

BULLETIN

## Tie a purple ribbon: taking on workplace violence

June 1, 2006

### The Report: June / July 2006 vol.27 num.3

by LAURA BUSHEIKIN

**No meetings. No budget.** No long-term plan. Just a deeply felt desire to honour three colleagues who had been injured in a violent workplace altercation.

That's how Shannon Breeze, a registered psychiatric nurse in Victoria, describes the origin of the Purple Ribbon Campaign she helped initiate at her workplace in April 2005.

"You take a purple ribbon, you cut it in pieces, you pin it on and you spread it around, and that's all," Breeze said. "You can't get any more grassroots than that."

To her surprise, the campaign quickly grew to be bigger than she had ever imagined, becoming a powerful tool to raise awareness about violence in the workplace throughout BC's health care community.

The story of the Purple Ribbon Campaign began in spring of 2004.

Breeze was on night shift at Eric Martin Pavilion, a psychiatric unit which is part of the Vancouver Island Health Authority. There, three of her coworkers were violently assaulted by a patient.

"The attack was very, very severe but not life threatening. Two of the coworkers are still off work. I happened to be the fourth person on that shift.

"I was not attacked so that made me the one who had to advocate," Breeze said.

A year after the attack, Breeze and her colleagues were concerned that the incident had just been "shuffled under the table," and that nothing had been done to make the workplace safer.

So, taking their cue from the purple dot sticker used to mark the file of a violent patient, they "got together on night shift and made ribbons to wear the next day," Breeze said.

They were immediately inundated with requests for ribbons.

"We didn't promote it, but our colleagues asked. Suddenly everyone was wearing them. Senior management were looking around asking, "What's the ribbon about? People started talking about violence, talking about their experiences.

"Absolutely everybody had a story. Chokings, hair-pullings, assaults, watching people go down, losing people to LTD and WCB ... everybody had a story and everybody really needed to tell their story. This gave them permission to talk ... it was powerful, it was incredible!"

Sharing stories gave people a sense of validation, Breeze said. "Instead of the violence being a traumatic event, it made it uplifting, because we realized we still do our work. We're good nurses and we've stuck with it. The

pride was enormous."

Breeze learned that violence in the workplace was an issue throughout health care, not just for nurses and not just in psychiatric wards.

-Speech language pathologists, transition house workers, community workers, lab technologists ... all have been affected by violence." Breeze said.

The campaign spread to other hospitals simply by word of mouth. And it went further.

-At the last HSA convention (April 2006), the ribbons showed up at the Work Safe BC booth, with all the how-to-prevent-violence-in-the-workplace stuff. And we were told by the Occupational Health and Safety Committee to take a little yellow sticky pad, write down our stories and put them up on a board. So people read them and discussed them. It became a huge catalyst."

Shannon Breeze Registered Psychiatric Nurse General Steward Eric Martin Pavilion / VIHA
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Awareness is the first step in creating change, Breeze said. When violence is not talked about, employers can avoid meeting the problem head-on. -Hospitals dont necessarily want to acknowledge workplace violence because then they have to admit theres a problem. But they dont have to take the blame; they just have to be part of the solution," she said.

While there are many practical things that can be done in the workplace to prevent violence, the real solution lies in addressing the increasing social and economic pressures that cause it, Breeze said.

-Ive worked in this field for 27 years," she explained. -The last five years have been the most violent.

-You have to look at the root causes. The downsizing of Riverview was a big factor. The designer drugs on the street have astronomically increased the violence. Why do patients come in with weapons? Because they live on the street. Their weapons are really important to them."

The links between social issues, violence and health are obvious to Breeze. -If people dont get enough money to live on, theres more crime. Go figure," she said.

-If youre eating out of a garbage can, youre probably not healthy. A lady lost her fingers last year from gangrene, because she lived in a park and got frostbite. It cost more to put her in hospital to look after her fingers than to get her a decent place to live.

-Some people have started to figure this out," she said, citing her workplace ... VIHA ... as an example. -Our hospital does a lot these days in terms of detox, housing the homeless and being part of community initiatives.

-We all have to advocate on a million levels, for safe housing, for public transportation, for crime prevention, for an attack on crystal meth."

Breeze knows these issues well. Over the last decade she has been tirelessly active in her community, focusing on safety issues.

She participated in community policing, helped initiate a Neighbourhood Watch program, sat on her Community Safety Advisory Committee, and solicited a \$37,000 grant to set up a recreation program for at-risk youth. Along the way she was nominated for the YWCA Woman of Distinction Award, was awarded a Paul Harris Fellowship from the Rotary Club (making her one of the first women honoured), and received the Queens Golden Jubilee Award for contribution to her community.

Breeze has recently redirected her activist energy into her union ... something she has been wanting to do for years.

-I always knew that the moment I had a little bit of time Id get involved in HSA to give back some of the support theyve given me. As nurses we always have to advocate for top quality health care and the union has been very good in backing us up," she said. She became an HSA steward earlier this year.

-Getting active in HSA was so exciting because there are so many amazing people doing amazing things," she said ... and with these words, she has aptly described herself. 

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