

BULLETIN

## Community builder

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SOCIAL WORKER DARWIN WREN BELIEVES IN GETTING INVOLVED

by LAURA BUSHEIKIN

**FOR SUCH A BUSY MAN**, HSA member Darwin Wren comes across as remarkably calm. Perhaps that's because he's very clear about what is at the heart of his many different activities. "Building community is what it is all about," he says. "I really love helping people, advocating, and making my community a healthier place."

Wren lives these values every day in his professional life as a counsellor. Since 2007, Wren has served as the Mental Health and Addictions Team Leader for Mental Health Services in Tumbler Ridge, a northern British Columbia community of about 3000 people. As well as carrying an active case load himself, he oversees two offices, one in Tumbler Ridge and one in nearby Chetwin.

Wren also volunteers with a number of nonprofit organizations, is an enthusiastic HSA activist, and, as of a year ago, an elected member of the Tumbler Ridge municipal council.

"It's all the same, really ... the work I do in my office, the volunteer work, and the union work," he says. "It's about giving, contributing. It's so rewarding."

Wren's heartfelt commitment to building community comes from his upbringing, he says.

"I grew up in a small farming community in Southern Alberta. There were about 500 people, and everyone always pulled together and did what was needed to get the job done. There was always collaboration and cooperation; it was never just the work of one individual that got things done. That was a big factor in who I've become."

Wren moved to Tumbler Ridge from Alberta in the mid 90s. He soon began working as a counsellor for the Mental Health and Addictions Services, which is run by the Northern Health Authority, and a couple of years later he took on the Team Leader position.

He got involved in community life right away, coaching minor sports and becoming a board member of the Tumbler Ridge Daycare Society.

"I've got two young boys, aged two and five. I believe it's every parent's responsibility to make their community the type of place they want their kids to grow up in. That's why I got involved," he says.

Once he'd lived in Tumbler Ridge long enough to get to know local issues, history and people, he was ready to take his involvement to the next level, and ran for Town Council ... successfully.

"It's been a great experience being able to see it from that side. I've been part of making changes in the community that have been very satisfying," he says.

**TUMBLER RIDGE**, he explains, has a unique history that has given rise to some very specific local issues. The town was built over a three-year period starting in 1981, when a number of coal mines began operating in the area. Then, when mining dried up at the end of the 1990s, many of the original inhabitants moved away. Real estate prices dropped dramatically, and there was a corresponding influx of retired seniors, drawn by the affordable homes.

-But the town wasn't designed for seniors," explains Wren. -There's a lot of work to be done in terms of programs for seniors." The municipality is making headway, he says. -We've recently secured 12 housing units for low income seniors and people with disabilities. We're making the town more livable for these people."

Wren is also active with a non-profit organization called the Tumbler Ridge Care Society, which addresses needs such as transportation to health care services (quite an issue given the isolation and climate of Tumbler Ridge), and emergency shelter for women.

-There are a lot of different things that go on in a small community. You can become as involved as you want, and you can really have an impact. I really love living in a small community," he says.

HSA is another community Wren loves being part of. Soon after joining, he signed up for steward training. -That was some great training. Then I went to my first convention about three years ago. That was another great experience," he says.

Wren was a member of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees in the late 80s and early 90s. -That's where the roots of my union activism come from, back in the days of Ralph Klein. Those were challenging times for front line workers trying to advocate for those who sometimes don't have a voice of their own."

When he moved to Tumbler Ridge, Wren hadn't been in a union for a number of years; he had taken a break from health care to work in heavy industry (where he had led an unsuccessful attempt to unionize). His HSA experience felt like a homecoming. -I got back in touch with the whole union movement ... that whole sense of camaraderie and community.

-HSA is a very welcoming organization, very professionally run, it's got exceptional staff and the training is some of the best union training I've ever had. I'm proud to be part of it."

Since joining HSA, Wren has served as Chief Steward at his site, attended a number of training sessions, and most recently has signed up as a representative to his region's upcoming bargaining conference. In early November he was elected to the bargaining committee for health science professionals.

Wren has no plans to slow down, although he is mindful not to compromise his time with his family. Burn-out, he says, is not an issue for him.

-If you're doing what you love doing, it doesn't burn you out. It's a matter of focusing on the positives, and in this line of work that means realizing that you may not see your successes. You don't always hear the stories of those who get counselling and then go on to do really well. You end up focusing on the ones who have many relapses along their journey. But that doesn't take away from your successes," he says.

As long as there are injustices in our society, as long as there are people needing support, Wren will be deeply motivated to help. He shares a story to illustrate this: -It was the first morning of the HSA convention. We were staying at the Fairmont Hotel in downtown Vancouver. I went out early one morning for a walk and there was a young fellow ... I will never forget this. He was hoping to get a dollar or two from people passing by. I don't know how old he was ... oh, maybe 20. I stopped to chat with him and I noticed he only had one shoe. I asked, "What happened to your other shoe? It was a really moving thing he told me that he didn't have any shoes the day before and he was thankful for just having one." Wren pauses for a long moment. When he speaks again his voice is a shade huskier.

-It's an emotional thing to talk about. That we've got that level of disparity in a province that has so much. When you walk out of a hotel of that magnitude and have an encounter like that, it's a real eye opener." 

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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