Safety, Sisterhood, Sanctuary

The Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre (DEWC)

2020 Summer Newsletter

Providing basic needs and positive change for women and children in the Downtown Eastside since 1978.
This year, the Spring Newsletter from the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre has become the Summer Newsletter. The main reason for this is that we have been focused on the health and well-being of women of the Centre and the Shelter, our staff and volunteers, and our community during an unprecedented time.

While the pandemic has been challenging for everyone, it is especially difficult for a community that is already in the midst of a multi-year opioid crisis and which is home to so many marginalized people. The pandemic piled on top of grinding poverty, lack of suitable housing or outright homelessness, gender-based violence, racism, compromised health and days when all feels hopeless has been a physical and mental drain for the residents of Downtown Eastside community.

Gender-based violence has increased, people have lost supports of all kinds, the drugs are the worst they have ever been and the overdoses have increased to a height never seen before. Women that access the drop-in centre have died and the shelter has managed to have women survive overdose at the rate of 4 per week for the last 2 months.

While these issues have taken their terrible and relentless toll on the DTES, there have been bright lights that have emerged from tragedies of the pandemic. People in the community have pulled together to support those in need with meals, PPE, sanitizing, food deliveries, and so much more.

There has been employment for peers who have taken great pride in their work keeping residents fed and safe and are supported by many organizations and individuals each day.

At the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre (DEWC), we have been overwhelmed with the support of long-time donors, new donors, groups and individuals. Since the onset of the pandemic, we have heard from so many people who have made financial donations, who have shared grants for DEWC to apply for, who have made homemade masks, provided hand sanitizer, medical grade masks, 3D printed face shields, new clothing, meals for the Shelter, food for the Centre – the list goes on. It has definitely been a coming together from far and wide to support the women of the Downtown Eastside for which we are infinitely grateful.

You know who you are and we can’t thank you enough. Your messages have, at times, moved us to tears and encouraged us all to keep on going when sometimes the hill is very steep to navigate.

The DEWC shelter has remained open and has provided beds for 50 women throughout. Some women from the Shelter were able to go to the new spaces created after the closure of Oppenheimer Park which made room for other women in need of a safe place to be. Staff have been leaders in managing a sanitary environment within close quarters and have relied on advice from VCH, BCCDC and BC Housing, some of which changed almost daily.

The Drop-In Centre was temporarily closed for gatherings of women but remained steady in supplying up to 130 breakfasts and 250 lunches to-go daily, maintaining access to indoor washrooms. As things have eased, access to much needed resources like housing support, victim services, advocacy, programming, clothing, respite and volunteering have opened up for women in need. We are still in the midst of COVID-19 and it’s hard to know when things will even out, but we do know that, as always, the Downtown Eastside is a strong, active community that is full of survivors who are working through the challenges together.

At the beginning of August, I am leaving my post as Acting Executive Director of DEWC and welcoming back Alice Kendall, Executive Director. Alice is returning at a time when there are many more mountains to climb, but after all her years of supporting and advocating for women in this community, she will tackle these challenges with her well-known effort and tenacity.

Thank you all for your support during my tenure at DEWC. It has been a time of change for sure, but I believe it has presented opportunities for improvement and recognition of the need for change for individuals who are most impacted by both the opioid crisis and the pandemic.
We have had to adapt quickly to the changing circumstances COVID-19 has presented us with and we will continue to offer all assistance within our means to the women and children we serve.

We want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your continued support, well wishes, and generosity during this time.

DEWC could not do this without the ongoing financial support of our donors, as well as everyone who has contributed masks, sanitizer, soap, disinfectant wipes, and groceries to our drop-in centre and 24-hour emergency shelter.

We are stronger together.

The gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic hits home for us each and every day as we work to continue these essential services.

Now, more than ever, we are leaning on our community. We will continue to develop additional ways that you can assist DEWC from a distance and help DEWC – from the safety of your home.

Physical distancing is one of the most important things we can do right now to help stop the spread of COVID-19 and protect our most vulnerable populations. We thank each and every one of you for helping to flatten the curve.

DEWC needs your help.

COVID-19 is impacting our annual fundraising events that we rely on to support our 100% donor-funded meal programs. We anticipate more challenges to our financial well-being over the coming months. Many of you have reached out to see what you can do to help DEWC at this time.

“The gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic hits home for us each and every day as we work to continue our essential services.”

If you are able, please consider donating to support our meal program. Just $5 will make a difference in the life of a woman in the Downtown Eastside, providing her with access to a meal and other essential services.

You can donate online at: dewc.ca/donate-online or by cheque to support women and children of the Downtown Eastside. If you’d like to coordinate a fundraiser or in-person donation, please contact us at: engagement@dewc.ca.

Your support means the world to women in need.
The in-person race may be cancelled, but you can still run to make a difference for women in the Downtown Eastside!

The Under Armour Eastside 10K Virtual Race will take place from September 1st – 30th, so you have the flexibility of choosing a date and time that works for you. Canada Running Series is working hard to provide a fun, virtual event for runners registered.

The Eastside 10k typically raises $15,000 a year for our essential meal program - all through the efforts of our supporters walking or running for DEWC. Help us reach our goal with this year’s virtual race!

To learn more, or to download our Fundraising Toolkit, please visit: dewc.ca/run-for-dewc

Not a runner? Consider supporting the fundraising efforts of other participants! Your contributions directly support women’s access to a safe space and sustenance.

“The door [at DEWC] is almost always open to any woman in need; open arms and honest minds with a big heart.”
- Marie, woman of DEWC

Indigenous Peoples Day at DEWC

Indigenous Peoples Day (June 21) at the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre looked a little bit different this year due to COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings.

At our drop-in centre, we held a physically-distanced outdoor celebration, featuring a prayer from Elder Rita Blind, drumming by the Wildflower, Women of Turtle Island Drum Group, a reading by Dalannah Bowen, a presentation of the new mural by artists Suna Galay, Lydia Brown, Qristine Hrvatin, and a special lunch. Our 24-hour emergency shelter also celebrated and provided a meal of venison tacos from Mr. Bannock, courtesy of donor Megan C. We are grateful for the time and efforts of all involved, and for the women who joined us to witness and celebrate this day.
“Freedom + Protection”: Mural project

Words and description written by artist Sukosi Maya Maria / Suna Galay.
Suna is a visual and performing artist of mixed Indigenous and European descent (Denésuline-Métis, Tamang-Nepalese, Ukrainian and German) born on the unceded ancestral territories of the S?wx?wú7mesh, S?lílw?ta?, and x̱m̕m̕txw Nations of Turtle Island.

The Freedom + Protection mural painted for International Indigenous Peoples Day at the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre was inspired by the strength and protection through which every woman is born: the blessings of 7 generations of Grandmothers who came before her.

When a woman is pregnant with a daughter, the growing fetus inside her is already carrying the egg which will later become her granddaughter. It is in the body of our Grandmothers that we begin taking shape. The women stand on a turtle’s back, which is our original Mother Earth. The gift and wisdom of womanhood comes through Grandmother Moon, as it is through our monthly moontime that we are able to bring forth life into this world.

While I designed most of the mural beforehand, it became a collaboration with the community. Two Indigenous aunties walking by suggested we add an eagle flying above the Grandmothers, and Lydia Brown, a Snuneymuxw First Nation artist painting alongside me, envisioned it crystal clear and laid it so beautifully into the sky.

Now that the image is complete, we cannot imagine it without the Eagle soaring above, carrying the Freedom spirit for the women.
In honour of Pride month this year, the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre team did a Q&A with women who shared their experiences on what Pride means to them. We are proud to share Marge’s unique story as a member of the LGBTQ2S+ community and as an Indigenous woman who works and lives in the Downtown Eastside.

Please tell us a bit about yourself.

My name is Marge. I am a proud warrior Heiltsuk nation woman from Bella Bella. I came to Vancouver when I was 19 years old and bumped into the biggest party of my life with the gay and lesbian scene Downtown. We were a big gang of street workers on Davie Street. The Downtown Eastside is now my home. Every now and then I visit my family in Bella Bella. I get to smell the ocean air; I see the eagles in the sky, get on the boat and go fishing.

How do you identify, could you explain what it means to you?

Being true to my identity has meant the world to me. It helped my girlfriend and I work on ourselves for the past few years and we have since been sober. We are going to do a wedding ceremony some time soon. Letting people know who I am has helped me get comfortable with who I am. The key thing to my existence is to be happy.

How did you arrive at your identity? Can you tell us a little about your journey?

I was initially with boys and was also a working girl for 22 years. Over time I came to be identified as a multiple personality disorder person. I was outed in my home town, Bella Bella. They would not be near me, I lost my friends who were a big circle of girlfriends. Everyone turned their back on me. My family suggested for me to leave Bella Bella, to go on "holiday". I thought they were maybe ashamed of me. I took it hard. I worked in a cannery, gathered a couple of cheques and left. I came to Vancouver and started a new life. My identity wasn’t in play because I was into addiction. When I stopped being a working girl I came to really identify as a lesbian.

How do your culture and identity relate?

I take both of them very seriously. I have regalia that I am able to put on at certain times, for certain events and I learned my culture through my aunties, sisters and the community. This includes my community down here. Ways of conducting ceremonies, various protocols and burning food for loved ones.

I also got some of the teachings from observing my granny from a young age. All these teachings and everything about my culture strengthen my identity and have allowed me to embrace my roots and who I am as an individual.

What are some of the challenges or struggles you face?

I am now a pretty happy person. I do not stand for violence and choose to walk away from it. I am grateful for my father’s support and how understanding he was when I told him I was leaving Bella Bella. Having a loving and supportive circle has helped me along the way.

What are some of the joys?

Being true to myself, my family, friends and community. And them supporting my partner and I.

Above: Marge poses with a Pride flag at DEWC.

Right: Gifts and swag provided by the Vancouver Pride Society, gifted to women during our Pride celebrations at the Drop-in Centre.

Left: A Pride cake from Railtown Catering for a celebratory lunch at our Drop-in Centre.
Seemingly Insignificant
But In Spirit Magnificent

Poem by: Joan

We in the Downtown Eastside are considered the lowly
Downtrodden
More or less down and out, and often bedraggled
Rain sodden
Pain, pressures of life and putdowns have come to us
But they have strengthened not weakened us
True, we are not often noticed or acknowledged
But as long as we respect ourselves and others we’re unchanged
We’ll continue to carry on staying true to ourselves and others
Our lives are hard but we’ll persevere
Friends, sisters, mothers
We will survive by being true to ourselves in every way
Physically we may seem weak but our inner strength will save the day
Oppression, virus, tragedy, with all that we’ll cope
As long as we hold on to what we trust and need
Love, truth, peace and hope.

The drawing featured on this page, by Ava, acknowledges all of our sisters who have passed away since the beginning of COVID-19.

Existing struggles have only been exacerbated by the pandemic, resulting in devastating loss in the community.

Many women of the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre have been lost in the past few months, and roughly 80% of these women are Indigenous. This heartbreaking loss is encapsulated in Ava’s image.

The poem by Joan, above, speaks to the impact of COVID-19 and how her life and other women’s lives have been impacted since March. Joan notes that women will “persevere” and “survive by being true to [themselves] in every way”. Her words showcase the resilience and power of community we experience daily at DEWC.

We thank Joan and Ava for sharing their hearts with us in the pieces displayed on this page and for providing an opportunity for us to reflect and remember the sisters we have lost.
Finding Joy Where We Can: An interview with Teresa Stenmark

During COVID-19, the Humans of Support team interviewed Teresa Stenmark, Peer Support Worker at the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre 24-hour Emergency Shelter.

Our shelter staff have been on the frontline during the pandemic to provide beds, meals, and support to women in need. All photos are by Erich Saide and interview below was done by Tracey Wade, reposted by permission from the Humans of Support team. To learn more about the Humans of Support project, visit them on Facebook (facebook.com/humansofsupport).

How has COVID changed your job?
A lot of ways but most notably is that we now operate strictly as an emergency shelter, open only to those self-identifying women with beds, rather than also operating as a drop-in space as we did before. It more than halves the number of women we see in our space daily.

Where are you finding joy?
I’m finding joy everywhere, to be honest. Our women are a joy unto themselves, and the sunshine doesn’t hurt one bit. We’re all laughing a little bit harder than we maybe would have before, at things that maybe aren’t that funny... I work as part of a great team, it’s not hard to find beauty in the day-to-day around here.

What positive things are you seeing?
Seeing people get housed – even temporarily – into these hotels has been amazing. It’s incredible what a global pandemic can do to convince the city that these people need and deserve housing. I love seeing them come back to visit, excited beyond anything to have their own bathtub and a door that closes.

Describe a moment that has truly affected you.
A moment that has truly affected me happened on March 17th. We had to make the decision to close the doors to those without beds, and stop doing intakes until we could get a handle on what COVID meant for the DTES residents we work for. It was a hard, weird day. I’ll never forget having to make a choice like that.

What would you like people to know?
I guess just that, all things considered, we’re doing alright down here. It’s not all face masks and scary headlines. I’d also like to give some major kudos to the management team and staff of the Shelter – teamwork makes the dream work!

Do you have any interesting stories you’d like to share?
A funny little tidbit I could share is that a few of our women rescued a couple of abandoned gerbils from a nearby park, where they’d been left to bake in the sun. They brought them back to the shelter (of course, who doesn’t bring gerbils to a people shelter) and staff promptly coveted them, cleaned them, and named them after ourselves. Lil T and Lil V are thriving and surviving.

Members of our 24-hour emergency shelter team. (Photos by: Erich Saide)
Stronger Together: Women find shelter and sustenance at 24-hour emergency shelter

Incredible community support has helped DEWC continue crucial meal services at our Shelter location during the pandemic.

Throughout COVID–19, we have received over 2500 prepped meals from donors to support over 50 women per day at the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre 24-hour Emergency Shelter location.

The pandemic brought a lot of different struggles to our organization. As some staff self-isolated, and as we suspended our volunteer program to minimize risk, we experienced staffing struggles in our kitchen at the shelter.

In our time of need, we started to receive offers of assistance. Restaurants, catering companies, and individual donors, despite experiencing struggles themselves, reached out to our team to see what they could do to help.

Thanks to their generosity, women’s stomachs are full and our hearts are too.

Giving in Unison

We are grateful for the support provided by Unison Architecture’s dollar-for-dollar fundraising campaign. Thanks to the support of their team, DEWC received over $9,000.00 to support our crucial meal programs and support women in the downtown eastside. We were so happy to have the opportunity to meet their team and thank them in person for their generosity!

Sharing is Caring

The Share to Care team have provided continued support to our team in the form of PPE, sanitizer, feminine hygiene supplies, and more. We are truly thankful for their organizing and quick response to provide these items to women in need and to keep our staff, volunteers, and women safe.
Thank you to our generous supporters and funders!

Centre Sponsors ($50,000+):
- The Houssain Foundation
- Lotte & John Hecht Memorial Foundation
- Sipco Formulations
- T-Gear Foundation

Community Supporters ($25,000+):
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Government Funders:
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**Government of British Columbia**
- BC Housing
- Vancouver Coastal Health
- Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
- Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development
- Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation
- Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture

**Municipal Government**
- City of Vancouver

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www.dewc.ca
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We are grateful for you.

Your support means the world to us and women who access our services.

Thank you to our monetary supporters and to all of those who have made large donations of goods or held fundraisers to support DEWC during COVID-19.

From sewing home made masks, to hosting live streaming performances to raise money for DEWC, we have been in awe of the generosity shown to our organization and the women we serve. We have felt your support from a distance and are grateful for all of your efforts in our time of need.
“Life is too stressful. But people sometimes forget that laughter is the best medicine.” - Elaine