



## 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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*Ruth Scalp Lock was working at a women's shelter in Calgary when she realized there was a gap in services for Indigenous women within the shelter system. She worked for years to secure funding and support for a shelter for Indigenous women in Calgary. The Native Women's Crisis Shelter, which would later become the Awo Taan Healing Lodge, opened in 1993 in Calgary.*

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## A shelter for Indigenous women

### RUTH

My name is Ruth Scalp Lock. *Awo Taanaakii* is my Blackfoot name; it means Shield Woman. *Awo Taan* is a shield in my culture. My grandma gave me my name, and I respect it every day on my journey.<sup>1</sup>

I had a vision to start the Awo Taan Healing Lodge when I was working at a Calgary women's shelter in the 1980s. I was the only Native counsellor there. They didn't know how to work with our women, especially to fulfill their spiritual needs. There were no workshops, and Elders did not come to work with the women. In our life, if you don't have that spirituality, you're just like a shell. There's nothing in there.

One time I came to work and the counsellors were all anxious, excited, and concerned. I asked them, "What's going on here?" They thought a Native woman was smoking dope. So we went down to this woman's room and this Native woman was burning sweetgrass! When I would come back to work after days off, First Nations women would be waiting for me. I used to tell them, "See other counselors." But it takes trust, especially after all we've been through and how our spirits have been broken.

In my vision to start the shelter, I dreamt about a man. We were walking down a road together and he had a long, white beard. Little did I know he was a retired professor from the University of Calgary. His name was Nelson Gutnick, and he did a lot of good work with us Natives in Calgary. Indian Affairs used to put our women at the York Hotel, right on skid row, and these women had to wait until there was space at the shelters. Nelson was always concerned about our women, and he went out of his way to help them. Any time I had a question or if I was having a hard time, he always supported me.

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<sup>1</sup> This story is based on several interviews with Ruth Scalp Lock. The text has been condensed and lightly edited for clarity.

He was like a father and a mentor. I'm a recovering alcoholic of forty-two years sobriety, and when I was having a hard time, he told me, "Ruth, you're going to get your life together and you're going to be doing something for your people."

When I met with the director of my shelter, I told her, "I know you do your best to fulfill the needs of Native women, but we strongly need our own shelter. I'm not working behind anybody's back, I'm not that kind of person." I approached Alvin Manitopyes, with the Secretary of State Department, for funding to do a needs assessment. It stipulated that we should have our own shelter. Then we hired Gerri Many Fingers, and she really ran with the whole thing. We finally got our board established, we got our charitable number, and we had an office at the Native Friendship Centre.

My feeling to help women is there for a number of reasons. I had a sister who was murdered. I have a cousin who has been missing since 1961 in Saskatchewan. I had a very good friend from Hobbema<sup>2</sup> who was found dead in her basement here in Calgary one summer. Her case was closed by the Calgary police. All these things push me. I just finished talking to my niece and I told her: "The whole intent behind Awo Taan goes way back. This is not a new thing for me." And when you have it in your heart to help people, you keep going. It might take a long time. It took at least eight years to really get the shelter going.

I felt so many of my people did not support me because they don't want to say, "This is the truth. This is what's happening to our women." There were all these put-downs by the men and sometimes even the women in my community. They would say: "I can't even give a dirty look to my wife anymore, she goes running to Ruth and Ruth takes her to a shelter." There's still denial.

There were so many feminist women who put me down, too. My vision was that we would work with men, too. I held my ground and I told them, "If I didn't like men, then I wouldn't like my father or my grandfather." My values are so different from some young women. I didn't like a lot of men either, especially the Catholic priests for the sexual abuse that I went through in my community. When I was applying to work at the shelter in Calgary, I thought I had dealt with a lot of my stuff; but no, I hadn't. When the women started to disclose sexual abuse to me, I couldn't take it. I cried deep inside and I went

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2 Hobbema, Alberta, was renamed Maskwacis in 2014; it is the community representing the Ermineskin Cree Nation, the Louis Bull Tribe, Montana First Nation, and the Samson Cree Nation.

to a psychologist. “Help me with the sexual abuse,” I said. Where would I be today if I hadn’t?

I told these young women that I can understand where they’re coming from, but it doesn’t work that way with me or my culture. All my brothers were survivors of residential school. Where are they today? They’re six feet under. They never had the opportunity to deal with the sexual abuse they experienced at the residential school. These issues are so deep-rooted. And where do men go to talk about these issues? They end up in court. One of my jobs is to attend court at the Siksika First Nation, and last week our court docket was eighteen pages long. The week before, it was twenty-two pages. There are men charged with sexual assault, rape, domestic violence. I know I have to look at the men. They need help, too.

Sometimes I would let go of all of my shelter work for a month, two months because it was so frustrating. We went to community meetings all over the city. We would have community meetings in the rich areas and, oh my gosh! There was so much prejudice and so many racial remarks. “What are we going to do if your drunken men are looking for women on our streets?” they said. They didn’t want us to build a shelter there.

Then one time, the city was going to let us build a house in an industrial area in Calgary. I said, “No way! We don’t belong there.” I was so ticked off. I got up and I said, “Thank you, Mayor. Thank you, Council. You might as well put us in the Calgary Zoo, if that’s how you think of us!” There’s no way we were going to go to these places. You’re going to have to give your head a really good shake and wake up.

There was so much negotiating. We worked with Ralph Klein, and then we finally got our building.

My grandma gave me the name *Awo Taanaakii* when we opened the shelter. My name is the outcome of my walk and being sober. I always have to think of my grandma who watched me on my walk. She told me, “One day, you’re going to get your rewards for helping these women.” She could have given the name to any one of her granddaughters, but she gave it to me.

My son and my nephews sang at the opening of *Awo Taan*. My son was telling me the other day, “I still remember that song, Mom. It was so spiritual.” He said that the women, when they come through the shelter, they’re going to be protected. There’s so much sacredness to this place.

I’ve now passed on the name *Awo Taanaakii* to my great-granddaughter. In Siksika, some of us have four names. Beaver Woman is my third name,

and I'll get my fourth name when I get to the spirit world. My grandmother told me that I would have to transfer my name at some point. To me it's so important, it has to be carried on. When teachings are shared with you, when Elders tell you to do something, you have to follow through.

*—Ruth Scalp Lock is a member of the Siksika Nation, which is part of the Blackfoot Confederacy, near Calgary. She is the author of My Name Is Shield Woman: A Hard Road to Healing, Vision, and Leadership (2014). Scalp Lock's work led to the establishment of the first off-reserve shelter for Indigenous women in Alberta. The Native Women's Crisis Shelter, which would later become the Awo Taan Healing Lodge, opened March 10, 1993, in Calgary. Awo Taan was a member of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters from 1993 to 2014.*



Imagine a circle of children seated around a fire. They are the most important members of a community and therefore positioned near the warmth of the flames. Now, imagine a ring of women, those who give and sustain life, encircling the children. The women are surrounded by the community's Elders, who share their knowledge and wisdom. Finally, those standing in the outermost circle are men—protectors and hunters—who stand with their backs to the elements.

Janet Gladue, a member of the Bigstone Cree Nation in northern Alberta and former executive director of the Nation's Neepinise Family Healing Centre, presented this concept of community and family at a 2006 women's shelter conference in Mexico City. Gladue explained to the participants from Central and South America how, in Canada, colonization and the arrival of settlers destroyed the circles. "They said, 'Let's put your kids in school.' They took away all of the children. Right then, when they started taking away the children, the nest was empty. There was nothing in there. There was nothing to live for. The circle was disrupted."

Ongoing colonization affects every facet of life in Canada, and women's shelters are no exception. About 60 per cent of Indigenous women in Canada report having experienced some form of intimate partner violence in their lives, compared to 44 per cent of non-Indigenous women, according to a

2018 national survey.<sup>3</sup> Indigenous women are almost twice as likely to have survived physical or sexual violence, with 44 per cent of Indigenous women reporting such experiences compared to 25 per cent of other women. And Indigenous women are more than three times as likely to have experienced extreme violence, such as choking, beating, or threats with a weapon, compared to other women.

It's a lived reality that has been well documented by Indigenous organizations across Canada for decades: "It is not possible to find a First Nations or Métis woman . . . whose life has not been affected in some way by family violence. Either as a child witnessing spousal assault, as a child victim herself, as an adult victim of a husband or boyfriend's violence, or as a grandmother who witnesses the physical and emotional scars of her daughter or her granddaughter's beatings; we are all victims of violent family situations and we want it stop now," wrote the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) in its seminal 1989 report, *Breaking Free: A Proposal for Change to Aboriginal Family Violence*.<sup>4</sup>

In the preface to its report, the ONWA identifies the root causes of this extensive violence: racial prejudice and the Indian Act, which have created poor socio-economic conditions for Indigenous people across the country. But the harm goes beyond the effects of poverty: intergenerational trauma and cycles of abuse that stem from loss of connection to the land, loss of ceremony and language, and disruption of the family that accompanied colonization and manifested as addictions and violence, are also the result of this legislation.

The Indian Act has always been particularly harmful to First Nations women. Written in 1876, it reflects the odious characterizations of Indigenous women that were created by early colonizers of Canada: they were uncivilized, a menace, prostitutes. "This made it easy for early police misconduct (including rape and murder) to go relatively unpunished," according to the executive summary of the final report from the National Inquiry Into Missing

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3 Loanna Heidinger, *Intimate Partner Violence: Experiences of First Nation, Métis and Inuit Women in Canada* (Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Statistics, 2018), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00007-eng.pdf?st=rnnvytbZ>, 4-5.

4 *A Proposal for Change to Aboriginal Family Violence* (Ontario Native Women's Association, 1989) iii.

and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.<sup>5</sup> That same dehumanizing indifference persists today; the families and friends of missing and murdered Indigenous women say police regularly don't take their cases seriously or victim-blame those who have been hurt, causing many not to approach the police at all, even in the face of violence.

The Indian Act contributed to dehumanizing attitudes toward First Nations women, in part, by imposing patriarchal structures on Indigenous communities, many of which had been previously organized along matrilineal lines. The Act denied First Nations women full participation in band democracy, and, perhaps most harmful, it defined a woman's humanity only in relation to a man. First Nations women who married non-status or non-First Nations men lost their own Indian status, Treaty benefits, and the right to live on their reserves, as did their children. It was a sexist piece of legislation that restricted the right of First Nations women to choose whom to marry, with whom to have children, and where to live. It affected the most intimate decisions of a woman's life.

"I received a letter from Indian and Northern Affairs that said, no question, no choice on my part, that I was no longer a member of my community and [they] gave me a cheque for \$35," Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, from the Wikwemikong First Nation in Ontario, told a newspaper about what happened when she married a non-Indigenous man in 1970.<sup>6</sup>

Corbiere Lavell, who would become a founding member of the Ontario Native Women's Association, challenged the Act all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada, which rejected her case in 1973. Other First Nations groups, such as the Alberta-based Indian Rights for Indian Women, were also fighting for change, often coming up against Indigenous male leaders who saw this fight as a threat to their own leadership and perceived any changes to the Indian Act as a potential pretext for the government to abolish Indian status altogether.<sup>7</sup> First Nations women faced stiff opposition within their own communities, leading to confrontation, division, and sometimes ostracization. Other women, like Yvonne Bédard and now-Senator Sandra Lovelace Nicholas, took the cause to court, drawing critical public attention to the

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5 *Executive Summary of the Final Report, National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, 17.

6 Rick Garrett, "Order of Canada Recipients Well-Deserving," *Anishinabek News*, January 5, 2018.

7 Rebick, *Ten Thousand Roses*, 108.



sexism and unfairness of the legislation. It wasn't until the Charter of Rights and Freedom was proclaimed that in 1985 this section of the Act was repealed.

But the Indian Act had already severed the ties of many First Nations women to their communities—physical, cultural, and familial. Women were not only cut off from their reserves but also from the systems of support there, leaving them more vulnerable to economic hardship and social harms, including domestic violence. The National Inquiry heard that, “without access to their own ways of living on traditional territories, which includes supporting others in times of hardship, many families and survivors [spoke] about their struggles with poverty, homelessness, addiction, and other challenges—struggles that were often greatly compounded by the lack of access to familiar, community, and cultural support.”<sup>8</sup>

Just as harmful and traumatic for Indigenous women was Canada's residential school system, which saw Indigenous children removed from their parents' homes to be taught in church-run schools where the goal was to “take the Indian out of the child.” The system devastated tight-knit Indigenous family and community structures—a form of family violence in itself, argues Mohawk lawyer and author Patricia Monture-Angus.<sup>9</sup> Children—boys and girls alike—frequently faced emotional, physical, and sexual abuse in the schools, which made them easier targets for abuse later in life, and more likely to perpetuate cycles of abuse. For many, violence was normalized, especially when people in positions of trust did not provide the help these children needed. According to the National Inquiry, “The normalization of violence within this context has serious repercussions in terms of Indigenous women's ability to protect themselves when it is necessary to do so. In many of the truths shared by witnesses, the normalization of violence could be traced back through family lines to trauma experienced in residential and day schools, to the Sixties Scoop, and to other forms of colonial violence.”<sup>10</sup> (The Sixties Scoop is a term coined in 1983 by Patrick Johnson, author of *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*, and refers to a period in the mid-1900s when Indigenous children were taken, en masse, from their families and placed

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8 *Executive Summary of the Final Report, National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, 24.

9 Janovicek, *No Place to Go*, 12.

10 *Executive Summary of the Final Report, National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, 33.

in the child welfare system, often without the consent of their families or bands.<sup>11</sup>)

The children who were abused and un-parented in residential schools often grew into adults who were hurt, angry, unhealed, and did not themselves know how to parent or maintain healthy relationships. As Janet Gladue remembers about the disruption of the family circle, “There was nothing to live for. That’s where the destruction came.”

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls found that Indigenous women, girls, and LGBTQ2SIA+ people in this country are the victims of a “Canadian genocide.” It is a striking indictment of how their lives are at risk, in their own homes and within society at large.



As women’s shelters opened across the country in the 1980s and 1990s, they were established as safe spaces for all women seeking help to escape domestic violence. But the systemic racism against Indigenous people in Canada would inevitably affect how Indigenous women could access these services.

Indigenous women who entered shelters would usually find they were run by boards and staff that were mostly—if not entirely—composed of White women. Did they understand the consequences Indigenous women faced if they left their home communities? Did they understand Indigenous languages and cultures? Did they understand the systemic racism that Indigenous women experienced every day in their lives?

“When I first came into a shelter in the city [from my reserve], I felt confused. I tried to explain my feelings but nobody understood,” said Marilyn Fraser-King at the opening of the Native Women’s Crisis Shelter, which would later become Awo Taan. Fraser-King was a board member of the organization. “I couldn’t just go and do what they asked of me. I didn’t have a car. I didn’t have a phone. I had no neighbours.”<sup>12</sup>

June Wiggins worked with Ruth Scalp Lock at Sheriff King Home, a women’s shelter opened by the YWCA in Calgary in 1983. Scalp Lock had set up an Indigenous women’s group, which operated through the shelter’s

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11 [https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/sixties\\_scoop/](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/sixties_scoop/)

12 Eva Ferguson, “Out from the Shadows,” *Calgary Herald*, March 11, 1993, B1.

outreach program, and Wiggins participated in the meetings as part of her work toward a master's degree. She recounted her experiences in Scalp Lock's book, *My Name is Shield Woman*.

When we did groups with the Natives and the White women, it didn't go over well, because the Native women were very quiet. It was really evident at the shelter too that the Aboriginal women . . . were very careful which staff could relate to them culturally.

But when [Native] women had their own group, they were very vocal. The stories they told were incredible. A lot of them related back to residential schools. I remember one group talking about women going missing on the reserves. It was almost every one of them had an aunt or a cousin that they had never heard from again. They talked a lot about what it was like in residential school, and it was amazing how they helped each other. The older kids helped the younger ones to learn to speak English just to get by. That was the big thing.

There was a need to understand cultural issues or why they were doing things differently. For example, they take on [their] kids. It could be the sister's kid, but they'll take the kid and that'll be their kid, but it's really not their kid. So, you can get a woman that shows up with seven or eight kids, but she's only twenty-four, and she says they're all her kids. So it's this whole thing of family. . . . I think Ruth basically educated all the counsellors on a lot of First Nations issues.<sup>13</sup>

Wiggins's account highlights what many women working in shelters didn't know about Indigenous kinship connections and the effects of intergenerational trauma on their Indigenous clients. At the same time, her observations point to how the experiences of Indigenous women were often best articulated in a safe environment with others who had gone through similar events in their lives. Wiggins said that Scalp Lock educated herself and others not only on the issues Indigenous women faced, but also on the need for a shelter to specifically serve this population in Alberta.

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13 Ruth Scalp Lock and Jim Pritchard, *My Name Is Shield Woman: A Hard Road to Healing, Vision, and Leadership* (Day Time Moon, 2014), 87.

In the early 1990s, a handful of shelters opened on First Nations reserves in Alberta, after the federal government opened a stream of funding for these facilities. (The story of Alberta's on-reserve shelters is covered in more detail in Chapter 7.) In Calgary, it took years of lobbying by Ruth Scalp Lock, and colleagues like Marilyn Fraser-King and Gerri Many Fingers, before the Native Women's Crisis Shelter opened in a temporary location on March 10, 1993. It was geared toward Indigenous women, but women of all ethnicities could use their services. Awo Taan, the permanent, \$1.5-million, twenty-four-bed location, opened two years later, funded primarily by private donations and a provincial government loan guarantee.

Scalp Lock credits former Premier Ralph Klein for financially securing the development of Awo Taan. Perhaps unexpected for a White, conservative Alberta premier who focused on cost-cutting above all else, Klein had a strong relationship with many members of the Siksika Nation. The closeness dated back to his reporter days in the 1970s when he produced a documentary about poor living conditions on the reserve, a situation that clearly shook him. He was adopted into the Siksika Blackfoot Nation in 1993, and Scalp Lock referred to Klein as her "brother": "One day, when he was the premier, he sat down with his caucus and he said this to the table: 'From this day forward, all of you, you're going to start funding my sister's shelter.'"

Gerri Many Fingers served as Awo Taan's first director. She told a reporter in 1994 that she would often sit with the women who came there. "I talk to them about issues of race, discrimination, the politics of the system; and I tell them because they are women, because they are single, because they are Native, they will face all of these. But in order to start the process of healing, they have to find self-esteem and create a strong network of support around themselves."<sup>14</sup>

Looking back now, many White women who were part of the early shelter movement express essentially the same sentiment when reflecting on the specific circumstances of Indigenous women who were fighting or fleeing domestic violence: *we didn't know what we didn't know*. They acknowledge that the gatekeepers and celebrated trailblazers of the movement at the time were often ignorant of the extent to which race and gender overlap to shape the experiences of women in this country. "Indian women face obstacles in their struggles for change that the White middle class women's movement

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14 "Gerri Many Fingers Community Service," *Calgary Herald*, June 19, 1994, B5.

has never had to deal with,” said Karen Fish, a member of the BC Indian Homemakers’ Association in 1977. “Indian women are discriminated against because they are Indian, because they are women, and more than either of these, they are discriminated against because they are Indian women.”<sup>15</sup>

For Indigenous women like Ruth Scalp Lock, the fight against family violence had to be holistic, and had to include offering help to men who abuse their partners. Whereas the mainstream shelter movement posited that family violence is rooted in patriarchal power structures, the Indigenous perspective sees the root cause as the colonial disruption of the family. While both Indigenous and mainstream feminists want to end violence against women, they diverge on one of the core tenets of the women’s shelter movement, which has been to urge institutions like the police and politicians to treat domestic violence as a crime and not merely a family affair.

“Feminists challenged the dominant social view that women provoked men’s violence and that it was better for the family if abused women tried to make their marriages work,” writes Nancy Janovicek. “Aboriginal activists also developed theories of violence that conceptualized it as a social rather than an individual problem, but the programs that Aboriginal women developed sought to strengthen the family and provide services for all members of violent families, including the abusers.”<sup>16</sup>

To Scalp Lock, it appeared that young, White feminists hated men. It was her gut reaction to two different approaches to the causes—and cures—of domestic violence against women. While everyone agrees that keeping women physically safe is the top priority, there are divergent views on what the rest of the fight against domestic violence should look like. Scalp Lock viewed men in prison as victims, too. She could see the over-representation of Indigenous men in the country’s criminal justice system and felt that sending more of her brothers, cousins, uncles, and neighbours into that system—without access to counselling or treatment—would only fuel a cycle of alienation from culture and broken family relations that led to violence in the first place. Locking someone up within a colonial institution that was never designed for healing Indigenous trauma would do nothing to help restore the circle of relations.

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15 Sarah A. Nickel, “I Am Not a Women’s Libber, Although Sometimes I Sound Like One: Indigenous Feminism and Politicized Motherhood,” *The American Indian Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (Fall 2017).

16 Janovicek, *No Place to Go*, 3.

There are still more reasons that Scalp Lock and others like her would resist involving the criminal justice system in resolving problems of family violence. Indigenous communities, and other racialized communities, are disproportionately victims of police violence itself, which further reinforces the view that the police may not be part of the solution to these problems. Further, “[t]he emphasis on the criminalization of domestic violence has been far less effective for Aboriginal women, immigrant women and women of colour who rely on strong connections to their communities to counter racism and exclusion from Canadian society,” Janovicek writes. “Women from these social groups are often reluctant to involve the police because they do not want to draw negative attention to their communities, or face censure from community leaders if they do.”<sup>17</sup>

Scalp Lock says her vision was summarily dismissed by some in Alberta’s shelter movement in the early 1990s, even if working with the whole family unit was always the intent of Awo Taan. Over time, more and more programs were developed to focus on or include work with men, such as *Oskâyi Kiskinotahn*, which ran out of Sheriff King Home, or Walking the Path Together, which was developed by on-reserve shelters and the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters and included opportunities for Indigenous men to find a new path in their family relations. Eventually, programming for men also became a part of mainstream shelter programming, although never without controversy or questions about its efficacy.<sup>18</sup> (The topic of men’s programming will be returned to in Chapter 5.)

*Oskâyi Kiskinotahn* began as part of the regular men’s group programming that was run out of the YWCA’s Sheriff King Home in Calgary. By the late 1990s, facilitators had observed that many of the men’s group participants were Indigenous, and that their needs were not being met by mainstream men’s programming. Sheriff King and Awo Taan—led by Strengthening the Spirit, a subcommittee of the Action Committee Against Violence—worked with Elders to develop a more culturally appropriate program. The name *Oskâyi Kiskinotahn* (New Directions) was gifted by Olive Manitopyes, a well-known and beloved Cree Elder in the community who worked for years at Sheriff King Home and Awo Taan. The program was designed to reduce the incidence of domestic violence in families and ultimately included

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17 Ibid., 14.

18 Intimate Partner Violence: Systematic Review Summary

programming designed for men, women, and children to discuss topics such as colonization, intergenerational trauma, residential schools, cultural identity, and healing. The men's and women's programming continues today and is now run out of several locations, including the Calgary Correctional Centre, the Siksika Nation, and Tsuut'ina Nation.

In other shelters, White women like Brenda Brochu were starting to wake up to the realities faced by Indigenous women, and they began integrating support for the latter into the very core of the work they did. Brochu, who helped to start the first women's shelter in Grande Prairie in 1980, moved to the Peace River area in the 1990s. There, she worked part-time in the local jail and part-time as a crisis intervention worker at the Peace River Regional Women's Shelter. At the shelter, she saw disproportionate numbers of Indigenous women seeking help. Then she started noticing news stories about women who had died or gone missing. She clipped articles out of the newspaper any time she saw a case—and soon realized most of the women involved were Indigenous.

When Brochu became director of the shelter in 1998, she aimed for half her staff to be Indigenous. She funded staff to attend Indigenous-run retreats that focused on awareness of history and culture. Smudging was permitted at the shelter and, she says, "It was even important in the decor and the artwork to have pictures that Aboriginal people could relate to. It couldn't only be that way, because everyone had to be comfortable there, but we didn't want to make the shelter an alien experience for Aboriginal women."

In 2004, Brochu received an email from the Native Women's Association of Canada, inviting the shelter to take part in a Sisters in Spirit project to remember Indigenous women who had gone missing or been murdered. She was a member of the town's Aboriginal Interagency Committee at the time, so she took the proposal to the group. The response was tremendous, and Indigenous groups laid the groundwork for a memorial based on activism, tradition, and remembrance. Brochu still remembers the number of women who attended the memorial. It crystallized for her just how acute the crisis of missing and murdered women was for Indigenous women in her community.

Her work was a sign of how shelters were developing their approaches to survivors, and to their greater activism.

By the 1990s, women's shelters in Alberta had moved past the stage of scrounging for the basics, like donated buildings and meagre salaries for a skeleton staff. People like Ruth Scalp Lock, Gerri Many Fingers, and Brenda

Brochu were pushing Alberta's women's shelters to think of new and better ways of operating. Perhaps nowhere was that more evident than in Calgary. The city was growing steadily by the second half of the decade, pushing towards a population of one million. Among those residents was a dynamic cadre of women who wanted to change the world of women's shelters by piloting new programs and connecting with others—even conservative politicians like Ralph Klein—to make it happen.



