



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

Alexandra Zabjek

ISBN 978-1-77385-493-9

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



Acknowledgement: *We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher, re.press, and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy <http://www.re-press.org>*



Brenda Brochu has dedicated most of her working life to the women's shelter movement in Alberta. She was a founding board member of Odyssey House in Grande Prairie, the executive director of the Peace River Regional Women's Shelter for 15 years, and president of ACWS from 2013 to 2017.

Material republished with the express permission of: *Peace River Record-Gazette*, a division of Postmedia Network Inc.

No place to go

BRENDA

Brenda Brochu packed the truck at night: a crib, a highchair, some camp coolers to store milk for the baby. The kids were at the next-door neighbour's house, and her husband was on the night shift. Working alone, Brochu tried to keep her anxiety in check; after months of planning, it was time to leave her husband.

It was 1975. Brochu was a twenty-seven-year-old mother of two, living in Grande Prairie, a resource town that sits close to the B.C. border but remains a five-hour drive from Alberta's capital city. The town abuts thick swathes of boreal forest, and Brochu's husband was working at the big new pulp mill in town. The couple had moved to Alberta from Saskatchewan when the mill job opened up a few years prior.

Brochu was twenty-one years old when she got married; her husband was twice her age. "A great storyteller," she remembers. "Kind of volatile but very entertaining to listen to. When I was growing up, my mother was really the dominant figure and didn't treat my father that well. She was often dismissive toward him, and a lot of men in my family were quite taciturn. I didn't want that dynamic in my own marriage. I wanted a man who could stand up for himself, which my husband was."

But soon after their second child was born, that volatile personality turned into something different from what she had known. One day, he beat her, pounding her leg until it was black and blue. Their toddler witnessed the assault and was distraught for days afterward. "The way he tried to make up afterwards was not to apologize and say he wouldn't do it again," Brochu says. "Instead, he said, 'I wish I hadn't had to do that.'"

Brochu knew it would happen again, and she knew she had to find a way out.

The next weeks and months were spent planning her escape and—although she didn't know it at the time—it crystallized her understanding of what women fleeing domestic violence need and how woeful the services to help them were. In the mid-1970s, “wife-battering” was not front-of-mind as a widespread social problem. In fact, it was rarely discussed in public at all.

Brochu stashed away a few dollars here and a few dollars there, slowly building a \$300 kitty in a way that wouldn't make her husband suspicious. At the same time, she was thinking of the profound ways her life would change once she was on her own. The baby needed to be weaned so she could go back to work. But first she'd need to find an apartment—and a job.

That night, while her husband was at work, Brochu focused on one task at a time: gathering her things, retrieving her kids from the neighbour's, and driving to the Swan Motel in town. When she finally walked into her motel room, after months of planning and mental preparation, Brochu felt a brief, yet distinct, moment of liberation—it would be days yet before the everyday challenges of life as a single mom, with a hostile ex-partner, would present themselves.

“I ended up in a one-bedroom basement apartment, so the two children slept in the bedroom and I slept on the couch. A lot of it was a very positive feeling—that I had managed to do this, that I had been able to get away and my kids were okay.”

Grande Prairie was a city of about twenty thousand people at the time—not too small, but certainly not so big that Brochu could avoid her ex-husband. She remembers that he eventually contacted her, wanting to see the children. He would pick the kids up for Saturday visits. On one such weekend, he refused to bring them back, abducting them to British Columbia and, through an intermediary, demanding that Brochu return to the marriage. She was terrified. At the time, custody orders were not enforced across provincial borders, and she felt she could do nothing but wait until he returned to Alberta with her children.

Brochu's husband returned to Alberta about a week later because the kids had come down with chicken pox, at which point Brochu saw her opening. She made an excuse that she needed to take their daughter to the doctor. She went to his apartment to get the children.

“I had the children in the car and I was backing out of the driveway when my husband opened the door, slammed his foot over mine on the brake and put his hands around my neck. I screamed and someone called the police.”

The couple ended up in family court that day, and Brochu was given interim custody of the children. For the next several years, she lived in constant fear that her children might be abducted again, all the while trying to settle into the rhythms of a single mother.

At the time, Brochu was working as a reporter for the *Daily-Herald Tribune*. She had walked into the offices of the newspaper soon after leaving her husband, armed with a modest journalism resume from before her children were born. In the mid-1970s, Grande Prairie was bustling, and Brochu was hired immediately.

The oil boom that had been rumbling through many parts of the province was about to hit Grande Prairie hard. In 1976, a natural gas field was discovered about thirty kilometres west of the city. It changed the face and feel of the town. As a reporter, Brochu learned that a boom doesn't just bring jobs and money: it also brings an influx of workers, sometimes more than a mid-sized Alberta city can handle.

"All the hotel rooms and motel rooms were full of oil patch workers, and even the campground was full. It wasn't just tourists or people passing through—it was working people tenting in the campground because they couldn't find any other accommodations," Brochu remembers.

"I realized then that if another woman was in the same position that I had been in, she would not have been able to do what I did. She would not have been able to save up a few dollars to stay in a motel until she had a job and an apartment—because there was no place to go."

The realization struck Brochu with such clarity that she knew she had to do something for that unknown woman. She attended a community meeting in town and pitched the idea of opening a house that would serve as a refuge for women fleeing violence in their homes. Almost immediately she began hearing stories from others who had also witnessed or experienced abuse. It was the start of a years-long journey toward opening a women's emergency shelter in Grande Prairie, which makes Brochu a pioneer in a movement that would change the lives of women across Alberta forever.

—Brenda Brochu was instrumental in advocating for a women's shelter in Grande Prairie. Croken House (later renamed Odyssey House) opened in 1980. It was the third women's shelter in the province, after the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter (CWES) and the first Women In Need (WIN) House in Edmonton. Brochu was a founding member of the board of directors for Croken

House and later went on to work with WIN House I in Edmonton and then the Peace River Regional Women's Shelter. She also spent four years as president of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters.



In 1975—the year Brenda Brochu gathered her children and snuck away from her home under a night sky—delegates gathered in Mexico City for the first United Nations World Conference on Women. The meeting occurred against a backdrop of international politics, which featured a notable lack of support for the event from UN member states and fears that the participants themselves would split between economically developed and less-developed nations.¹

The conference received scant coverage in the Alberta press, where discussions of feminism were typically relegated to the “lifestyle” or “family” sections of the major daily newspapers. That’s where the Ann Landers advice column held a regular spot, perched next to predictable features on interior design and homemaking. Feminism, in other words, was just another women’s issue that men were not expected to care about or view as news. In mid-1970s Alberta, the front-page story was the oil and gas boom. There were grand promises of infrastructure mega-projects that would bring extraordinary investment, a plethora of jobs, and endless possibilities for resource extraction. With streams of black gold coming out of the ground, a rush of men and money was coming in.

But the wealth wasn’t evenly distributed. During boom times, the male-dominated oil and gas sector compensates labour in an over-the-top way, and those excluded from the sector are left even further behind. Full-time female workers in the 1970s in Alberta earned about fifty-nine cents for every dollar that men earned.² Even in the public service, women weren’t doing much better. Women earned roughly 65 per cent of their male counterparts’ salaries, according to a study commissioned by the Alberta Human Rights Commission in 1979. The government at the time explained the difference as resulting from “technical deficiencies” in the research, and the

1 Suzanne de Lesseps, “Women Push for Rights.” *Calgary Herald*, June 21, 1975, 7.

2 Linda Trimble, “The Politics of Gender in Modern Alberta,” in *Government and Politics in Alberta*, ed. Allan Tupper and Roger Gibbins (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992), 221.

commission itself rejected recommendations to promote greater equality in government workplaces.³

Such glaring economic inequalities had been a key focus of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women that swept across Canada after its appointment by Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson in 1967. The commission was tasked with considering how the federal government could ensure women equal opportunities in all aspects of Canadian society. For a start, it proposed the then-radical idea that women should be able to choose whether or not to work outside the home.⁴ While Canadian women had the right to work—and many did—employers could openly discriminate on the basis of sex, and long-entrenched social norms meant that most women still married young and had children, and the man was the default breadwinner in the family. Indigenous women, women of colour, and those living in poverty had an even harder time securing full-time employment in the face of outright discrimination and of structural barriers, such as lack of access to transportation or reliable childcare, that hinder workforce participation.

The myriad obstacles and Catch-22's that tumble from the premise of offering women the option to work were explored over the course of the report's almost 500 pages: the need for a national daycare strategy; the need for paid maternity leave; the need for effective equal pay laws. The commission formed an integral part of the swell of second-wave feminism building across the country, and indeed the world. Women were critically evaluating their place in a thoroughly patriarchal society and exposing the many layers of systemic discrimination that kept them there. At the same time, Black women, Indigenous women, lesbians, and others faced even more layers of discrimination, from society as a whole and sometimes from the women's movement itself, which was often dominated by White, heterosexual women.

By the early 1970s, women were organizing. In the spring of 1970, an abortion "caravan" travelled from Vancouver to Ottawa, the first national demonstration of the second-wave feminist movement in Canada. The lead vehicle carried a coffin filled with coat hangers, representing the women who had died from dangerous, illegal abortions. Though birth control and abortion had been legalized in Canada the year before, restrictions on access,

3 Linda Goyette, "Gov't Pays Women Less, Report Says," *Edmonton Journal*, October 15, 1979, 17.

4 *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada*, <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.699583/publication.html>, xii.

especially access to abortion, were prohibitive. The caravan stopped in cities along the way to Ottawa, prompting rallies and meetings with feminist organizers in places like Calgary and Edmonton. The caravan arrived on Parliament Hill on Mother's Day weekend; hundreds of women marched on Parliament Hill before part of the group branched off to protest at Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's residence at 24 Sussex Drive, leaving the coffin behind when they left. When the House of Commons reconvened that Monday, the lawmakers found a group of women protesting inside the House, shouting, "Free abortion on demand!"

The caravan was organized by the Vancouver Women's Caucus, one of the earliest women's liberation groups in the country; it wanted to mobilize women around issues of equal pay, childcare, abortion, and birth control.⁵ Another powerful feminist group to emerge in Vancouver in the early 1970s was Vancouver Rape Relief, which started out by running a twenty-four-hour crisis line for women who had experienced sexual or physical assault. A similar service was being run in Ontario by the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre. These groups wanted to make body politics part of the mainstream conversation, highlighting the ways Canadian women were not in control of their own bodies, either through legislation that limited their reproductive choices or social attitudes that deferred to the adage that "boys will be boys" in the face of assault and harassment.

Like its provincial politics more generally, feminist organizing in Alberta was unique. Some of the most prominent Alberta feminists of the era were Indigenous women, like Nellie Carlson, Kathleen Steinhauer, and Jenny Margetts, who founded the group Indian Rights for Indian Women, to fight against sections of the Indian Act that stripped Indigenous women of their Indian status and Treaty rights if they married non-status men. In Edmonton, Susan McMaster and Sharon Batt began publishing the feminist periodical *Branching Out*, which offered space for women's writing—and their activism—to appear on newsstands across the country, attracting writers such as Margaret Atwood. In 1975, activists in both Edmonton and Calgary were spearheading plans to open rape crisis centres, despite governments that refused their requests for funding. Other organizations like the Calgary Status of Women Action Committee were focused on issues like workplace equity

5 Judy Rebick, *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution* (Toronto: Penguin, 2005), 35.

and matrimonial property rights. The committee lobbied for the establishment of a provincial advisory council on the status of women but faced such intense government opposition that the group eventually shifted its mandate to become a coordinator for local women's organizations. In Edmonton, the group Options for Women focused on maternity leave rights, which yielded new—but largely insufficient—legislation to ensure women could take leave from their jobs after giving birth. These regional organizations were succeeded by the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee, which formed in 1976 as the first provincial feminist organization in Alberta.⁶

But even in the mid-1970s, as feminist organizations gained traction and attention, many Alberta women were still reluctant to associate themselves with the most public demonstrations of mainstream feminism. It wasn't uncommon to hear disdain for "women's libbers" by those who would breezily dismiss all feminists as radicals with unrealistic ideals. That characterization was sometimes internalized. "The women of Alberta are emphatically not part of the Women's Movement—or so they say," reporter Heather Menzies wrote in the *Edmonton Journal* in 1975.⁷ "They see it as a bunch of women burning their bras and 'going out and storming places', as one representative woman put it. They consider it 'too pushy . . . too radical . . . and too sensational'."

If the general public in Alberta wasn't willing to embrace the feminism championed by authors-turned-celebrities such as Gloria Steinem, it most certainly wasn't paying much attention either to the struggles of Indigenous women, Black women, lesbians, or women with disabilities. At the time, Indian Rights for Indian Women was working alongside groups like the Voice of Alberta Native Women's Society, which was fighting against the continued placement of Indigenous children in White foster homes and against sexism within their own band councils. In the years before politician Rosemary Brown ran for the federal NDP leadership, her speeches were often relegated to the "Family Living" section of the *Calgary Herald*. As the first Black woman ever elected to a legislative chamber in Canada, Brown gave speeches on the specific struggles that resulted from being Black and being a woman,⁸ and she critiqued female politicians who did little to improve the lives of all

6 Lois Harder, *State of Struggle* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2003), 23-29.

7 Heather Menzies, "Liberation in Low Gear," *Edmonton Journal*, December 30, 1975, 9.

8 "Women's Lib Helps Black Men Too—MLA Rosemary Brown," *Calgary Herald*, April 12, 1973.

women—not just wealthy and White women.⁹ This work was covered in the back pages of the *Herald*, the articles placed next to advertisements for rummage sales and women’s fashion.

Even the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, which heard from hundreds of women across the country with the authority of a national inquiry, was criticized in Nova Scotia for not doing enough outreach to Black and Indigenous Maritimers, who faced issues of poverty and isolation.¹⁰ The second wave of feminism wasn’t a tidy narrative of women unanimously organizing and uniting. There were socialist feminists and radical feminists, the former believing that true social change for women would be tied to an overhaul of the capitalist system, while the latter believed that women’s liberation would be achieved by challenging and ultimately dismantling patriarchal norms in every institution and within every gendered relationship. As feminists met and organized, other cleavages were revealed, across lines of race, class, and sexual orientation. Indigenous women, Black women, lesbians, and others were forming their own organizations, centering their own stories and their own ideas for achieving equality and justice for their communities. “I am not interested in gaining entry to the doors of the ‘White women’s movement,’” wrote the famed Stó:lō writer and academic, the late Lee Maracle. “I would look just a little ridiculous sitting in their living rooms saying ‘we this and we that.’ . . . I say this for those Native women who think they may find equal relations among White women and who think that there may be some solace to be found in those relations.”¹¹

Women were wrestling with the weighty issues of how to improve their social, economic, and physical environments, all central to the feminist cause, despite a lack of support from peers and institutions. As Menzies noted in the *Edmonton Journal*, Alberta women might not have always wanted to publicly declare themselves feminists, but they still cared deeply about the issues at play. Even in that climate, there was one poster cause that women in the province were widely willing to stand up for, perhaps because it began in a place familiar to many in a province covered in swathes of wheat and canola: the family farm. It was the case of Irene Murdoch, who familiarly became known as the “Nanton Farm Wife.”

9 “Women Could Set Own Political Rules,” *Calgary Herald*, June 18, 1973, 13.

10 Rosemary Speirs, “Lacklustre Hearings Dull and Repetitive,” *Calgary Herald*, September 19, 1968, 27.

11 Lee Maracle, *I Am Woman* (Richmond, BC: Press Gang Publishers, 1996), 18.



Irene Murdoch married her husband, Alex, in 1943. The couple worked on ranches in southern Alberta for a few years until they were able to purchase their own. Over the years, they bought bigger and bigger tracts of land and, according to both, their hard work allowed their operations to flourish and fortunes to grow.

At some point the relationship began to crumble; by 1968, Irene Murdoch had filed for separation and a claim for a portion of the couple's assets. But the courts repeatedly denied that Irene Murdoch had any legitimate stake in the ranching business she had spent twenty-five years building through physical labour and business deals. For five months every year, as Irene Murdoch told the court, her husband left their home to work for a stock association and she headed the ranch herself. Even when her husband was home, her work included “[h]aying, raking, swathing, moving, driving trucks and tractors and teams, quietening horses, taking cattle back and forth to the reserve, de-horning, vaccinating, [and] branding.”¹²

A trial judge dismissed her efforts as “the work done by any ranch wife,” offering an implicit acknowledgment that the work was simultaneously expected and valueless. After fighting for three years through three levels of court, Irene Murdoch was left with nothing more than “a pile of legal bills and \$200 a month, for a lifetime of hard labour.”¹³ The Supreme Court even found that Irene Murdoch should pay a portion of her husband's legal costs. It wasn't until more than a year later, after launching another court proceeding, this time for divorce, that Irene Murdoch was awarded a financial settlement worth approximately one third of her ex-husband's total financial assets.

The Nanton Farm Wife was widely discussed in Alberta and beyond; academics such as Lois Harder wrote that her story represented “the central focus for feminist organizing” in Alberta in the 1970s.¹⁴ While the case was front and centre in the fight for matrimonial property law reform, an important detail of Irene Murdoch's experience was omitted in most accounts of her story. One night, as husband and wife argued over their ranch and who

12 Supreme Court of Canada, *Murdoch v. Murdoch* (1975) 1 S.C.R. 423, 1973-10-02, 443.

13 Margo Goodhand, *Runaway Wives and Rogue Feminists: The Origins of the Women's Shelter Movement in Canada* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing Company, 2017), 70.

14 Harder, *State of Struggle*, 2.

owned what, Alex Murdoch's anger turned violent: he broke his wife's collarbone and her jaw in three places and sent her to the hospital. The dissenting judge in the Supreme Court Case, Bora Laskin, described the incident as a "physical clash."

"It was a great case for the feminist movement at the time because it was so grossly unfair and so clearly sexist, that a spouse's contributions could be completely ignored in the end," says Margo Goodhand, author of *Runaway Wives and Rogue Feminists: The Origins of the Women's Shelter Movement in Canada*. "But when I read Laskin's comments about the injuries she suffered that last night in the home, it triggered a whole new way of looking at the case. No one at the time wrote about Irene's last hours in her home—but they must have been horrific.

"Those other facts were irrelevant, and maybe shameful to Irene herself because she never talked about the assault either, or let her lawyers use it in subsequent court appeals."

In the early 1970s, domestic violence simply wasn't widely discussed in Canada. The home was considered a private sphere, where men paid the bills and ultimately controlled what happened there. If a man hit or beat his wife, the immediate question that many people asked was, "What did she do to provoke him?" These patriarchal attitudes reverberated through the social fabric of Canada. Women's bodies, through restrictions on birth control and abortion, were still regulated by mostly male legislators; it would take another decade before marital rape would even become a crime in Canada. In such an environment, is it any surprise how few people were willing to acknowledge that physical abuse was happening in suburban bungalows, Prairie farmhouses, and inner-city apartments?

At that time, when women came forward about abuse, or others learned of it, the response was typically muted. Social workers promoted reconciliation between spouses, no matter the marital circumstances. Doctors treated broken bones but didn't ask why a woman was making multiple visits to the emergency ward. Police would sometimes take a man out of the home to "cool off," but wouldn't follow through with formal charges.

For those experiencing violence in the home, there was—as Brenda Brochu and so many others have observed—no place to go.

"My mother had no education, she had nine babies, she had no employment skills or experience. So she stayed and she took it. There were holes in the walls, there were bruises, black eyes, all that stuff," says Heather King, who

grew up in Grande Prairie and was one of the first staff members at Croken House. “We would have incidents where we were running to the neighbours, calling the police, hiding in the basement, clinging to each other and crying. We had everything packed under the bed for probably twelve years, ready to leave my father, but my mother had no options.”

In a twist of sad and strange irony, King’s mother often opened her home to other women experiencing violence—women she met through her husband’s attendance at Alcoholics Anonymous. It was an example of how women with few resources, struggling in their own lives, are often the first to step up to help peers in need. King’s sister once remarked that their mother had the first de facto women’s shelter in Grande Prairie, long before Brenda Brochu and members of the Grande Prairie Women’s Residence Association opened a formal shelter on Main Street.

For thousands of women in Alberta’s smallest hamlets and biggest cities alike, the “options” were similar: stay at a friend’s house, sleep in your car, run to a neighbour when things are especially terrifying. Towns might have had animal shelters, but there were no shelters for women in need of refuge. Sometimes, friends and neighbours of abused women didn’t want to get involved for fear an angry husband would show up on their doorstep. But often, women like Heather King’s mother helped others in need, readying a bed for a neighbour or quietly driving a friend to the doctor.

Even years later, after the first women’s shelters had opened in urban centres, women in more rural areas relied on their ingenuity to help their sisters, friends, and neighbours. Before there was a physical shelter in Rocky Mountain House, staff of the Mountain Rose Shelter used their own vehicles to drive women to the closest facility with an available bed—often almost a hundred kilometres away in Red Deer.

“There wasn’t anything happening in government. No one was saying, ‘We identify this issue. Let’s start some projects in these communities,’” says Pat Lowell, who sat on a steering committee to determine the feasibility of a shelter in Pincher Creek in southern Alberta and later became a shelter board member. “It was totally the opposite of that. It was the grassroots saying, ‘We need to do this.’”

Through her job as a reporter for the *Herald-Tribune* in Grande Prairie, Brenda Brochu heard about a meeting being organized by the United Church, which wanted to sponsor a project to benefit the community. Brochu was intrigued and went to the meeting, not as a reporter, but as a citizen who had

a vague but pressing idea for an endeavour that she knew would help many in her town, especially as rents were jacked up and hotel rooms filled in the midst of the energy boom. Inspired, she stood up and told the crowd that women needed a safe place to stay if they were fleeing abuse in their homes.

She soon met others who had either experienced domestic violence themselves or had seen their mothers being abused. They made connections with local politicians such as MLA Elmer Borstad and secured a major donation from a town councillor—a pink house that sat kitty-corner to the Co-op on the main drag in town. Croken House, named after former town councillor John Croken, opened in 1980. The shelter started as a space to help homeless, transient, and abused women, but it soon became clear that domestic violence was so widespread and harmful that the shelter would focus its efforts to help those affected by it.

“My involvement in the sheltering movement is one of the most worthwhile things I’ve ever done in my life. Getting a shelter started in Grande Prairie is one of the things I’m most proud of,” says Brochu.



This book tells the stories of women who paved similar paths to that of Brenda Brochu, even if their surroundings were very different. They come from Banff and Bonnyville, High Level and High River, and everywhere in between. They are White women, Indigenous women, and women who weren’t born in Canada. Some started their work in the 1970s, while others later built upon the efforts of their peers.

Their work emerged in lockstep with the broader feminist movement as it evolved in Canada, but it also played out within the unique social and political context of Alberta. When the Calgary Women’s Emergency Shelter opened in 1973, it was among the first women’s shelters in the country that focused on helping women escaping domestic violence. In the 1980s, women in smaller Alberta centres networked with decision-makers in their communities to gain support for women’s shelters at a time when “feminism” and “special interests” were looked down upon by male-dominated municipal and provincial governments. In the 1990s, Indigenous women in Alberta advocated for shelters to serve their sisters, whose experiences are shaped by the intergenerational effects of colonialism and systemic racism. At the same time, all shelters were working within a political climate that normalized

the slashing of social service budgets. Despite these challenges, shelters, over time, developed more nuanced understandings of domestic violence that allowed them to establish cutting-edge programs to help women and children in crisis.

The women and men who have been part of this movement changed the public's perception of domestic violence and the government's view of its responsibility to help them. The earliest shelters recognized that there was strength in numbers, and in 1983 they officially incorporated the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. The organization has for decades acted as a central voice of advocacy, not only for adequate shelter funding, but also for legal reforms and data-driven policies to ensure women fleeing domestic violence are safe and supported.

Shelters have changed dramatically over the past four decades: the buildings are better designed and equipped, the staff are better trained, and the policies are better developed. There are still struggles for adequate funding and appropriate facilities, and misogynist attitudes persist in Canada, endangering the safety of women in various ways. But the shelter movement continues to build on the early efforts of those who didn't always know what would happen when they joined a social movement that changed the lives of Alberta's women for the better.