

# Jessie's

## *Young Moms & Thriving Babies*

BY JUNE CALLWOOD

*Jessie's Centre for Teenagers is still thriving in 1991; in fact, a new building is in the process of being constructed. Affordable housing along with health care, day care, continuing education, vocational options, and other human rights issues for teenage parents continue to be pursued at the levels of front line services and advocacy. This broader holistic approach to achieving wider social change while providing immediate much-needed services has become a prototype for other centres in Canada and internationally. Now that the value of community-based organizations like Jessie's has been recognized, the funding agencies are gradually shifting their emphasis to supporting this kind of approach, especially for groups attempting to work with hard to reach populations. This article was first published in Adolescence (Vol. 4, No. 1, 1982).*

**A**merican writer Norman Cousins has called the phenomenon of teenagers' raising babies "the bombshell that has hit America." In Ontario, according to the Ontario Medical Association, there are about 20,000 adolescents each year who become pregnant. About 9,000 will have abortions; most of these are from stable, middle-class homes. Of the remaining 11,000, almost 90 per cent (many of these from fragmented family backgrounds) will decide to raise their babies.

Times have changed. Today there is tolerance of unwed mothers who keep their babies instead of furtively placing them up for adoption. Girls begin to menstruate earlier: there are ten-year-olds who are biological women. What has not changed is that sexual willingness is still the price-tag for holding the interest of a desired male.

Birth-control programs are working. The birth rate among adolescents is going down, particularly in areas where family-life programs in schools are specific about contraception. The boom is in what social workers call the retention rate (mothers keeping their newborns) and in the youth of these mothers. In Kitchener, Ontario, last year a twelve-year-old took her teddy bear into the delivery room; Jessie's now has two thirteen-year-olds awaiting the birth of their babies.

Jessie's is a comprehensive service which concentrates on teenagers younger than nineteen. It began late in 1979 when a group of people involved in direct services to teenage mothers began to meet regularly in a basement room in Nellie's, a Toronto shelter for battered women. They were alarmed at their inability to meet the needs of these vulnerable families. Out of two years of planning sessions, which eventually pulled in representatives of provincial and municipal governments and health departments as well as every agency in Metro Toronto concerned for adolescents, a holistic approach was developed.

Somewhere in that process the program acquired the name Jessie's. Jessie is Everywoman. The planners reviewed the short list of prominent Canadian suffragettes and decided that Agnes, Emily, and Nellie already are well represented in feminist undertakings.

It is appropriate that Jessie is Everywoman because Jessie's is everything. The one-stop service for young mothers opened in January, 1982, at 154 Bathurst Street in a two-storey former Toronto car-repair shop which now contains a basement swap-shop (where mothers can borrow cribs, toys, baby clothes, and other supplies), a main-floor lounge, kitchen,

baby-bathing area, and an enormous nursery available for parent-relief and parent-child drop-in and an upstairs space for pre-natal groups, parenting groups, reading and math upgrading, life-skills training, family counselling, vocational counselling, adoption and abortion counselling, and follow-up. Two public-health nurses, one full-time and one part-time, are available, along with counsellors, teachers, birth coaches, housing placement, nutritionists, and a roster of screened and trained volunteers.

Underway is the country's first 24-hour emergency infant-care service. Mothers in acute distress can arrange at Jessie's to place their babies temporarily in private homes where caring, trained, and supervised people will look after the babies until the mother is able to cope again. This already unique service has an additional unique feature. It is a joint project of Jessie's one of the newest agencies in town, and Family Day Care Services (FDSC), founded in 1851. Since Jessie's is a feminist collective, it is quite remarkable that the directors of FDSC (which is structured in the traditional way) were willing to make their employees responsible to Jessie's egalitarian staff.

Jessie's funding is another miracle. The project's planning group received immediate support from the then-Minister of Community and Social Services Keith Norton. Later Ontario's then-Minister of Health Dennis Timbrell also was encouraging. George Thomson, a former Kingston family-court judge with a reputation for social innovations while on the bench, was highly placed in Ontario's civil service at the time and expedited a guarantee of provincial funding. Frank Drea, who succeeded Keith Norton, bumped the guarantee from \$100,000 to \$150,000 commencing in April 1982.

Funding the 24-hour emergency infant care was another saga. Since there is no legislation to cover such a service, there is no government funding apparatus. Paul Godfrey, Metro Toronto Chairman, met with June Callwood, President of Jessie's, and John Pepin, Jessie's board member and Executive Director of Family Day Care Services, and was so impressed with the need for emergency hostels for babies that he pulled together joint funding of \$50,000. Dr. Gordon Chong, Alderman in Jessie's ward and Chairman of Metro's Community Services and Housing Com-

mittee, steered the funding through the shoals of red tape.

That amount of high-level backing is eloquent evidence that the community is worried and that Jessie's had done its homework. The planners had good statistics, a thought-through program, and letters of praise from children's-aid societies, maternity homes, public health officials, mayors, and community centres. The feminist approach of respect for teen-

age women and encouragement to enable them to achieve self-worth and independence happens also to be the most-effective way of helping their babies to thrive.

A frequent response to the public's perception that all teenagers are likely to be inadequate parents, a prejudice that is flatly untrue, is that there should be mandatory supervision of adolescents who raise babies. Apart from a civil-liberties issue, mandatory supervision of young

moms and their babies simply would not work. The most vulnerable, the least able to mother, would simply hide from contact with health professionals, teachers, and social workers.

Jessie's is the same proposal turned around. It provides what young moms, what *all* moms, need: friendship, information, relief. It is worth a try in every community.

# La violence faite à la femme lesbienne

PAR LUCE BERTRAND

*La violence comme expression de discrimination, d'isolement et de fuite existe toujours dans toutes les formes décrites dans cet article (vol. 4, no. 4, 1983). Si, en surface, le monde prétend être plus libéral en encourageant la libre expression des lesbiennes, il n'en est pas moins que l'homophobie et la xénophobie bouillonnent toujours là, juste au-dessous. La violence contre ce dont on a peur et ce qu'on ne comprend pas n'est jamais une réponse valide.*

**L**es femmes dont on a dit si souvent qu'elles étaient le «sexe faible», ont été maintes fois abusées dans l'essence même de ces deux mots. «Sexe» d'abord: bien des hommes les ont considérées comme des objets sexuels, dont ils étaient les propriétaires ou les usagers, créés pour leurs besoins et mis à leur disposition. Toute femme ne répondant pas à leur critère d'efficacité sexuelle est considérée comme frigide ou lesbienne. Si on s'arrête au mot «faible», il est évident que la différence de force physique entre la plupart des femmes et des hommes a permis à ceux-ci de prendre beaucoup de pouvoir, ne serait-ce qu'en créant la peur et la violence.

La violence sous une forme ou une autre est presque constante dans la vie des femmes. Cette violence est parfois physique et évidente mais elle est souvent morale et beaucoup plus subtile. Les femmes subissent souvent cette violence pour la seule raison qu'elles sont «femmes»: le violeur qui s'en va au hasard avec un goût de violer, cherche une femme, n'importe laquelle.

D'autres femmes ont à faire face à une violence particulière faisant référence au milieu social auquel elles appartiennent, à la figure d'autorité qu'elles représentent, au poids qu'elles pèsent, à l'orientation sexuelle qu'elles privilégient ou à d'autres facteurs. Nous essayerons de cerner dans ce texte, la violence faite à la femme lesbienne.

Violence de la parole qui se veut blessante, écrasante, très

souvent gratuite et sans fondement, parce que l'homophobe se soulage de sa propre peur de ses tendances homosexuel-le-s en essayant d'en éliminer ses représentantes. L'hétérosexuel-le qui est bien dans sa peau et dans sa sexualité n'a pas ce type de parole.

L'oeil accusateur posé sur la «criminelle», l'oeil religieux posé sur la «pervers», l'oeil vicieux qui songe: «à quel point ce serait excitant de les regarder ensemble». Le regard nerveux de la famille lors de réunions sociales, «pourvu que ça ne paraisse pas», le regard du patron qui se doute et qui renforce le harcèlement sexuel pour vérifier le niveau de résistance de sa victime, qui est une proie encore plus intéressante que bien d'autres femmes à cause du choix qu'a fait la femme lesbienne d'exclure l'homme de sa vie sexuelle.

La violence du sous-entendu, le mot caché, les allusions, les insinuations malveillantes plus ou moins directes, du type: «Tu n'es pas encore mariée?», «Est-ce ta petite amie?» Le harcèlement moral du sous-entendu, technique raffinée et subtile qui se rapproche du supplice chinois de la goutte d'eau. La guerre des nerfs, la peur entretenue, haut prestige du sadisme humain.

La violence de la moquerie, de la blague grossière au cliché usé des «enfants forts». Plus directe que le sous-entendu mais aussi plus violente. La moquerie que l'homophobe utilise rarement sans public. Ce n'est plus le couteau dans le dos mais la balle en plein front tirée par des gens qui ont l'air plus brave mais qui ont quand même besoin de complices pour oser.

Violence de l'évitement:

1. Par les membres de la famille: ne pas inviter sa soeur lesbienne à son mariage, par exemple, par gêne ou par honte face à la belle-famille. De peur que «ça» paraisse. Ne pas faire garder ses enfants (surtout les filles) par leur tante lesbienne de peur de la contamination ou peut-être des touchers sexuels. Il est à remarquer que ce dernier argument vient plus souvent des hommes. Or je lisais récemment qu'une fillette sur quatre et un