

# Profile of a Women's Refuge

*by Adele Rowden-Johnson*

In the Old Testament, God appointed six cities of refuge to harbour any individual who had accidentally killed another. These strategically placed cities protected the life of the perpetrator who remained safe, provided they remained inside the refuge. While our modern-day place of refuge is not so all encompassing, we do harbour abuse victims—fearful women and children—who are able to feel safe and secure in our refuge environment.

## **A refuge is:**

- A place of safety where abused women and children are made to know the reality of being safe and protected.
- A shelter where three meals a day and a clean, warm bed at night are assured.
- Literally, a place of refuge and respite from fear, pain, rejection and grief, where loss and remorse are recognised.
- A place where panic attacks, anger management and emotional dysfunction are addressed.
- A place for counselling, training and preparation for change.
- A place for facing denial.
- A place for victims to learn to recognise their unique value as a human being.
- A place where, by the grace of God, hopelessness may give way to hopefulness.
- A place of refuge for the downtrodden, the browbeaten and the abused.

People who come to the refuge are experiencing one or more or all of the following: emotional abuse; physical abuse; sexual abuse; neglect; deprivation; psychological abuse; economic abuse; or spiritual abuse. Even the person who has often “missed out” on abuse, but who has experienced vicarious abuse finds help. This is just as damaging for them as for the one who is being abused.

Southlakes Refuge is staffed by volunteers who receive on-the-job training. I've discovered that it's always busy people who have time to do more! Numerous volunteers have said that the work at the refuge has kept them from indulging themselves in their own problems, and that they receive much more than they give!

Domestic violence occurs when one or more persons have power over another, thus causing fear, physical and/or psychological harm.

Ritual abuse (organised sadistic abuse) is far more common than most recognise, and at the refuge many women who come here have suffered this type of abuse. These people live in constant fear, and it's only through serious commitment from our carers for these victims that changes begin to occur.

## **The abused and their helpers**

Those who are experiencing abuse:

- Are always looking for someone to help and someone else to bring happiness.
- Discount feelings. This is a survival technique to ignore feelings, and thus survive.

- Either feel powerless or are controlling and fluctuate from a sense of powerlessness to the need to control.
- Are always fearful of someone or something.
- Will often overreact.
- Do not know what giving or receiving love is about.
- Assume too much responsibility for others (be it a parent, sibling or friend).
- Withdraw from life.
- Neglect their own needs.
- Experience low feelings of self-worth and self-esteem.
- Search for physical, mental and spiritual answers.
- Experience extreme shame.
- Never feel good enough.

The workers at a refuge have several roles as they:

- Assist victims to become survivors.
- Enable people to be themselves without fear.
- Provide safety for victims to explore other options.
- Assist people to enjoy the everyday pleasures of life.
- Point residents in the direction of using the refuge as a stepping stone to change.
- Become an immediate part of a support system.
- Train people in life skills.
- Teach people to take responsibility for themselves.
- Allow residents to share their feelings in safety.
- Enable people to find hope for the future.
- Allow people to feel validated.
- Give what is necessary to reveal strength, courage, respect and assertiveness previously unknown.
- Challenge people physically, mentally and spiritually.

### **Recognising the need**

In the past 12 months this refuge has turned away more than 520 desperate people. Many of these are either left to live on the streets or return to an abusive situation. Accommodation is urgently needed—more refuges, safe houses and reasonably priced rental properties.

I'm often asked, "But why do women return to the abusive situation?" There are many reasons why these women choose this option. These include:

- They have been told and believe, "You made your bed, so you lie in it."
- They believe that commitment really means "for better or for worse."
- She may feel she is to blame and have feelings of guilt.
- Economic reasons.
- Fear. Fear of violence, labelling, family pressure, being alone, not being believed, fear of God and fear of the unknown
- She may believe he will change and she wants to believe this for herself and her children.
- It's emotionally too difficult to leave.
- It's too difficult to break the social circle.

- For spiritual reasons. Church leaders have recommended that returning to their abusive situation is the best option, the honourable thing, because they have the spiritual responsibility of a wife and mother.

From my experience working at the refuge with women in trauma and depression, one thing that has been made very clear to me is that resentment is the main cause of depression. Every woman who comes to the refuge has resentment issues.

The underlying cause of resentment is anger, which occurs when their needs are not being met. Underlying the anger is hurt. Underlying the hurt is fear. This occurs when they know their needs will never be met. Underlying the fear is depression.

It's the work of every carer or worker at the refuge to support in a non-judgmental manner and reflect the love and character of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I did not come to judge the world, but to save it."

The carers are the only Bible some of these people will ever read. It's our responsibility, as carers, to walk in our Lord's footsteps. We must present to the residents, in love and compassion, that they are children of God, and He loves them as they are.

We must present to them that they are of great value to Christ. And if He sees them as treasure, they must look again within themselves, and the seed of self-respect thus sown will blossom into a new start, founded on love for the Lord and a new self-respect for themselves.

As carers we must present His message of salvation to them in Christlike love—no condemnation, just love. We believe that the 10 former residents who now work at the refuge and who are training to become carers are the result of sown seeds.

### **Kathy's story**

Kathy (not her real name) learned to read at the age of 24 years. As a child, by the age of nine she had assisted in many robberies after running away from home because of sexual abuse. She had been in and out of jail until the age of 23. She was married when she was 17 and divorced at 24 when her husband was sent to jail.

She met a "straight" partner, fell pregnant and found that this "wonderful" man was married. It fell my lot to let the father know he had a new daughter. (That's one of the tasks of being a refuge worker.) It did not go down too well!

When Kathy came to the refuge she had a three-week-old baby. She was unable to care for her baby and was continually asking for help with every minor detail. For her, housekeeping was just a word, not an experience. Kathy required special commitment on behalf of the carers, all of whom, without exception, made extra efforts for her.

Kathy eventually left the refuge, and the authorities removed her child from her.

Only a short time ago Kathy returned to the refuge with her two-year-old baby, both were simply glowing—what a difference! If I'd met her in the street, I wouldn't have recognised

her. The changes were dramatic. She told me it was because of the love and support she'd received at the refuge. She now works with people who are in a similar situation as she was.

Does working in a refuge make a difference? Is it worth providing a safe place for people like Kathy? Is it worth the effort to find clothing, footwear and personal items to give people who arrive with only the clothes on their backs? Is there value in feeding them and nurturing them?

Ask Kathy. She told me she most certainly would have suicided or overdosed if she hadn't come to our place of refuge.

Each time we have a spare room I pray that God will send the person He chooses so that His will can be done in their lives. We aren't here to convert, but to plant seeds. Every simple act of kindness is a seed sown—then it's God's responsibility.

I love passing over the problems to the One who can deal with them in a way that can bring praise to our Saviour. He came to seek and to save the lost. We deal here, at the refuge, with lost souls. Our refuge is a place where, by the grace of God, we're able in a small way to return and to share with others the love given to us by the Lord Jesus.

At our refuge we're able to disperse the saving love of Jesus to others who are desperate for salvation. This is why the work at the refuge must keep going.

Jesus Christ is the best counsellor; He's our refuge and our strength. His mission on earth was to save sinners. We're honoured to be labourers in His vineyard in this important way. That's why the work at the refuge keeps going. The refuge is God's special place for those with holes in their hearts. But He has a special place in His heart for the hurting, the needy and the defenceless. God holds these people in the hollow of His hands.

1. "It's not love—it's violence," a NSW Women's Refuge Referral and Resource Centre.
2. Barb McDonald, Surviving Child Abuse, ASCA.

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*Record*  
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