



## WE NEED TO DO THIS: A HISTORY OF THE WOMEN'S SHELTER MOVEMENT IN ALBERTA AND THE ALBERTA COUNCIL OF WOMEN'S SHELTERS

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*A woman rests on a cot in an early shelter space in Edmonton in the 1970s. Lack of funding—and support in general—meant that women shared very confined quarters.*

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## Prairie pragmatism drives the shelter movement

### LENA

Lena Neufeld was on summer break from university in 1986 when her roommate mentioned a job opening at the women's shelter in Lethbridge. Neufeld didn't know much about Harbour House, but figured it had to be better than delivering pizzas until 3 a.m. like she was doing at the time. She completed an application and was hired within a day.

The shelter occupied the top floor of Lethbridge's brick YWCA building on 8th Street. On her first day at work, Neufeld was buzzed up to the secure fourth floor; she stepped off the elevator and was almost immediately handed a box of Kleenex and told to speak to a woman waiting in the next room. The woman's husband had physically thrown her out of their home, and she had run to Harbour House for help.

"That was my training. I was told to just go in there and talk to her. I listened to her, but I think I was in a bit of shock. It was probably her first time at the shelter, so at least she didn't know what was supposed to happen and didn't recognize me for the newbie that I was," Neufeld remembers.

Neufeld grew up in Coaldale, a small town just a few kilometres outside of Lethbridge. She was thirty years old, divorced with two kids, and—although she didn't talk about it much—she knew what it was like to feel terror in the presence of her husband. For most of her marriage, Neufeld didn't recognize her husband's abuse for what it was. Then, when she experienced what she calls a "severe beating," she ran to her mother's house. "[My mother] told me, 'You can never go back because he will kill you.' I don't know how my mother knew to tell me that, but she must have seen something somewhere."

By the mid-1980s, the term "wife battering" was slowly creeping into the public's consciousness, even if none of Neufeld's friends were talking about it.

Harbour House had been established a few years before Neufeld arrived and was one of about a dozen shelters in Alberta in the early 1980s. After the first shelters opened in Calgary and Edmonton, the movement spread to smaller communities. The Lethbridge shelter was run under the organizational umbrella of the YWCA, as well as being housed there.

Neufeld remembers that Harbour House seemed chaotic when she arrived. There were twenty-eight beds and no executive to oversee the operation. Staff would usually work alone on twelve-hour shifts. Neufeld's official job title was Crisis Relief Counsellor, but while on shift she had to do the cooking, cleaning, intakes, office work, and one-on-one meetings. "You were responsible for everything. It was all your job," says Neufeld. She was paid \$6.97 per hour.

Lethbridge is situated on Treaty 7 territory, and many of the shelter's clients came from nearby reserves, including the Kainai Nation and Piikani Nation. Neufeld recalls that many of the Indigenous women they served ended up returning to their home communities; there was less support in those days for women who wanted to start over. Indigenous women, especially, faced such barriers as discrimination from landlords when they tried to find housing—a problem that persists today. Meanwhile, family members and sometimes even clergy would show up at the shelter to talk to the women—both Indigenous and not—and quietly urge them to return to their families. "Because everybody wants mom to go back home, right?" says Neufeld.

The shelter often saw women with problems the staff simply weren't equipped to handle, even as training increased for shelter workers in later years. There was the woman who was convinced her body was being used to manufacture lightbulbs. There was the woman who showed up at Harbour House one night with a note pinned to the front of her dressing gown that read, "Take to Harbour House." Someone at the hospital had put the woman in a taxi and sent her over. Neufeld figures the woman either lived in YWCA housing on the bottom floors of the building, or hospital staff had decided that Harbour House would take her in since it operated 24/7.

"Back in the day, a lot of agencies used us as a dumping ground. They've got a problem client and they don't know what to do with her? They'll just say, 'Let's get her admitted to Harbour House.'" That kind of attitude persists even today.

Many women arrived with their children, and although shelters weren't initially designed to treat them as anything other than extra "heads on beds,"

it soon became apparent how deeply children were affected by domestic violence. Neufeld's colleague Kristine Cassie remembers one young boy who would check the doors and windows of the shelter every night to make sure they were locked. Then he'd take the fire extinguisher to bed with him. "His role should have been playing Lego and riding his bike. But he was the oldest of the kids so he was pseudo-mature for his young age and took on a role in the family as a protector." Other children, even toddlers, would swear at staff, mimicking the language they heard at home.

As chaotic as the job was, Neufeld immediately loved the work. The buzz of activity that characterized the day shift was replaced with relative calm after dark. Neufeld would sometimes stay up all night working on a puzzle with a client. Even if she knew a woman would return to a chaotic, violent home, she perceived small moments of change and reckoning. She remembers many women talking openly and eagerly, desperate to feel accepted and to be believed.

But the stories could also be traumatic for the listeners, and not everyone was cut out for the work. Cassie remembers the day an older woman came into the shelter with blood on her legs. She had been sexually assaulted in a condemned building across the street from the shelter. She just wanted to take a shower but staff tried to convince her to save her clothes and call the police. Two weeks later, she came back to thank the shelter staff for their help. Still, one staff member was traumatized by the entire incident. "She had never dealt with a sexual assault before and there's that feeling of powerlessness because you couldn't force the woman to go to the hospital or do anything else. But at least [the woman] knew she could come here," Cassie says.

A few years after Neufeld's arrival, there was a distinct turnover in shelter staff, and the newcomers seemed to represent a shift in both the profession and society's attitudes. Many of the newcomers were openly gay or self-described feminists, women whom Neufeld had never encountered in her life in and around Lethbridge. Some staff were willing to stretch the limits of their job descriptions. "If we saw a woman was really getting the shaft and there was no give, we'd have a little conference and we'd help get her things. She'd have a key and she'd have neighbours who would let us know when the husband was away. So, we'd go to the house to get what she needed. Some of my colleagues wanted to get militant and take spray paint and let the whole neighbourhood know what these men did. There was talk, but I don't think they ever did it."

That wasn't Neufeld's style. But she is still irked by newspaper obituaries in which a woman is described in loving terms by a husband who Neufeld knows inflicted pain and trauma on his wife when she was alive. She remembers one prominent political activist in southern Alberta whose wife spent many nights at the shelter, due to an unbearable life at home.

Almost forty years later, Neufeld says her shelter work was some of her best work. "It just felt so good to know that you had maybe made a difference. The people who come are so vulnerable. But sometimes you could just see them waking up and saying, 'Wow, this is happening to other people. It's not just me and I don't have to put up with this.'"

*—Lena Neufeld worked at Harbour House from 1986 to 1989. She went on to work in other positions with YWCA Lethbridge. She sometimes sees women who were once clients around town, and she continues to volunteer with Harbour House when she can.*



There's a stubborn stereotype of rural Alberta as a bastion of conservatism. While it's true that the cities, towns, and hamlets outside of Edmonton and Calgary seem to perpetually vote conservative blue in elections, it can be harder to pinpoint the on-the-ground social values of the people who live there. After all, the province is full of contradictions. Alberta was home to the Famous Five that drove the Canadian suffragette movement. Albertans across the province still revere former Premier Peter Lougheed, a conservative who created a human rights commission and happily pumped money into the arts. Medicine Hat-born Doris Anderson was at the helm of *Chatelaine* magazine in the 1960s and 1970s, where she directed critical ink to abortion, sexuality, and child abuse when most mainstream Canadian publications would not.<sup>1</sup>

By 1982—the year male MPs in the House of Commons notoriously laughed at a female colleague's query about a report on domestic violence<sup>2</sup>—women's shelters had opened in a cluster of smaller Alberta cities: Medicine Hat, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Cold Lake, and Lethbridge. These

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1 Erin Collins, "Alberta's Dirty Little Progressive Secret," *CBC*, December 17, 2015.

2 Keri Sweetman, "Male MPs' Guffaws at Wife Beating Query Enrage Female MPs," *Ottawa Citizen*, May 13, 1982, 4.

shelters hadn't been established by government agencies, but by local citizens with limited funds and a conviction that women needed help.

Their challenges were often different from those of their big-city counterparts, as they had to convince funders that domestic violence wasn't just an urban phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> Decision-makers frequently assumed the problem wasn't widespread in their communities and that shelter beds devoted to women fleeing domestic abuse would sit empty. Or that what women in their communities actually needed was a crisis hotline. Or that perhaps a homeless shelter would serve more clientele. They were invariably wrong.

In 1986, Lisa Morgan went to work at the Dr. Margaret Savage Crisis Centre in Cold Lake. It's in an area known as "Lakeland," with hundreds of fish-filled lakes and farmland that stretches east to Saskatchewan. The town of Cold Lake is about a thirty-minute drive from Bonnyville and neighbours a Canadian Forces Base and the territories of the Cold Lake First Nations. The three communities are linked geographically and economically, but, at the time, they were unaware that they shared a common social problem: domestic violence.

"When I would do public education on the Base, people would say to me, 'Well, the people going to the Crisis Centre are from Cold Lake, the First Nation, and Bonnyville,'" Morgan remembers. Meanwhile, people from the Cold Lake First Nations thought the Centre was used by town residents and military personnel. And people from Bonnyville thought the Centre was only being used by their neighbours. "Nobody wanted to believe family violence was in their own backyard. It's the Indigenous people; it's the military people; it's the farmers. It's their culture, it's not ours."

One of the first tasks for any group trying to establish a women's shelter is to find a suitable space. In the 1980s, that usually meant any building with a kitchen and a few rooms that could house women and their children. Offices were set up in spare corners or sometimes even a garage. Shelter advocates looked for cheap or, even better, donated buildings. In Grande Prairie, a town councillor offered a small pink bungalow on Main Street. The original shelter in Cold Lake was a converted church with sturdy mesh coverings on the windows. The walls in the bedrooms didn't even go up to the ceiling. "We had bunk beds and we had kids bouncing from one bedroom to the next,"

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3 Nancy Janovicek, *No Place to Go: Local Histories of the Battered Women's Shelter Movement* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 2.

recalls Morgan, who started out as a child support worker and spent most of her early years working from the kitchen since there was nowhere else to set up a desk.

In many towns, advocates had to fight neighbours who worried about plummeting property values if there were a shelter in their neighbourhood, or feared angry husbands roaming their streets. In Pincher Creek, it was racism, with some residents insisting the service would only be used by women from nearby First Nations. “I thought it would take maybe three years to open a women’s shelter in Pincher Creek,” says Wendy Ryan, who spent much longer than that advocating for a facility in the small southern Alberta town, as part of a local women’s shelter steering committee. “When people told me it would take eight to ten years, I didn’t believe them. But it was true.”

One of the first facilities Ryan and her colleagues considered was an unused nunnery just north of downtown. Ryan describes it as a “solid brick” structure, with about ten bedrooms, a shared kitchen facility, and plenty of bathrooms. In other words, it would have been perfect. Ryan says the building had been inspected and her group had priced out the necessary renovations. But, at the last minute, the local priest flipped on his decision to offer them the building for just a few dollars, and they never received an adequate explanation why.

“Then we had a line on a fabulous house. It was a split house, so there was an apartment on the bottom and an apartment on top—there were two kitchens, two separate living quarters. But the neighbour across the street fought us,” says Ryan. Town council rejected the application for the shelter after neighbours offered the familiar arguments about property values and crime. The first women’s shelter in Pincher Creek eventually opened in a very small house on Main Street, and then moved to a medical clinic that was renovated for its new use.

Makeshift offices and improperly walled bedrooms aside, early shelters also had to improvise their approaches to security. In small towns, it was inevitable that the shelter’s location would become known to anyone who really wanted to find out. Some facilities had fenced yards, but security features like cameras, double doors, intercoms, and bollards to prevent abusers from ramming their trucks through the front doors didn’t become standard until many years later.

“There was one incident when I heard one of the ladies screaming around the time that everyone was going to bed,” recalls Heather King, who started

work at Croken House in Grande Prairie as a summer job during her break from college in 1981. “There was a great big drunk fellow pushing in the door and the women were pushing back on the door to shut it. And we were all pushing the door, saying, ‘You have to leave! You have to leave!’ And finally, I ran and called the police and they came and picked him up. So, security was not great. We didn’t have good locks and there were so many ways to get into that facility.”

But there wasn’t enough money for proper security measures because there was barely enough to pay rent or meet payroll. In the fall of 1988, the Lurana Family Centre, an overflow facility run by an order of Franciscan sisters in Edmonton, closed temporarily due to a lack of funds. It was only after a weeks-long public awareness campaign aided by several prominent feminist organizations that the centre inked a new deal with the province. Overall, women’s shelter budgets were shoestring and haphazard, with staff scrounging for donations and accepting outrageously low salaries for themselves. Shelters were finally becoming recognized as one of the most important interventions for women facing domestic abuse.<sup>4</sup> But the funding model was inadequate and unsustainable.

In the early 1980s, shelters were paid on a per-diem basis, receiving a set amount of money for every day a woman stayed. WIN House I in Edmonton, for example, received \$5.50 per client, per day, from the department of social and community health in 1978.<sup>5</sup> Staff from Odyssey House in Grande Prairie remember being told in the early 1980s that their funding deal with the government was for 80 per cent of what the Edmonton shelters received, since they ran fewer programs. Individual shelters often had to negotiate their own agreements with local governments, creating disparities and uncertainty from organization to organization.

These funding models were particularly damaging to Indigenous women. Those who decided to leave their reserve could be caught in a dehumanizing fight among federal, provincial, and local social service agencies, each of which would argue that the women were not their responsibility and thus were not eligible for their help.<sup>6</sup> This type of dispute is similar to those meant

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4 Linda MacLeod, *Wife Battering in Canada: The Vicious Cycle* (Hull: Canadian Government Publishing Centre, 1980), 48.

5 “Shelter for Battered Women Opens,” *Edmonton Journal*, December 6, 1978, B2.

6 MacLeod, *Wife Battering in Canada*, 50.

to be addressed by Jordan's Principle,<sup>7</sup> which since 2016 has made strides toward resolving the jurisdictional breakdown in caring for Indigenous children in the healthcare system. A resolution to this problem for adult women would require adequate services on reserve as well as barrier-free access to off-reserve services. The first on-reserve shelters in Alberta, offering women from a handful of First Nations communities emergency accommodations on their own lands, didn't open until the 1990s.

The fight for sustained, equitable funding, so critical to women's shelters serving all types of clientele, was what prompted the formation of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS). At first, it was a loose coalition of shelter board chairs who knew they could better advocate if they made their demands in a single, strong voice. "The vision was to unite, and to get the government to recognize that shelters are a vital social service," says Loretta Bertol, the first provincial coordinator for ACWS. The per-diem funding scheme made long-term planning impossible and put tremendous strain on the women working to keep shelter doors open. They relied heavily on charitable donations for everything from table linens to food to beds. There was perennial uncertainty—and accompanying stress—about whether shelter workers would get their paycheques. Some shelter directors remember sleepless nights, thinking about staff who weren't being offered much money to begin with.

In Cold Lake, shelter director Joie Dery spent twenty years running a twenty-six-bed shelter even though she only received funding for eleven. Colleagues would later describe her as a "wizard" with a budget, her work "a testament to grit, perseverance, and to the fundamental principle of doing all that you can to keep women and children safe." Before the words "believe women" became an expression of the #MeToo movement, Dery lived that philosophy: she believed that women's stories should not be dismissed just because you couldn't always see their bruises. Dery, who passed away in 2011, retired just as the province agreed to fund a dozen more beds, meaning there would be more money for staff and supports at the shelter.

"When you look back at the archives of our budgets, it was just shameful. We were always running a deficit. But the organization took that on, women took that on," says Kristine Cassie, the former CEO of the YWCA Lethbridge

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7 <https://manitobachiefs.com/advocacy/jordans-principle/>

and District. “I mean, there weren’t eggs to fry up. You were living on next to nothing.”

But as public awareness of domestic violence improved in the 1980s, so, too, did the funding. When, in 1982, men in the House of Commons laughed at NDP MP Margaret Mitchell’s query about the need to help battered women, it was a dark but still illuminating moment. That elected politicians would snicker at a serious social issue was profoundly disappointing, but Mitchell ultimately used the incident to raise awareness of the problem. By the following year, the Criminal Code was amended to include marital rape as a crime. In Alberta, the government established the Office for the Prevention of Family Violence, the first of its kind in the country, in 1986. That office actively coordinated with the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters, and two years later, ACWS won its first major battle when the provincial government developed a standard contract for all off-reserve shelters. It was nothing short of a coup for the start-up coalition of women’s shelters.



The fight for funding has been enshrined in the shelter movement since its very beginning, but women also had to be formidable advocates and deft educators in order to garner public support for these facilities. For women in smaller communities, it sometimes meant walking a careful line to maintain social relationships with key community figures who could single-handedly determine whether or not a shelter would open.

In the 1980s, St. Paul residents Yvonne Caouette and Jean Quinn began holding meetings in a small office at the Mannawanis Friendship Centre to plan for a full-service shelter in their farming community. Caouette started working the town’s Friday night bingos to fundraise for the project, and her family was soon recruited for the job, too. “There were fifty-two bingos a year, and we needed at least twelve volunteers a week.” The Caouette family would have their kids and grandkids there. They’d walk around the floor and sell cards and markers. “I would tell the kids, ‘If Alberta Gaming and Liquor comes and asks how old you are, you say: How old do I have to be to work here? That’s how old I am.’” Decades later, the Caouette family was still working a handful of bingos every year.

Caouette made fundraising presentations to the most powerful networks in town, including business groups, the Knights of Columbus, and City Hall.

“The old mayor from St. Paul said, ‘Well, I’d like you to bring me a picture of a battered woman.’ A lot of them didn’t believe it. It was women, too. I had a good friend from school who insulted me. She said, ‘You people just do this to break up families.’ I was so insulted.” But Caouette persisted and, after years of advocacy, the Knights of Columbus offered some land for a shelter and \$25,000. Then the St. Paul Lions Club kicked in \$25,000, too. Caouette laughs, “I think people were so sick and tired of seeing us, they eventually said, ‘Let’s give them money to get rid of them!’” A new shelter finally opened in St. Paul in 1991.

Women like Caouette had to place themselves at the centre of small-town social life: the curling club, charity golf events, religious organizations. Women in small towns might come up against one skeptical gatekeeper with an undue amount of influence over charitable funds, says Nancy Janovicek, author of *No Place to Go: Local Histories of the Battered Women’s Shelter Movement*. But they might also bump into the police chief at the grocery store, which could lead to a sit-down conversation about domestic abuse and the need for a women’s shelter.

“These interpersonal relationships and those networks could hurt you, or they were an absolute asset—and they were often both at the same time. So, women networked,” says Janovicek.

Despite their feats of diplomacy and networking, shelter advocates still faced widespread denial and pronouncements from public figures who scoffed at the issue outright. In 1986, the *Drumheller Mail* printed this item in its irreverent “Roundtable” column: “Did you know that November is Family Violence Prevention month, so don’t beat up on your old lady in November, wait for December or January.” The newspaper’s publisher, Ossie Sheddy, refused to apologize in response to backlash from feminist and social service organizations. Instead, he wrote that “In thirty-five years, not one incident has been reported to the paper of such happenings.”<sup>8</sup>

Even those who were on board for the generic cause of “helping women” often didn’t want to see the issue “politicized”, despite the fact that violence against women is inherently political, rooted in misogyny and abuse of power. This incongruity between the desire to help women in need, and a refusal to acknowledge the social forces that kept them in crisis, is perhaps best

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8 Lorraine Locherty, “Violence ‘Joke’ Sparks Furore,” *Calgary Herald*, December 17, 1988, B6.

highlighted by small-town Alberta's reaction to one word: feminism. Shelter workers and advocates may have strongly identified as feminists and with the feminist movement, but many realized that doing so publicly could actually hurt shelters as a whole. In other cases, the development of shelters was fueled more by a sense of Prairie pragmatism than by hot ideological conviction. In her book *State of Struggle*, Lois Harder argues that Alberta's women's shelters were spared "the full wrath of deficit cutting" that hit a lot of "special interest" organizations in the 1990s largely because shelters walked a fine line to avoid publicly linking feminism to the movement to prevent violence against women.<sup>9</sup>

But those forced to walk that line were inevitably put in an awkward position, required to soften the message that violence against women is a societal problem that calls for solutions geared specifically to the safety and well-being of women. Kristine Cassie, of Harbour House in Lethbridge, recalls being called a "man-hater" and being told that women's shelters weren't paying enough attention to male victims of abuse. "We recognize there are men who are abused, but the levels and the types of abuse are very different. It almost felt like you were apologizing for being a woman, that you were apologizing for focusing on women's needs and rights," she says.

Catherine Hedlin was executive director of the Medicine Hat Women's Shelter in 1989. Late that year, when a gunman walked into the École Polytechnique in Montreal, separated the men from the women, and opened fire, Hedlin was interviewed by the local newspaper about the national tragedy that left fourteen women dead. In the interview, she identified herself as a feminist. "My board was not happy," says Hedlin, who went on to become an associate professor at MacEwan University. "After my initial interview around the Montreal massacre, I rephrased my wording and took 'feminism' out because it made my community uncomfortable. When I talked about the massacre from that point on, I had to talk about it more as the actions of a man with mental illness. But I still wanted our community to understand that what happened in Montreal should never happen again. And that we need to look at issues of equality for men and women as one of the ways we address issues of violence. Whether or not we were acknowledging feminism, we were an organization that was trying to change the community for women. And if that meant not proclaiming my beliefs, I was willing to live with that."

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9 Harder, *State of Struggle*, 128.

Hedlin clashed with her board on other fronts, too, including the amount of sick time shelter staff required. The board wanted to slash sick days in the middle of a fiscal year and Hedlin felt the decision revealed the board to be disconnected from the realities of the women who worked at and who stayed at the shelter. In Hedlin's observation, board members tended to be middle-class community members who didn't necessarily see the shelter as something they or their peers would use. Many clients who landed at the shelter were poor, with no other housing options available to them. Meanwhile, staff were being paid paltry salaries due to a lack of funding. Many had been drawn to the work because they, too, had experienced violence in their homes; for them, the work could be re-traumatizing. For others, like the worker at Harbour House who struggled after trying to help a sexual assault survivor, the cases they encountered could produce new trauma as the stories they heard time and time again affected their own mental well-being.

Hedlin herself was a private-school-educated woman who came into her position after having completed a master's degree. She lived in a different socio-economic realm than almost everyone else in the shelter, staff included. But at the time, no one was thinking much about how different life experiences could impact the work of keeping women safe. "We all came with very middle-class attitudes. Even the staff who weren't middle class measured things by middle-class standards—the idea of the Protestant work ethic, that success is about making a certain amount of money, that you'll marry and have kids, and if you have a career it will probably be in nursing or teaching. We expected that what our clients wanted would fall in line with those middle-class values."

The term "intersectionality"—the idea that combinations of race, class, sexuality, gender, ability, and other characteristics will affect a person's life experiences and how they are perceived and treated by others—was not coined until 1989, by American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. But to look back, it's obvious that the real-life experiences of many shelter clients, especially those who had lived in poverty, and Indigenous women, whose lives are inextricably affected by racism, sexism, economic exclusion, and colonialism, were affected by what we now understand as intersectionality, and are vastly different from the life experiences of many shelter leaders; their struggles against patriarchal norms would be different, too. Hedlin says that, at the time, "we were just starting to recognize that White middle class feminism was not the only version [of feminism]."

Others, however, were more familiar with that distinction. By the late 1980s, one woman from Siksika First Nation, near Calgary, had identified the chasm between second-wave White feminism, which had dominated the early phases of the shelter movement, and the realities of many shelter clients. And she was determined to do something about it.