

Incident with an Architect

Humewood House, Toronto

Sue Sigurdsonⁱ stood outside with the architect gazing at Humewood House, a young parent resource centre in the west part of Toronto.

“How much money do you have to spend?” asked the architect.

“Nothing,” said Sue with a smile. “You tell me how much it will cost and I’ll go find it.”

The “it” Sue was referring to was the vision she and her colleagues had to renovate their facility for young pregnant women so that it could become a pre- and post-natal facility with 15 beds. Young women would be able to come to live at Humewood at any time during their pregnancy and stay, after delivery, for up to six months along with their child.

Without the renovations, young pregnant women would have to be placed elsewhere when they reached 8 months of pregnancy. And without the money, there would be no renovations.

But that doesn’t stop people like those working at Humewood House.

A couple of years later Sue laughs when she remembers her conversation with the architect. “I guess it was kind of gutsy.” But it wasn’t, as it turned out, unrealistic.

“The money from the federal SCPIⁱⁱ and the provincial Trillium program was hugely important,” says Sue as she explains how they were able to turn the vision into a reality. “Now we’re able to provide this good start for mothers and their babies.”

Since 1912, Humewood House has helped pregnant and parenting young women, ages 13 to 21, build safe and stable lives for themselves and their children. Now, as of September 2001, they have a newly renovated residential facility.

And if anyone needs convincing about the need for those renovations, they only need consider the case of Cindy.

Cindy was due to have her baby before the renovations would be completed. With nowhere to live, she decided to move out with her boyfriend, only to find herself in an abusive relationship. She had to move herself and her baby to a safe environment or the Children’s Aid Society would intervene in order to keep her baby safe.

Cindy decided to go to a shelter for abused women and remain in hiding from her partner. Although she knew that it was the best thing to do for herself and her baby, she felt alone and confused. She contacted Humewood House to receive support and counselling.

At that time, the renovations had been completed, providing Cindy with a safe place to reside and the postnatal support that she required.

During their stay, clients receive housing in excellent facilities, care from professional staff, and access to many programs and services. When the time comes for them to move on, staff members help them find suitable accommodation and provide support.

Fortunately, this is what happened for Cindy. She stayed at Humewood House for six months, receiving counselling, support and legal assistance. She then moved out to live independently, with the ongoing help of an aftercare worker.

For Cindy, and many young women like her, Humewood has much to offer. In addition to the 15-bed residence, they have a school facility offering secondary school courses for up to 24 young women and a 10-bed infant daycare centre. They offer counselling services, and training in parenting, nutrition and life-skills. They also help clients find a job, providing computer training and employment readiness courses.

“Helping young mothers provide a good start for their children makes social and economic sense,” says Sue. “It means they are less likely to use social services later on.”

Humewood House received \$130,807 from the Government of Canada’s National Homelessness Initiative to help turn a vision into reality for young mothers and their babies.

ⁱ The following story is based on real events. To protect privacy, the names of clients have been changed.

ⁱⁱ Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative