

Journeys

To

Family Self-Sufficiency

A Publication of the
Burnside Gorge Community Association

Copyright 2005

Reproduction of this publication, in whole or in part, is prohibited without permission from the Burnside Gorge Community Association

Acknowledgements

Participants of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program gratefully acknowledge the following people and organizations for their support and wisdom:

- Colleen Kasting for her vision of the program and her continued dedication.
- Burnside Gorge Community Association for supporting Colleen's vision.
- Linda and her staff who have made the program all it is.
- Steering Committee who have helped move the program forward.
- Community Organizations: for their financial support
- VanCity Credit Union
 - VanCity Community Foundation
 - Vancouver Foundation
 - Ministry of Human Resources
 - Coast Capital Foundation
 - Pacifica Housing
 - BC Housing

Please acknowledge the following people who have made this publication possible:

- Participants who took a leap of faith and shared their stories with us.
- Alisa Shebib a participant who graciously agreed to design the cover.
- whose financial assistance funded this publication.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Table of Contents	3
Introduction	5
Encouragement.....	6
New Beginnings	8
Becoming Self-Sufficient	10
Courage Found	12
Empowered.....	14
A Journey of Many Blessings	15
Moving Forward	16



Introduction

As a participant of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program, I have seen it flourish to what it is today. The FSS Program began as a three-year pilot project which focused on helping its participants break the cycle of poverty. Its intent was to help them achieve their career and personal goals, save money and build up confidence. The project, which launched in 2002, was the first of its kind in Canada and was based on research of similar projects in the USA. Offering financial incentives, it attracted 38 participants in the Victoria area.

Like many others, I was apprehensive of the program to begin with as it seemed “too good to be true”. Although it was voluntary, I found it difficult to trust everything I was hearing. We were told of the financial incentives, Escrow and Individual Development Account (IDA), which would help us accumulate savings, some of which would be matched. After all was said and done, it was these that caught my attention but they soon became secondary to all that the program offered.

Each participant worked with a personal advisor to explore their hopes and dreams and clearly identify barriers and existing supports. Participants then learned to define and take realistic steps toward their goals. With each step achieved came increased confidence and improved self-esteem. People began to believe in their ability to overcome challenges. They learned what community resources and supports were available to them and how to access them. The support and encouragement of the advisors inspired participants to reach further. These personal sessions were enhanced with monthly group meetings where participants were able to network with each other and take part in workshops, such as goal-setting, financial literacy and job search techniques.

During the program, I have had the privilege of seeing lives change before my eyes. Some changes were tangible as people reached their employment goals; others were subtle but just as impressive. It is my hope that this book of our journeys will help paint a picture of many of the transformations that have taken place; reflect changes that have not been recorded in the statistics but will continue to ripple through time.

Encouragement

At the time I entered the Family Self Sufficiency Program, I was working in a restaurant and working on-call shifts. I was getting very little work but I had been turned down by welfare because they said that I was making just over their limits. I heard about the Program when I received a letter from Pacifica Housing. I talked to my boss at the restaurant about the Program and he said that he did not think the Program would be very good for me. I thought the Program would be great for me, so I went to meet Linda.

Linda and Colleen have been there for me from day one. They have offered a lot of coaching, support and Linda has been my sounding board. Whenever I had a problem, Linda was always there to listen to me and offer advice. She has always been able to say things to me that were supportive of my decisions and has helped me to see that I make good decisions. Linda encouraged me to apply for work at Chateau Victoria and I was hired on in the Laundry. When I had to leave work unexpectedly to care for my sick mother out of the country, I thought I would be fired. Linda and Colleen wrote a letter on my behalf to Chateau Victoria and the Manager re-hired me.

Linda also encouraged me to look for permanent employment. I eventually applied to the Marriot Hotel and they asked me for an interview. I was so scared to go to the interview and afraid of disappointing my current Manager, that I rescheduled the interview appointment four times before I finally went. They offered me a better job with more hours and better wages than Chateau Victoria. I moved to the Marriot Hotel and I am now supervising the Laundry Department.

I have learned how to speak directly to people about issues that come up at work. I am learning how to be a good supervisor and realizing how important it is to listen to staff and to also observe.

The Individual Development Account (IDA) has also been so helpful to me. Initially, I didn't think it was a lot of money that I could save, but when the community contributions are added, the money adds up. I didn't know anything about budgeting and money when I started the Program because my husband had always controlled our finances. I have learned that I can manage money and look after myself now. My goal is to use that money toward buying a home for myself and my children.

I have been able to network with so many people through the Family Self Sufficiency Program and everybody has been very supportive. I have been making connections in the community and recently volunteered to make spring rolls for a children's fundraiser at the Hotel. Everybody loved my cooking and now I am thinking about starting a sideline Catering business sometime in the future. Before the Program, I was always worried about the future, now I'm excited about my future. I'm happy and my children are happy.

Ha Fei Leung

New Beginnings

The month of November 2002
A time in my life, wondering what do I do?
A letter arrived beckoning my eyes to see
A new program starting, was it for me?

Six years before, I was doing quite fine.
Our family of four was soon to be five.
We lived in a house that one day we'd own
Life almost seemed perfect, If only I'd known

I woke up one morning, to my surprise,
Life appeared hazy through both my eyes,
Off to the ophthalmologist, I went
Countless tests later, a virus they said.

Not able to read, nor able to drive,
My children a blur, debt starting to rise,
My dreams crashing down and put on a shelf,
Depression set in, I hated myself

My world closing in, I felt all alone,
I left the mainland, returning to home,
With security of family and friends.
I found the strength to start again.

Life was not easy and didn't seem fair,
My children depended on me for their care.
A one-bedroom cottage, one year we did stay
Little food, little money, living life day-to-day

I applied for housing, it didn't take long
We moved into town, I hoped we'd belong
But fear and doubt kept me locked inside
I'd only found another place to hide.

I return to the start where the letter arrived
A beginning beyond the will to survive
I stepped out of my box, took a huge leap
Waking myself from a lethargic sleep.

With the support that I did receive
From my advisor, I began to believe
Anything is possible, you just have to try
It's okay to want more than just to get by.

I wrote out my goals: employment was one;
Releasing anxiety; support for my son.
I never imagined all I would do
Beyond these three goals by the time I was through.

I work part-time, volunteer for the rest,
My skills have increased, communication addressed,
My contact list, over two pages long,
Is a gentle reminder that now I belong

Learning to budget, putting money away,
My debt is gone, credit rating okay.
Gone are the days of just getting by,
On myself, I can rely.

The road was not straight, it would rise and then fall
Roadblocks were many, I often felt small
As I pondered on the steps I would take
My resolve to succeed, these would not break.

No longer alone, and facing my fears
I now look forward to future years
Building upon all my success
Thank you for thisFSS

Karen Coleman

Becoming Self-Sufficient

When I was asked to submit a written piece about the Family Self Sufficiency Program (FSS) I was not sure I would. After I spent some time reflecting on the past two years, I felt I would enjoy doing so. First, I would like to acknowledge the Coast Salish, Songhees People whose land we live, work and play on.

During my time in the program I watched a number of people change, including myself. The changes were unique as the program gave room to grow. This was unlike any other program developed for families or individuals seeking to change their sociological or financial status. Many programs that offer parental, job or life skills, even with educational components, usually run about six to twenty weeks claiming to provide better opportunities. This is unrealistic to achieve as it takes multiple years to raise a family and learn how to work in a community collectively.

The FSS Program did not set unrealistic expectations. It was a pilot program and the efforts and successes were born through a collective by all participants, from various levels of income, education and experiences and the programs amazing staff. The common thread was living in subsidized housing. We all were given the chance to learn at our own pace and needed skill development as well as individual goals, which were important to each participant and their respective family for duration of two years. The length of the program (two years) allowed room for change. As mentioned earlier, crisis happens in life through poverty, illness (physical, mental, other) over many years so why would those serving the needs of the low income families expect changes to happen within a few weeks?

I recommend and challenge those agencies/ministries serving the needs of families who come under poverty or crisis to wake up and pay attention to this pilot program as it works through collaboration and time. I have witnessed some who have become more outspoken, healthier, employed, educated, debt free, and **self-sufficient**. Our society expects change in a matter of weeks although crisis and poverty take multiple years to happen.

I myself will continue to grow and I will be back as a part of the next phase. I am not yet **self-sufficient**. As I am a First Nation's Cree woman living below the poverty line having survived long term, generational affects of colonialization, residential schools, and the "Indian Act" (still in effect). I would like a little more time to turn it all around for the next seven generations, as it has taken many generations/years of imposing governmental policies and laws to create such crisis with the Aboriginal People of Canada. Thank you participants, Van City, Trudy (Taming the Financial Dragon), staff of the FSS Program, the financial donors and dignitaries who made this program possible, respectively.

Crystal Silverquill

Courage Found

Even before the FSS program, I had a good life.

Or so I thought.

It was just part of the roller coaster ride.

There was the euphoria after leaving an oppressive relationship.
The fear in leaving, then the glee of having unbounded freedom.

When the shine wore off, I realized how unfocused I was.

Great that I wasn't under a tyrant's thumb, and what a wonderful
time the kids and I were having in our new found world; but where
were we going?!

More so, where was I?!

No skills, no network, isolated, pressure coming from every angle. I
was getting scared again. There was no wizard or yellow brick road.

My best friend sold me on the wonders of this great program - the
FSS and some IDA/Escrow stuff. Sounded like the answer to my
prayers...or maybe some CIA thing she wasn't telling me about.

Wow, when I get into this; I'll have a full time job and full
benefits.....

I forgot one thing. I wasn't like everyone else.

No, I just didn't want to accept I wasn't like everyone else.

You see, if I did the 9 to 5, multi-tasked, juggled chores, and fit in
being a Mom before bed; I'd short circuit. You'd find some frizzled
burnt out wiring behind a couch.

I've battled depression and anxiety for almost 10 years. I also suffer
from stubbornness.

It's a very interesting combination especially when you throw in a
dose of humour.

I remember the first meeting with Linda. I knew she was my
guardian angel. Just an amazing package of all the right stuff and a
last name no one could spell. Perfect!

She was tuned into who we were. She was the centre of the safety
net. It was almost like an intangible power was created.

I felt like Superwoman.....No, Wonderwoman (Nicer...tiara)

Now I'm finding myself taking on 'de woold'.

My ex, MHR, the school board, the courts.

I wasn't afraid anymore. Weird things like self confidence and
esteem evolved.
I was part of a network now that was powerful, even in its infancy.

The time has just flown by.
I'm afraid.....I mean..... I don't want to leave the nest.
I never would have saved up an IDA account, quit smoking, learned
to breathe (Linda post-its), stuck to boundaries, reached goals,
advocated, encouraged and influenced others, and worked to my full
potential without the FSS program. **I believe my children gained
the most through these changes.**
What we do in life echoes in eternity.
Thank you Colleen, Linda and BGCA.

Lisa Fife

Empowered

Approximately two years ago I arrived home one day to find a letter of invitation from the Family Self-Sufficiency Project. I knew that this project would change my life. At the time, I was a 24-year-old single mother of two young daughters, then one and two. I had recently left an abusive relationship and was trying to get my life back on track. I never imagined myself being in the situation that I was in. I had never believed that I would be unable to provide for my children, that the food bank would be our provider of food. Never before had I faced the insurmountable hardship that I was currently facing.

I grew up in a good home, was university educated but I was suddenly faced with an immense sense of hopelessness brought about by my change in circumstances. By the time I entered the FSS program, I had returned to school to upgrade my skills. The project provided me with the tools I needed to change the situation I was in. Gradually I came to see that things could be different.

The program empowered me to change my life. I am now employed on a full-time basis with the University of Victoria - a job that I love. I have since purchased my own home. I have a new sense of the possible and of the value in seeking out and in participating in organizations that work for positive change in my own community. I will forever be grateful to Linda and the FSS project for believing in me.

Stephanie Collinson

A Journey of Many Blessings

Joining the Family Self-Sufficiency Project has helped me to work on my goals and see them through. I now have a good job that I'm proud of and I am able to support myself and my three children. It's given me the opportunity to save money and get out of debt. I am happy and optimistic about the future.

I believe it takes unity to build strength, and direction to overcome obstacles. This is what I found in FSS. Believe in yourself and never give up. Life is a journey of many blessings.

Kelly

Moving Forward

In the fall of 2002, after studying music for several years and completing a Voice Teacher Training course at the Victoria Conservatory of Music, I wanted to start my own voice studio and begin teaching. However, I was lacking confidence, energy and sense of direction. That same fall I received two letters: one from the Ministry of Human Resources, and one from the Burnside Gorge Community Association, outlining the FSS pilot program and inviting me to join. Even though I was having a difficult time getting my studio going I wasn't very optimistic that this program would be helpful for me or my family. After struggling with a lack of direction and confidence for a couple of months, I decided I needed some help and made an appointment to see Linda of the FSS program. Thank God I did!

Even though I was pretty uncertain about the Program to begin with, I knew I needed some help setting goals. Linda assured me that the whole program was voluntary and that she would be working with me to help me set and reach my goals. I was pretty excited after I realized that Linda would basically be my life coach. I was also amazed at the individual development accounts and that an agency would actually match my contribution. I joined the Program.

With all the provincial government cutbacks from 2002 onward it seemed like everybody was saying "no" except for the Family Self-Sufficiency Program. Through Linda and the support available through the Program, people were saying "yes" to my ideas and my goals. Linda's support through her kindness, empathy, gentleness and validation made it possible for me to give myself permission to take the time I needed for self care and to help me shift my perspective to realize different ways to reach y goals. As a result I've begun to deal with some pertinent personal and health issues.

Being a part of the Family Self Sufficiency Program has changed so many things in my life. I've become more confident because of my successes and I'm also more aware of the goodwill that is out there in the community. Knowing that there are people and agencies that have a heart for helping people has restored my faith in my community.

I've realized that my biggest inward growth and benefits happened when I was willing to be open and vulnerable enough to ask for help. Through Linda and my peers, I realized that I wasn't alone. I took a course in Early Childhood Music at Musicalia and have taught music in several Early Childhood Centres as well as private voice and theory lessons. Whether or not I continue in the next phase of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program, I know that I'll always take parts of the program with me and I know that I won't lose my momentum. I have faith in myself that I'll keep moving forward in a great direction.

Valerie

“The program has improved our quality of life immensely” – Zoe

“I just felt stuck before, now I’m going forward” – Alisa

“The program has given me direction, support, confidence and encouragement” – Anna-Marie

“It made a huge difference because now I know what I want to do. It seems possible now...It’s pretty motivating.” – Anna Marie

“I didn’t realize how much was possible before this program” – Nadeen Rasmussen

“It’s all about you, about what you believe and what you can do. A program like this enables you to see those things.” – Nadeen Rasmussen

“Every small step is actually a huge step, because somebody else can look at that and say “I can do that too”. - Nadeen Rasmussen

“FSS not only helped set her feet back on the ground, it gave her the motivation to take chances she might not have otherwise.” – Emilie Rhone

“It’s all about being connected to the community. It keeps people from becoming isolated.” - Emilie Rhone

“There’s no words to say how happy and elated I am to have been working with this group” – Christine Cherneske

