

DOMESTICS' CROSS-CULTURAL NEWS

monthly newsletter of the Toronto Organization for Domestic Workers'

October 1989

(INTERCEDE)

HIGHLIGHTS OF INTERCEDE AGM

At its Annual General Meeting on September 10, 1989, INTERCEDE members reviewed the events of the past year and elected seven new members to the Board of Directors.

Ms. Naomi Alboim, Assistant Deputy Minister of the Ontario Women's Directorate, honoured the meeting as its guest speaker, while the cast of the play, "If My Mother Could See Me Now", presented a scene dramatizing some of the experiences of domestic workers in Toronto.

A message read to the assembly and sent by Ms. Mavis Wilson, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, stressed the importance of INTERCEDE's work and the Ontario government's commitment to ensure "that immigrant and visible minority women who are domestic workers become fully participating members of our Ontario society".

Outgoing president, Ms. Cornelia Soberano, presided over the AGM and reported on the measures taken during the year to strengthen the organizational foundation of INTERCEDE. "An organization can only be as strong as its base - our voting and non-voting membership have increased dramatically and our members are participating actively in our organization," Ms. Soberano said.

She noted the changes that have been effected to improve INTERCEDE's capacity to serve the need of its members for information, education and counselling; to reach out to domestic workers in various parts of Metro and outlying areas; to represent domestic

workers' interest with government, the community and the public; and to advocate for improvements in their work and living conditions.

Among these changes she cited leasing of a new and bigger office located at 489 College Street, and hiring of a new Coordinator in January. She cited the enthusiastic response to the year-long-plan of monthly educational meetings on timely topics; the new features and improvements in the newsletter, *Domestics' Cross-Cultural News*; and the new brochure that clearly outlines the settlement services offered to domestic workers.

The Board of Directors has instituted "more efficient procedures for case management and filing, and for financial and internal control," to improve service levels and to maximize use of the organization's funds.

The results of these changes are visible in the dramatic increases in direct services that, since January, has been averaging 327 client contacts a month, the large meeting attendance (monthly average of 430), the expansion of the mailing list to more than 2,300 names, and an average 110 new members per month since February.

Worthwhile noting is the long-delayed upgrading of the salary levels of INTERCEDE counselling staff, the increase in volunteer participation and the positive response to its request for increased funding from sources at all levels of government.

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Come to INTERCEDE's monthly meeting on Sunday, October 1, 1989 from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. at the Cecil Community Centre, 58 Cecil Street.

"What Constitutes Sexual Harrassment in the Domestic Worker's Workplace", will be the topic of

Lynda Davies, Executive Director of Assaulted Women's Helpline

There will be CLASP legal clinic and INTERCEDE counselling.

Ms. Soberano noted the organization's involvement with the proposed changes to the Employment Standards Act drafted by the Ontario Advisory Council for Women's Issues, "with emphasis on enforcement, penalty provisions for repeated offenders, multilingual access and full overtime protection."

She enumerated the networking activities of INTERCEDE including active participation in the March National Dialogue on Domestic Workers' Rights held in Toronto, sending delegates to the National Organization for Visible Minority Women of Canada Conference in Ottawa, meetings with the Barbados Consulate and with the Centre for Caribbean Dialogue, and speaking at the Alberta conference on equality rights and at the first anniversary of the Filipino Domestic Workers' Association of Manitoba.

The President's report was followed by a report on the financial status of the organization by acting treasurer, Carmencita Hernandez. After reporting on the membership, Mary Jarrell, 2nd Vice President, opened the table for nominations to the Board, and election.

The seven elected were: Herminia Andrade, Thelma Coolen, Sedef Arat-Koc, Judy Rebick, Rosemary Seymour, Celia Tababan, and Annie Wong. They replaced outgoing members who were applauded for their dedicated work: Dolores Alapide, Eusebio Aquintey, Naserita Gascon, Yola Grant (Treasurer), Eva Smith, Cornelia Soberano (President), and Eugenia Yuen.

DUAL CHALLENGE TO INTERCEDE

(Excerpts from the Remarks made by Ms. Naomi Alboim, Assistant Deputy Minister, Ontario Women's Directorate, at the AGM, September 10, 1989)

It is a pleasure to see that one full decade after the launching of Intercede, it continues to attract such an active, enthusiastic and, above all, committed group of members.

Let me take a moment to congratulate the past and present boards of directors and the staff... their dedication to the group has contributed greatly to Intercede's growth and vitality. I know that half of the Board is made up of women who are themselves, or have been, domestic workers, so the leaders of this group truly do speak for their members.

...I want to focus on a theme...work, .. what working really means to us as human beings. Most of us work, after all, a minimum of one quarter of our lives. And work can have a major impact on our self-esteem - on how we see ourselves, how others see us, and how much we value ourselves. We do not question the need to work. It is what we do to survive... an economic necessity, it shapes our days, and, indeed, our lives.

I want to talk about the work of the Ontario Women's Directorate, of Intercede, and that you as individuals are doing each and every day.

The Ontario Women's Directorate was established in 1983, as an advocacy agency within the Ontario government...for economic, social and legal equality of all women in Ontario.

Our mandate...is to raise women's issues and concerns within government, and ensure that those issues are addressed and incorporated into government initiatives. Some of the priorities that we have targetted include economic equality, employment equity, and

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the elimination of violence against women. We consider it our job to provide information and support to women's groups...through publications and brochures, ...workshops, and..grants which enable women's groups to carry out their own projects.

We helped to finance the Intercede publication..."Know Your Rights". We provided a grant to produce a video on the concerns of domestic workers. And we also participated in the funding of the play you will see later today.

...My experience at the OWD has given me enormous respect for the potential of community organizations - and for the power they can bring to bear on decision-makers.

Thanks to Intercede, domestic workers in Ontario have been demanding - and getting - increasingly fair and equitable working conditions. We still have a long way to go, ...but there is no doubt that your group has been the catalyst for some important progress...:

- nine years ago, Intercede presented a brief to the provincial Ministry of Labour, recommending that domestic workers be included in the Employment Standards Act, in the Workers' Compensation Act, and in the Ontario Human Rights Code.
- three years later, Intercede again lobbied...for extension of the minimum wage to domestic workers, along with regulation of their hours of work and overtime.
- in 1985, Intercede met with the Minister of Labour and the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues to discuss working hours and domestic workers' right to unionize.
- shortly thereafter, Intercede initiated a campaign to introduce overtime protection....

I agree that we have to do more - ... Intercede wants more government action on overtime regulations, and changes to the Foreign Domestic Workers program. ...I think it is clear that while Ontario is among the leaders in this country in providing legal protection for domestic workers - we are well aware of the need for improvement. And Intercede has played a key role in creating that awareness.

What is particularly impressive to me, as I observe the evolution of this group year by year, is this: somehow, you always manage to take the diversity that your membership represents, made up as it is of women from a wide variety of culture and backgrounds - and out of that diversity, you shape a united front, you emerge

with a single voice. That is a strength that I hope you will continue to demonstrate.

In my opinion, groups like Intercede are faced with a dual challenge: ... to provide a vital service function to your individual members -...the one-on-one counselling, the legal advice, the social support, the education about basic workers' rights - all of which are absolutely essential, if you are to counter the very real isolation that is the domestic worker's experience in Canada.

But...it is equally imperative to stay alert...to the second half of the challenge - the need for a public advocacy role. Because by widening your net, and fighting for change in public policy, you can get at the root causes of the problems...and your impact therefore can be a thousandfold greater.

Let me turn to my final topic ... your own roles as working women. The kind of work that you do as domestic workers... caring for children, parents, ...the daily operation of the homes of your employers - has traditionally been labelled women's work. Unfortunately, that label (has) low status and poor pay. Work in the home is highly privatized and...invisible...

There are other working women in somewhat the same boat... But all of us, as working women, are learning that we are entitled to make choices about the work we do;...to be empowered to change the workplace and, in the process, change attitudes.

..Whether you are committed to domestic work on a temporary basis, or on a more permanent one, I want to get the message across that the work you are doing right now is in fact fundamental. Yes, it is undervalued; and yes, domestic workers in this country are not rewarded properly, nor are you respected nearly enough.

I believe, however, that with time we are going to turn that reality around - as society begins to acquire a new appreciation of how vital caregivers are to the stability of our children, to working parents, and indeed to the survival of our economy.

Take pride in your achievements, and work towards changing the status quo...I'd like to assure you that the Ontario Women's Directorate is always available to hear your concerns,... to work together...to welcome your input and participation so that all women in Ontario will...truly achieve equality - economic, social and legal equality - in our society.

COCO'S CALENDAR

Great appreciation...

for the student lawyers of CLASP who faithfully operate a legal clinic during our monthly meetings and lend a very valuable service to domestic workers. We had a chance to touch base and discuss the progress of misrepresentation cases with three of them: Jay Sengupta, Patty Cullen, and Laura Setzer.

Before leaving us...

Cornelia Soberano, past president of INTERCEDE, travelled to Winnipeg to be guest speaker at the anniversary banquet and dance of the Filipino Domestic Workers Association of Manitoba (FIDWAM) on September 3, 1990. FIDWAM was formed in April 1988 and counts more than 60 members. Cornelia also held an information session with FIDWAM members and friends the following day about the problems of domestic workers.

Hello again...

to officers and members of the West Coast Domestic Workers Association. Together with the Filipino Christian Alliance Fellowship and the Filipino Women's Study Group, they formed a coalition whose first activity was a panel discussion on domestic workers' rights in B.C. led by representatives from Immigration, Labour, the Philippine consulate, legal advocacy groups and INTERCEDE.

According to our coordinator, Fely Villasin, the panel was attended by almost 300 people at the Robson Square Media Centre in downtown Vancouver. Problems of misrepresentation, release letters, below minimum wage salaries plague B.C. domestics who expressed the need to establish an INTERCEDE-type organization that could render individual service as well as lobby the province for legislative changes.

The West Coast Domestic Workers Association met with Fely to establish concrete working relations and asked INTERCEDE to coor-

dinate their input to the FDM review being undertaken by Immigration.

More congratulations...

to the successful graduates of the first phase (English proficiency) of the Registered Nursing-Job Development program of the Coalition of Visible Minority Women who will now go on to George Brown College to prepare for the State Board exams.

Project manager Elaine Prescod has every reason to be proud of them and we commend her enthusiasm and energy in carrying out the program.

And not to forget...

the 50 or so members who braved the chill and threatening clouds to attend our picnic at Centre Island last August 20. Braver still were those who joined the impromptu program and did whatever they did best: sing, dance, tell a joke,...even compose a riddle!

by Columbia Diaz

INTERCEDE GETS \$27,000 FOR PROGRAMS

Minister Barbara McDougall handed over to INTERCEDE the first half of a \$27,000 federal grant for "operational support" from the Ministry of State Multiculturalism and Citizenship on September 23.

New Board members Herminia Andrade and Celia Tababan were joined by Carmencita Hernandez and members of the staff to receive the payment. Tababan told Minister McDougall that the grant represents a token of government recognition that domestic workers render an important service to the future of Canada in caring for children and the elderly.

As taxpayers, these workers have the right to the social and other services available to everyone else in this country, Tababan added. According to Andrade, the federal grant will "enable INTERCEDE to provide necessary services, programs and activities which domestic workers like myself find indispensable because of our isolation".

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c/o INTERCEDE

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