

BULLETIN

## Positively life affirming: supporting women living with HIV and AIDS

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by LAURA BUSHEIKIN



**angam Grant laughs** as she describes the typical response to her job: -When someone asks what I do, I say I work in an agency for HIV-positive women. Most of the time peoples reaction is "Oh, my God.'

-They think it must be terribly hard and depressing and that I must be some kind of saint. But its not like that, not like that at all. Certainly there are tragedies, certainly there are sad stories, but I find my work to be very life-affirming," says Grant.

-Its not just about HIV ... its more than that. Its about womens lives, addiction, recovery, housing, violence, relationships. Everything."

-One of the things I love most about my job," she adds, and pauses to laugh again, -is that I laugh a lot."

Grants workplace, the Positive Womens Network, is dedicated to improving the lives of HIVpositive women.

-In the support program, we provide one-on-one support, information, referrals and advocacy; we have a hot lunch program, outreach, a food bank, a drop-in, support groups, support for HIV-positive "trans women, phone counseling, and ... one of our best programs ... an annual weekend wellness retreat," says Grant.

The scope of its work is province-wide, but the organizations hub is its premises on Davie Street in downtown Vancouver. Grant smiles appreciatively as she describes what goes on there.

-Say, on a Tuesday ... thats our busiest day ... the lunch program is going on upstairs, and downstairs is groceries and an area to get clothing donations. Its pretty lively!

-Like women do everywhere, we connect and meet and share in the kitchen. Other agencies might be doing case management or sitting in an office doing counselling, but here its happening in the kitchen! Of course, we do all that other stuff, but theres also the ongoing support that happens when women are together, sharing their stories and exchanging information," says Grant.

The importance of peer support at PWN is reflected in the language staff use to describe the people they serve. -We call them members, not clients," says Grant. -Im not there as the authority; Im so not the authority! Theres a huge amount of information that gets exchanged over the lunch table or the support groups." And some of the members contribute in a more formal way as program volunteers.

-We have some amazing women who are members who come in and volunteer; they pretty much run the food bank and help out with lunch," says Grant. She pauses, mulling over the word "member. -The requirement to become a member of PWN is that you are HIV positive and you define yourself as a woman," she explains. Letting people self-define their gender allows for a greater inclusiveness than might be found in some agencies.

Sangam Grant Chief Steward Support Worker Positive Women's Network
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-I dont mean to gush here but when Im at work every once in a while I look around and see the world of PWN is quite exceptional. To be among a group of extremely diverse women, hanging out and laughing and supporting each other ... I dont think you would see such a diverse group together outside the agency. The accepting of each other ... its quite something. I work in an amazing place," she says.

However, woven into the laughter, inspiration and uplift of Grants job, there is, undeniably, the sadness and frustration of dealing with a deadly virus.

-We really get to know the women who come in because were seeing them sometimes for years. You see their lives; you become part of their lives. And, you know, they die. So we have to deal with that, and with how it impacts other women and how it impacts staff."

These stresses can typically lead to burnout, yet PWN staff tend to stay for a long time, says Grant. She herself is coming up to her ninth year with the agency. She attributes the staff longevity to the supportive policies and attitudes of the workplace.

Grant, and most of her colleagues, work part time. PWN has a core team of eight people ... including counselling, outreach, administrative, communications and education staff ... as well as various contract and relief workers. -Thats why we last so long; we are invested in our own self-care. At staff meetings we check in with each other.

-You can look at death and dying in many different ways. We can affirm their lives because we are working with them for so long," says Grant.

-The culture at PWN is very supportive. We all genuinely care about each other and were small enough that that can happen. Theres genuine care and support and we laugh a lot. Thats so important. And were in a supportive union," says Grant, who currently serves as chief steward and occupational health and safety steward for her site.

-The union has always been there for us when we needed guidance or clarification. And HSA is a very supportive union for women. Theres understanding of who we are as women working with women, and a recognition of the reality of womens lives."

That reality isnt always catered to in the world of AIDS service organizations. PWN is the only womens agency west of Toronto, says Grant.

-But women are disproportionately impacted by HIV. Whos taking care of the children? And the home? Who cant negotiate for safe sex?


-Whos facing violence and abuse? Women have all these issues that most men dont have to face. Women make less money. And its way more probable that a woman is going to contract the virus from a male than the other way around.

-One issue is around violence. Because this is a women-only space, women can come to a safe place, without being in the company of their abusive partner," says Grant. An abusive partner is likely to prevent them from finding access to services, and not allow them the rare opportunity to relax and find support in the company of other women.

Health care issues are also different for women. -Historically, most treatments for HIV were based on tests done on men. But women dont present the same. And women are often diagnosed later than men," explains Grant.

Grant has developed a comfortable expertise in working with women. In addition to a counselling certificate, Grant brings years of experience leading antioppression workshops, working in transition houses, drug and addiction counselling, and prevention of violence against women.

All this ... combined with her own life experience in fighting class prejudice and racial bias ... makes Grant an ideal counsellor for PWN members, and a passionate, articulate advocate.

With her work at the Positive Womens Network, she recognizes that she has found her calling: -I have an amazing job," she says. 

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180 East Columbia  
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website  
[www.hsabc.org](http://www.hsabc.org)

Telephone 604-517-0994  
1-800-663-2017