

Shelter from the storms

Ernestine's offers refuge from abuse

New facility brings services together

Leslie Ferenc, The Toronto Star
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He was only 9 when the police came to the door to rescue him, his mother, sisters and brother, but that day is forever burned into Jordan's memory.

It was a rainy Saturday morning, and there had been a bitter argument between his mother and stepfather – one of many. The anger erupted into violence and, before anyone could stop it, his mother had been beaten. The pain she suffered left emotional scars on everyone.

But the helping hand he and his family received at Ernestine's emergency shelter for abused women and their children will also never be forgotten, said Jordan, now 24. Though they were homeless and penniless, with nothing more than the clothes on their backs, he could sense that they were out of harm's way the minute they walked through the door.

"At first, I didn't really know where we were," he said, adding that the family had only been in Canada for six months when their world caved in.

The kindness shown his family by Sharlene Tygesen and other staff members in the four months they were at the shelter made all the difference. And, if not for the safe haven, they would have been on the streets.

Ernestine's Women's Shelter also opened up a whole new world for them. "Staff were so nice and they took us on outings to places I had never been before, like a movie theatre and mall," Jordan said. "They even took us to the beach."

He'll be forever grateful for the little things Ernestine's staff did to make the shelter feel like a real home. Aware that Jordan was curious about everything electrical, Tygesen, now the community and staff relations director, scouted out old stereos and VCRs for him to tinker with. He spent many happy hours with wires and screwdrivers, and it spun off into a career in the music production business.

"I have happy memories of being at the shelter," he said. "It was better than living in a violent situation." And, after all these years, he's still connected to Ernestine's, as a volunteer. It's his way of saying thank you for the gifts that were bestowed on his struggling family.

"When I was there, they connected with me," he said. "Being at Ernestine's also helped my mom get back on her feet."

The first couple of years after leaving the shelter were rough, Jordan recalled, but his mother was determined to make a better life for her children.

For Jordan, the most important gift was what he learned at Ernestine's. "it's respect for women," he said quietly.

A United Way of Greater Toronto agency, Ernestine's is a haven for the physically and emotionally battered. Opened in August 1983, the North Etobicoke shelter was named after Ernestine Van Marle, a social justice advocate and former executive director of Rexdale Community Information and Legal Services. She died this past June.

Over the past 23 years, more than 3,000 women and children have sought shelter at received counselling, support and referrals, said Tygesen. A new 15,000-square-foot, 32-bed, accessible shelter is to open soon, bringing all of Ernestine's program under one roof.