



CCPA REVIEW

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

March 20, 2013

Shannon's Story: Hope and Healing

It started slowly. It usually does. He chipped away at her self-esteem, isolated her from friends, then family. She wasn't allowed to work. She wasn't allowed to talk to others. She wasn't allowed to look at anyone. So began fourteen years of hell with her abuser.

Shannon was young when they married. Growing up in a small town in Manitoba she had witnessed addiction and abuse in her home. She learned at an early age to hide— to be there but not really be present.

“That is what I carried into relationships with me,” Shannon says.

He broke her spirit, and then began to break her body. She had two children with him. She tried to leave five times. “That was the thing he used the most to get me to come back,” Shannon remembers. And he was manipulative. On one occasion, he relocated with their children to another small town in Manitoba, then called Shannon and told her that she had to be there at a certain time, or she would never see her children again.

The verbal abuse led to physical abuse, then sexual abuse. “It was all about survival and doing what I had to do to survive.”

The last month and a half was the worst. “He dug a fire pit in the backyard, and started burning my stuff, my high school yearbooks, my baby album, anything that had meaning to me. He would tear out pages and make me stand and watch as he burned them. Then he said ‘One of these days I am going to kill you and bury you in a shallow grave.’ And then he started to say ‘You're not worth digging a grave for.’” Ominously, he began to make their children go to school and tell their teachers that they did not have a mother.

One night, he woke Shannon up with a knife in his hand. “He said ‘You've got to help me or I'm going to kill you.’ I had worn a necklace to bed, a choker made of bone, and he pressed the knife to my neck and cut through this bone choker. I am thankful I was wearing it. He made me go with him to act as a look out as he robbed

CCPA-MB

309 - 323
PORTAGE AVE.
WINNIPEG
R3B 2C1

PHONE

204.927.3200

EMAIL

CCPAMB@
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

WEBSITE

WWW.
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

BLOG

WWW.POLICYFIX.CA

TWITTER

@CCPAMB

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our neighbour's home.”

It ended one fall evening. “He would sexually assault me, and then I would have to be there with him when he did a crime. If the police came after him, he told me I would have to take the charges. One night he stole a vehicle, he was driving but I was in the passenger seat. He sped past an RCMP officer, turned down a gravel road, and stopped the car. He made me get into the driver's seat. He said ‘Take the charges. Prove that you want to be with your kids.’ At the station he kept saying ‘You take these charges and I'll take care of the kids.’”

“That was it. I told the police everything.”

“I was so psychologically damaged that I was not myself. It was like Creator took me out of the centre of the fire. I was taken to a shelter in Selkirk, I had never been to Selkirk before. I had lost absolutely everything and it was an opportunity for me to start healing. The first month in that shelter, I had an amazing counsellor. She really encouraged me to learn who I am because I had lost so much of myself.”

Shannon, who had given up everything about herself to stay with her children, lost her children to the child welfare system. “I thought I was doing what I had to, to be with them. I stopped drinking and doing drugs the day that happened. I did not need it anymore.”

After a stay in the women's shelter, Shannon moved into second stage housing, and a year after they were taken away she got her children back. “The hardest part for me is knowing how much my kids were hurt. My son spent his childhood looking after his sister, my daughter, because I couldn't. He

tried to protect me and he lost his childhood. My daughter says she can remember, before she was even able to talk, thinking that she wanted to help me.”

“It was three or four years before I could see my own sacredness and my value as an Indigenous woman. I went to Red River College and got my counselling certificate. I graduated with honours and I began taking university courses one at a time.”

Shannon started working in a women's shelter. Then at the North End Women's Centre developing a family counselling program. Then a move to Pritchard House to work in addiction.

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Ceremony, Elders, and her culture saved her. And Shannon saved herself. “I am growing into my own power. At Sundance, I pray to be able to use our traditions and our teachings to help our people.”

During a fast, she started having dreams about her ex-husband, and they were sharing food and laughing. “Right in front of the doorway where I was fasting was this medicine bundle flag that always had this string that would get caught and not let it fly. I started to think and remember things he had done to me that I had blocked. Whenever a memory would come up I would pray, each memory more intense than the last. I thought I can't let go of all of this. Those grandmothers told me I don't have to let go of it all at once. One at a time. But they said don't let that connection keep me from flying.”

A few days after the fast, and ten years after the relationship ended, her former husband called. “I had not seen him or heard from him since court. He phoned me and I yelled at him and hung up. He called me again, and started to apologize. It was the first time he ever admitted that he had abused me, that he had tormented me.”

At the West Central Women’s Resource Centre, Shannon gathered together western education and traditional teachings and developed a family violence program called the Red Road to Healing Program.

“It is like my life. It is where I come from and what it took me to heal. There isn’t anything that women can come to the group and tell me that can shock me. One of my first Elders told me to take all of that negative stuff and make it a positive thing. Look back and see it, my fourteen years, as a training place.”

“One of the things that always stays with me is to remember who you are, the things that I like, remembering how sacred I am. If they get nothing else from me, from the program, it is to remind them of how sacred they are. I see the light come back into their eyes. I tell them violence and abuse is not our way, this is not our culture.”

The West Central Women’s Resource Centre put out a call offering the Red Road to Healing training to local agencies, and 25 different agencies responded. It is now offered twice a year, and last year the program was recognized by the federal government as a promising practice to reduce violence and increase safety for Aboriginal women. The WCWRC is starting to partner and take the training into First Nations communities.

Shannon is now co-director of the WCWRC, and very involved in the Missing and Murdered Women’s Coalition. She has been given a grandmother drum to carry. Shannon starts to cry when she tells this

part of the story. Everything she has been through, and the drum makes her cry.

“It is huge for me. The drum is the first bundle item that I received. I was so compliant, timid, and it brought me out of my shell. It really healed me. To be the keeper of a woman’s drum—I know the power of that drum,” she says softly.

Shannon remarried and is about to celebrate her fourth wedding anniversary. She says she is not totally healed yet. But who among us is?

“I am growing into my own power. At Sundance, I pray to be able to use our traditions and our teachings to help our people.”

Her message to victims of violence—there is always a way out. “Our women need to remember who they are, spiritually, emotionally, physically, mentally. There is always hope.”

If you are in crisis, or know someone who may be, don’t wait. Call the nearest shelter, or call 1.877.977.0007 toll free province-wide 24/7 for free, confidential information about services

available in your community.

About the Authors

Shannon Buck and *Jennifer Rattray* want to end violence against women.

Shannon Buck is Co-Director of the West Central Women’s Resource Centre.

Jennifer Rattray is Associate Vice-President of Indigenous Affairs at The University of Winnipeg and Winnipeg Chair of the Canadian Women’s Foun-

dation campaign to end violence against women.

Event

On Saturday, April 13, 2013 women and men will come together to **Move for Hope**, a one hour workout to raise money for women's shelters here in Manitoba. Shannon and Jennifer hope you will join them. Check out www.canadianwomen.org/winnipegmove for more information.

STATS AND INFO

The Canadian Women's Foundation notes that in 2010, the most recent year for which we have statistics, the Winnipeg Police Service received 16,972 domestic violence related calls, and in 2009/2010 there were nearly 6,700 admissions of women and children to Manitoba shelters.

Each year in Canada, more than 100,000 women and children stay in a shelter for abused women, and many more thousands of children witness violence in their homes.

According to Statistics Canada General Social Survey, just 22 per cent of spousal violence victims stated that the incident came to the attention of the police.

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R3B 2C1

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