



SHELTER FROM THE STORM



2019 Winter Newsletter

*The Downtown Eastside
Women's Centre (DEWC)*

Downtown Eastside
Women's
Centre 

Providing basic needs and positive
change for women and children in
the Downtown Eastside since 1978

WELCOME

Message from the Acting Executive Director

Here we are, 41 years later, opening the doors of the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (DEWC) every day to women in our community.

So much has changed in these 41 years, including advancement in technology, a climate crisis, and many human rights advancements. But for many of the women who frequent our Drop-In Centre and Emergency Shelter, life has become more and more challenging.

The women we see are women who, 41 years ago, probably never imagined themselves in the circumstances in which they find themselves today. Of course there are many factors that have brought them to the Women's Centre – intergenerational trauma, gendered violence, family breakdown, systemic barriers, different learning styles that didn't comply with mainstream education, injuries to mental and physical well-being – so many unique and unalterable events, very few of which are exactly alike.

The continuous thread that runs consistently through these stories is financial poverty and racism, as well as all the challenges, stigma and judgement that come with it, particularly for Indigenous women. Our response to the

needs of women who seek our services is to create an environment of acceptance and open-heartedness to create a sense of belonging each time a woman comes through the door.

There are activities to join, supports to meet individual needs, seasonally-appropriate clothes, safe showers and washrooms, delicious hot meals, and a place to relax and build community. You will find, in these pages, stories of women who talk of what the Women's Centre means to them and what it fulfills in their lives.

The way we manage to meet the needs of women is through a dedicated, thoughtful and experienced staff, volunteers and Board of Directors whose priority is to create a shelter from the storm that follows so many wherever they go. There are good days and bad days for everyone, but it is the strength of the women we see, and their hopes and dreams, that keep us focused on and dedicated to our work.

None of this could be accomplished without the generosity of our donors and supporters – some have been with us for years and some are new to the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre – who find that our goals and work align with their values. To all of you, we send our heartfelt thanks for entrusting us to not only provide safe places for women,



Kate Gibson, Acting Executive Director

but to further the cause of equality for women, be it in housing, opportunity, safety, and amplifying women's voices in our community.

Currently, I am the Acting Executive Director of DEWC as our long-time Executive Director, Alice Kendall, is on a well-deserved leave. It is a great privilege to be here, and to be involved with this inspiring organization. Please accept our best wishes for the holiday season, and know that we hold you in our thoughts as we welcome women to the warmth of our Centre and our Shelter.

Kate Gibson
Acting Executive Director



Santa Claus poses for a photo beside the Christmas tree at the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre while waiting for children to arrive for the annual Children's Christmas Party

“A safe haven:” Nora’s story

Almost three decades ago, 53-year-old Nora became pregnant with her first child. She breaks down in tears as she recounts being abandoned by her family. “Being a single mom put my family to shame. They were ashamed of me,” she says. “It was very tough. There were days I thought to myself, ‘What did I get myself into?’” Nora lived most of her life in poverty and found herself vulnerable to violence. She had no support system and no place to go. She says this is why family and community are so important. “I ran from the violence. Back then, there was no one to help me.”

In 2013, Nora discovered the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre (DEWC) by chance. “One of the workers at the Carnegie Centre showed me,” she recalls. “I asked her, ‘Can I sit with you? I’m cold and wet.’ I was so happy that they showed me [the Women’s Centre]. The

Women’s Centre provides everything for me. I’ve never stopped coming [to DEWC].” For Nora, DEWC became a safe haven. “I feel very safe here. One of the ladies I met here told me: ‘If you ever feel like you are in danger...go to the Women’s Centre because they will protect you. Run there.’” After all she has been through, Nora strongly believes the community makes a difference, especially having safe, accessible and supportive spaces such as DEWC.

“It is very important to have community. Anytime I didn’t feel safe out there, I looked for the Women’s Centre.”

Nora has some important words for other single mothers who are going through the same struggles: “It may be hard, stressful, exhausting. You will be



Nora poses for a photo after sharing her story and talking about the importance of finding the Women’s Centre

really lucky if you have family to help you. But even if you are a single mom, you are the blessed one. My kids are my treasures. I’d never trade them for anything.” To everyone else, she offers this advice: “Don’t ever let anything get you down. Just smile and say, ‘It’s [going to be] okay.’”

“My home:” Patricia’s story



Patricia enjoys precious bonding time with her daughter, Victoria, age 2

In February 2019, Patricia and her two-year-old child, Victoria, arrived at the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre (DEWC) in despair. One of the members of a single mothers group, to which Patricia belongs, had recommended the Women’s Centre. “She knew just how bad I was struggling and she told me about DEWC,” she says. Patricia, who

is originally from Mexico, was initially hesitant because she believed her case was not typical for DEWC, especially having a baby and coming from a different country. She feared rejection.

However, she was at her wits end, so she decided to take a leap of faith. “That day, I was at risk of being homeless because I didn’t have enough money to pay my rent,” Patricia recalls. Justina, her housing support worker at DEWC, remembers just how critical Patricia’s case was. “Patricia was in despair, depressed, anxious and afraid. She was isolated and felt undermined by society,” says Justina.

DEWC quickly became a place of love and safety for Patricia. “[DEWC is] my home. I was there everyday to have breakfast and lunch, and work with my support worker [to get] a better place. Slowly, everyone became my family.

The love that the women in the Centre were giving to my baby was priceless,” says Patricia. Living in the Downtown Eastside with her child has not been an easy experience, Patricia admits. “It could be very stressful because the environment is not very kid-friendly. I felt I need to be more aware of everything in case of an emergency,” she says.

DEWC helped Patricia and her daughter find a home, and provided a sense of community. Patricia says she is grateful for the support and empowerment she has received, which enabled her to work towards improving her family’s living situation. “DEWC approved my rental support for a year while we were working to find a better place for me and my baby,” she says. Now, they are one step closer towards a better life and a brighter future in their new home.

This Christmas, give a gift to DEWC and support safety and basic needs for women in the DTES!

By making a donation,
you are giving the gift of
nutritious meals, basic
needs, a safe space, and
an extra special holiday
to women & children in
the community.



Your donations make a big
difference:

\$5 gives a woman a day's access to a hot
meal, safe space, and support services

\$150 gives a woman a month's access
to a daily hot meal, safe space, and
support services

\$750 gives a nourishing meal for
women accessing the drop-in centre



Your generous support makes it possible
for the Downtown Eastside Women's
Centre to meet the needs of women who
are at risk and in need.

Your contributions directly support women's access to
a safe space, sustenance, nourishment, and support in
crisis. In addition to being able to access basic, day-
to-day necessities, women are able to get help with
finding housing, counselling, advocacy, building skills,
and moving from isolation towards being part of a
supportive, non-judgmental community.

The holidays are especially difficult for women who
are at risk, marginalized, and have nowhere to go. At
the Centre, we host a Christmas party for women in
the community, including mothers and their children.
Each woman receives a Christmas gift (care package).
We also give gifts to the children to add more cheer to
their holidays. Your donations help us provide support,
comfort and a sense of community to women and their
children in need, especially during the holiday season.

For other ways to help this holiday
season, go to dewc.ca/holiday.



Market volunteers welcome attendees at the Arts and Crafts Booth, part of the Women’s Street Fair & Flea Market held this past summer

“A better, brighter future:” The fourth annual Women’s Street Fair & Flea Market

For the fourth year in a row, the women of the Downtown Eastside (DTES) partnered with the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre (DEWC) to hold a market on Columbia Street, between East Pender & Hastings. Held every Saturday afternoon this past summer, the Women’s Street Fair & Flea Market was a powerful celebration the resilience, creativity and community. For vendors like Pat, Mikaela and Kathy, who sold original artwork, customized accessories and baked goods, respectively, the weekly event was a source of positivity in a neighbourhood associated with poverty and drug overdose. “It is needed. We, as women, are isolated by everyone and need the bonding opportunities,” says Shelley M., a jewelry and crafts vendor.

Official reports highlight the common health challenges – HIV, Hepatitis C, and psychological trauma, to name a few – that many individuals in the neighbourhood are facing. Despite the challenges that they have faced and continue to deal with, the women are survivors. Time and again, they display their ability to move through painful experiences and see a better, brighter future – the market is no exception. Brenda, who moved to the DTES after

her husband’s death in 2000, is one of a handful of regular volunteers who help out every summer. She witnessed its humble beginnings four years ago and says she feels grateful to be part of such an inspiring community event. “It is my opportunity to give back to my community,” she says. As a volunteer, Brenda has seen the market blossom. “We have learned a lot of good lessons.”

A project like the annual summer market helps DEWC to continue moving the agenda towards addressing systemic issues like poverty, while providing women in the area with much-needed safe spaces, basic necessities, and advocacy and self-development programs. Operating on a grassroots model, DEWC’s programs and services, which promote inclusion and cultural safety, have emerged out of necessity

to meet the needs of the women in the DTES. While the market celebrates the beauty and joy of the community, the surrounding area is not without visible reminders of prevalent poverty and hardship. Yet, another vendor named Gem found refuge and reprieve at the market:

“There is drama everyday in the Downtown Eastside but here [in the market], I feel safe.”

Looking ahead, the hope is that the market continues to grow into something that makes an even greater difference for the women and for the community.



Entrance to the Downtown Eastside Women’s Street Fair & Flea Market

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

Cooking to build community: Chinese seniors find connection through community kitchen



A group of Chinese seniors prepare to cook a traditional Chinese dish as part of the Community Kitchen initiative

The Chinese Seniors Community Kitchen, held by the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (DEWC) as part of its Chinese Seniors Outreach program, aims to promote cultural understanding and a sense of community for Cantonese or Mandarin-speaking women, many of whom face isolation and discrimination.

As part of the initiative, Chinese seniors regularly gather to cook a meal together in the heart of the Downtown Eastside. The initiative includes Cultural Exchange, which enables Chinese seniors to learn about different cultures from other women of the Centre through

recipe-sharing and cooking. The first Cultural Exchange meeting this year was led by a Métis woman who cooked bannock and hamburger soup, sharing laughter and food with participants.

Teng Lai, Chinese Seniors Outreach worker at DEWC, facilitates regular meetings for the program, which are hosted by the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House (DTES-NH). Approximately 75 seniors in total participate in the project; meanwhile, it is estimated that 200 women access the Chinese Seniors Outreach program every year.

During one of the gatherings, half of the women made a pork noodle bowl to share, while the other half prepared dumplings for the DTES-NH, as a way to show gratitude and share their culture. The friendship among the women is evident; all the women have a vital role and the opportunity to share their culinary skills.

Each event is run on a budget of approximately \$50, which equates to more than \$2,500 per year, says Teng Lai. Currently, the Chinese Seniors Community Kitchen is only funded for \$2,000. Any donations will go a long way towards ensuring the continuation of the program. To learn more, donate or volunteer, please visit dewc.ca/programs/chinese-seniors-outreach.

“The program not only allows [Chinese seniors] to cook & share a meal, it also acts as a social get-together so they can check on each other & make sure everyone is doing fine.”

–Teng Lai, Outreach Worker

#DOITFORDEWC

Going the extra mile at this year's Scotiabank run & Eastside 10K

Another year, another successful run! Many thanks to everyone who supported the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre by participating in this year's Scotiabank Half-Marathon & 5K and the Eastside 10K. Whether you ran, fundraised, crowdsourced, or donated, your contributions have been of great help and enable us to continue meeting the needs of women in the Downtown Eastside year after year.

The Scotiabank Half-Marathon & 5K takes place every June, while the Eastside 10K takes place each September. Both events bring the community together to rally for great causes and raise significant funds for DEWC each year.

Please stay tuned to our website (dewc.ca) and sign up for our e-newsletter to receive updates about the next Scotiabank Half-Marathon & 5K and the Eastside 10K!



DEWC staff pose with their medals after running the 2019 Scotiabank 5K



The Downtown Eastside Women's Centre would like to acknowledge the generous support of its donors and funders!

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Join us at the fourth annual

HERSTORY IN FOCUS

January 30, 2020 | 6.30 pm | Vancouver Art Gallery

