

A Face to the Place

Stella Burry Corporation, Carew Lodge – St. John's, Newfoundland

Geraldineⁱ went home to die. She went back to the place where she and her ten brothers and sisters had been raised, a place that had brought her so much physical, emotional and sexual abuse. She went home to finish her life as she had been living it, with booze and pills.

Fortunately for Geraldine, and all the lives she would touch in the years to come, she didn't succeed. But she still had some difficult times to face.

A continuing drug and alcohol problem, a series of abusive relationships, life on the streets and two prison sentences were still in front of her.

"I knew there was something wrong with me, but I didn't know what it was," says Geraldine. "And I couldn't find any answers outside of the prison system."

After prison, she entered into an abusive relationship and moved in with a man who lived in Carew Lodge, a notorious den of crime and violence in St. John's, Newfoundland. As Geraldine's life in the lodge unfolded during the next few years, her next-door neighbour would be murdered and there would be three other suspicious deaths. There would be fires, bomb threats and frequent visits from the police, fire and ambulance services.

But Geraldine is a tough woman. She was one of the few women who were tough enough to live in Carew Lodge.

And, if any of us can point to a moment in our lives when everything changes, when we take a completely new direction, it is Geraldine Lush.

It started when Stella Burry Community Services (SBCS), a corporation run by the United Church of Canada, purchased the Carew Lodge building in 1998.

Jocelyn Greene, executive director of SBCS, started looking for funding to upgrade the building. She tirelessly lobbied all levels of government and secured over \$500,000 from the Government of Canada's Homelessness Initiative and over \$200,000 from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.

She also needed a new superintendent for the building. Then an unconventional thought occurred to her. What if they offered the job to someone who lived at Carew Lodge? Someone who was tough enough to live there, and respected enough to shepherd through the changes they had planned for the building. What if Geraldine Lush was the superintendent?

"Geraldine was also a participant in some of our programs," says Jocelyn of the woman who by this time had overcome her addictions. "She's bright, capable and has been through the rough and tumble."

Jocelyn chuckles as she remembers when she offered Geraldine the job. "She was really floored!"

Geraldine puts it another way. "Nobody's ever done anything for me without strings attached and it really cost me. I thought it was a joke and had to ask Jocelyn to tell me straight out that it wasn't."

It was no joke.

Together with Jocelyn and the others at SBCS, Geraldine worked to transform Carew Lodge. They used the federal funding to completely rebuild Carew Lodge into a long-term housing facility for fourteen low-income singles. There are also outreach services and a resource centre. Carew Lodge is now safe, supportive and a part of the community.

The police, fire and ambulance services are rarely around. Most of the residents, who by nature are often transient, have stayed and brought some stability to their lives. And the neighbourhood's reaction to the building is considerably improved.

This is partly because of the improved condition of the building, but also because Geraldine went door-to-door and talked with the neighbours in the surrounding houses about who they were and what they were doing.

"I put a face to the place. There is no NIMBY around here," she says referring to the "not in my back yard" reaction that can often occur.

And how did the residents who knew Geraldine before she was the superintendent react?

"I tell the residents that 'I'm just like you guys, I still went through the ringer. I just want to do something more with my life,'" says Geraldine.

Perhaps most telling of all, when you think of the woman who once tried to take her own life, Geraldine says something that sums up her transformation.

"I love what I do."

ⁱ No names have been changed. Permission was given by all individuals named in the story.