

ISSUE 1, SPRING 2021

Stories of Hope

A MAGAZINE BY ISLAND CRISIS CARE SOCIETY

WANDA - THE RIPPLE EFFECT

KYMBA'S JOURNEY AND FINDING HER VOICE

THE STORY OF TANYA: MOVING AHEAD

MYSTIE'S STORY - A TALE OF RESILIENCE

THE ICCS CONTINUUM OF CARE - BULDING ON STORIES OF HOPE



What are Stories?

Stories are the way we understand the world around us. They tell us about who we are, and who others are, and let us build bridges to understanding others that bring us together, and remind us that, despite the differences in our experiences, in our lives, in our perspectives, all of us have a lot in common as well.

And stories give us hope. Sometimes in the immediacy of our experiences, even the strongest and most positive among us can lose sight of the path we are on. We can lose courage, thinking that our today is all there is. It is only by remembering the whole journey and reliving the hard but sometimes miraculous steps along the way that we can be brought back to hope.

May these stories of journeys taken inspire you as you read, and remind us all of our hope for a brighter tomorrow.

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Wanda - The Ripple Effect

In every life there is a turning point; every person has impacts on others around them. "There's always a ripple effect. If you're doing good, you've got positive energy and you're happy and you've got a great outlook on life, that ripple effect is going to go towards everybody else that's around you," says Wanda.



She has seen this in her life, and speaks strongly about how she believes in this potential for positive impact on others, but she also knows that currents can go the other way.



For Wanda, her early life was swamped in a tide of misunderstanding and pain. Abused from an early age, she became caught in a vortex of hurt and, as time went on, was pulled into a cycle of negative experiences and abusive relationships. Her two older children were taken from her care as she faced threatening and abusive relationships with their fathers, and negative waves spread. One partner tried to throw her out of a 7th floor window. In self defence she stabbed him, and she ended up being put in jail. In her own words, her life was destroyed.

Misunderstood, others around her pushed back against her anger, and reflected their own.

A crisis came when she was kicked out of her apartment. "There were a few people in the complex that didn't like me at all. I am a very, very blunt, brutal honest person. I tell it like it is. If you don't like it, that ain't my problem." But it did become her problem when some of those people conspired to accuse her of racism and succeeded in having her removed from the complex.

Bewildered and hurt from the accusations, she reached out to her aunt, who had been staying at the ICCS Samaritan house programme, and – almost against her will – Wanda joined her there.

But the corrosive effects of her negative experiences continued to drag her under and made her bitter. When people were nasty to her, she fought back, and the ripples of anger grew.

" I didn't want to be there, and everyone knew I didn't want to be there. I was just very hateful and very angry. I was defiant. I had my walls up, my guard up. It was like a steel wall, there was no breaking it down whatsoever."

The final blow came when her former boyfriend – a man who her youngest daughter had called “Daddy” from her earliest years – stalked her to Samaritan House and, catching her alone, sprayed her with bear mace. It burned her face and eyes and throat, and she sank.

The tide swamped her and she had a mental and emotional breakdown. It was only thanks to caring staff at Samaritan House that she made it through.

This crisis had another effect though – it stopped the negative momentum. When she reached out for help, and that help was given, slowly but inexorably the waters stilled, and the ripples started, ever so slowly, to move in the other direction. Bit by bit, Wanda realised that she didn’t have to continue drowning in negativity. Instead she realised that she could choose to move from darkness to light.

Even more, she saw that the people around her really understood. They were “willing to step out of their comfort zone to help”. They didn’t give up on her. Some had been through things just like she had.

And so, slowly, she too chose to pause and then move in a different direction.

Now she feels great, and she has hope for the future once again. Her motto now is never give up. She is on a list to move into independent housing where her youngest daughter will be able to move back home with her. She is hoping to go back to school to complete her high school diploma, and then to start a baking business out of her new home.

When you are caught in the negative, “everybody else that’s around you. They’re gonna feel it, they’re gonna go through it and they’re gonna do the exact same thing.”

Her daughter remains her hope and her joy. Wanda beams when she tells that her daughter says she wants to be just like her when she grows up. “The main thing I tell my daughter every time is never give up. Just keep pushing, keep working, keep fighting and eventually you’ll get everything you want and need.”

She has become a rock to others around her who have also experienced adversity. Recently, when she found one of the other clients at Samaritan House in a crisis, Wanda reached out to her in support.

“ I looked at her and I said, “it doesn’t matter what you’re going through right now, it doesn’t matter what your situation is, what your

circumstance is, and what’s going through your head.

You are a strong individual, you are a strong woman... You’re going to rise from whatever you’re going through right now, and you’re going to become a stronger person in the end. We’ve gotta go through the ashes before we come out to the fields.”

Ultimately, despite her hard road, Wanda is determined to move forward, to learn and to grow from all she has been through.

“ The life that I have is just making me a stronger woman in the end and it just lights my fire to do better and to help other people around me to do better. So, if I can make that one change in somebody’s life, my job’s done. I did something good.”



Kymba's Journey and Finding Her Voice

Kymba sits down in front of me, a tall woman with a shock of blonde hair and kind smile. She is wary and won’t meet my eyes right away. What is soon clear, though, is that she is ready to speak, and to let her voice be heard. It has been a long road to get here.



As we talk about her life and her story, it is clear that though she has always had something to say, she has not always been heard. Often people didn’t respect her space or her voice, and frustration from that made her mad.

Kymba has a new peace now, and is keen to tell her story. She exudes an inner strength, and as she talks it becomes clear that it is this strength which has brought her through her difficult tale.

It wasn’t always that way. Kymba remembers her road to the street. She used to live up-island, where her four children (three of them now estranged from her) still live. She was in her own apartment then, but got caught in a cycle of drugs and bit by bit she lost everything.

When her story continued, she was on the mainland, living in marginal housing with a roommate who was hard to get along with. She moved across the hall to share a room with another woman, who smothered, not listening when Kymba said she needed her space.

In a short time, she decided that living on the street would be better. So, she bought a tent and moved back to the Island; but though she kept trying, people weren’t listening. Her reaction was anger, and sometimes violence.

She was restricted from some programs, including Samaritan House for a period of time, and started to become silent – afraid to let her story out. It was safer to hunker down in nooks of buildings than to be ignored.

But it was so tiring. Some days she would just ride the bus, or wander around the local shopping centre, with nowhere else to go and nothing to do. She slept in alcoves and in a hiding spot she knows at the Harbormaster's dock, but it was all exhausting and soon, it made her sick.

She was taken to hospital but still no one was listening. "I had an infection that made me really sick and I kept getting so sick that I couldn't be without care. It was so hard to explain that to the hospital and the RCMP they weren't listening, and I just didn't have it to explain. I was so sick..." Kymba pauses, and tears roll down her face, "And they put me out on the street [discharging her from the hospital before she was better]... with me telling them I was so sick, and they wouldn't listen."

It was rock bottom. She was returned to the street late one night, leaving her and her belongings at the side of the road, but Kymba was still very ill and within moments she collapsed. Someone called an ambulance and she was taken back to the hospital...but her belongings were left at the side of the road. When she finally left the hospital for good, all of her things were gone and – after being kicked out of most programmes in the city for her anger and violence – she had nowhere to go.

But she did have people supporting her, including her Island Health case worker, and they encouraged her not to give up, but to try again, to be honest and call for help. "That's when I called the Programme Manager at Samaritan House and asked her to please give me a chance. Please, just I won't be bad. I just didn't have it in me to go back on the street again."

For people living on the street, without an address, even accessing basic services becomes impossible. If you lose your cell phone, for example, if you have no address you can't get another one. Very quickly, people can become, quite literally, voiceless.

The programme that brought Kymba together with her Island Health case worker was an effort by Telus, as a part of their "For Good COVID-19 Emergency Response program" in which they distributed 6000 cell phones to the most vulnerable Canadians, including people living on the street, like Kymba.

At the time, no one would work with Kymba. But her case manager, undeterred, asked a simple question that no one else had bothered to ask – "What are your triggers?" She knew that people don't act or react in a certain way for no reason – for everyone, all of us, certain things take us one step too far, and when we get there, it is very easy to overreact.

For Kymba it was being heard and being given her space. "I don't like it when people are in my face," she said. Another trigger was people speaking at her not to her.

"I have a hard time with people that won't take no for an answer. Why I have to go to such lengths to get someone to listen to me is hard."

When Kymba called Samaritan House that night, she didn't have a lot of hope, but the Programme Manager did what no one expected – she agreed to give Kymba a chance, just 24 hours, to prove she could stay there without becoming angry or violent. She did it that day, and the next, and before long, she had stayed in Samaritan House for 60 days.

At the same time, Kymba was learning what she could do to filter her anger and calm herself down – and be heard.

She knew this was her last chance, and she took it. She had to let people know that she could control her anger when they weren't listening to her. She learned that though she couldn't make people hear her all the time, she could make herself react in a different way, stepping back – sometimes literally – rather than letting their actions provoke a negative reaction in her.



"Stepping away has to be done sometimes and I learned how to do it in the best way without using violence... I step back from situations instead of putting so much effort into them that they grow their own energy..."

To her surprise, as she changed, the reactions of others to her changed as well. "People were acting different; they were giving me space. I didn't have to fight for it, I just had to learn to speak graciously and take the chance to let other people know that I'm not the fighter I was."

After 2 months in Samaritan House, it was time to move on, and the suggestion was made for her to go to the ICCS sister programme Safe Harbour. She didn't want to go. She had found a modicum of balance and stability in Samaritan house, she had met people and made friends for the first time in a long time; but through her new channels of support, she made the move, and never looked back.

Now, months later, Kymba is in her own apartment. Her face cracks into a beaming smile as she talks about it. "I am in my own place and it feels good," she says. "I just love my space – it's mine." It's not always easy, but day by day she keeps working to keep her home and keep on track.

"I miss my alcoves sometimes. As weird as that sounds, because there's nature right there. I miss nature, yeah I miss nature sometimes."

Kymba keeps a reminder of nature on her arm. Winding up her left hand from her thumb and up her lower arm is a tattoo of a graceful flowering vine. The reminder isn't just of nature. The tattoo symbolises her four children, and it is the constant reminder of them that keeps her on track.

Her progress is changing perspectives for her as well. Now that she has a home, she is starting to think about having a future.

"[So I] take myself a step back and just have to be brave... I just have to stay conscious of where I am now and I just have to stay acting appropriately. So I stay pretty close to the heart now."

Her case worker sees the difference. She has always been taken with "how big of a heart Kymba has, and what a good person she is. When I see her come out [now], she has her head up high, and she ... just marches right in [now she] uses her voice."



The Story of Tanya: Moving Ahead

An ICCS Staff Story

As I sit to start my chat with Tanya, it is clear that she is a dynamo, smiling and expressing herself through voice and face and hands; always in motion. It is in fact movement that resounds in her story, with a journey marked by an ever forward momentum.



Tanya is a support worker at Island Crisis Care Society's Hirst House. Her job is to come alongside clients who are part of the programme, support them and listen to them – and share of her own.

"It's been quite a journey. I just want to help others. I want other people to see that life's so short, and there's a chance, there's a chance for everybody."

She grew up in Newfoundland, one of 24 siblings. Her parents were alcoholics, and her father abusive, but when she turned 18, she and her now husband left, moving across Canada to start a new life and escape the dead end existence of their home town.



Life was good, they married and had two children. They were living in Northern BC when a different kind of motion stopped everything. Parked at the side of the road to move their sleeping children out of their car seats late one evening, a drunk driver barreled into them, decimating their car – and their lives. Tanya and her husband were severely injured, and their five-year-old son was killed outright. Only their nine-year-old son survived unscathed – as did the drunk driver of the truck who was completely unharmed, though he had totalled his own car as well as theirs.

Tanya and her husband were medevacked to Vancouver, and both their sons were taken to the morgue, one dead, and one alive, but with nightmare images of sitting there with his dead brother forever imprinted on his psyche.

Tanya's recovery took two years, and she still has pins in her neck which have to be replaced every few years. But though she left the hospital physically better, she was buried under a weight of prescription pain killers and medications which threatened to take the rest of her life away.

"It was so easy to give up," she remembers, "It was so easy to stay in my room, take the pills and cry all day."

The day came when her surviving son walked into her room and she didn't recognise him – he had grown up and she had missed it. That was the day that she started to move forward again.

I can cry an ocean, I'm not going to bring him back... what do you do? I have another little boy who looks at me for so many answers... he looks at me for everything, so I've got to be the strong mamma and say c'mon, it happened, we can't change it, we've just got to stay positive and move forward. Life is short, so short. We're here – it seems like forever, but we're not here forever...we're not."

Through her life she had seen so many people who got caught in their past – her siblings still stuck in her hometown with no hope for the future, and others who were buried under the weight of an abuse or substance impacted past, caught now in a downward spiral. She didn't want that. She chose to change.

Now she works at Hirst House and thinks of it as her second home. Her husband (now of 24 years) and her son laugh at her that she loves her job so much, but she doesn't mind. For her, it is so important to keep reaching out, hearing stories and accompanying people on their journeys – and always making the choice to move forward.

"...once you learn and you understand what you're going through, everybody can make a change. Some people just need help that's all. It's that love, support that connection – that's what I give them all."

Tanya won't let anything hold her back – even the worst thing that happened to her, the death of her son. She knew that the anger she felt was stopping her from flourishing, so she went back to see the drunk driver – it was something she had to do, though he had killed her son and nearly destroyed her life, and had been unrepentant. She knocked on his door and forgave him – for herself. "I can't change what happened, I can't change the past - none of us can, so we need to learn to deal with what happened from that moment... I was angry for many years. I had to forgive the man who killed my son. Once I forgave, then I let go."

Every day, now, Tanya comes to work with a smile on her face.

After all she had suffered, she also wanted to give back, and so she went to Discovery College to study to become a Community Support Worker. After an internship at Safe Harbour – an ICCS programme in Nanaimo – she found her calling and never looked back.

"Isn't life about one big choice? That's what it is. Everything you do you have to choose... and it's not only that choice, it's sticking with that choice. Following through with it..."

When I ask her what she wants to do in the future, she says that she is happiest here, bringing brightness to the lives she touches, and affirming them in their own journeys.

"If I can do it, everybody can do it. You probably just need some encouraging words, or some way to redirect, but everybody can do it... Life's hard. I get it, I so get it, but you know if we all stay positive...Imagine if everybody was this positive with everybody, imagine how life would be? The world would be such a beautiful place."

Mystie's Story: A Tale of Resilience

It's an overcast day, but Mystie is undaunted. A diminutive woman, she comes into the room in a pink sequined hat and leggings to match, shy but excited to talk about her story and of her new role as the first informal peer support worker at Newcastle Place. Yet even as she sits down in a chair in the centre of the room, there is a sadness that belies the candy coloured sparkles she wears.



Her story is shocking. Beaten and abused by an

alcoholic mother from childhood, her life has been a spiral of pain. When her mother drank, she faced intense physical abuse including cigarette burns; once she was beaten and tied up and left to sleep on a toilet. Then her mother started bringing men home with her from the bar and letting them do what they wanted to Mystie. "The louder I screamed the louder she put the music on. The more men, the more she got turned on."

Her escape was school. "When I'd run away, I'd go to school, 'cause they weren't looking there – the police would never go to school to look for runaways." There she found affirmation, pursuing excellence in her studies, and as captain of the soccer team, active in volleyball and track and field – "anything so I didn't have to go home."

But home caught up. She had to miss a few weeks of school because she was so marked up from abuse. When she returned, her substitute teacher took her to the principal's office because she refused to wear her uniform or to change in front of the other girls. When she removed her shirt, her teacher fell to her knees in shock and the principal called the police.

She went into foster care after that, but the system was not kind, and she was moved from home to home, all the while wracked with worry about her younger sisters who were still with their mother. She had escaped, they had not.

She graduated high school, but then, before she knew it, she was living rough on the streets. Life went on with a trail of abusive relationships and pain. "I have not been in one relationship where I didn't get beaten, hard...and, so it took years of counselling to figure out that it was normal [for me] to be in an abusive relationship, cause that's all I knew."

Her last boyfriend left her with significant scars. Kicking her with

steel toed boots, her boyfriend put her in the hospital with 300 stitches and deadened teeth that are now falling out one by one.

She moved from Ontario to BC, and her welcome was violent, stabbed by the first woman she met on arrival. She tried a couple of safe houses but ended up back on the street...and then one day she walked into a different kind of place. "Finally, I went to the Ladies' shelter for a couple of days [Samaritan House] and then I've been here [Newcastle Place] since."

She has been at Newcastle for 10 months, now, and though it hasn't been easy, the stability has allowed Mystie to start to find herself again, and to show herself as, above all, a woman who cares about others.

She quickly became known as a listening ear, a caring helper, and an advocate for those who could not speak out for themselves. The team at Newcastle started to see the difference Mystie was making, reaching out to others, supporting them in ways that staff could not.

Then came the turning point. Feisty still – with a leadership remembered from her days captaining her school sports teams, and from looking after her younger siblings when their abusive mother was at her worst – Mystie started to stand up for others once again. When much-liked snacks were discontinued because of budget cuts, Mystie spoke up.

Her advocacy paid off. Not only did the staff listen, they made her a part of the team that goes to the food bank to collect treats.



Mystie at the foodbank diving for snacks

At the same time, they affirmed her advocacy and work with other clients at Newcastle. They saw that her natural empathy made others reach out to her in ways that the staff couldn't do. Where outreach workers faced a wall, Mystie was able to get in and listen to others, to sit with them, and even help them do things they were having trouble with, like cleaning their rooms or doing laundry.

It wasn't long before the Newcastle team approached Mystie to take on an informal role as a peer

supporter – and Mystie jumped on board. Mystie adds, "So now, I hand out snacks when outreach leaves, I hand out [harm reduction] kits."

"I also sit with them even if somebody is having a crappy day – 20 minutes with me and they're usually laughing."

Mystie herself is never happier than when she is busy helping out. She is part of the cleaning crew at Newcastle, and helps to advise on client concerns and needs.

Even more, she is a friend to those in the most dire need. COVID has been a significant derailer for many in the past months, with service access limited for clients.



Gratitude and creativity

As she blossoms, she becomes more and more active. The connection she has with outreach staff and with her peers giving her a confidence she has never known, and – despite all – a gratitude.

On her own initiative, she has started a wall of appreciation at the back of the compound – a rainbow-chalked board of compliments and thanks for the people working there. Daily, she encourages her peers not to grumble, but to go out and write a word of thanks to the staff, remembering and dwelling on the positive, and the future.

The role has also started, ever so slowly, to make a difference for Mystie herself. The affirmation she gets from staff is

Tears are in Mystie's eyes as she finishes her story, but the sequins on her cap are still sparkling, and for perhaps the first time since she was a young girl, there is hope.

The ICCS Continuum of Care

What is it that makes the difference to the work we do at ICCS?

It is many things...but among the most important is our belief that everyone, no matter what their circumstances at the moment, is a person with hope, and that with support and community around them every one can make change for the better.



Looking forward to hope

The programs of ICCS are not just providing shelter and food, we are providing care so that people know they are valued and have the support they need to recover and grow.

Each client is encouraged to develop an individualised case plan that helps

people keep on track, supported by people who care including support workers, outreach workers, and trained volunteers who are committed to walk with them along that road.

When people come to our programs, they arrive with different needs. Some are in crisis and need just a safe place to recover. That's where programmes like Crescent House in Nanaimo and Hirst House in Parksville can serve. They provide a space for 'stabilization' for clients in substance or mental health crisis who need a short-term safe place and care.

Crisis stabilization is also offered through Safe Harbour, where clients have private rooms and home cooked meals to help them recover and heal. Clients tend to stay in these programs only briefly – just a few days at a time, or maybe just overnight – but they provide a start when it is needed.

Emergency Shelter is focused on meeting the immediate physical needs of people who have lost their home or suffered trauma.

Samaritan House and Martha's Place have filled this need in the past. These have now transitioned into the temporary Prideaux Place which offers referral beds to both men and women and supportive housing.

This will transition later in 2021 to a new site on Nicol Street, which will have supportive housing for men and a "Bridge" to housing for women.

Other people are in need of more complex care in a place like The Bridge which provides space for **supportive recovery**. There, specialized services are provided for people diagnosed with mental health challenges, including substance use disorder.

Martha's Place, Orca Place and Newcastle Place offer short or long term **supportive housing** for people who are not able to live independently, but may be able to eventually. On site staff support wellness and growth. As clients become more able to re-develop independence, **transitional housing** like Mary's Place can meet their needs – intended to provide a stepping-stone to independent living.

ICCS also provides **Outreach support** and access to **subsidized housing** for those who are just starting to live independently.

At the same time, ICCS is working to find new ways to support client well-being and recovery. Part of this will be the creation of a new program hub in 2021 offering, among other things, training and pre-employment skills to clients, supporting them on their path towards recovery and independence. This ambitious new project area, provisionally titled *Project Rise* will provide an opportunity for client community integration and new areas for partnership and development.

Project Rise will provide a space for stories, for community connection and for action to bring new opportunities for people who overcome the impacts of trauma and homelessness and return to community life, for good.