



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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In the early 1970s, Ardis Beaudry worked tirelessly along with other early volunteers to find safe spaces for women in distress in Edmonton—anywhere and wherever they could. These beds from a shelter in 1972 showcase the cramped and limited spaces available to women.

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A reckoning about wife battering

ARDIS

Ardis Beaudry climbed the winding staircase to the bell tower of the All Saints' Anglican Cathedral in downtown Edmonton. The corridor was uncomfortably narrow and steep, but she pushed ahead. It was 1970, and it was Beaudry's first shift at the first shelter for women in the city.

Beaudry had no experience as a social worker or a shelter employee, but she was willing to volunteer and, in the early 1970s, that was qualification enough. The bell tower was small and isolated, hardly an ideal spot for an overnight shelter, but it had room for a few pieces of furniture and a coffee maker, so it would have to do. The church had been the first to offer space to an upstart organization trying to create a shelter for women in crisis, so the group took it. That night, a social worker brought in the first client—an intoxicated woman who promptly fell asleep—and Beaudry was relieved. She didn't know what she would have done had the woman tried to leave.

Outside that bell tower, Beaudry's life was that of stay-at-home mother, judge's wife, and volunteer with the Catholic Women's League. She got involved with the church organization after moving to the provincial capital as a new bride who didn't know a soul. A friend told her to contact the Catholic Women's League, and that's where she met a circle of friends, including Daisy Wilson, a natural 'doer' who would invite friends for tea to discuss new projects or pressing concerns.

A few years before that night in the bell tower, Wilson had told her friends about an observation that concerned her. "Daisy had a real worry about the young women who were coming into town on the bus," Beaudry remembers. "She felt they were being picked up before they got out of the Greyhound bus depot by men who were waiting around. It was the 1960s, and young girls were starting to travel across Canada. She could see that a lot of Indigenous

girls were arriving, often looking for family. And if there was nobody there that could help them, they'd be picked up before they could even get out of the depot."

The group pinpointed a glaring gender disparity in the city: there was a shelter for men who had no place to go, but nothing equivalent for women. Beaudry and her friends felt compelled to help the women who Wilson had observed at the bus depot, but it would take months before they formalized the idea of starting a drop-in space for vulnerable women, and even more time before they realized that, for many of these women, their own homes were unsafe places to be.

Beaudry and Wilson started organizing, calling the YWCA and every other social service organization they could think of that served women, including the Edmonton Social Planning Council. It took months until they got some organizational backing to open a drop-in shelter, where women could rest and get a cup of coffee, maybe make a few phone calls. They initially secured a small amount of funding from church groups and launched their endeavour in the All Saints' Cathedral in January 1970. Over the next several months they saw dozens of women, including teenagers. Some came to the shelter inebriated; others were suffering from physical injuries or ailments; still others were just looking for a temporary place to rest while they tried to secure their next move.

"The bell tower was right downtown, so it was in a good location, but we knew right away it was not an ideal situation. We couldn't keep going up those stairs—it was dangerous. So, we got moved into the basement of the church. We were moving from pillar to post," says Beaudry.

The group later bounced between a few downtown locations, landing in a storefront that had once housed a pawnshop. They laid down mats for women to sleep on, while a skeleton staff and volunteers tried their best to refer women to more formal service agencies. There was no hot water and no showers, but it was the only option for women with nowhere else to go, so they were always busy. Beaudry remembers asking the government for money: "And we were very much told that women should stay home."

The group eventually managed to secure meager, haphazard funding through different organizations and from provincial and municipal governments. It was a constant learning process for those who managed and staffed the shelter: they learned by doing and, sometimes, by failing. "There were two really young staff with the Edmonton Social Planning Council who tried to

help us find locations—and here we were, these housewives,” says Beaudry. “More and more girls started dropping in. We had a volunteer staff, which was not too good because the volunteers sometimes didn’t show up and sometimes they didn’t know what they were doing any more than any of us knew what we were doing.”

By 1974, the provincial government had finally recognized the dire situation of vulnerable women in Edmonton. That year, the minister of health and social development announced a contract with the City Centre Church Corporation, a local charity, to operate a new facility, called the Women’s Emergency Accommodation Centre, for homeless and transient women. It was a blow for Beaudry’s group, which had formalized their organization by incorporating as the Edmonton Women’s Shelter Ltd. (EWS) the year prior. They felt they still had a role to play, however, and dreamed of opening a house that could offer women more freedom than they might find at a homeless shelter. They decided to narrow their focus to help women who had experienced domestic violence.

At the time, Beaudry was just learning that many women without housing were fleeing abuse in their families. “We had no idea how much abuse was around. At the beginning, I was in shock because I just couldn’t believe what I was hearing,” she says. “I think you realize that you have to stick together. I really learned to listen because who was I to say, ‘I don’t believe what you’re telling me.’ You just don’t know.”

At the same time, Beaudry was navigating her new role as activist and advocate while maintaining her life as a stay-at-home mother to four children and wife of a husband with a demanding job. “My husband never said anything about me not doing this work, so I guess I took it for granted that it was okay. I got my own car, so he must have been okay with it—either that or he got tired of me driving him to work and talking about it,” she laughs. Years later, while looking through a stack of documents at home, Beaudry found an envelope with her husband’s name on it. Inside, there were work papers that showed her husband had asked for a presentation about family violence in his capacity as a judge. Beaudry is still incredulous at the discovery: “He never said a word about that to me.”

Edmonton Women’s Shelter Ltd. was also learning to navigate the world of non-profit partnerships and fundraising. It connected with the Clifford E. Lee Foundation, which urged the women to find an appropriate house that could be used as a shelter for women. Meanwhile, the group continued to

lobby the provincial government for funds and launched a public fundraising campaign that lasted for months. By fall of 1978, EWS was getting ready to open the doors of a brand-new facility for women in Edmonton.

On December 5, 1978—eight years after the first drop-in night at the All Saints’ Cathedral and four years after Edmonton Women’s Shelter Ltd. was pushed out of operating the first government-funded homeless women’s shelter in Edmonton—the first WIN House opened. It was named Women In Need, and it would serve women fleeing domestic abuse.

“When you think back on it, this all began because one woman cared enough to help somebody else,” says Beaudry. “That’s often what happens. One person has an idea or does something that starts a whole movement.”

—Ardis Beaudry was a long-time board member for WIN House, a founding member and the first president of the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters, and an honorary member of ACWS. Beaudry worked tirelessly for the shelter movement for decades after that first night volunteering in the bell tower of the All Saints’ Anglican Cathedral. She passed away in 2021.



In the 1970s, women across the country were organizing. They spanned the spectrum, from young women publicly tossing their high heels into trash cans, to Black women fighting for recognition that both race and gender affected their lives and livelihoods, to married women like Ardis Beaudry and the members of the Catholic Women’s League who approached their work from a position of benevolence and a sense of social justice, wanting to address the gaps in services for women in need. But as different as their backgrounds and political perspectives may have been, many women’s groups—once they gathered, listened, and talked—shared a common experience: a discovery that domestic violence was widespread and women needed help.

Whether it was through the medium of a rape crisis line, women’s centre, or homeless shelter, it soon became apparent that women seeking help often needed to escape violence at home. “When women’s centres opened in communities across Canada, these were supposed to be political action hubs for feminism,” says Nancy Janovicek, a professor of history at the University of Calgary. “Then when women would come to them, they’d say, ‘I need help

getting out of this abusive relationship.’ And they realized there was nowhere to refer them.”

In Edmonton, the path to a women’s shelter for those escaping domestic violence began in 1968, when twenty-eight social agencies and church groups gathered to discuss the housing needs of transient women. This was the group that Ardis Beaudry and Daisy Wilson had helped to convene; they were joined by established organizations like the YWCA and operated under the direction of Ronald Mossman, a well-known Quaker and social justice organizer in the city. Over the course of a year, the coalition researched what services were available for vulnerable women in Edmonton. Their final report, called the Mossman Report, outlined different categories of women, such as “Girls With Pathological Problems - e.g., Prostitutes, Alcoholics” and “Girls Released From Institutions Who Need Supervised Residential Accommodation.” The use of the term “girls” to refer to women who often had husbands and children of their own was at once infantilizing and problematic, but also reflective of the attitudes of the era.

Under the category of “Destitute Girls Coming To The City” was this note: “Many of the destitute girls who come to the City express a great need to get away from their homes for many tragic reasons. Often it is because of beatings, etc., by a cruel husband. These frantic women feel trapped and are trapped. They require short-term housing, sometimes with babysitting available.”¹ The report called for more supportive housing units for young women and for the establishment of a 24/7 ‘point of contact’ for newcomers to the city to receive information about social services and housing options.

That domestic violence was reduced to a footnote in an expansive report on vulnerable women was not surprising in the 1960s and 1970s. The issue simply wasn’t widely discussed. When it was, stereotypes and myths were almost always present: women had done something to provoke their husbands’ anger; the real problem was alcohol; violence was an issue for poor people. These notions dominated the narrative at the time, as they sometimes still do today.

It wasn’t until 1982 that a House of Commons committee would produce a report called “Wife Battering: Report on Violence in the Family.” Even then,

1 *The Mossman Report on Housing Needs in the City of Edmonton for Homeless Girls 15-25 Years of Age*, May 1969, 2.

the first page of the document sets up the parameters of the problem by acknowledging that living with someone can be “frustrating”.

“Nerves become frayed, tempers flare, dishes start flying about the room and someone gets slapped. Such events are not pleasant, but they are not unexpected; they are tolerated, and wryly made fun of. . . . We have found that wife battering is not a matter of slaps and flying crockery. Battered women are choked, kicked, bitten, punched, subjected to sexual assault, threatened, and assailed with weapons,” the report states.²

Considering that elected members of Parliament thought slapping one’s spouse was a normal, almost expected, event in the course of marriage, it’s perhaps not surprising that even early advocates of women’s shelters, like Ardis Beaudry, had lots to learn about the realities of domestic violence. Some of these advocates struggled to understand even the basics of the phenomenon, let alone sympathize with women who didn’t “just leave.”

Rose-Marie McCarthy joined EWS not out of a personal desire to advance the cause of fighting domestic violence, but because Beaudry, a good friend, had asked her. “I knew how to take notes,” she says simply. McCarthy remembers carefully cranking out meeting minutes on a Gestetner duplicating machine, her recollection of that time-consuming process just as firmly etched in her memory as the discussions she was recording. She bristles at the notion that she was either “rogue” or a “feminist”, as the title of journalist Margo Goodhand’s book, *Runaway Wives and Rogue Feminists: The Origins of the Women’s Shelter Movement in Canada*, implies.

McCarthy admits she had a hard time understanding the problems women were facing. “I was always independent and I always thought, ‘Well, just get the hell out.’” When asked what changed her mind, she told this story:

“I had an experience with one lady who taught at the university, where her husband also taught. She was a nice lady. And for years, she was locked in her basement. And her husband would drive her to work and he would pick her up and drive her home, and then lock her in the basement again. And I couldn’t believe this. I was driving her to court and she was telling me her story—it was such a shock. That’s when I really woke up. She didn’t have a single penny. That was the first time that I thought, ‘Oh, here’s somebody so well-educated and smart, who is in this situation.’”

2 Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs, *Wife Battering: Report on Violence in the Family*, 1980, https://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.com_HOC_3201_19_5/1.

Those moments of reckoning are still happening today. In 2014, professional football player Ray Rice—a two-hundred-pound NFL running back—was filmed striking his then-fiancée in an elevator after what appeared to be a brief argument. Janay Palmer Rice was flattened to the ground instantly. The couple married the next month; when video footage of the assault was released later that year, the hashtag #WhyIStayed began trending on Twitter. Writer Beverly Gooden, a domestic abuse survivor, started the hashtag, noting that people were zeroing in on why Janay Rice stayed with her husband, rather than why her husband had struck her with such force she was knocked unconscious.³

“We need to understand that violence against women and intimate partner violence is a complex issue and no one deserves or asks to be beaten,” says Pat Vargas, who has served as executive director at A Safe Place in Sherwood Park, Alberta. “And if you stay in a relationship, there are many factors—and we shouldn’t be asking why [the woman stayed]. Rather we should be asking, ‘What support do we have in place for women who choose to live a life without violence?’”



By 1973, women’s groups across the country were fighting bureaucracies, stagnant social attitudes, and a lack of funds to open women’s shelters. The first facilities specifically geared toward helping women escape domestic violence opened that year in Vancouver, Toronto, Langley, Saskatoon, and Calgary.

Lynn Zimmer, a young feminist behind the opening of Interval House in Toronto, told Goodhand, “Let’s just say it was a spontaneous combustion thing and it just spread like wildfire. Because in our way, we each were the first, we didn’t copy each other, we just did it.”⁴ Zimmer had posted an advertisement that read: “Want to do something for women in distress? If you’re interested in forming a women’s shelter, please come to this meeting.” That gathering was held at a recently opened, federally funded feminist centre; the attendees included young university students, ready to attend protests and rally for feminist causes, and a handful of older women, some of whom had a personal understanding of the harms caused by domestic violence. They

3 Zosia Bielski, “A Simple Hashtag Reveals the Complexities Facing Women Who Experience Domestic Violence,” *The Globe & Mail*, September 9, 2014.

4 Goodhand, *Runaway Wives and Rogue Feminists*, 52.

partnered with the city to find a rental and opened Interval House in January of that year.

On the other side of the country, in Langley, British Columbia, a small feminist group applied for federal government funding to open Ishtar Transition House, named for a mythical Mesopotamian goddess who represented love, war, justice, and power.⁵ A three-hour drive south of Edmonton, Joyce Smith was leading the charge for the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter. A mother and homemaker, Smith had gone back to school as a mature student to study social work and experienced an intense desire to change the lives of vulnerable women. "When other girls were talking about dirty diapers and a pot of coffee, Joyce and I talked about the welfare of the world and different things that were happening," a friend told the *Calgary Herald* in 2008, a year after Smith passed away.⁶

Feminist activists in Edmonton were building projects like the Rape Crisis Centre, which became a launchpad for many young workers who would go on to staff women's shelters as they opened in subsequent years across the province. The Edmonton chapter of the Catholic Women's League, made up of Beaudry and her friends, was hardly composed of young radicals, but their work still pushed social boundaries as they fought for resources for vulnerable women. Lynn Hannley, from the Edmonton Social Planning Council, worked beside them and says the group was initially driven by a sense of benevolence and charity. "But as they became engaged, it became an issue of rights. I was always impressed with them, to see how they evolved. I think it gave them strength to continue on."

But there were still blind spots, for the group and for society at large. The majority of clients who arrived at the storefront shelter run by EWS were Indigenous, landing in the city from reserves and settlements in northern Alberta. Groups such as the Métis Association of Alberta pushed for a new shelter, to be operated by an Indigenous board and staffed by people who knew Indigenous languages and were familiar with life on reserve.⁷ It was an early example of how Indigenous women were ready and willing to tackle issues of violence and other social ills but struggled for resources and support for Indigenous-led solutions. It also showed how, since the very beginning, some of the main players in Alberta's women's shelter movement have had to

5 Ibid., 60.

6 Peter Green, "Joyce Smith," *Calgary Herald*, January 20, 2008, B5.

7 Proposal for Women's Interim Aid, Nagisayway peygamak (no date).

reckon with how to best meet the needs of Indigenous women—even if that meant stepping back—and to understand how Indigenous women’s experiences with violence are entangled with racism, sexism, and colonialism.

After Edmonton’s Women Shelter Ltd. decided to focus on opening a non-institutional home for women in crisis, specifically those fleeing domestic abuse, the organization spent months researching women’s housing needs. Some members even corresponded with the staff of transition houses—as women’s shelters were more commonly called at that time—in other parts of the country to learn more about their operations.⁸ By 1978, the organization had produced a professional eleven-page proposal that outlined the need for a shelter for battered women. The document included a short scan of available services in Edmonton and a proposed outline of operations, including staffing levels and intake policies.

The women found a brown, four-suite, up-and-down apartment building that would become their shelter’s first permanent home in the city’s Beverly neighbourhood. The Clifford E. Lee Foundation purchased the building and then agreed to lease it to the shelter for one dollar per year, for ten years. Like every shelter in the 1970s, this one was filled with donated furniture, its renovations done by donated labour. Beaudry remembers the moment the foundation agreed to lease them the structure: “A dollar a year! Can you imagine what that was like? That was just an amazing thing.”

The opening of WIN House was marked by an un-bylined article in the *Edmonton Journal* under the title, “Shelter for battered women opens.”⁹ The shelter’s first executive director, the inimitable Ruth Pinkney, would become the public name and face of the shelter over the next decade. A registered psychiatric nurse, Pinkney would later tell a reporter that her job at WIN House involved overseeing budgets, counselling women in crisis, changing diapers, and washing dishes in a facility that had no dishwasher and a washing machine that had been broken since day one.¹⁰

She also had to educate the public about the dynamics of domestic violence, and the role of a women’s shelter in helping women affected by it. “Our aim is not to break up marriages if there is any hope the husband can look at

8 Marsha Mildon, *WINning: The Trials, Tribulations, and Triumphs of Opening a Women’s Shelter* (Edmonton: Housing for Women Book Society, 2020), 134.

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

10 Marta Gold, “Time for a Change, WIN House Director Says,” *Edmonton Journal*, July 2, 1988, C11.

his behaviour and work to change it. . . . Sometimes it is best the women go back,” Pinkney told a reporter in early 1979. “[But] many women go through repeated beatings and return to the husbands time and time again before they develop confidence that they can survive on their own.”¹¹

In less than a month, WIN House had served thirteen mothers and twenty-two children, according to a board report written by Ardis Beaudry in early 1979. The numbers continued to grow, and the women who had spent years fighting, fundraising, and advocating for a women’s shelter knew their work wasn’t done. “As soon as WIN House I was open, we knew we needed WIN House II,” says Beaudry. “Because it was overflowing right off the bat.” In September 1981, the group got city approval to construct a second shelter in Edmonton.

If the Edmonton shelter was quickly stretched to its limits, it follows that women in other parts of the province needed help, too. Domestic violence is not just an urban phenomenon, and in the 1980s and 1990s, women from smaller centres were ready to organize for the cause, too.

11 Wendy Koenig, “Price of Peace at Home May Be Too Costly,” *Edmonton Journal*, January 4, 1979, B2.

