

# Aki Centre restoring tall-grass prairie

By: Sydney Hildebrandt

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PHOTO BY SYDNEY HILDEBRANDT

Alexis Nazeravich is the program co-ordinator at Aki Centre, which is restoring tall-grass prairie on more than 30 acres of land in West St. Paul (pictured here).

Less than one per cent of indigenous tall-grass prairie remains in Manitoba.

The complex ecosystem of tall-grass prairie, which includes various species of flower, grass and wildlife, has been disappearing over time as the land is transformed for agricultural and developmental purposes.

A project underway at Ozhaawashkwaa Animikii-Bineshi Aki Onji Kinimaagae' Inun, also known as Blue Thunderbird Land-based Teachings Learning Centre or simply Aki Centre, hopes to replenish some of the depleted ecosystem.

"It's one of the most endangered and least protected ecosystems (in Manitoba)," said Alexis Nazeravich, the program co-ordinator at Aki Centre.

Aki Centre, opened by the Seven Oaks School Division in 2019, is located on 49 acres of land in West St. Paul. Every day, students visit to participate in land-based and experiential learning, such as decomposition and gardening.

The land previously grew crops like oilseeds, legumes and grains, but waterlogged and saline soil stunted their growth, according to the school division's website. Before the land was used for agricultural purposes, it was home to indigenous tall-grass prairie.

In 2017, the school division launched its stewardship plan. Its goal? To enhance soil health and restore the land's natural ecology through conservation. Around 35 acres are being rehabilitated.

The centre recently received \$50,000 for the project from the province's Conservation Trust, building on the \$100,000 it received from the same organization in 2019.

Even with funding, tall-grass prairie seed is hard to come by, according to Nazeravich. They've been collecting remnants from the land and working with seed growers in Manitoba and Alberta.

"It's taken us years to just even acquire the seed and get the site prepared, so that it could be sown."

Between spring and fall last year, they planted 54 species of indigenous plants. It could take a few years before the land becomes dense with vegetation, though, especially with the recent dry conditions. But once the plants start maturing, the ecosystem will be able to sustain itself.

Not only is the project about conservation and stewardship, but it also cultivates a path towards reconciliation, Nazeravich explained, adding that the school division has worked with Indigenous Elders since before the opening of Aki Centre.

"It also helps us to share cultural and historic connections through the land.

"Land-based teachings come from Indigenous worldviews and philosophies and Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

"We learn about how Indigenous peoples from time immemorial have lived here and have taken care of the land and have a close relationship with the land ... We don't quite have that close relationship here today, there's disconnects between ourselves and the land."

The Conservation Trust funding will also support the installation of interpretive signage.

"The public also uses this site. There's three kilometers of walking trails. It's beautiful. The toboggan hill is used every night in the winter. So we want to encourage that community use of the site as well. But of course, without signage, it's hard for people to understand (the land's significance)," she said.

The Conservation Trust was established in 2018 to support activities that create, conserve, or enhance natural infrastructure in Manitoba.

The trust is held by the Winnipeg Foundation and revenues are managed by the Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation.

### **Sydney Hildebrandt**

*The Times community journalist*

If The Buggles' 1979 breakout single were about Sydney, it might be called Print Killed the Radio Star. Before she joined Canstar Community News, Sydney was an anchor and a reporter for a few local news radio stations in rural Manitoba. After realizing she enjoyed writing more than speaking, Sydney moved to Winnipeg just months after graduating from Carleton University in Ottawa with degrees in journalism and geography. Through clenched teeth and frostbitten fingers, she has come to appreciate Winnipeg — numbing winters and all. When she's not in the newsroom, Sydney can be found playing card games, listening to music, and writing content for her friends who are too cheap to hire a PR team. Sydney has a strong heart for community news and believes every neighbourhood, town and city is better off because of it — although she may be biased. Sydney loves learning about communities and what makes them tick, which is why she's grateful to be a reporter covering northwest Winnipeg neighbourhoods, where resilience and innovation is abundant. She can be reached at [sydney.hildebrandt@canstarnews.com](mailto:sydney.hildebrandt@canstarnews.com)

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