

Break the Silence, Walk in My Shoes shines light on harsh reality of gender-based violence

If Yellow Brick House was able to open up a third shelter for women and children fleeing domestic and gender-based violence tomorrow, it would be overflowing from the outset, leaving many to look elsewhere to find a safe space for the night.

While a third shelter might still be out of reach for Yellow Brick House, every available bed helps, and your efforts this fall can help support spaces as the organization gears up for their annual Break the Silence, Walk in My Shoes fundraiser.

Set for Sunday, November 3, at Aurora's St. Andrew's College, this year's event aims to raise funds for the 16 shelter beds under their umbrella that do not receive Provincial support. Participants are invited to register for the walk, which has a number of routes through the school's scenic campus, all the while collecting pledges to help support the goal.

It's also a chance to raise much-needed awareness of the stark realities of domestic and gender-based violence both close to home and across the country.

'The basic principle is to raise awareness of the issue of domestic violence and to offer support to Yellow Brick House (YBH) to fund unfunded shelter beds,' says YBH Executive Director Lorris Herenda. 'Out of the 41 beds Yellow Brick House offers through two emergency shelters, only 25 beds are funded. We need to raise funds for 16 unfunded shelter beds at a cost of approximately \$50,000 a year per shelter bed.'

'Last year, we started [the event] with a very symbolic practice where we tie purple ribbons to a pole in memory of the women and children we lost this past year. Last year, that meant 67 ribbons were tied for the lost lives in Ontario. This year, our numbers are still very high. At the end of August, we were at 49 women and children, but we also know there were several deaths in the month of September and, unfortunately, already in October. It's important as we break the silence to remember all the lives lost because domestic violence is still prevalent.'

It takes a while to see a shift in these statistics, and sometimes it takes a generational shift, but Herenda says the pandemic created a backlog on access to community services which is still being addressed, particularly a rise in calls to YBH's community counselling and support services.

'We are trying to address the wait list because we're encouraging women and children who are living in violent situations to reach out and get support,' she says. 'At the same time, we're recognizing that we may not have the capacity to address that immediately. We're trying to be innovative and come up with short-term interventions to stabilize the family while they are on the waitlist to get longer-term counselling support.'

Also exacerbating the challenge is the affordability crisis.

'Food insecurity and the whole affordability crisis has absolutely 100 per cent impact on the women and children we serve. When a woman leaves a violent home with her children, she is not only faced with the uncertainty of what her future is going to hold in terms of housing and lack of affordable housing, but also how she is going to feed her children,' says Herenda. 'The financial supports, if she doesn't have a job, results in struggles. Access to food banks has been reduced in terms of available food. We often get calls from women who are really trying to establish themselves in the community to lead violence-free lives, saying basically, 'I don't have enough money to feed my children, to afford the food prices, or utilities, or skyrocketing rent.' In addition to dealing with the trauma of intimate partner violence, they are now dealing also with uncertainty of surviving.'

'For some women that may translate into having to return to their abuser because there is no other solution for the current time being, until the economy stabilizes. Definitely we are hearing a lot of the concerns from the families we serve about the struggles they are dealing with and trying to balance stabilizing their mental health, stabilizing the trauma from the violence and abuse they

are experiencing, while at the same time trying to balance being able to afford groceries for themselves and their children. It's a crisis situation, I believe, currently that we are experiencing in Ontario and we don't have any solution for it. We rely on our community a great deal to help us support the families we serve through donations of gift cards for grocery stores or food itself that we have our volunteers prepare food packages and transitional food packages for the clients who are leaving our shelters and moving independently, but it is a challenge.?

To step up and be a part of the solution, more information, including registration and how to pledge, can be found at yellowbrickhouse-2024walk.raiselysite.com.

The November 3 event will be hosted by students and teachers at both St. Andrew's College and St. Anne's School.

?It's great to see young people taking on leadership roles and emceeding the event ? really driving it forward in their community and beyond,? says Herenda. ?It's really empowering [for] the young girls at St. Anne's to see their colleagues, the boys, really be on the same page to change the future of domestic violence, to change the stats. We need boys' voices, we need men's voices on this particular issue because it is perpetuated by men against women and we need to start changing that societal pathway of thinking. Messaging is the same: gender-based violence is not acceptable for our younger generation, it is not acceptable for any age group, but to have them really driving this forward is enlightening to many of our elected officials and it has been an eye-opening experience.?

By Brock Weir