

Visions

BC's Mental Health and Addictions Journal

Vol. 4 No. 1 | Summer 2007



housing

&

homelessness



For my friends, reaching age 19 meant clubbing, parties and looking at universities. To me reaching age 19 meant losing all the supports that the system had provided and I had relied on since I was 14: my home, my child-care worker and my amazing Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) support team.

My introduction to the Youth Supported Independent Living Program (YSIL) began at age 16. I was in total denial that eventually I would turn 19 and when that day came, I would have to live on my own. It just seemed too scary. My therapist referred me to the YSIL program and everything about it seemed challenging: the disability pension, finding an apartment, living alone and budgeting. But what was most frightening, was accepting this was inevitable and one way or another I was going to have to deal with it. I decided to meet with the YSIL worker, even though I was still convinced that this was not for me. I was caught on the word "disability" mainly because I hated the idea of being labeled. However, while I did not want to leave the security of care provided by the system, I did enjoy the possibility of being able to choose buttercup yellow walls with sky blue trim in a place of my own.

Over the next 2 years, I meant with my YSIL worker once a week, and the idea of having my own apartment brought on

feelings of both fear and excitement. But now I no longer felt like on that dreaded day when I turned 19, that I would be "dropped off a cliff" and left to fend for myself. I began to see YSIL more as a stepping stone between my current support systems and total independence. A program where I was learning budgeting, cooking and identifying and solving problems that arise from when someone lives on their own for the first time—everything from safety to dealing with loneliness.

The realization that they believed I was capable of living alone, also helped me believe I could do it too. I trusted them. I was getting the support I needed to becoming independent! Realizing there was this supportive middle ground was key to me accepting the YSIL program and succeeding. As soon as I realized this and that my YSIL worker would be there for the long run, I was ready to take the plunge! Over coffee, we worked on the dreaded budget forms, the shopping list which was always followed by the what-can-I-afford list, and the search for "the" apartment. I finally found the perfect home, took a deep breath and moved out on my own at 18 years old. I channeled the empty scary feeling into unpacking and decorating, the fear soon turned to housework. I continued to meet with my YSIL worker, working on issues like paying bills, advocating for myself with the MHR [Ministry of Human

Resources, known today as MEIA] and most important, cooking edible food without setting the fire alarm off.

Over the past five years I feel like I have successfully crossed over to adulthood. September will be my last month in YSIL and I'm excited to be starting a new chapter in my life by returning to Douglas College to get my diploma in child and youth counselling. Ultimately I was the one who created the success in my life, but I thank the YSIL program, and its dedicated workers Dan, Lindsay and Paige, for the continual support, guidance, laughter and companionship throughout my journey. **i**



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Already in Our Backyard

Coast Foundation began providing supported housing in 1972. Jackie Hooper, a mental health consumer, came up with the idea of buying an apartment block to provide housing and a healing and supportive community for people with mental illness. The plan was to take people out of boarding homes and Riverview Hospital and to provide them with their own apartment, a support worker and a housing subsidy.

Jackie shopped the idea around, and Coast agreed to pioneer the concept. Today, Coast owns and/or manages 12 different housing locations in Vancouver that provide apartment accommodation for 309 people with mental illness. Coast also provides supported independent living (SIL) units in market[†] rental housing for 153 people.

Coast's supported housing model ensures that our clients have help from their

housing worker to search for, secure and keep housing. We have found that having a housing worker as an advocate and support is vital for most clients.

Unfortunately, it is still a challenge to place tenants in market housing, despite the fact that a person living with mental illness is as good a neighbour as anyone else. Many Coast tenants actively contribute to their communities by serving on strata (some Coast apartments are

Rudy Small

Rudy is the Supported Housing Manager for Coast Foundation Society. He is a Registered Psychiatric Nurse and has worked in mental health for over 30 years. Currently, Rudy manages 20 community housing workers who serve 462 people with a mental illness living in supported housing in Vancouver

located in condominium complexes) or cooperative boards or by becoming involved in Neighbourhood Watch programs.

One barrier is that the rent subsidy for our clients is too low. Many neighbourhoods in Vancouver don't have any decent apartments for \$750 a month, which is the maximum allowable rent. The \$375 housing portion of disability assistance is topped up with funds from Vancouver Coastal Health, but only to the \$750 rental charge ceiling.

Other major barriers are directly related to discrimination and stigma. Some landlords believe that Coast clients might be dangerous and may scare away other tenants. Some landlords view people receiving Persons with Disabilities assistance as "welfare" recipients, and worry that they won't pay their rent. Landlords are permitted to ask about source of income or to run a credit check. Since most

Coast tenants have never had credit, they must reveal their source of income. Disability benefits and income assistance are managed and distributed through the same Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance offices. Thus, disclosing source of income often serves as a barrier to obtaining apartments.

Much work still needs to be done to educate landlords and neighbours about people with mental illness. At Coast's annual general meeting in 2001, a motion was put forward to change Coast's name from Coast Foundation Society to Coast Mental Health Society. The motion was defeated, because clients and staff did not want to use an agency name that contained the words "mental health." Most of the people who voted against the motion did so because they thought the "mental health" label would prevent people from getting decent housing.

Fortunately, there are a small number of private landlords who are willing to house people with mental illness. For our staff, building relationships with these landlords is an essential part of assisting clients. Landlords who have problems with tenants often feel quite isolated and unsure of what to do. They may take the only course they know: eviction. By getting to know landlords as individuals and by using every opportunity to provide mental health education and information, we usually develop strategies that meet the landlords' needs and expand housing opportunities at the same time.

It is critical that these relationships result in successful experiences of providing housing for people with mental illness. My experience is that when landlords and their tenants are provided with problem-solving support and mediation services, people with mental illness

become highly desirable tenants. After people move into their homes, there are rarely complaints.

It is safe to have a neighbour or tenant who has a mental illness. Coast tenants and buildings fit seamlessly into neighbourhoods. When people say, "I do not want housing for people with a mental illness in my neighbourhood or building," they don't realize that "those people"—brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers—are already in their 'backyard.' **i**

related resource
for a story from a Coast housing client, check out Jake's online-only Visions interview

"major barriers are directly related to discrimination and stigma."

In from the Shadows, in the North

AWAC's services for marginalized women and female youth

AWAC—An Association Advocating for Women and Children was created in 1994 by a small group of community activists and social service providers in Prince George. The group was responding to an identified need for more accessible and appropriate services for street-involved women and female youth. These women and girls were living in poverty, homelessness and struggling with addiction, mental illness and exploitation. Many were engaged in survival sex to maintain their addictions. Many were dying violently or alone. All were engaged in a daily battle to survive.

With so many obstacles, the women were rarely able to access safe and supportive resources. Existing

services were mostly based on sobriety and asked too much of women who barely saw past each day. It was clear that vulnerable women in Prince George were in need of a safe place, a refuge from life on the streets.

After gathering together donations of money, time and materials, and securing a very small contract with the provincial government, the Quebec Street 24-hour Emergency Shelter opened in 1995. The shelter offered 19 crisis beds on a 24-hour-a-day, year-round basis for women and female youth. The program provided meals, snacks, coffee, outerwear and personal items for residents, as well as access to laundry and hygiene facilities.

Marianne Sorensen

Marianne has been the Executive Director of AWAC—An Association Advocating for Women and Children in Prince George since 1996. She is active on many community and provincial initiatives to address women's issues, homelessness and community development