



SPRING 1993

Friends of Interval House Newsletter

The articles in this issue of Interval House's newsletter reflect three separate memories from individuals connected with our shelter. Lynn Zimmer, a co-founder of Interval House, remembers the first days at the shelter; Dionne Williams, an ex-resident, talks about her time there as a child; Lisa Steele, a counsellor from 1974 to 1986 shares her work experience with us.

THE FIRST DAY

BY LYNN ZIMMER

The house was scrubbed and painted, the beds were made and Interval House was ready for occupancy on April 1, 1973.

The kitchen had been the biggest problem — since our funding from CEIC (Canada Employment and Immigration) was mainly salaries at \$100/week, which meant we had no money for food until we received some fees from residents. So, the twelve of us contributed \$5 each and we had kitchen start-up money. In those days \$60 for groceries went a little further.

We recruited the services of a woman with lots of experience feeding a co-op on a shoestring. She organized donations of kitchen equipment, bought supplies of health foods and tried to teach us the basics of rice and beans.

Immediately we were divided. Some of us argued that our residents should have familiar food, food to be comfortable with, while others thought that "modelling" healthy, low cost cooking was part of the job. Since the supplies were already at hand, we decided to wait and see.



Members of the cast waiting for the "women."

... a hopeful cast of young, feminist, idealists, waiting for the "women."

When we opened the house we intended to provide a temporary time and place — or interval — for women with children who wanted to leave their husbands. To the world we described ourselves as a temporary shelter for women with children in a housing crisis. As anyone knew, once a woman left her husband, she was in a housing crisis, and without a new address she was ineligible

for welfare, yet without welfare, she couldn't afford a place to live.

So there we were ... a hopeful cast of young, feminist, idealists, waiting for the "women."

Linda, took a little getting used to. She was eighteen, tougher than us, an angry mother of a two-year-old daughter. She had left her husband and was very involved with a new boyfriend who we thought was exploiting her. Frankly, we were scared of her and many of the team battled with feelings of disapproval and anger about her high risk lifestyle.

Louise and her children, six and three, were the next family to move in. Louise was a disabled woman who walked with the aid of leg braces and canes. Her husband was a violent alcoholic.

The most bewildering thing for us was that these women didn't really seem to need us — this recognition eventually led us to admire their strengths and coping skills and to help them with problem solving from their perspective, not ours.

We had to get over feeling sorry for the women coming to us. They didn't need our pity. They needed our support and confidence in their determination to find a place to live and begin a new life.

Linda went off with her new boyfriend and lost custody of her child to her violent former partner. That crisis helped her focus on what she really wanted — her daughter and a better life. Interval House supported her fight to regain custody of her daughter.

Ten years later, she called one night when I was on shift and was amazed and pleased that she was remembered. She had returned to Toronto, had a responsible job she enjoyed, and was seeking advice on safe neighbourhoods and a good school for her daughter. It was a treat to hear her sounding so confident and optimistic about her future, so sure of her priorities, within a safer life.

What happened about the food? It

turned out that nobody, whether staff, residents, or kids really wanted that worthy health food diet. Once the cash flow improved, meat and white bread got added to the shopping list. As far as I recall "white bread" remained a hotly debated issue for the next eleven years.

Lynn Zimmer is a co-founder of Interval House.

INTERVAL HOUSE UNDER SIEGE

BY LISA STEELE

When I look back on my time at Interval House, I often say that I learned to do everything there. For instance, long before my own daughter was born, I learned to hold cut edges of a small forehead together while the wounded red-faced toddler wind-milled in my arms and at the same time shove a chair under his fainting young mum. And I learned to fish crayons (hundreds of them) out of the toilet.

And I learned to shop for 30 people. I used to go to the local supermarket on a weekly basis, list in hand, and line up seven shopping carts (one completely full of bread and hot dog buns, another devoted to diapers). Then, looking deadpan, I moved the shopping carts through the check-out, and inevitably my friendly check-out clerk would tell the bug-eyed onlookers, "She's got nine children . . . and she looks so young. . ."

I also learned a lot about police work. One week will never fade from my mind. Interval House was under siege. First

there were rocks thrown through the windows — not little stones — rocks big enough to use as door stops. We were all scared.

in the act. Then a shot was fired through a back window early one evening. That was the turning point.



Getting ready for the "overnight shift"

Obviously it was too dangerous for the residents to stay at the shelter. We temporarily relocated the women and children in another shelter; some staff went to be with them; a few of us stayed at the house with the police. It was a classic Catch-22 situation. You see, the police cannot guard a house unless there is someone in the house. (It's considered abandoned, if it's empty.) But we could not jeopardize the safety of the already traumatized residents, so...some of us had to stay.

First there were rocks thrown through the windows . . .

We had a pretty good idea of who was doing it, but the police couldn't make an arrest unless they caught the person

We took turns, always in pairs, doing the office work during the day and sleeping over at night in the office. The house was strangely eerie that few days — with no laughter or squeals of delight or tears from the children, no smells of dinner being

cooked. Just curtains drawn, and a succession of police coming and going.

That is how I ended up spending a few days in the company of the "old clothesmen" from 52 Division. They came in 8-hour shifts, two or three at a time, never in uniform. They drank coffee in the kitchen and every so often peered out the front window into the dark street.

One morning at 2 am, while Christine and I were on shift together, as things were winding down for the night, just as we were going to turn in, there was

a knock at the door. (The suspect in the siege of Interval House was, as of yet, unapprehended.)

One of the officers motioned to me to answer the knock at the front door. I moved to the door, without hesitation—he drew his gun and stood behind me. As my hand was on the doorknob beginning to turn it, it did cross my mind: "why isn't he doing this?" But I completed my actions. The door swung open—and there was a very young, almost baby-faced, police officer just stopping by to chat. He had, as I recall,

a bag of donuts in his hand.

The suspect in the siege of Interval House was finally questioned by the police. No arrest was made but a high-powered slingshot was confiscated from him. The women and children returned to the shelter within a week and the police continued drive-by surveillance for another week.

Things then returned to "normal" at Interval House.

Lisa Steele was a counsellor at Interval House from 1974 to 1986.

FRIGHTENED CHILD – CONFIDENT WOMAN

BY DIONNE WILLIAMS

I remember the night I arrived at Interval House with my mom and four brothers. I was ten years old—it was 1983. It was a cold winter night and very late. I didn't know where we were going. I was sad we had to leave our home and frightened for my mom—she was crying and very upset.

We arrived by cab at this old, strange looking house—I didn't want to go in. Nedra, the counsellor working that night, opened the door.

She asked to speak to my mum alone and asked that we kids just wait in the living room for a short while. I didn't want to be left alone but my mum assured me she would be right back. My oldest brother, Clive, sat quietly and didn't say a word. The younger ones were asking me "why are we here?" and "what is going to happen?". I just tried to keep them quiet.

Later Nedra and my mum made up beds for us in the living room. There was no room in the bedrooms.

I woke up seeing all these strange people. I didn't want to know anyone—I simply wanted to find a corner and hide.

But Nedra came and we talked—she told me we would be safe here and that

things would get better. She showed me around the house and introduced me to the other kids.

I didn't want to know anyone - I simply wanted to find a corner and hide.

Thinking back, most of my memories of my stay at Interval House are truly happy. Celebrating my eleventh birthday is one of those memories. It was a surprise party—balloons everywhere, a cake with candles, and presents for me—dolls, a monopoly game, and stuffed animals. I didn't think anyone at the shelter knew it was my birthday. That party made me realize people cared.

My family was given so much from all the counsellors at Interval House. We were given support, understanding and friendship. With their help our lives changed.

We left Interval House and started a new life. It was difficult for my mother but we were no longer living with

violence and abuse.

I often came back to visit Interval House. Knowing I could come back to just talk and be with people was very important. I spent one summer with the kids at the shelter in the summer program. My family came to the Christmas parties and summer picnics for many years.

Interval House gave me hope, confidence and guidance when I needed it most. The support and love I was given while staying there helped me overcome my difficulties.

This experience has given me the understanding of how violence affects children's lives and I want to help children who have suffered abuse in the same way that I was helped.

Last summer, nine years since I was a child living at Interval House, I worked at the shelter co-ordinating the summer program activities for the children. I am presently doing relief work as a Children's Advocate at a shelter in Toronto.

Dionne Williams is an ex-resident of Interval House.

CELEBRATE OUR ANNIVERSARY

Please join us in celebrating our 20th Anniversary at our "Celebration Picnic."

1993 marks Interval House's 20th Anniversary. This event has significance for both our shelter and the women's movement. Interval House was the first shelter for assaulted women and their children to be opened in Canada.

To celebrate and commemorate our Anniversary we will be holding a "Celebration Picnic"

on June 13, 1993 at Queen's Park from noon to 3 pm.

The opening ceremonies will take place on the front steps of Queen's Park at noon followed by a picnic at the park behind Queen's Park, north of Wellesley Street.

Interval House wishes to celebrate and commemorate the various women who worked at the shelter, the women and children who found safety and shelter with us, and the hundreds of donors and supporters who gave us the means to continue with our work.

AN EVERLASTING GIFT

The Harrowston Foundation and The Zonta Club of Toronto I

have made an everlasting gift in securing Interval House's future. They have removed the burden of our monthly mortgage payments with their generous and very significant donations to retire the shelter's outstanding mortgage balance.

We now have a secure, intact, "roof" over our heads. Interval House is deeply grateful to The Harrowston Foundation and The Zonta Club for their incredible support. Interval House also wishes to extend our heartfelt thanks to The Harrowston Foundation for their endowment to begin our "Harrowston's Children's Fund" and our "Harrowston Video Fund."

It is truly encouraging and heart warming, in this our anniversary year, to be given gifts of such phenomenal magnitude.