit with mold.

AH: In terms of what you were paying for your housing—you were paying $3400 a month—how would you rate the quality of the units for that rent on a scale from 1 to 10.

FW: Some of the newer homes are nice but the older ones that were built in the 1960s and 1970s should be torn down. The tenants that live in the older units
AH: So the people in the old houses have the same rent as the tenants in the new houses. They both pay $3400 a month?

FW: Yes. Well if they submitted their income to Housing, they'd only be charged rent that is geared to their income.

AH: It took a lot of guts for you to start the Facebook page you know, because I've watched it for years, and most people are just quiet, except among themselves. They don't say much and they don't want to cause much trouble, I find. So it took just a huge amount of courage I think, for you to do that. I'm really, really impressed and I think you should get one of those awards.

FW: Thanks. It's a big step for us. To get that attention from media and everything like that — it's a huge step and it's a voice that we all have now. The Housing Corporation and politicians have no choice but to look at the situation and try to deal with things, to consult with communities before making change and reflect the communities' needs. They should stop thinking they know what's best for us.

AH: What are you taking in school now?

FW: Social Worker Access. I would like to become a social worker. I'd like to help our youth. I worked as an Aboriginal Healing Foundation youth coordinator so I've worked with youth already. I've worked as a Brighter Futures coordinator and I've taken suicide intervention training. I like helping people. I don't like to see people suffering. With housing now, people are really suffering.

AH: I do advocacy work, so I know that it takes a lot of energy to respond to everybody — I have lots of grey hair. In my experience people often need even more support than you can give them right?

FW: Yes.

AH: Researching the response to the Facebook page would be really interesting. It would be great to know who the members are, what challenges they are facing and what the response has been because there are leaders on that Facebook page now. Have they participated on the page?

FW: None of them has expressed anything yet.

AH: So they're just watching; they haven't said anything.

FW: Someone said there was a Housing Corporation analyst that was watching the group. I told them I couldn't care less if Stephen Harper was watching — I'm not scared... When it comes to healthy homes I'm not going to be afraid of anybody. — I'm not scared... When it comes to healthy homes I'm not going to be afraid of anybody. I have all the support of the members that are in the group, and they are just as frustrated as I am. I'm just one person but there are many others who share [my frustration] in the NWT and in Nunavut.

AH: Looking at pulling all that information together into some kind of analysis — not an analysis done by the government but by an outside analyst — would be really interesting.

FW: I was flying here from Inuvik for the conference and there was a young lady on my plane who was pregnant. She had a toddler and he has really bad asthma. I was so glad that I met her because I was kind of scared, and when I saw her with her son it just gave me all the more strength and courage to come here, and really express [the concerns of the members of] this Facebook group about housing issues. She said her son’s asthma is getting worse and she received letters from doctors to move to another housing unit because of his condition. I guess they haven’t moved her, so she’s coming to Yellowknife now for medical check ups for her son and that’s going to get costly healthwise. It's going to have that effect of poor health for her family, and the cost for
[the Department of Health] is going to be going up because of doctor’s check ups and travel plus accommodation, etc.

**AH:** So those are things we have to keep any eye on—the health cost for mould and housing conditions...

**FW:** I have a fear [about my health]. My lungs and my respiratory system are not the same, especially after living in moldy units for so long. I feel a tightness—my lungs are not as healthy as they used to be. As soon as I step away from the moldy home my lungs feel like they can relax and I can breathe. And then when I am back in a moldy unit my lungs get really tight, my nostrils feel like they’re burning because they’re so dry, and I start to break out—like skin break outs—it’s really bad.

**Northern Public Affairs (NPA):** Thank you both very much. Before we wrap up, can you each think about one policy change that you would make? What is one recommendation you would say needs to happen now in order to improve the housing situation in the North?

**FW:** Give us back our authority from our board of directors and let us make our own policies that will reflect our needs and not what someone from Yellowknife is going to do for us, because they don’t know what our needs are.

**AH:** My one thing is always having an independent monitoring voice for communities, which isn’t tied to leadership and isn’t tied to the government. I believe that independent research is critical...because whoever is doing the research sets the agenda for where people are going because they use it as evidence...You can’t have independent researchers paid for by the GNWT, in my view. So my dream is always that some research can be paid for by industry or government, but you have to have an independent capacity for research.

**FW:** There’s one more thing I’d like to say about the rental officer. Rental officers are supposed to be like an adjudicator. They are supposed to be listening to both sides but when people were getting evicted in Paulatuk, the adjudicator would only believe the housing manager. People were trying to express their concerns about their moldy homes; [about] falling behind on payments, etc. The adjudicators should actually go to the communities themselves because they would see firsthand what the people are talking about. Why would they only take the housing manager’s word over the people’s? If Housing is so serious about wanting to fix things, I think they should allow that rental officer to fly into the communities with an Environmental Health Officer to really put their foot down and say, “this is enough”.

**NPA:** Thank you both so much for sitting down with us.

 אהלена הכה היא המנהלת המוקדשת של סוכנות הوفقיות נורדיים, פרמות פולקיס הוא מייסדה של "סוכנות פוליטיות נורדיים/nsicat" במון. היא מתגוררתrigesimal Paulatuk.

---

**SUBSCRIBE TODAY!**

Three issues for $28  
(plus GST/HST where applicable)

© Individual: $28  
© Institutional: $150  
(check one)

Name:  

Address:  

Community:  

Territory/Province:  

Country:  

Postal Code:  

(please include payment)

First issue mails in Winter 2013. Subscribe online at www.northernpoliticalaffairs.ca.  
Mail to: Northern Public Affairs P.O. Box 317, Stn. B, Ottawa, ON CANADA K1P 5P6
Above: A man and two dogs, Yukon, 1942.
Below: Whitehorse, Yukon, 1903-1904.