

Jay, a single mom in rural Ontario survives an abusive relationship and with a little help manages to become a whole person again and contribute to her community.

I first met the people at the local community health centre because I was expecting my first child. The doctor and the nurse who cared for me throughout my pregnancy were friendly and supportive. However, the dream of the happy family did not last. I suffered much emotional abuse in my marriage, a marriage that was not working out after all. I felt like a twit and totally useless. Following up on his clients, the doctor who cared for me throughout my pregnancy telephoned me to see how things were going. This call was one bright spot in a tumultuous stage of my life because it seemed as though someone cared about me. I received counselling through the clinical services but was later referred to local mental health services for further counselling.

My husband and I eventually separated. This was a difficult time for me because I became a single mother without much money and no links to the community. Poverty was a real issue for me. My self esteem was incredibly low. Not only had my marriage fallen apart leaving me as a single mother, but I had moved away from my matrimonial home to a new place. I had few friends and I was alone. I felt very vulnerable and I had very little support from those around me. Being on my own with a child and having no other financial means, I was forced to accept Mothers' Allowance.

*"I felt like a twit and totally useless"*

Fortunately for me, the Health Promoter from my health centre called to talk to me and gave me some encouragement. She told me of a parenting program which was being offered for financially disadvantaged and rurally isolated parents. Child care and transportation were provided and there was no charge for the program. I felt that this was something that I wanted to do, something that I could do. I told my family that I wanted to attend the parenting program at the local health centre. They approved of this program and lent me a car so that I could attend the weekly sessions.

The parenting program and the other individuals involved in this program were all very understanding and encouraging. It gave me the opportunity to meet and socialize with other adults from the area, some of whom eventually became my friends. My new friendships broke the loneliness and isolation; I was once again becoming part of society. Even my family was in favour of this social interaction because it was through the well-respected local health centre. My involvement with the health centre's program was a starting point in my new life. Although I was still struggling to pay the bills and to make ends meet I was feeling more and more confident about what I could and would do with my life.

I was a licensed hairstylist and I had been trying to set up my own hair salon. However, with everything that had happened in my life, the goal of my own salon was put on hold. A 20% cut in Mother's Allowance payments sped up the process of setting up the hairstyling business in my own home. My business helped to supplement my dwindling income and my confidence grew. I was making it on my own with help from my friends and people who cared. I no longer felt that I was a twit.

*With A little Help From My Friends*

It was around this time that my association with the health centre led me to even further involvement with the community around me. The Health Promoter told me that I am "a dynamic person with leadership abilities" and she invited me to sit on the North Leeds Community Action Group as a representative for the interests of the financially disadvantaged people in the area. The North Leeds Community Action Group was initiated as a task force against poverty to support people who suffered set backs due to cuts in their income. I understood the struggle to keep afloat financially and I found the work meaningful and real. I helped to implement a twelve week skills program called "Living on Less". This program focused on financial management and aspects of survival for those living in poverty. I felt empowered by my work with this group. Through my participation in this program, not only as an organizer, but also as a participant, I seemed to have gained control of my life and my situation. I was now able to make a difference by helping other people.

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Although things seemed to be getting better for me, I still had my child to care for and I realized that my child needed to play with other children. We joined a local playgroup. Shortly after my joining, the playgroup began to crumble due to a change in sponsoring agencies. There was a leadership void but the need for the group to continue persisted. I wanted to see the playgroup succeed so I took the initiative to see the group run properly. I met with the other care-givers and we decided that we needed larger facilities. The Health Promoter invited me to attend a proposal writing workshop. The health centre sponsored my attendance and I returned to the playgroup with the skills to outline goals and objectives and how to achieve them. I went to work for our playgroup. The Health Promoter supported my endeavours to secure a larger facility. I made presentations to a local board of directors among other things. It was difficult to stand up and speak in front of the directors, but I knew that the playgroup was a valuable resource in our community. People needed it, I needed it. I was successful with my petition for the larger facilities and my success boosted my self-confidence. I was doing things for myself and for others.

The twelve week "Living on Less" program ended and the North Leeds Community Action group decided that the next step in the fight against poverty would be to increase skill building in cooking. With the help of the health centre's dietitian, I set up a monthly group called "What's Cooking?". This group is more than just cooking. It has become almost like a support group. We talk about issues which concern us. I value the social interaction and the ensuing friendships which extend beyond our monthly cooking sessions.

When the North Leeds Community Action Group turned toward youth issues, I wanted to be involved. A youth advisory committee was formed and I was invited by the Health Promoter to be part of this committee. For a short while I was chairperson of the committee. This group was very important to me because I had experienced the lack of opportunities when I was a youth. The area has been characterized by a lack of resources. I am working with the committee and the community to provide meaningful activities for area youths. Recently I have moved to a new home, but my involvement in the community and community activities continues. I have self-confidence and determination to get things done. I am happy, healthy and I feel like a whole person who can and does make a positive contribution to my community. I continue to work with the local health centre to find and achieve my goals and the goals of my community.