

At Ernestine's, courage grows to rebuild lives

Women and children driven from home by abuse find safety, support and new reasons for hope

Nancy J. White, The Toronto Star

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Inside Ernestine's shelter, a young mother has begun to sing. Supper dishes are cleared, a television sounds from another room. But in the spacious dining area, the mother with the beautiful voice belts out the hip-hop number, "No More Drama."

Snapping her fingers, she sings about a broken heart, a lesson learned, and the riveting refrain: "No more pain."

It could be the soundtrack of her own story. Her partner held a gun to her head. When he was distracted, she grabbed her child and fled down the fire escape. At the bus station, they boarded the first one leaving town.

There had been other incidents, promises to change. "Pfft," she says. "He only got worse."

This time, she's got plans. She'll study sociology at university. This time is different. No more pain.

That song could be Ernestine's anthem, a pledge to be rid of mind games, nightly tears, drama. If only life were that simple.

On this spring evening, 15 women with 16 children live at Ernestine's. They share one bond: escaping violence. They stay here usually three to six months, sometimes a year, as they create new lives – not a home exactly, but a sanctuary. The reporter spends just one night, hearing the stories, struck by the humanity amid the mayhem, the singular mix of fear and relief.

For shelters, this is state-of-the-art. Ernestine's bright and airy new building, which opened in January, was designed as a shelter and offers more amenities than most. The previous building squeezed four women into a bedroom. Here, every family has its own room.

There are two computer rooms and television lounges, rooms for exercise, prayer and children's play, a kitchenette and a large kitchen where a weeknight cook makes dinner. Despite the niceties, it's still an institution: locked doors, sign-in-and-out sheets, security cameras, rules, assigned chores, bare linoleum floors. The women visit job counsellors, enrol in school and wait: for housing, immigration papers, court dates.

For many, no one – not friends or family – knows where they are.

"They're people in limbo," says Lisa Aldworth, Ernestine's housing counsellor. "What that means to someone's mental health is a real challenge."

Out on the deck, to the sound of cars whizzing by, an Iranian widow cradles another woman's infant as if, she says, he were her own. Once a successful businesswoman, she lost everything to a sweet-talking con man who physically abused her and threatened to kill her.

At a patio table, a woman in her 50s sips tea, a bag over her shoulder containing her intravenous chemotherapy drugs. During cancer tests, a doctor inquired about her black eye – and the truth about her home life spilled out.

Next to her sits a woman who fled war in Africa to end up in Canada with an abusive man who locked her and her children in the house.

"I'm scared at all times," she says, dabbing her eyes with her lowered headscarf. When she speaks about relatives still in Africa, she pulls up the headscarf to hide her face.

But her children are happy at Ernestine's. "Everyone here, we are in the same situation," she says, her smile returning. "They are all my kids, all my friends, all my sisters."

Some struggle with guilt. One woman calls her husband at night so their child can talk to him. Some may return home. Staff say, on average, a woman leaves an abuser eight to 10 times before going for good. "Nobody here judges," says program director Carol Latchford.

In the computer room, two young mothers turn up the music and dance. At first, one says, she cried every day. She thought about going back. But, slowly, a vision of herself emerged. She's now finishing high school. "I'm taking a step for myself. I want to become an immigration officer," she says proudly. "I can picture a bright future now. I couldn't do that before."

Adds her friend: "You can almost touch it." Somewhere in the house, a baby cries.

The living room is all pale-mint, walls and couches. It's a private place to talk. Perched on a narrow sofa, a 30-year-old woman has been running from her ex for four years.

He raped and beat her, nearly strangled her when she was pregnant. For a while, he forced her into prostitution. He almost found her this winter, but a friend's text message alerted her. She skipped town.

She glances out at her child playing. She worries about his disruptive behaviour in school. He'll see a counsellor soon.

As she talks, kids wander in to hug her. "I bond with the children. The parents come after."

The smell of hot pizza wafts through. In the dining area, two young teenagers eat and talk about movies. Two women raid the kitchen for popcorn, then watch television. "CSI is too scary," one argues.

A mother and son share a bedtime snack and heart-to-heart talk. He kisses her. The boy instructs the reporter: "Tell people this is a great place for kids. They have two game systems."

Upstairs, a weary mother of five opens her bedroom door to reveal a large room where three little girls are still hopping around. The little ones still cry for daddy. The older children miss their friends back home. At their new school, some kids saw where they live and called them "shelter rats."

"Many times, I think I should go back. It would be easier. The only problem would be the abuse," the woman says flatly.

It's almost midnight. A light is still on in the computer room. A woman explains, with a shy smile, she's talking to a man online.

A nice guy? "So far."

Named for community leader, shelter can house

Background: Founded by community activists in 1983 and named after community leader Ernestine Van Marle who supported and guided their efforts.

New building: Planning took six years; number of beds increased from 22 to 32.

Funding: The province, United Way, private donations.

Access: Ontario has 113 shelters serving women and children escaping violence. 96 are funded by the province. Thirteen of these are in the Toronto region. Seventeen shelters receive support from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada or The Aboriginal Health Wellness Strategy. Ernestine's new building is the most recent shelter to be built in the province.

Length of stay: Some shelters have a six-week guideline. In Toronto, clients tend to stay three to six months, even a year, owing primarily to the lack of subsidized housing (even though women escaping violence are on a priority list).

Backlog: "I hear regularly from shelters that they turn away one or two women and children for every one they take in, especially in urban areas," says Eileen Morrow, co-ordinator of the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses. "There's not enough affordable housing so the shelters can't move the women out."

Clientele: Women, some mothers, range in age from 16 to their 80s and come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Urban shelters have begun seeing more immigrant women and more women in their early 20s, some the daughters of abuse survivors. "On the positive side, they know we're here and aren't waiting until their 40s to come," says Morrow. "But to see the second generation shows just how entrenched the problem is."

In case of crisis: Call the Assaulted Women's Hotline, 416-863-0511 or 1-866-863-0511. Francophone line: 1-877-336-2433. From a cellphone: #SAFE (the free call will not be listed on a bill).

For more information: visit awhl.org or ernestines.ca.

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