



Firehall provides single moms with safe housing

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Najma and her kids got a new lease on life when she moved into a YWCA transitional home for low-income single moms. Streetohome is partnering with YWCA Metro Vancouver and the City to build new housing in a redeveloped firehall.



Najma’s easy smile, and eagerness to make others feel comfortable, belies the brutality of war the diminutive forty-four year-old woman has survived.

Caught in the aftermath of Iraq’s Kurdish Civil War, Najma, with tears streaming down her face, recalls running from city to city with her children looking for safety, while witnessing civilians being shot and killed just a few yards away.

She lost: two brothers fighting in the war; another brother to a heart attack after learning his brothers had been killed; her father, who was taken away at gunpoint, and never seen again; and twins at six months of age – for whom she was unable to get basic medical attention.

She spent eight months living in a refugee camp on the border of Iraq and Iran. In 1999, she fled to Turkey where she lived for five years with her abusive husband and their two surviving boys. Her husband would beat her every day says Najma, emboldened by the fact that there was no family to help her.

It was a far cry from the comfortable life she had lived in Kirkuk as the daughter

of a wealthy businessman. Eventually she would ask a cousin for help, and with assistance from the UN, she immigrated to Canada as a refugee in 2004.

“It was the first time I felt like a human being in a very long time,” says Najma.

“I knew my kids would have been dead if we had stayed in Iraq. In Canada, they had a great place to grow up and live.”

However, the new beginning wasn’t easy for Najma and her two boys, living in a cramped one-bedroom apartment without any supports. When her apartment flooded, and struggling with an unresponsive landlord, she confided her troubles to a friend who told her about a subsidized housing complex operated by YWCA Metro Vancouver in East Vancouver.

The YWCA offers women and their children a safe place to call home, and provides them with the life skills they need to become personally and economically independent. A maximum of 30 percent of a woman’s income goes towards housing.

Given the demand for affordable housing, it took a year for her to learn that she had

qualified for a three-bedroom apartment in the well-cared for complex.

“This is a single mom’s dream,” says Najma, “to have a safe place to live. There are cameras and security all around. There are other moms like me, and we support each other.”

It was also the first time in a long time she had a bedroom and a bed of her own. The boys shared the only bedroom and Najma slept in the living room in their old apartment.

But more importantly, the support staff at the YWCA gave her hope for a better future. She eventually went back to school, earned a certificate as a care aid, and began working and supporting herself and her boys. She has dreams of going back to school to become a nurse.

The YWCA’s Fire Hall #5 – a Streetohome funded project – will give women like Najma the opportunity to rebuild their lives in a family-friendly neighbourhood with schools, shopping and recreational facilities nearby. It’s the

Firehall #5 provides single moms with bright futures

first project of its kind, with a fully-functioning fire hall on the main floor, and four levels of transitional and longer-term subsidized housing on top.

Thirty-one, two and three bedroom units will house up to 76 moms and kids.

It signals the City of Vancouver's desire to maximize the use of public land through innovative uses to better serve the community. The other YWCA and City collaboration underway – low-income housing for women above a library – is also being funded by Streetohome.

According to Kathy Lilyholm, Manager at the YWCA Metro Vancouver, single moms are among the poorest families in the province, and face enormous hurdles in making ends meet. "We believe the road to economic independence is an education, so women can earn enough money to support their families," says Kathy. "It's really hard on a single income to afford rent and childcare, let alone be able to save to go to school. Rent at YWCA housing is set at 30 percent of income, allowing women the opportunity to save and pay for school."

Often the journey is a long one. The typical stay at YWCA longer-term housing is between five to seven years. "It all depends on the number of barriers women have when they move in with us. If English isn't your first language, if you're dealing with years of abuse, if you don't have a post-secondary education, it's going to take you longer to break down the walls and become economically independent."

But it's an investment worth making, says Kathy. "If you look at it from an economic perspective, your dollar goes twice as far. Not only are you helping a low-income single mom, you're changing the future for her child."

Streetohome has made a commitment to raise \$892,000 for Fire Hall #5, which is expected to open in 2018. The total cost for the housing portion of the project is about \$10.6 million.

"Streetohome's mandate is to invest in initiatives to increase supportive and subsidized housing for those who are most vulnerable in society, including low income, single women with children, to prevent them

from becoming homeless," says Rob Turnbull, President and CEO, Streetohome Foundation.

"This is truly an innovative housing project, and we're delighted to be partnering with the City and the YWCA to create this safe, supportive community for women."

For more information, please contact Streetohome at 604.629.2711, ext. 101, or visit www.streetohome.org

► Short-term Housing:

Interim housing. In the case of Fire Hall #5, up to nine months for women who are fleeing abuse and at risk of homelessness. Women receive one-on-one support, set goals and make a plan for their future.

► Longer-term, Subsidized Housing:

Provides stable, permanent housing for women and their dependent children, with no more than 30 percent of a woman's income going to rent. Women at Fire Hall #5 will have access to support services through the YWCA, including parenting and employment programs.

Board Notes:

Board Chair John McLernon received a *BC Community Achievement Award for his philanthropic work, in particular founding and stewarding Streetohome Foundation*. The awards are given out by the Premier of British Columbia to celebrate the spirit, imagination and dedication of British Columbians who make a significant difference in



their communities. Photo: John receives his award from Hon. Coralee Oakes, Minister of Community, Sport and Cultural Development (left), and Her Honour Judith Guichon, OBC, Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia.

Streetohome board member Joanne Gassman (photo to right) received a *lifetime achievement award* from The Association of Women in Finance (AWF) in May. Joanne, former Senior Vice-President, Bank of Montreal, was honoured for her: exemplary career, spanning more than 39 years; her enduring commitment to achieving excellence; and for guiding and supporting the promotion of other women in finance.



Board members Mary Ackenhusen, President and CEO, Vancouver Coastal Health, and Penny Ballem, City Manager, City of Vancouver, were recognized as among the *50 most influential women in BC*. Mary and Penny are featured in the June issue of BC Business magazine.

Life in the slow lane suits Steve just fine



Steve in his new home at 111 Princess, a supportive housing building operated by the Portland Hotel Society.

Steve has spent the last decade or so in and out of prison for stealing cars, breaking and entering and petty theft.

He was firmly entrenched in criminal activity since the age of 12, after his mom committed suicide, but when he became addicted to drugs and alcohol, he says he got sloppy and started making dumb mistakes that got him caught.

When he talks about his life – the death of his mom, a dad that was already doing hard time in the pen, and knowing more than a young child should about the underbelly of life – it's no wonder he joined a gang in his East Vancouver neighbourhood as a teenager.

The gang was his family and they looked after each other, and they stole and caused mischief – but there wasn't excessive use of drugs or alcohol. That came later for Steve when the gang dispersed and he started to feel isolated.

After years in and out of prison, he was court-ordered to rehab and he was given a place to live at the Bosman Hotel, located at 1060 Howe, which offered supportive housing for the homeless with mental health and addiction issues. Streetohome provided capital funds for remodeling the Bosman Hotel in 2008 – and more recently the City of Vancouver provided an additional million dollars for renovations at the building now referred to as the Metson.

"I was homeless and using jail as a place to stay," says Steve. "When I moved to the Bosman, I stopped stealing, because I had a home. Before the Bosman, I would be on the streets for a few weeks and then I'd be inside again."

"I don't know what finally clicked, but when I finally had a decent place, I was just happy it was mine, and I wasn't worrying about where I was going to stay."

Unfortunately, it's a story that Richard Marquez, Lookout Emergency Aid Society's Downtown Residential Manager has heard too often. Lookout helps released offenders with housing, vocational training and employment.

Most inmates are released without any supports, and as he tells a Georgia Straight reporter, they are told "Your time is up; your sentence is served. Good luck."

It's a "prison poverty cycle," says Richard. "Providing housing is the greatest deterrent to prevent someone from reoffending."

Steve is one of the lucky ones – he moved from the Bosman, where he had been living for three years, to the Portland Hotel Society supportive housing building at 111 Princess just before Christmas last year. Streetohome provided \$2.78 million for the project, which is home for 139 residents.

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Two decades of life on the streets and jail has taken its toll on 38-year-old Steve. He finds it hard to focus on anything for too long, and is unable to work. With secure housing in place, he's trying to keep sober. He's eight months without a relapse, and he's quit smoking. Working with a counsellor, he's learning to take care of himself better, saving money, and making plans for the future.

"I'm doing pretty good," says Steve. As for how he spends his time, "I try not to get stressed out about things. I go for walks. I clean my place. I take care of Sabrina, my cat."

He loves his new home, "I have a kitchen for the first time. I have a view – I can see Burnaby Mountain and the North Shore Mountains outside my window."

It's a much quieter life than the chaos of his past, but it suits him just fine.

A Message from Rob Turnbull



Rob Turnbull, President and CEO, Streetohome Foundation, at groundbreaking of YWCA Cause We Care House.



Ralph Guitard, resident; Jane Thornthwaite, MLA for North Vancouver-Seymour; Rob Turnbull; Councillor Kerry Jang, Acting Mayor, City of Vancouver; Caroline Bonesky, CEO, Family Services of Greater Vancouver; and Nancy Keough, Executive Director, and Maria Holman, Director, The Kettle Society.



Rick Sielski, Vancity; Craig Richmond, BC Housing; Kerry Jang, City of Vancouver; Nancy Keough, The Kettle Society; Brenda Prosen, City of Vancouver and Lloyd Craig, Streetohome Foundation, celebrate the opening of Taylor Manor.

We began this year by celebrating the culmination of many years of collaborative hard work and planning, with the ground breaking on Cause We Care House, 21 units of housing for single moms and their children, above a library at 730 East Hastings; the opening of Taylor Manor, 56 units of housing for people living with mental health and addiction issues; and the opening of 1134 Burrard, 141 units for homeless adults and at-risk youth.

Mid-way into the year, we are looking forward to the official openings of 2465 Fraser Street, 99 homes for aboriginal adults and youth, and 111 Princess, 139 units for adults with mental health

and addictions (read Steve's story in this issue); and the groundbreaking of 41 East Hastings, 52 units for women and their partners.

That's a total of 508 units of housing for hundreds of individuals and families who will have the safety and support of a new home this year. However, we know that our work is not yet done, and we continue to scrutinize new funding applications for unique projects that will provide supportive housing for the most vulnerable in our society (read Najma's cover story about Fire Hall #5).

We are awaiting the release of the City of Vancouver's 2015 Homeless

Count numbers in late June. In consultation with our partners, we will reconcile these numbers with the Housing Inventory Count (the number of supportive housing units available across the city) to more accurately determine the additional housing units required.

We are also reviewing evidence-based practices to better support and improve the lives of individuals living in shelters and supportive housing. In addition, we are exploring innovative initiatives to prevent homelessness in the first place.

Of primary interest as we move forward is how to best steward the resources and faith that donors have invested in Streetohome.

I look forward to sharing some of our new strategies to tackling homelessness, as they begin to take shape, in future issues of the newsletter.

Rob Turnbull, Ph.D., CHE
President & CEO
Streetohome Foundation

about streetohome

Streetohome Foundation is a community organization dedicated to ensuring that vulnerable residents of our city have access to safe, decent, affordable housing and the support they need to make a difference in their lives.

We bring together business, government and community leaders to build resources and develop lasting solutions to homelessness.

Be **part** of the solution.

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