

## Working to end abuse

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by CAROLE PEARSON



**rigid Kemp is proof** that education is a life-long journey. Her early experience with education, as a child growing up in Edinburgh, Scotland, was the kind that drives people away from a love of learning. Corporal punishment was readily meted out. And she got her share.

Brigid Kemp Older Women's Liaison Chief Steward, South Okanagan Women in Need Society
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"I hated school as a kid," she admits. "I was in Scotland in the days when you got the strap if you so much as breathed out of order. I never thought of myself as an unruly child, but I didn't fit into the mold of what was expected and I was chronically being strapped or caned."

Brigid Kemp knows about the effects of abuse first hand. This gives her insight in her job as a social worker with the South Okanagan Women in Need Society.

After spending her teen years in Canada, she returned to Britain to complete an Early Childhood Education certificate.

At 32, she put that training to use as a child care worker at Metro Toronto Childcare Services. The centre offered daycare for inner city children, many of whom had serious emotional issues.

But, in order to be certified as an ECE educator in Ontario, she had to go back to school to meet the provincial standard.

In 1981, while studying in Ryerson University's two-year social service program, she decided she really wanted to be a social worker.

After the early years of a poor experience with formal education, it was formal education that changed her outlook on life.

"There were two crucial parts of my fourth year. One of the required courses was called Social Change which really addresses the issues in society, and what we need to do - and how to make changes in our community, in our country and in the world."

Also in her fourth year, Kemp's practicum was with the Women's Committee of the Metro Toronto and York Region Labour Council. At the same time, she was working full time for an agency that offered supervised

home day care.

Kemp, along with a few co-workers, signed up the non-unionized employees with sufficient numbers to win automatic certification with CUPE.

That was back in 1984, and Kemp still remembers, "Two colleagues came to my apartment that evening with a bottle of champagne and three glasses to celebrate." She went on to serve as chief steward.

Then in 1987, when these day care workers asked for the union's help in getting their new employer to address personal safety concerns, the employer fired Kemp on the spot.

"I got my job back two months later, through expedited arbitration," she said. "By that time I was no longer chief steward - I'd been elected president of the local," she added.

Kemp credits her continued learning with giving her the tools to end an abusive marriage. "It was coming to an end at the time I was going back to school and I was becoming educated. My ex-husband couldn't understand where I was getting all these ideas about women's rights."

Her personal experiences and her formal social work education have come together in her job as a social worker at South Okanagan Women in Need Society and her union involvement as HSA's chief steward at the agency.

She has worked at the South Okanagan women's support services since September 1998. Eighteen months ago, Kemp was hired to co-ordinate an outreach program for older women as a federally-funded pilot project. "My particular project now is working with older women who have been abused. These are women 50 years and over. I even have one 83-year-old woman as a client," she says.

Abusive relationships usually involve a spouse or partner but, in the case of older women, it can also involve abuse from adult children, male and female. Kemp said research indicates that categorizing the abuse of older women under the term, "elder abuse" is misleading.

"Research has shown that sixty per cent of elder abuse situations are towards women," she says. "What it does is obscure the fact that abuse towards women continues after the age of 65."

Kemp tells her clients, "The important thing to know is, (A), you're not responsible for somebody else's behaviour and (B), you're not alone and you're not crazy."

An HSA chief steward since January 2003, Kemp says, "For me, I see a union as my only protection in my job. The employer, ultimately, is there to represent the employers' interest. For me, I've always felt I need to be in a union. I haven't always worked in a unionized place, but I've tried. I've tried to get them unionized."

Since September 2003 she has also been the recording secretary for the South Okanagan Boundary Labour Council.

According to Kemp, "It isn't enough for me to be a working in a unionized workplace. I need to be an active worker, and have an understanding of the collective agreement and the rights of workers, to offer support."

Besides her involvement with HSA and the Labour Council, Kemp is active in the Penticton Peace Group and the Penticton chapter of the Council of Canadians.

Despite the abuse she has experienced herself, she remains positive in her outlook and inspiring in her philosophy of life.

"To me," she says, "it's about enjoying the 'free parking' of life. To acknowledge one part of that is the friends and supports we have.

"Somebody comes over and brings a dish or shares something with you: to me, those are the parts that make life good. And it's sharing and being with people and having fun." 

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