

Abuse Hurts ?plunged into crisis? due to rail expansion



By Brock Weir

To the average passer-by, it doesn't look like very much.

Its bare white walls are peeling, weeds are overgrown here and there, and industrial noises hang in the air all around it.

But, on the other side of those whitewashed blocks, a certain degree of magic happens.

This magic, however, might soon come to a close as Abuse Hurts, an organization dedicated to providing resources for victims of neglect and abuse, looks for a new home.

Over the past three years, thousands of clients ? primarily women and children ? have come through their warehouse doors at the corner of Edward Street and Connaught Avenue, not only seeking services, but browsing the cavernous halls of the former munitions works and match factory for clothing, furniture, and other necessities to make a house a home and begin a new chapter in their recovery and their life.

This building, however, is set to meet the wrecking ball as Metrolinx looks to expand the Barrie ? Toronto rail corridor to make way for all-day two-way GO Train service through the community.

The building is currently owned by Vic Priestly, who gave Abuse Hurts a very good rate for the use of the building. They might have to share space with a collection of antique tractors being held in the warehouse, but it has been a harmonious relationship that is coming to an end a bit earlier than Abuse Hurts founder and CEO Ellen Campbell expected.

?I thought we had about five years [to be in the space] because I was told from someone I know on Council that Metrolinx was looking for at least a five year [window],? said Ms. Campbell, noting it is looking increasingly likely they will need a new home and warehouse space in place by August.

Ms. Campbell and her team of volunteers have been exploring every opportunity they can find throughout northern York Region and South Simcoe that might suit their needs. Before moving to Aurora three years ago, they had a 4,000 square foot space in Newmarket.

When they moved to Aurora, they found themselves in a situation where they had additional space closer to Edward Street in which to open a retail space, selling heavily discounted donated furniture to raise further funds for the cause.

The furniture component is now in the process of being liquidated (see www.abusehurts.ca for further details), so they are setting their sights back on a 4,000 square foot space.

In their current digs, the upstairs floor and warehouse space is littered with holes blasted through the thick concrete walls, a remnant of the building's previous use as a paintball centre, but the spirit of the place is now about renewal and helping victims of abuse ? women, children, and an increasing number of men ? rebuild.

Downstairs, there is a beautiful living room space to meet with clients and referrals, a space for them to find clothes that suit their needs, and, in the back, a veritable salon of which women make full use of during ?Makeover Mondays,? which includes lunch and fellowship.

?The women come in here from Sandgate Women's Shelter in the morning and they don't know what they are going to get,? said Ms.

Campbell, showing off the salon chairs and mirrors. They find out and they get so excited. They get their makeup, and then they all leave with a bag full of makeup and clothes for their kids. It's a great day and, for that day, they don't have to think about what they are going through.

But what they are going through is never far from Ms. Campbell's mind.

She is a survivor of abuse herself, a situation which she says left her feeling so down and abandoned that she sought help after becoming suicidal. She says she is heartened every day that something good came out of her own experiences.

"I know where these women are, I know where they are in their thinking and their soul and just to see them, even for a day, get out of that situation," said Ms. Campbell, pausing to collect herself, "then to know that after they get out into their own place, we can help them again and it is ongoing. I started this in the basement of my house 25 years ago, never expecting it to grow, but the need is huge. The number of women we've helped over the years is close to 100,000.

"Unless we get space, thousands of women and children are not going to get helped with the essentials they really need."

For more information on Abuse Hurts, the agencies that refer individuals to their services, and for any leads on potential space, visit www.abusehurts.ca or call 905-727-4357 (HELP).