



**Journeys to
Family Self-Sufficiency**

Journeys
to
Family Self-Sufficiency

A Publication of the
Burnside Gorge Community Association

Copyright © 2005

Reproduction of this publication, in whole or in part, is prohibited without permission
from the Burnside Gorge Community Association

Acknowledgements

Participants of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program gratefully acknowledge the following people and organizations for their support and wisdom:

Colleen Kasting	for her vision of the program and her continued dedication
Burnside Gorge Community Association	for supporting Colleen's vision.
Linda and her staff	who made the program all it is
Steering Committee	who offered the staff advice and supports and who promoted the program, each in his/her own way
Funders	for their willingness to trust that this unique program would bring participant success
BC Housing Management Commission	
Coast Capital Savings	
Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance	
Pacifica Housing Advisory Commission	
Steve Nash Foundation	
VanCity Community Foundation	
VanCity Savings and Credit Union	
Vancouver Foundation	

Thank you to the following people who have made this publication possible:

Karen Coleman	a participant who decided that the stories were important to tell and so took on the major task of coordinating this booklet
Alisa Shebib	a participant who graciously agreed to design the cover
Cody Graham, Media One	"friend" of FSS who did the final layout
Participants	who took a leap of faith and shared their stories.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
History of the Family Self-Sufficiency Pilot.....	3
Where We Are Now.....	4
What is the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program?.....	5
LIFE 101.....	7
Encouragement.....	8
Community.....	10
A Profile of Inspiration.....	12
New Beginnings.....	14
A Home for My Family.....	17
Becoming Self-Sufficient.....	18
What is Wisdom?.....	20
Participating in Change.....	22
Hope Renewed.....	24
A Journey of Many Blessings.....	27
Courage Found.....	28
Moving Forward.....	30
A Profile of Success.....	32
Freedom.....	34
Empowered.....	35

Introduction

As a participant of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program, I have had the privilege of seeing lives change before my eyes. With the support of their family advisors, participants set goals for themselves and are turning their dreams into reality. It's amazing when I think back to the beginning:

Like many others, I was apprehensive to begin with as the program seemed "too good to be true". Although it was voluntary, I found it difficult to trust everything I was hearing, especially the part where we could earn matched savings. After all was said and done, it was this that caught my attention but soon became secondary to all that the program offered.

Our advisors worked with us to define our goals and to plan the steps needed to achieve them. With each step achieved came increased confidence and improved self-esteem. People began to believe in their ability to overcome challenges. They learned what community resources and supports were available and how to advocate for themselves. Our advisors encouraged us to reach further, and the farther we reached the more lives we touched. Through sharing our learning with our family and friends, they too, have gone on to improve their financial situations by budgeting, finding work or enhancing their existing employment. Community organizations have also benefited as volunteerism has increased. The spiral continues in an upward motion.

During the final year of the pilot, I had the opportunity to sit on the FSS steering committee and to attend an asset-building conference in Vancouver. These opportunities enabled me to view the project from another perspective as I listened to feedback from funders and government agencies. As I listened, I was disturbed by the lack of connection between the life changes that were taking place and the statistics that were being analyzed. It seemed that, without the stories, the

statistics were incomplete. My frustration became my inspiration. It is my hope that this book of our journeys through FSS will help paint a picture of many of the transformations that have taken place; reflect changes that have not been recorded in the statistics but will continue to ripple throughout time.

Karen Coleman
FSS Participant
2002-2005

History of the Family Self-Sufficiency Pilot

The Family Self-Sufficiency pilot was based on a Family Self-Sufficiency program model in the United States. Jill Savage of Pacifica Housing was intrigued with the model because it supported families living in subsidized housing, helped them become financially self-sufficient. In fact, many purchased their own housing because of the program. Jill wondered if this program could work in Victoria, especially with the high price of housing. She decided to look into the program further. She discovered that there were over 1400 FSS programs throughout the US. Some of the programs worked well and some did not. So she wondered, what would a “Made-in-Canada” Family Self-Sufficiency model look like? BC Housing granted the funding needed to answer that question through a research and feasibility study.

This study was carried out with the help of a local advisory committee. This committee read the research and asked lots of questions. Out of this work came the nucleus for our Family Self-Sufficiency pilot program. A number of funders decided to take the risk and fund this program: BC Housing, Ministry of Human Resources Policy and Research Branch, Vancouver Foundation, VanCity Community Foundation, and Coast Community Foundation. Other funding and supports were located as programming needs emerged.

Where We Are Now

Now, three years later, the first group of participants are graduating. Each participant will follow her/his dreams into the future. These dreams have always been there, but just not attainable. By working hard to reach their goals and by building a savings account, each participant started to see their dreams unfold.

We learned a lot throughout the pilot. Staff learned from participants and participants learned from staff. Not only did participants take responsibility for their personal successes, but also for the program success. Together, we created a strong program. In fact, because of this work, the pilot has now expanded to Phase II.

Thirty-one participants stayed with the program. They accomplished their goals and laid out a healthy path for their future and the future of their families. In some cases, participants saved thousands of dollars.

Many had great personal challenges, yet still they persevered. The stories in this booklet speak for themselves. They are powerful and full of hope. I am proud to have been a part of this pilot to know such wonderful people.

Colleen Kasting
FSS Program manager

What is the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program?

FSS is a program for families who live in subsidized housing and who are either unemployed or underemployed. The goals of the program are to:

- Decrease participants' reliance on all forms of government subsidies.
- Increase participants' self reliance
- Increase participants' financial capacity
- Enhance participants' capacity to make positive lifestyle choices
- In the long run, break down generational patterns of heavy reliance on the state for financial support.

What we hope for from the participants by the end the program:

- Increase their employability either in wages, training and education, or removing barriers to successful employment.
- Help participants to plan to move from subsidized housing to other forms of housing, if they so choose
- Help them to develop realistic goals for their own lives and help them achieve those goals
- Recognize the benefits of community building and support other participants as they, too, work towards self-sufficiency

The key elements in the program include:

- Working with a family advisor to develop personal goals and plans to reach those goals.
- Keeping the voluntary nature of the program. Participants are selected because of their personal motivation to make changes in their lives.
- Relying on the support of a local Steering Committee to ensure that we remain community based.
- Monthly meetings.
- Financial training including possibility of earning financial incentives. The IDA (Individual Development Account) is a matched savings program. The escrow is savings built on increased earnings. The difference between one's original rent and any increased rent due to higher earnings will be returned to the participant if they meet the terms of their FSS contract.

LIFE 101

In my mind, I've lived a thousand lives
Each one a prelude to the calling of the next.

I am not connected as one to the sacred sea,
But as one who rides through promising prairie skies.

I am not one who pivots against the human plight,
But one who reaches for words
That stretch in endless flight.

I am not one who waits for the dawning of a perfect day,
But one who chases ebbs and tides,
And stows them in the seashore of my mind.

I am a child, anonymously, moving towards the light
Aware of the shadow that stumbles
Behind my humble sight.

I quicken the pace, I run, but don't stop
For I have other lives to live and other dreams to chase
In the travels of my mind.

Arlene Gonczy
copyright 2005
Victoria, BC

Encouragement

At the time I entered the Family Self Sufficiency Program, I was working irregular shifts in a restaurant. I was getting very little work but I had been turned down by welfare because they said that I was making just over their limits. I heard about the Program when I received a letter from Pacifica Housing. I talked to my boss at the restaurant about the Program and he said that he did not think the Program would be very good for me. I thought the Program would be great for me, so I went to meet Linda.

Linda and Colleen have been there for me from day one. They offered a lot of coaching and support. Linda has been my sounding board. Whenever I had a problem, Linda was always there to listen to me and offer advice. She has always been able to say things to me that supported my decisions and she helped me to see that I make good decisions. Linda encouraged me to apply for work at a Victoria five-star hotel and I was hired on in the Laundry. When I had to leave work unexpectedly to care for my sick mother out of the country, I thought I would be fired. Linda and Colleen wrote a letter on my behalf to the hotel and the Manager re-hired me.

Linda also encouraged me to look for permanent employment. I eventually applied to the Marriot Hotel and they asked me for an interview. I was so scared to go to the interview and afraid of disappointing my current Manager, that I rescheduled the appointment four times before I finally went. They offered me a better job with more hours and better wages. I moved to the Marriot Hotel and I am now supervising the Laundry Department.

I learned how to speak directly to people about issues that come up at work. I am learning how to be a good supervisor and realize how important it is to listen to staff.

The Individual Development Account (IDA) has also been so helpful to me. Initially, I didn't think it was a lot of money to save, but when the community contributions are added, the money adds up. I didn't know anything about budgeting when I started the Program because my husband had previously controlled our finances. I have learned that I can manage money and look after myself now. My goal is to use that money toward buying a home for my children and myself.

I have been able to network with so many people through the Family Self Sufficiency Program. Everybody has been very supportive. I am making connections in the community and recently volunteered to make spring rolls for a children's fundraiser at the Hotel. Everybody loved my cooking and now I am thinking about starting a sideline Catering business sometime in the future. Before the Program, I was always worried about the future, now I'm excited about my future. I'm happy and my children are happy.

Fei

Community

Almost ten years ago, while pregnant with my daughter, I moved from Montreal to Victoria to learn English. During my pregnancy, I moved three times trying to find a suitable and affordable place for us to live. The final move was 2 days after she was born. As it turned out, my daughter was born with a severe heart condition and would need my constant attention.

I had taken courses at CDI, but could no longer continue the program because I couldn't afford my loan payments or tuition. I ended up on welfare, and slumped into depression. I moved into subsidized-housing, which helped, but ended up injuring my back in an attempt to save money cleaning the carpets. Coupled with my depression, I was not in good shape. Then, when she was 6, my daughter underwent major heart surgery. I was having trouble balancing everything that was coming at me.

Around this same time, I received a letter inviting me to the FSS program. I didn't know what to do, but 6 months later, in September, I started the program. With the help of the FSS staff, I learned how to set small goals that would help me achieve my big goals. It helped make life less overwhelming. I made a list of 100 things that I would like to do in my life, and then narrowed it down to the three most important goals for the duration of the program.

I decided that my first and foremost goal was to work on my health. I set goals to save money for physio for my back and to properly balance the medication I was taking for my depression. I now feel that I've got that under control. I also ride my bike and try to get exercise regularly. I eat better, and make sure to spend lots of time outdoors. Through Scout camp this summer I discovered how much I love the outdoors; I feel so much better in the fresh air.

My second goal was to volunteer in the community to get work experience that would help me feel more self-assured. I volunteer at my daughter's school (a French school), I helped with computer aspects of the FSS newsletter. And most recently I helped at a French Scout camp, which I loved. Between Scout camp and my daughter's school, I met many other French parents, which has enabled me to gain a better sense of community.

For my third goal, and for my 40th birthday, I would like to hike the West Coast trail. I'm still working towards that one, and have a little ways to go strengthening my back, but I will do it. Before the FSS program I was stuck, now I realize that I know more than I gave myself credit for.

Brigitte

A Profile of Inspiration

This participant is a single parent with one child and had lived in subsidized housing for 1 year prior to entering the FSS Program. She was on EI and was working on an employment plan. She indicated that what initially attracted her to the FSS Program in January 2003 was the incentive of making money and saving it.

Her initial goals were:

- To be self-employed (full or part-time)
- To have her son get balanced in his physical and emotional health.
- To get a driver's license
- To put some roots down.

Since coming into the FSS Program, she has completed a month long business development course and secured funding for a year while she established her business. She became part of a small group of participants that were mentored by successful businesswomen in Victoria, and says that the help she received from her business mentor has been invaluable. She indicates that she felt inspired and empowered to do things she had never done before. As well as currently running her own business, this participant is employed, and is writing a book.

As this participant had moved around a lot for most of her life, she says that owning her own home is important to her. She has found a mentor who is willing to assist her with coming up with the down payment to purchase her own home. She indicates that knowing that she has her IDA money in the bank and that it is growing has helped her to feel confident that the dream of home ownership can become a reality.

Although she says that she still struggles with money issues, she feels that she approaches things very differently. In her own words – “My life has changed 100% and I am planting seeds all over the place. It’s an amazing, empowering feeling, doing what you love and getting paid for it”.

From this program, I was able to get out of a toxic work situation because I felt that I didn’t have to be a victim anymore. I feel I can rely on the resources of the program and this gives me more courage.

**FSS Participant
August 2003**

I can trace everything I have achieved this year back to the Family Self-Sufficiency Program. I feel like my life is just starting. I was going around and circles before and now I’m going ahead. Today I can talk about what I do with confidence and pride.

FSS Participant

New Beginnings

The month of November 2002
A time in my life, wondering what do I do?
A letter arrived beckoning my eyes to see
A new program starting, was it for me?

Six years before, I was doing quite fine.
Our family of four was soon to be five.
We lived in a house that one day we'd own
Life almost seemed perfect, If only I'd known

I woke up one morning, to my surprise,
Life appeared hazy through both my eyes,
Off to the ophthalmologist, I went
Countless tests later, a virus they said.

Not able to read, nor able to drive,
My children a blur, debt starting to rise,
My dreams crashing down and put on a shelf,
Depression set in, I hated myself

My world closing in, I felt all alone,
I left the mainland, returning to home,
With security of family and friends.
I found the strength to start again.

Life was not easy and didn't seem fair,
My children depended on me for their care.
A one-bedroom cottage, one year we did stay
Little food, little money, living life day-to-day

I applied for housing, it didn't take long
We moved into town, I hoped we'd belong
But fear and doubt kept me locked inside
I'd only found another place to hide.

I return to the start, where the letter arrived
A beginning beyond the will to survive
I stepped out of my box, took a huge leap
Waking myself from a lethargic sleep.

With the support that I did receive
From my advisor, I began to believe
Anything is possible, you just have to try
It's okay to want more than just to get by.

I wrote out my goals: employment was one;
Releasing anxiety; support for my son.
I never imagined all I would do
Beyond these three goals by the time I was through.

I work part-time, volunteer for the rest,
My skills have increased, communication addressed,
My contact list, over two pages long,
Is a gentle reminder that now I belong

Learning to budget, putting money away,
My debt is gone, credit rating okay.
Gone are the days of just getting by,
On myself, I now can rely.

The road was not straight, it would rise and then fall
Roadblocks were many, I often felt small
As I pondered on the steps I would take
My resolve to succeed, these would not break.

No longer alone, and facing my fears
I now look forward to future years
Building upon all my success
Thank you for thisFSS

Karen Coleman



“The program has improved our quality of life immensely”

~ Zoe



“I just felt stuck before, now I’m going forward”

~ Alisa



A Home for My Family ...

I would like to start by thanking Burnside Gorge Community Association and the staff of the Family Self Sufficiency Pilot for the wonderful opportunity and experience I have had over the past 2 years. When I look back to where I was when the program started, it's hard to believe how far I have come.

These last 2 years in the Family Self Sufficiency Pilot have been an incredible life changing experience and I am so grateful to have been a part of it. As I reflect over the course of the program, I feel like I have truly been transformed into a different person. When I first started the program I was struggling with depression and anxiety. We were not managing very well financially and I felt that our future was pretty bleak.

The program helped me to see that I am entitled to feel good and that there was help out there for me to overcome the obstacles that put me in a rut. It gave me the tools to help me change my future. I became motivated to seek help for my depression, was able to overcome some of my anxiety and gained the confidence I needed to negotiate a pay raise and increase my hours of work. My wife and I have re-established our relationship and are enjoying our life again. I can now see a light at the end of the tunnel.

My wife and I have negotiated a mortgage with VanCity Savings and hope to purchase a mobile home in the near future. Buying a home was just a distant dream such a short time ago, but here I am. As the Pilot comes to an end, I am now in a position to buy a home for my family, which is something I thought would never happen for us.

Thank you again for this once in a lifetime opportunity.

Dave

Becoming Self-Sufficient

When I was asked to submit a written piece about the Family Self Sufficiency Program (FSS) I was not sure I would. After I spent some time reflecting on the past two years, I felt I would enjoy doing so. First, I would like to acknowledge the Coast Salish, Songhees People whose land we live, work and play on.

During my time in the program I watched a number of people change, including myself. The changes were unique as the program gave room to grow. This was unlike any other program developed for families or individuals seeking to change their sociological or financial status. Many programs that offer parental, job or life skills, even with educational components, usually run about six to twenty weeks claiming to provide better opportunities. This is unrealistic to achieve as it takes multiple years to raise a family and learn how to work in a community collectively.

The FSS Program did not set unrealistic expectations. It was a pilot program and the efforts and successes were born through a collective by all participants, from various levels of income, education and experiences and the programs amazing staff. The common thread was living in subsidized housing. We all were given the chance to learn at our own pace and needed skill development as well as individual goals, which were important to each participant and their respective family for the duration of two years. The length of the program (two years) allowed room for change. As mentioned earlier, crisis happens in life through poverty, illness (physical, mental, other) over many years so why would those serving the needs of the low-income families expect changes to happen within a few weeks?

I recommend and challenge those agencies/ministries serving the needs of families who come under poverty or crisis to wake up and pay attention to this pilot program as it works through collaboration and time. I have witnessed some who have become more outspoken, healthier, employed, educated, debt free, and **self-sufficient**. Our society expects change in a matter of weeks although crisis and poverty take multiple years to happen.

I myself will continue to grow and I will be back as a part of the next phase. I am not yet **self-sufficient**. As I am a First Nation's Cree woman living below the poverty line having survived long term, generational affects of colonization, residential schools, and the "Indian Act" (still in effect). I would like a little more time to turn it all around for the next seven generations, as it has taken many generations/years of imposing governmental policies and laws to create such crisis with the Aboriginal People of Canada. Thank you participants, Van City, Trudy (Taming the Financial Dragon), staff of the FSS Program, the financial donors and dignitaries who made this program possible, respectively.

Crystal

What is Wisdom?

What comes to mind when you call a woman wise - she speaks with faith and clarity, she is perceptive and kind; she reminds you to trust and to believe in your words. This is wisdom. A wise woman once told me that you must know what you are asking for and be ready to receive it when it comes. She found the places that I kept most hidden and taught me to be proud of my faults. I have welcomed change all my life; it is the stability that I didn't trust. I am ready to plant roots and become my own, thanks to her.

Just because I had a belief of how a family should look does not mean that mine is insufficient, I can create a whole and loving environment complete with all of our families needs. We are not a traditional family but we are complete. It took me a long time to stop feeling incompetent. I remember leaving the hospital with my son thinking 'how can they trust me with this child, I know I will break him'. They should provide courses before they let you take such a precious thing home.

Time builds, you both grow and life becomes hectic. Every time I was in hardship I blamed my ex. Many nights I didn't sleep worrying about my son, rocking him back and forth wishing I had help, building resentment. I knew the doctors at the clinic by first name. I mourned my alternative life and isolated myself so far as to move to Quebec. I felt that I must do this on my own. I would not ask for help, for it would mean I had failed and my walls would come crashing down.

I ended up on welfare, unable to speak the language. I turned to the community center and started to take lessons in French. I met a single mom of teenagers there who became a parental figure to me, I admired her mothering, she was casual and fun loving. She truly educated herself about being a parent and constantly clipped articles for me to read about my son's conditions. She taught me a lot about parenting and that I was

wasting time fighting the past. She was a student of life and taught her children to have a passion for learning. I thought if I were half the mother she was I would do all right.

Quebec never felt like home. Man, the move was hard and I fell back into my old ways of not reaching out. I was having trouble breathing; with my son in my arms I rushed down to the clinic only to learn that I was suffering from panic attacks. They were getting worse; sometimes I couldn't bring myself to leave the house. I sat in my little eggshell until my sister gave me a pamphlet on a program called discovery (a six week intensive counseling workshop) where I met the second wise woman.

Before then I was not sure how I felt, just going through the motions. I think I cried the whole six weeks and everyday I felt lighter. The walls did come crashing down. I started teaching art classes and going on play dates. Shortly after that I started in the FSS program, where I learned information and skills I should have known since adolescence. My mentor provided empowering lessons and generous advice. I no longer felt stuck. I had a plan. I remember one day playing at the park in the grass with my son and it dawning on me that I was happy and felt every part of it! Finally I had faith that everything works out. It may not be how you planned it, but it is always perfect and divine. I believe that I AM a casual and fun-loving mother. I am a skilled employee, business owner and a good friend. And it is all because I have surrounded myself with three of the wisest women - they are my teachers.

Alisa Shebib

Participating in Change

This participant was attracted to the Program by the idea of having support, of becoming self-sufficient, and of starting a financial savings plan. She was a single parent with three children, on a disability pension, and had lived in subsidized housing for five years. She said that she experienced high anxiety much of the time and that her youngest child had serious behaviour and health issues.

Her initial goals were:

- To become employed on a full-time basis
- To deal with her social anxiety and to improve her communication
- To establish better household and childcare management.

She felt she was an organized person, but that she needed to “get it all sorted out.” She found that as she started to work with the FSS Program, she needed to “work backwards” from her first goal. It became clear to her that working full-time was not a realistic goal. She decided that seeking more volunteer work opportunities would help her with her goal of dealing with her social anxiety and developing better communication skills, as well as helping her to figure out her aptitudes and skills, and assess her ability to physically cope with the demands.

This participant has successfully faced her anxiety issues and is contributing to her community through her volunteer activities. She has added some new goals to her amended goal list. They include moving ahead with her divorce and starting to date again. She says “my will keeps me strong – I like doing things for myself. My biggest challenge was asking for help.” The best part of the FSS Program for her has been the support she received from the staff, and the referrals to community services for support and services.

Family Self-Sufficiency refers to the knowledge, skills, and personal and collective power necessary to meet the needs of one's family and to function interdependently within one's community, with economic self-sufficiency as one of the several desirable outcomes.

**Victoria Advisory Committee
August 2001**

Once I had decided on the goals I wanted in the Family Self-Sufficiency Program & started working on a plan that would help me gradually work toward reaching my goals, I talked to my children about it. They asked me to help them write down a plan that they could do. We had so much fun doing it. So far it seems to work very well. They say that they like doing chores now because they helped decide what they could do and how they were going to do them. They are having fun!

**FSS Participant
April 2003**

Hope Renewed

The other day I came across the original information package about the Family Self-Sufficiency Project I'd received in the summer of 2002. I remember how excited I felt when I read about being invited to join the pilot and was scared that I may not qualify. I phoned right away, hoping to be included in the group. I learned of the information night in November and attended, determined to learn about all that the project offered to participants.

A single parent of two teenagers trying to distance myself from a disturbed ex-husband, I tended to remain isolated from my new community at Pacifica Housing. I felt so lucky to finally move my family to a decent townhouse in 1998, having worked so hard to improve our lot over the years. I had achieved full employment, but money could still be tight. My kids were in school, not working or contributing yet to the family finances. So when I learned I could save money in escrow and IDA accounts, I was very interested.

I was hungry for social contact outside of work and family and the chance to meet with other people and family advisers might help to fill that void. It's been almost three years since that time and I've attended as many meetings as I could, probably worn out my welcome in Linda's office, completed the IDA savings and am building savings in an escrow fund.

My children are almost grown up, now working and attending college. The money saved through the program will help me get established when my children move out. It will also help my children continue their education. I found the meetings and financial lessons very helpful. Best of all, meeting with Linda, my family adviser, helped clarify important goals and boundaries in my hectic life.

I feel so much gratitude for the project and hope for my family's future. I enjoyed meeting with all the other participants, rejoicing at their achievements and sympathizing with their trials. I wish everybody the best for their futures, especially for Linda and Colleen with the next phase of the project.

Jeri

“The program has given me direction, support, confidence and encouragement”

“It made a huge difference because now I know what I want to do. It seems possible now...It’s pretty motivating.”

~ Anna Marie



“I didn’t realize how much was possible before this program”

“It’s all about you, about what you believe and what you can do. A program like this enables you to see those things.”

“Every small step is actually a huge step, because somebody else can look at that and say, “I can do that too”.

~ Nadeen Rasmussen

A Journey of Many Blessings

Joining the Family Self-Sufficiency Project has helped me to work on my goals and see them through. I now have a good job that I'm proud of and I am able to support my three children and myself. It's given me the opportunity to save money and get out of debt. I am happy and optimistic about the future.

I believe it takes unity to build strength, and direction to overcome obstacles. This is what I found in FSS. Believe in yourself and never give up. Life is a journey of many blessings.

Kelly

Courage Found

Even before the FSS program, I had a good life.
Or so I thought.
It was just part of the roller coaster ride.
There was the euphoria after leaving an oppressive
relationship.
The fear in leaving, then the glee of having unbounded
freedom.
When the shine wore off, I realized how unfocused I was.
Great that I wasn't under a tyrant's thumb, and what a
wonderful time the kids and I were having in our newfound
world; but where were we going?
More so, where was I?
No skills, no network, isolated, pressure coming from every
angle. I was getting scared again. There was no wizard or
yellow brick road.

My best friend sold me on the wonders of this great program -
the FSS and some IDA/Escrow stuff. Sounded like the answer
to my prayers...or maybe some CIA thing she wasn't telling
me about.
Wow, when I get into this, I'll have a full time job and full
benefits.....
I forgot one thing. I wasn't like everyone else.
No, I just didn't want to accept I wasn't like everyone else.
You see, if I did the 9 to 5, multi-tasked, juggled chores, and fit
in being a Mom before bed; I'd short circuit. You'd find some
frizzled burnt out wiring behind a couch.
I've battled depression and anxiety for almost 10 years. I also
suffer from stubbornness.
It's a very interesting combination especially when you throw
in a dose of humour.

I remember the first meeting with Linda. I knew she was my guardian angel. Just an amazing package of all the right stuff and a last name no one could spell. Perfect!

She was tuned into who we were. She was the centre of the safety net. It was almost like an intangible power was created. I felt like Superwoman.....No, Wonder woman (Nicer...tiara)

Now I'm finding myself taking on 'de woyle'.

My ex, MHR, the school board, the courts.

I wasn't afraid anymore. Weird things like self confidence and esteem evolved.

I was part of a network now that was powerful, even in its infancy.

The time has just flown by.

I'm afraid.....I mean..... I don't want to leave the nest.

I never would have saved up an IDA account, quit smoking, learned to breathe (Linda post-its), stuck to boundaries, reached goals, advocated, encouraged and influenced others, and worked to my full potential without the FSS program.

I believe my children gained the most through these changes.

What we do in life echoes in eternity.

Thank you Colleen, Linda and BGCA.

Lisa Fife

Moving Forward

In the fall of 2002, after studying music for several years and completing a Voice Teacher Training course at the Victoria Conservatory of Music, I wanted to start my own voice studio and begin teaching. However, I was lacking confidence, energy and sense of direction. That same fall I received two letters: one from the Ministry of Human Resources, and one from the Burnside Gorge Community Association, outlining the FSS pilot program and inviting me to join. Even though I was having a difficult time getting my studio going I wasn't very optimistic that this program would be helpful for my family or me. After struggling with a lack of direction and confidence for a couple of months, I decided I needed some help and made an appointment to see Linda of the FSS program. Thank God I did!

Even though I was pretty uncertain about the Program to begin with, I knew I needed some help setting goals. Linda assured me that the whole program was voluntary and that she would be working with me to help me set and reach my goals. I was pretty excited after I realized that Linda would basically be my life coach. I was also amazed at the individual development accounts and that an agency would actually match my contribution. I joined the Program.

With all the provincial government cutbacks from 2002 onward it seemed like everybody was saying "no" except for the Family Self-Sufficiency Program. Through Linda and the support available through the Program, people were saying, "yes" to my ideas and my goals. Linda's support through her kindness, empathy, gentleness and validation made it possible for me to give myself permission to take the time I needed for self care and to help me shift my perspective to realize different ways to reach my goals. As a result I've begun to deal with some pertinent personal and health issues.

Being a part of the Family Self Sufficiency Program has changed so many things in my life. I've become more confident because of my successes and I'm also more aware of the goodwill that is out there in the community. Knowing that there are people and agencies that have a heart for helping people has restored my faith in my community.

I've realized that my biggest inward growth and benefits happened when I was willing to be open and vulnerable enough to ask for help. Through Linda and my peers, I realized that I wasn't alone. I took a course in Early Childhood Music at Musicalia and have taught music in several Early Childhood Centres as well as private voice and theory lessons. Whether or not I continue in the next phase of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program, I know that I'll always take parts of the program with me and I know that I won't lose my momentum. I have faith in myself that I'll keep moving forward in a great direction.

Valerie

A Profile of Success

This participant is a single parent with two dependant children. She has lived in subsidized housing for one year. She was initially on Maternity Leave, and then applied for training through E.I. She says that she was in the middle of a postpartum depression, money was very “tight”, and she frequently obtained help from the Food Bank and the Salvation Army. She responded to the mail-out regarding the FSS Program, and she went to the first meeting.

Her initial goals upon entry into the FSS Program were

- To get out of subsidized housing
- To find full-time work
- To buy a home of her own.

In September 2003, she had moved out of subsidized housing and into her own home, which she had jointly purchased with her father. By June 2004, she was off all income assistance and was working full-time. She was diagnosed with a health condition that made it difficult for her to work full-time, requiring her to revise her second goal. In July of 2004 she found a half-time job with excellent benefits and a better salary than the full-time work.

This participant says that the things that helped her the most were the one-to-one meetings with the FSS Program staff, the childcare grants where helped relieve lots of her stress, and the financial benefits of saving money through IDA and Escrow. This participant strongly supports the continuance of the FSS Program so that other families can benefit from its services. She says that the FSS Program has been “inspiring”. “It gave me a push and helped me to reach all of my goals.”

My experience in the program has allowed me to take charge of my life in many other aspects that I would have attempted before. There is a real feeling of a support (safety) net that give me the strength to take on challenges.

**FSS Participant
July 2004**

I have left an unhealthy job, found a good part time job, I am spending quality time with my daughter and I am a full time student. None of these things seemed to be possible before. With the immeasurable support through the pilot and the contacts that I have acquired, I have become confident in my abilities and know that I can accomplish anything I set my mind to. The biggest positive is the fact that I have a voice and now I know how to use it.

**FSS Participant
June 2004**

Freedom

Before the FSS program, I never wanted to deal with people or have contact with them. I suffered from severe anxiety and would often have panic attacks. I hardly went outside my house; I was afraid of crowds, of taking the bus, and I never ventured further than a block away from home. At that time, I saw myself as a hermit.

For the first three months of the program, Linda visited me at a community centre a block away from my house. I had a really poor memory due to a bad car accident, so she always called first to remind me. We started by making small goals, to work on my health and to start volunteering at my local community centre, and then I set my own goals to practice getting out of the house. I was determined to get on a bus, so my next goal was to follow through with that.

Now, almost three years later, I ride the bus, I drive, and I can walk anywhere without anxiety. I volunteer and I also work part-time. I am really good at multi-tasking and at getting things done. Through the FSS program I also met Trudy, a wonderful role model and mentor. She offered financial literacy training, which has been a real benefit to me. My dream is to continue to focus on work that sustains me, and now I am confident that I will get there.

Kerry


Empowered

Approximately two years ago I arrived home one day to find a letter of invitation from the Family Self-Sufficiency Project. I knew that this project would change my life. At the time, I was a 24 year old single mother of two young daughters, then one and two. I had recently left an abusive relationship and was trying to get my life back on track. I never imagined myself being in the situation that I was in. I had never believed that I would be unable to provide for my children, that the food bank would be our provider of food. Never before had I faced the insurmountable hardship that I was currently facing.

I grew up in a good home, was university educated but I was suddenly faced with an immense sense of hopelessness brought about by my change in circumstances. By the time I entered the FSS program, I had returned to school to upgrade my skills. The project provided me with the tools I needed to change the situation I was in. Gradually I came to see that things could be different.

The program empowered me to change my life. I am now employed on a full-time basis with the University of Victoria - a job that I love. I have since purchased my own home. I have a new sense of the possible and of the value in seeking out and in participating in organizations that work for positive change in my own community. I will forever be grateful to Linda and the FSS project for believing in me.

Stephanie Collinson



“There are no words to say how happy and elated I am to have been working with this group”

~ Christine Cherneske



“It’s all about being connected to the community. It keeps people from becoming isolated.”

~ Emilie Rhone



Notes

