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# PEOPLE IN TRANSITION INC. *MY SISTER'S PLACE*

*SPECIAL EDITION—HONOURING WOMEN'S VOICES*

Spring/Summer 2008

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Welcome to this special edition of our newsletter. The members of the public awareness committee are excited to be able to give voice to the stories of some amazing women. These women face social inequity and personal challenges daily and in spite of this, they are all striving, through education, to achieve their dreams and build better lives for themselves.

The statistics of woman abuse are staggering. According to Statistics Canada in the “2005 Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile”, the rate of spousal violence in the previous five year period was 7% representing 653,000 Canadian women. When compared with men, women were almost twice as likely to report being the targets of ten or more incidents of violence, more than three times as likely to fear for their lives and more than four times as likely to be murdered by their spouse. Despite the work of dedicated individuals who bring these statistics to the forefront, lobby for legislative changes and ensure that women have safe haven for themselves and their children, the problem persists.

While statistics provide us with a picture, we must always remember that these numbers represent real women whose potential is diminished by the violence in their lives and the social inequity that they face. We hope that by presenting these stories to you, we are giving you a glimpse into the lives of women – their hopes, dreams, challenges and accomplishments.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Christina Meredith, Professor, Laurentian @ Georgian B.A. Program, for presenting our idea to her students and for coordinating with them in getting their stories to us for publication. I would also like to express our heart-felt gratitude to the students themselves who, in spite of their academic deadlines, have taken the time to graciously share their stories with us.

Please take a moment to read their stories and celebrate their lives.

*Sue Hopcroft*  
*Chair, Public Awareness Committee*

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**Message from the Chair,  
Board of Directors, My Sister's Place**

**Anne Skeates**

Women's voices being heard. Finally!

Reading an article by Margaret Wentle in the *Globe and Mail* I was astounded to realize that none of the First Nations Territories in Canada have matrimonial laws in place. The reason given is that this would undermine their distinctive culture. This definition of 'differentness' originates from the very outdated Indian Act which was enacted in the late 1800's as Government policy intended assimilate and acculturate First Nations peoples. There have been many attempts to change this outdated, divisive document but it remains a governing piece of legislation to this day. However, after a long fight by many activists within aboriginal communities, new legislation extending basic family law to all First Nations territories is now in the works. This means that aboriginal women will be able to claim legal rights that women elsewhere in Canada now take for granted. Activists within aboriginal communities, such as Leona Freed of Manitoba, have long fought for aboriginal women who, on leaving abusive relationships have found that they have no home, no access to joint assets or the value of their houses. Often they have been forced to leave their homes and in some cases, have lost their children too. Most of us are unaware of these inequalities in law. Now that we are aware let's speak out and support this legislation and the women whom it is designed to protect. Let us also add our voices to those working so hard – even going so far as to appeal to the United Nations – to change the Indian Act and laws it encompasses—an Act that leaves so many at the mercy of outdated attitudes and antiquated government policies.

I would like to take the rest of my space to thank all of the young women whose voices are quoted in this newsletter. Speaking out does make a difference!

**Anne Skeates**  
**Board Chair, My Sister's Place**

**Message from the Executive Director  
Judith Stevens**

At the end of February 2008, I had the opportunity to attend a provincial conference: "Communities Working Together to End Violence Against Women". Over the course of three days, there were several workshops and presentations to the over 1,000 participants. Certain keynote speakers imparted very powerful messages.

Carolyn Thomas from Waco, Texas is a young woman who was shot in the face at point blank range by her partner of 8 years. She spoke about the relationship prior to the gunshot blast, which was intended to kill her, as well as the several reconstructive surgeries she has undergone over a two-year period.

Governor General Michaëlle Jean shared with those present how important it is to 'break down solitudes', working very closely with youth, and women. While attending university in Quebec, she worked for eight years with women's shelters in that province, and was instrumental in establishing a network of emergency shelters for women in Quebec.

Lt. Mark Wynn from the Nashville, Tennessee Police Department, spoke eloquently about his own personal experiences, but more importantly on "Making the Law Keep its Promise – Building a Community Coordinated Response to Domestic Violence."

Brian Vallee has recently published another book dealing with the issue of violence against women, entitled "The War on Women" (2007). His presentation spoke to the fact that the killing of women by the intimate partners in their lives continues, and the victims are more often ignored rather than honoured.

Personally, the most important, poignant speaker of the entire conference was Irshad Manji, who was the keynote speaker on the first evening. Irshad was absolutely spell binding, and evoked in the conference participants the desire to accept responsibility to end violence against women and children.

To paraphrase, but in no way to simplify her important message, she spoke about the unifying fact that we are all human beings, and as human beings, we are all entitled to human rights. Often, individuals

do not speak out against injustice or violence, particularly if they are not of the same cultural origins as those who may be experiencing violence or injustice.

Irshad's message was clear: If we acknowledge that all human beings are entitled to human rights, we must speak out in support of all human beings being given access to these human rights.

In keeping with our newsletter theme of "Honouring Women's Voices", we must remember to speak out against violence, of any kind, when we encounter it in our professional and/or personal lives.

We must be willing to listen, and truly hear the voices of the women and children who are experiencing violence in their lives. Once we listen, and hear the voices of women and children, we must take action to end violence, in whatever form it is presented.

*Thank you,  
Judith Stevens  
Executive Director*

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## **I am a Womyn - Period**

### **By Sandy Johnston**

I was asked to write from the perspective of a womyn with a disability. While I do walk with a cane to aid in my balance and use a power wheelchair for distance and energy conservation, I do not identify myself as a womyn with a disability. My feeling has always been that these "aids" are just that – aids to help me get around. I am, and have always been, quite simply, a womyn. I have always felt that the words *disability* or *disabled* are derogatory and negative. I have taken the view of considering myself a womyn with a *diffability*. That is, I am a womyn who may do some things differently than the average person – but I still do them.

I am a womyn who is very happily married to an amazing man. Tom is truly my partner in every way. When I was first stricken with my illness, I was dependent on my husband in many ways. However, I was no more dependent on him than I was on the home support workers who came in to help me bathe, dress, etc. While I have been fortunate to have a partner who is kind, caring, and considerate of me in every way, I didn't NEED him to "take care" of me. I could have, and would have, managed with the assistance of support workers just as well.

As a womyn living with a diffability, I have been taught many things, such as how many barriers exist in our society regarding accessibility although I have found that peoples' attitudes are the number one barrier I have encountered thus far. As a woman with a diffability living in a patriarchal society, I cannot begin to explain the number of times individuals would pat me on the head and say "Thank goodness you have a good man to look after you" "You are very fortunate to have him" or "You are lucky that he has stayed with you." While these people may have been trying to be well meaning, these were the only times that I have felt angry and frustrated with my diffability. At first, I just agreed with these people. Eventually, I started to reply that he is just as lucky to have me because I look after him just as well and that we have stayed together because we love one another – not because he feels that he has to "look after" me. As partners, there are many household things that I take care of and there are many things that Tom takes care of. However, we take care of each other equally. We support each other's dreams and goals and foster each other's growth - because we are partners. Thus, we are actually dependent on each other, but it is because we want to be, not because we have to be.

I am a strong, independent womyn. I don't need to be looked after as if I am a child just because I have a diffability. I am quite capable of taking care of myself. However, I have chosen to be with my husband because we love each other and make one hell of a team – diffability or not.

**From Freedom to Confinement,  
From Empowered to Powerless & Back Again:  
One Woman's Story of Immigration & Violence in a Same Sex Partnership**  
*Anonymous*

I was 35 years old and preparing for one of the biggest changes in my life. Finally, I would be given the opportunity to live a life of freedom, opportunity, success and prosperity in Canada - all of this surrounded and supported by my soul mate. Caught up in the frenzy of love, lust, desire, commitment and the prospect that I would be living a better life I embarked on a journey that was tumultuous and exhilarating yet at times dark and lonely.

The decision to immigrate to Canada was not necessarily easy. I had prepared myself for a long hard journey but knew that I could count on the love and undying support of my partner to see me through the ups and downs. I was realistic in my expectations of transitioning to a new country and recognized that although Canada was well revered as embracing multiculturalism, and thus supporting its immigrant population, that I would still face many barriers and challenges in my journey to landed immigrant status. Racial discrimination was at the heart of my first experiences of stepping onto Canadian soil. Although at times I began to question my right to live in Canada, I tried my best to maintain my dignity and respect and instead sought to educate those who so ignorantly judged me without any cause. Just as I began to feel like Canada was my home, my personal life was turned upside down and I was forced to reconcile with the fact that my one true love was not who I thought she was.

My daily life quickly moved from one filled with daydreams of hope and prosperity to one that was consumed by fear and loneliness. Threats of deportation, life on the streets in a country that I still did not know and daily verbal beatings, all telling me how worthless and unthankful I was, slowly began to take their toll. I began to tell myself that I had no rights and to believe that I was stupid, valueless and that my life did not have any meaning – just like she told me everyday. In retrospect I should have known better. The first instance she demonstrated power and control over me began while I was still in my home country. I had wanted to stay a few weeks extra to celebrate my ill father's birthday with him but was quickly reminded that my fate lay in her hands. She threatened to cancel my immigration application thus canceling her love for me and all of the promises that it held. As time went on I tried to dismiss her anger and outbursts; silently dying inside, gradually losing my voice and eventually falling into a deep despair of silence and trepidation.

Then I woke up one day and started to take my power back. It still pains me inside to use the word abuse because I love her so deeply, but I had to recognize that I could not change her – I had to take my life back into my own hands and rise above all of the heartache that I had experienced. I am now a firm believer that knowledge is power. Having connected with the local immigration office, I found out that she could not, in fact, deport me and that I had legal rights to half of our possessions. Today we continue to try and heal our relationship and, while I am forever grateful for the many opportunities that living in Canada has brought, my only wish is that other immigrant women never have to experience the fear and loneliness that I did. It is my hope that other immigrant women may learn from my story so that they too can rise up above the challenges of transitioning to a new country. It is also my hope that they learn that their human rights are just as worthy as a person that was born and raised in Canada. After taking courses like Women's Studies I have learned that sisterhood is powerful and that we all deserve to live a life that is grounded in respect, freedom, happiness and peace and one that is free from the daily effects of personal and institutional violence.

## **I am a Womyn...** *Anonymous*

I come in different colours, different shapes and different sizes. I live in rural villages and metropolitan cities in all corners of the globe. Sometimes I struggle to find enough food and water to sustain myself and other times I have an abundance of wealth that I may or may not use to help make the lives other womyn better. I may love men, I may love other womyn and I may not want to choose which sex I decide to develop an intimate partnership with at any given point in my life. In some instances my body has been used as a weapon of war and I have experienced an unimaginable life of rape, abuse and violence at the hands of strangers but more often than not at the hands of someone who claims to love me. Sometimes I suffer from mental health issues that are beyond my control but for which there is little support and understanding in the society in which I live. I may be able bodied but may also use the support of a wheelchair, cane or other assistive device to navigate this inaccessible world.

I am a womyn. I am a unique individual with thoughts, dreams, desires and feelings. You would not know this, however, if you only knew about me from the images presented in the media which most often focus on one part of my body namely my breasts, legs or buttocks. I have been objectified, dismembered, violated, desecrated and dishonoured but I will not give in or give up.

Now, you may be thinking that I sound like the men in your life but it is critical to remember that simply because I was born a womyn....

- I am more likely to grow up poor. For instance, if I live in Canada I am one of 7 million women living in poverty today
- If I do not have a man to depend on financially in Canada then I am part of the 41.5% of single, widowed or divorced (“unattached”) women over 65 who are poor
- If I am aboriginal or my skin is not white then I am more likely to suffer the devastating consequences of living in poverty, for example, if I am aboriginal my annual income is \$13,300 and if I am a womyn of color my average income is \$16,621 whereas my male counterpart’s is \$23,635

Again, simply because I was born a womyn...

- I am more likely to suffer abuse at the hands of my partner. Around the world, as many as one woman in every four is physically or sexually abused during pregnancy
- If I have a disability I am more vulnerable to violence and I may make up one of the 40% of Canadian women with disabilities who have been raped, abused or assaulted
- While I am not immune from intimate violence simply because my income is in a higher tax bracket; I am more likely to be trapped in abusive relationships because of a lack of financial resources for housing and income support if I am in a lower income bracket
- I may also be one of over half of all Canadian womyn who has survived at least one incidence of sexual or physical violence in my lifetime

And simply because I am born a womyn...

- I am bombarded with the pressure to conform to idealized images of thin women in the media and in the popular culture, regardless of my natural body type
- I am more likely to suffer from a life threatening eating disorder, or to have a negative body image, low self-esteem, fear of becoming fat or social pressures to be thin
- In fact, in 1995, 95% of reported hospitalized cases of anorexia and more than 90% of hospitalized cases of bulimia in Ontario were women

Again, I have been objectified, dismembered, violated, desecrated and dishonoured but I will not

give in or give up because...

I am a womyn, who draws on the strength, courage and resilience of other womyn in my life. In all my uniqueness and in all my diversity I know that there is one thing that I have in common with my other sisters, I will not give up, I will not give in and I will continue the fight for equality and freedom simply because I am a womyn.

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## **A Personal Narrative of Financial Abuse**

### **By Vanessa Kinsley**

At the age of eighteen, I was thousands of miles away from my booming hometown in Ontario, living in a sleepy industrial town in Nova Scotia. A high school dropout, laid off from my part-time job at a sports store, I found out I was knocked up by my factory worker boyfriend. Now at twenty-three, I am in my third year of university, work two part-time jobs, am future CEO of my own brilliant company, and am the proud single mother of my clever, happy, singing, dancing, 3½ year-old daughter.

I stand strong, in spite of the overwhelming lack of help and financial support from my daughter's father, "Jake". After lying about his income, Jake was ordered to pay \$140 per month in child support, yet he never pays. The Family Responsibility Office has tried to collect child support from him for over 3 years, yet he evades his duty as a father and hides in Nova Scotia. By working under the table, using a cell phone instead of a landline phone so as not to be tracked, never filing tax returns, and numerous other ploys in his mission to deflect responsibility, Jake perpetuates the financial abuse that he has inflicted on me each month for the past 3½ years.

Jake is so good, in fact, at avoiding paying child support that after not being able to make any progress in finding him, the Family Responsibility Office gave me thirty days to provide them with new information on where he works or else they said that they would have to close my file – ultimately condoning the practice performed by thousands of men across Canada who do not pay child support for their own children. This painful reality is what pushes me to use the Canada411 website, call old mutual friends, and use all of the tools that I have learnt in my journey to gaining freedom from the financial abuse that grips me.

How can a man of 6'1 be hiding from the daughter who stands to his knees? By Jake not paying child support it is a form of financial abuse that is used to limit and control me. Years after our break up, living provinces apart, and with all of our daughter's days seen with only my two loving eyes, Jake still has control over me by abusing me and our daughter financially.

Through his lies, schemes, and games, it is I who works two jobs, I who studies well into the night, I who wipes the tears from our daughter's hot cheeks when she is sad or hurt, and I who will be free when I gain my financial independence from Jake, and no longer need and wish that this is the month a deposit of \$140 will be put into my chequing account.

**The shelter is staffed by trained professionals 24 hours/day, 7 days/week**  
**Crisis Telephone 705-435-3835 — Toll-free anytime 1-800-461-5419**  
**[www.mysistersplace.ca](http://www.mysistersplace.ca)**

## **No Regrets** **By Cindy Korpatnicki**

My mother lived for eight weeks after she was diagnosed with cancer. For the year following her death, I often wondered if she had any regrets about her life and, as is often the case in times of grief, I asked myself the same question. What would I regret about my life if I was given a short amount of time to live? There was only one answer. I had never pursued my dream to become a teacher. Since the age of twelve it was the only career I had ever wanted, but my life circumstances were such that I could not attend university. Instead I ended up in an abusive relationship, with little hope of ever leaving and becoming a teacher. While I did not know it at the time, I lived the same life that many other women live in abusive relationships. I had no idea how I would support my two children and myself. I had no self-esteem. I lived in a state of constant fear. I had no one to turn to for help. As is often the case, it was only when I realized the harm that my marriage was causing my children that I left. It was not an easy life, but eventually my life improved. When my mother died I was compelled to examine my own mortality and I knew that I did not want to die without at least trying to fulfill my dream. At the age of 45, I enrolled at the university and this spring I will graduate with my degree. The experience has taught me that, pursuing a dream is not only the hardest thing we will ever do, but also the best thing we will ever do. It is never too late to change our lives. It is not even the end goal that is the most important, it is the pursuit that enriches us, heals us, and liberates us.

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## **Women of Diversity: An Aboriginal Experience** **By Linda McGregor (Mohawk)**

Many aspects of being a woman are still cause for concern while other aspects are cause for celebration. As an Aboriginal woman, whenever I reflect on my experience, it's important to me to keep a balance between these two points of view with a steady focus on the future. Interestingly, being in the company of women from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds has helped me make sense of my own experience. And at 53, after experiencing many of life's highs and lows as a woman and as a member of the Aboriginal community, I've reached three conclusions that guide me as a person.

The first conclusion comes under the heading *Own Your Life*. The moment I embraced this as a fact was the day I got in the driver's seat of my life and made decisions accordingly. Finding a way to have independence has been critical in my relationships with both men and women. Every choice has a consequence with difficult but sound choices generally being the most empowering.

The second conclusion comes under the heading *Find a Way*. Whatever baggage has attached itself over the years – don't let it keep you a prisoner in your own mind. Find a way to address what you can when you're ready and in a positive way. This is a very personal, sacred and life-long journey with some things worked through independently, others with the support of loved ones and still others with the help of trained professionals – whatever works best for you.

The third conclusion comes under the heading *Live Life*. At the beginning of the New Year I decided to start each day with this thought, "I'm going to be the best I can be today." It was from a magazine article and I've actually been quite surprised at how it helps me start the day in a good place regardless of what's going on around me or in the world. And, living life also means taking the time to pamper yourself and have fun.

Finally, being a woman and being Aboriginal has given me a set of circumstances that caused me to discover my strengths, courage and determination – an abundance I believe we all have.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

People in Transition (Alliston) Inc., "My Sister's Place" would like to welcome the following new staff members:

*Laurain (Rainy) Chappell, Women's Program*

*Charlene Nero, Women's Program*

*Lydia Rogerson, Women's Program*

*Catherine Parsons, Women's Program*

*Marita Pinto, Women's Program*

*Alison Petrie, Administrative Assistant/Volunteer Coordinator*

All of these women bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise to their positions, which enhances the essential services we continue to provide to women and children who are seeking refuge from the violence in their lives.



People in Transition (Alliston) Inc., "My Sister's Place" would like to extend a sincere welcome to the newest members of the Board of Directors. These individuals bring considerable experience, knowledge and skills in various areas to the Board of Directors.



People in Transition (Alliston) Inc., "My Sister's Place" are pleased to announce that Huda Bukhari will be this year's guest speaker at the Annual General Meeting, scheduled for September 22, 2008 at the Millpond Cafe.

Huda Bukhari is the Programs Coordinator of the Arab Community Centre of Toronto, and will share her considerable knowledge and experience with those present, specifically around the topic of cultural diversity.



May is Sexual Assault Awareness month.



June 15th is World Elder Abuse Day.



### Trees for Shelter

Thanks to the TLC provided by Doug Skeates, we have 4-year-old potted, white spruce trees available for \$15. Perfect for your spring gardening. Call Anne or Doug at 905-729-3337 or email them at [dskeates@csolve.net](mailto:dskeates@csolve.net).

The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributor and may not necessarily reflect those of People in Transition Inc., "My Sister's Place." If you have any comments, questions or suggestions about anything you've read in this newsletter, please contact our Executive Director, Judith Stevens, by phone at 705-435-9400 or by email [pitmsp@bellnet.ca](mailto:pitmsp@bellnet.ca).