

The story of Shannon, a young mother that manages to break the cycle of violence and abuse in her life and embarks on a healing journey with supportive counselling from her local Health centre.

Not so long ago I realized how wrong things had become in my life. There was still so much struggle ahead of me, and many hardships to face, but I had no idea.

I was twenty-two with two children, and about to end the relationship I was in, because I refused to live in an abusive and emotionally unstable situation. My children were the only thread tying me to my ex-partner, and they were also my inspiration to leave him.

I felt strong, but I was really scared because, like my abusive mother, I gained strength from alcohol and found myself feeling worse for it. The discrimination that I faced while trying to find a place to live was profound. The apartment I found turned out to be a disaster. The children's father still harassed me for almost three years because I continued to let him see the children. I felt like I was marked for abuse, and that no matter what I did, there would be someone there to make my life hell.

In desperation, I called the crisis line one night, because my feelings of hatred and loss were consuming me. The line was busy. I guess I got through it alone one more time. Soon after, I noticed a community centre close to where I lived, Carlington Community and Health Services. I called and made arrangements to meet with somebody and find a family doctor.

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My memory of that first day, having the chance to talk to someone who cared, is still very clear. I was almost in tears. I brought up a lot of details about the problems I had been having, but I wasn't rushed or made to feel like I was wasting this person's time.

Eventually, I started going to the centre quite often. Not only did I gain insight and strength, I found the most caring female nurses and doctors in my life experience. Gradually, I got my act together through the help of many caring people at Carlington. I got custody of my children, and found a lawyer that understood and cared about me as well.

A women's group that helped victims of abuse helped confirm to myself that I was better off single. Then I saw a sign posted up at the centre for incest survivors. I mentioned it to my counsellor, and soon after, I was attending this group too. That was the hardest thing I ever went through, but my healing journey was just starting. I struggled with my guilt and the flashbacks, and I also found a place where I knew I belonged.

Never before has my experience been acknowledged. This time, I realized how awful my childhood really was, and I could see why my problems were consuming me. I can honestly say now that I have complete faith in myself to get through my pain and suffering. I started to stand up for my rights, learning that I was worth the fight it would take. I moved to a new place where my ex-partner cannot find me. He still sees the children, but I haven't been called a degrading name for almost a year now.

# The Stepping Stone

When I hear about the cutbacks to many essential services that directly affect women who still struggle today, my heart sinks. Carlington Community and Health Services was the biggest stepping stone in my life. I have nothing but respect and gratitude for everyone who works there.

Rena Lafleur, a social worker at CCHS, reflects on Shannon's story:

The range of services we provide is critical. Crisis Intake provides quick access and information and helps clients to begin making connections, for example, between being in an abusive relationship with a partner and growing up in an environment which was abusive. They can work on safety plans and get advocacy around housing, welfare and child care.

Individual counselling provides a protective and supportive relationship - it may be long or short term or may be something she returns to over time as new issues emerge. Individual, supportive contact is often necessary as a bridge to other services because clients have experienced so many boundary violations before.

We also provide groups for abused women and survivors of childhood sexual abuse: a documented way for survivors to break their isolation, to speak and be believed, to share ways that have worked to navigate systems and challenges with abusers. We validate the survival techniques as just that. These groups act as 'comfortable places of discomfort' in trying on new ways of coping with difficult feelings and realities.

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Our area has a large number of single moms who are or have been in abusive relationships. There is a high level of poverty. We link with other similar service providers across the city and attempt to coordinate when groups are offered. Groups are evaluated by participants - midway and at the end, as well as inviting ongoing feedback.

The result? Shannon received high quality health care for herself and her children. Staying out of abusive relationships, she has reduced their risk of harm by legal routes; she is no longer feeling controlled or harming herself with alcohol. She has nurtured her tremendous creative capacities to write, draw, make music, and be the kind of mother she wants to be.

Many problems still face women like Shannon. Society takes little responsibility for children. The need for strong measures against abusive partners is still not well accepted.

Woman abuse groups are not provided in most other health care models. Survivor groups and counselling in institutional settings often focus on the pathology of patients instead of interpreting the effects of trauma as creative survival skills. CHCs offer smaller, more life-like environments, with access to integrated services like playgroups, parenting information, help with employment and education, home help, etc. When we work with the whole person, she becomes much more than "a survivor of abuse."