

BULLETIN

Helping people back from the edge

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SHEILA KERR DIDNT NEED the services of a career counsellor to choose her professional path. In fact, she never even had time to wonder what she wanted to be when she grew up. At the age of 14, her life experience led her to a volunteer position at the Living Positive Resource Centre in Kelowna, and shes been there ever since.

Four years ago, after seven years of consistent volunteer involvement, she took on a staff position as Prevention Outreach and Harm Reduction Coordinator. While shes just 25 years old, she says shes already one of the "old timers" in the organization.

Kerr provides education around HIV and Hepatitis B and C throughout the Okanagan Valley, work that takes her to diverse settings ... treatment and detox centres, colleges and universities, seniors facilities, homeless shelters, and more ... to teach people about these diseases and motivate them to prevent them. Any given day could see her making a presentation to health care professionals in the morning about the realities of HIV and Hepatitis, and demonstrating correct condom use to sex trade workers in the afternoon.

Speaking to *The Report* in February, Kerr describes herself as "very, very passionate and motivated about her work, and she traces this passion right back to her street experiences in her early teens, and then as a volunteer with the Centre.

"I've known people who have lost their lives as a result of behaviours associated with their lifestyles, and many more who have contracted HIV or hepatitis C," she says. "It can be tough to see and tough to rationalise."

At that time, the Living Positive Resource Centre, then called the AIDS Resource Centre, provided an opportunity that changed the course of Kerrs life.

"They put a call out for young people interested in creating a youth theatre to educate others about HIV and AIDS. I loved acting and writing, so I got involved. A neat play came out of it, which became a video.

"I saw a huge amount of value in this and was compelled to keep involved," she says. Over the following years she took part in a rich variety of volunteer activities.

"I got trained to give educational workshops; I was involved with special events such as the AIDS walk; I did some inventory with brochures, volunteered on the Board of Directors, worked on the newsletter, threw a Battle of the Bands event as a fundraiser ... basically, I did anything they asked of me," she says.

Although she certainly gave a lot, what stands out for her is how much she received.

"I feel a great gratitude to this organization; it has contributed a lot to who I am. They gave me guidance; they gave me motivation; they gave me opportunity. The executive director became a father figure to me."

Kerr feels fortunate to go to work each day for an organization that means so much to her. But what she loves most about her work is seeing that what she does actually makes a difference.

For instance, she says, there are times she encounters the same client more than once, for instance, in a detox centre. -Sometimes they say, "I went back to using but now I'm doing it safely. Everything you said stayed with me and your words echoed in my brain. It gives me such a great feeling to know I've helped motivate them to make changes to stay safe, even if their behavior is reckless."

Although Kerr is able to celebrate such a moment as evidence that her work is saving lives ... and saving our health care system money ... not everyone sees it that way.

-The biggest challenge in my work comes from some of the attitudes in the community," she says. -There are a lot of negative attitudes toward harm reduction as a whole. It's really sad, because these illnesses already target those who are so marginalized. It's easy to ignore or condemn those who are affected."

The other huge challenge in Kerr's field comes from funding challenges forcing changes this spring. -Yesterday was my first time as a part-time worker. All the staff moved from full-time to part-time yesterday," she says, with quiet outrage.

Already a tireless advocate for her clients, Kerr is also ready to advocate for her profession. She recently became steward and completed steward training in January.

She has already put what she learned to good use. Based on what she learned at her steward training, she realized that the tentative collective agreement that is now in place for her workplace was eroding existing rights.

-The agreement cuts long-term disability for anyone with pre-existing conditions. But in our workplace, we strongly encourage people with HIV to apply. It would be horrible to not give them what others have access to. It also would apply for people who have chronic conditions such as asthma or heart conditions.

-Because I'm now more informed, thanks to my HSA training, I got staff together and organized an email campaign explaining to people what's going on," she says.

Activism comes as naturally to Kerr as her work does. Over the years, she has been involved in many community initiatives. She ran the gay youth group she founded in 2006, Out With Friends, and sat on the board of Caia Connection, a grassroots organization that helps AIDS orphans in the Caia district of Mozambique. Currently, she is the Vice President of the Hepatitis C Council of BC; she is an active member of Pathways to Open Doors, a Kelowna project trying to create a 24-hour drop-in centre for women involved in the sex trade; and she organizes health-related events for the gay community in Kelowna.

-We really need to strive for a healthful community, and that includes people who are marginalized and pushed to the edges of society and would maybe not be thought of as community members. But we don't really have a community unless we incorporate them as well," Kerr says. 

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