

Having fled from torture and persecution, Mireya finds support in her struggle to build a life without violence and abuse for her and her children.

I arrived in Canada on December 22, 1992. I was forced to flee my country of origin, Guatemala, after I was brutally tortured by members of the military. I had witnessed how the army had murdered a couple of innocent people and they wanted to make sure I kept silent about the incident.

I had heard that Canada offered protection to people who were persecuted but I did not know how I could do that. I fled in the middle of the night, I could not say good bye to my two children, my husband, my parents and the rest of my family. Their lives could be endangered if I attempted to make contact with them. I traveled through Mexico, USA and after twelve days I arrived in Hamilton. I came here because I had a sister-in-law living here. She told me about the program for refugees and immigrants at the North Hamilton Community Health Centre.

I visited the centre for the first time on December 23, 1992. I was afraid and confused. I felt completely lost and I did not know where to begin. I did not know if I could talk about my experience back home. It was embarrassing and I feared to be judged. Back home women who are tortured are blamed and stigmatized. The worker made me feel very comfortable and soon I was telling her everything I had gone through. She immediately arranged an appointment and I was seen by a doctor on that same day. The doctor was very gentle and understanding while she did the physical examination. She also listened to my story and validated my feelings. I felt very confident that I had found the right place to get help.

"The army wanted to make sure I kept silent"

The community worker assisted me with the preparation of documents, translations, arranged for General Welfare Assistance, Legal Aid and accompanied me to my appointments with the immigration lawyer. She made contact with members of the Ecumenical Support Committee for Refugees and with my permission she told them my story and how important it was for me to be reunited with my children who were five and three years old. I had told the Community Worker how dangerous it was for my family to stay in Guatemala. She made a priority to get my family out of that country. The churches took interest in my case and they managed to get funds to bring my children to Buffalo. They arrived there in February 1993. My children arrived in Buffalo, where they were picked up by the Community Worker of the North Hamilton Community Health Centre and two members of the Ecumenical Support Committee for Refugees. My children were allowed into Canada on the same day of their arrival. They came with their grandmother, who stayed in Buffalo. She was allowed into Canada a week after she made her refugee claim. My husband arrived a month after and my father-in-law (who had also been torture by the military after I left) joined us in March 1993. Once we settled in Hamilton a new set of problems arose as a result of the torture. I was afraid to tell my husband the details of my experience but as we were making a joint refugee claim, he heard everything I had been exposed to. Our relationship soured as my husband became verbally, emotionally and physically abusive.

I came to this Centre very often even though I did not make appointments. I felt so

Recapitulating Trust

safe coming here that even if the workers were busy I did not mind to wait for a while until one of them could see me. I found the receptionists warm and welcoming. It has been such a friendly place to come to. Without exaggeration, in my beginnings in this country, this place felt like a second home for me.

Previous to our hearing in Toronto I was referred by the centre to the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture. A volunteer drove me there several times (my father in-law was also referred to the CCVT). I got counselling and I was also able to get a valuable documentation that I could present at my immigration hearing.

The Health Centre's worker accompanied us three times to Toronto as our hearings took longer than normal. We had to testify and we were questioned for those three long days in a way that we will never forget. It was such a relief to have someone beside the lawyer to give us moral support. It took us almost four years to get landed immigrant status. In March 1996 I finally got my documents and since then I have been working through the psychological effects of the trauma I was subjected to. Whenever I feel overwhelmed I visit the Centre. I trust the doctors and the social worker. The community workers are always there to listen, to validate, encourage and support my decisions. I have to say that this is the place where I can be myself, where I do not feel judged and that I can count on.

"I could never go to school before because I could not concentrate as the memories from my country would interfere with my concentration"

I finally managed to separate from my husband as I learned that I deserved to be treated differently. I learned that my children and I deserved to live a life without violence. I am now more assertive. I learned to drive and I am happy about it, because it has given me freedom. I recently started going to school because I want to learn to speak English very well. I plan to get a good job. I could never go to school before because I could not concentrate as the memories from my country would interfere with my concentration. Every year I feel stronger, more confident that I can make a difference for myself and for others in my community.

In 1994, I was invited by the Centre's workers to participate in a workshop on Self-Esteem. After this I became a member of a Women's Support Group. Through this group I have been able to give back to other women in my community who came to this country as refugees and immigrants.

I give credit to the immigrant and refugee health program of the North Hamilton Community Health Centre for having given me a chance.. For the safe and friendly environment you have at this centre (at one point in my life I spent more time in this place than in my own home)... for helping me to be reunited with my family... for being there when memories are too painful to bear...for giving me the service and flexibility I need and I deserve... for helping me to recapture trust in humanity...

I look forward to my future and that of my children with hope.