

## Chamber applauds non-profit developer

Written by Shaina Brassard, West Broadway Coalition  
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*Mike Wynne and EMERGE latest caretakers of 120 year-old North Minneapolis cultural asset*

Mike Wynne, President and CEO of EMERGE Community Development, accepted an award on behalf of EMERGE for Non-Profit of the Year at the Minneapolis Chamber's Best in Business luncheon earlier this month. EMERGE, dedicated to "creating a community where people have the freedom and mutual support to thrive," was recognized by the Chamber for the non-profit's success in four focus areas: community development, staffing, villages (housing), and workforce development.

Established in 1995, EMERGE got its start as an independent nonprofit on the strength of its innovative alternative staffing enterprise that combines a temporary staffing business platform with supportive services to help people enter and advance in the workforce.



Beyond working to build careers for people with barriers to employment, Wynne's board and staff have also taken on projects that promote neighborhood revitalization through the renovation of historic buildings on the West Broadway corridor in North Minneapolis. Wynne explains that the "community" referred to in its vision statement is made up of places as well as people.

In 2007, EMERGE acted as a co-developer of a highly successful commercial redevelopment of a long abandoned property at 1101 West Broadway, which now serves as EMERGE headquarters along with the very popular neighborhood cafe, Avenue Eatery.

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After an ambitious multi-year \$6.5 million capital campaign that began in 2008, EMERGE is preparing to launch the EMERGE Career and Technology Center (ECTC). The Career and Technology Center is envisioned first and foremost as a community space, and will include training classrooms, meeting and conference facilities, office space and a digital access center equipped with computers, WiFi, printing services, and other amenities. "We want it to be very open on the first floor especially, so when you enter and sign in, you feel at home. We want people to feel like it belongs to the community," said Wynne.

The historic former North Branch Library was chosen as the site for the ECTC and extensive renovations are well underway. The historic building, which sits just to the southeast of EMERGE headquarters, has been a valuable community asset for over a century.

The North Branch Library opened in 1894 and was not only the first community library in Minneapolis, but is recognized by many as the nation's first open shelf library, meaning patrons could browse open shelves of books on their own without having to ask librarians to retrieve them. While it doesn't seem very significant now, what made the transition to an open shelf system so important was that it empowered people to explore all of the library's resources, not just those they already knew of. At the turn of the century, the North Branch Library set a precedent for the expansion of the Minneapolis Public Library system.

Upon its closing in 1979, the North Branch was placed on the National Register of Historic Places given its cultural significance. It was then occupied by a local arts group into the late 1980s. During that time Fred Keller, the owner of a boiler repair business that had serviced the building over the years, noticed that it was falling into some disrepair. As a neighborhood resident, he much admired the building and knew from professional experience that such structures require a great deal of upkeep, likely more than the arts group had the capacity to oversee.

As Wynne relates, Mr. Keller spoke with members of the arts organization and "offered to take it off their hands," and look after the historic building that residents, preservationists, artists, and others came to be so fond, and also protective of. After purchasing the library around 1990, he used it for storage for his business while maintaining building upkeep and preservation. In the early 2000s, Vernon and Alean Burks, two other residents who had grown up visiting North Branch Library, bought the property from Keller and took on caretaking duties out of the desire to protect what they saw as an irreplaceable asset.

"All three of them were African American and longtime members of this community; they live only blocks from here, and wanted to see the building kept up enough until it could eventually be returned to the community," says Wynne of Keller and Mr. and Mrs. Burks. They replaced the roof and attended to other vital issues, and with their care and presence prevented it from incurring the devastating weather damage and copper theft that render so many vacant properties beyond saving.

After observing the revitalization of 1101 West Broadway, the Burks approached EMERGE in late 2008 about doing a similar project with the library. Shortly thereafter, they sold the property to EMERGE at a profit, proving that investing in one's community can also be a sound fiscal

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investment.

There is a satisfying full circle quality to the North Branch Library's life as a community asset. EMERGE plans to have a broad range of training offerings at the ECTC, from financial literacy to specialized courses on healthcare and construction-related careers. Wynne explained, "We're really excited to have a space where partners can come and do training," as opposed to sending EMERGE clients to different locations all over the metro area. Many of EMERGE's clients lack access to transportation, so having these resources close by helps to eliminate another obstacle to reaching their employment and career goals.

When 1834 Emerson Ave N opens its doors again this autumn as the EMERGE Career and Technology Center, a beautiful historic structure and symbol of everyday Northsiders' devotion to community will once again be a bustling hub of knowledge and collective growth.



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