



Joy Lang, Community Liaison Officer for the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children at the Faculty of Education at Western will

Each year the Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women and Children presents **The Everyday Hero Award** to recognize women or men who through their ideas, effort and dedication are making a difference in the lives of other people. They are people who don't go looking for attention, but who deserve it. This time, in searching for Everyday Heroes, CREVAWC decided to recognize one of our own, Joy Lang, our Community Liaison Officer.

When Joy Lang moved to Chatham in 1979, she had volunteered for a short time with the fledgling women's shelter in her former home of Sault Ste-Marie. That was enough for a group of women who were trying to open their own women's shelter to see her as an expert. She became the first Executive Director of the new women's shelter in Chatham-Kent and remained in this role for the next 25 years.

She had little to guide her in the work. Lenore Walker had just written her famous book "The Battered Woman," but wide spread acknowledgement of woman abuse as a persistent problem was still far off. "I can remember the first women that walked through the door. It was scary for them and scary for me," Joy says. "Outside the shelter community members did not want to hear what I had to say. They were insistent that it doesn't happen here."

Joy and her staff of five learned from the women who walked through the door of the new shelter. They learned of the challenges and barriers facing women trying to leave abusive relationships in obtaining financial assistance from the welfare system, in getting lawyers to understand the nature of the problem, in getting the police to treat it as a crime.

The shelter relied on a per diem contract with the City of Chatham in order to keep its doors open. A little more than a month into their work, upon returning from a meeting with the City, Joy, who had never met a nun in her life, was overwhelmed with gratitude to find that the Ursuline Sisters had dropped off a cheque for \$2,000. "It would be like a \$50,000 donation in today's terms," she remembers. "We took it as a sign that we would be able to stay open."

This marked the beginning a significant personal and professional relationship between Joy and the Ursuline Sisters. "They told me our work was an extension of their work," she explains. "The order was founded in the 1500s to help homeless women and children."

Even with this new found support, the work was demanding. Six women had to keep the shelter running day and night, with no break in service. Joy worked 24 hour shifts every other weekend. Being an Executive Director came with few perks. She did housework, grocery shopping and childcare, along with her management and leadership activities. Her children cut the lawn. Her husband did the plumbing.

In reflecting back, Joy identifies the shift in community attitudes and acceptance of the shelter as one of the highlights of her career. "It was hard in the beginning, but acceptance grew," she says. "I went from being an outsider, to being an insider." Community institutions and leaders went from denying that woman abuse was happening to fully embracing the work of the shelter, donating money, time and in-kind services and products. "We met with the United Way at the neighbourhood bar across the street," she muses with a smile. She remembers proudly that when Chatham built the very first building designed as a women's shelter in 1987, they were able to furnish every single room with new furniture received through donations. The Ursulines donated the land for the building.

As a way of giving back just a small part of what the Ursulines had given her, Joy subsequently went to Peru where she volunteered with some of the agencies they had established. Today she volunteers regularly at My Sister's Place. She has also volunteered with Londoners for Afghanistan's Women and the Homeless Coalition in London. She regularly assists abused women who call into our Centre and never hesitates to offer to accompany a woman no matter what the time, if it will help. She recently returned from Kenya where she did manual labour for long hours with Habitat for Humanity to ensure that one family could literally have a roof over their heads and a place to call home.

She also trained young psychologists. As a rookie, almost 30 years ago Dr. Peter Jaffe approached her for assistance when he was starting out on a research grant looking at the impact of domestic violence on children. Reflecting on this Peter said "She was the first shelter to take a chance on me and she taught me a lot about respectful and practical research as well as respecting the voices of women and children living with violence."

Although the work she does is incredibly difficult, and likely takes a toll in ways that are not always evident, Joy goes about everything she does with dignity, grace, intelligence, and quiet determination – giving tirelessly to her family, her community, and the world around her. That is why it was so obviously appropriate to give her this award. She goes about doing profoundly important work, doing whatever she can to face social injustices and inequities, in her quiet and modest way, usually underestimating the impact of her actions. Avoiding the limelight, Joy is motivated by nothing other than her desire to create a more just world for all of us.

Joy shows us that one person can really make a difference in the lives of others and that if each of us takes the time to help in large and small ways we will change people's lives. It is a rare privilege to meet someone like Joy who genuinely cares so much about others, especially women and children. Those of us who are lucky enough to count her as a friend and a colleague know that we will always have the best advocate in our corner!