

Using food and discussion to overcome abuse



At the end of the Community Kitchen Program, women write their hopes and aspirations and add it to the "Tree of Hope."

"I knew I was unhappy, I knew something was wrong, but still, I was making myself believe it was normal, it was okay," said Sarah*, of the years she spent in an abusive relationship.

Sarah left her home and family in Sri Lanka to embark on a new life in the Malvern area when she agreed to an arranged marriage and joined her new husband here in 2002. Far from an ideal upbringing, Sarah grew up with constant ridicule, bullying, and verbal abuse from her entire family. Socialized to believe she should be submissive and obedient, a fresh start in a new country promised a better life.

However, soon after moving to Canada, Sarah found she had moved from one abusive situation to another; this one compounded by the fact she was entirely alone in a foreign place.

This story of abuse and isolation is just one of many heard within the walls of Women's Place, a women's-only space as an integral part of Malvern Family Resource Centre, that links women to community services in the Malvern area.

Manager Cathy Mwanza, five staff, and a team of trained volunteers have dedicated the past eleven years to create a safe, welcoming space, which encourages women to drop by to get information, use their computers, or simply chat over a cup of tea.

Sarah's first point of contact with Malvern Family Resource Centre occurred about six months after moving to Canada, when she started volunteering for the Early Years Centre.

"These were the first friends I've had in my entire life," said Sarah of her Early Years contacts. It was the first time she found people who

genuinely cared about her well-being and wanted to help. Finding comfort in people who cared, she slowly started to find her voice and opened up about her home life. As the gravity of the situation became apparent, her friends at Early Years encouraged her to take action and directed her to Women's Place.

Initially, Sarah just dropped by to chat. Partly, she was afraid of the repercussions and stigma associated with discussing her family outside of the home. Part of this fear is still apparent through her wish to use the alias "Sarah" to protect her family name. However, she also had convinced herself that what she was experiencing did not constitute abuse.

Abuse is not just physical. It can be emotional and psychological when it involves threats, taunting, or bullying. Abuse can be economic, when it involves excessive control of finances. Stalking and extreme control by constantly calling to check in or showing up unannounced at work or school is also considered abuse.

Sarah experienced all of these but still she was convinced it was normal.

"He tried to make me believe there was something wrong with me, and you know, I almost believed him," Sarah said of her then-husband.

After gentle prodding and convincing, she attended the Community Kitchen program, which endeavours to give abused women a safe place to receive information about abuse and share their stories, while cooking and enjoying a meal together in a relaxing environment.

"At first I was skeptical because I had a lot of pain in my heart. So for me to go and see the abused women was too much to handle. Even to talk about it was painful," she said.

However, she quickly found acceptance and solace in the other women. "The staff made it easy. There were games; slowly people

(Continued on page 3)