

## WEAC at 30: a safe haven under stress

### EDMONTON CITY CENTRE CHURCH CORPORATION

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Entering the second-floor common room of the Women's Emergency Accommodation Centre (WEAC) one crisp winter morning, I discover it's not easy to break into the action, even this early in the day. A few women lie on the hard floor, others sit in the equally hard chairs. The most urgent congest in a knot around the office, leaning over the split door whose open top forms the window to medications, shampoo, bus tickets—and a telephone that's in obvious demand. My presence adds to an already long to-do list for the staff.

regulations that set a maximum sleeping capacity of 75. Through it all, the number of frontline caregivers normally on duty has stayed constant at two.

The shelter accepts all women and transgender individuals, including many discharged directly from Alberta Hospital, detox programs and police custody. "When they fail in all the other programs, they come here," says Tanya Tellier, who became shelter manager two years ago. Yet she sees WEAC not as an end, but as a potential beginning. "All of these women are more than capable of learning and being responsible and accountable for their own actions," she says, "but many of them didn't have fair start from the get-go and that's a life skill they haven't acquired."

Marking its 30th anniversary this year, WEAC is serving Edmonton's expanding homeless population with limited resources—and showing the strain. When moved to the historic Jasper Avenue flatiron building known as the Gibson Block a decade ago, the shelter had 50 beds, up from 36 at its 10015-105A Avenue location. Now a typical night finds 66 clients in beds, nine on mats, perhaps another half dozen or more in the common room, kept awake by fire

To challenge habits ingrained by oft-tumultuous childhood and life on the street, shelter staff employ what Tellier terms "a little bit of tough love." A client found using drugs onsite is suspended for a week, for example, while anyone dealing drugs or becoming violent loses her bed or mat for a month. Besides moving some women toward that big step of finding a home in the community, consistent consequences make WEAC a safer place, the manager says. "Every woman who walks through that door is in some type of desperate situation, and by God she is not going to be further victimized when she comes into this shelter."

attempting to put addictions behind by tapping such resources as AADAC and KIS (Keep It Simple), a sobriety club that meets at the shelter. "I'm at the point now where I can't relapse no more," she says, "but it's hard to say 'no' around here, so I fall back and lose my bed."

Like many who come, Unknown resisted staying at WEAC. "I always thought this place was for people who sleep in cardboard boxes," she recalls. What's more, the flatiron building holds dark memories from her teens, when she was renting one of its then-ramshackle rooms while selling her body for drugs. Now she says it's the right place to be at the moment, both for herself and for others. "Some I knew years ago are very ill now, so basically I try to support them, be there for them. And I help out wherever I can. I always learned from my elders 'If you can't put bread and butter on the table, run a mop.'"

Among clients who've suffered consequences, Unknown (as she asks to be called) began sniffing glue at age five to block out an abusive mother and entered prostitution as a pre-teen. Now a mother of seven living with both Hepatitis C and Tuberculosis, she is

Onsite two days a week to provide counselling, Pegi says her records tell a tale of skyrocketing mental illness and addiction among clients, often in combination. Forty-



five per cent are diagnosed with such illnesses as schizophrenia while many others show symptoms including hallucinations, paranoia and explosive anger. "Being homeless is a stressful situation, never mind all the things that happened to make these women homeless," she observes, ticking off such realities as childhood sexual assault, abusive relationships, fetal alcohol effects and trampled self esteem. "It doesn't take much to put them over the edge." Death invades all too often, typically through drug overdose. "Sometimes the family comes in and takes the body away, and we're left with nothing," Pegi says. "But we are the last family they had." Onsite memorial services are important then, offering a time to remember and mourn.

Understanding and hope are key to working here. "I've done an awful lot of my own stuff, so when these girls feel they're going crazy, I know how it feels," Pegi says. "That makes a difference to them. They know there is hope." Miracles do happen, she adds, sometimes in the most unlikely people. "But you couldn't stay here if that's what you stayed for. Mostly, I'm providing a bit of comfort at the time."

Come morning, some women go out to work, pick bottles, sell sex or simply wander while others remain inside, too fearful, sick or lethargic to leave. As evening nears, the common room fills with bodies and smoke, the TV blares—and tempers flare. "It gets too packed and the claws are out," Unknown says. "It's really scary, especially when you're trying to get out of that street atmosphere."

Simply having another room to smoke, talk and play games "would ease that tension a lot," says Sheila, who turned to the shelter when a job as live-in nanny evaporated, and finds her training in early childhood education and massage therapy useful here.

"You can't force change on anyone, and the moment you try, that person will run the other way. If they recognize themselves that there is a need for change, we help them develop a fail-proof plan of action that takes into account all of their barriers. Even then, the success rate is so small. It's difficult for anybody to face their own internal demons, never mind when you're coping with mental illness compounded by addictions and the state of being homeless." – Tanya Tellier, WEAC Manager

The shelter did have other gathering spots, but most now hold beds. Meanwhile, the basement remains underused due to lack of staff to safely supervise that space. "I just feel there are so many women with so many needs that are not being met at all," adds Sheila, "Staff can't always cope because they're stressed out, too."

"We're stuck between a rock and a hard place," affirms Tellier, who sees frustration build as women jostle for space, eat on the cheap and wait in line for attention. Yet she remains determined to welcome any woman who needs help while providing the supports that enable some to move to a better place.

Beyond the room and board it is mandated to provide, WEAC has hired outreach workers Muriel and Trudy. They introduce clients to inner city services and advocate on their behalf in courtrooms, rental negotiations, social service offices and numerous other arenas where the very presence of a professional results in better treatment. In addition, WEAC's two resident supervisors, Linda and Joyce, have begun working one-on-one with clients to develop realistic action plans then apply the mix of toughness and love that promotes follow-through. "In all honesty, we aren't changing these

women," Tellier says. "But if they recognize themselves there is need for change, we help them by pouncing on that small window of opportunity and hooking them up with the resources they need."

Beyond the 66 individuals it is funded to serve, WEAC opens its door to as many as 110 a day, including dozens who no longer sleep here but come back for meals, showers, friendship, counselling or a few hours out of the cold. "It is a big, scary, lonely world out there, and for many of these individuals, all they have are their street sisters," Tellier says. "Without further support, they were sabotaging themselves once they moved into the community. So now we do whatever we can to walk with them down the road, month by month, until they're comfortable and confident in their ability to maintain their own independent environment."

Clients who scrape together enough cash and resolve for a home of their own typically have no furnishings and live on as little as \$450 a month in provincial assistance. Besides lending money for damage deposits, WEAC gathers care packages of pots, pans, used bedding and other supplies. One resident at another ECCCC facility even reached into her own meagre closet to offer



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### Tickets

\$40 in advance

\$50 at the door

mitts, hat and a scarf. The shelter also works out third-party rental agreements, ensuring that the first portion of a woman's income goes directly to the landlord to keep the roof over her head.

Through that mix of efforts, as many as 25 clients a month are moving to homes in the community. "Once they've had a small taste of that success and see what true independence is, that freedom fuels their fire to succeed," Tellier says. "Now they have no curfew, and they're welcome to invite guests, and they can sit and smoke a joint in their living room if they want."

Yet the pressure builds as those 25 are replaced by up to 50 women a month who have never used the shelter before. As a result, says Betty Hamilton, a caregiver for 24 years, "We just don't have enough time for the clients."

Given client-caregiver ratios as dramatic as 1:50, Tellier marvels at what the shelter is able to accomplish. "Everybody underneath this roof has to cope with our incredibly high numbers, and we're working with individuals who don't have a heck of a lot to be happy about in their lives," she muses. "It's a lot easier for them to cope with their circumstances when they're able to blame those on everyone else around them. That's the burden that these staff have to bear."

Additional funding for supervisors and care workers would ease the crunch, as would a separate facility for transgender individuals who now have nothing but a mat on WEAC's laundry room floor, Tellier says. More space for women is also needed, but not necessarily in shelters, she adds. "Edmonton could build another shelter and it would fill up, but that's not the solution to assisting these women."

Instead, Tellier envisions a greater array of semi-independent homes, where onsite staff could take over the task of helping these women cope. "A lot of our ladies, because of their physical and mental disabilities, may never be capable of supporting themselves independently, so it's a matter of trying to hook them up with supportive living environments," she says. "But finding the right space at the right time is always a problem."

Society may look at her clients as undeserving, she adds, but "they are absolutely beautiful, especially once you peel away all the outer layers that they've had to develop for their own survival."

## How you can help

- Donate food, particularly fruits, vegetables and desserts.
- Donate underclothes, mitts, socks, pillows, shampoo, conditioner, towels.
- Help in the kitchen.
- Socialize over cards, games, crafts.
- Help women learn software, write resumes, access the internet.
- Volunteer wherever you're needed.

## WEAC by the numbers

- About 50 new women move in each month and 25 move out.
- Ages vary from 18 to 85, with most between 31 and 40.
- Slightly less than half are First Nations.
- Fire regulations limit sleeping capacity to 75.
- In addition to the 45 per cent diagnosed as mentally ill, staff suspect most have undiagnosed mental illnesses including Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and manic depression.
- Onsite medical clinic run by Boyle McCauley Health Centre sees high rates of TB, HIV, Hepatitis B & C, injury and infection.
- WEAC is staffed by 21 persons, including cooks, maintenance workers, caregivers and a management team of eight.
- Partial funding comes from Alberta Seniors, the remaining is made up from donations to Edmonton City Centre Church Corporation.

Sheila echoes that appreciation, noting that life at the shelter has put her in touch with individuals she would never have met in suburbia. "I was quite prejudiced against hookers and drug addicts," she says. "Now I know a lot personally, and they're good people. I still get angry with some who come in really drugged up and make it hard for everybody else, but now I understand."

Like Tellier, Sheila dreams of a shelter with even greater capacity to heal rather than simply hold. In her vision, cottages cluster around a central eating place containing several recreation rooms, all set amid beautiful grounds. Each cottage has at least one trained caregiver, and meals include plenty of fruits and vegetables, items in short supply on today's low-budget menu.

Perhaps it's the lack of fruit and evening snacks that spawned this morning's dream, in which Sheila made crispy squares dotted with raisins while playfully fending off shelter mates eager to test the results. "Everybody was getting along. It was a happy family scene, a good feeling," she relates. "Then Betty woke me up and said she needed me to talk to you."

In penance, I offer hope that her dreams will come true. "Well," she responds, "I can ask the kitchen if I can make rice crispy squares with raisins in."

*Cheryl Mahaffy*

# ArtStart kids camp-out courtesy of Tim Horton's

What do you get when you combine 6 dozen kids with thousands of cups of coffee? No, not the longest day of hyperactivity ever recorded, but a fun filled weekend at Tim Horton's Children's Ranch. The ranch sits amid 150 acres of beautiful Kananaskis wilderness in the Canadian Rockies. This year Tim Horton's raised six million dollars on their annual Camp Day, enough to send more than 9000 kids to camp at no cost to their families.

Thirteen ArtStart participants between the ages of 8 and 12 joined campers from Saskatchewan, Quebec, New Brunswick, and elsewhere for a jam-packed camping experience July 10th to 12th. They left the familiar comforts of the city to sleep in teepees, make new friends, experience nature, and learn new skills such as rock climbing, horseback riding, archery, and swimming.

Jacqueline Biollo, director of ArtStart, three volunteers, and two of the camp's counselors provided the support and nurturing required to help the children overcome fears and learn more about themselves during this experience of a lifetime. Some tears were shed amidst the laughter as the campers faced new challenges and unfamiliar experiences. Everyone left camp with many stories and memories that will be with them forever.

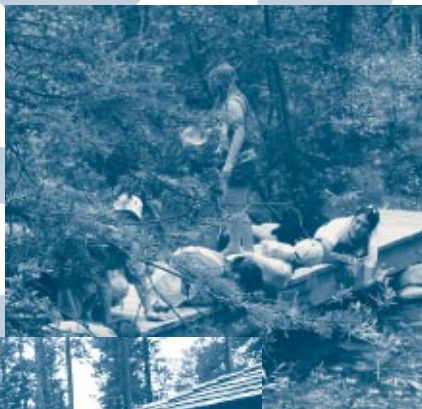
Tim, an ArtStart volunteer, will remember "how the students worked as a team to do our presentation for the 'no talent show'. Everyone was involved in making posters and learning the routine to make our

ArtStart dance creative and successful." He will also not soon forget seeing some of the kids eat tadpoles!

For nine-year-old Isabella Bustamante this was the first time away from home. She was much too busy having fun to be homesick. She loved trying out the paddleboats on the lake and flying down the slip and slide (a long plastic strip placed on a hill with water on it to make it super slippery). Each camper was given a colored bead to take home as a keepsake at the end of the weekend. Isabella's was yellow, which represented having a positive attitude and being part of a team.

Thank you to everyone who made this possible. Especially, Jacqueline says, the kids "who did ArtStart proud—for it is through them, their eyes, their experiences, that one truly appreciates what an experience like this does for the soul. Watching them come out of their shells, encourage each other, and overcome barriers was amazing."

*Christine Dober*



## Items Needed

### ECCCC is looking for donated items to assist their clients

- Infant/Toddler Car Seats and Cribs (CSA approved)
- Vacuum Cleaners
- Microwaves
- Disposable Diapers (all sizes)
- Baby Wipes
- Kitchen "starter" items (pots, dishes, can openers, etc)
- Freezer, Washing Machine & Fridge

### ArtStart needs volunteers and related supplies such as:

- Dance slippers (ages 5-10)
- Art supplies
- Musical instruments (Wind, brass, piano, etc.)
- White glue
- Scissors
- Plastercene
- Coloured sand
- Glass baby food jars (with lids)
- Flower and/or vegetable seeds
- Baby oil

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