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Volunteer Daniela Howlett of London enjoys watching a game of Musical Shoes with Lan Tran, 7, left, and Savooun Chhom, 5, during a summer afternoon program for Vietnamese and

Cambodian children at the Church of Christ on Huron Street. The eight-week program was organized by the Northeast London English-as-a-Second-Language committee.

## Program offers time to dream

In a community where many new Canadians must live in chronically poor housing, an afternoon program invites them to think of ways to improve their lot.

**E**VERY WEEKDAY AFTERNOON, Syvan Nov, his two brothers and sister tumble out of their crowded Cheyenne Avenue apartment to share a little Cambodian culture — and give their parents a break.

"My dad takes care of us in the morning and my mom takes care of us in the afternoon," says Syvan, a rambunctious-looking eight-year-old.

The arrangement is not an uncommon one among Cambodian families whose children swarm into an afternoon summer program at the non-denominational Church of Christ on London's Huron Street.

**NURTURING SPACE:** The program began two weeks ago "to provide something for kids that isn't just recreational but also nurtures the children and is sensitive to their own cultural needs," says Reverend Susan Eagle, chairperson of the Northeast London English-as-a-Second-Language committee.

But through the supervision of children playing Cambodian games on a dusty, paper-strewn field, organizers hope to have a more lasting effect on a community marred by chronically poor housing conditions.

### STREETSIDE



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By Lynn Marchildon/The London Free Press

discuss how to permanently improve apartments plagued by leaky taps and screenless windows that tenants have no choice but to open on sweltering summer days.

**MAKING CHOICES:** "We're inviting people to dream a little bit about what kind of a community they'd like to have," Eagle says. She says options include leaving the buildings as they are, buying and restoring them, or bulldozing the buildings and starting over.

Bulldozing would require city approval and money from the provincial housing ministry. Eagle says she's convinced there's public support to redevelop the land.

She says taxpayers already foot an enormous bill for public servants who are constantly ordering and monitoring repairs to the buildings.

The owner of 95 and 105 Cheyenne has been fined at least twice for failure to comply with improvement orders. In 1988, the owner of 88 Cheyenne was charged with failure to comply with an earlier improvements order.

"There's a racist and classist thing at work saying, 'poor people, it's the best they deserve, they can take what they get,'" Eagle says. "So repairs aren't done and when they are done, they're done badly. And people wait a long time."

Eagle says the idea for the program was sparked by a racial clash in the neighborhood involving a landlord, a tenant and a child, which is still in the courts.

Elijah Elieff, owner of 95 and 105 Cheyenne, said he was unaware of the program and would wait to read the tenants' suggestions.

In 1989, Elieff blamed his Cambodian tenants for the poor state of the buildings, calling them "little pigs" who think "they're still living in the jungle."

"When you simply dump people on top of each other in crowded, ghetto-like housing conditions, you can expect you're going to have problems," says Eagle, who hopes Cheng's project will educate tenants about their rights and inspire them to work collectively.

**CULTURAL AID:** While the larger issue of cultural co-operation will take time, Theng says the afternoon program, attracting children aged four to 13, is already starting to smooth out cultural differences.

During the program's first week Vietnamese-speaking children avoided talking to Cambodian-speaking kids and sat at opposite ends of the table to color, says Theng, 22, a Fanshawe College nursing student.

"Now, I see it's really improved," says Theng, pointing to two little girls, one Cambodian, the other Vietnamese, chattering away as they leave the church basement.