

Changing Paths



Changing Paths...

Literacy & Life Skills.

*A literacy & life skills program
for women in conflict with the law.*

Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton

Changing paths. A literacy and lifeskills program for women in conflict with the law.
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DEDICATED TO

Elizabeth Fry

**“When thee builds a prison,
thee had better build
with the thought ever in thy mind
that thee and thy children
may occupy the cells”**

Elizabeth Fry (1780 – 1845)

In a number of mysterious and life-affirming ways I believe that Elizabeth Fry has been with all of us who have journeyed together on the *Women’s Journeys in Self Discovery* project that led to the *Changing Paths* program. This now includes you - the reader. Welcome aboard!

Elizabeth Fry was a Quaker and a believer in the equality of women. She saw a “divine light” in every person. She worked to establish humane treatment for prisoners and their children; campaigned against slavery; established local societies to help the poor; and was considered by many to be a leading expert in prison reform. Elizabeth Fry was also the mother of eleven children.

In Britain during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, women convicted of crimes, ranging from prostitution to being absent from work without leave, were deported to the penal colonies in Australia. Elizabeth Fry was at the docks documenting the conditions of women and providing them with a bag of “useful things” for the voyage. Some of these “useful things” were pieces of fabric that women used to create quilts during

their voyage. On their arrival in Australia, the quilts were sold and the proceeds either used by the women or sent back to England to support the prison reform work of Elizabeth Fry and her committee. We are grateful to Elizabeth Fry for her vision and passion. Her work continues.

The first Canadian Elizabeth Fry Society was established in Vancouver in 1939. The Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton was initially formed as a project of the YWCA and was incorporated as an independent not-for-profit society in 1979. There are 22 member societies across Canada. The Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) was conceived in 1969 and incorporated as a voluntary non-profit organization in 1978.

Elizabeth’s Beauty, the quilt embellishing the cover and pages of this curriculum guide, was created by women who work at Earthly Goods, a quilting shop in Edmonton, Alberta. Raffle tickets were sold for the quilt during 2002 and proceeds donated to the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton. ■

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- Sara McEwan, Executive Director Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton
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- Unity Centre

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Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton
Changing Paths
Program Facilitator



History

– WOMEN'S JOURNEY IN SELF DISCOVERY

The journey began in 1996 when two literacy co-ordinators, Moira Kovaks and Judy Murphy, began to dream about creating a program especially designed for women who were in, or at risk of being, in conflict with the law. The uniqueness of the program focused on an integrated literacy and life skills approach to learning, with a commitment to participatory approaches to education from a feminist perspective.

The program became a reality in 1998 with funding from the National Literacy Secretariat, a partnership between the Edmonton John Howard Society, and the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton, and collaborative support from numerous community-based agencies and organizations.

Phase One, conducted in 1998-1999, consisted of research and the development of a conceptual framework to integrate literacy and life skills education for women who are, or are at risk of becoming, in conflict with the law.

Phase Two of the project was completed in 1999-2000. During this time the framework was tested through four program pilots referred to as *Women's Journeys in Self Discovery...Setting Direction for Lifelong Learning*. These pilots were held at two correctional institutions and two community locations in Edmonton.

The work of Phase Two is documented in the curriculum *Women's Journeys in Self Discovery – An Integrated Literacy and Life Skills Approach to Learning*, which is available from the Learning Centre.

Upon successful completion of Phase Two of the *Women's Journeys in Self Discovery* project in August 2000, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton made a commitment to build on the learnings, positive evaluation and momentum of the pilots in phase three. Elizabeth Fry's existing life skills program, *Changing Paths*, was extended to incorporate the components of literacy skill development and the philosophy of participatory education.

Phase Three began in September 2000 with the goal of integrating literacy skills into an already-existing life skills program. With funding support from the National Literacy Secretariat and core funding from Alberta Justice the intent of phase three was to continue to:

- explore and create relevant, meaningful, and effective educational programming for female offenders in community correctional settings
- work in a participatory approach to learning
- integrate literacy into a life skills model
- operate on a continuous intake basis
- experiment and document effective program practices to make the ongoing research and practice more complete
- solidly implement the program model within the mandate of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton

This curriculum guide is a sequel to the curriculum developed in Phase Two. It is a record of selected *Changing Paths* program activities from September 2000 to June 2002. ❏

Changing Paths,

A PROGRAM OF THE ELIZABETH FRY SOCIETY OF EDMONTON

PROGRAM HISTORY

Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton has sponsored a life skills program funded by Alberta Justice since 1987. This has now been developed into a new model to encompass and integrate literacy and participatory education practices. The present model is a result of the foundational research and pilot delivery work funded by the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) from 1998-2000, in partnership with the Edmonton John Howard Society, and collaborating community agencies. Since September 2000, the integrated literacy and life skills program model has been implemented within the mandate of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Women in conflict with the law are mandated to participate in the *Changing Paths* program and are referred to the program by probation officers, social workers and the courts to complete requirements for Fine Options, Alternative Measures, Community Service Work hours and Temporary Absence programs. Women's offences include assault, shoplifting, fraud, driving without insurance, trafficking, solicitation, mischief, intoxication in a public place, and driving under the influence.

The average age of women in the program is 35 years, with 18 years being the youngest and 61 years the oldest participant. The average size of the group is six women, with a maximum of 12 group members. Forty five percent of women in the program are Aboriginal; 80% have children and 20% are pregnant. On

average 125 women per year participate in the *Changing Paths* program. Women attend for varying amounts of time ranging from eight to 450 hours, as determined by their court orders.

PROGRAM PHILOSOPHY

Changing Paths is committed to a philosophy of participatory education. This philosophy is based on the principles of shared power, capacity building, accountability, creating community and having choices. Women referred to the program bring a series of life issues that form the basis of the curriculum and include involvement with child welfare, possession of criminal records, poor health, and mental illnesses such as agoraphobia, depression, suicidal tendencies, and addictions. Women live in poverty, feel isolated, and have a history of violent relationships and self-harming behaviors. The needs and issues in the lives of women that have contributed to their offences form the basis of the curriculum. This learner-centred philosophy engages women in the shaping of the curriculum and provides a springboard to transfer the learnings from the classroom to everyday life.

LITERACY FOR LIFE

The integrated literacy and life skills model uses creative and free-flow writing as a pathway to identify and take action on life issues that have contributed to women's offences. Literacy skills are the means for women to find their voice, grieve losses, celebrate success, advocate, heal, build self-esteem, and experience connectedness. Developing literacy skills is a way to build strength and capacity, and is a tool for person-

al empowerment. This model is about creating a learning environment in which women feel comfortable enough to speak; where they will speak up and speak out. The *Changing Paths* program uses the development and extension of writing and reading as a springboard to naming, making meaning of and taking action on life issues. Life skills are modeled and practiced in the classroom with the goal of enabling women to secure better jobs, return to school, resolve conflicts, strengthen self-esteem, make positive lifestyle changes, and communicate more effectively. This integrated approach builds women's self-confidence and self worth in a culture that has often silenced them.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

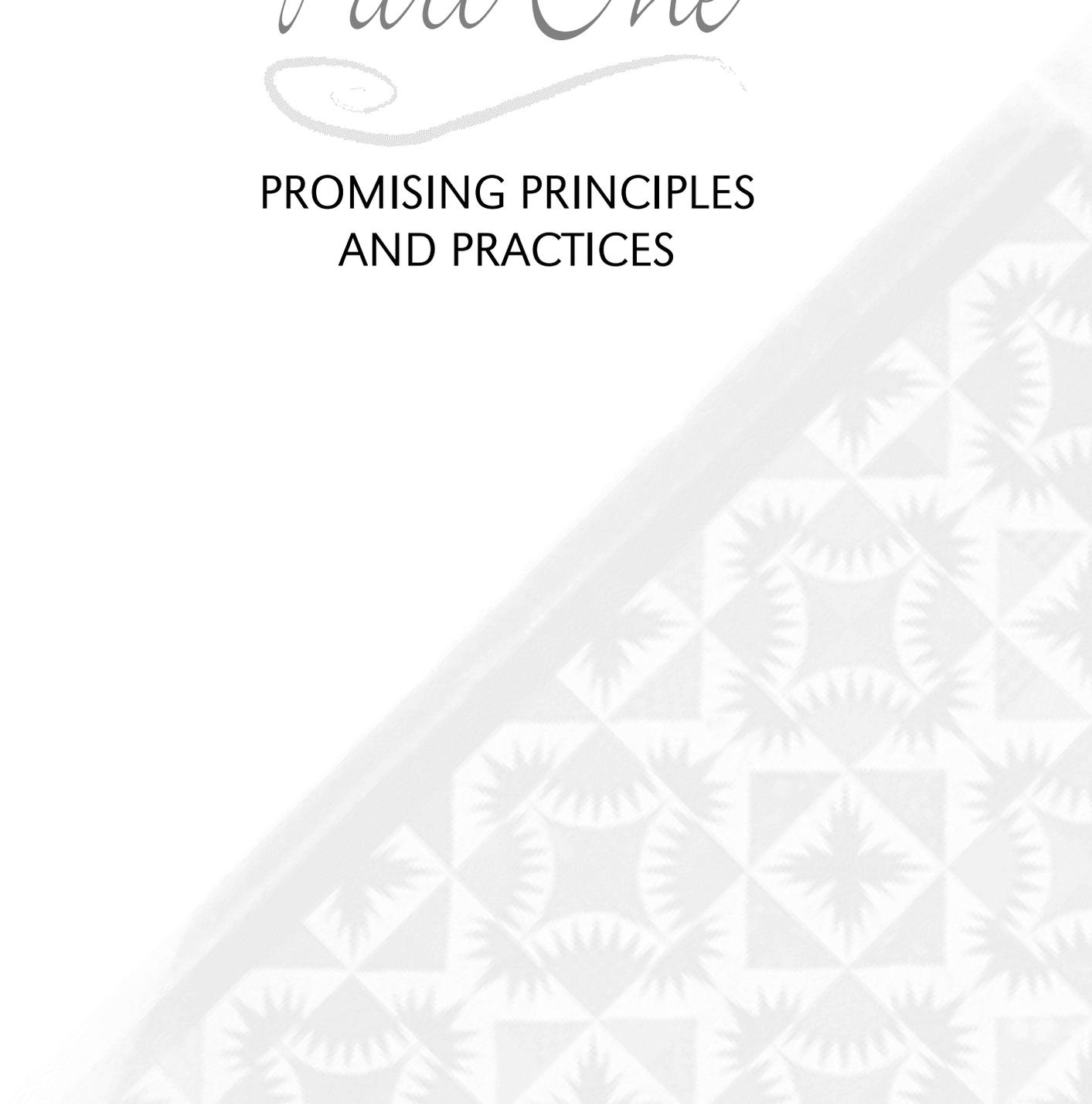
Changing Paths has continuous intake. It runs from 9 am until 3 pm on a daily basis, year round. The morning program is held in a classroom in the Alberta Justice Attendance Centre.

The morning group work focuses on the development of literacy and life skills with a participatory approach to learning. The needs and interests named by women in the program form the basis of the curriculum.

The afternoon sessions take place at the offices of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays when Aboriginal Crafts, Talking Circle, and food preparation are offered. On Wednesday afternoons, the group works at the Edmonton John Howard computer lab where computer skills are developed. ■

Part One

PROMISING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES



Introduction

This section of the guide identifies and explores the principles and practices of the *Changing Paths* program that make for effective programs and promote successful outcomes for participants. These principles and practices have formed the framework for the development and delivery of the *Changing Paths* program. They flow out of the historical work of Phases One and Two of the *Women's Journeys in Self Discovery* pilot projects, and build on the curriculum from those phases of the work.

These principles encompass theory and practice. They work to serve the interests of women who are in conflict with the law and are a foundation for community-based agencies working to provide emancipatory educational programs.

While it is necessary to name the philosophy and principles that guide this work it is critically important not to think of them as a recipe. There are no recipes or easy answers. The bottom line of this work is that it needs to remain fluid, open, and responsive, and in a constant state of exploration and experimentation.

The two key factors in the success of the *Changing Paths* program are the acknowledgement of women's lived reality and the context of their lives, and women's active participation in choosing themes, selecting topics, and creating activities.

In creating a learning environment where we are all learners and teachers, we break the pattern of traditional educational practices, which hold the teacher standing at the front of the classroom as the expert. Sadly enough, this practice leaves everybody else as simply passive recipients instead of active learners. Addressing power imbalances is key to this work. I expect that others will

be challenged, as I have been, by their own unconscious patterns of behavior. These patterns are masked by status as a professional and the privileges gained through access to education, work and money.

My mantra of late has been, "But for the grace of God there go I". I say this with the awareness of just how vulnerable we all are and of the fine line between being in conflict with the law and/or being at risk of coming into conflict with the law. Without personal and social support systems in place, many women, not unlike myself, fall through the social safety net and end up in conflict with the law.

I am coming to know and understand that crime is a cry for help. It is my hope that this resource will respond to that cry.

Philosophy

The philosophical framework that grounds the *Changing Paths* program is multi-faceted. It embraces feminist theory and participatory approaches to education. The program model is holistic and builds on humanistic adult education theory.

WOMAN CENTERED/ FEMINIST THEORY

Feminist theory focuses on women's experiences and knowledge. It is gender specific. The *Changing Paths* program is committed to learning about and making meaning of the life factors that have impacted women and contributed to women's offences. Woman's experience is at the center of the program model.

In practical terms, this means working with women in the program to ensure that they have access to transportation to get to the program; that their children are safe and cared for in their absence; and that food is

available in the classroom if they are hungry. Attention is paid to the issues of isolation, addictions, self worth, shame, violence, poverty, and agoraphobia. These issues are common barriers to women's participation in the program. The fact that women feel safe enough to talk about these issues is a breakthrough. Creating a classroom environment where the unspeakable is spoken is key to the process.

Women are supported and encouraged to speak, to listen to each other, and to write their stories. Through this process women validate themselves and each other. They celebrate their wisdom, strength, courage and survival skills. Women find their voice. They are heard. They reclaim their lives and personal power.

Women's strengths and identities that are linked to relationship building, caring and connection are integral to the model. In practice this means that the facilitator experiences a connection and solidarity with women in the program, and understands that this is not an "us/them" scenario. In the classroom the traditional roles of teacher and learner fade away. All participants come to know themselves as teachers and learners. The roles move back and forth in a fluid way. We learn from each other and work towards being in relationship with each other.

A feminist model embraces shared power and effects personal and social change.

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES TO ADULT EDUCATION

"Participatory education is a learning/teaching process wherein all participants are involved in and committed to defining their own learning needs and wants, working out an approach to addressing them, and evaluating that process as

they live out and into it, all within a context of making life better for themselves and those around them.” (Sauvé, 1987, page 7)

The *Changing Paths* program is committed to working in a participatory approach to education. Being authentic to this philosophy keeps me, as a facilitator, honest, humble and vulnerable. It keeps me mindful of my actions in the work that I do that support or oppresses women I work with.

In practice, participatory education is about living the principles of shared power, focusing on capacity instead of looking at what is lacking, the gift of building and being in community, choice, and accountability. Participatory education is about transformation and emancipation. It is about freedom and choice, and living our lives as fully as possible.

Shared power speaks to not “doing to” or “doing for”, but “working together”. Women in the *Changing Paths* program are invited to create a curriculum that is rich, relevant and meaningful for them. They name what the issues are and this forms the basis of the curriculum. The gift and challenge of working in a participatory way is that the curriculum is not fixed and solid – it is a constant state of creation. Working with the issues that surface in the classroom as a result of participants’ writing and dialogue provides the basis for the curriculum.

The *Changing Paths* program celebrates women’s strength and capacity. We focus on the gifts that women bring to the classroom and their ability to survive and cope given the unrelenting challenges in their lives. Some programs work in response to skill deficits and put in place a curriculum to build skills. The philosophy of *Changing Paths* honours the skills that women already have and works to extend or transfer these skills in life-affirming ways.

Women are invited to be part of community the moment they enter the program. Working in a group where all members are valued and welcomed, women very quickly feel at home and talk about how comfortable they feel in the group setting. Activities that are created to develop community are: writing and reading together, giving and receiving constructive feedback, cooking and eating together, participating in First Nations crafts and talking circles, and working collectively toward goals that benefit the group. Our “Donate A Ride” proposal, and providing input into the “Low Income Program Review” are both examples of community building activities initiated in *Changing Paths*.

Women often feel they don’t have choices and report being told what to do by many people including husbands, children, parents, probation officers, and lawyers. In the *Changing Paths* program, participants always have choice. They decide. Nobody decides for them. They are not punished or shamed for choosing to “pass” or saying “No”. When a woman chooses to pass on an activity in the classroom, I stop and acknowledge her decision. “Good for you. You always have a choice.” The classroom is a safe place to try out new behaviors. To say “No”, to vent without punishment are the norm in the classroom. My experience is that women do not stay in the “passive observer” role for long. They are eager and ready to be active participants and try out new behaviors inside the classroom that are then transferred to life outside of the classroom.

**“If you have come to help me,
You are wasting your time
But if you have come because
your liberation
is bound up with mine
Then let us work together.**

**— Lilla Watson,
Australian Aboriginal Woman**



“The major difference between this learning program and others is that the facilitators are there to help people identify WHAT they want to learn, HOW they want to learn it, and to help them do just that. The belief behind this stance is that if people can learn to take control of their learning in one context, they come that much closer to being in greater control of their lives in general.” V. Sauve, One Educator to Another: A Window on Participatory Education.

The principle of accountability is about not blaming others. It is about coming to a place and time in our lives where we know that we are responsible for our actions. We are accountable for our lives, as difficult as they are at times. This principle acknowledges that we are on a learning journey and the lessons return until we learn them. This principle is not about “re-victimizing” women. It is about becoming conscious of our thoughts, beliefs and actions with the goal of creating a life free from violence, poverty and oppression. Accountability is a tool for transformation.

This educational philosophy has, as its goal, personal transformation and emancipation. This model supports the belief that life is about freedom and choice and living as fully as possible. Power may be mis-used to control and silence ourselves and others. Participatory education has the potential to move us towards accountability and reclamation of personal and political power and bring us out of the place of learned helplessness and self-sabotage.

The theoretical underpinnings of participatory education address the social injustices in our world. If we do not address and take action on the phenomena of feminization of poverty and the criminalization of women,

then we are only warehousing women in prison and in programs.

HOLISTIC PHILOSOPHY

A goal of the *Changing Paths* program is that women will come to experience themselves as whole and complete. They will know themselves as capable and contributing citizens. Holistic education focuses on, and supports the growth of, each person’s full potential including physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, artistic, creative and social growth.

Students’ engagement in the teaching and learning process encourages their sense of responsibility. Holistic education develops participants’ awareness of how knowledge is created in a cultural context, and encourages a critical approach to the cultural, moral and political contexts of their lives. In our program, we learn that we are part of a greater whole, that we belong, and that life is purposeful.

First Nations people have always known this truth as they work with the Medicine Wheel as the basis for their teachings. First Nations women have very generously shared their Medicine Wheel teachings, and we have been blessed to participate in sweet grass ceremonies, feasts, talking circles, First Nation’s campouts, sweats, and ceremonial prayers.

HUMANIST PHILOSOPHY

This theory focuses on the importance of personal growth and the development of self esteem. It is understood that this inner work or personal change is necessary in order for individuals to move into the realm of social change. The learner takes responsibility for her own personal development. The educator is a facilitator – a resource or guide in the process.

Integrated Literacy and Life skills approach

“I don’t know how to talk about what is really bothering me, but as I talk, I go to a deeper level and because it is a safe and non judgmental place - the truth spills out. We listen and women talk and its like a light comes on and the core problem erupts – the core truth just spills out – it tumbles out.”

— Brandy

This integrated learning process involves:

- creating a safe environment
- honouring the ground rules of working in a group
- being present
- listening to each other
- talking about the process of creative writing
- paying attention to the ground rules for writing practice
- inviting women to write and speak
- genuinely inviting women to connect to themselves through writing

Literacy is typically defined as the streams of language development that include writing, reading, speaking, listening, and thinking. Literacy is a basic life skill that can provide more choices for living life fully and purposefully. The integrated literacy and life skills model reminds us of the essential link between these skill sets, and the importance of working with them in a holistic way instead of attempting to separate them out.

WRITING

Writing is used in the program as a springboard to the identification of life issues. Women write in order to work through personal issues in a positive and life-affirming way. They write about their life to sort out

issues, to heal, and to find their voice. Women write what they are not yet ready to speak about. Women write about life. Many women love to write and women valued the freedom of self-expression in the program as well as appreciating the clarity that writing brings them.

Writing is a gift because it builds on our strengths. Participants are reminded not to worry about spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The writing done in the classroom is referred to as free flow writing or creative writing. Rules for writing practice are posted in the classroom.

The issues named by participants form the program curriculum. Literacy is used as a pathway to identifying and taking action on issues that are barriers to living life fully. Examples of life skills that flow out of women's writing include: problem solving, conflict resolution, communication skills, saying NO, and discerning between healthy and abusive relationships.

"I love to write because my journal never talks back, or reacts to what I am saying. It doesn't interrupt, call me names or put me down."

"We write for ourselves – nobody else. Just write. Write from your heart. Write out your fears. Write to live."

"In the Changing Paths program we wrote freely; we spoke freely; we questioned freely. We even debated freely. I was told to keep writing – I have come to associate these words with: Keep Trying, Keep Looking, Keep Going – PERSIST and things will come to you."

— Ann

READING

The *Changing Paths* classroom has a variety of books for reading, however, the prime source of reading material is the writing produced by women in the program. This is where the energy is. Women are invited to read their writing and they jump at the chance. They own the value and wisdom in their words and are eager to share them with others. Women are heard. This is validating.

I always acknowledge women who offer to read their writing. I thank them before they read. It takes great courage to read our words. If women can do this they can also do many things that they never thought possible. What happens in the classroom is a microcosm of what can happen outside of the classroom. The goal is to practice new behaviors and take risks with the goal of transferring these skills to one's life.

Reading skills are extremely important for women in conflict with the law. They are required to read court documents, respond to lawyers' requests for written information, follow instructions for fingerprinting, meet court deadlines, and read legal documents that are full of "legalese". It is easy to see that reading skills are essential life skills. Reading skills are built and extended in numerous practical ways which include using the telephone book, reading recipes, reading transit maps, and applying for Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) Pardons and Supports for Independence funding.

SPEAKING

Some women cannot stop talking. Some hardly speak at all. The lesson is to become aware of personal patterns of communication and to push the boundaries of our personal comfort zone while being mindful of group needs. Group guidelines are posted in the classroom and are a use-



ful tool to build effective group dynamics and communication skills. The goal is to hear from each other. All of our stories are important. We are in the group together because we have things to learn from each other, stories to tell, personal work to do. We are not here by accident.

LISTENING

Sometimes women are not able to listen. They have experienced such personal trauma that their ability to listen has shut down. Sometimes women do a lot of listening before they speak. In hearing the stories and experiences of women in the group they realize that they are not alone. There is a sense of solidarity and validation. Women's experiences are validated by other group members. They say *"I have the same feeling. I am going through the same stuff. I am not alone."*

There is a beautiful link between speaking and listening – women speak when they are listened to. Women come to know that their opinion counts, that their experiences are valued. When this happens the flood gates open and women's life stories start to flow.

Jenny Horsman's (2000) research that explores the links between violence and learning is a valuable resource for practitioners and women in learning programs.

"At E. Fry they don't just listen – they hear." — Terry

THINKING

Our thinking determines how we see ourselves, the world, and our place in it. Our thoughts create our reality. We learn to become conscious of our patterns of thinking and make changes that move us towards living life fully.

Life skills lessons build and extend

the use of "I" statements, affirmations, positive thinking, and constructive feedback along with critical and creative thinking activities. We work to replace old patterns of negative thinking that focus on blame, learned helplessness, and victimization with accountability, self-reliance, and interdependence.

LIFE SKILLS

In my experience traditional life skills programs can assume that learners are lacking in skills and if they would just learn the skill that all would be well, and the learners will be fixed. This approach focuses on a deficit model.

The integrated literacy and life skills model focuses on capacity. Writing is used to make meaning of life's journey and to sort out life's issues. Literacy is a non-obtrusive, non-judgmental way to make life's problems, challenges and issues discussible. It works beautifully because women take ownership of their issues. Specific life skills are explored and built in response to women's needs. Life skills include and are not limited to: problem solving, conflict resolution, setting and maintaining boundaries, open, honest and direct communication, "I" statements, relapse prevention, change, parenting, literacy, commitment, accountability, team work, employability, and study skills.

It is an ongoing challenge to look beyond and move deeper into what may initially appear to be a problematic behavior linked to a lack of life skills. Limited interest in reading may be a smoke screen for shame, or not having money to purchase glasses. Lack of classroom participation may speak volumes about old messages that have battered a woman's self worth and self esteem with messages like, "Don't talk stupid," or "Be seen and not heard." The inability to "string together and make

meaning" of words in print is a common experience for addicts. Women in the Changing Paths program do their inner work and reclaim their self worth and personal power. They become aware of negative thought processes, build new belief systems and support themselves to speak up, speak out and take action.

It is essential that life skills are modeled in the classroom. Facilitators are accountable to align practice with theory. This means communicating in an open and honest way, giving and being open to hear feedback, having a non-judgmental attitude, having an open heart, and the desire and ability to engage in problem solving and conflict resolution. Modeling life skills in the classroom is a call to be real and open to the development of relationships and the building of community.

"I got new glasses. Before now I couldn't afford to get new glasses. I'm reading now. I like to read thick books." — Pauline

"I couldn't read a book and get the meaning from the book. It was just a million words. I didn't want to read. I thought I was illiterate."

— Narcotics Anonymous
12 Step member

Program Model

Being a visual learner, I value having an image that says it all. This has been a great challenge and I have struggled to find a way to visually convey what an integrated literacy and life skills model looks like and how it works.

The *Changing Paths* model:

- is holistic, woman-centred, and literacy and life skills focused
- is dynamic – not static or linear
- is organic and has a natural life cycle that moves through the stages of creation and chaos
- begins with the core issue of self discovery
- believes that all lasting and meaningful change starts on the inside and works its way out
- acknowledges that personal “inner work” is necessary in order to move towards social action and advocacy
- is transformational
- acknowledges that personal growth and healing is a pre-requisite for learning readiness, employment readiness, and advocacy
- celebrates the power of connectedness and community
- shifts, changes, and grows in response to the dynamics in the classroom

The model takes an holistic approach and integrates the components of literacy and life skills. Each component is transparent and layered one over the other. This transparency of layers enables us to see all three layers at once. (See diagrams on the right.)

The model for this program is represented by a butterfly. Butterflies are a powerful image. They speak to us at a conscious and subconscious level and are a deep-seated metaphor for the potential in our lives. They remind us about the power that we have to transform our lives. Butterflies speak of hope, love and

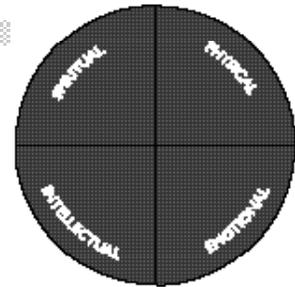
new life. The integrated literacy and life skills model is about change, recovery and the potential that each one of us has to fly – to move beyond the constraints of life – to push the boundaries and to live life fully.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her book *The Wheel of Life – A Memoir of Living and Dying* (1997), writes about the images of butterflies that she saw scratched on the walls of concentration camps. “The barracks were full of them. The image was repeated over and over again. Butterflies. They were everywhere I looked. Some were crude. Others were quite detailed. Why she asked? Why butterflies?”

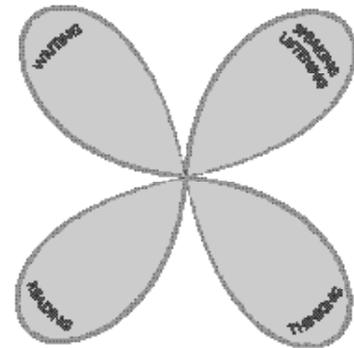
Kubler-Ross answers this question in the final pages of her book. Her writing suggests that the butterfly is a physical as well as spiritual symbol for us as we live life. On the physical level the butterfly reminds us that at the time of death there will be a time when we physically leave our bodies the way that butterflies leave their cocoons. On the spiritual level, the butterfly reminds us of the potential for transformation that we go through on an ongoing basis, as we evolve, grow and change over the course of our life. The butterfly reminds us about death and rebirth. It is symbolic of life, hope, transformation,

The Butterfly Model

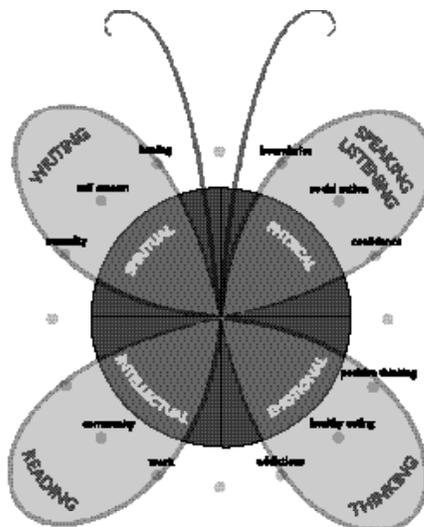
HOLISTIC:
spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual realms



LITERACY:
reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking



LIFE SKILLS:
self, family, community, work and education.
Some examples are: self esteem, feelings, communication, problem solving, ethics, sexuality, parenting, relationships, managing money, boundaries, healing, community, work, skills, change, interests, creativity, “I” statements, addictions, advocacy, team work, study skills, commitment, accountability, education...



change, wholeness, and connection. Butterflies are beautiful. They remind us of our beauty and the need for beauty in our lives.

A butterfly cannot fly without all four wings. As human beings we are not fully alive if we are not aware of all realms of our being. This image helps to explain the interconnectedness of who we are and how we live our lives. It visually represents the areas in our lives that need work and growth in order to take flight. No part can be missing.

Each butterfly is unique. Each classroom activity in the Changing Paths program is unique and responsive to women in the group. It is about the lived reality of women in the program, as named by them. The dynamics change day to day. The curriculum is built moment by moment. Common themes and issues emerge. Resources are gathered and classroom activities are designed in a fluid way in response to the issues in women's lives.

The Butterfly

*Change is like a butterfly.
A butterfly is free
Opening your wings and flying.
Like the free bird flies.
I am beautiful.
Like a butterfly.*

A poem created by women in the Changing Paths program. June 25, 2002

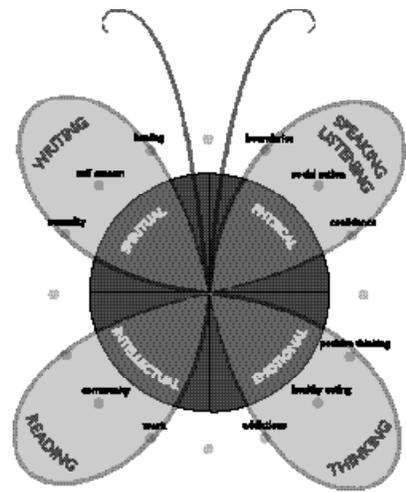
HOW THE MODEL WORKS:

You can start anywhere with this model. The following example begins with a free writing activity.

Example One:

Start with a free writing activity. Invite women to write. Refer to the Guidelines to Write on page 21. Writing is a physical activity and it usually starts from an intellectual perspective. Writing can move to become an emotional and hopefully spiritual experience. Writing becomes an emotional experience when emotions are released and a spiritual experience when women experience themselves as being whole, with a strong connection to themselves and others.

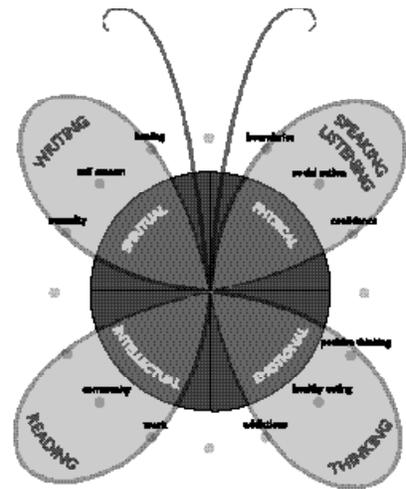
Inviting women to read their writing takes the process back to the literacy component, with the potential to shift to address life skills, advocacy and the development of community.



Example Two

1. Women talk about not having enough money to buy bus tickets to get to class.
Literacy – speaking/listening
2. Group writes about the issue of transportation
Literacy – personal writing
Life Skills – communication, problem solving, possibility thinking

3. Group decides to work together to take action on poverty issues
Literacy – public writing
Life Skills – advocacy, community building
4. Women talk about criminalization of poor women
Literacy – talking, critical thinking, reflection
Life Skills – research, solidarity building, discrimination, grief, loss, anger, rage
Holistic - Spirituality realm healing, higher power, recovery, synchronicity.



Things I Have Learned

A colleague suggested that I record the details that I pay attention to in the classroom, and record how I work. At first I thought it was unnecessary and simply “common sense”. Her words stayed with me and over time I have come to see the merit in this exercise and have taken up the challenge.

1. CREATE A WELCOMING AND SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Many women come to the Changing Paths program with fears that they will be told to sit down, shut up and endure a program delivered by a war-

den or guard. Others display great courage to simply get to the program due to difficulties through lack of money for transportation, and child-care. Mental health and family issues are other barriers to participation.

After being in the program for a week, one woman spoke of her fears of getting on a bus. She reported riding a bus, arriving at the program site, and going directly to the bathroom to vomit. Upon her disclosure, another woman said she too was unable to ride the bus on her own. She made arrangements to have her sister drive her and pick her up on a daily basis while she was in the program. Another woman spoke of being stalked and the trauma she endured to get out of her residence and make her way to the program.

Sometimes women are outright angry about having to come to the program. They report being charged with offenses that are unjust and discriminatory.

So, what do I do with this “stuff”? The moment a new woman walks into the classroom I know how critically important it is for me to be present, to acknowledge each woman’s presence and invite her into the group. As I hear women’s stories, I am once again sensitized to how courageous and resilient they are, and how important it is that they be treated with dignity and respect.

I also welcome hearing the issues women raise. These form the basis of the *Changing Paths* curriculum. In the past I used a number of needs assessment tools, questionnaires, and work sheets to surface up and gather information to identify the needs of participants. I no longer do this. Now I work to stay open enough to hear and observe the multitude of messages - spoken and unspoken, and to create an environment where women feel safe enough to speak their truth without the fear of being

ridiculed, judged, shamed, dismissed or put off.

2. CLASSROOM SETUP

Adult education principles document the importance of classroom set-up. Different arrangements may speak volumes about power relationships. It is important to be mindful of these subtleties that either reinforce traditional power relationships or challenge them.

I arrange tables and chairs so group members can sit facing each other – ideally in a circle. I have not had the luxury of specially designed tables that can be arranged to form a circle, so rectangular tables are pushed together forming one large rectangular table. Women come to the classroom expecting the very worst “school” experience with individual desks set up in rows, facing the teacher, who will lecture at them all day.

Being a creature of habit, I remind myself to “change positions” in the classroom. As well, over the course of the program, I invite women to sit in a different seat around the table. I remind them that the behavior attached to “sitting in the same spot” in the classroom, as opposed to sitting somewhere else, acts as a metaphor for life and is a useful tool for reflection. Our reluctance or willingness to change seats speaks volumes about our own willingness to view life from another perspective – to look again, to see at a deeper level, to change patterns of behavior. Changing seats challenges us to get out of our comfort zone. By staying with our initial discomfort with change and talking about it, we learn and grow.

The basic requirements for a classroom include: a room with a door that closes, drapes that can be drawn for privacy, no through traffic, tables and chairs that can be arranged or moved out of the way as needed, a quiet reading and writing space, a space to make coffee,



and a place to put out snacks. It is ideal to have the classroom space designated. This allows for the women's writing, photographs, art work and works in progress to be put up on display or left out without the threat of vandalism, breach of confidentiality issues, or theft. Displaying women's writing is a powerful tool that is used to build self-esteem and self-worth.

As well, the ideal classroom would not be housed in a community corrections facility. We have lobbied long and hard to move the Changing Paths program out of an institutionalized environment. It is the women in the program who continue to remind me of how traumatizing it is to come to a facility staffed by men in guard uniforms, with men on work crews hanging around the entrance doors, or being greeted by clerical staff who display a punishing and authoritarian demeanor.

3. CLASSROOM RESOURCES

An ideal classroom would contain a resource collection of books, games, videos, audio tapes, and computers. There would be a TV with a VCR and a CD and tape player.

The *Changing Paths* classroom library has an assortment of books including daily readers, 12 step program materials, addictions/recovery, self help, employment, spirituality, novels, writing, poetry, meditation, and art books. Books are sourced and purchased in response to the interests of women in the program. We have ordered children's books, books on dreams, craft magazines and books and tapes on guided meditation practices in response to requests from women in the program. Library books are available to be loaned out. This practice has become problematic, as a number of them have not been returned.

Women enjoy playing board and card games. Our games inventory includes

Scrabble, Spill and Spell, a deck of cards, and crossword puzzles.

The program inherited a huge number of videos on topics of family violence, anger, parenting, addictions, grief, saying No, and meditation. The videos are used less and less.

Music is essential and the collection grows. We have quiet nature tapes, guided meditations, classical, Celtic, pop, and easy listening music. Music is almost always used as a way to build an atmosphere in the classroom that encourages writing. Soft background sounds of nature assist in moving pen to paper and losing oneself in the bliss of writing – encouraging writing from the heart.

I have set up files that hold information on housing, community resources, family violence, addictions, legal issues, parenting, employment, education and health. These resource files sit on the shelf of an open bookcase and the information is available for all to access.

Often the classrooms we work in suffer from a lack of funds for furniture, adequate lighting, cleaning, and repair. To embellish the space, I bring in fresh flowers and live plants. I add colour through posters, photographs and colourful mats framing women's writing and offer a selection of music and a ghetto blaster. These additions work to make the classroom feel less institutional even though it may be run in a community correction facility.

Coloured ink pens, hard-covered journals, tissues, candles, sage, sweet grass, craft supplies, plasticine, hand cream, fragrant oils, as well as bus tickets and food, are essential items in the classroom.

Creative writing is fun and inviting to do, especially when coloured ink pens and journals are provided for all participants. Each woman receives a

hard covered journal. Journals are purchased from the dollar store and are not a huge budget item. Receiving a new journal contributes to women coming to know that their words are important. Self-esteem and trust are built. Most women carry their journals with them and write in them outside of the classroom. Most recently, one woman completely filled her journal during her 3 week stay in the program. In cases like this, I offer a new journal to encourage and support the continuation of journaling once women leave the program.

Having tissue in the classroom gives the message that it is OK to cry. Women are oftentimes moved to tears in the classroom. We believe that "tears are OK". In fact tears are welcome. Elsie Paul, my colleague at Elizabeth Fry, speaks of tears as "sacred water". They are a gift from the Creator. Being able to cry is the sign of women doing their emotional work. Initially women feel an immediate need to wipe away their tears. As we work together over time, women are more comfortable being with their tears.

Candles are used in the classroom on a daily basis. They are part of a ritual that begins the day and invites inner reflection, connectedness, and the flow of creative energy. Candles are symbolic of healing, hope, and dreams.

Sage and sweet grass is predominately displayed on the bookcase in the classroom. This honours the First Nations women in the program and provides an opportunity for them to take a leadership role in sweet grass ceremonies. The sweet grass ceremony has been a ritual in the classroom and a powerful learning for all women.

We keep a selection of craft supplies in the classroom, including: glue sticks, beautiful decorative writing paper, feathers, crayons, scissors, felt pens, glue gun, tissue paper, coloured

paper, magazines, buttons, ribbons, beads, leather, yarns, etc. These supplies are used for creative projects like mask making, collages and cards.

Plasticine is often placed on tables in the classroom with no specific agenda other than for women to have something to do with their hands. Beautiful sculptures are frequently created out of the plasticine. These pieces of art are kept for months on the display shelf of our bookcase or window-sill.

Hand cream is a must in the classroom. It is self-nurturing, always used, and greatly appreciated.

A selection of fragrant/essential oils is a standard inventory item in the classroom. Lavender, lemon and rose geranium are examples of basic oils that I keep on hand. Lavender relieves stress and is relaxing. It works to balance our physical and emotional realms. Lemon is anti-infectious and a disinfectant. It strengthens the immune system. If a number of women are suffering from colds or suffering from flu symptoms I bring out the lemon oil and invite women to put a drop on a cotton ball and tuck it into their sleeve, bra or purse. Rose geranium is great for menopausal women.

Food is an important resource to have in the classroom. Women are hungry and live on extremely limited incomes. It is hard to learn when hunger gets in the way. Most women in the program live in poverty and dollars allocated for food often get spent on bus tickets, children's field trips, and laundry. We are grateful to The Edmonton Food Bank for their generous donations of fruit juice, whole-wheat crackers and peanut butter to the program. As well, women prepare cookies, bannock and muffins to be eaten in the classroom. Coffee, tea, sugar, and cream are standard items. Having a fridge would enable us to have

yoghurt, milk, and fresh fruits and vegetables on hand.

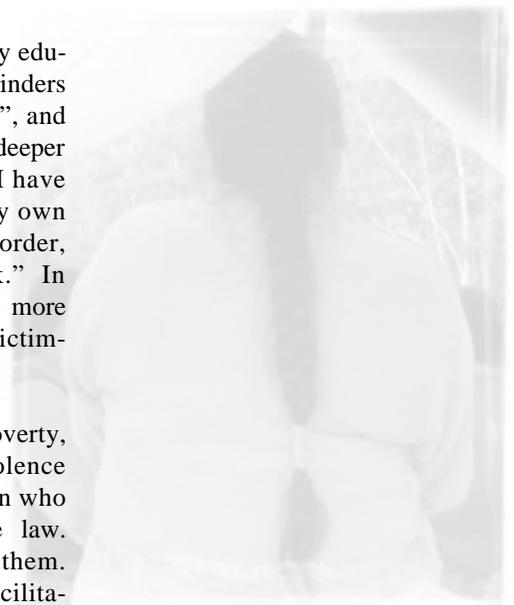
Bus tickets are essential. Women report the trauma they go through to get enough money to come to the program. They are prepared to pawn furniture, stereos and jewelry to get money for transportation. Getting to the community based program and completing their fine option or community service hours keeps women out of prison so the stakes are high. We are grateful to the City of Edmonton Donate A Ride program for providing the Elizabeth Fry Society with bus tickets. This activity is written up in Low-Income Programs section of this guide. See page 61

4. WALK THE TALK

I often marvel at how my work/vocation teaches me. Twenty years ago I began a journey to explore non-traditional educational approaches. Little did I know that the seeds that were planted, as I began to explore the notion of participatory education, would have such a profound impact on my life. The journey has not been an easy one and yet, looking back, I borrow the words from many of the women that I have come to know over the past few years, "I wouldn't change a thing."

The philosophy of participatory education invited me to take the blinders off. I feel like I began to "see", and most recently, "know" at a deeper and more meaningful level. I have been challenged to look at my own life and get my own house in order, in short to "do my own work." In order to invite others to live more fully, free of oppression and victimization, I must do the same.

Research has shown that poverty, child abuse, and domestic violence have traumatized many women who come into conflict with the law. Power has been used against them. It is critical that program facilita-



tors, administrators and agencies do not engage in any further actions that would traumatize, victimize or oppress program participants. It sounds harsh to suggest that this would happen, however, it does. I, myself, have first hand experience of how authoritarian systems and individuals engage in oppressive actions as a result of their own unresolved issues of power and control.

I no longer assume that I know what others want or need – I ask them. I no longer act for others, thinking that I am helping them. This keeps others dependent and child-like and puts me in a position of power. I no longer get my identity from knowing it all and being the professional expert. I no longer feel a need to keep a distance and I do enter into relationships with women with whom I work. These relationships with clients honour our unique roles, yet do not allow these roles to keep us from being authentic and real with each other. Working to build a connection, if only for a moment, is an outcome that is hard to measure, but one that I think is at the heart of this work.

5. FACILITATION

I struggle with finding words to describe how I facilitate because when I am good at it, it simply happens. I am in a state of creative flow: I intuitively know what to do. The paradox is that often it is not so much about doing. It is about being.

The most powerful and healing experiences in the classroom have not come out of a lesson plan. These experiences have manifested themselves as a result of developing a caring and trusting relationship with women. I want to genuinely understand their situation. We are real with each other. Women feel free to tell their truths, speak from their hearts and begin the process of healing. They experience them-

selves as whole and capable women. Perhaps it is about believing in women until they believe in themselves. Perhaps it is about the transformative power of love.

I am comforted to hear that other educators have thrown away the curriculum and the lesson plans and followed what needs to be done in the moment. I do not spend time creating experiential learning. We work with what presents itself and move with the energy of the group. I refer to this as ‘emergent curriculum’. Issues that women bring to group include no money for food, abuse by a partner, concern about an upcoming court date, an unwanted pregnancy, and eviction notices. There is a never-ending supply of life issues/life skill learning. Working to address these issues forms the basis for the curriculum. A file cabinet in the classroom is filled with handouts, quizzes and worksheets. I have print materials on such subjects as Making I Statements, Conflict Resolution, Saying No, and Depression and Grief. The bookshelf holds life skills and literacy curriculum developed by skilled and gifted educators. I keep an inventory of videos and books. All of these resources provide a backup. I use them less and less. The heart of the program and the most meaningful resources are women in the program and their stories – their experiences.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL CULTURE

There is a congruency between the philosophy of participatory education and the ideological belief system of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton and the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies. This is critically important. The Changing Paths program is ideally situated within an agency that has a mandate for advocacy, education and social change. The work currently being done and the potential to continue to push the boundaries would

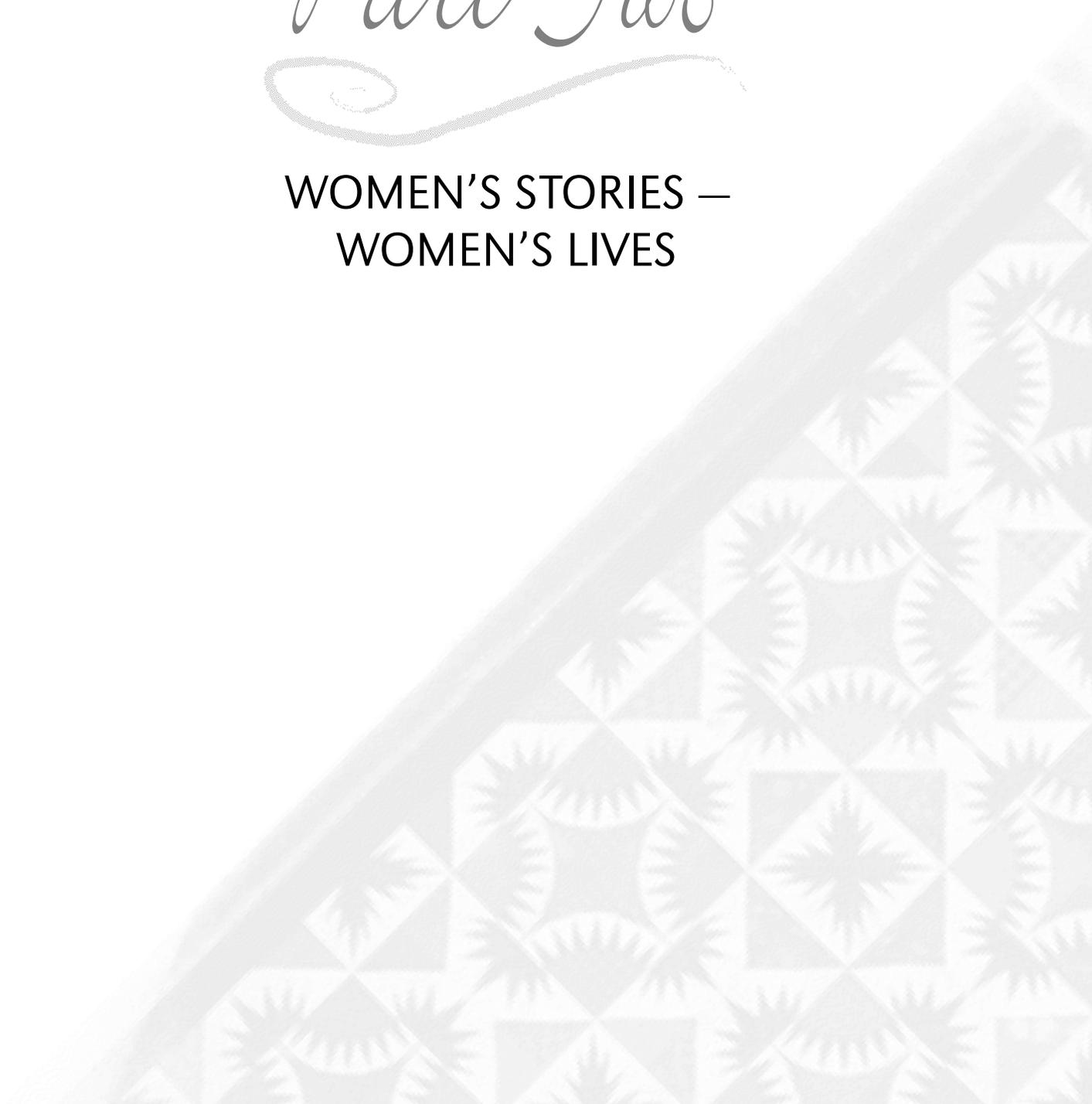
not be possible without Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton’s commitment to emancipatory education.

Women report that they feel good when they walk through the door at Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton. They speak of an “aura” that is inviting and comfortable. They say, “It’s OK for me to simply ‘be’ here.” Old patterns of behaviors that include defensiveness, anger and blaming can melt away in a safe and welcoming environment. The environment or the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton affords women an opportunity to experience a safe and caring women-only community where the women are valued and supported to make positive changes in their lives.

Women accessing our services can immediately tell if they are being listened to, and if staff is present to them. Build an environmentally friendly culture by ensuring that agency staff is non-judgmental, non-shaming, authentic, and relational rather than one-way and authoritarian. ❁

Part Two

WOMEN'S STORIES —
WOMEN'S LIVES



Getting Started

First day in the classroom. Women in conflict with the law and in a time of crisis in their lives. Women report: being unemployed and resorting to shoplifting to make ends meet, depression and anxiety to the point of being agoraphobic, a theft charge that leads to being fired from a job, living in an abusive relationship, credit and debt issues and being hounded by creditors, growing up in family where using is the norm, a car accident that leads to loss of work and a charge of driving without insurance, young women being disowned by their families, a daughter takes on the job of parenting her mother who suffers from severe mental health issues, a gambling addiction that leads to theft to feed the habit.

— Bev Sochatsky's personal journal, September 5, 2000

Loss, grief, shame, despair, anger and trauma. These are common themes in the lives of women who are mandated to participate in the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton's Changing Paths Program. They are mandated to participate by the courts, probation officers and social workers. All women in the program are in conflict with the law.

WHERE TO START?

In the *Changing Paths* program we use a literacy approach and start with women's stories and experiences as a way to connect with "self". Many women feel disconnected from themselves. Their lives are marked with unrelenting demands from others: their children, partners, families, school, work, the courts, lawyers, and probation officers. *Changing Paths* provides

women with time for themselves, for self-reflection, evaluation, healing and change.

Here is a learning environment where women feel safe enough to do their personal work, to re-connect, remember and reclaim their power and voice. The goal of the *Changing Paths* program is to have women experience themselves as whole and capable of transforming their lives, as symbolized by the butterfly. The program works to have women discover their talents and skills that can be transferred to the workplace. The curriculum is designed to have women build self-esteem, self-awareness, gain confidence, and make conscious and healthy choices in all areas of life. The intent of classroom activities is for women to come to know themselves as lifelong learners with the power to effect personal and social change.

We begin most mornings in the classroom with a ritual of writing. Women are invited to do write "freewriting", or "stream of consciousness writing". They may write in response to a daily reading, a writing prompt, or to a specific issue. Women write to get centred for the day, to make meaning of their lives, to problem solve, to release pain and to celebrate their worth and giftedness. As women tell their stories they come to know how strong and capable they are. They say to each other, "That is an incredible piece of writing," and "You are awesome." Through this process begins the healing that builds self worth and confidence. Identifying with the stories of others relieves feelings of isolation, and builds community and hope.

RULES FOR WRITING PRACTICE POSTER

This list is short and inspirational. I keep it posted in the classroom and refer to it when new women join the group.

- 1. Keep your hand moving.**
- 2. Don't cross out.**
- 3. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation or grammar**
- 4. Lose control**
- 5. Don't think. Don't get logical.**
- 6. Write what comes up.**

— from *Writing Down the Bones*, by Natalie Goldberg

CHANGING PATHS GROUP GUIDELINES POSTER

What's Said Here Stays Here – Confidentiality
Be Honest – Tell the Truth
No Judgements
Focus on the Positive
Respect for Self and Others
Use "I" Statements
One Person Speaks at a Time
We Always Have CHOICE
It's OK to Pass
Humor Works
Resolve Conflict Peacefully
Take What you Need and Leave the Rest
Participate Actively
We Can Look at the Past – Just Don't Get Stuck There

GETTING STARTED TO WRITE HANDOUT

This handout is designed as a resource for use in all writing activities that may include: Morning Pages, stream of consciousness writing, creative writing, writing prompts, freewriting, writing in response to a daily reading, etc..

I keep an inventory of various coloured ink pens, hard covered journal books and an assortment of quiet, reflective music for playing during writing activities.

Deborah Morgan's book, *Writing Out Loud*, is an excellent resource. It is user-friendly and filled with examples of inspirational pieces of writing. Her guidelines on freewriting are direct and easy to use.

FREEWITING

I start every writing class with five minutes of freewriting. Timing the writing focuses the group. It is less threatening for those unaccustomed to writing because it has a beginning and an end. Writing for 5 minutes is manageable and women are more likely to participate. The short time also encourages free expression because the limited time span means that there is no time to analyze or be self-critical. Women immediately connect with their issues. When appropriate I increase the time to seven or ten minutes depending on the topic and women's engagement with the process.

What is freewriting? Just as it sounds; it is a time to write freely, without worry of what to write or what will "come out". The whole idea is to keep your pen moving, allowing thoughts to come onto the paper as they will. Freewriting is a little bit like journalling, but it is a timed activity that doesn't have specific goals, except to write as much as possible for the given time period.

EXERCISE STEPS

1. You will need a pen or pencil, a clean sheet of paper (a notebook is fine, too) and a timer. I always encourage group members to date their pages – especially with freewriting. This makes it easy to go back and look at the progress they have made, both personally and academically.
2. Explain to group members that the idea for this exercise is simply to write about absolutely anything. If nothing comes to mind, simply write "I can't think of anything to write" and keep going. Remember – punctuation, spelling and grammar are not important right now. The goal of writing from the heart is just to write.
3. Set the timer and start writing. You too! When five minutes is up, ask women to finish their sentence, put their pen down and take a deep breath.
4. Encourage one another to read our free writing out loud. This is voluntary; students always have the option to "pass" if they want to. Sometimes women will choose not to read her free writing, but would show it to me later or read it at the end of the class. In most cases, women looked forward to reading their thoughts out loud and listening to the thoughts of others.

— adapted from
Writing Out Loud,
by Deborah Morgan

CREATING SAFETY IN THE CLASSROOM

Writing is a very personal and potentially vulnerable activity. Women report having their diaries read by family members when they were children. The painful memory has stayed with them. Women need to be reminded that their writing is private. No one reads it without her permission. They have the right to “pass” when asked to read.

It is critically important to create an environment in which women feel safe enough to write and read what they have written. The following group guidelines are posted in the classroom. The guidelines are a reminder for all group members and especially for new women joining the group.

RESPONDING TO WOMEN'S WRITING

The classroom is quiet as women write with only background music providing a blanket of safety and comfort. Women write with focused energy. I let the group know when there is one minute left to write. When the time is up, I call their attention back to the group and ask them to stop writing.

Sometimes women offer to read, and that is wonderful. I acknowledge their offer before they begin to read. This usually starts the process where-in others offer to read their writing.

It takes great courage to read our words especially if we find ourselves with a group of women that we have just met. When the reading is complete, I thank them again and begin a process of “opening up” a dialogue that starts by offering positive and constructive feedback and moves to posing questions as follows:

- “I loved your description of ...”
- “I’d like to know more about ...”
- “What was that like for you?”

- “Has anybody else had a similar experience?”
- “Sounds like you have lots more to write about this topic.”

“What a great piece of writing” and “You are awesome” are common comments from other group members. “I have the same problem...”, “Your writing made me think about...”. This is an opportunity to offer affirmation to a woman through her writing. The pleasure women feel at this acknowledgement increases their willingness to participate in the reading and discussions.

This process is not about writing complete sentences, using correct grammar, or being graded, and I don’t draw attention to this technical aspect of writing. This kind of writing is about something altogether different. It begins with getting out of our heads and into our hearts; connecting to a place in each of us that is hungry to have our innermost thoughts and dreams brought to light.

If nobody offers to read I usually say, “Does anybody want to read?” And then I wait. I have become quite comfortable to sit in silence while the question hangs in the air. If there is great hesitation I begin by reading my writing which breaks the tension and often other writing comes forth.

THE WRITING PROCESS

Women write in their journals. I will invite them to copy their writing out and give it to me if they want it typed up. When I return it to them, they go over it, making changes and doing corrections. Sometimes the dictionary comes out and women try different words to more precisely express themselves. Often other women in the class will also help to edit. I then print the writing on designer paper and get a mat for it. When feasible, women are encouraged to type up their own work.

With the finished product, women see that writing is a process in which they participate with ease. They begin to see themselves as writers, and value their work. They begin to see that maybe they could do some upgrading or take a course, that maybe they do have skills.

Often the writing is for family members or boyfriends. Women strengthen their relationships by expressing feelings to those closest to them in writing.

RECOMMENDED WEB SITES

www.nald.ca

aaal.ab.ca

www.writingoutloud.ca

www.nataliegoldberg.com

www.jot.org

www.storycircle.org 

Part Two

JOURNEY TO SELF



Women's Stories — Women's Lives

My Favourite Colour

RATIONALE

The *Changing Paths* program works on a continuous intake model. This means that it is an open entry program. Women do not have to wait for the next intake cycle, they can register whenever they are ready. Similar to “just in time learning,” the continuous intake model provides women with a program to meet their immediate needs.

Having new group members walk through the door any day of the week provides the facilitator and existing group members with an ongoing challenge of getting to know each other, building trust, and feeling safe enough to be present and participate in group activities.

Introduction activities are key. Many women come to the program with great apprehension and stress. The first few hours in the classroom will set the stage for the entire program. The group format necessitates getting to know each other, and has the potential to break down old patterns of behaviors linked to fear and isolation replacing them with experiences of feeling comfortable, safe, and part of a community.

This activity is an introduction exercise. It is a creative alternative to the standard “go round the table and introduce yourself to each other” activity.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- introduce themselves to each other in a fun and creative way
- form trust and build community
- explore who they are and what makes them unique

- ask questions and give feedback
- strengthen their self worth and sense of self
- offer and accept validation
- begin to see themselves as writers

PROCESS

1. Group facilitator welcomes all participants and talks about how important “getting to know each other” is in the process of forming a group.
2. Have women select a pen and two or three pieces of paper.
3. Ask group members to think about their favourite colour (or it could be a piece of music, a rock, a memory of childhood, or a special place).
4. Explore the inspiration through more than one sense if possible. For example, what does your favourite colour smell like, taste like, look like, feel like? What memories does this colour bring up for you?
5. Churn up the experience, the memory, the emotional response to this by talking it out. If the group is large, it is better to talk in pairs first before beginning a group discussion. One person’s memory or experience will enrich another’s so that the creative work is building.
6. While women are talking, the instructor catches any telling or especially expressive phrase, words, idea and might comment on it positively or else write it down. Make sure that the women know what the instructor is writing so they feel validated. Confidence begins to build with the thought, “my ideas are worth something”.
7. Brainstorm ideas on flip chart paper or on the board. This is a good time to focus on the product. Poems are the most rewarding for women as they are direct and emotionally expressive. Generally they have written poetry in their teen years, and it does not require intimidating punctuation, grammar, the conventions of a long piece of prose, and it’s short!
8. Words are written on the board so the spelling is correct which tends to reduce anxiety for some writers. The range of emotions and experiences that are described in the brainstorm segment are written and so shown to be perfectly acceptable and give permission to everyone to be honest and open and to be individual in their response.
9. After women have written down what ideas they wanted from the board and from the ensuing discussion, they are ready to write their own piece. This is a time for silence and also without a time constraint.
10. When ready, women read their writing out loud to the group, who give positive feedback. This never has to be formally asked for. The instructor simply models and then group members are keen to give support too. Each person knows that attention and positive feedback will be returned when it’s their turn.
11. As the work is read out loud it gives the writer the opportunity to notice awkwardness of construction or mistakes which can be corrected then and there. The group can co-operate to provide a better or different word.

(Continued on page 26)

Blue

I love the blue sky,
It's such a mystery
To me.
I wonder, wonder,
What's underneath that
Blue sky?

I love the colour blue.
It matches my personality.
I'm often blue.

I wonder what my gifted talent is?
I'm still searching.
Hope it will come soon.

I love blueberries.

I do a lot of praying,
Whenever, wherever.
However, I'm not even good
at that.
I do my best.
Hoping I get through to him.

— by Martha



Right now I feel very stressed about where, when and how much I may have to pay to find safe affordable housing. In the recent two years, I've had to always move in with a room mate in order to avoid costs of damage deposit and share utility costs. However these situations haven't worked out either because I end up in a dysfunctional relationship with my room mates who have always been men. Also too, other situations come up where me and the room mate are in recovery then something happens. One or other of us falters in the recovery process, bringing

ourselves and the other down with us or vice versa.

I need to find a place I can afford by myself so I can take care of my needs and not those around me. For me to be with a room-mate right now or in the near future is not feasible. I end up forgetting about my needs and help in the needs of others before myself. I need to address my addictions and start shutting them down.

One day at a time. I feel the only way to do this would be living on my own, not having to answer to anyone but myself. I'd really like to get on with my life going forward, not backward or stalled.

12. Work is then typed up for participants and returned to them. They are encouraged to write any changes on it and are reassured that it is no trouble to have the work corrected in the way they want. By following this process they are able to experience self expression, learn more about themselves, recognize what they have to say is of value to others, build self esteem, improve literacy skills, and begin to think of themselves as writers.

13. Frame the poems and put them on display in the classroom along with photographs of each author.

REFLECTIONS

Martha's beautiful poem "Blue" (see page 25) speaks of her sadness and ongoing depression, the importance of spirituality in her life and the search she is on for her talent or purpose in life. As well, Martha's poem lets us know that nature is very important to her and that she likes to spend time outdoors.

When Martha read her poem she received much positive feedback from other group members. Martha's face began to glow. Other women in the group who enjoy berry picking shared their stories. A warm and natural exchange of information flowed as women got to know each other. The group began to bond.

Unexpected, wonderful things happen in the classroom when women surrender to the process. Being in the classroom triggered a memory of Martha's father. He was illiterate and beat his children if he found them reading. By sharing this memory, Martha was able to make meaning, heal and move forward in her life. "I started reading when I came to this class. I don't understand it, because I don't like reading. I haven't had much of an education."

On the second day in group Martha went to the library over the lunch hour to get a library card.

Follow Up #1

1. Martha writes about being sad. She is suffering from depression. Working with Martha in the group, she began to disclose issues specific to housing, poor health, poverty, and divorce. In the group we did some problem solving to assist Martha with the pressing issue of the high cost of housing, making suggestions such as get a roommate, negotiate a rent reduction, and look for seniors' housing with not more than 30% of income going to housing costs.
2. As Martha developed trust with the facilitator and group members she began to share more details of her personal life. We learned that she had debts that were being taken off her AISH cheque. These claw backs made it very difficult for Martha to live. We spoke about personal and group advocacy. Martha and I met with her AISH worker to negotiate a reduction in the amount that was being taken off her cheque.
3. Collect and set up a resource binder of leaflets, magazines and handouts on housing.
4. Use "housing" as a writing prompt. Other activities to elicit writing/thinking about housing may include: meditate/visualize your dream house, make a collage of a dream house, write about a childhood memory of a special house, view house plans and write about and design a dream home. Choose activities that honour a holistic approach and support women's learning styles.
5. See the following piece of writing on "housing" that is a result of this activity.

FOLLOW UP WRITING – USING "HOUSING" AS A WRITING PROMPT

It's pretty sad for us women when we need to find housing. Where do we go? Who would even listen to us? My major concern is when looking for accommodation. There isn't enough money for damage and rent. I am on a small income. Every minute is a struggle to make ends meet. There has to be two incomes.

There is also racism when they see us coming. "Oh it's been rented out."

I would like to live in a safe place and where I would feel comfortable.

— Martha

SPIN OFF TOPICS/ISSUES/ ACTIVITIES TO EXPLORE

1. Self Discovery (see page 27)
2. Boundaries
3. Saying No
4. Discrimination
5. Self Care
6. Addictions
7. Grief and Loss
8. Depression
9. 12 Step Groups
10. Self Harming Behaviors

RESOURCE AND MATERIALS

- pens and paper
- mats to mount typed up poems
- coloured pens and embellishments to decorate picture frame mats

SELF DISCOVERY ACTIVITIES TO EXPLORE

Myers Briggs Personality Tests

- Responses to a series of questions provides insight into our personality as identified by descriptive words that include: extraverted/introverted, sensory/intuitive, thinking/feeling, judging/perceiving.

Enneagrams

- Enneagrams are a personality identification system that represents nine personality types: perfectionist, giver, performer, romantic, observer, loyal skeptic, epicure, boss and mediator.

Goddess Cards for self reflection

- Goddess cards are beautifully illustrated images of the many faces of the Goddess as worshipped in cultures around the world. The cards are used as a source of guidance for understanding the present with a view to creating an abundant future. Feminine faces of the divine are used as a pathway to wisdom, power, and healing.

Astrological Signs

- A fun way to discover our uniqueness and connection to the mysteries of the universe.

Learning Styles Inventory

- An easy to fill in questionnaire provides insight into how we best learn. Categories include kinesthetic, auditory and visual preferences. A valuable assessment for both learners and facilitators.

Animal Cards

- Animal cards are used for guidance and inspiration and as a way to find answers to the questions and issues in our lives. Women pick an Animal Card and learn about our connection to nature through animals and their special powers.

Jo Hari Window

- The Jo Hari Window is a model that is used to describe, evaluate and predict aspects of interpersonal communication. This model provides a way to share information about ourselves with others. It also provides a format for receiving information from others. The Jo Hari Window is an excellent way to open up dialogue about judgments and assumptions.

Career Inventory Assessment

- There are a variety of career inventory assessment tools. Check out the Internet. This assessment tool assists in exploring work and career options based on skills and interests. 



“...I would like to live in a safe place and where I would feel comfortable.”

I am

RATIONALE

The search for self is a driving force for many women in the program. Women talk about wanting to know themselves and discover who they are. They speak of being so busy taking care of others that they have lost track of themselves.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- explore and acknowledge their multifaceted roles
- do personal development, “inner work”
- speak their truth
- reclaim themselves and their lives
- have hope

PROCESS

1. Invite women to write down as many responses as they can to the writing prompt “I am”.
2. Everyone writes for seven minutes – this includes the facilitator. Do not invite women to write and then go about doing paper work, or leave the room to do an errand. Participate. Join in. The facilitator is part of the process. She models it.
3. Choose one of the responses from the list.
4. Write about it in more depth for 6 minutes.
5. Invite women to read or talk about what they have written.
6. Open discussion, dialogue and information sharing.

REFLECTIONS

Karen’s honest and insightful writing speaks volumes about her life. She gives us a glimpse into her gambling addiction. This kind of disclosure confirms the gift of writ-

ing as a way to release emotional pain and turmoil and to reach out in search of help.

When a woman writes so honestly she gives others permission to do the same. Often there is an outpouring of personal stories. Group support is very strong and women hold in confidence each other’s stories.

FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES

1. Invite speakers from Gamblers Anonymous & Canadian Foundation on Compulsive Gambling.
2. Gather information on 12 Step Programs and create an Addictions Resource Binder for the classroom.
3. Support women to go to 12 Step meetings.

RESOURCES

1. Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) print materials.
2. The Big Book – a 12 Step Manual.
3. Videos on addictions:

- **When A Man Loves a Woman**
Alice Green is an alcoholic whose attitude towards children and especially her life change after going through detox. (1995 – Meg Ryan and Andy Garcia)

- **28 Days**
A big city newspaper columnist is forced to enter a drug and alcohol rehab centre after stealing a limousine and crashing into a house. (2000 - Sandra Bullock)

- **Clean and Sober**
A Philadelphia real estate agent’s life is on a collision course with disaster. After sharing cocaine with a girl he meets in a bar, he wakes up the next day in her bed to find that she is dead from an overdose.

(1988 – Michael Keaton and Morgan Freeman)

- **Basketball Diaries**

Adaptation of the true story of a teenage boy’s free fall into the harrowing world of drug addiction. Heroin, crime, and prostitution become his reality until, with the help of a friend, he is able to begin the long road back to sanity. (1995 – Leonardo diCaprio)

- **Through a Blue Lens**

The Odd Squad Society, which consists of seven Vancouver police officers, conduct interviews with various drug addicts on the streets of Vancouver, British Columbia (1999 - National Film Board)

GAMBLING RESEARCH COMPILED BY THE CANADIAN FOUNDATION ON COMPULSIVE GAMBLING

Albertans spend the highest amount of money per capita on gambling in Canada.

There are 6 000 Video Lottery Terminals (VLTs) in Alberta, of that number, 1 200 are in Edmonton. Fifteen percent of the profits from VLTs go to the business where they are located, and the remaining 85% is revenue for the Alberta government.

In 1999 a total of \$5,600,000,000.00 was wagered in Alberta (total of VLTs, Casino Gaming Terminals (CGT), Lotteries, Bingo, Casino, Raffles, Pull Tickets, Horse Races). Of this amount, the Alberta government saw a profit of \$770,000,000.00

VLTs are called the crack/cocaine of gambling.

(Continued on page 30)

I am...

I am a mother
I am a wife
I am a compulsive gambler
I am not myself anymore
I am a daughter
I am a sister
I am an aunt
I am a friend
I am a Godmother
I am a caregiver
I am a lost person

I am a compulsive gambler and I hate what it has done to my life and the people around me. I wish with all my heart I could just get a needle or something and I would be cured.

But there is no quick fix. I resent it that I am an addict because I want better things for my life and that of my family. I resent that I have to struggle with this everyday of my life and I am scared of what could happen should I fall again.

I just want a normal life. That's all I ever wanted. I am part way to that goal, having a husband and two children. A nice home to raise my kids, but I want my addiction to go away and leave me alone.



Sometimes when I am playing with my kids or spending time with my husband I feel so happy and at peace with life. Then suddenly, the temptation of my addiction creeps up on me and ruins the rest of my day because I have to spend the rest of that day fighting off the temptations. It's like coming up for air in a lake and someone throws you an anchor."

— Karen

I remember the person I used to be - the laughter, the joy and the love. I had so much to give. I miss that person and so do others. I know she is still around but where do I find her? Where did I go? Sometimes I still see a glimpse of her but I know that she is waiting some day to appear. She is deep inside, not really hiding, just needing a hopeful day to let herself be found. The steps are being built and getting higher. I'll get strong, just wait and see. Then my real self will come out of me. I will be back to stand my ground - strong as the wind.

— Wendy

There are three million people in Alberta and 100,000 of them have a problem with compulsive gambling.

Gamblers numb themselves with their gambling. Addicts report that this activity provides a temporary escape from feeling, and masks underlying or unresolved issues in their lives that are often linked to abuse, violence, and feeling silenced.

Of all addictions, gambling has the highest link to suicide. Gambling addicts feel incredible shame and guilt.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Canadian Foundation on Compulsive Gambling (CFCGA)
(780) 461-1259

Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC)
1-800-665-9676 (24 hour)

Treatment Centres

- Lloydminster (Slim Thorpe)
- Lethbridge (South Country)
- St. Albert (Poundmaker)
- Calgary (Villa Treatment Centre)

Gamblers Anonymous/Gam Anon – Information Hot Line

- Edmonton
(780) 463-0892 (24 hour)
- Calgary
(430) 237-0654 (24 hour) 

... a snack with some “kick” to it

RATIONALE

Women come to the classroom hungry. They report not having food for themselves and their families. In response to this we have worked with the Edmonton Food Bank to access a range of nutritious snacks that are made available to women in the classroom.

As well, we incorporated a food preparation activity into the program. Every Thursday afternoon women cook and eat together. Women decide what they want to make, the ingredients are purchased, and they take the lead in the food preparation.

One woman from Thailand made spring rolls, several First Nations women prepared bannock, and we enjoyed a Vietnamese noodle dish. We have eaten lentil soup, cookies, sushi, banana bread, and made gingerbread houses together.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- share their talents with each other
- strengthen their self worth
- have fun working together
- experience and build community
- are fed, and leftovers are taken home to feed their families
- learn about various cultural traditions
- share knowledge about free meals in the city, and learn how to access the Edmonton Food Bank
- learn how to prepare economical and nutritious meals
- record and share recipes

RECIPE

*See page 31.

REFLECTIONS

I love the feeling when, as a group, we sit down to share in a meal or snack that was prepared by group members. It is what I call “community”. There are always lots of compliments for the cooks and an eagerness to have a copy of the recipe. There is an easy and natural flow of conversation and laughter. We enjoy being together.

Women in recovery report having voracious appetites. One young woman who had recently gotten off methadone, said, “If I had the money, I would eat ten times a day.” The relationship we have with food is symbolic of how we view ourselves and is key to the process of healing.

Food is an unobtrusive way to begin to uncover and talk about issues of body image, self care and addictions. Women report being skinny when they were active in their addictions because they simply did not eat. Family members made judgements about their addictions based on how much they weighed and said things like, “You’re so skinny. You must be back into coke.”

FOLLOW UP

- Form or join with a Collective Kitchen
- Become a member of the We Can Food Co-op
- Produce a cookbook and sell it as a fundraiser
- Research free places to eat
- Take a field trip to the Food Bank and ensure that women know how to access this resource
- Explore issues of body image and women and advertising
- Explore the use of drugs and weight 



Ester's Curry Bagels

Ingredients

Bagels
Yellow Onion
Mushrooms
Hot banana peppers
Cheddar cheese
Curry powder

1. Turn on the oven to 400.
2. Cut bagels in half, toast and butter them.
3. Chop mushrooms, onions, and banana peppers, and grate cheese. Layer ingredients on toasted bagel starting with onions, mushrooms, banana peppers and cheese.

Sprinkle with curry powder.

4. Line cookie sheet with tinfoil and arrange bagels on cookie sheet.
5. Cook for 10 minutes or until cheese is melted.

Instead of bagels, try pita bread, sliced bread, Kaiser buns, English muffins, tea biscuits, or bannock.

This is a quick and easy snack to prepare. For children who do not like curry try using seasoning salt or pizza sauce for flavor.



Acquainted with the Night

RATIONALE

Move with the energy in the group. Respond to what women name as important. Strive to make the curriculum relevant, meaningful and rich. These practices guide me and I remind myself that they are key to creating a program that has meaning and hope. The poem, *Acquainted with the Night*, by Robert Frost, is an example of an activity that exemplifies how these principles are put into practice.

Participants in the program are often deeply moved by poetry that is included in our morning readings, or in classroom library books or by a poem that they have discovered. Often the writing that is most compelling is a piece written by another woman in the class or writing that has been produced by participants in similar programs. The emotional response is often profound and in-depth discussion leads to much self-discovery.

The following poem was brought to class by Gay, a participant in the program. Gay searched for, and found the poem on the Internet. The poem spoke directly to her life experience, and she wanted to share it with other women in the program.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- validate their interests, needs and desires
- facilitate classroom activities
- honour their lived experience
- explore poetry as a literary form
- write poetry

PROCESS

1. Copies of the poem *Acquainted with the Night* were distributed to group members.
2. Gay talked about the relevance of the poem in her life. She said that

the poem was a metaphor and explained what this meant. Gay said that it was about more than it seemed to be – about more than a night-time walk. It was up to the reader to find out what its special meaning was to her.

3. The poem was read out loud – first by Gay and then read out loud again around the class, with additional time, in silence, for reflection.
4. In turn, around the class, each woman responded to what the poem meant to her.
5. Gay felt the poem spoke to her addictions. It resonated with her feelings of isolation, loneliness, shame and grief. She discussed the rhyming scheme of the poem and how it reinforced the feelings of repetition, monotony and the sense of no escape.
6. One member of the group shared her reflections that included the issue of prostitution. Once she gave voice to the issues, other women in the group said that this resonated for them too. This led to a discussion of prostitution of the self in an abusive relationship and another form of addiction, the addiction to this type of relationship.
7. Women wrote freely for a timed 5 minutes.
8. Women shared their thoughts. Some chose to read their writing out loud and received positive feedback from the rest of the group. One of the women, who had until this point in the lesson only listened and not contributed, broke through her inner dam and said, “What you are talking about is my story,” and then she told it. (All the women in the group had let go of or were in the process of letting go of abusive relationships.)

9. Women wrote for a second time, using the first line from the poem “I have been acquainted with the night . . .” and kept on writing whatever each person felt.

REFLECTIONS

The transformational aspect of the poem was acknowledged – the gifts of hard life experience and the strength gained enable a woman to move forward on a different path. The discussion moved from the darkness of these experiences to a sense of their own coming into light and knowing.

The poem written by Cheryl is an example of the work that was produced. The original of this writing was in reality a prose poem. When the facilitator typed it up, the addition of attractive font, poetry format, decorative paper and a mat made the piece of work quite a celebration of Cheryl’s writing gift with a corresponding reinforcement of her self-esteem.

Many beliefs that women had about their reasons for behaving the way they had in staying in an abusive relationship were laid out on the table. Tears of despair that had begun our morning ended in healing laughter as they acknowledged their previous irrational beliefs and celebrated their freedom of choice.

FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES

- Healthy vs. non-healthy relationships
- Addictions
- Read and write love poetry
- Poetic metaphors to gain insight into life experiences, for example, “my life is like . . .”

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS

- copies of the poem *Acquainted with the Night*
- decorative paper to print typed poem
- picture framing mats to mount poem 

I have been

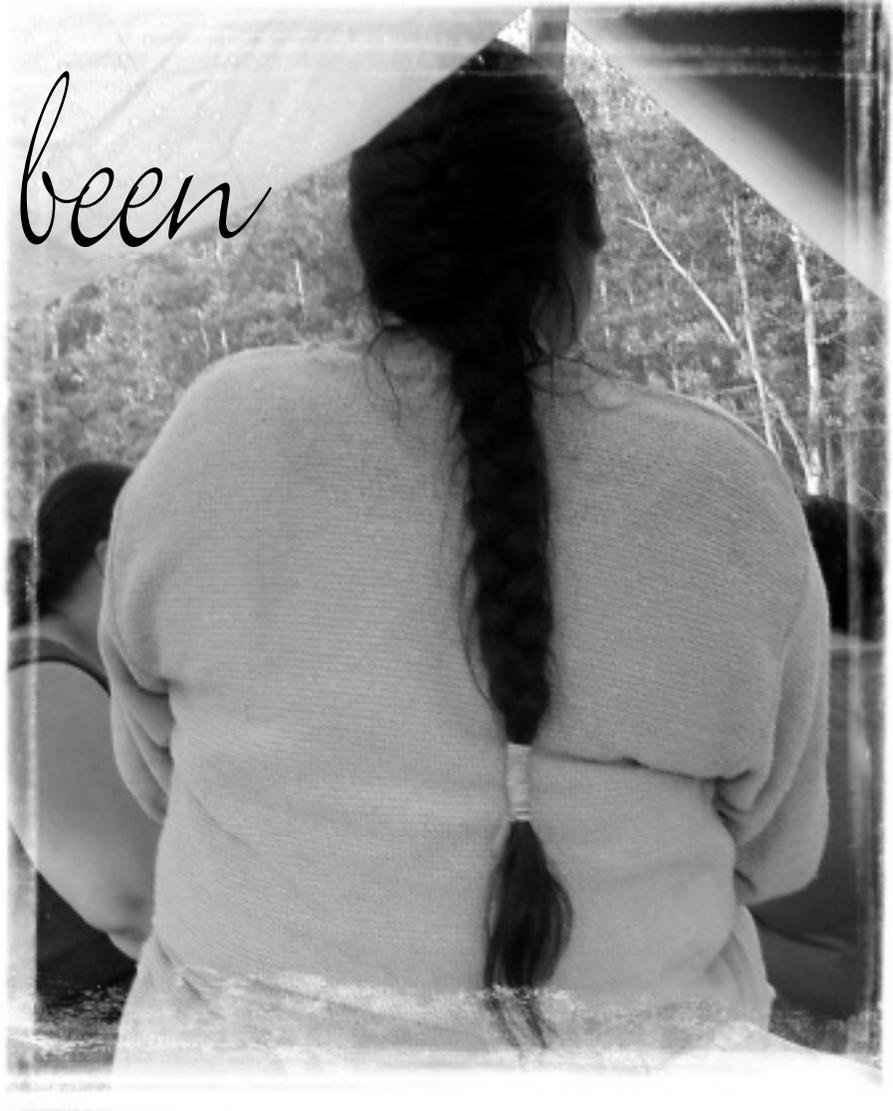
I have been acquainted
with the night
And prayed for light,
For no more pain,
For a ray of hope
To want to live again,
For peace, serenity,
clear direction,
A sense of purpose,
To feel more fulfilled,
More complete,
More sure of myself.

Lots of bad things happen
in the night
But also in the light.
I understand without pain there
can be no sense of relief
Without hate – no love,
Without sadness – no joy.

I know there has to be a balance of sorts.
Life has to be lived in order to die.
What goes around comes around.
Where's the balance in that?
It's a full circle.
The night is also when you snuggle,
Can relax a little,
Make love
And sleep – hopefully.

I have lived through the day and prayed
for the night.

— by Cheryl



ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT

**I have been one acquainted with the night
I have walked out in rain – and back in rain.
I have out walked the furthest city light**

**I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.**

**I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,**

**But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height
One luminary clock against the sky**

**Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right,
I have been one acquainted with the night.**

— by Robert Frost

Part Two
HEALING



Women's Stories — Women's Lives

Writing as Ritual

RATIONALE

Rituals are an important part of what happens in the classroom. They provide comfort, structure and predictability. We create rituals such as lighting candles, playing background music, doing a daily check-in, sweet grass ceremonies, and reading inspiration writings.

We often begin the day with a reading from a daily reader. It is fun to explore and talk about how the reading “speaks” to us. We are more able to see the patterns that repeat themselves in our lives. We begin to see subtleties that in the past that went unnoticed. We wake up. We become more alive and are more present.

Sometimes women’s words begin to flow in response to the words of others. Using a daily reading assists in the process of women writing about their own experiences.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- have increased insight into life experiences
- speak freely, honestly and openly
- talk about feelings
- begin to heal
- connect to their strength through their pain
- increase their knowledge about self harming behavior
- learn from the past

PROCESS

1. A book of daily readings is selected and read.
2. Group members listen and spend a few quiet moments linking the reading to our lives and experiences.

3. Suggest that women reflect on the following questions: What is the message for me, from this reading today? Does it speak to me? What does it say?
4. Group discussion – exploring the open-ended questions.
5. Invite women to write in response to the reading. Write for six minutes.
6. Invite women to read their writing.

REFLECTIONS

Jennifer’s writing (page 37) is insightful. She writes about her healing journey and the importance of forgiveness to enable her to love and care for herself. Jennifer’s writing prompted a spin-off writing activity focused on forgiveness.

I have shown the National Film Board’s Earth Walk to open up discussion about healing, forgiveness, and self love. Forgiveness is a central theme in the film. A forgiveness ritual that is suggested specifies that we forgive ourselves by writing down what we forgive ourselves for - seventy times a day for seven days.

FOLLOW UP ACTIVITY

Writing prompt – Forgiveness

I forgive myself for hurting myself with drugs and alcohol. The damage I have done is there and always will be. I accept that and, yes, I do forgive myself. I also forgive myself for the reasons I was charged. Stealing used to be my fantasy and now I’m terrified. I can’t imagine how I ever stole as much as I have. At times it does eat at me and it

makes me clench when I think about it – but I do forgive myself.

Part of me can’t forgive and I’m not sure what part, but it has to do with my kids.

— Darlene

If we do not forgive others, we will not be forgiven. It seems that I have and do on a continual basis, forgive those who I feel have wronged me. But I feel others have not and do not return that forgiveness to me.

I forgive myself for:

- feeling intimidated
- not speaking up
- not taking initiative
- not progressing quickly enough
- feeling rejected
- not doing proper and regular exercising

— Carol

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS

- Earth Walk, National Film Board, 1992. A quest for well being, a journey away from fear towards understanding; in search of healing, a woman follows her instincts to be with other women in crisis.
- daily readers – see bibliography ■

THE Woman IN THE Mirror...



The woman in the mirror is me. But I don't like what I see. When I look in the mirror I only see the Jennifer of yesterday. And that Jennifer was not a very nice person. She didn't care about anyone, not even herself.

I know that Jennifer is yesterday's Jennifer. But I haven't truly found the real Jennifer. I'm still looking for her. I hope to be able to find her. For she is a loving person who has a lot of love to give. She's a wonderful person. I'm working on bringing that Jennifer home but I haven't truly

accepted her or forgiven her for all the wrong she has done. I have to love her, forgive her and accept her for who she is before she can come home.

There are times when I feel I haven't done this. Then I turn my back on her and bring up all the wrongs she has done and I am right back at the beginning.

— Jennifer

FORGIVENESS...

I forgive myself for lying to my parents when I was younger.

I forgive myself for calling the police on my Mom when I was trying to move out.

I forgive myself for not trying to fight for my kids and get them back.

I forgive myself for not trying to find a place to live and be on my own.

I forgive myself for lying to my husband and telling him that I don't go out at night, but I do, just to get the money for my drugs.

I forgive myself for being a slow learner because it's my Mom's fault the way I am today. But I am trying to learn different things each day.

I forgive myself for being an alcoholic, but now I am feeling better I might quit.

— Sheri



I forgive myself for feeling so ashamed for what I did. For what happened. For not confiding in some one to help me over my problems.

— Deborah

Striker Bag - First Nations Craft

RATIONALE

Doing crafts takes women's minds off the demands in their lives. The focus is on the craft. Doing the hand work gives women a reprieve from the unrelenting demands in their lives. For a short period of time they can put their worries aside. Doing crafts "stops the stinking thinking." Women report being so focused on the beadwork that their next court dates and the fear of getting put in jail is out of their mind. One woman said that doing crafts was a "pleasure in a life of pain."

Morningstar shared her teachings about making crafts. For her and her people, making crafts is a spiritual experience. "When we connect to our creative spirit we connect to the great spirit. It is therapeutic and healing. It is a rebirth of spirit. It was there all along, but it was lost."

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- learn new skills
- pass new skills on to others. "It's how it's supposed to be. That they pass it along to others. That's the First Nations Way." Elsie, Aboriginal Women's Program Coordinator at Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton
- may use their crafting skills to generate income (craft sales/entrepreneurial)
- come to know that they are creative
- have a spiritual experience - crafts feed the spirit
- build self esteem - we see changes in women's bodies, they sit up straight with bright eyes, smiling, and showing pride in themselves

- feel productive and experience a sense of accomplishment
- give back to the agency by making two craft items – one for Elizabeth Fry and one for themselves.
- understand crafts are a self care strategy. "Staying productive is key to staying healthy."
- have a feeling of accomplishment, " I didn't know that I could do it."
- who are of First Nation's descent, identify themselves as such and feel pride in their heritage
- learn about Aboriginal culture and history

REFLECTIONS

It is a joy to participate in the First Nations craft activities at Elizabeth Fry on Monday afternoons. Elsie Paul, our First Nations Program co-ordinator, leads the activity. She not only teaches the skills to make a specific craft, but she also works to ensure that women know the traditional teachings associated with their making. Cree is taught and stories are told. Women sit in a circle and very quickly take the lead in teaching others what they have learned. Women feel productive and creative. They are pleasantly surprised with their accomplishments.

Women who participate in the craft activities are asked to make

two craft items – one for themselves and one for the agency. The donated items are sold at a yearly craft sale with the proceeds going back to the agency. This policy was initially put in place as a way to generate funds to replenish craft supplies. Over time we have come to learn that women are keen to donate a craft back to the agency. This is their way of demonstrating their gratitude and a tangible way of giving back to an agency that has given them so much.

MATERIALS AND SUPPLIES

Leather (71/2" square of moose, deer or cow hide)

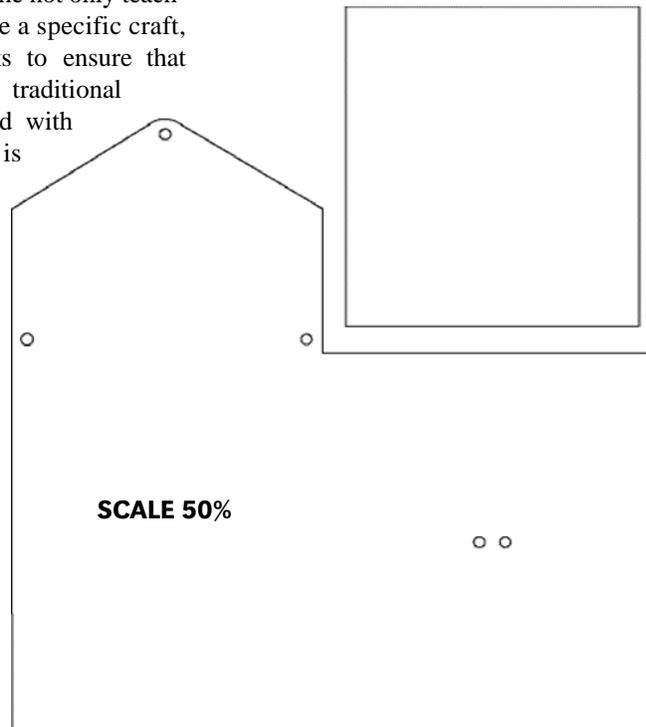
Beads –seed beads and pony beads

Thread

Leather punch

Wax (optional)

Cone beads (optional) 



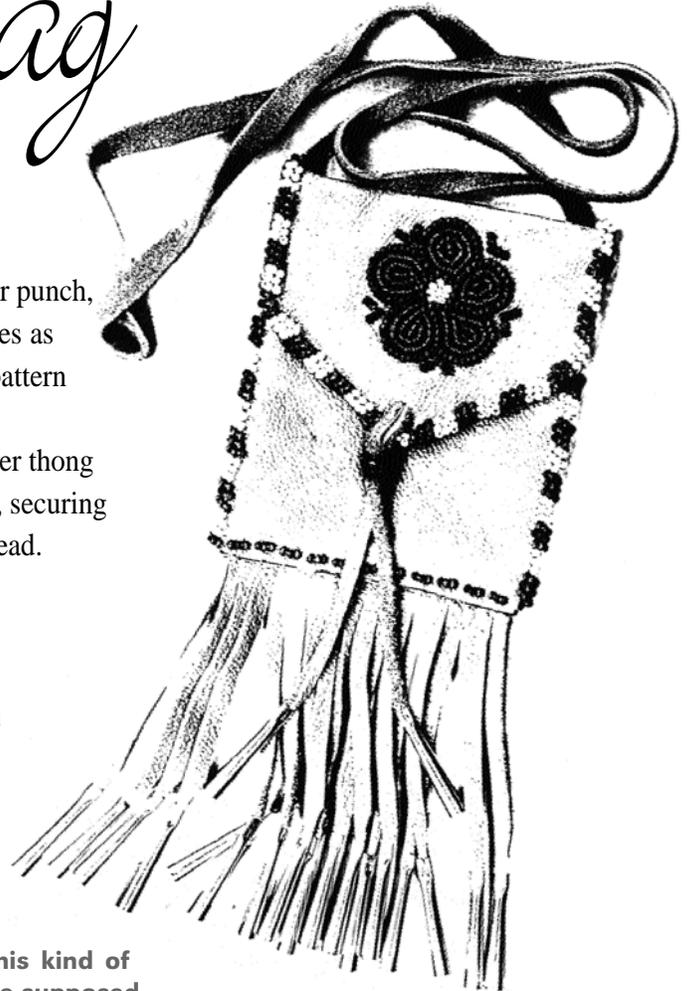
Striker Bag

Keeping the fire going was a big responsibility among the First Nations' people before the contact period. The Striker Bag was designed to hold fire-making equipment – flint, matches and birch bark.

We make this bag now because it symbolizes the past and gives the starting point to learn about culture and traditions through story-telling.

1. Place the pattern pieces on hide and cut on lengthwise grain.
2. Fold pouch and baste right side of pouch.
3. Cut left side of fold and baste.
4. Beadwork on flap
 - place masking tape on back of leather beadwork area
 - complete beadwork on flap
5. Use lazy beadwork stitch to close sides of pouch. Pick up 5 – 7 beads for each stitch.
6. Use lazy beadwork stitch to finish edge of flap.
7. Attach fringe piece to bottom of bag. Secure using beads, stitching through the three layers of leather.
8. Cut fringe.

9. Flap closing
 - Using leather punch, punch out holes as indicated on pattern pieces.
 - Thread leather thong through holes, securing with a pony bead.
10. Neck Strap
 - cut leather thong to desired length
 - tie a knot to secure.



“When you do this kind of beadwork you are supposed to have a positive outlook, because beadwork is sacred. The deer hide is sacred. The deer traveled many journeys.

I usually pray when I do this work. I pray to the four directions. I was taught this years back. My father-in-law and other elders taught me through the years. I don't enter into this kind of work with negative energy. You don't know who is going to wear this. You want to give them good energy. I felt happy making this. If I'm unbalanced, I don't go near this work. If you're

“using” you're not supposed to wear this jewelry.

“I wear buffalo sinew on my left ring finger. Buffalo is strong. It protects me. I can make something out of it and carry it with me. I smudge it with sweet grass. If I am in my moon time then I smudge it with sage. It is very strong and very sacred.

Buffalo sinew is from Mother Earth. The hide guides and watches over me.”

— Morningstar

Reparative Art - Collage as self portrait

RATIONALE

I picked up the call and spoke with Gayle Burritt, an Edmonton artist. She talked about her interest in the Changing Paths program and her desire to volunteer her time to work in the classroom. She was keen to explore the link between words and images.

Gayle spoke of the phenomena of women's work - the ongoing, never ending process of cutting apart and putting back together of food, fabric and life experiences; a fascinating concept that brings to conscious awareness the ongoing mending, repairing and creation of our lives. Everything we do is re-constructive. Most of women's work is about taking something apart and putting it back together to create something new.

Gayle and I chose a workshop date and named the session: "Reparative Art – Using Collage as a Vehicle for the Creation of Self-portraits." The process would be that of ripping, joining together and ripping again the pieces of our lives – as experienced through the art form of collage.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- learn to trust the creative process and heed their inner voice
- experience a process of creative flow
- create through art
- learn the value of welcoming change in one's life
- are sensitized to symbols and

the powerful role they play in our lives

- become aware of unconscious patterns of behavior and thought patterns
- learn art is fun and a tool for self-discovery and healing

PROCESS

1. Talk about the phenomena of women's work that is rooted in the process of cutting apart and putting back together. Explore examples of this phenomenon, and share stories.

Examples include:

- Food preparation: cutting apart of various foods and putting them back together in the creation of recipes
- Quilting: cutting apart of fabrics and sewing them together to form a new piece of fabric
- Knitting: joining together of separate pieces of yarn to make a new garment
- Life: sorting and sifting through life experiences with the intent to discard, repair and re-create the life we choose to live

2. Silently reflect on our lives – think about what we want and what is important to us. Think about where we are and where we want to be. Choose one word that captures those thoughts.
3. Keeping the word in mind, take 15 to 20 minutes to look through magazines and randomly choose pictures, words, sentences, etc. that reflect your word or just pick what appeals to you without thinking about it. Spontaneously

choose and rip out what speaks to you. Do not judge or question. Flow with your intuitive self – respond to colour, texture and images and RIP!

4. Create a collage by pasting down the images and words that were ripped from the magazines.
5. Invite each woman to talk about and "read" her collage. Have group members guess what the "word" was that guided the creation of the collage.
6. RIP the collage apart. There may be resistance to rip apart the collage. The ripping may become calculated and guarded. To compensate for this, turn the collage upside down, lay a clean piece of paper on top of the collage and RIP!
7. Select a new word, keeping in mind the process as detailed in #2 of the process. This word will be your guide as you begin the second stage ripping images and words from magazines.
8. You now have two batches of images and words to use to build the final collage.
9. Begin the process of building a collage for the second time. When laying down images and words in the creation of the second stage collage keep in mind design elements that include: line, shape, texture, colour and perspective. Use these elements to assist in the development of a composition. Ignore the images and words and work with the design element of lines or colour – you choose. Work to connect lines, make seamless the overlaying of image, words and colour. Begin to "see" at a different level. Let go of what the first collage looked like. Do not try to recreate it. Begin anew!
10. If the composition you create makes you feel uncomfortable, assess what it is that creates this

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feeling, and continue working on your piece. If you really do not like where you arrived, rip what you have done into fragments to be reused with new material.

11. Mount the finished collages on a wall. Stand back to view them. Begin the discussion and share the meaning, insights and discoveries.
12. Name the collage and write about it.
13. Build into your budget the necessary funds to have the collages framed or at least dry mounted. The collages are works of art and should be displayed as such. It validates life experience and builds self-esteem.

REFLECTIONS

Collages are a common art/education activity in life skills classrooms. This collage building activity takes the lesson one step further. Participants are asked to rip apart their collage and begin the process again. The activity is symbolic. It's about transformation. It invites us to change, with the understanding that life does not change if nothing changes. Reparative art beckons us to repair our lives, to create something beautiful out of tatters, like the phoenix rising out of ashes.

“Making this collage helped me to make sense of what is going on (in my life)”

“Mend, repair, cut apart and put back together. That's what we are doing.”

— Gayle

MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

- Magazines and printed materials – including *Time*, *Vogue*, *People*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *National Geographic*.
- Flip chart paper
- Glue sticks 

Martha's Bannock

RATIONALE

We have a nickname for Martha. We call her Martha, the Master Bannock maker. Martha taught many of us how to make bannock. Martha is a wise and generous woman. She offered her bannock-making talents in response to an invitation to prepare food together one Thursday afternoon.

Martha's bannock has graced the table of many celebrations and feasts at Elizabeth Fry including the Elders' Pot Luck and the community Christmas party. Martha shared her talents with other women in the Changing Paths program. I have a strong memory of Martha sitting in the E. Fry kitchen as she gave instructions to other women in the program while they prepared bannock under her guidance.

Food is symbolic. It provides us with a multitude of learnings. The healing process is connected to food. We heal when we care enough about ourselves to eat nutritious food, to honour its source, to be mindful of our connection to the land and our role as its stewards. Food reminds us of our needs. It connects us to our bodies – for some women this is a painful place to be. Women report “numbing out” – finding ways to kill the emotional and physical pain by leaving their bodies and living in their heads. Food brings us to a reconnection with the physical and spiritual realms.

Preparing and sharing food works magically when the ideas of what to prepare come from women in the group. If no one in the group is interested or able to take the lead in food

preparation, I often let the session go. When an idea surfaces from the group – it is fun to be part of the growing energy. Women step up and own their expertise and knowing. We watch as experienced hands take us on a delicious journey.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- build community through the preparation and sharing of food
- share their talents by teaching others
- strengthen their self-esteem and self-worth by a public recognition of their skills
- share personal stories and revisit cultural practices

My Mother didn't make bannock. Her bannock was hard. She went to residential school. But she made beautiful bread. How did my Mom make bread? We had no running water. We had to thaw the snow, or go to the slough and strain the water through a rag.”

— Elsie

“My Mom hated to waste, so I work in all of the flour in the bowl.”

“My Mom liked her bannock with lard and jam. She used to mix together lard and syrup. If we don't have crackers we used to break bannock in our soup. They say bannock is best hot right out of

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Martha's Bannock

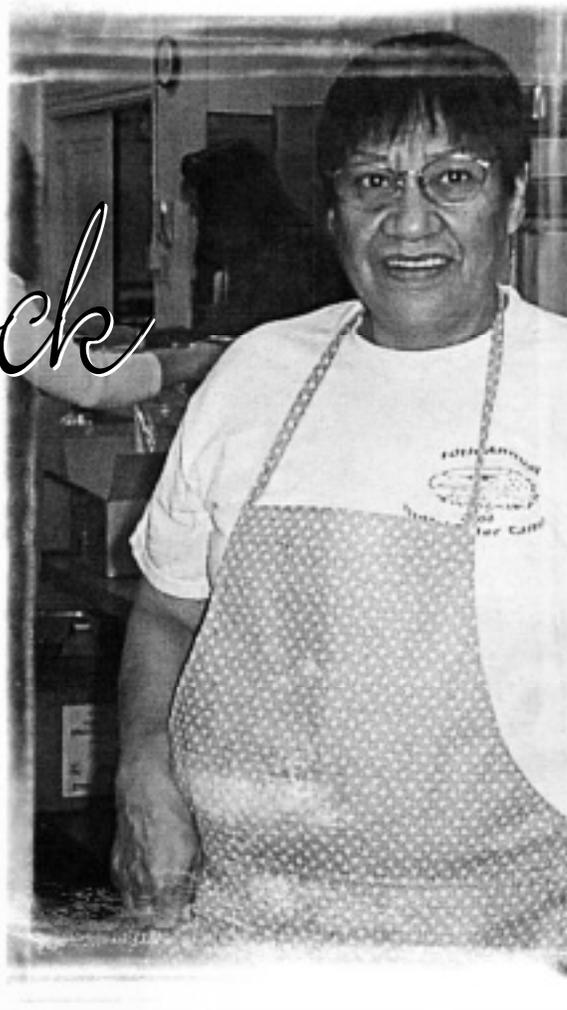
Ingredients

- 4 cups flour
- 4 tbsp. baking powder
- handful of sugar
- 1 cup margarine, lard, or oil
- 1 cup milk
- 1 cup water

1. Pre-heat oven to 425°
2. Measure and thoroughly mix together flour and baking powder
3. Add sugar and mix
4. Add margarine, lard or oil Work in until the shortening is mixed in thoroughly
5. Make a well in the centre of the mixture
6. Add milk and water
7. Using a circular motion, gently mix the liquid with a fork
8. Continue to mix until a ball of dough forms
9. Knead gently
10. Put dough on a cookie sheet and knead with knuckles, gently stretching the dough to fill the cookie sheet
11. Using a fork, poke holes in the bannock all over
12. Bake for 25 minutes or until bannock is golden brown
13. Take bannock out of the oven and remove it from the cookie sheet. Stand bannock up to cool
14. Eat bannock by breaking off pieces. Do not cut with a knife because it gets sticky inside
15. Eat with butter. Serve with soup, stew or as a snack

Recipe hints:

- It is important to really mix the baking powder into the flour.
- Add one egg for a softer dough.
- Remove bannock from the oven and rub it with butter.



"I like my bannock the same colour as my skin."

"I cook bannock until it smells done."

"My Mom used to put fish eggs in bannock. We've been eating caviar for centuries and didn't know it."

— Elsie

"You don't fool around with bannock. The less you knead it, the better the results."

"When my Mom made bannock, she used water. We were so poor that we seldom had milk. It was such a treat for us to have milk to drink."

— Martha

"Mend, repair, cut apart and put back together. That's what we are doing." — Gayle

the oven, but I like mine after leaving it for a while. I leave it in a plastic bag. It softens up. We used to make our bannock into toast. When our toaster broke down we used to toast it in the oven.”

— Georgina

REFLECTIONS

There are some wonderful stories that are shared as women sit down and share food together. One afternoon over bannock and tea, Elsie began talking about the importance of feasts in First Nations' culture.

“When feasting we tell stories in the traditional way. It is a way of re-connecting and bonding. Feasts happen four times a year. It was a way for people to get to know new people. People meet mates during the feasts and celebrations. (Elsie referred to it as a time to “go snagging”. Star blankets were historically known as “snagging blankets.”)

FOLLOW UP

- produce a cookbook with the recipes shared in group
- use food memories as a writing prompt in the classroom
- explore the emotional and spiritual aspects of food
- share information and recipes on low cost, nutritious foods
- share food shopping tips and strategies to stretch the food dollar
- have women create a book of their favourite recipes and stories ■

Part Two

WOMEN'S ROLES



Women's Stories — Women's Lives

AND RELATIONSHIPS

Being a Mother

RATIONALE

The majority of women in the Changing Paths program are mothers. They speak of their love for their children. Women also share their pain and grief as they speak and write about the loss of their children. It is sad. The majority of writing done in the classroom about children and the role of being a mother is in relation to issues of loss, pain, and suffering.

Women speak and write about the loss of children to death, apprehension of children by the child welfare system, by their ex-husbands, and by their in-laws. They are challenged to make decisions about abortion and adoption issues. Parenting from a distance is the norm for women who are incarcerated. Women share their stories of trying to make sense of legal issues of Temporary Guardianship Orders (TGO) and Permanent Guardianship Orders (PGO). They beat themselves up and judge themselves harshly for lack of knowledge about parental rights. Women report signing off legal papers without knowledge of the long-term consequences and then going to court to fight to get their children back.

The ability to write and speak about the pain of being a mother is a gift. It takes great courage for women to do such deep emotional work. The process of writing provides an opportunity to feel the feelings and stay with the pain, confusion, guilt and shame. This process is healing. Women come to know and own their strength and power. They are able to carry on.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- express their feelings
- support each other
- receive validation through telling their stories
- work to heal their inner child
- learn how to take action on issues of importance to them

PROCESS

1. Invite women to write following the guidelines for freewriting. See page 21
2. Ask women to identify "themes" in their writing.
3. Explore the potential for follow-up action and activities. It is because of the writing that women did about child welfare issues that Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton hosted an Open Forum on Child Welfare.
4. Be aware that sometimes the act of writing about life issues is enough. **There is not always need to follow up, take action or do anything.**

I am pregnant but I am going to have an abortion. I am very confused now because I saw the baby in the ultra sound room yesterday. I just wanted to cry because I can't believe I am going to go through with this and I am afraid my mother might find out somehow.

But I can't keep the baby because I wouldn't be able to raise another child on my own. It's too hard. I'm already having problems with my two year

old. I can't get her to listen. It's very frustrating. She whines and cries all the time and gets up in the middle of the night so I haven't been getting any sleep.

I am very angry at the father because he was supposed to come and visit her yesterday but he never came. He's not supposed to visit her but I gave him a chance and he screwed up. I am sick of his excuses and don't want to give him any more chances.

Anonymous

Ah well I am a new Mother and it feels so good to be a Mom. I'm so happy.

Sometimes I feel like I'm not a Mom because it's my first time being a Mom. I just feel lonely without the father around me and my girl. I wish he wasn't in jail. I miss him so much. Once in a while I cry because he's not with me.

Besides that I am happy deep down inside because I have a baby in my life. I feel like I have a new life now and I am grateful for that.

I wanna go back to court and get this house arrest dismissed. And I want my baby's father here with us.

I truly want a normal life. I want to have freedom instead of being under house arrest. I want to feel free to go out and take my baby out for a walk and to feel free to do things that have to be done.

July 3, 2001

(Continued on page 48)

I am feeling...

I am feeling out of it right now and just want to sit back and cry. Part of it is because my mother's family is so unsupportive of both my relationship and my pregnancy. We are so excited about going to the doctor tomorrow and getting to hear the baby's heartbeat.

I don't feel that side of the family could care even if I were living on the street and am doing my best to raise our child. They think I'm going to have my baby and then pawn it off on them to raise. I wouldn't do that.

I am so thrilled that I am pregnant and will raise a family with my partner. It is my biggest dream and now my reality. I want a child so desperately because of my abortion. I want to replace the child that I lost. I have a yearning to be the mother that I should have been with my first child.

December 20, 2000

I am going insane. I just feel lonely and depressed because of being under house arrest. I can't stand it. I just wish my new court date will hurry up so I could get



this dismissed and live a normal life.

I also feel like I am very ugly and big and fat, not good for anything, pregnant woman. I even feel really depressed almost everyday because of how I look. I know it's only for a while because of me being pregnant but I just feel so different and funny looking.

I know deep down inside I feel so happy to have a child in my life to straighten my act up. TRUE.

March 19, 2001

We write to heighten our own awareness of life...

We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospection.

When I don't write I feel my world shrinking. I feel I lose my fire, my colour.

— Anais Nin,
The Diary of Anais Nin, Vol V.

REFLECTIONS

This freeflow writing activity and the writing it produced is an excellent example of how writing is a pathway to the very personal issues of women in the program. Issues, personal hardships, and experiences often become secrets that are kept under wraps for fear of judgement or punishment.

Writing works to give voice to the issues – it frees us. Writing works to lighten the load and release the tormenting voices and messages that race in our head and shout their bad advice.

Women write. They share their writing. In the process, women experience a lightness, a release. They have begun a healing journey.

FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES

- referral to grief and loss, adoption and abortion counseling
- self care – brainstorm ways to take care of ourselves
- discussion about "parenting ourselves"
- referral to Elizabeth Fry's Traditional Parenting program
- Health for Two program – City of Edmonton Capital Health
- Tough Times Handbook for listing of community resources and parenting supports
- discussion about setting up a babysitting co-op
- put up posters about birth control, sexuality, date rape, and parenting
- always have a full basket of free condoms in the classroom
- discuss relationship issues – what is a healthy relationship/unhealthy relationship/abusive relationship
- guest speakers and discussion on HIV, safe sex, sexuality issues
- refer to activity on – Child Welfare Open Forum page 64 

Messages from the Past

RATIONALE

"If nothing changes, nothing changes."

12 Step Program

This simple and powerful slogan is borrowed from the very successful 12 step program and used in the classroom as a way to become conscious of patterns of behavior and the thought processes behind them. It beckons us to change. We can not change others. We can only change ourselves. The magic of this kind of work is that when we do our own inner healing work, the world changes. Life becomes better.

Women report being in relationships with abusive partners, struggling with addictions, poverty and poor health. Sessions often start with stories of how horrific life has been. The pain, suffering and abuse are almost unimaginable. As women's stories unfold, it is clear that messages and experiences from the past are keeping them stuck. The past keeps playing itself out. By re-visiting the past, women are able to become conscious of how past experiences continue to inform today's reality.

Writing provides a pathway to the past. Memories surface in response to writing prompts. Writing becomes a pathway to healing.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- write about feelings and life experiences
- explore issues that resulted in coming into conflict with the law
- understand that writing may become a pathway for healing

- share their pain and grieve their losses
- take steps towards overcoming self-harming behaviors
- begin inner child healing

PROCESS

1. Invite women to select from a variety of coloured ink pens and writing paper or journal books.
2. Talk about the value of writing and explain why we write.
3. Put on quiet music.
4. Write for seven minutes in response to a writing prompt. Suggestions for writing prompts:
I'm thinking about . . .
My life is like . . .
Money memories . . .
You told me . . .
Childhood memories . . .
I used to be and now I am . . .
5. Invite women to talk about what the experience of writing was like for them
6. Ask women to read their writing – passing is OK
7. Suggest that group members provide feedback. Give examples of constructive feedback – "I liked", "I'd like to know more about . . ."
8. Type up women's writing and bring it to class for the next day.
9. Mount writing on display board.

I'M THINKING ABOUT . . .

This morning I am thinking about my Mother. She's getting out of the Edmonton Institution for Women. I'm so happy for her. I can't wait until Sunday when she comes

(Continued on page 50)

Childhood Memories...

I would like to write about my Mother. This is a woman who so gently allowed me to be. She embraced my fears and wiped away my tears. When I was sick she would tuck me into a soft cozy comforter with a teddy bear at my side.

My successes are never unnoticed, her encouragement came naturally, her belief in my ability was never doubted. Even today as a grown woman, she'll still tuck me in on sick days, encourage me to never give up. She embraces my fears and wipes away my tears. She loves my children the same as she loves me.

Who is she? The lady who walked the street at night, who was kicked around, violated and looked down on by society. I am proud to say she's my mother who has shown me with gentle hands not to ever let the judgments of others get me down, to remember to walk my own path and to never give up. I love you mother and thank you for the gift of life.

Love,
Always a Street Girl's Daughter
— Kim



MONEY MEMORIES . . .



My Kookum is 78 years old. She knows about native medicines and how they work. You could call her a medicine woman. There is one mushroom-like plant that she often burns when there are storms happening. As she burn it, she prays to the Creator to calm the storm. The smoke has a very nice smell. It makes me feel so safe to have some one pray for me.

— Sheila

My Dad was an eccentric man. When I asked him for money it was like asking a rock to bleed. He was stingy. He bought nice presents but he never wanted to part with his cash. I loved money because I could buy things I wanted. If you had money you had friends. I remember going to the store for my Dad when he was drunk. This was the only time he parted with money. He said to us kids we could keep the change. I nearly had heart failure! What a God send. When I got older and he passed away he left me a bag of old coins. I didn't want them so I sold all of them and bought drugs. That was a small fortune gone up in smoke. I regret it now but at the time I didn't want them. I'm not on good terms with him even though he is dead.

— Marie

The world changes when we do.

to my apartment so she can see what a nice place I have and we can visit in the privacy of my own home. We can listen to music, watch TV or do whatever we want to do without someone watching over us.

I WANT. . . I NEED . . .

I need to go deeper into myself to realize and find the person I am and to be really present for me and for my friends. I react emotionally instead of thinking things through.

I need to take myself to the next level. As I get older and have a more diverse crowd of friends I see how they affect me. Surrounding myself with great people makes me develop more as a person.

I want to find my niche in life, define my goals, find my purpose. But I don't know how.

I want to make other people happy, but I don't know how to make myself happy and find out who I really am. I need to think things through before I react. My emotions get the better of me. That's why I am in this situation. I have a temper and so does my Mom.

Since I was young I have been passive in dealing with my parents. I never stood up to her. As I got older we became so alike that we butted heads all the time. I hate her drinking.

— Cara

YOU TOLD ME . . .

You told me that I'd never be anything. I'd be a drunk like my mom. You told me I was dumb and that I was bad.

Why couldn't I be more like so and so?

As I grew and began to wonder "Who is Jennifer? I just came to believe and accept these things. I made them who I am. I became a drunk and a drug addict. I felt dumb and bad.

You told me I'd never be anything. Well how the hell was I supposed to do anything positive with my life when I wasn't shown any love and encouragement.?

Well you are wrong. I am somebody. I'm me. I know now that everything you told me were lies.

I have the power to make something of my life. I'm not bad or dumb – actually quite the opposite. I may not be so or so, but you know what I'll never be so or so. I'll always be ME. And that's exactly what I'm going to do.

Today I'll give myself the love and encouragement to grow into a beautiful woman.

— Jennifer

I AM . . .

I am worried about my brother because he's in the Remand. I don't know if he is gonna get out but I sure hope he does. I try not to think about him, but I can't help it. I feel so depressed because he's in there and I'm scared for him. I hope nothing will happen to him. I think he'll get out sometime. This following week or next week. I hope so. It's his first time he's been in jail. That's all that is on my mind – my older brother C*.

— Blanche

Relationships

RATIONALE

"I just don't want to be alone."

"I drank so that when he beat me up I wouldn't feel the pain so much. Now that I'm out of the relationship, I don't drink."

Many women live in abusive relationships. Some are aware, and struggle with leaving. Others are in denial. Many are caught in the cycle of abuse. It is tangled and messy.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- discern between healthy and unhealthy relationships
- experience themselves as whole and capable without a partner in their lives
- explore co-dependency issues

PROCESS

I struggle to record the process that leads to the following pieces of writing. They form a large portion of writing done in the program. These are the issues that women are living with. They need to be released. Writing becomes a vehicle for their telling. The very act of writing is a beginning; a wake-up call.

I do not say "Let's write about our relationships today." We come to this writing through the back door. It is done by:

- creating a safe environment
- being present to hearing women's stories/life experiences
- celebrating the courage that it takes for women to speak their truths
- honouring the ground rule of confidentiality
- being real

(Continued on page 52)

with Men

The music on the radio reminds me of being with T*. I was always trying to please and satisfy him, from getting him drugs to providing him with the finest clothes and jewelry. I used to do all the ironing and make sure supper was ready before he got home even though it would sit for hours or sometimes days.

Now that I've flown away he still wants to bring me down. I don't know why I felt like I had to prove myself to him. I threw away my life, my kids, and my self-esteem for him. It wasn't for nothing. That life experience made me stronger.

Although I don't have any fears of being abandoned, my husband continually taunted me with the fact that I was abandoning him. The kids and everything he had worked for. Even though he had conditioned me extremely well, by that point, even the guilt he was attempting to impose upon me didn't deter my determination to get out of the relationship.

To some extent, although it is diminishing, the guilt over walking away still remains. The fact that each of my children, my husband,

and myself are happier and more content with the direction our lives are taking, reinforces the rightness of my decision. I did not abandon everything as L* so unjustly accused me of. I made a decision that enabled me to begin my healing process. My thoughts, at that time, were of myself. I can see now that my "selfish" decision benefited each member of my family. One of us needed to take the first step and begin severing our ties to each other.

"As Laurie spoke this morning I marveled at how she was able to have a bird's eye view of her life. It's like she is now able to fly back in time and reconstruct moments in time, remember people and especially times in Rehab. At the time she thought that she was not in those moments – not in her life. But she was. She knows that now because the stuff that was said and the things she is struggling with now are directly linked to the groundwork that was done three, five and even ten years ago."

— Facilitator's Journal,
May 28, 2001



"He tried to light me on fire."

"He stayed up all night sharpening knives, I couldn't sleep."

My relationship is not doing well. I hardly know where my husband is or where he is going. He asks me for money because he wants it for drugs. I try to say no to him but he doesn't take no for an answer.

I feel hurt because he doesn't trust me or he thinks I'm lying to him. I try to be honest and trusting towards him but I feel he does not love me anymore. I feel used and abused.

But I really want to work on my marriage because I love him and I care about him. We have two beautiful children. If he will not quit doing drugs then we can not get our children back.

I want to tell him that I love him very much but I want him to change. I want my family and my husband back. I want a change in my life.

*This whole situation concerning ** has really disrupted my life. He's in the Remand Centre right now but I'm worried that he'll get bailed out. If that happens he won't be in the best of moods. I wish the earth would open up and take him to China.*

*I still get very nervous talking about what happened to me in the last year and a half. It does get better with each passing day and I hope I will be strong enough when I do meet up with *. He has caused me so much emotional and physical pain. I want to look him in the eye without backing down and say "I'm not afraid of you anymore."*

*What's important in my life right now? This program, my friend who hid me from ** and the support and love from my family.*

Well anyways I am writing my thoughts about my baby's father. He has court today and by the looks of it he'll be getting out of jail. I really don't know but that's what he said. I sure hope he gets out (kinda). I am just scared that he'll probably end up hanging out with his bro's and drinking and getting in trouble. Usually he does when he gets out.

Plus I'm shy to see him because I haven't seen him since last year cause as a matter of fact, I was in jail and I just got out too. And I don't want him to see me cause I feel funny. I feel fat, ugly. Ever since I've been pregnant I feel so different. But I understand that a lot of pregnant women go through these feelings.

I would like to tell you about my first date with my first boyfriend who I later married. We went to see a movie and we took our time going home.

I was 15 minutes late so naturally my mother was waiting for me with a whip. My older sister and her boyfriend were sitting outside. My mother came running out of the house and started to whip me right in front of everyone. I will never forget the hurt and embarrassment I felt that night.

I went into the house crying just to grab a bottle of aspirin and out to the bushes where I started to eat them one at a time. I'm not sure how long I was out there until my sister finally found me. She and I are still very close.

My blood pressure was fine until he got out of prison. It's hard going to sleep at night. My stomach is nervous. I go to the washroom all the time. I can't

keep my food down. If I go out, I run to the car and I don't like to be out on the street.

When I was with him, he'd leave the apartment and say I was not to leave. I was so scared that I didn't even open the apartment door. I didn't know if he was there and would beat me up - or if he had gone and I could have left. It was like I was in prison.

He beat me up on Boxing Day. I went to the hospital and the Doctor told me not to go back to him. I told him that I had to go back and get my clothes. He said, "Clothes can be replaced. Your life can't."

FOLLOW UP

- check out 12 Step programs including Al Anon, ACOA, Co-Da (co-dependency)
- join an abused women's support group
- read about women's issues, self care, self love, healing the inner child, sexual addictions
- set up a resource file in the classroom on community resources that include information on safe houses, family violence support programs, and other information brochures
- display posters on family violence
- attend public events on family violence, International Woman's Day, Take Back the Night Walk, and Peace Rallies

REFLECTIONS

Stories spill out – verbally or written. There is so much to tell. Women report having no one to talk to about their relationships. "Is it abusive?" they ask. Giving voice to the issue of violence is a start. Being heard is essential. The group provides support and a glimmer of hope that life can be different.

Timing is key. When women are ready to make changes things fall into place. For some, it takes a long time. ■

Part Two
WOMEN AND



Women's Stories — Women's Lives

THE SYSTEM

What Makes Something Criminal?

RATIONALE

Women are mandated to participate in the Changing Paths program because they have broken the law. Coming into conflict with the law is linked to "hitting rock bottom". Being at risk of, or coming into conflict with the law doesn't happen "out of the blue". There is a history of poverty, sexual and physical abuse, addictions, discrimination, intergenerational patterns of incarceration, low levels of education and/or an experience of living on the margins of society. The intent is not to justify criminal activity, but to provide a context through which to make meaning of these behaviors, to begin to see crime as a self harming behavior and to view it as a wake up call. It is a call to social justice not criminal justice.

In the recent past, women's groups were talking about the phenomena of "feminization of poverty". Simply put – women are poor. Today, the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) and the provincial counterparts are working to raise awareness of the current trend referred to as "criminalization of women" and the fact that as a result of being poor, women are more prone to be in conflict with the law. Research confirms that 80% of incarcerated women are poor.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- engage in social analysis
- identify issues that they believe resulted in conflict with the law
- experience solidarity
- understand that the personal is political
- are validated and work together for social change

PROCESS

- Discussion prompt "what makes something criminal?"
- Open discussion, responses written on flip chart paper.
- Notes are typed up and given back to women.

REFLECTIONS

Having a criminal record stops women from getting on with their lives. They cannot volunteer and they have a difficult time re-entering the workforce or returning to school. Women report feeling like they are branded and that their lives are on hold. Although women with a criminal record are bondable, they may still be viewed as a liability. It costs an employer more to insure a woman with a criminal record.

As a result of this dialogue, the group moved to action and we began to explore supporting women to get a Pardon. Please refer to the next lesson on the Pardon Pilot Project for Women (page 59).

"I felt so violated. The court system treated me so poorly. I don't believe anybody anymore. It has been devastating at this stage of life. I am 61 years old."

"Getting charged was a good thing. Everything happens for a reason."

"My charge has benefited me. I've taken this in a way differently (than in the past). It has a lot to do with timing. In the past I wanted to change and I wasn't ready. Now I feel ready; I am connected to myself now."

RESOURCES

Student Legal Services of Edmonton
www.law.ualberta.ca/students/sls

A Guide to the Law in Alberta Regarding:

- Drivers License Suspension
- Divorce
- Domestic Abuse and Your Legal Rights
- Maintenance
- Parents and Family Law
- Assault/Self Defense
- How to Speak to Your Own Sentence
- Impaired Driving
- Possession of Controlled Drugs and Substances
- Theft, Fraud and Possession of Stolen Property
- Landlord and Tenant Law

Alberta Justice Self-Help Books:

www.albertacourts.ab.ca/familylaw/

- Child Support
- Custody and Access
- Restraining Orders and Protection Orders

Access to Justice Network

www.acjnet.org/

Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton

www.elizabethfry.ab.ca

Canadian Association of

Elizabeth Fry Societies

www.web.net/~efryont

Alberta John Howard Society

www.johnhoward.ab.ca

Edmonton John Howard Society

edm.johnhoward.org 

Discussion Notes:



1. Cycle of crime.

There is a vicious cycle of crime in the rich province of Alberta. The criminal system is a major employer. It makes money off the backs of the poor.

2. Determinants of Crime

There are determinants of crime that are similar to the determinants of health. Crime does not happen in isolation. Women reported doing crime to get money for gambling and drug addictions. Women report stealing food, or working the street at the end of the month, to get money to feed their families.

3. Money and Power

Money speaks. Money equals power. Money equals legal connections. "I would not be here if I had the cash. Jails are full of poor people. The wealthy buy their freedom."

4. Women, Money and Crime

Women talked about their experiences of being poor – feminization of poverty and how as a result of being poor they are more prone to be in conflict with the law.

5. Emotional trauma of being in conflict with the law.

Women report not able to hear what was said in the court room because they felt so traumatized by being in conflict with law. Women feel victimized by the criminal justice system. Women report not being able to "hear" about viable options such as access to the Alternative Measures and Fine Options programs.

6. Pessimism about research.

The group felt pessimistic about the value of research as a tool for social change. They

felt that there was no evidence of positive change that was a result of research, that has benefited women.

The group felt that change comes from the political process and talked about the importance of casting a vote in elections.

"Research keeps government workers employed. Can't see any results from research. We are researched to death."

"Twas ever thus – you're poor, Aboriginal and female."

— Ann

Criminal Justice System

RATIONALE

Women in conflict with the law talk about their interactions with individuals who represent the criminal justice system, specifically: police officers, probation officers, security guards, judges, duty counsel, crown prosecutors and lawyers. They report feeling anxious, stressed, shameful and humiliated as they recount being caught for shoplifting, given a ticket by a police officer, or preparing to appear in court.

Sometimes they sing praises about a judge and speak about the positive support from their probation officer. Sometimes they share horror stories of mistreatment and abuse.

The Edmonton Police Commission monitors complaints against the police. Alexandra Lapko, the Public Complaints Monitor, has been a valuable resource to the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton. She has met with women and informed them of their rights, supported them to tell their stories, and recorded their complaints and compliments regarding police officers.

Women talk freely and openly about their complaints against the police. When asked to write down their concerns and put forward a letter documenting their concerns – they often withdraw. Women become anxious and fearful and express amazement that they have the right to make a formal complaint. Even though women report questioning the treatment they received from a police officer, they feel silenced by threats of an overnight stay in jail.

The letter on the following page speaks to the empowerment gained when women develop their literacy skills and use them as a tool for advocacy.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- address issues of power imbalances in society
- strengthen writing skills to advocate on their own behalf
- experience themselves as articulate and powerful
- access community resources
- speak out and speak up
- see writing as a form of cultural capital

PROCESS

1. Women share their experiences and tell their stories of injustice and mistreatment.
2. Request permission to record the details of their stories on flip chart paper.
3. Inform the group of their rights. Discuss the right to redress.
4. Discuss how to write a letter of complaint.
5. Draft a letter building on the details of the incident as documented.
6. Discuss options for action.
7. Work with feelings/issues that may arise: fear of speaking out, potential negative repercussions, issues of power and authority.

REFLECTIONS

Building and using literacy skills is a way to reclaim power, to advocate, to build self-esteem and to participate more fully in society. Literacy is a basic life skill. Literacy skills are needed to

maneuver one's way through the various systems: legal, child welfare, health, education, and social assistance. The intent is to reclaim, build and extend literacy skills that empower women to take control of their life.

RESOURCES

How to make a Complaint Against the Police brochure, Edmonton Police Commission

How to Compliment the Police brochure, Edmonton Police Commission

Family Law Information Centre – Edmonton and Calgary 310-0000 

Letter of Complaint

May 16, 2001

Edmonton Police Commission
Suite 911, 10365 – 97 Street
Edmonton, AB T5J 5A6

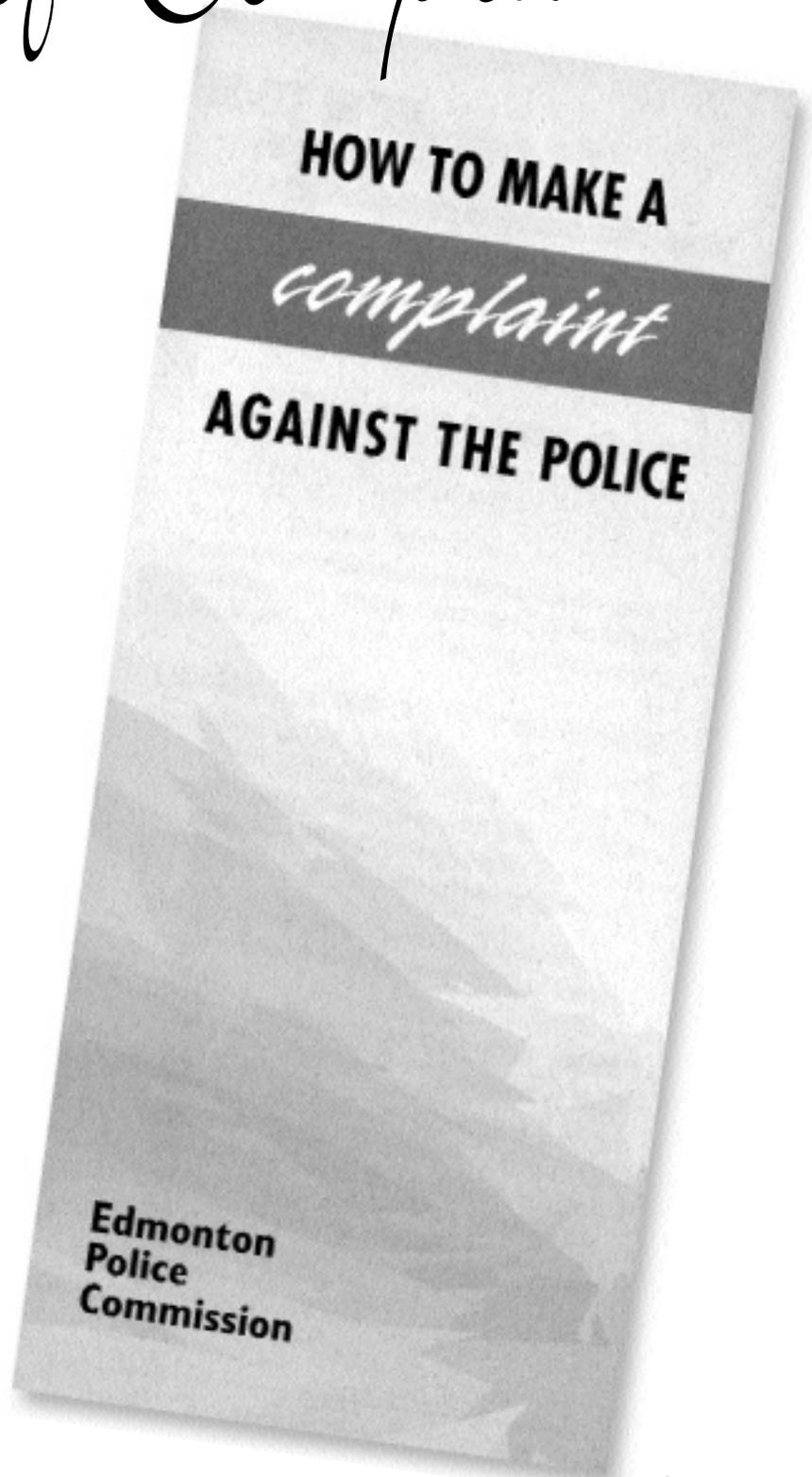
Dear Edmonton Police Commission:

I received a ticket for intoxication in a public place by a bicycle police officer, badge #****. I wasn't bothering anyone, minding my own business while waiting for a taxicab at 7pm.

The police officer asked me if I had any money for a cab and I showed him my money. He threatened me by saying, "If you keep talking smart, I'll throw you in jail." The comment made before that threat was a question of why I was getting a ticket because I was on my way home.

I don't think that the ticket was fair and that is why I'm writing this letter. I am too frightened to attach my name to this letter but I wanted you to know about the situation.

Anonymous



Criminal Justice System

RATIONALE

The majority of women in the Changing Paths program have a criminal record. Their criminal record often disallows them from becoming successful and contributing members of the community. A criminal record can hurt career, job, and volunteer opportunities, professional standing, and travel. As well, women talk about the shame and guilt of having a criminal record. It is a secret. Many carry the baggage for years not knowing that they can get a Pardon. A Pardon removes some of the limitations of having a criminal record. Getting a Pardon is proof that a person has changed her life.

Once free, Pardons now cost on average \$150.00. This amounts to a fortune for most women. A Pardon becomes unattainable. The process of filling out the paperwork and making sense of the steps to obtaining a Pardon require strong literacy and self determination skills.

The timing was right in the fall of 2000, when Ann Nicoli with the Beverly Community Development Office approached the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton to explore putting together a proposal to assist women to get a Pardon. Ann knew of many women in the communities of Edmonton's north east who had criminal records and whose lives were on hold.

The proposal identified the following reasons why women, with Pardonable criminal records, have not applied for a Pardon:

1. Lack of Knowledge – Many women who have a criminal record that could be Pardoned do not know that they can apply for a Pardon. In

addition, service providers to offenders do not have the information and/or the time to assist.

2. Fear – The process of applying for a Pardon is overwhelming and intimidating. Many women who have been involved with the criminal justice system are uncomfortable dealing with the courts, the police and the bureaucracy. The application form itself is arduous.
3. Cost – It costs on average \$150.00 to apply for a Pardon. This is too much for those who are unemployed and/or on SFI or on AISH.

A committee was struck and a proposal submitted to the Edmonton Community Foundation and The Kristie Charitable Foundation. Beyond our wildest dreams, both foundations agreed to fund the pilot project with support of funds to work with a total of 100 women.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- have first-hand experience with a pro-active and innovative project that demonstrates the power of collective action
- are granted a Pardon and can return to school, volunteer and re-enter the workplace
- heighten public awareness of the impact of having a criminal record and obtaining a Pardon
- learned that community agency staffs are trained to do Pardons
- demonstrated the power of community development projects and their value to the community at large
- Allowed community agencies and organizations build on the learnings from the pilot and take action to address similar needs in their communities

PROCESS

1. Women in community programs speak about the barriers of having a criminal record.
2. Agency staff and women with a criminal record meet to talk about the issues of having a criminal record.
3. Working committee is formed to research Pardons.
4. Decision is made to write a proposal requesting funds to support women to obtain a Pardon.
5. Letters of support for the project are solicited and obtained.
6. Proposal is written for a pilot project and submitted to Edmonton Community Foundation and the Kristie Charitable Foundation.
7. Project is supported by both Foundations.
8. Pardon Training session is organized for all agency staff who will work with women to obtain Pardons.
9. Development of Pardon brochure and posters.
10. Public awareness through distribution of posters, brochures and meeting with agency staff to promote the pilot project.
11. Agency staff works with women on a one-on-one basis to obtain a Pardon.

RESOURCES

- *Pardon Application Guide*, National Parole Board
- *How to Obtain a Pardon*, John Howard Society of Alberta
- *What Happens Next Information Series (What is a Pardon?)*, John Howard Society of Alberta
- *Understanding Criminal Records*, John Howard Society of Alberta
- Edmonton John Howard Society staff who are experts in the Pardon process.
- Prostitution Awareness and Action Foundation of Edmonton, contact: paafe@telusplanet.net 

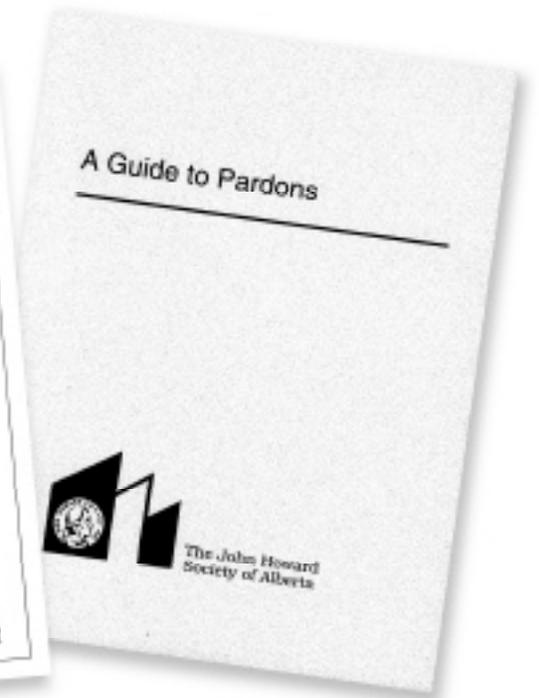
Pardon for Women Pilot Project

"I was a different person then (when I was in conflict with the law). I have changed. I want to go back to school."

"I had the experience for the job that I was being interviewed for. I was being honest with them and I told them that I had been in trouble with the law. They didn't offer me the job. I learned about being honest from going to the 12 step program. I have to be honest even if I get punished for being honest. I had to tell them the truth. They were going to do a security clearance and they would have found out anyway."

"There are lots of jobs I don't even apply for because of my criminal record. I don't want to go through the humiliation of the employer finding out (that I have a criminal record)."

"I wanted to volunteer for the World Games but you have to get a security clearance."



STEPS TO OBTAIN A PARDON

1. Complete a criminal record check. The cost is \$30.00 and it can be done at most local police stations or at downtown headquarters.
2. Obtain fingerprints from - Edmonton Police Station Headquarters. Cost is \$30.00. Your local police records check is also done at this time. Then fingerprints are sent with \$25.00 to Ottawa to be processed.
3. Obtain necessary court documents from every city you have lived in during the past 5 years. Prices vary from city to city.
4. Complete a Pardon Application. Once completed, send to Ottawa. The cost is \$50.00

Tell Us How To Improve

RATIONALE

Many women who are in conflict with the law rely on government programs that include Supports For Independence (SFI), Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), and Student Finance Board funding (SFB). The Alberta government's "Work for Welfare" policies have reduced SFI numbers. Clients have been shifted into training/education programs funded by SFB. This shift assumes that women have enough stability in their lives or required literacy skills to return to school or enter the workplace. Many do not.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- take collective action to address personal issues
- speak up and speak out
- advocate for themselves and others
- are pro-active and offer recommendations for government policy change

PROCESS

1. Women report injustices and hardships of low income programs: AISH, SFI, and SFB.
2. Read the Alberta Government announcement to review low income programs which invites consumers of these services to "tell us how to improve low income programs."
3. Women in the Changing Paths program download Low Income Programs survey questionnaires from the Internet.
4. Working as a group, we brainstorm responses to survey ques-

tions and record them on flip chart paper.

5. Discussion and recommendations are typed up and forward to the MLA Committee to Review Low Income Programs.

REFLECTIONS

Living in poverty is criminal. Women report resorting to crime to get food to feed their families. They speak about the unrelenting stress that affects their mental and physical health. Women talk about giving their children up to child welfare because they do not have enough money to feed them. They suffer from shame, guilt and feelings of inadequacy. They blame themselves, and often act out in ways to kill the emotional pain.

Social change is a slow process. It is easy to collapse, to fall into despair and say, "What difference does it make anyhow?" Working together, sharing stories, taking collective action and supporting each other makes the journey a little easier, and maybe even hopeful.

RESOURCES

- Debt Management Strategies workshops available through Credit Counseling Services of Alberta (CCSA). The CCSA also has Tip Sheets on money management, credit and debt from www3.gov.ab.ca/gs

The link between crime and health

- Determinants of Health/
Determinants of Crime
- Crime does not happen in isolation. It is linked to the following factors that have also been named

as determinants to health. They could just as easily be named as determinants to crime.

- Income and social status
- Social support from families, friends and communities
- Levels of education
- Employment
- Environmental factors (housing, community safety)
- Genetics
- Prenatal and early childhood development
- Knowledge, intentions and skills for dealing with life in healthy ways
- Health Services (no glasses, dental care, lost medical cards/ID) 

Low Income Programs

I'm thinking about Doreen. She is suffering from poor health: Crohn's disease, heart attacks; and blocked bowels. She is under house arrest. A 61 year old woman on 24/7 house arrest. This means that she is under surveillance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Surveillance comes at 3am. She staggers to the door. "I explained to them that with the medication that I take for my heart waking me from sleep, at that hour of the night, makes me off balance. I stagger and bump into furniture and end up bruising myself. It is very scary to be woken in the middle of the night with a loud bang, bang by the surveillance person. I live in the inner city, which is very scary. There is no security door for my apartment. In the middle of the night I have had strangers knocking at my door."

I remember when Doreen came into the program. She reached into her pocket and said that this was all the money that she had until the end of the month. It was pocket change – maybe 3.50. It was April 29, 2001 and this money had to last her until May 31, 2001. Such shame and lack of worth. She had no idea that she could ask for money from social services. Her crime was



social services fraud. Together we advocated and put forward a written request for extra dollars to cover the costs of a high fiber/protein diet, medication and transportation. The request was supported and Doreen's income rose from 396.00 to 700.00/month.

— Facilitator's Journal,
May 28, 2001

"If I don't do my fine option hours they will throw me in jail. I am scared to even ask for the dollars for a bus pass, because I am afraid that I might get kicked off SFI. Then what will I do? I am afraid to have them look in my files. I just hate dealing with them. Fear that if I ask questions that they will cut me off SFI."

Work and Education

RATIONALE

Transportation is a huge barrier for the majority of women in the Changing Paths program. It is a "Catch-22". Women are mandated to participate in the program by the courts, but they have little or no money for transportation to get to the program.

In the winter of 2000, Sandy, a participant in the program, was moved to personal action by the stories of financial hardship of women in the program. She arrived one day and made a donation of her tip money from her previous night's shift. She requested that I purchase bus tickets with the funds. Sandy's gesture challenged us to find a sustainable solution to the problem of transportation.

I call it an act of divine intervention. Within a week, I read an article in the Edmonton Journal on the City of Edmonton's Donate A Ride program. This program provides bus tickets to agencies for distribution to low income consumers. I suggested that women in the program put forward a request to be granted bus tickets.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- take collective action to address personal issues
- strengthen hope and build solidarity
- have their stories heard and acted on, and they reclaim personal power
- experience and celebrate success

PROCESS

1. Women talk about transportation as a barrier to participation in the program.
2. We learn about the City of Edmonton's Donate A Ride program and decide to put forward a proposal to receive donated bus tickets.
3. Women write letters requesting that Elizabeth Fry be supported to be a "Donate A Ride" sponsored agency.
4. Proposal is approved and Elizabeth Fry is approved to receive donated tickets.
5. Women from the Changing Paths program attend the City of Edmonton press conference/ceremony where successful recipients are announced.
6. Participants write up policy guidelines to determine process for women to access tickets.
7. Thank-you letter is sent to City of Edmonton.

The letters to the right and on the following page written to Alderman Bolstad a City of Edmonton are a testimony to the power of literacy skills used as a vehicle to affect change.

REFLECTIONS

This project provided us with a number of valuable learnings. We named an issue and took action on it. We were successful. We learned that we can affect change. We can create a different reality. We do have choices. Our needs are important and we are listened to. Working together makes sense. ■

To: Councilor Bolstad

Elizabeth Fry is an organization that helps women in conflict with the law. As a first time participant with this program, I have learned in a very short time the benefits of being a part of such a program. E. Fry assists women both emotionally and intellectually.

Many of the programs run by E. Fry are meant to help women realize their strengths and overcome weaknesses that have been hindering their development as a strong woman, both in their community and in their own personal lives. As participants in this program I have listened to women tell how they have walked 20 – 30 blocks to get to the program. Other women express concerns over the cost of a daily basis that the bus fare places on a budget they are stretching to its limit already.

I was aware of the "Donate A Ride" last year and was fortunate enough at that time to be able to donate free rides myself. This year I have come full circle and am now in a position where your program will benefit me. I realize just how important one single ride is.

A donation of bus tickets to E. Fry will not only benefit the program, it will benefit women by giving them the ability to attend the program without the shame or embarrassment of not being able to provide a means for their own transportation cost.

*An active participant,
Cindy*

Donate A Ride Project

January 5, 2001

Councilor Bolstad

I am writing to suggest "Donate A Ride" consider the Elizabeth Fry Society.

I am a S.F.I. client and am temporarily unemployable due to medical reasons. I am gratefully able to take advantage of the Elizabeth Fry program to pay my \$715.00 fine.

I made a wrong choice and am now experiencing the consequences of that action. I take full responsibility.

I receive \$422.00 per month to pay rent, phone, power, food and transportation. I have often not taken the bus to save \$3.50 for groceries or maybe laundry money (\$3.50 does 2 loads). Often I have been short bus fare and feel shame that I am different, poor, unable to pay like the rest.

Bus tickets donated to this program would help women like myself have the freedom to attend things on time, without worry of "how will I get home?" I am "changing my path" and I admit I need help doing just that. Something as



"small" as a bus ticket to me allows that I can bring lunch instead of bus fare.

Donate A Ride is a wonderful program that helps people like myself. Please consider the Elizabeth Fry Society as there are probably 98% of the women who would benefit.

In order to participate in life you need to show up for it, you can help us do just that.

Sincerely,
Patricia

"Four months ago a group of women in the Changing Paths program talked about counting pennies, searching the house for spare change, doing without and using food money to buy bus tickets. One dollar and 75 cents, three times a day, five days a week, adds up.

The City of Edmonton's Donate A Ride program heard us and granted the E. Fry Society 122 books of tickets.

At the time it seemed like a huge project. Looking back it happened like clockwork. Women in the program made a difference. They asked for what they needed and it was granted."

— Facilitator's Journal,
June 6, 2001

the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

— MARGARET MEAD

Part Two: Women and the System 63

Child Welfare Open Forum

"Child welfare threatened to take my kids away. Those words just silenced me."

RATIONALE

When women are separated from their children they talk about being so depressed that they cannot get out of bed for days. They do not shower or eat. They collapse. Many report turning to drugs, alcohol and gambling to numb out. Having children apprehended by the child welfare system is a common issue for women who access the services of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton. In response to the issues, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton hosted a Child Welfare Open Forum on July 9, 2001.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- share their stories of pain and hope
- are able to see intergenerational patterns of behavior
- grieve the loss of their children
- learn about the child welfare system
- do inner child healing
- learn tools to work towards uniting their families
- advocate for changes to the child welfare system

PROCESS

1. Promote the Child Welfare Open Forum event by distributing posters in the community.
2. Talk with women about child welfare issues. Invite them, their friends and family to participate in the Open Forum event.
3. On the day of the event welcome

all participants. Arrange seating in a circle. Begin the session with a sweet grass ceremony and a prayer.

4. Ask permission to take notes and record discussion on tape.
5. Invite women to introduce themselves, sharing the experiences of their children and involvement with the child welfare system.
6. Move round the circle until all participants have spoken.
7. Coffee and bannock break.
8. Group re-convenes and continues with a large group discussion.
9. Key issues are recorded on flip chart paper.
10. Action plan is discussed and future meeting date set.
11. Closing prayer.

REFLECTIONS

As women speak about the pain, loss, grief, and despair of losing their children to the child welfare system I began to wonder if what we are experiencing today is a repeat of the phenomena of residential schools. History repeats itself. Children are taken out of the homes of their family of origin and put into the child welfare system. To date in Alberta 15,000 First Nations children are in care.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

- Get informed. Obtain a copy of the Child Welfare Act to read and discuss.
- Obtain policy information from Alberta Children's Services – Child Welfare Services.
- Record child welfare issues and write a position paper.
- Invite the Children's Advocate to speak with the group.
- Share knowledge about the child welfare system and learn about

Temporary Guardianship Order and Permanent Guardianship Order.

- Seek legal advice.
- Work with women to produce a book for their children who are in care. The book could contain family pictures, childhood stories and memories of family.

MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

Child Welfare Act

www.childwelfareact.gov.ab.ca

Alberta Children's Services, Child Welfare Services

Fact Sheets on the following:

- Apprehension
- Permanent Guardianship
- Private Guardianship
- Joint Guardianship
- Support Agreements
- Child Welfare and You
- Child Welfare Court Hearings
- Care and Maintenance Agreements
- Child Welfare and The Professional
- Having a Decision Reconsidered
- Your Right to Appeal
- Child Welfare Files
- Family Ties
- Supervision Orders
- Your Rights and Duties

Things kids ask about Being in Care booklet from Alberta Children's Services

Traditional Parenting Program – Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton

Making Peace with the Past Program – Edmonton Catholic Social Services

Legal Rights of Grandparents brochure – Family Law Centre ☒

Women's words:

"I've been involved with child welfare myself and now my children are in care. I am trying to win my children back. There are lots of hoops. You gotta do what they say. It is hard"

"I don't want my daughter in care because of my own experience of sexual abuse. I am a victim of the child welfare system."

"It's humiliating and degrading. It takes away your self esteem.

It wasn't because of drugs and alcohol that my children were taken away. I drank afterwards. I stayed drunk for a whole month after that situation. When I sobered up I didn't even know where my kids were."

Everything sounds like Chinese when they talk about child welfare policies that I don't understand. I hesitate to ask questions. They look at me like I'm stupid."



WORDS OF WISDOM AND HOPE:

"Never surrender your kids. Find some one to take care of them when you go for treatment otherwise child welfare will take them away. If you are on Supports For Independence ask for supports and don't give up. Study and learn about agreements so you know what you are talking about. Ensure that the child welfare worker explains what everything is about before you sign

anything. Ask your child welfare worker to explain terms. This is hard when you feel stupid or are hurting. But you have to be assertive and advocate for yourself."

"This is the gift of pain. When you go through so much pain and do your healing, you are the best advocate."

"Prayer helps to stay on the path to get kids out of care."

— Elsie

Work and Employment

RATIONALE

How do I put prostitution on my resume? She stopped me cold with her question. How does this young woman get back into mainstream employment? How do women move from "illegal" work to mainstream work? It is a huge challenge as they are faced with the barriers of having a criminal record, low levels of education, student debt, no fixed address or telephone, addictions, and two or three young children.

Some of the women are in the Changing Paths program because they engage in illegal work. When caught, it gets them into conflict with the law. They work the streets, shoplift, commit fraud, traffic drugs and do armed robberies. Women are vulnerable to offers from friends and family to get quick cash from illegal activities.

Some women report engaging in illegal activities at the end of the month when they have run out of money. They report stealing food to feed their families. Many are very good at it and they do not get caught for a long time. They become addicted to the rush of getting away with the crime. The cycle begins and it is hard to stop. Getting caught is sometimes a cry for help.

When women work to break the cycle of shop lifting some report that they get depressed. One woman spoke of being hospitalized for depression after she stopped shoplifting.

"I got depressed when I stopped shoplifting – I'm addicted to the rush".

Crime is a vicious circle that starts early in life and it is almost always

linked to poverty. A young First Nations woman talks about discrimination in her elementary school. She beats up another kid in the playground and steals her coat in an attempt to fit in, to have the same kinds of clothes that the other kids do. She wants so badly to be part of mainstream culture - to be accepted.

Later in life she is charged with armed robbery. The cycle continued and the stakes kept getting higher. Now she is doing time. She is on house arrest 24/7.

"I would be doing pen time if I wasn't pregnant. I am grateful to the judge"

As women share their stories, common themes emerge. At the end of a session I usually invite the group to name the themes and issues. They are recorded on a "Parking Lot" flip chart paper posted on the classroom wall. This list forms the basis for curriculum as the group works together over time. The Parking Lot flip chart paper stays up until the majority of issues are checked off. The process begins again as a new women join the group – a new Parking Lot list is generated and the process begins again.

Common themes and issues named by women in the group include: poverty, employment, criminal records, suicide, food insecurity, parenting, saying "No", co-dependency, advocacy, child welfare issues, relationships, self-harming behaviors, homelessness, violence, isolation and addictions.

Addressing the issue of employment is a big challenge. Because most of the women in the program have a criminal record, returning to school, volunteering and finding work is dif-

ficult and sometimes impossible until women obtain a Pardon. Obtaining a Pardon provides hope for some. The process of obtaining a Pardon is written up in the Pardon Project for Women activity (page 59).

For some women who have been engaged in illegal activities, the goal of mainstream work seems impossible. What I attempt to do is have women acknowledge and name the multitude of skills that they have. They then begin the process of becoming aware of how those skills might be transferred to a paid position.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- share their work experiences
- validate their work experiences
- learn that they have many skills that can be transferred to mainstream work
- explore future employment opportunities
- make conscious decisions about employment opportunities

PROCESS

Starting with women's stories like the one below, we begin the process of unpacking the context of her work, her work history and skills.

"I go shop lifting three times a week and I have made as much as \$10,000.00 in 6 weeks. I always went shoplifting to get money to pay the bills, but the cash always went on coke – so the cycle continued."

A professional shoplifter talked about the "shopping lists" that she had in her purse. Friends told her what they want – she stole it and got 10% of the retail price. I was amazed at her skills.

"I can spot a floorwalker. If somebody is watching me I

(Continued on page 68)

"How do I put prostitution on my resume?"

"When I was a young girl I wanted to be an interior designer. I look back with sadness on what I could have been – given the ideal circumstances. I'm not sad about my past, really. I just wonder what could have been."

— Trish



"When I was younger I wanted to be a teacher. I always looked up to my teachers and respected the work they did with children. I considered myself a good student. I always listened and never talked back. I was really looking forward to finishing school and becoming a teacher but as they years went by situations in my

life prevented me from completing the goals I had.

Now I want to be a youth counselor. I have been through enough in my life to know I can be very helpful and make a difference."

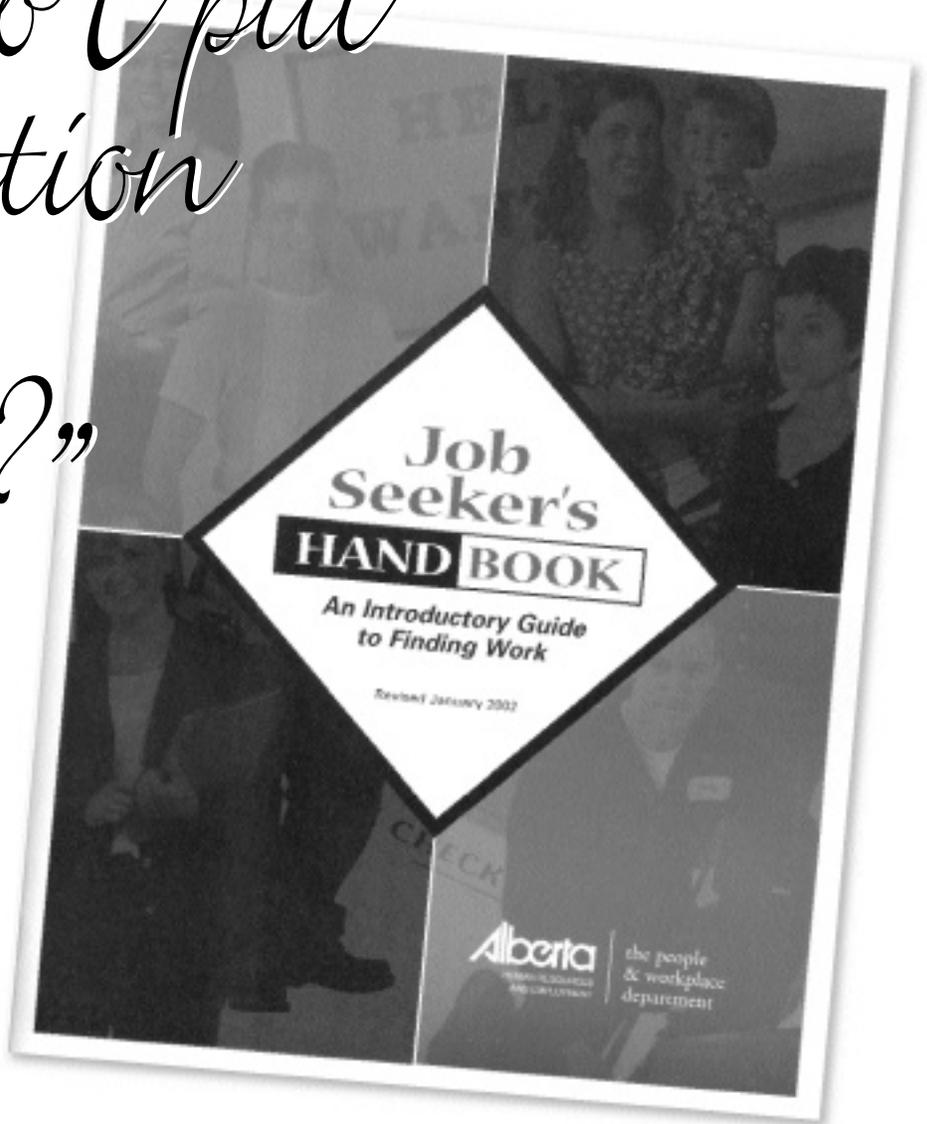
— Starr

"Get a breast implant, dye your hair blonde and lose 15 pounds."

— quote from an exotic dancing agent



"I need to come to this program to practice getting out of bed in the morning, to be on time, because I want to return to work."



pick up the vibes in my body. I can feel others' glances. I don't forget a face. I pick up on people's energy. I have a photographic memory. I get a shopping list from a friend to buy Tommy Hilfiger jeans. I know what stores in West Edmonton Mall have the jeans. I know which entrance is closest to the elevators and which route is the most efficient to get into the store and get out."

Women often negate their skills that are linked to criminal activity. I work with them to re-claim them, embrace them with the goal of transferring them to work that does not get them in conflict with the law.

1. Brainstorm skill sets (photographic memory, risk taker, reads/feels energy fields, organized).
2. Discuss how skills can be transferred to other areas of work.
3. Complete a Career Assessment Inventory.
4. Visit the Alberta Career Centre to read resources and ask questions.
5. Write a resume.
6. Learn to use the Internet for job search.
7. Read classified advertisements and want ads.
8. Dream and write about the perfect job.
9. Read information on getting a Pardon.

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS

- Career Inventory Assessment Guide (get web site address)
- Alberta Career Centre – Student Finance Board and Learning Resource Centre
- Job searches on the internet
- Career searches on the internet
- www.monster.com
- www.hrdc.com
- Prostitution Awareness and Action Foundation of Alberta paafe@telusplanet.net 

Becoming Computer Literate

RATIONALE

Computer literacy is an essential skill in today's workplace. Many women in the Changing Paths program have plans and dreams of returning to work. They are eager to build new skill sets that will enable them to do so. The Changing Paths program has incorporated computer skill development. One afternoon a week, we access the computer lab at Edmonton John Howard's Alternative Learning Program.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Women:

- become comfortable using computers
- build and extend word processing skills
- become adept at Internet searches
- set up email accounts
- type up writing done in the classroom
- use the digital camera and learn how to manipulate, store and send digital images
- develop resumes
- type up character letters and other required documentation for court

PROCESS

The structure in the computer classroom is open ended, fluid and completely determined by the skill and comfort of women in the group. It is desirable for women with strong computer skills to teach and provide support to women who have no or limited computer skills. A buddy system works well. Confidence and self-esteem is built by sharing skills. Working in pairs women have an opportunity to build friendships and trust.

For women with limited computer skills I suggest that they start with the

card games. This is fun and a non-threatening way to learn to use the mouse, and develop an understanding for how computers work.

A typing tutor program provides the framework to establish and extend word processing skills. Internet access is essential for setting up email accounts and to do research.

The Internet has been used to do research on housing, employment, credit and debt issues, career assessments, relationship questionnaires, genealogy, astronomy and fun topics and hobbies.

Women with email accounts pick up and send email messages. For women who are parenting from a distance, emails are one way to maintain contact with their children. It is heart-warming to witness the joy women experience when they read messages from children from whom they are estranged.

Digital cameras are great tools to build technical and computer skills. Women love to have their pictures taken and use the digital camera with ease. The images can be downloaded and manipulated on the computer. The images are printed and women take them home and frame them, give them to family and friends and attach them to emails.

Photos of women in the program, along with women's writing and art work, form the basis of a Changing Paths display that is mounted in the drop-in centre at Elizabeth Fry office. This display is changed every few months. Women report feeling proud to have their writing, photos, and art work on display. The display makes a strong positive statement about the value of women's words and the work that is done in the program.

I am grateful for...

I am grateful for . . .

the opportunity to support Alex,
my health,
the love of my family,
being alive,
the direction and acceptance
in this group.

— By Gay

I am grateful . . .

to be clean and sober,
to have a home, food and family
that is supportive,
to have a new hope in life,
to be alive
not to be in jail.

— By Linda

I am grateful for . . .

getting out of an
abusive relationship.
getting into a
healthier relationship.
for not being in jail.
for my health.
for having some good friends.

— By Cheryl



THREE THINGS I'M SURE OF

**I am sure I have
addiction problems.
I am sure I am safe.
I am sure I can be content.**

— By Linda

SIX THINGS I KNOW FOR SURE

**I am alive.
I feel.
I care.
I love.
I will choose.
I will die.**

— By Gay

supportive; to have a new hope in life; to be alive; not to be in jail. — BY LINDA

The display works to build self-esteem and confidence. It is one way to push the boundaries from the private to the public arena by giving women's writing a broader audience.

REFLECTIONS

I've seen a lot of trembling hands in first encounters with the mouse. I am continually sensitized to the reality of the technological revolution and the stress for women who are of another generation; out of the loop and technologically inept. I also marvel at the ease with which they try, and come to like, working with technology. Thankfully so because the bottom line is that computer skills are essential literacy skills and an important component in a literacy program.

A small number of women have purchased computers through the United Way's In Kind Centre in Edmonton. This service is available to not-for-profit agencies in Edmonton and provides a valuable opportunity for women to purchase a used computer at an affordable price. Women returning to school and families with school age children have benefited from this service.

Women report wanting to get a computer to ensure that their writing is absolutely safe and not available to be read by others.

Typing up women's writing transforms it. Some women question if it is theirs. They are amazed at how articulate they are and how beautifully their words flow on the page. They wonder about the strong emotions that rise up when their words are read. This is the gift of literacy. It is strengthened when hand-written copy is transformed by word processing. I encourage you to try it. Invite women to put their writing forward and type it up. Use a descriptive font; bold the title and their name; print it on decorative paper. I guarantee you will see a look of amazement, delight and a growing sense of pride from women you work with.

ment, delight and a growing sense of pride from women you work with.

RESOURCES – INTERNET SITES

Alberta Human Resources and Employment
www.alis.gov.ab.ca

Business Link, The
www.cbasc.org/alberta

Labour Market Trend
www.labourmarketrends.com

Scholarships, Grants and Loans
www.scholarshipscanada.com
www.millenniumscholarships.ca
www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca
www.alis.gov.ab.ca/learning/Financial

100 Hot Jobs
www.100hot.com

City of Edmonton job postings
www.gov.edmonton.ab.ca

Capital Health Authority
www.cha.ab.ca/healthsite

Edmonton Journal Classifieds
www.careerclick.com/edmontonjournal

Edmonton Public Library
www.publib.edmonton.ab.ca

Government of Alberta Job Board
www.gov.ab.ca

Alberta Career Information Hotline
www.alis.gov.ab.ca/hotline

Motivational Appraisal of Personal Potential
www.assessment.com

Career Planner.com
www.CareerPlanner.com

Human Resources Development Canada
www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca

Monster Canada
www.monster.ca

National Job Bank
www.hrdc.gc.ca

Workopolis
www.workopolis.ca



Part Three

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*ALIS: Alberta Learning Information
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Alberta Learning Information
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<http://www.elizabethfry.ca>

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<http://www.careerclick.com>

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