

A love letter to transition house workers

December 6, 2010

By Anne Davis

HSA member and transition house worker

The call comes late at night. A woman is weeping; she says she has been beaten. Its not the first time and the attacks are more brutal each time. She is hurting and scared and doesnt know what to do. She thought her children were sleeping but now she knows the oldest child was awake and listening; he is also hurting and scared. Her partner has stormed out of the house; she doesnt know when he will return or what his mood will be when he does. She doesnt know what to do.

The woman who receives the late night crisis call is a support worker at Lilli House here in Courtenay, or at any one of the hundreds of other transition houses across Canada. She is on her third night shift in a row; this is one of many similar calls she has received this week. When the phone rang, she was drinking tea with a resident who couldnt sleep because the flashbacks were so bad. The other residents have finally settled for the night, though one child has been having nightmares.

The woman on the phone decides its not safe at home; not for her and not for her children. She isnt sure if she is ready to leave for good this time, but she knows she needs some space to think about things and to talk to someone about the kids and whats best for them. Shes scared that her partner will wreck her belongings when he finds shes gone, but shes more scared about what he will do to her when he comes home.

The support worker sends a taxi. When the family arrives, she helps carry the sleepy children into the house and settle the little ones into bed. The oldest child wont leave his mothers side and needs assurance that the house is really safe; he wants to see the locks, the alarm system and the video cameras. A brief intake is completed, toothbrushes are handed out, and finally the oldest child agrees to go to bed.

And then the woman cries. She cries and cries while the support worker sits with her and listens to the tale of a heart that is broken and promises that, in the morning, a child support worker will be there for her children and that she will be supported in whatever choices she makes about her future.

At the end of her shift, the support worker sits with her co-worker who is coming in on day shift and briefly goes over all the crisis calls she received in the night, as well as the nights intakes of women and children. It wasnt an unusual shift, but the support worker was saddened by the grief of the woman who cried in the night and she was troubled by the hyper vigilance of the oldest child. The co-worker agrees to alert the child support worker about that childs need for reassurance and, very likely, a safety plan for the future.

Shift after shift, month after month, year after year, the support worker hears stories of violence, trauma, grief and loss, sometimes with horrific details. She cannot share any of that information outside of the workplace; its confidential and could potentially endanger lives. In many ways her work is invisible in the larger community and cant be talked about, except in very general terms. She cant share these stories at home, even anonymously, without risking trauma to her own beloved partner and family. She can access some support from her co-workers and her supervisor; they understand, but they are also carrying their own share of stories. She can access counseling when the burden becomes too great and sometimes thats exactly what she does.

But the support worker also hears stories of great strength and resilience and she witnesses moments of pure joy ... the joy of a woman who has had her first night of uninterrupted sleep in weeks, the joy of a woman rediscovering who she is, the joy of a mother and child spending time together without feeling afraid, the joy of a group of women letting go of all the stress for an evening while they share popcorn and laughter around the kitchen table.

Over the years, the support worker builds her toolbox of knowledge and skills. She becomes an expert in a field that she cant really talk about. And, shift after shift, year after year, the support worker keeps coming back because she cares passionately about this work and she knows it matters.

December is the month when we remember the 14 women who were murdered at LEcole Polytechnique on December 6, 1989, as well as the over 500 missing and/or murdered aboriginal women in Canada, and all women who have died as a result of male violence against women.

Here in Courtenay, the Comox Valley Transition Society set up the annual Shoe Memorial on the plaza of the Comox Valley Art Gallery on Dec. 6, from 10 am ... 4 pm. Rows of empty womens shoes, many containing cards with information about murdered women, are a mute testimonial to the ongoing violence. In the evening, there was candlelight vigil on the Court House lawn

Memorials such as these take place all across Canada on Dec. 6. The B.C. Federation of Labour, the Canadian Labour Congress, and individual unions are very involved in these memorials and in raising public awareness about the ongoing human rights issue of violence against women. Many of the workers in transition houses are represented by unions and we appreciate that support. We also appreciate the ways our unions support us in achieving reasonable working conditions, given how difficult the work is and the toll it can take.

The memorials are public events; everyone is welcome to join in. The work in transition houses is private and confidential, but lives are saved every day by the support workers in those transition houses. This column is my love letter to those workers.

Type:

[Bulletins](#)

Topic:

[Issues, Campaigns and Government Relations](#)

[Events](#)

- [Print](#)
- [PDF](#)

180 East Columbia
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website
www.hsabc.org

Telephone 604-517-0994
1-800-663-2017