

Outspoken advocate feels at home in HSA

December 1, 2003

The Report: December 2003 vol.24 num.6

by YUKIE KURAHASHI



ithin the first minute of meeting Suzanne Bennett, you might not think [passionate union activist] or [tireless community social services advocate.] You would probably think [ecstatic young grandma.] In the subsequent five or six minutes, you'd realize that Suzanne Bennett is all these, and more.

Suzanne Bennett Chief Steward & Member-at-Large Youth Addictions Counsellor John Howard Society
--

Bennett brings a psychiatric nursing background to her work as a youth addictions counsellor at the John Howard Society in Courtenay. She also works in the school suspension program. [That's where kids who get suspended for using substances at school are required to come to me for two counselling appointments,] she said. [I've had a big influx of them lately, so I've been very busy. In the other part of my caseload, I do assessment and treatment for young people who are wanting to get off drugs or alcohol,] she explained.

[By far the most prevalent cases [in the suspension program] are those involving marijuana. I interview them to find out a little more about them [do they have any past involvement with drugs or alcohol?] she said.

[I share with them information from various studies, to try to dispel myths about marijuana. All the time that I'm talking with them, I'm assessing whether or not I think that this incident is a fairly isolated one. Are they in an experimental stage and there's nothing to worry about? Or is the incident an example of a bigger problem? In which case I end up inviting them to come back, and then I will do more in-depth assessments with them,] she said.

[I just love working with young people,] she said. [Speaking a bit selfishly, they keep me vitalized as well, you know. I'm enormously grateful and respectful that these kids allow me to step into their lives,] she added. [I've been working with youths since I was a university student, and I can't see myself ever doing anything else.]

And it's not hard to see why. Bennett is an active listener. Even while being interviewed, she asks incisive questions and she listens. In her daily life as a social activist, she listens, and then she acts.

Recognizing her energy and acumen, Bennett's colleagues at John Howard Society have repeatedly elected her chief steward. In addition, for several years, she has served as one of HSA's members at large for Region 1.

Her speech quickens as she talks about the current bargaining in the community social services sector. [Four

years ago, we made our first, historical, real step towards having a master agreement in community social services," she said.

"It was just the most amazing time – we were new to being organized in a union, and it was the first time we ever took job action, and I think people's pride has increased around being in this field and doing their work. Because there was acknowledgement in that agreement about our value," she said.

"We've had this feeling of optimism, that finally we're getting our due – that we're being recognized – that we do perform really important work that requires skills. And recognition comes in the salary that you get, in the benefits that you can enjoy. We've been making great strides; everyone in the community benefits when people are well paid."

But Bennett sees that optimism fading in the face of the provincial government's hostile approach to public sector bargaining. "We went on strike and won job security, and now that's been taken away from us by the government," she said.

"There's a feeling of, 'my God, are we going to lose all those things we fought so hard for?' And it's totally demoralizing to think we might lose what we've worked so hard to gain. Why should we have to negotiate for things we already won four years ago?" she said. "I have great faith in our representatives at the bargaining table, and I will support them any way I can."

Bennett is equally incensed at the short-sighted cuts the government is making to various social service programs. "Cutting preventative and outreach programs make no sense," she said. "This government doesn't seem to see that they will pay more in the long run."

She cites as examples programs that have recently been cut because of funding cuts at John Howard Society. "We had a very effective community action program for the North Island which got axed last year. This was a program where young people who were out of school, but were finding it difficult to get established in training or careers, could get in touch with a co-ordinator who could facilitate their access to training," she said. With that support gone, youths are left to turn to social assistance or other, more desperate measures.

"We also had an excellent Aboriginal family support program that was curtailed last year," she said. "These are well-established, excellent programs that are being cut with little regard to where people can turn."

And what about union activism? "Oh!" she exclaimed. "That's when I come alive! I love my job, but this is something that also touches my soul," she said. "I was born in Wales, so when I think of unions I have these images of my ancestors – the Welsh miners – you know, I hear them; I see them.

"When I was at university I went to hear Tommy Douglas speak, and it was one of those truly motivating times for me – one of those times I will always remember," she said.

"But it really began for me when we joined HSA and found out what a great union it is and that there was a place for me there. Whatever job I had, if I saw that things weren't right, I was always the spokesperson," she said. "I always spoke up, and tried to make a difference, but it can be hard. And all of a sudden, here was a formalized way to do that: a way in which you could have a voice, you could make a difference!

"It's been challenging to serve on union committees and to advocate for my co-workers, but I love it. We need the union more than ever because of what's going on in our province, and in our world," she said.

"There are always new things to learn. It's just been amazing, and terribly exciting." 

Type:

[The Report](#)

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