

ANITA'S STORY

"I know what it is like to have nothing."



I was born in Scarborough. My dad worked for Air Canada. I had a great family and lots of opportunity.

In fact, I went to University, and for some time studied at La Sorbonne in Paris. I studied diligently and worked as an au pair.

Ever since I was a teen there had been hints that not everything was okay.

When I was twenty-one I had my first major depression. I found myself in a psychiatric ward on my birthday. It was pretty dismal. It was also the start of an almost a twenty-five year -long pattern of mental health issues.

I have a diagnosis of a very severe type of bi-polar disorder with delusions. For many years I did not believe that I needed any help at all. I was a wife, a professional and a mother to two beautiful, young girls.

However, little by little I lost everything.

My marriage ended. We separated and I found it increasingly difficult to pay bills. I found work to be very stressful and hard. I lost my job. My parenting abilities suffered and the girls went to live with their Dad.

My poor mental health interfered with all of my relationships. I thought that my loved ones were receiving secret messages through transceivers in their ears. I was angry and irritated. I did not understand that I needed a medical intervention.

Over many months and years, I was institutionalized for my failing mental health, but it did not get better. Finally, I lost my apartment. My few remaining friends stopped communicating with me. I felt totally alone. Not sure what to do next, I lived in my car.

Living in a car during an Ottawa winter is a very tough thing to do.

Everyone deserves a safe place to sleep. Especially, people who are struggling just to keep their head above water.

I decided to go to an emergency shelter. That is when I found Cornerstone Housing for Women. I am really grateful that Cornerstone had a place for me. It

gave me a community. I was at Cornerstone for almost two years. I received the daily essentials I needed. I remember that I really liked a particular type of orange and ginger shampoo that was regularly donated from a local hotel. I considered it 'my scent'. I also had my favourite coffee mug. I still have it today.

I did not start to get better until I finally received the serious mental health intervention I badly needed. I was in hospital for seven months.

I did not choose to be homeless. It was not what I wanted. I know what it is like to have nothing. All of my possessions were kept in one black garbage bag.

It has been a long journey of recovery. There was so much wreckage. Having a safe, supportive home has helped me to find purpose in my life. My dignity was restored and I could heal.

Let me tell you about my life now.

Today, I am married and have a small apartment in a lovely neighbourhood.

Can I tell you something special? I had not seen my daughter in almost ten years but recently I attended her wedding. I see my other daughter regularly now. I volunteer and share my story with the hope that it will help others.

However, I did not get to this point alone. You know that expression, "it takes a village..."? It takes a loving community to help women recover from homelessness. We all need each other to chart a new path forward.

For instance, my friends and family recently got together and helped my new husband and I with the cost of airfare and accommodations in British Columbia. The trip allowed me to see my daughter get married, plus my husband and I were able to have a honey moon.

This Christmas, I will be welcomed by my husband's family, as well as my daughter. They are loving and kind and have helped me so much. It is my hope that I can pass on that love to others.

In this season of hope, I ask that you also consider giving to Cornerstone Housing for Women. All of us can make vulnerable women's lives better.

I wish you and your family a very merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

Warm wishes,

Anita