

Luke's Place

Women's Information & Resource Centre

Project History

Durham Region, through the efforts of many, continues to strive toward developing initiatives to strengthen the safety, security and well being of woman abuse survivors and their children. The conceptualization and development of a resource centre which offers a combined understanding of woman abuse dynamics and custody and access issues is, we understand, the first of its kind in Canada.

During the Executive Director's Breakfast at the Steps for Change Working Conference in March of '99, Kate, one of the woman abuse survivors, courageously shared her story with a group of key professional representatives in the hopes of effecting some proactive changes in the way our community responds to woman abuse survivors faced with custody and access issues. Several other survivors also bravely shared their stories during the conference in the same hopes (Refer to Seven Survival Stories).

This resulted in the recommendation for establishing a central information and resource centre, which was later unanimously endorsed by all of the conference participants. It was also proposed that the resource centre be called "Luke's Place" in memory of Kate's son, a 3 ½ year old boy who, on his first unsupervised access visit in August of 1997, was brutally murdered by his father who then took his own life, destroying the marital home in the process. Once again, this was unanimously endorsed by all the conference participants.

The working group for Luke's Place, created to address the undeniable need for this central resource centre, has been meeting regularly since July of '99, and its sixteen members are dedicated to transforming the concept of Luke's Place into reality. (See the final page for a List of Members). The vision for this resource centre is firmly planted, a preferred delivery model has been recognized, and an action plan is being identified to continue with steps necessary to make Luke's Place a reality.

Luke's Place Vision

Luke's Place will provide a central resource centre for woman abuse survivors seeking answers, assistance, guidance, and support as they face pending custody and access proceedings; as a single point of access to the wide range of services available in the community. Luke's Place will radiate with a comfortable and secure atmosphere for women and children while they learn of the multitude of community resources available to assist them with their many and varied needs during one of the most crucial of transition periods. The services and materials will also be sensitive to the challenge of cultural diversity.

The primary goal is to be a **central information and resource centre**. Luke's Place will house comprehensive and current information covering community services and agencies, the impact of family violence on women and children, and reference material concerning court and legal processes. This will include national and international research reports relevant to these issues, and information will be monitored and researched regularly to maintain its relevancy. With all this information, trained peer supporters at Luke's Place will be in a position to refer women and their children to the appropriate agency or agencies either over the phone or in person. In this way, Luke's Place will become like the hub of a wheel, able to provide linkages to all the key supporters of these relevant issues. This benefit is all encompassing, bringing the best of services to those who need it, and acting as a central "clearing house" for the community agencies at large.

Another goal is to deliver both short and long term **support**, from individual and peer support through to support groups for the women and their children, both younger and older (adolescents). It is not the intent, however, to unnecessarily



duplicate any other areas of support already available in the community. The support Luke's Place will provide would also include court preparation and accompaniment, giving an overview of the unified family court process they are about to experience, and the much-needed comfort of someone who understands. While there is no intent to become a legal clinic, it is expected that Luke's Place will contain a legal component, possibly looking to include in the proposals some funds for a lawyer to be available once a week. Additionally a list of compatible lawyers will be comprised and kept for referral.

The third goal for Luke's Place is to work toward supporting change in community attitudes toward woman abuse, an area that constantly needs to be addressed. This means serving as a resource centre for other agencies and services, while participating in various methods of educating the community on the relevant issues, and in so doing, aiding in establishing a community of 'no tolerance' for the abuse of women and children.

Throughout the project, it has become evident that an undocumented history of emotional abuse was present in all of the focus group participants' lives. Emotional abuse is not easily identified or talked about, and so is often even more hidden than physical and sexual abuse, and there is presently no legal recourse. There are undeniably many challenges to be faced. Part of the work Luke's Place will undertake is to educate the public about the damage levied by abuse (especially emotional abuse), and the increased risk faced by women and children at the point of separation from an abusive relationship. Keeping the highest risk women and children safe will benefit all women and children.

Luke's Place will have a built-in accountability piece for all who work there, both paid staff and volunteers alike, to ensure that the standards and philosophies Luke's Place is founded upon are upheld over time.

Although it is our primary focus to support woman abuse survivors and their children throughout the custody and access process, we feel it is fitting for Luke's Place to welcome all women going through divorce. Even when there has not been abuse, there are still some power and control issues that can surface while a couple moves through the legal system.

Luke's Place is also committed to maintaining a connection to the 'grass roots' from which it was born, and therefore will operate autonomously regardless of the venue in which it operates.

Delivery Model

Physical Location and Operating Times

As woman abuse survivors and their children have suffered and can be in fragile states, they should experience a warm and welcoming environment when they come to Luke's Place, and feel safe and comfortable within its walls. Therefore, the intent is to locate Luke's Place in a setting, preferably a house, that does not resemble an office or institutional building, and one that will be located in a centralized area where public transportation is readily available.

The Luke's Place Working Group will be investigating further the ramifications of either owning or renting a property. From initial investigations however, the group is leaning strongly toward the idea of ownership of the property that will house Luke's Place.

Luke's Place intends to be open and available to women and children daily and into the evening, although exact times are to be determined.

Environment

To foster an environment in which healing can begin and peace can be found means the women and children supported by Luke's Place must find a quiet and relaxing atmosphere. Given the relentless and insidious nature of abuse (particularly

emotional abuse), the Luke's Place Working Group strongly believes there is a great need to provide a soothing and healing environment. Staff will support this environment by speaking quietly and respectfully to one another and to the women and children using the services. All who visit will be encouraged to do the same.

There will be a reading room and reference library housing the information pamphlets from local community agencies as well as other topical books and resources. Quiet rooms will be available for private discussion or just to gather thoughts. Children will be cared for in the children's room with books and toys by Luke's Place staff while the mother relaxes and learns what she needs to know. A child's quiet room will also be available for naps when necessary.

Light lunches, teas and fruit juices will be provided, and in this way, Luke's Place will see to the physical as well as the emotional well being of the women and children who come.

Within the overall safe and accepting environment of Luke's Place, a component will be built in to respond to the disclosures of children, as it is recognized that it is in this type of environment that they might be more inclined to disclose events that could be occurring in their lives.

As well, some elements of self-care will be incorporated into the services provided, as it is the belief of the Luke's Place Working Group that woman abuse survivors and their children need to once again, or perhaps for the first time, learn the importance of tending to both their physical and emotional needs.

Staffing

We anticipate an initial need for two paid staff at Luke's Place filling the roles of Executive Director and Volunteer Coordinator. Volunteers would make up the balance, although the numbers needed are yet to be determined. Sufficient numbers are required not only to avoid burnout, but also to become a strong support system for one another. Having volunteers from this community, including some woman abuse survivors, will maintain the 'grass roots' feel of Luke's Place.

A criminal check would be required for all staff, paid and volunteer, with regular renewals suggested, possibly once a year.

Initial and ongoing training for the staff will ensure that those who come to Luke's Place will always find the support and information they require in an environment that understands their issues and needs. Luke's Place will collaborate with the well-established VAW trainers in Durham Region for this training.

Legal Component

While not becoming a legal clinic, a need to provide some legal support has been identified. The Luke's Place Working Group strongly believes that helping a woman prepare for the court experience is invaluable, and will better equip a woman abuse survivor to understand and face that experience. By hearing about some of the actual process and the physical environment of the court, confidence can be gained. Luke's Place will support with third party advocacy throughout the legal process, lawyer's appointments, and court accompaniment.

In partnership with existing legal entities, Luke's Place will focus on the Unified Family Court Process as it relates to custody and access issues.

Through funding and various partnering mechanisms, services would be available from lawyers from various disciplines (Family, Criminal, Civil, Immigration and Real Estate) who would be available to come once a week to Luke's Place to answer questions. It is expected that this would be a fee for service arrangement, although a reduced fee would be anticipated.

A mechanism will be created that will allow women to comment on what their experience was like in the court system, and also their experience at Luke's Place. This feedback will generate ongoing improvement, and also would be invaluable feedback for the legal system.

As an additional goal, Luke's Place will provide support and up to date information (e.g. case law) to the legal community. It is understood that this aspect of family law is a complex and demanding task for lawyers, and the provision of ongoing support and education to the legal community is essential.

Service Delivery Partnership Possibilities

Luke's Place will naturally and necessarily foster many working partnerships with other entities in its capacity as a central resource centre. Partnering with the legal community to provide the legal component of the Luke's Place services, is one example of the types of associations to be cultivated. In this way, Luke's Place will be the first of its kind where the fields of woman abuse issues and family law can comfortably co-exist.

In recent weeks, an exciting partnership possibility has been presented to the Luke's Place Working Group by The Denise House. A need for expansion of their own facilities as it relates to their donation centre, and a greater demand for outreach programs for their clients and more community based programs has prompted their consideration of acquiring an additional property. The property they are currently considering is quite large and so they have suggested that it could also accommodate Luke's Place.

As a transition house for woman abuse survivors and their children in Durham Region, The Denise House is committed to supporting other groups whose initiatives surround this vulnerable group in our society, without the responsibility for their creation and implementation. Because there is a natural and close link between those served by both The Denise House and Luke's Place, exploration of a partnership is fitting and desirable. The Denise House makes this offer recognizing and expecting that Luke's Place will operate autonomously, yet with the advantage of some very key resources being shared that will help reduce some of the operating costs.

The Luke's Place working group has warmly embraced this proposal, and will be actively exploring the possibilities and options over the next short while in order to reach a decision by August 2000.

Funding

Over the months that the Luke's Place Working Group has been meeting, several brainstorming sessions surrounding funding have taken place. There is an awareness of the different types of funding, such as capital funding, corporate funding, core funding, and project funding, and the Working Group will be focusing on the direction(s) to be taken with funding over the next few months as the exploration of a potential relationship with The Denise House continues.

As it is known that corporations and foundations prefer to fund incorporated groups, it is expected that Luke's Place will be incorporated regardless of the venue in which it operates. First and foremost, funding to undertake the incorporation process as well as establishment as a charitable organization will be sought. The Luke's Place Working Group has maintained throughout many of its discussions that owning the property that will house Luke's Place is strongly preferred, and even if the decision is to share facility with The Denise House, shared ownership would be the goal. Incorporation is also desired to achieve that goal. One idea being considered for this initial requirement is to approach a corporate business within Durham for some start-up funds.

Another idea that surfaced in discussions is that of having a Corporate Information Session this fall, inviting key people from the various corporations in and around Durham. In keeping with the 'grass roots' creation of Luke's Place, the Working

Group believes that speaking to corporate Durham from the standpoint of the well-being of their very own employees will thereby plant the seed for corporate involvement in the creation of Luke's Place.

Whether fundraising singly or jointly with The Denise House, we will need funds for at least the following:

- purchase of a property or portion thereof
- incorporation & charitable status
- building and liability insurance or portion thereof
- lawyer's fees for incorporation process
- salaries & benefits for paid staff
- office supplies
- office equipment: photo copier, fax, telephone, local & toll free numbers, laser printer, computer(s) and software pkg(s) furniture for library, kitchen and tea room, quiet rooms, children's play room and quiet room, and reception area
- technical support for office equipment
- client expenses (taxi/bus fare)
- utilities or portion thereof
- groceries
- travel expenses for volunteers/staff
- lawyers' consultation fee on a fee for service basis (e.g. weekly consultation)
- initial decorating of Luke's Place

The Luke's Place Working Group is committed to achieving their vision for the creation of Luke's Place. However, if the funding process turns out to be protracted, because of the urgent need for such a resource centre, the Working Group is prepared to establish an interim resource centre somewhere in the community.

Reflections on Group Process*

All the members of the Luke's Place Working Group were drawn together in a common effort to create something positive from an unspeakable horror. Initially the group was very task-oriented. Kate, a key member of the group and Luke's mother, coped with the tragic loss of her son by detaching somewhat and focusing on the task at hand. Most of the members of the group were unfamiliar with one another and no one knew how to broach the topic of Luke's death. Over the course of the first few meetings, the discomfort of some members increased as it became clear that the very purpose of being drawn together remained unnamed. Members of the group approached the Steering Committee and requested assistance with facilitation. It is not unusual, despite the skill level of many of the group members, to not know how to raise such a difficult topic. The fact that many committee members were also parents of young children made it even more heartbreaking.

Until the group could find a way to speak the unspeakable, the emotional process was stifled. To speak about the business of the resource centre was easy, but to acknowledge openly why all members were drawn to this particular working group was extremely difficult. As permission was given to share one another's reactions to Luke's death, the group pain eased and members were freed to express themselves more openly. Despite the deep sorrow present in the group, the emotional tone of the meetings lightened and members moved easily from the sharing of tears to gales of laughter. There were many poignant moments throughout the meetings as both instrumental tasks got accomplished and emotional healing took place.

One particularly touching moment occurred when Luke's mom, Kate, stood up to show her son's picture to a new member in the group. She did this by simply stating, "I don't think you've met my son". This picture was passed around amongst all of the participants and his spiritual presence was felt by all. Since that moment, a wonderful picture of Luke has been center stage at every meeting. More trust and comfort has developed amongst group members. Each participant is learning both how to handle their own grief and to be in the presence of Kate's grief. The emotional task of the group is to learn that it's



OK to feel feelings, express them and let them go. To know that each member can support one another by sharing both the joys and the sorrows has been a tremendous comfort. It has been an uplifting experience to be part of this healing process.

Next Steps

1. Luke's Place will incorporate, and in so doing will strike its Board of Directors and develop its bylaws. Terms of Reference have already been articulated and the process is underway.
2. Enter into discussions with The Denise House as it relates to the exploration of the possible sharing of space and resources. Prepare a proposal for submission to The Denise House by August 2000 in time for their September board meeting.
3. Continue discussions surrounding funding in preparation for the Corporate Information Session tentatively suggested for this fall.

Respectfully and joyfully submitted by the members of the Luke's Place Working Group.



LUKE'S PLACE WORKING GROUP - MEMBERSHIP

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