

Herstory

Although it is said that there was talk of starting a transition house in White Rock as early as 1979, the written record shows that actual meetings on the subject did not start until the summer of 1982. On July 9 of that year, seven women and one man met at the White Rock Women's Place and formalized discussion of steps needed to found such a center. The minutes of that first meeting suggest that some work had already been under way, since there is reference to a needs survey that was almost complete for the area of North Delta, Surrey, and White Rock. A later report, written by Zandrika James in 1992, clarifies this matter:

In 1981 under the auspices of South Surrey White Rock Women's Place, a grant was obtained to conduct a study to ascertain whether there was a need for a Transition House in the ... area. Cher Cartwright was hired to carry out the study, and an advisory committee formed to oversee the work. The completed study showed conclusively the dire need for a Transition House. As a result of this finding, a group of local citizens decided to make it their objective to open a Transition House.

The organization acquired its name quite early on. In the first few sets of minutes it is referred to variously as the Advisory Committee for Transition House Research Project, Planning Committee for a Transition House for Battered Women and Children, and Transition House Society. On September 15, 1982, however, it is reported that the name Atira Transition House had been informally adopted and would be formally adopted at the October meeting, which, in fact, was done. There is no discussion in the record as to how this name was arrived at, what other possibilities were offered, or what this name means. However, in her March 1992 report, Zandrika James offers an explanation - The name ATIRA was chosen by a sub-committee of the original Board of Directors. ATIRA is a Female deity of a North American First Nation. She symbolizes a bountiful harvest, strength and power without being warlike.

The name was aptly chosen for an organization whose first principle is that "violence is not an accepted form of interaction and men must be held responsible for their behavior." ATIRA's working philosophy begins with this point, and continues as follows:

- * Women and children have a right to a safe refuge when endangered.
- * The abused woman has a right to receive supportive services while in the house and upon re-entry into the community, including the right to make decisions regarding her own future and the right to information regarding alternatives which may be open to her.
- * A woman and her child can be considered a viable family unit and the battered woman has the right to make decisions regarding her own future and the future of her family unit.
- * Peer counselling and support is invaluable resources for women who are battered.

The group organized itself for action remarkably quickly. By the end of the year, it had established committees for most of the vital areas of its business, including incorporation, membership, funding, publicity, and housing, and two members had formed a Speakers Bureau to disseminate information to the community on the issues and needs for a transition house in the area. Concurrent with these developmental activities, one member, Susan Lash, started a Battered Women's Support Group to meet the immediate real needs of the community.

Organizational papers were filed with the Registrar of Companies by March 1983 and, the group was officially recognized as a nonprofit charitable society. By June the group had determined its staffing needs for a house: four full-time people (including a coordinator and a child care worker), two part-timers, plus volunteers. These last would serve in assisting the childcare worker or in clerical or household duties and could also be involved with administration, fundraising, public relations, or the board of directors. In November the Society held its first Annual General Meeting, where it was

announced that ten units of housing could be made available if the group received funding from the Ministry of Human Resources (MHR). The Society was reported to have seventeen members, a credit union account of \$59 and a debt of \$79.46. At year's end the Society applied to MHR for funding and adopted a drawing by Jane Benfield as a logo.

Although the Society's application for funding received support from MHR at the regional level, it arrived at the federal level too late to be considered and was forwarded to the next year, that is, for 1985-86 funding. The Society was forced to consider alternative means of funding, but chose to stay with its efforts for federal support. Consequently, the budget was revised to meet 1985-86 levels of need and resubmitted by year's end 1984.

The failure to gain funding in 1984 was received, understandably, with more than a little disappointment. Minutes of the January 1985 meeting mention attendance at the BC-Yukon Transition House Society Conference as a possible "good shot in the arm," and an outside speaker was invited to the next meeting to provide a "pep talk" for the group. The situation was exacerbated by the news that Evergreen had announced it would operate as a transition house in the new fiscal year and, in fact, it was given funding ahead of Atira. As a result, discussions were held in May and June meetings regarding how Atira might change its focus from serving as a transition house to providing a phone-line, counseling, advocacy, an information network, or other such services. In October consideration was given to changing the constitution to include education, counselling and referral as part of the Society's functions.

In terms of start-up, 1986 was mostly a waiting game - waiting for notification of funding from MHR. There was a level of assurance that funding would be approved, and the society moved forward with some confidence in the process of planning staff, collecting donations, maintaining public relations, and reviewing the issues of renting, buying, or building a house. By mid-year notification had arrived that funding would be available, and by October an initial budget of \$130,507.00 had been approved by MHR. At that point, consideration of housing began in earnest, with many site-visits, meetings with housing consultants, and discussion of the options for location and type of housing.

The major developments of 1987 included actual acquisition of a house, entitlement for Chapter 38 staffing, and acquisition of an office. Much of the business of the Society during the first half of the year had to do with arrangements arising from these main issues -- for example, arrangements for renovations to the house; decisions about training, scheduling, salaries and benefits for staff; repairs and preparation of the new office space. Within the year it would be decided, after careful consideration of the possible consequences, to move the office into the house itself.

Not everything went smoothly: after several months of negotiations and plans, the initial deal for a house fell through, and the search had to be renewed. However, by July a suitable house had been acquired, and by August it could be reported that five women and five children had already resided at the house.

Chapter 38 staffing allowed the Society \$69,000 for four positions: a project coordinator, a volunteer coordinator, a fundraiser, and an office manager. Appropriate steps were taken for recruitment, interviews, and hiring. Some performance problems arose early on that eventually led to the dismissal of one of the original staff members. The seriousness of the troubles can be measured by a reference in the October minutes that "the last few months' events have taken their toll on the staff."

During 1987 several policy decisions were established about methods of operation and staffing. For example, in April and August the manner of functioning - whether by collective or by hierarchy - came in for major discussion at board and staff meetings. In both instances, the group reiterated its faith in the collective process even while recognizing some of the difficulties of decision making that it offered. It was also decided that men would be accepted as volunteers in the society but only after careful

screening and only for work outside the house. In no case were men to be allowed to behave in dominating ways.

The Society had gained enough prominence in the local community that it needed to consider carefully its relations with other organizations. Throughout its early history, for example, Atira had to define its relationship to Women's Place. Originally it was decided that the Society needed to maintain its independence of Women's Place and be an apolitical organization. In 1987, the issue arose again, and again the Society determined not to be narrowly affiliated with any single outside organization but rather to maintain good working relationships with all community service groups.

The final minutes available for 1987 show the society preparing for the conclusion of Chapter 38 staffing as of December 11. In a strongly optimistic tone, it is said in November's minutes that "wind-down going smoothly; volunteers seem enthused. House is full and busy." When ATIRA celebrated its first birthday in August 1988, it could say that it had provided safe refuge for 74 women and 86 children.

Once ATIRA had been established, Board proceedings through subsequent years consisted mostly of routine matters related to staffing, scheduling, funding, and public relations. However, the actual acquisition and staffing of a house complicated the existence of the Society in ways that may well be altogether predictable. In the first few years of its existence, ATIRA experienced a rather frequent turnover rate among staff members. In some cases, this was owing to the lack of experience and skills of the staff members. In other cases, it was due to the stressfulness of the work at the house. And in still other cases, it was due to a split in perceptions between the Board and the Staff about policies and procedures. At times some skepticism arose on the part of staff members that the board members could understand the true nature of the work at the house.

Complications such as these forced a change in the nature of the Board's existence. In addition to making policy decisions about routine matters, the Board was required to perform some therapy on the organization itself by holding special sessions in which grievances were aired and talked through. In 1991, the Board considered options for restructuring ATIRA, including turning all responsibilities over to the staff, putting ATIRA under the umbrella of Peace Arch Community Services (PACS), or installing a more traditional management structure. Through the spring of 1991, extensive discussion was given to turning ATIRA over to PACS, but in June the vote against this move was unanimous. In August the Administrative Coordinator established as a formal matter from the house. Under this new policy, the board would be responsible for long-term and short-term goals with input from the Administrative Coordinator but would have no role in day-to-day operations, which would be managed entirely by the Administrative Coordinator.

The period from 1992-95 saw a substantial improvement in the Society's overall situation, owing, no doubt, to extensive and effective fund-raising efforts. During late 1993 two concurrent developments were pursued: a move to 24-hour staffing, and establishment of a second stage house. Round-the-clock staffing met with virtually unanimous approval from staff and board members. Though funding was at times uncertain, this staffing mode was maintained as late as mid-1995. The second stage house was under construction by 1995 with an expected service date of early 1996.

ATIRA drew attention across Canada and the United States in the spring of 1995 as a result of a lawsuit in which confidential records were subpoenaed. ATIRA's Administrative Coordinator (AC), Janice Abbott, formulated a stand against such invasions of confidentiality and was featured in articles in *The New York Times* and *MS* magazine.

In her annual report for fiscal year 1993-94, the AC noted that ATIRA had provided shelter for 114 women and 133 children. Reports to the board through fiscal year 1994-95 indicate that residency at the house was consistently in the high 90 percentile, sometimes over 100%.

It is clear that staff understanding of the problems of abuse has deepened over the years. In her report of 1993-94, the AC identifies the complexity of issues as including not just circumstances of violent spousal relations but also matters of childhood abuse, systemic abuse due in part to a lack of awareness among police, physicians, judges, lawyers and social workers, and the extension of these problems to the abused women's own children.

ATIRA, through its staff, board, and volunteers continues both to seek and to provide funding, outreach, training, and networking to make an impact against these difficult problems.