

West Kootenay Women's Association / Nelson & District Women's Centre 1996 - 1999:
a biased memoir by Karen Newmoon

I moved to the West Kootenay in 1994 and became involved with the West Kootenay Women's Association/Nelson District Women's Centre in 1995. I began as a volunteer, took the volunteer training when it was available, and was hired as one of the coordinators starting May 1, 1996 and working until June 30, 1999. Subsequently, I have been a member of the Coordinating Collective twice and have volunteered off and on.

I came to the Women's Centre with over a decade of experience of involvement with women's centres and women's support groups of one form or another. The first women's centres I was involved with, starting in 1984, were actually called family resource centres, but it was all women who went to them: strong women, feminists who saw their choices of birthing naturally and staying at home to raise their children in a wholesome way as political activism – challenging the status quo of two working parents with children in daycare.

In 1986 I became involved with Common Ground Women's Centre in Toronto, a centre for single moms, which, at that time, was run by strong feminists. I was a single mom of one daughter, a political activist, a budding feminist and a baby dyke. I came out in the context of feminism and still remember my shocked surprise when I met a lesbian who did not identify as a feminist ... I remain astonished to this day. But sexual orientation is not the same as political analysis.

In 1987 and 1988, I was coordinator of the Women's Centre at Ryerson Polytechnic Institute in Toronto. I organized and participated in many events including Take Back the Night, a Women for Peace event on Remembrance Day, the first AIDS vigil, International Women's Day, etc. I was involved in political actions about homelessness, poverty, the Cruise Missile, the US presence in Central America ... more than I can remember. To me, it was all part of the same issue: the exploitation of the natural world - and various groups of people in the world - by those with power and privilege, in order to hold onto and increase their power and privilege. This was the background I brought with me to the West Kootenay Women's Association in the 90s.

The first time I went to the Nelson and District Women's Centre, it was upstairs, above Gerick Cycle. Everyone was very excited, because the house on Mill Street had been purchased. There were t-shirts around that said "a home of our own" and it was thrilling to know that the women's centre now had that security of basis. A home of our own indeed. By the time I took the volunteer training, in the fall of 1995, the women's centre had moved in to the house at 421 Mill Street. Very exciting! The coordinators were Deborah Schwartz and Moe Lyons, with Maggie Shirley working as the office manager. I liked the balance of having one coordinator married (to a man) with a family and one coordinator a single dyke. Of course, that changed when I was hired to replace Deborah; there were then 2 lesbians working as coordinators, but - since I do have children - there was still balance, of a different sort. Shortly after I started working there, Maggie departed and was replaced by Beryl Clayton (briefly) and then by KLinda Kivi → 3 dykes on staff.

Those were kind of halcyon days for the association, though we didn't really know it at the time.

With the NDP in the legislature and the existence of the Ministry for Women's Equality, we had core funding the allowed for at least some sense of job security. About 1/3 of our funding was federal, from Status of Women Canada, and 2/3 was provincial. We didn't have enough paid hours for the extent of work we were doing, but that is always the case. With three staff, there were a total of less than 60 paid hours in the budget. I think we all worked about 1½ times our paid hours. At that time there was also a functioning BC and Yukon Association of Women's Centres, with a few conference calls per year provided by the BC Ministry of Women's Equality and an AGM funded by Status of Women Canada. Good times! Women working in women's centres could actually communicate on a regular basis, to share information and to strategize, and we did.

Working at the women's centre is very much a job where one does whatever needs to be done. However, we did have some general division of labour: Moe planned and organized events - weekly Wonderful Wednesdays as well as annual events such as Take Back the Night and International Women's Day celebrations - while I trained volunteers and ran support groups. We shared administrative tasks, representation on community committees and responsibility for staffing the drop-in, which was open 4 afternoons/week. KLinda kept the office organized. There were also volunteers who hosted special kinds of drop-in times: a moms and tots group one morning a week, a monthly Company of Older Women gathering, a les-bi-dyke drop in one evening/month.

Working at the Women's Centre at that time felt like being at the hub of the women's community as well as at the hub of the lesbian community. I loved it! I had previously not found a way to connect with the lesbian community, perhaps partly due to living in Kaslo with no car and two kids, which made attending events rather challenging. I had heard that the West Kootenay had a great women's community, but had not found a way to connect with it. However, since my previous experience was connecting through women's centres, doing that again worked just fine for me. I do wonder, though, how women new to the area find connection these days, since the WKGLB (West Kootenay Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Committee - a completely volunteer group that existed in the 1990s) no longer exists and there is no les-bi-dyke drop-in at the women's centre, and hasn't been for years. There is a lesbian brunch once a month, but I think one has to already know the organizers in order to be on the information list about that - it is not publicly advertised. There is Kootenay Pride, but that committee is really only active in the summer, planning the Pride Parade, which happens every Labour Day weekend. It makes me question whether one has to already belong to the community in order for it to be "a great community". I know a woman in Vancouver, who grew up in Queen's Bay and comes back a few times every summer, who told me that, despite rumours of "a great community", she questioned whether everyone went back in the closet whenever she came to town, because she could find no visible queer community. I think it can be difficult to find a way to make an initial connection. But I digress.

So there we were, working on issues that effected women in rural BC: transportation, isolation, poverty, violence, past history of abuse, needing a living wage, needing stable housing, needing childcare, needing connection and community. This is not a comprehensive list! There seemed to be lots of energy around. The Coordinating Collective was fantastic the first year or two, with strong feminist and political activists who also volunteered in the drop-in so were very connected

with the daily experience at the centre. We had funding to do a project to get more women hired on the Keenleyside Dam refurbishment project. We still had the West Kootenay Women's Festival - I hope it is described elsewhere - that was a great gathering of energy and lots of fun. We had the first Kootenay Pride Parade in 1996 - there was lots of energy and political activism around that, with the Pride committee having to initiate a lawsuit against the City of Nelson in order to get recognition. It was busy, exhausting, energizing, productive, draining, fantastic, frantic at times, fulfilling, wonderful and ultimately time to move on.

Moe and I had several conversations about the possibility of having a maximum of a three-year term as coordinator, out of compassion for the women who do this work, as that seems to be about the burn-out timeframe. Moe moved on to other things in 1998 and I left in 1999. The last Coordinating Collective I worked with was a bit of a challenge for me at times - starting with an activity at the retreat we held in October for new and returning CC members to come together and get ready for the work ahead. I had been asked to prepare a few ice-breaker exercises, one of which was a go-round stating our personal definition of "feminist" and why/how we identified with that term. The newly elected Chair said "I don't identify as a feminist", leaving me to wonder why she had volunteered for a position with a feminist organization. The world is full of strange things.

It was also a hard time because there had been an election (**May 2001**) that replaced the NDP with a Liberal majority and we knew that our core funding was about to disappear. We were told we could apply for funding from the BC Gaming Commission, which we did, but it amounted to under ½ the Ministry of Women's Equality funding and we knew we'd have to cut staff way way back. So we did. Since I left, there has been only enough funding for one coordinator, instead of two, and it is hard to be the only staff person at the Centre. Coordinators following my time there have explored new avenues such as Social Enterprise funding and various project-specific funding streams. Currently there are two staff, both with very few paid hours per week.

The Women's Centre continues to struggle through and there are many dedicated women in the community who will ensure that it continues to exist. Owning our own house and having it be almost debt-free by now gives us the ability to feel secure that we will persist, will continue to be a gathering place for women, will continue to be one hub of the women's community in the West Kootenay. Rural women know how to persist, and persist we will.

Thanks for the chance to write this Marcia, and for all the work you do!!!
Big hugs to ya,
karen