

“ACKNOWLEDGING 25 YEARS”

To say we are “celebrating” our 25th anniversary is a stretch. When we gathered together in 1977 to create a safe shelter for women who are battered, our vision was blurry as to the specific journey, but the larger vision was clear: **we would end violence against women**. The fact that we are still here and in our third “home,” which is much larger and safer and can accommodate many more women and children, is testimony that we are still a long way from achieving that larger vision. We have won many battles, but we have not yet won the war.

On March 1, 2003, Safe Haven Shelter (formerly Women’s Coalition, and originally Northeastern Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women) will acknowledge 25 years of providing shelter to battered women and their children. We opened our doors on March 1, 1978. I staffed the very first overnight, at 216 North 2nd Ave East, full of anticipation, wondering if a woman would call that night or if I would remain alone in this old duplex with its strange noises. A woman did call. She came in and we stayed up all night talking, both of us feeling our way. She was taking a giant step in reaching out for help and I was taking a giant leap of faith that we could actually provide her with some.

There was a core group of us, ten in all, all of us white. (As the movement grew, both locally and statewide, we were not aware of the importance of including the voices and experiences of women of color. That awareness, which would have strengthened our work immensely, developed only later.) Shirley Oberg and Jean DeRider took the lead. They were the ones who had attended a support group, listened to a woman’s story of abuse and decided to take action. They sought information from the first and only shelter in the state, located in St. Paul. Then they recruited the rest of us.

Some of us had been battered and some not. None of us had any specific skills. None of us were grant writers, expert typists, bookkeepers, professional public speakers, or advocates. We were self-proclaimed feminists and activists and we together forged a vision, first to establish a hotline for women to call for help and then a safe place for them to escape to. We needed a working board, we needed money and we needed incorporation as a nonprofit organization. With the help of the men and women on our first board of directors, we opened the shelter on a shoestring, a grant of \$50,000 from the Minnesota Department of Corrections.

HRA provided us with one side of the duplex on 2nd Avenue East rent-free for six months. The Ordean Foundation gave us an interest-free loan to buy our first building, an old three- story Victorian house. It was perfect, but it needed lots of renovation. We did much of it ourselves and tried to divide our time among ripping up old carpet, patching holes in the walls, installing new linoleum, and staffing the duplex.

At this same time, the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project started as a pilot program to hold batterers accountable and to test a mandatory arrest policy in Duluth. Prior to this, domestic assault was treated by law enforcement as a private, family matter. The City of Duluth has since received international recognition for its pioneering efforts to alter public policy to protect victims of domestic violence and hold offenders accountable. Many other communities have adopted the “Duluth Model” of coordinated community response, of which a battered women’s program/shelter is an integral part.

Our collective work creating programs, changing laws and policies, and challenging existing institutions was not at all easy. There was resistance, indifference, a lack of compassion and outright hostility. Law enforcement, judges, probation officers, social workers, and child protection workers all had their ingrained beliefs. A routine question then, as it is today, was “Why does she stay?” When that question becomes “Why is he violent towards women?” we will have made giant strides in changing the ingrained beliefs and misogynistic attitudes of our culture.

In the last several years, shelters nationwide have been challenged. Have we turned into social service agencies and abandoned the battered women’s movement, an outgrowth of the larger women’s movement? We can’t claim to be grass roots anymore. The money we receive has required us to become to a large degree service providers, as opposed to agents of social change.

Through an exchange program, I was recently able to visit many women’s organizations in and around Nairobi, Kenya. Many of them are in the activist stage of their development. It made me nostalgic and I wondered, since none of them receive government funding, if they would they be able to maintain their level of activism for many years to come. When they were tired, would the staff move on to make room for new energy? Would they keep their sights on making larger social and cultural changes or would they settle for only providing services? Or, because their funding comes largely from private and corporate donations, both domestic and foreign, would they be able to continue to do both and would they choose to do so? These are very interesting questions and we look forward to tracking their movement.

As we conclude our quarter century of service, our funding is in serious jeopardy. We understand, if taxes are not going to be increased that there is a need for funding reductions, and we are willing to accept our share, but we need to protest disproportionate cuts to funding for battered women’s and sexual assault programs. If no other solutions can be found, then we need to encourage lawmakers to raise taxes before severely crippling programs that save lives. These issues affect all of us directly or indirectly. We ask for your help. Call your senators and representatives to tell them your views. You can make a difference.

~ Cathryn Curley