

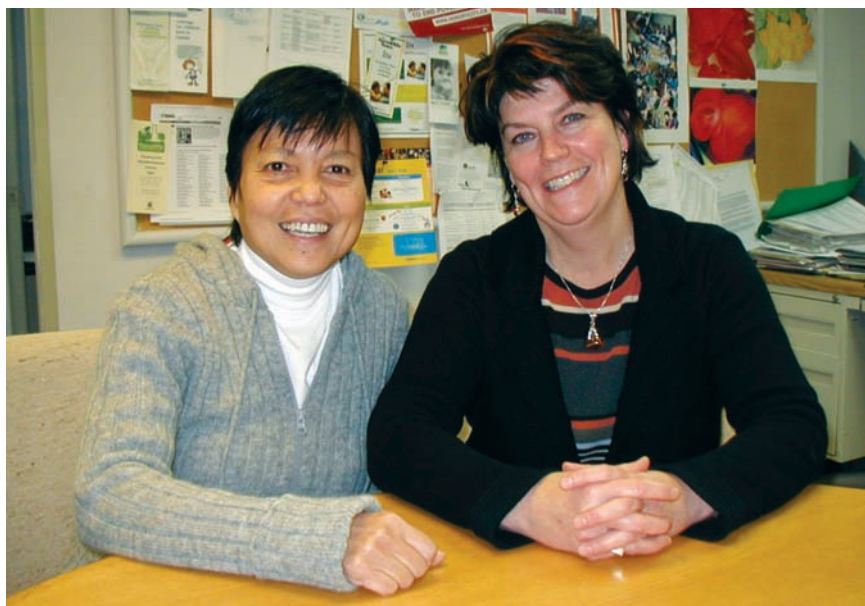
Inside

the life of a

Community Health Officer

Carol's day was starting on an overcast morning on a vacant lot crammed with people who were there to watch a politician dig up a shovelful of dirt – all rather uninspiring to the eye, but a dream come true for Carol and many of those present. This was the symbolic first step in the construction of the city's first housing project dedicated to homeless mothers and their babies. What had finally made it possible was the ability of young homeless women to stand up for themselves and speak of their situation with compelling dignity.

Carol had come to know many of these women well over the past few years. As a community health officer her job was to work with communities at a grass roots level, helping them to recognize their strengths, understand their problems, and tap into available resources. Once a community thinks through its issues



together and discovers its own solutions, it is empowered to run with them.

In the case of the homeless mothers, a network of agencies had gathered around the cause, but it was being blocked by local concerns about bringing homeless people into the neighbourhood. That's when the mothers themselves came forward – forty of them showing up to a council meeting, and a

month later many of them standing at a microphone to deliver deputations before a committee, articulating the personal experience of being homeless with a baby to look after. They brought the issue home so forcibly that council voted overwhelmingly in favour of the housing project. Carol had been immensely proud of these young women, and the strength they had displayed. When she had congratulated one of them, the young mom had smiled at



her and said, “Well, you had more confidence in me than I had in myself, initially – but I got there, didn’t I?”

After the soil-turning ceremony, Carol headed for a meeting with the program team for the Drug Treatment Court. This was a special court for non-violent offenders who are addicted to drugs. It was designed to reduce substance abuse and criminal behaviour through a voluntary treatment program, in lieu of incarceration. Carol had been involved in the court since its inception, which was precipitated by the incidence of drug-dependent repeat offenders and the question, “What can we do better?” She had worked hard to ensure that the community at large had a voice in determining the way it would run, and it had worked so well that several other countries had copied the model. Now, it was being expanded to include sex trade workers who were addicted.

Carol had had a fair bit of frontline experience with such workers through a needle-exchange program she had helped organize and run. The resources of the Drug Court included rehabilitation support for a year and assistance with housing, education and employment. Carol knew that opening those resources to sex trade workers would be a stabilizing influence in the community as a whole – and would ultimately save tax dollars as well. But again, to make it really work it would need endorsement and input and support from the community and from the various agencies that served it.

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After that meeting, Carol returned to the office to work on a couple of projects. A group of teachers and parents were working to overturn the zero-tolerance policy. In practice the policy solved nothing and further marginalized troubled youth, without any attempt at understanding the root of their troubles. On another front, she needed to make some phone introductions for a citizen’s action group that was striving to provide training and local employment opportunities for youth. In all such advocacy work she was careful to keep her own leadership reined in: what mattered most wasn’t that her voice be heard, but that the voice of the community be heard.

Carol grabbed a bite to eat, then went to her last stop of the day – an early evening meeting of a downtown resident’s association that was concerned with the local drug problem. As the meeting got underway, it quickly became clear that the group was divided – some wanted more police presence so the “druggies” could be put behind bars, and others wanted to look for community-based solutions. Carol listened as the discussion heated up, and then one of the most ardent debaters turned to her and said, “What do you think?” She tried to summarize for them what she had heard, and observed that discussion was not really useful if both sides had already made up their minds. One of the members yelled at her that this was an urgent matter – that crime had been escalating. She replied calmly that it was helpful to hear that information, but that it would also be helpful if he could find a different way of conveying it.

She left the meeting not sure that the group would be able to move forward. Sometimes, though, a group breaks up and then morphs into a different group that gathers momentum. Even then, where a community thinks it is headed can change fourteen times before they get there. In her core, Carol had huge faith in the innate capacity of people to join together and do amazing things. She had also found that you didn’t need to take charge to help people along – you just needed the expertise to reach them.

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