

An advocate on and off the job

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Perhaps it was all those lonely hours staring through a microscope – something laboratory technologist Heather Sapergia enjoys, although she also seeks out human interaction. Or maybe it's due to her belief that if you want something changed, you must get inside of it and change it yourself.

Heather Sapergia Chief steward & medical technologist Prince George Regional Hospital

At any rate, a lifetime of community involvement has been recognized by the Canadian Society of Medical Laboratory Science, which will officially confer the honour on Sapergia when she attends her professional association's annual meeting in Quebec City this June. She will be the sole recipient of the society's community service award this year.

Sapergia's volunteer work as a caseworker with the RCMP's Victim Services captures a good deal of her spare time, on top of 24 hours and hours and hours of weekend duty to her fellow HSA members as chief steward at Prince George Regional Hospital. Nor is it the kind of work, paid or unpaid, that many would relish.

At any time of day or night during a 48-hour period, Sapergia might be called to accompany an RCMP officer to the scene of a house break-in or domestic violence, or to offer comfort and advice to someone who has just been told a loved one has been killed in an accident or murder.

"We offer emotional support," she said. "If it's a break-in, we might also offer advice on home security or organizing a block watch. When we get called, it's never for something nice. But if we can help someone find the skills and resources to keep on going after a tragedy, that's what we do."

Sapergia said domestic violence accounts for the bulk of incidents. While the victims are of both genders, 90 per cent of the cases involve attacks by men on women.

With domestic violence, the caseworkers do not immediately visit the scene. "We won't attend a situation where we don't know where the accused is located. We once had a case where a worker was attending and the man came back, which made for quite a dangerous situation."

Instead, the caseworker visits the scene after the alleged perpetrator has been apprehended. Services might involve offering emotional support, accompanying the victim to the hospital, babysitting while the victim is receiving medical attention, or accompanying victims to safe houses.

Such tasks aren't for the untrained. Victim service caseworkers attend about 70 hours of classes, studying the

criminal justice system and the psychological effects of crime on its victims. They engage in role-playing and visit funeral homes and hospital morgues.

Sapergia took the training after attending classes towards a psychology degree. A classmate recommended she try it, and she's been volunteering since 1996.

"I was taking the psychology degree for another volunteer activity, at an Anglican Church summer camp," Sapergia said.

For the past 20 years she had hired all staff and selected some 65 volunteers to work at the camp each summer; since counselling was part of the work, the psychology degree was necessary.

Sapergia has lived in Prince George for the past 25 years, having worked around the province prior to that, including a stint in an eight-bed hospital at the former Canadian Forces Base in Masset.

She has been a laboratory technologist since 1970, and a member of HSA since 1974.

She acknowledges she was only "peripherally aware" of the union and its role in the early days.

"My awareness grew over the years as I saw HSA help the members," she said. But her active involvement began in 1996 after winning a grievance with the union's help.

She is now chief steward, working on behalf of members through committees and high profile activities like the 2001 strike. She credits HSA with playing a strong role when the hospital decided to reduce its work force by 27 per cent last October.

"HSA spent considerable time trying to convince management this was the wrong move. We still have outstanding grievances from this, but without HSA the impact would have been much worse," she said. She also credits the hospital's "great bunch of stewards, who are very active and vocal."

Being a community service worker and a steward involves long hours, but Sapergia has the support of her partner and adult children, and credits them for their commitment to support her work in the community. 

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