

Improving life for society's most vulnerable

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ine years of working at Campbell River and North Island Transition House helped convince Carrie Sjostrom that she had even more to do. She decided that running for city council could be the next step in her life of activism.

Carrie Sjostrom Transition House Worker Campbell River & North Island Transition House

“Running for municipal council was a very new experience for me,” she said. “More than 1500 people voted for me, which is very gratifying.” In fact, Sjostrom came within 800 votes of clinching a seat on council – an impressive feat for a first-time candidate.

“It was very exciting. My platform was social issues,” she said. “I believe in creating a healthy community, and that we need to develop partnerships with all of the community organizations, the businesses, our municipal government, the non-profit organizations, the volunteers. There’s a whole array of different groups of people who are working towards developing a healthy community, but it isn’t an organized effort. I think that by bringing everybody together, we can really effect change in our communities.”

Sjostrom said that the provincial government’s short-sighted cuts to health and community services spurred her to run. “I think more cutbacks are coming. I think we are going to see a lot more homelessness, and we’re going to see a lot more people struggling to pay for or live in affordable housing,” she said.

“I see the effects of the cuts every day at my job at the transition house. Resources for women are diminishing, and this is a step backwards,” she said. “Women are having to make different decisions now, because of the recent cuts. One of those decisions might be to stay in an abusive relationship if they feel that they’re not going to have the support out in the community that they need to break free.”

How does Sjostrom feel about these cuts to social services? “I feel a lot of anger. When I hear that a woman is choosing to return home because she has no options, because she has no finances, she no longer has access to legal aid, and so she needs to return not only herself but her children into a violent situation, I’m angry,” she said. “Right now there isn’t a lot of ways to work through this. There was hope before. I’ve worked in this industry for nine years, and there was always hope,” she said. “But now there just don’t seem to be any options anymore for many women. All I can do is continue to support and continue to provide creative ideas on how they can work within their situation – and do a lot of safety planning with them.”

As a single parent of three children, Sjostrom said she can relate to families who are being pushed to the brink by the relentless service cuts. “People who are trying to run a home, look after children, and work, and also be

active politically and with their union – it’s a huge juggling act! But it can be done,” she said. She is happy to inspire confidence in the women she works with. “They look at me and say, “Hey, you’re doing a lot. I can do it too.” That gives them extra empowerment to go ahead and try,” she laughs.

Sjostrom’s union activism has been similarly inspired. “I believe in working with people to create a better community for everyone. What the union offered was an opportunity to learn new skills, to expand on the skills I already had, and to become involved in the workings of a union that wasn’t something that I had experienced before,” she said. Over the years, as elected member at large, Sjostrom has served on almost every HSA committee, including the Committee for Equality and Social Action and the Resolutions Committee.

It’s no coincidence that someone with such a commitment to improving the lives of others works at a transition house. “I’ve had many experiences that have been life-changing, for me as well as for the women I’m working with,” she said. “I think the most satisfying part of my job is seeing a woman come out of a horrendous situation, put her life back together, and heal from that abuse and make her life healthy again. I find that very empowering to watch.”

Sjostrom also co-founded an advocacy group called “Women Taking Action,” which actively speaks out against the provincial government’s service cuts to society’s most vulnerable. “We’ve been very busy. We’ve met with our MLA to talk about the cutbacks, and the issues they’re causing in the community,” she said. “We’ve also developed a back-to-school start-up program where we approach businesses in town to donate to a fund – and that fund purchases back-to-school items for children whose families can’t afford it. It was a tremendous success. And we’re planning to continue with this every year.”

Although Sjostrom will not be on Campbell River’s municipal council this term, you can bet she’ll continue to pour her energies into improving life in the north island. 

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