

# VOICES FROM THE SHELTERS

*the grass roots working...across the vast spaces of Canada is a growing network of women dealing directly with family violence, and with each other.*

## *from a shelter worker in Goose Bay, Labrador*

I am a shelter worker in Goose Bay, Labrador. We serve all of Labrador; Labrador is a large area that is widely spread out and sparsely populated. We are very isolated as the majority of communities are not accessible by road. The only access we have to each other is by small aircraft. In the winter months, November to June, Goose Bay's only access to the rest of Canada is by air. The cost to travel to St. John's, which is within the same province, is approximately \$400.

We live near a military base, thus we serve a wide range of peoples. We serve white settlers, transients, Innu (Indian), Inuit (Eskimo). We have few interpreters available, on limited time, therefore we often run into difficulty with language barriers and culture needs.

It is very difficult to help someone understand the added stress our women have as we are dealing with social and economic issues almost daily.

Housing is critical in Goose Bay and almost impossible to find in most of the communities from which the women come. Many of the communities are sparsely populated, with no apartment available, and few if no public housing. We have had to send a resident home who didn't want to go, because no one could find housing for her. Social workers believe that she will eventually be killed. It is for this reason that for many native women our shelter is not much more than a resting place between beatings. Some of the women we see speak very little English, that plus the fact that Goose Bay has a critical housing shortage makes the likelihood of a woman resettling slim.

I don't believe I could say enough to help people understand that for many women it's not a simple matter of leaving or staying in a battering situation.

## **Anguish at Midnight**

*from Cathy Pater, volunteer with Marianne's Place, Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis\**

My sleep was shattered by the shrill ringing of the telephone just before midnight. A call at this time of the night instantly calls forth a sense of foreboding.

Hesitantly, I picked up the phone. The caller was a volunteer from the Rural Women's Shelter Program for abused women. She was handling an emergency call from a victim.

The shelter, located in a nearby community, consists of a network of volunteers who provide transportation and emotional support for battered women and their children. The shelter is specifically set up and designed for women in crises.

I was asked if I would drive a woman and her children, who had been subjected to violence, to the protection of the shelter. Rather curtly, I said "Now?" I knew that question wasn't the expected response, because I was on call that night, but I was rather annoyed to be awakened and taken from the comfort of my sleep and bed.

The caller was patient and did not seem at all upset with me. She said that if it suited me better, she would call another volunteer. At this point I felt ashamed of my reaction, thinking of the anguish and desperation the victim in question must be feeling.

I agreed to transport her and we made arrangements for me to meet the woman and her children at a place away from her home. Volunteers never drive to the scene of the violence; in doing, so, they could be exposed to personal injury—physical or emotional. Therefore, either the victim goes to an agreed-upon pickup spot, or a police escort is provided to transport the abused woman.

After I hung up, I took a few minutes to collect my thoughts. I had been told the woman in question was very upset, which was understandable under the circumstances. I told myself not to become emotionally affected, a guideline we had been advised to follow during training sessions. I, participating as a driver, was playing only a small but important part in a much larger and complex organization set up to provide shelter and immediate relief for abused women and their children.

I don't know the name of the victim. She doesn't know my name either, or where I live. It doesn't matter. What I did is only a small contribution amongst other contributions by many volunteers who provide the shelter from an abusive partner that is so desperately needed.

I drove home through the lonely night and back to the comfort of a loving home and warm bed. I had done my part, but I could never again remain aloof and emotionless during the heart-rending separation of a family and the move from the known into the unknown.

*\*"Neutral Zones" were established in all five communities in the region. These provide emergency overnight shelter in a place not normally identified with family violence. Centrally located in each of the communities, they are able to be securely locked and are accessible twenty-four hours a day. A toll-free telephone was installed in Marianne's Place, the transition house operated by Guelph and Wellington Women in Crisis, and staff hired to answer calls (Crisis line: 519-836-1110; business: 836-1110). Two types of volunteers were recruited in the five communities. Some acted as emergency drivers, willing to transport women and their children to Guelph if necessary. Others were available to meet a woman at the neutral zones and stay with her, offering comfort, support and information about alternatives. Marianne's Place can be contracted at P.O. Box 1451, Guelph, Ontario N1H 6N9.*

*from Christi Carmichael, worker, Nipissing Transition House, North Bay, Ontario*

When I first began working in a shelter, I thought that because I was a feminist I knew about women—about our strengths and our skills and our knowledge—that unique and powerful understanding we have about the world around us.

But years later, having met and marvelled at the strength of hundreds of battered women, I realize that what I had really thought was only that women had the potential to be strong. To be truly strong we would first have to rid ourselves of our defeatist need to consider other people's needs before our own. I was wrong.

Women's strength manifests itself and originates in our belief in togetherness, in giving to others as a vital part of our view of ourselves. And while for battered women this can be dangerous to our lives and our sense of self, it is also our greatest strength.

Our goal as women and as feminists should not be to become less willing to give of ourselves, but rather to teach and inspire others to become more like us.

*Nipissing Transition House is located at 547 John Street, North Bay, Ontario P1B 2M9; crisis line 1-705-476-2429; business 1-705-476-2431.*

*from Mary Shelley, follow-up worker, Niagara Women in Crisis, NOVA, Niagara Falls, Ontario*

You can not work in a shelter without eventually being forced to examine the oppression in your own life. It doesn't matter where the oppression is coming from—your partner, your board of directors, or others you deal with as a shelter worker (the police, various agencies of the state, funders, etc.), you will

eventually reach the point where you must deal with this oppression. If you do not, if you continue to deny this oppression, you will cease to function as an effective worker and the shelter will cease to function as an effective agency assisting women to deal with the abuse in their own lives.

*Niagara Women in Crisis, NOVA, is located at 5017 Victoria Avenue, Niagara Falls, Ontario L2E 4C9.*

*de Marthe Vaillancourt, intervenante sociale, Ministère de la Justice, Chicoutimi*

Si en tant que femmes on décidait d'ouvrir notre porte et notre coeur aux femmes qui vivent de telles situations, on découvrirait des femmes merveilleuses, brillantes, généreuses à l'excès. Des femmes à qui on n'a pas appris à ne pas trop aimer. Des femmes si formidables, qu'on éprouve du ressentiment envers la société qui a fait d'un être fier et plein de capacité, quelqu'un d'anéanti qui se croit responsable de ce qui lui arrive et qui en a honte.

Le problème des femmes battues faut-il le répéter, ce n'est pas un problème de femmes, mais celui d'une société sexiste et mysogine qui n'arrive pas à respecter la moitié de sa population et qui maintient les femmes dans des rôles de servitudes limitatifs et contraignants...

Des années de pratique et de travail sur le terrain ne m'ont pas encore désabusée. Quand je vois une femme se reprendre en main et abandonner dans le recoin de son passé son lourd manteau de culpabilité, de honte et de soumission, je suis encore ébahie de la transformation même se cela a nécessité des heures et des heures d'entrevues étalées parfois sur plusieurs années. On ne se défait pas si facilement de ses vieux apprentissages mais quand on réussit, quelle joie!



*pushing tendrils through the hard soil...women struggling to express and recover from their pain*

*from Carol, a client at Nova House, Selkirk,  
Manitoba*

**Life**

Life Was Fine	Life Is Hard
Life Was Us	Life Is Maddening
Life Became Depressing	Life Will Be Surprising
Life Became Wrong For Living	Life Will Be Filling

To Our New Way Of Living

*from a resident at Maison Interlude House,  
Hawkesbury, Ontario*

**Amour Troublé**

Je me suis choisis un partenaire  
Je vous assure que j'en étais fière  
Mais lorsque je surpris sa colère  
Et qu'il me jeta par terre...

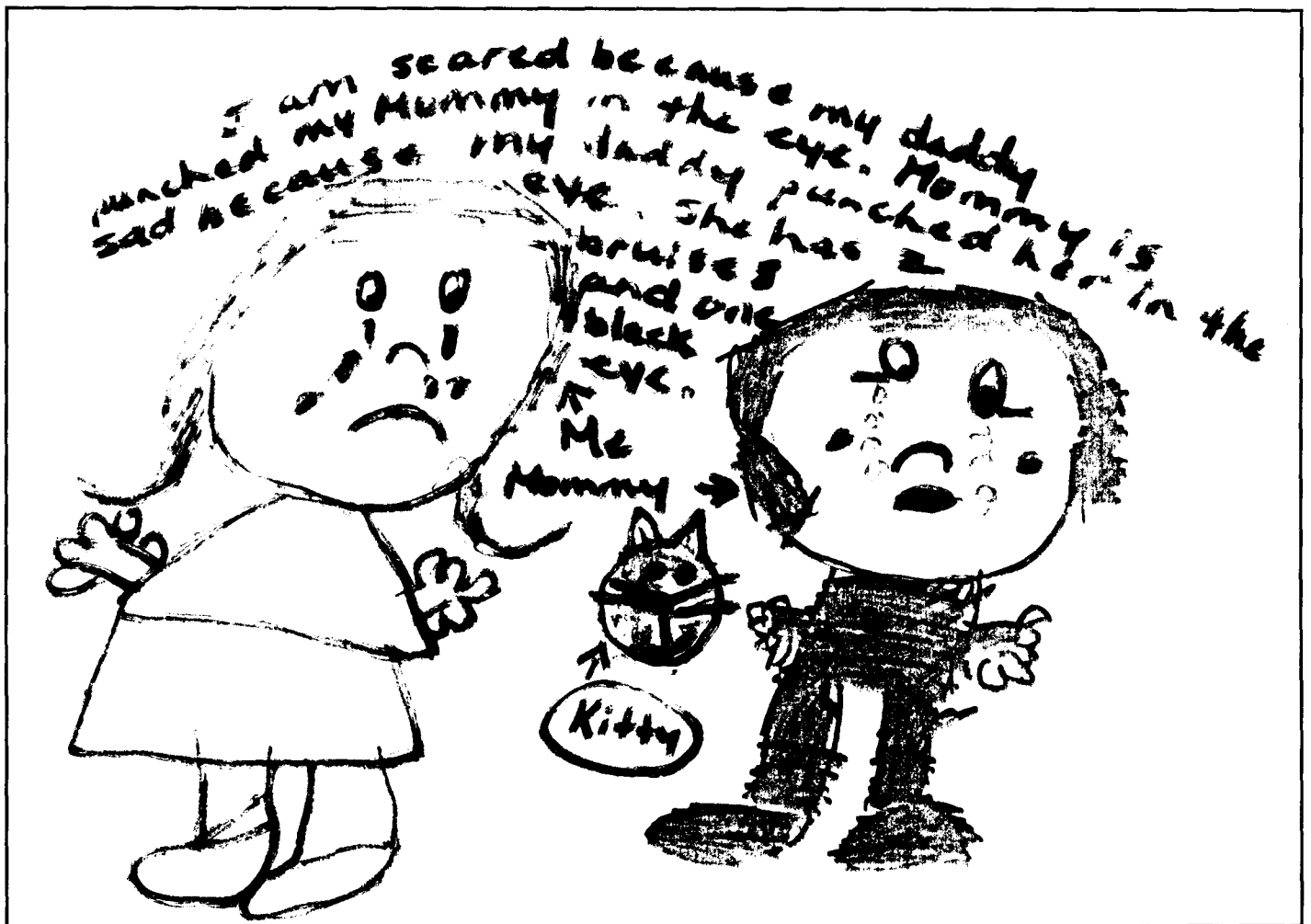
D'un bon je me suis relevé  
Et je me suis mis à penser  
A tous les plaisirs et les mois d'été  
Et bien sur je lui ai pardonné

L'entrain violent revenait de temps en temps  
J'y réfléchissais longtemps à cause des enfants  
Puisque la violence ça s'apprend  
Je ne voulais pas qu'ils en fassent autant

J'ai donc pris ma vie entre mes mains  
Lui offrant de mettre du sien  
A son refus, je me suis aperçus  
Qu'avec l'amour il faut en peu plus.

*from Karen Martineau, the Committee on Family  
Violence, Corner Brook, Newfoundland*

The staff and residents were having great fun at a front-lawn birthday party we held. We decided it would be even greater fun if we had a cake fight. One of the children looked at her mother, rather concerned, as she was not sure if the actions were playful or not, and asked: "Is this having fun, Mommy?"



Invoice

I am voiceless,  
frustration and anger, at my impotence,  
prompts tears, restrained behind clenched eyes  
yet,  
even tear, with watery voices,  
will not release what builds inside.

I am raw,  
so thinned, so open,  
that the passing intrusion of my husband  
induces hatred of such intensity  
I would damn him without regret  
but, I am voiceless.

I am powerless,  
unable to patch the accumulated cracks  
of untruth, supporting my world,  
gaps appear faster and faster  
and I fade  
further and further into nonentity.

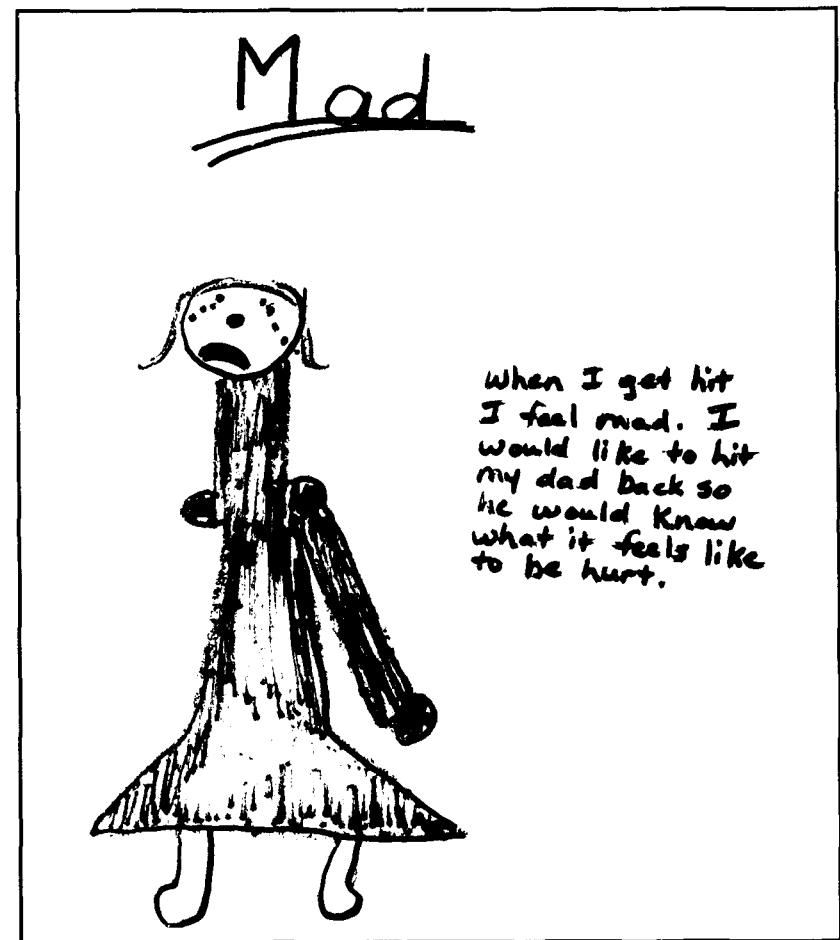
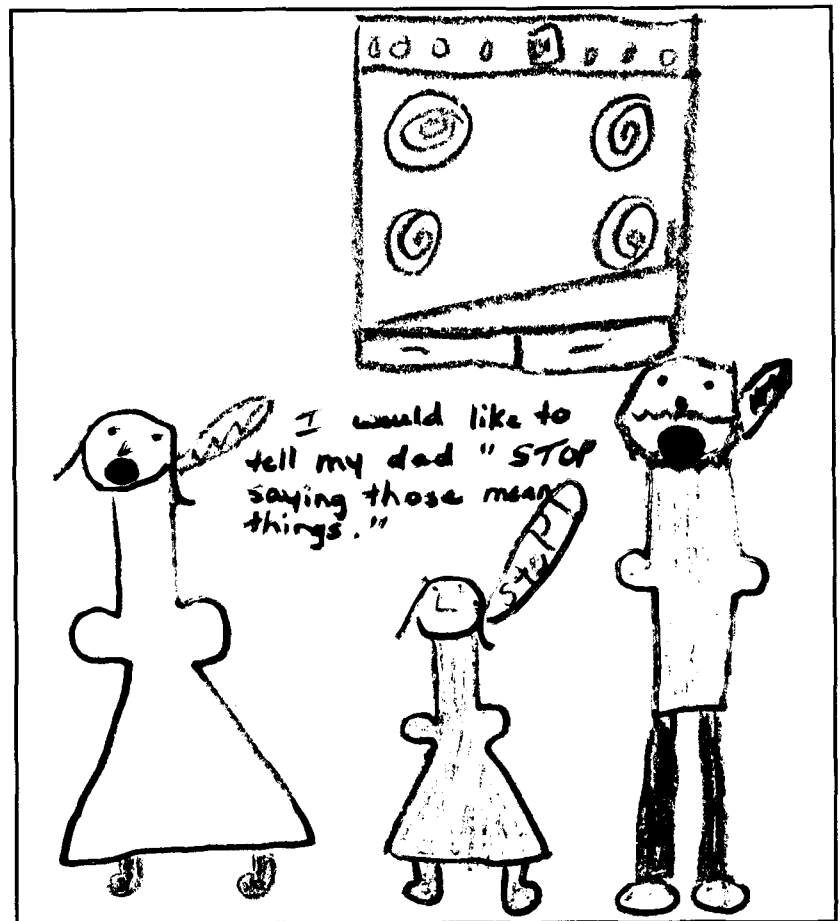
I am nothing,  
sleep, in safe, timeless, darkness  
sit, brain ded, even denial, a chore  
I can not see my self,  
where are other eyes to see me,  
to clothe, in bone and skin,  
in selfhood.

.....

I search  
with every woman  
huddled and isolated, insightless, confused,  
congealed lumps of cast off words,  
inadequate to the task,  
try to placate overpowering needs  
to reach out, share, validate experiences.

I turn  
peer into the eyes of other women  
see their mute appeals  
"please...understand, I cannot speak",  
"am I insane?"  
our words are not fine enough,  
our words are not clear enough,  
our words are not women's enough  
to be spoken.

I am silent, expectant,  
knowing within the deepest part of this self  
the momentum of discovery can never be stayed  
it is, the living, in my life  
I take back my voice  
fill my mouth with hard won words  
and begin.



*from Interval House, Ottawa, Ontario*

The house is unassuming, doors locked, quiet...But step inside and you'll find groups of children in the playroom or in the backyard playground. Their mothers are in the kitchen, drinking coffee, talking, cleaning, cooling. The talk isn't the same as in any other kitchen because these are women in transition.

They are among the many hundreds of women and children who have lived in Interval House since it opened in 1976. They had to leave their homes because they were physically or mentally abused. They came to Interval House for refuge and support, and an opportunity to start thinking about new lives. The house has twenty beds to house eight families. Even so, the house has a waiting list, with first priority going to women and their children who are leaving a physically violent home.

What does a woman find when she enters Interval House? She finds that her experience is not unique; that she can, perhaps for the first time, talk about what has happened to her. Many other women have found themselves in similar situations. She, like them, can gain strength from the support of other women, can receive help to live a life free from violence. She can obtain financial information and can also learn what other resources are available that will help her in resettling herself and her children.

She'll find that she is expected to take part in running the house, cooking, cleaning and caring for children. Interval House is run on a collective basis. Besides staff and residents there are many other women involved with the house, all of whom work in various capacities to assist in its operation.

Whether a woman stays for a week or a month, she will find space to think clearly about the future and will receive support and encouragement as she makes her decisions.

*from an interview with Mary, a woman in her late twenties living with her infant son at Kirby House, St. John's, Newfoundland; her other two children have been in foster care for two years. Her words were submitted by Elizabeth Church.*

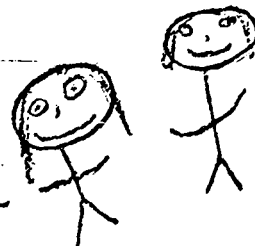
*My father never did work, mum never did work, the two of them were on welfare most of their lives. We lived in a dump. Actually a dump. What we lived in was one bedroom—there were eight of us, eight youngsters in one bedroom. Five girls had to sleep together in one. bed. And we had no toilet or nothing; it was a bucket. We had to dump that every day. The landlord came down one day and he told us, he gave us notice to get out. Me and the old man were sitting down eating our dinner and he just pushed and he broke the window down with a hammer. He was tearing down the house with us in it. And the old man said he wasn't leaving because he had nowhere to go. So the landlord came down and tore the house down with us in it.*

*Because I was sexually abused and my father used to beat me up all the time I ran away from home when I was sixteen. So one night, the last time it happened, he got me drunk. I was babysitting and I came home. He had a bottle of rum there, and he said to me, I dare you to drink half down or drink it down as much as you can. And he kept daring me. And I took the bottle and I drank it and I was ossified. I didn't know what I was doing, I couldn't sit up. I didn't know what I was doing but I knew what was going on.*

*They put me in the girl's home for a couple of days and then in the boarding house for two years from sixteen to eighteen. I got pregnant when I was eighteen. The only reason I got pregnant was because I was on the street and had no where to go and just wanted something to call my own, right. So I had the baby. I wanted something to live for, I didn't care.*

For the peacemakers  
in this world. so that  
they don't give up  
trying to make peace.  
For this we pray to  
the Lord.

By Jammy



During the previous interview, Elizabeth Church asked Mary: "If you could have just three wishes, what would they be?"

*Three wishes. One wish would get my youngsters back. And then I would wish to meet a man who was so nice, so good, who would do anything for you. He's not violent and we can reason with each other without physically or mentally hurting each other. That's what I'd like. I'm not saying that would happen, but I would like to meet one like that...and I wish, I always wished for this, that people when I was a baby, like when mum and the old man had me, that I would grow up as a normal child and not be abused like I was and have no memories of it and no thoughts. I could have a father I could go to and say 'Could I have some money' and stuff like that. 'I'm going to a movie with my boyfriend tonight.' Something we could argue about. I always thought about things like that; I'd see girls with their fathers and their fathers love them and care for them, and give them money and they got education. I always think about stuff like that.*

*The following extract is reprinted from Leadership for Change, by Bruce Kokopeli and George Lakey.*

Shared leadership liberates leaders! It frees people who have been worn down by years of extra responsibility to water their gardens and nurtures their souls. It enables them to share their experienced wisdom at one moment, and follow through with manual tasks the next. It frees them to take risks, the risks which inevitably accompany personal growth, for they now know that others are accepting responsibility. They can also say goodbye to loneliness as they "move in a common rhythm," to quote from the title poem of Marge Piercy's book, *To Be Of Use* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co.):

*I want to be with people who submerge  
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along.  
who stand in the line and haul in their places.  
who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
but move in a common rhythm  
when the food must come in, or the fire be put out.*

## PROPOSED NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF TRANSITION HOUSES

In Ottawa in January of 1987, a group of representatives of provincial and territorial organizations representing shelters for battered women, met for the first time. It became apparent to all of the women present that the political and economic future of services for assaulted women could be enhanced through the formation of a National Organization of Transition Houses.

A steering committee was elected and consists of the following people:

Trudy Don, Toronto, Ontario (Chairperson)  
Cate Moise, Whitehorse, Yukon  
Joey Brazeau, Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Denise Stuart, Montreal, Quebec  
Cheryl Hebert, St. John, Newfoundland

The steering committee is presently investigating sources of funding for two meetings to take place (possibly) in January and April of 1988, in order to prepare and finalize drafts for a constitution, conditions of membership, goals and philosophies of the organization, etc. It is hoped that a National Conference will follow in the Fall of 1988, to be hosted by the Manitoba Committee on Wife Assault.

For further information contact: Trudy Don, 29 Dalton Road, Toronto, Ontario M5R 2Y8.