

BULLETIN

Breaking the cycle of abuse

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or a woman escaping abuse, North Island Transition Societys Ann Elmore House offers safe haven ... and the skilled, empathetic aid of transition house workers like Charity Perrault.

Charity Perrault Transition House Worker Chief Steward Ann Elmore House, North Island Transition Society
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Perrault was drawn to front-line support work from early life experience. She grew up in dysfunctional family circumstances in the First Nations community of Alert Bay.

-My mom was an alcohol and drug addict. My parents separated when I was three, and when I was six I went to live with my father," Perrault said.

-Then, when I was 11, my life changed again. My dad put me in custody of my grandmother in Prince Rupert.

-My grandparents ... actually, not my biological grandparents, but my stepmothers parents ... were amazing people. I spent two very formative years with them, and for that Im grateful. Its where I learned that people who were not biologically related could still form a strong, heartfelt family bond," she added.

However, this stable and loving relationship couldnt quite contain Perraults rebellious behaviour as she moved into adolescence.

-I started misbehaving," Perrault said. -Granny couldnt handle me and so dad took me back. But I ran away from my dads home and went to live with my mom. She was still drinking; we fought; I ran away from home."

At that point ... Perrault was 13 ... she began to get involved in relationships and had two children within two years.

Its not what most people would call an auspicious start. But at about the time Perrault had her first child, there was an important change in her family.

-My mom began AA and quit drinking and drugging. Shes been clean and sober now for 15 years," said Perrault proudly. However, the cycle of dysfunction still had Perrault in its grip. In her early teens she got into an abusive relationship.

-Thats the experience that helps me relate to the women in the transition house. It was very extreme, and I know these things happen on a regular basis," she said.

Perrault can remember the exact moment everything changed for her.

-I was at my moms with the kids. One side of my face was all swollen up. My son Devin was leaning on my chair, his face in his hands. I opened my one good eye and looked at him and he said, "Mom, when is he going to stop hitting you? And I thought, what the heck am I doing? Im showing my children that its okay to be hit," she said. In that moment Perrault decided to change her life.

Perrault credits her step-grandparents with teaching her values that helped her through this transition.

-My grandmother was a person with strong family values and morals," she said. -She believed you had to graduate and look after your family, no matter what."

Perrault moved away from her abusive partner and arranged for both of them to get treatment before continuing a live-in relationship. But when he began drinking again, she knew it was over.

Perrault got on with creating the life she wanted. She enrolled in North Island College where she completed grades eight to 12 and earned her Secretary and Office Assistant Certificate. She then went on to complete the Human Service Worker Diploma Program in Alert Bay.

Perraults first job was as a Child and Family Support Worker for the Namgis First Nation in her home town of Alert Bay, working with troubled teens, pregnant single moms, and victims of abuse. This job taught her how to defuse crisis in action.

After a couple of years, Perrault decided Alert Bay was not the right place for her family at that time.

-I wanted to give my children more options and opportunity in their lives," she said. Perrault wanted to stay close to home, so she chose Campbell River, just a two-hour drive away.

The position at Ann Elmore House seemed a natural choice. The facility provides a safe home and many kinds of support for women escaping abuse. Perrault feels her life lessons have given her the understanding and empathy needed for the job.

As a support worker, Perrault needs to get to know each woman, gain her trust, and understand her physical and psychological needs. She provides one-on-one support and advocates for the woman with outside agencies.

Perrault said the job brings great rewards: -When I hear a woman express happiness with her life once shes not in an abusive relationship, I think, "Oh my god, I was a part of that!"

However, she also has moments of frustration. Perrault knows that many of the women she works with end up back in abusive relationships.

-A lot of people will go back because they cant afford to be on their own, or their kids are hungry," she said. Its not the women who are to blame, but rather the inadequacies of government programs and policies, she explained.

-How do you expect women to be self sufficient if they have to wait four weeks for income assistance, or do a job search when they dont have childcare?" she said.

Still, Perrault only has to look at her own life to be reminded that change is possible. She has a third child with her partner of nine years. Her family is stable, loving, and supportive of her work.

-I have broken the historical cycle," Perrault said. -My youngest child will never know what its like to live on welfare or witness abuse in his home."

Thanks in part to the stable foundation her family provides, Perrault is able to manage a busy, and rich, life. As well as working on-call at Ann Elmore House, she has been HSA Chief Steward since February 2004. She recently began a new job as a First Nations Educational Assistant for the school district. As well, shes planning to pursue a degree in social work through correspondence courses at North Island College.

Perraults goal is to keep working with people in crisis, and continue to give to her community and her colleagues with an empathy born from experience. 

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