

Speech given at International Women's Day, March 8, 1984

by Vita Storey, Nelson, B.C.

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Tonight I'm going to go back about 12 years to when the Women's Centre was an idea whose time had come in Nelson. Sometimes we had trouble convincing people of that - like the Nelson Daily News who wrote an article in 1972 titled "No Need of Women's Lib." The reporter interviewed five people (we weren't among those five) and she came to the conclusion that, I quote, "while women liberationists are fighting for equality, local institutions appear to be granting it quietly and without much ado." Well we weren't asked for our opinion but we disagreed. The Nelson Women's Centre has made herstory, and I might add it hasn't been very quiet or without much ado. We were the first Women's Centre outside of the Lower Mainland and we are the oldest living centre in B. C. We can take pride in our accomplishments. We've had a strong and visible impact on this community over the years, particularly most recently on Kootenay Tractor. But my intention is not to deal with our present successes. My task tonight is to share with you the Nelson Women's Centre history, as I recall it from my work as one of the original Founding Mothers, as coordinator, chairperson, and all-around person who most of the time acted like she knew what she was doing. I consulted with a few original members for their memories of those days; I looked at old press releases. I read through ancient newsletters and put together these recollections.

The scene opens on 1972 and the content is a Local Initiatives Project (L.I.P. - today known as Canada Works) - it was surveying adult education needs in Nelson. I was job sharing with another woman. We sent an abortion survey to doctors in Nelson; got a few responses. Well, one issue led to another and we started having weekly c-r groups in living rooms throughout Nelson. From there we decided we'd like a Centre, so we put together a proposal for a Women's Centre. I hithchiked to Vancouver (we didn't have a travel budget), presented it to Secretary of State people and in January 1973 we received a cheque for \$7,600.00 made out to the Nelson Women's Centre. From there a physical space was secured at 490 Baker Street (on the corner of Baker and Ward) known as the KWC Block. It was a lovely oval shaped room with high curved windows overlooking Baker Street and I remember it was heated with those hot water radiators that used to hiss and occasionally spew hot water. There were lots and lots of wooden stairs to climb to get up to this room. In fact, you had to be in pretty good physical shape to make it up without huffing and puffing. The location above Baker Street was great. We were visible, accessible and the staff especially liked it because it was an excellent vantage point from which to watch

the parades on Baker Street.

But not everyone was thrilled at our success in getting federal funds for starting a Women's Centre. a staff member from the Nelson Daily News wrote in an opinion editorial "Women's Lib is little more than a vehicle for members of the fair sex who cannot cope with the pressures of society. Strong women can and do make their mark in life and don't need to derive false comfort by associating with other females content to complain about male chauvinism..." He ended his article by saying, "In summation it is nothing short of ludicrous for the government of this country to spend taxpayers money on any project associated with a facade such as Women's Lib. The recent granting of \$7,600 to the Nelson Women's Centre is incredulous and does little to instill confidence in the Trudeau government," end of quote. Well, to have evoked that kind of reaction, we knew we must be on the right track.

Our first official problem was our name. We were the Nelson Women's Centre but that wasn't good enough for Victoria. We were applying to become a legal society so that we could receive government funding. We knew little about incorporation so we borrowed someone else's constitution, changed the goals, replaced man for woman and sent in our constitution. Victoria kept sending the papers back. The name had to include society or Association. We finally settled on the West Kootenay Women's Association and we kept the name Nelson Women's Centre. It became a project of the West Kootenay Women's Association. That was in 1974.

490 Baker Street was home until the move into the Jam Factory around 1978. Our landlord was never quite sure what we did up there. I think he was afraid to ask. He did say one day that he noticed a lot of women going up to the Centre wearing work boots. One night without telling us, he changed the lock on the street level door and took down all our signs. The next day when we came to work and couldn't get our keys to work in the door we knew something was going on. Well, we went to see him. He was a bit excited. He told us it wasn't the women he objected to, but the boots we wore. He said it confused people. Well, we stood up to this landlord (and remember those were the days before assertiveness training, before fogging and broken record, etc.). We got back in, and life went on.

One of the drawbacks of 490 Baker Street were the stairs but that didn't keep people away. In fact, many of the women who climbed those stairs were pregnant. The Centre ran childbirth education classes on Saturdays. The room would get filled with wall-to-wall foamies, pelvic models, posters of foetal development, new fathers. It was a very busy place on Saturdays.

The Centre did self-examination and self-help classes. The book, Our Bodies/ Ourselves by the Boston Women's Health Collective was a must for reading. We spent a lot of time looking at cervixes. Someone commented that the way you knew if a woman belonged to the Women's Centre in those days was if she had a speculum in her drawer and, I would add, that you knew she was really committed if she had 2 speculums, one at home in her drawer and one at work in her drawer. But seriously, it was a time of exploration and awareness - we learned about pap tests that should be done yearly and what the different classes meant. We asked our doctors at the clinic to please warm up the speculum and to give us a mirror during our pelvic exams. When they couldn't provide us with mirrors, we brought our own. We learned about venereal disease and passed it on to others (the info, not the disease). For example, 80% of women who contract gonorrhoea do not have symptoms initially. We also found that the gonorrhoea culture taken from one's body is delicate and short-lived and usually died in transit on its way to Vancouver for testing. That explained why Nelson had no gonorrhoea in those days. When the samples arrived at the Vancouver lab, they were dead. It didn't take a great medical mind to figure out that there was a problem here; I guess the medical profession just hadn't figured it out yet. The Women's Centre was instrumental in getting the Selkirk Health Unit to set up a special Culture Clinic in Nelson in 1977 for diagnosing gonorrhoea on the spot. We managed to get a Well Woman's Clinic and a V.D. Clinic set up at the Health Unit one afternoon a week. I remember the Health Unit staff didn't want to put up the sign for the V.D. Clinic on the front door. I guess they were concerned about public image. So they put the sign on the back door where no-one would see it.

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We had our impact on the Medical Associates Clinic in Nelson. Ten years ago every doctor in Nelson (with the exception of one elderly gentleman) belonged to the clinic. We took issue with the fact that registering at the Clinic was difficult. You had to declare a head of the household person - preferably male. You were either Miss or Mrs. and if you said Ms. they pretended they didn't hear you.

Then there was the Nelson Hospital. Maternity practices at KLDH have changed a lot since 1972. At that time, it was unusual for anyone who wasn't medically involved to be present at the birth of a woman's baby, unless of course the baby was born in the car on the way to the hospital. The Centre's childbirth education classes and support for midwifery changed these policies over the years. I read in the paper a few weeks ago that they're now considering letting in two

non-medical people with the woman..

But I think our longest project on record was getting the Women's Centre sign hung outside on the granite wall of the Jam Factory building. That's why it was such a tragedy when it was stolen. Three years work went down the drain. The meetings that we had over the sign!

I've already mentioned the Centre's promotion of the philosophy of self-help and of natural healing methods. As I recall, everyone had vaginitis - Nylon underpants were out; cotton was in. Feminism hygiene products were definitely out; vinegar and yoghurt douches were in. The self-help section in one of our old newsletters suggested if all else fails, boil your underwear. I don't recall anyone ever getting into that, though.

The Centre offered natural birth control classes based on the mucous method of detecting when you're ovulating. We used to compare our mucous - you know how Eskimos have a dozen names for snow, well we had a dozen names for mucous: there was tacky, stretchy, flakey, sticky, and we all knew what a woman meant when she said she felt slippery that day.

We were interested in other issues besides our bodies - it wasn't our only obsession.

We took on discrimination in many forms. The Nelson Golf and Country Club didn't escape our wrath. A letter sent to the Nelson Daily News by the Women's Centre was captioned "Macho's Hog the Links". Women were not allowed on the Nelson golf course until 10 a.m. on Saturdays because, and I quote: "women are free to golf during the week".

Yes, as the early Nelson feminists we were called upon to debate, argue, prove that women can do things that men can do - like lifting a box of liquor at the Nelson liquor store, and like peeing in the woods without separate washroom facilities. Or how about the ad that appeared in the Nelson Daily News on July 6th, 1973 which read, "Local Bank requires young men interested in banking as a career. High school education essential". I remember him saying they wanted male trainees because they were easier to transfer, that they would have to carry mail and vouchers about. I told him to give me his heaviest letter and I bet I could carry it to wherever it needed to go. Yes, we took on a lot of these heavy challenges - like offering to lift a letter, offering to share washrooms with male employees, offering to carry on with business in a rational and clear-headed way while menstruating at the same time. Yes, we were constantly breaking down those age-old stereotypes.

The subject of money for the Centre was always a concern. \$7,600.00 doesn't stretch very far and we weren't financial experts. In fact, in our April newsletter in 1974 there was a notice to all members that read "The Women's Centre in Nelson has just run out of money. Due to an error in bookkeeping, this happened about two months ago." The plea for donations that followed must have worked or we wouldn't be here today to enjoy each other's company in this way.

We survived many crises: running out of money before we realized it, getting locked out of our Centre, getting foul publicity, posting signs on the Centre saying "No Men Allowed" only to have them disappear the next day, dealing with the mice population in the present location, and the smells and sounds from the Jam Factory. But we continue to survive, and grow, and celebrate our experiences and struggles as women on this planet earth.

I'd like to end with a quote by Jane Howard from her book "A Different Woman" as it seems appropriate to my experiences and perhaps to others here:

"This is a watershed time in my own life. Motherless, I have nobody to paste my clippings into scrapbooks, so I shall achieve, or try to achieve what I want to, and because I want to. Maybe some of my achievements won't even involve the printed word. Jobless, I have no office to go to, no boss to tell me where to be next Thursday, and so I shall move at my own pace away from the conventions that structured my past. Perhaps in doing so, I shall seem at the same time appallingly brassy to those I leave behind, and hopelessly timid to those on the farthest shore. Tough."

Thank you.

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