

# DIAMOND WILLOW YOUTH LODGE

## — Annual Impact Report —



**United Way**  
Calgary and Area



## Land Acknowledgment

In the spirit of our journey to promote reconciliation, we would like to honour the truth of our shared history and acknowledge Treaty 7 territory and the traditional lands of the Blackfoot Confederacy, that includes the Kainai, Siksika and Piikani First Nations.

We acknowledge the traditional lands of the Tsuut'ina First Nation and the Stoney Nakoda, including the Chiniki, Bearspaw and Goodstoney First Nations. We also recognize the Métis and Inuit people who have made their home here in Moh'kins'tsis, also known as Calgary.

**THE CONTENT WITHIN THIS REPORT IS CONSIDERED  
SMUDGED INFORMATION ACCORDING TO  
INDIGENOUS PRACTICES.**





# About Diamond Willow Youth Lodge

Many Indigenous youth in Calgary face cultural disconnection and limited access to safe, inclusive community spaces. Diamond Willow Youth Lodge (the Lodge) exists to change this.



As part of United Way of Calgary and Area's (United Way's) Akak'stiman Indigenous strategy, we partnered with Miskanawah to open the Lodge in 2018. It's a free, welcoming gathering place where Indigenous youth ages 12 to 29 can drop in to spend unstructured time with peers and trusted adults to build meaningful relationships. In addition to being a casual gathering space, the Lodge is a hub for activities and programming

specifically designed for Indigenous youth—from movie nights to traditional ceremonies and cultural workshops. These events are led by Lodge participants, an Indigenous Youth Coordinator and an Indigenous Youth Council.

The Indigenous Youth Council helps guide all Lodge programming, shaping offerings that reflect their peers' interests and backgrounds. Council members work alongside Elders creating a space for intergenerational connection and skill-sharing. This deepens their cultural knowledge and empowers them to become changemakers.

In 2024, the Lodge welcomed 304 youth, including 115 first-time visitors and recorded 1,220 total visits—a 47% increase from the previous year. This growth points to an increasing need for spaces like the Lodge, where Indigenous youth can find connection, culture and support.

## Attendees

In 2024, hundreds of Indigenous youth connected with the Lodge to build relationships and explore their identities. The following data provides a snapshot of who visited the Lodge and how they found their way there:

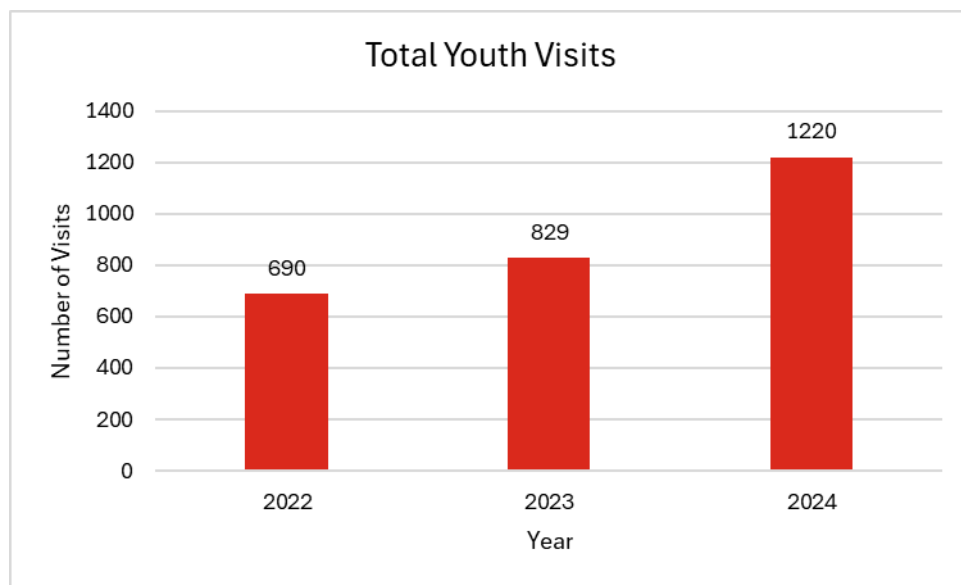
- **Age Distribution of Lodge Attendees in 2024:** 54% were aged 18 and under and 46% were aged 19 and up.

- **Cultural Identity of Lodge Attendees:** 33% First Nations, 23% Métis, 5% Inuit and 39% other.
- **How Youth Discovered the Lodge:** 51% of lodge attendees were referred by family or friends, highlighting the crucial role of family and the importance of strong kinship bonds and community support.

## Growth Over Time

Although the Lodge opened in 2018, attendance numbers during the major Covid-19 lockdown periods do not reflect normal attendance. Since 2022, the Lodge has recorded more than 2,700 youth visits and has seen a steady increase in attendance.

- **2022:** 690 total youth visits.
- **2023:** 829 total youth visits.
- **2024:** 1,220 total youth visits.



This growth reflects the Lodge's expanding reach and the important role it plays in the lives of these youth. This is only possible thanks to the generous support from donors.

# Programs

The Lodge's free, youth-led programming supports cultural connection, skill-building and relationship development. Activities range from cultural workshops like ribbon skirt making to traditional ceremonies such as Naming Ceremonies and more casual events like movie nights.

This balance is intentional—ceremonies and workshops help youth reclaim identity and cultural knowledge, while casual gatherings create low-barrier opportunities to build trust and community. Below are three examples of some impactful programming offered at the Lodge in 2024.

## Weekly Drumming and Singing Circles



Each week, youth gather for drumming and singing circles led by Siksika Knowledge Holder Skip Wolfleg, who brings more than 30 years of experience in Blackfoot Pow Wow traditions. These sessions are opportunities to learn traditional songs and hear creation stories in a supportive, low-pressure setting.

With 40 sessions and 221 total visits in 2024, this was the Lodge's most attended program, highlighting the ongoing interest youth have in reclaiming traditional knowledge.

"I find traditional drumming is a doorway or conduit to many of our Indigenous Plains Cultures. Many stories and teachings come with the drum teaching. The origins of the songs and rhythms we sing and drum today were given to us by the animal beings a long time ago. The modern Pow Wow songs are meant to heal, to educate, to introduce a young person to learn about plains culture or realize their own origins." — Skip Wolfleg

## 2 Spirit Circle



'Two-Spirit' is a term used by some Indigenous people to describe a sacred, non-binary identity that often encompasses both masculine and feminine spirits. It reflects traditional roles and understandings of gender and sexuality that existed in many Indigenous cultures long before colonization.

At Diamond Willow Youth Lodge, the 2 Spirit Circle is a space for Two-Spirit youth to gather, feast and explore both their cultural and personal identities in an affirming setting. Held Friday nights, the circle provides a positive alternative to the weekend party scene, creating room for youth to be fully themselves without judgment.

In 2024, the Lodge hosted 19 2 Spirit Circle sessions with a total of 24 participants, making it the second highest attended program of the year and underscoring the importance of consistent, identity-affirming spaces.



## Hide Camp



As part of the Lodge's 2024 summer programming, youth took part in a three-day Hide Camp led by Knowledge Holder Cory Wadsworth from Kainai First Nation. Over four sessions, 13 youth participated in learning the traditional process of scraping, preparing and stretching animal hide, gaining hands-on experience and a deeper understanding of the cultural teachings behind this skill.

"The youth are very fortunate to have places like Diamond Willow where we can come together and learn traditional skills like this." - Cory Wadsworth

"This is such an amazing opportunity for my daughter to learn about her culture since she can't learn it from family members." - Caregiver



## Community Partnerships in Action

In 2024, the Lodge also collaborated with local community organizations to create culturally grounded opportunities for youth—demonstrating that it is not only a gathering place, but an important part of Calgary’s local community.

1. **Affinity Mentorship Foundation:** Weekly life skills and mentorship programs for at-risk youth, focusing on values, identity and practical skills like budgeting and cooking.
2. **The Alex Youth Health Centre:** IndigiNight offers cultural programming - including medicine pouch making, beading, cooking and more - that’s bringing Lodge-led workshops to a wider group of urban Indigenous youth.
3. **YMCA & USAY:** Co-hosted the Indigenous Youth Hoops basketball tournament, building confidence, teamwork and visibility for athletes.
4. **Tawaw Family Resource Network:** Expanded Lodge programming into Calgary’s Northeast and Northwest quadrants, reaching youth who previously couldn't access their main location.

## Casual Gatherings

By design, not every moment at the Lodge is structured or ceremonial. In 2024, they offered a range of social and recreational activities that helped youth build friendships and simply have fun in a safe, welcoming space, including:

- Movie nights and paint nights
- Yoga and spa days
- Swimming, skating and roller skating
- Trips to The Confluence (formerly known as Fort Calgary), Telus Spark and the Royal Tyrrell Museum
- Cooking nights, pillow making and candle making
- Mini golf, basketball and park days
- Calgary Flames and Hitmen games

Whether through ceremony, art or simply spending time together, every moment at the Lodge helps youth connect with their roots and build confidence in who they are.

# Every Moment Matters

*The following story offers a powerful glimpse into what the Lodge means to the young people who walk through its doors. It's a story of finding community, culture and a sense of self in the heart of the city.*



From the moment I stepped into Diamond Willow Youth Lodge, I felt a sense of belonging that's hard to come by in a large city. I had seen a poster for a cultural workshop and decided to attend. That simple choice changed everything for me.

Living in Calgary without close family nearby can feel isolating—especially for Indigenous youth navigating life in an urban centre. Cultural connection, community and accessible programming are hard to come by. The Lodge filled a gap I didn't realize existed until I found myself surrounded by people who understood and accepted me for who I am.

At the Lodge, I learned traditional crafts like beading and ribbon skirt making, and discovered a welcoming network of peers, elders and staff. I can show up exactly as I am and be welcomed every time, which is rare to find as a Two-Spirit, Queer Indigenous person in Alberta.

The Lodge has given me a renewed sense of purpose. I no longer feel alone in the city. I know I'm part of a community that sees my potential and lifts me up. Places like these are mental, physical and spiritual lifelines. I am endlessly grateful that it exists, and I hope every Indigenous youth living in an urban setting has access to a space like this.

# Thank You to our Donors

**Diamond Willow Youth Lodge is made possible thanks to our generous donors. Your support helps keep the Lodge a trusted, welcoming space rooted in culture and community and empowers local Indigenous youth to thrive.**

**The following donors have made multi-year, cumulative contributions of \$100,000 or more to Diamond Willow Youth Lodge, including a gift of \$10,000 or more in 2024:**

## **Legacy of Relatives**

TransAlta

## **Keepers of Kindness**

McCarthy Tétrault

## **Grandparents**

Richard & Cathy Bird

Fluor Canada Ltd.

## **Donor Spotlight**

Longtime supporters like Richard and Cathy Bird, of The Ptarmigan Charitable Foundation, play a vital role in sustaining and expanding core programs that create opportunities for Indigenous youth to connect, grow, and thrive.

“We’ve been proud to support Diamond Willow Youth Lodge for a number of years and we’re thrilled to see the continued positive impact it has on youth and the broader community. Our support stems from a deep belief in the power of culturally grounded, youth-led initiatives—and the Lodge exemplifies this through its diverse programming and commitment to accessibility. Importantly, it creates vital spaces for connection, cultural learning and a sense of belonging—all of which reflect the values at the heart of The Ptarmigan Charitable Foundation’s mission to empower Indigenous youth. We look forward to seeing even more young people thrive through the Lodge.”

– Richard and Cathy Bird (The Ptarmigan Charitable Foundation)

*A special thank you to the Miskanawah Community Services Association for permission to share the vibrant stories and photographs contained in this document.*