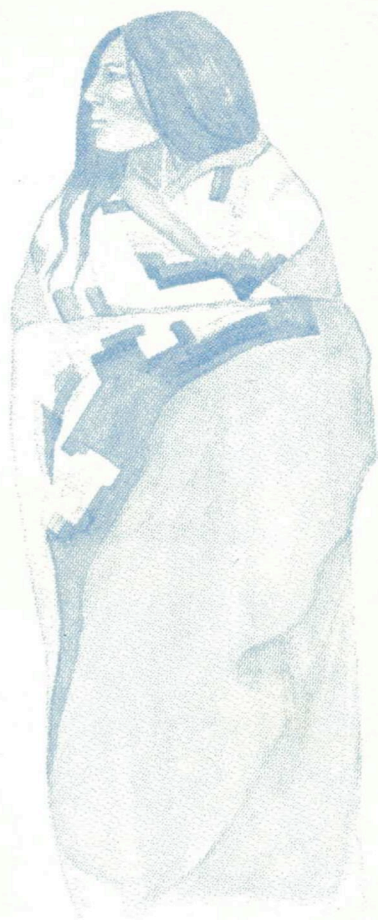


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# Voices of Aboriginal Women



**Aboriginal Women  
Speak Out  
About Violence**

**Canadian Council on Social Development  
and  
Native Women's Association of Canada**

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## Foreword

In 1986, the Canadian Council on Social Development established a Family Violence Program to help prevent violence in families by expanding public awareness and understanding of the problem.

Certain fundamental principles underlie the Council's Family Violence Program:

- It is a basic right of all people to live in a non-violent environment;
- Violence in the family – most often directed towards women and children – transcends class, cultural and ethnic boundaries;
- Victims, perpetrators and family members must all be active participants in identifying and implementing solutions;
- Governments, business and labour, voluntary groups, and communities must also share the responsibility for eliminating violence in the family and in society.

The Program also recognizes that some groups may be doubly victimized, particularly those that are vulnerable or disadvantaged, and may require special attention. Such is the case for victims of violence in aboriginal communities. The CCSD believes it is, therefore, essential to underscore the unique problems, needs and hopes of aboriginal women who have experienced violence. This booklet allows women to tell their stories of victimization and healing.

The CCSD often works in collaboration with other individuals or organizations in disseminating information and developing solutions. We are especially pleased to have the opportunity to join with the Native Women's Association of Canada in enabling aboriginal women to tell their stories. We hope this booklet will strengthen the many efforts now being made to overcome the problem of violence against aboriginal women.

Patrick Johnston  
Executive Director  
CCSD

## Preface

In 1987, members of the Family Violence Program at the Canadian Council on Social Development conducted interviews with women who had been abused by their husbands or boyfriends. Some were aboriginal women who wanted others to hear about and learn from their stories.

This booklet is a joint project of the Native Women's Association of Canada and the Canadian Council on Social Development. It is divided into four sections. The Introduction is a descriptive overview of what it is like to be abused as an aboriginal woman, and also as a society. The second section contains testimonials from five women who have survived the violence in their lives. The third section is an interview with Liza, a drug and alcohol counsellor, and an elder. Liza talks about her process of healing and how she now helps others heal from the effects of wife assault, child abuse and other forms of violence. The fourth and final section describes new directions and initiatives that are being developed to help family violence victims and offenders.

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of those who made this booklet possible: Chantal Goyette conducted the interviews with the aboriginal women; Vivian Cut-hand wrote the introduction and the testimonials while she was working with the Native Women's Association of Canada; and Jeanne MacDonald, a member of the Native Women's Association, interviewed Liza and wrote the final sections on healing and the conclusion.

We would also like to thank the Native Women's Association of Canada, and the Family Violence Program and Communications Branch of the Canadian Council on Social Development for their valuable contributions to this booklet.

This booklet was made possible by the generous support and funding of the National Welfare Grants Division of Health and Welfare Canada.

## 1. Introduction

In many respects, family violence in aboriginal society is no different from any other society. Whether she is First Nations, Métis or Inuit, the abused aboriginal woman shares a life very similar to her non-aboriginal counterpart. She lives by the dictates of what is typically unwarranted, unpredictable and explosive violent conduct. She may have learned from childhood to live with her daily dose of fear and abuse. To cope, she wraps her fears in a cloak of fairy-tale hope, assuring herself that the coming days will heal family wounds and offer a peaceful tomorrow. All the while, in her heart lies a harbour of shame, humiliation, resentment, denial, yet with it, the strength to endure. As time passes and the violence mounts, she accumulates memories of attempted escapes that would have declared her stand against a cycle that began before her time, and in all likelihood, will persist into her children's generation.

It is often the recurring realism of the children's future that eventually breaks the spell of her opiate dream. She is rattled with the understanding that her submission and passive obedience is never enough to appease the patriarchal authority to which she has been subservient and dependent for what seems like endless years. She no longer perceives violence as a normal part of family life. She acknowledges that she can no longer blame alcohol for the fits of rage. Nor does she feel the need to indulge in alcohol to be a worthy companion or to numb the anguish and the physical pain. And ultimately, it is the growing fear of violence in the extreme, perhaps death, that causes her to cross the threshold of tolerance.

She screams to break her secret silence and then storms the prison walls of isolation one more time, trusting only her injured self-worth to carry her in flight. With her frightened children, she seeks help. She knocks at door after door in search of support and guidance, only to discover she is becoming a victim of another design. Suffocating anger begins to surface in response to bureaucratic indifference which perpetuates her own sense of helplessness. The army of professional "helpers" she seeks out – police, doctor,

nurse, social worker, lawyer, magistrate and priest – tangle her life and her future in jurisdiction and paperwork. As she turns and walks to another door, she sometimes hears a whisper, "It's all your fault." When she enters the transition house, she opens the door to her privacy and releases a flood of tears in an attempt to cleanse the overwhelming urge to blame herself.

The nature of family violence transcends cultural boundaries. Its affliction is indiscriminate. The voices of aboriginal women who have been battered attest to the same victimization and brutality echoed by other women in violent circumstances. The scars on their faces and bodies show their powerlessness against violence in the home.

But family violence in aboriginal society also has its own unique dimensions. It is not simply aboriginal women who have been rendered powerless – it is aboriginal society. Since the arrival of colonists, aboriginal people have survived a massive affront to First Nationhood by the state, church and educational systems exercising a willful intent to dismantle self-governance. For centuries, aboriginal peoples have existed within the confines of the *Indian Act*, which dictates an official assimilationist policy and Christian indoctrination of aboriginal communities through the Indian residential school system.\*

The effects of children being forced into residential/mission schools is still being felt today. Generations of aboriginal people had their lives and culture disrupted, which resulted

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\* The Indian residential school system served a specific purpose. These schools were limited to Indian children who were uprooted from their families and communities for most of their childhood. The schools were designed to prepare the Indian child for life in mainstream society, not aboriginal society. The church usually ran the schools and the students were generally forbidden to speak in their mother tongue or practise aboriginal customs.

in a people growing up with no parents, no home life, no language of their own and not much in the way of love, comfort or security. These displaced children were unable to grow, unable to parent.

It was aboriginal women, in particular, who felt their role and status corrupted. Once an influential member of her society, participating in the governing process and commanding the highest respect as the life-giver of her people, the aboriginal woman was reduced to a subservient role by the *Indian Act* of a foreign and patriarchal system.

Combined with devastating social and economic problems, native people have been left in a state of turmoil and confusion. In spite of these problems, aboriginal women have persevered over the centuries. But not without cost. The following accounts of five aboriginal women reveal the extent and nature of that cost.

\* \* \* \* \*

## 2. Testimonials

### Patsy

*On the reserve, I know a lot of girls that want to leave . . . and if they find somewhere to go for a while, they find that they can't pay their way to go any further. And so, after a couple of days, they make up with their husbands.*

I come from a reserve up North. I have two sisters. They both left their husbands. One time I saw my sister's husband hit my sister. And she went flying. It was like in the movies. She was one tough lady, though. She had two nervous breakdowns before she left. She told me she couldn't leave him because she loved him so much. But the more he abused her, the more the love started to go away. And then she finally did it. She left him. That's what happened to me. Because he could have done anything and I'd still forgive

him. My sisters never said to leave him. They just advised me. They said, "You'll learn one day." And I did.

I did not know I was a battered woman for a long time. Now I know. Some people used to tell me about the abuse. But I was not listening. Then, I thought I knew everything. We were so young. I was 14 and living with him. I depended on him for support and everything. The first time he hit me, I was six months pregnant. When he hit me, he hardly left any marks. He used to bite my hand or bend me like a pretzel. That's why I have back problems. He just left a few bruises. I think he hit me because I nagged him. Sometimes he was drinking and sometimes he wasn't. I used to wait for him until he wanted me. Then I'd go back. But then I just felt so empty. Now I look back on it and I see how stupid I was.

Last year he abused me most of the time. But I never reported it. I didn't want to cause anyone any trouble and I didn't want people to look down on me. I only told my family about the abuse this year. When I told them, they were surprised. When I'd go for a checkup, the nurse would ask me what happened, but I wouldn't say anything. But there was this one very nice nurse there and I talked to her. She was the only one I ever talked to. She didn't judge me. She just listened and she didn't tell me what to do. The police knew about the abuse but they didn't do anything about it. They wanted me to press charges. But I did not want myself or the police to press charges. I didn't want him to go to jail.

When I broke up with this guy, I came to the transition house. I stayed there for one month. It was good. All of them were so nice. I've been going to school here now for a month. I didn't know a soul when I came. I only wanted to get away from that man. I'm 20 now and I don't want to live that kind of life. So that's why I came here to go to school; I want to learn to be an addictions counsellor.

When I came here, I had to apply for welfare. You have to lie to get them to help you. If you are living with somebody

you have to lie and tell them you are living alone. Because if you are living with somebody, they won't help you.

Now I'm living in an apartment here with my two children. I know he knows that I am around here. He didn't know I was running. He thought I'd still wait for him like I used to. My little girl misses him. She is always talking about him. But he doesn't want her.

On the reserve, I know a lot of girls that want to leave. But they don't have the money. One day, they want to leave and if they find somewhere to go for a while, they find they can't pay their way to go any further. And so, after a couple of days, they make up with their husbands. And it keeps going like this. A transition house cannot be on the reserve. The men just come in there – they are so rough – shooting guns or something. Some of them are that crazy. A lot of women are afraid to leave. They have nowhere to go and they don't know anybody that can help.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### Alice

*When a woman calls the police here, at first they'll ask her if she's been drinking. And if she says yes, then they'll probably say, "You brought it on yourself."*

I'm from the North. I'm 53 years old and I was married at 14. My mother lost her eldest son and I was the eldest daughter. I was 13 years old when my mother brought this man home for me to sleep with. She told him; "Now, make her listen. She's yours." Those were my mother's words. At the time when I was married, the man more or less owned you. He took you from your parents and you became his property. And he was to make you listen any way he could – even if it was by beating you. If you forgot to put food in his box when he was going hunting or if you forgot to feed the dogs, you were beaten with the dog harnesses. They'd

make home brew in those days and you'd get beaten when they were drunk. If they had men friends around and a man friend wanted to go to bed with you, you were his. And if you didn't, you got a beating.

I had 19 children in the house – 14 of my own and 5 nieces and nephews. My husband had these 19 kids and a woman and he was like a king. The more power he held over our heads, the better. He'd seen his father do it to his mother. He'd seen his two other brothers do it to their wives and families. My husband had a scar on the back of his head, about two inches long, where his father had beaten him with a gun. And now, my sons do that to my daughters-in-law and their women.

Twenty years ago, we had a few RCMP officers policing our community. I'd call the police and they would say, "Oh, he's been drinking." But seeing as how I had all these children, I assume now that they didn't want to lock him up. So, they'd lock him up overnight, no charges, and send him home sober in the morning. The next day, it would start again. I'd be pregnant in some cases, and I'd have miscarriages. My last girl child wasn't due for two-and-a-half months. He came home drunk, he beat me and she was born prematurely. I had my teeth knocked out of my mouth and I'd say, "It was an accident." I'd have black-and-blue eyes and I'd say, "I ran into the cupboard doors." I think we are still like this in the 1980s, the same as we were in the 1950s. We're protective. In my case, I had all these children. They had to eat. Then it just got to the point where I was tired of going to social services, the RCMP, the doctors, the clergy. The straw that broke the camel's back was when I went to social services to get help for me and my 19 children. They told me, "You're a young woman. Go out and get a job." That was 15 years ago. I have been separated from my husband for the past 19 or 20 years now.

I'm a court worker now, and I still see these same problems with other native women. It's still very quiet. I don't know why the women aren't speaking out these days. But in my day, it was shame. We had all these children around. The

kids would get beaten up if you told anybody so you'd take the beating for them. You'd go to different organizations and they say, "Oh, he's got a lot on his mind." It's shame really. That's what it boils down to: shame.

It's very difficult to be a battered wife, I realize, anywhere in Canada. But I think it's especially difficult here. Family and friends could give us a little more support. Like, if a girl or a woman gets beaten by her husband, it's mud across the face. They always assume that the woman did something. And really, half the time she's just there. I mean, she could have been a dog for all the guy cared. He was going to hit something anyway. Maybe they should have a home in this world where they can put the men and educate them. Really, the men are the ones that need the educating.

In this part of the country, you don't find too many native women out working. The man is still the breadwinner. She's still dependent on the man for everything. I mean, you have to ask somebody for the least little thing. You are always begging. When I was married, I had to. Today, it's still "I need a roof over my head. I don't have the education." We native women don't think of ourselves very highly.

When a woman calls the police here, at first they'll ask her if she's been drinking. And if she says yes, then they'll probably say, "You brought it on yourself." When the police are called, the woman waits over an hour. Sometimes I think a lot of the problems are brought on by the language barrier. And if I think it's bad for me, then you can imagine what it's like for people who can't speak for themselves. Because I'm definitely, by no means, quiet. Not anymore.

The women go to court for being assaulted. They may be very young, or older like me. And they're still afraid. Once you've called the police, they make out this complaint form and we've had women come to court and say, "I don't want to press charges. I want to drop the charges against my husband, against my boyfriend." But they can't do that anymore. They have to go through with it. The woman would be on the witness stand, she's crying, she's shaken up. The



woman has no support at all when she gets up there [on the stand]. Unless I'm there. That's it. Like the prosecutor, a couple of weeks ago, who brought in the *Canada Evidence Act* against her. You have to be there to pat them on the shoulder and say, "I'm here. You did good. I'm proud of you."

We have one legal aid lawyer for the whole region. We have one other lawyer, private practice, but he's too expensive for our people so we usually go to legal aid. It's hard to get information about peace bonds or other protection orders. The only time a woman finds out about a peace bond is if one of her friends has had one previously. There's just no information. More native women are seeking divorces. But the majority of them, our people and the Inuit, tend to have quite a few children. We are always thinking of shelter, of food. Who's going to shelter me? Who's going to feed my kids? So, it always boils down to taking care of the children.

Usually now, the woman just walks out and she leaves everything there. She goes to friends or relatives, and then eventually social services will find her something, months down the road. You can call social services and they will tell you that they can't do any more. I really have given up on them. They seem to think that the women have brought it on themselves: "If you had been quiet while he was drinking, you know, this never would have happened." I know this is not how they're thinking, but this is how it feels to me. Until a few years ago, social services would take the children away from the family. Out of the country, if necessary. But now, it's mostly the woman that gets her children. In my day, it would have meant losing all my children. And I wasn't about to go through all that pain and misery to give somebody else a big family! Social services just can't do that anymore. Native people are fighting back saying, "No. You can't take our children away." The judge here is really good about that.

You know, the men that do it get a few months. Two years at the most, I've heard. And while they're away, their wives are living in fear of them coming back. We have a

gentleman, who I know personally, who's been coming to the correctional centre here ever since it was built. He has a long history of child molestation, female beating, rape. And for the latest incident, where he assaulted my little 11-year-old with people watching, he got two years. So, he'll probably be out again in a few months. And in six months' time, he'll be committing another crime.

I don't know what should be done about these men. I think if he had a friend who knew that he was actually beating on this little skinny woman and he was this big six-foot guy, it wouldn't look very good. Maybe we should shame them into getting help. We've tried everything else. Nothing else has worked.

I'm trying to get funds or looking to the government to give us help. The girls come up from the coast. They're 16, 15 or younger and they're going to go big time – the big city! This time of year, it's not so bad but in the summer when all the boats are in, they end up at the docks. They end up making money for the guys they've shared a bed with. And then they become alcoholics, druggies. Then the guy beats them up, throws them out. We have at least three young women that I know of that have no place to stay and are walking the streets. The majority of these girls have grade 5 or grade 6 education.

If you go around the shops in this town, you'll not see one native person working. You'll see them in the summer, maybe, picking up garbage on the side of the road – the town may hire them for 10 weeks or so. The Native Friendship Centre has one honest-to-god native working. She's the secretary. The rest are white. It's easier to get a job if you're white. If you're native, the only way you are going to get a job is through social services. Social services will put you on a make-work project for 20 weeks so you can draw your unemployment. But that's always as a cleaning lady or janitor. You know, why should my people, like these young girls, try to make themselves a little better when they know that they are not even on the same level as the white girls who are going to get the nice jobs

anyway? Then we're always accused of being lazy, alcoholics, thieves. Really, we actually don't have much of a choice. We have to survive, somehow.

There will be an alcohol counselling centre opening here in the spring. They have a young girl working there. She doesn't speak Inuktitut. She's going to be the Inuit counsellor but she doesn't speak Inuktitut. They have somebody giving her a crash course in how to speak Inuktitut. So, you can be a counsellor for the Inuit population if you take a crash course, if you can believe that! I happen to know for a fact that there are at least three women in their late 30s and early 40s who have held pretty good positions, one as a court worker, one a teacher and one a nurse's aide, that had applied for that job. They were turned down. They didn't have the experience. The government wasn't willing to train them. But they take a 17-year-old girl to train through a three-week crash course. This is what happens if you have friends in the right places.

As you look out this window, you can see it's not a very friendly environment to sleep outdoors, on a porch. This is what is happening to them. There is no housing here for battered woman. Period. Nothing. People are living in condemned houses just to have a roof over their heads. But it's ongoing. It seems that if you're native, no matter how much you try to bring yourself up to what the white people expect of you, you still haven't gotten very far beyond that.

I refer native women to the new transition house but, for the life of me, I'll never understand how people that don't speak Inuktitut can actually help somebody, can counsel the women. Somebody could come in here and talk Russian to me all day, counsel me. But it's not going to do me any good if I can't understand what the counselling's about. So, it's just a roof over their heads and something in their mouths for that short period of time. And then, after six weeks, what do you do? You go back to your husband. I've even offered to be their volunteer interpreter – morning, noon or night. But, I'm told, I have to have special counselling skills for this.

When I look to the future, I hope that nobody has to spend nights with somebody sitting on your bed with a gun and you turning your back thinking, "If I don't see it, I won't feel it." Or somebody sitting at the edge of your bed with a butcher knife, sharpening it at three o'clock in the morning. I hope our women will take pride in themselves.

I'm 53 years old but I feel now like I'm in my 20s. People say to me, "But you're married with grandchildren." Time and years are just calendars. I'm not about to roll over and play dead for anybody. And I want other women to survive.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### Rose

*If you're threatened with a severe beating every day, or maybe a couple of times a day, you become quite timid to do anything for yourself.*

I was a registered nurse when I came to the North. I'm originally from the south. I met my husband in one of the communities here and eventually got married to him. I have two children in my family, plus one semi-adopted. She's a niece but she's been staying with us for three years.

Basically, I'm married to a husband who has a horrible temper and it leads to violence. It leads to physical abuse but it was mostly the daily verbal abuse that became intolerable. I have been married to him for 10 years and within the first 2 years, I left him twice. It was mostly because of his drinking at that time. His violence was related to his drinking. His drinking stopped but he found out that he could get angry and violent without drinking. It didn't make a difference. So, life changed, yes. He wasn't drinking but, instead, it was replaced by living with the thought that he could blow his fuse at any time. Then I got pregnant with the children and I thought that somehow this is going to work. I went into a martyr syndrome for eight years. I lost

my nursing registration because I haven't worked as a nurse for four years. My husband didn't allow me to work. Any job I had, he fought it all the time. He didn't want any kind of independence – just total dependence, possession and control. For the longest time, I felt like I couldn't do anything. I was getting totally brainwashed. I was getting to feel like I was useless and incapable of anything. I had nowhere to go in the family. I felt isolated. And that was the whole objective of my husband's brainwashing – to get me used to feeling totally worthless. If I, a professional person, can get to feeling worthless and incapable of doing anything, then I would think that another woman, not as educated and who doesn't have the coping skills that I had, would feel much worse. I was really afraid of the next beating I was going to get from my husband. If you're threatened with a severe beating every day, or maybe a couple times a day, you become quite timid to do anything for yourself.

One of the things that my husband often did was he tried to cut me off from as many supporting people as possible, and that included my family. I was only permitted to phone long distance when he said so – when he would deign to permit me. My dad knew that my husband had a temper. He often questioned why I was still living with him. But in day-to-day happenings, I didn't want to involve him. I didn't want my dad to suffer any of the consequences of my being married to this man.

I've had interactions with the police a couple of times during my marriage. One time, when I was severely beaten, I called the police and I asked them to lay charges. I was not determined enough, not strong enough, not whatever it takes to actually stick by and lay the charges myself. The police, at that point, refused to do this. They said it was up to me. That was about two years ago. I didn't have my kids with me at that point. If I had laid charges, I probably would not have been able to get to my kids. So I went back home, back to my husband.

This time, I did not wait to get beaten up again. I had my escape plan. He went caribou hunting in the hills. While he

was away, I sorted out things in the house and found everything (sort of made them easily accessible) knowing exactly what I was going to take and how I was going to take it. I knew I couldn't stand by, watching him abuse the kids. So I asked the police if they would help me – give protection so I could leave. They said I could only leave by myself. They could not help me take the kids away from my husband because it was sort of kidnapping. So literally, I was left on my own. I felt it was unfair that the police would help me escape but not my kids. They said that they needed definite evidence. I don't want my kids to get mauled in any way and I don't want to be beaten again. I had enough blue marks from being thrown against the cupboards. I didn't want to be beaten by his fists so that they could get some kind of visual evidence of what he did to me. I know that men and women are supposed to have equal rights over their children, but do they really need the physical evidence? That almost becomes too much. So, if I wanted to take the kids with me, I was left strictly to my own resources to pull out of there. And that's what I did.

When I left, I found out about this transition house through a social worker in the community. Social services bought our tickets to leave. I was penniless, more or less. The transition house was good for somebody new in town, who didn't know where everything was. The staff of the transition house were helpful when I told them I wanted to get a lawyer so that I could gain custody of my children. I didn't want my husband to come here and take my kids away, and I felt that was something that he could easily do and would do.

I got subsidized housing through the transition house. They have a priority points list and so the people that score the highest points are the ones who get the houses first. So when we came through this transition house, we raised a lot of points. I have been going to the welfare office now so they know my situation. They helped me furnish my house when I got a house. I didn't want them to pay for a phone in the house but I wanted them to pay the downpayment to get a phone installed because I didn't have the money. They really fought that. I broke down crying. I was feeling really

like a beggar. I needed a phone for my protection, to have some fun and for my sanity.

I am going to family counselling, so I'm finding the emotional support I need. I know if I'm having problems, my children must be, too. I think the kids go through a lot of emotional things that mothers don't often have time to cope with and don't have the insight to see. And I think kids need emotional therapy as much as the mother does. I know the psychological effect on the children's life in a violent home is a long-term thing.

Since I have left, I have gained enough insight to know that he is sick. It really didn't matter whether it was me or any other woman. He probably would have treated her the same way. So it makes me get rid of a lot of my resentment and anger to know that it wasn't me specifically. It was just the only thing he knew how to do. My father-in-law was a batterer and my husband learned it from him. When I saw my boy starting to hit me at the age of three, I knew he was starting to think that what daddy was doing to me was right and that he could do the same. As a mother, I was faced with being grabbed by the throat by a three-year-old; it was very demoralizing. I knew that the cycle had to be stopped, that this couldn't go on. In fact, I put it to my husband a couple of times. I said, "Do I have not only to look forward to you beating me up whenever you want to, but my son as well?" My husband just doesn't have the emotional skills to do anything else. And therefore, in a sense, it is a sickness.

I left a line of communication open so that he can talk to the kids, because my kids love him and I don't want to alienate them from their dad. So, I'm leaving it. I'm just seeing if he'll cool off. He doesn't understand why I don't want him *in my house* to visit the kids. He doesn't understand my need to protect myself from him. I didn't think it would change things. In fact, I thought it might worsen the situation if I was trying to control him too much. He would just rebel and make things worse. But, I don't want him to be back in my house taking control of my life again and saying, "I'm the king of the household." I also feel that if he

is supporting us, then that is going to mean to him that he should also be able to do what he pleases with us. I don't want him to have any sense of ownership of us. I would rather not get any child support payments from him if it means that he is going to make demands. I feel that once I get back to nursing, I should be able to support my children within reason. It shouldn't be a problem for me.

And so, eight years later, here I am. Unmartyred.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Jean

*It seemed like nobody cared. Often I would look for help, but it was like it was my fault, so I didn't bother. I just kept taking it. I took it for 17 years.*

I'm from a small reserve that is way up North. I am 38 years old. I had four children – I lost my oldest son, one son is living with my mother and the other two are in foster care. My English is not really that good because I only went up to grade six.

People who have grown up on the reserve all their life are not used to the city. They hate city living. It is harder for native women because most of us have never learned how to drive vehicles and we don't have anything of that sort. We have to walk if we want to get anyplace. And we don't know where to go when we need help. We've never heard of places to help us. And some of the women can't read. Some of them don't even know how to speak English. So, it is really hard for them. It's not easy for someone who is born on the reserve to try to adapt to living in a city.

I was brought up kind of religious. My grandparents brought me up and raised me since I was two months old. My mother didn't. When my grandparents passed away, that's when I left. I left the reserve because I couldn't stand the

way I was living anymore, and because I was beaten up. Even when my husband was sober, he'd beat me up. And I just had to get away. It didn't matter to him where he beat me. He didn't care whether anybody saw him. My grandparents supported me all through those years. And every time I got a beating, I'd go to my grandparents because my husband was kind of scared of my grandfather because he was a medicine man. My husband wouldn't dare do anything to me – not in front of my grandfather. And that's when I left – when they passed away.

I also have a problem with alcohol. I got married when I was 16, and I never used to drink before that. I wouldn't drink but I ended up getting black eyes. I don't think I have a rib in my body that hasn't been broken. I had a broken leg, a broken arm. I started drinking. I tried to get drunk faster than him because I knew as soon as he'd get half-cut, he'd be in a bad mood. And then he'd end up hitting me although he had no reason to. So, I started drinking more and more. So, when I'd have a black eye, I wouldn't feel the pain that much. I'd get to drinking more and more. Then I got hooked on it.

It seemed like nobody cared. Often, I would look for help. But it was like it was my fault. So, I didn't bother. I just kept taking it. I took it for 17 years. There were cops there that could help. I usually took off and went to a place where he wouldn't be looking for me. Then, I'd make a phone call to the cops. They'd say, "I'll be there in 10 or 20 minutes." And I'd end up waiting for an hour-and-a-half. They just took a statement from me and then they'd wait for my husband. Then, they'd usually end up walking away. They never took him in. I wanted them to charge him and take him to jail.

Maybe he was used to that kind of treatment because his dad was like that. I think he is sick. He used to make all kinds of promises and he would keep them for about a week. And then, the same thing would start all over again. I was scared of him all the time. I could not even go and visit my mother without him having all sorts of ideas, like I was fooling around. He did not want me to go anywhere. He

was spying on me. I was afraid of him every time he raised his voice. I think he is a sadist. He gets satisfaction out of hurting other people. Once he even tried stabbing my own mother because my mother defended me. Any mother would do that for her child. I don't think I could have taken much more. Either he would have ended up killing me or I would have killed him.

One time my husband just left me in that house to bleed to death after he beat me up. He never got any help for me. He left the door wide open. My baby was three months old and my other one was almost four years old. When I got up, the snow was blowing in the door. I could hardly carry my baby to my mom's because I had all open cuts. I went to my mom's and I told her what happened and she took my kids and sent me to the hospital. I don't remember what else happened. I was in shock when I got to the hospital. The nurse called me in and she phoned the cops. And the cops came and took pictures. I think the nurse at the nursing station knew what was going on at home because I went to her so many times before. But I wasn't honest. I always made up some story because I was ashamed, I guess. It would have been better if she had told me that there was help for me somewhere. I never heard about it. She could have helped me somehow to get out of there. But she never did. After I got out of the hospital, I never saw anybody. No counselling. There was nothing over there – I never even had a place to go to. I just had a sister down here, and that's where I went. I knew she could help.

I am in a correctional centre now. It's going on eight months now, but I'll be out in two weeks. I was in for robbery with violence. I was drinking at the time. My divorce was over last April. I went to legal aid. They helped me right through until the end. I did not have to pay for anything. I get to see the kids whenever they can arrange visits for me. I'm still very close to my children. My daughter finds it hard being in a foster home because she wants to be with me. The kids used to think it's just another day because they see so much abuse. My eleven-year-old son says, "I want to be big and strong so I can go back to the reserve and beat the

shit out of my dad for what he has done to you." He says that a lot.

When the lawyer asked me if I wanted my husband to have visiting rights, I told him, "No." After I left him, I sent him some pictures of the kids. And he did not even open my letter. He just tore it up and threw it into the fire. He did not care anything about them. Now that I am practically on my own, I think he came here twice to see the kids. So, I asked my social worker, "What business do you have arranging visits with my husband and the kids behind my back?" She did not even tell me. And the second mistake she made was that she placed my daughter and son in separate foster homes. I did not find this out until much later. The social workers – they never told me a thing. They did not figure it was important for me to know.

Now, I don't have anything to do with my husband. As far as I'm concerned, he is dead. I am still scared of him. Whenever someone mentions him, my heart starts beating fast and I get all scared. Even when somebody yells at me, I get all scared. There were quite a few women from my reserve who were going through the same thing. Even now, sometimes the women are able to stick to their charge. They don't drop them. And the guys get put in jail. But they come back from jail. The same thing goes on. You've got to want to get out of it yourself. If you really want to get out of it, you will find a way to get help.

The first thing I am going to do when I get out is go into that counselling centre. The next thing I am going to do is put some money (because I'll have some money when I get out of jail) in the bank. Then, I'm going to look around for a place, a small place because I won't be with anybody. I'll be alone. Maybe there is going to be work but that is going to be hard for me, too, because of my offences. But, I'm not going to give up until I find something.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Susie

*And so the abuse started verbally,  
then slaps, and then much later, fists.*

I am a native woman. I was born and raised on the reserve until I was 10. From the age of 10 to 16, I was raised in the Indian residential school. I quit school in 1956 at the age of 16 and I went out to work. We came from what you might consider a poor family. But I never thought that I came from a poor family because we always had food on the table, a roof over our heads. And there was lots of love and caring in our home. I was never starved for affection at home. And I never saw my father or mother raise a hand. They never believed in punishing a child. Their method of punishment was a stern look. But I was aware that there was violence on the reserve. After drinking bouts and that, I would hear men fighting or I would hear some people talking about some men going to fight or a couple that had a big fight. I can remember thinking, "When I grow up, I hope I never marry a guy like that – someone who is violent." I was not from a violent family.

The Indian residential school was industrial learning, mostly. English, math and all the academic subjects were taught. You were taught how to survive in the white world. One of the first things you learned when you arrived in the school was to never speak your own language. Our parents let us go to the school though because they wanted us to have the education. My parents, what they told me was, "Go to school and learn about this *Indian Act* that controls us." The day I left for residential school they said, "Do not forget your language, but learn English."

When I came out of residential school, I didn't know who I really was. I knew my colour was brown, but I really didn't belong to either society. I didn't belong to the Indian society because people knew I had gone to residential school and other kids did not want to associate with me. I just didn't belong and I didn't understand their way any more. And when I went to the white society, I didn't belong there either

because I was looked upon as a savage or Indian squaw or a drunken Indian woman. In order to pass through and be accepted into the white society, you had to hide your identity. So, I began to dress like the white people dressed and I put lots of powder on my face because I thought I would be more accepted in the white society if my skin were not so brown.

I was married twice and my first husband was not a violent man. He was Métis and we were married for three years until his death as a result of a brain hemorrhage. When my first husband passed away, I was given 10 days to grieve. Ten days is supposed to be, in the tradition, how long the soul or spirit is here on earth. And after the 10-day period, you have to let that spirit go. One of the things my father did after the 10 days was to say to me, "What ever happened to that little girl who had a lot of spunk? I wonder what ever happened to that young lady who went out working?" As he was talking, I realized he was talking about me. And that helped me think about my life and what I was going to do.

I went back to the city to look for a job. I couldn't find one so I went back to school. During that time, I met my second husband. He was a native person. Life with him started very differently. I thought he was gentle and we got along very well. I heard a lot of things about him from other people when we decided to get married but I didn't listen. Not long after our marriage, he started to stay out late at night. He wasn't coming home on the weekends. So, when I confronted him, he would get really angry. And so the abuse started verbally, then slaps, and then much later, fists. At first I looked the other way. We would talk about these things and he would say, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I was under the influence of alcohol and I didn't know what I was doing." And I believed him. I never talked much to anyone about the abuse. There was a doctor who came to our reserve once a month – a psychologist. There were other doctors who came two or three times a week, depending on their schedule. There were nurses that you could talk to daily, but they didn't make you feel comfortable. They made

you feel as if it was your own fault. I did go to them once and one of the responses I got was, "What did you do to provoke this fight?" I only went to the priest when I had nowhere else to turn. And I was getting desperate for someone to help me sort out getting beaten so I went to see the priest. And the priest told me, "What did you do to provoke the fight? Are you running around?" And the advice I got was, "Bear the cross." I went to three different priests and they told me almost the exact same thing, "You know, Jesus carried the cross for miles and miles." As if he was telling me that the beatings I was getting were the sins I had to carry.

I never had my own children. After we were married there were two boys. They were my sister's. The children were beginning as unwanted children and she asked me if I would raise them for a time. It was a natural thing for me to say yes. In our society, it is okay to raise somebody else's children and you are not to interfere with whoever is raising your children. And that is looked on as a verbal legal agreement. And that is a natural law that you raise these children until they are capable of managing on their own. In the non-native society, it is not like that. But there was the Children's Aid Society who might come and take these children. And so I was always living in fear that if these boys did something or ever got into trouble, CAS would just come to the door and take these children away. There was always that fear because I did not have a legal standing.

My life had been threatened three times. The first time, he had tried to choke me with his hands. And the second time, he used a gun. And the third time, this last time, he used a brick. The third time he threatened to kill me, something came over me and I told him, "You might as well end it once and for all. But I have made sure to leave word that if anything should happen to me, there will be an investigation." When I said that, he let go and left – he and this new woman. I sat there and cried.

I got involved in drinking to kill the emotional pain. As long as I didn't know what day it was or what was happening,

nothing mattered. One day I woke up and I thought about my father, and what he said. And I said to myself, "Gee, where is that woman who had a lot of spunk? Where is that woman that had a lot of guts? What happened to her?" And then I started to laugh! I left my husband and I moved. When I go back to my community now, the women say, "You are so happy."

\* \* \* \* \*

### 3. Healing

*Women have to pick up their medicine and heal a sick and troubled world. A woman approached me and asked "What is a woman's medicine?" I thought about it and said, "Woman is the medicine." It is her gentleness, her soft voice and her ways of being. We never had to think about these things because we lived it but now we have to think about it.*

Art Solomon, Ojibway Elder

Increasingly aboriginal people, and aboriginal women are turning to traditional beliefs and teachings for strength and guidance in their search for solutions to the problems they face. The following account illustrates how one native woman found her identity and spirituality through traditional native teachings, and went on to help others among her people.

#### Liza\*\*

My name is Liza, my Indian name means "strength" and I am of the Bear Clan, Ojibway Nation.

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\*\* Liza is a drug and alcohol counsellor and an elder for the South Region for the National Native Women's Association of Canada. She is presently beginning the process of developing the Healing Lodges with native women.

I follow my own native teachings, the Ojibway Mide win. I have been following this for seventeen years and I have also been sober for seventeen years. I work on myself in dealing with the alcohol, the drugs and the abuse. I would like to say I am a survivor of family violence. For me, the healing began when I followed my own native teachings, by going out to fast and being with Mother Earth, by going out there to have visions and dreams is how I got help.

There was no one there for me when I was going through a hard time in dealing with family violence, sexual abuse, wife battering; there was no one there for me to turn to. I dealt with my own self with the drug and alcohol problems; I knew I had to deal with that first. I always knew also that there was something missing for me and that was my identity and spirituality. These were the first Teachings I received in the Lodge.

I began to look because I have always asked myself, Who am I? Where am I going? What is my purpose in this life? It wasn't until I heard that Teaching that I knew who I was and where I was going and I finally found my spirituality. It really felt good and that was what I was searching for all my life. When I walked into the Lodge and heard my own Teachings, it touched me.

For the past seventeen years, I have been out fasting every year, and the visions I have had which helped me came through this feeling. Everything I have had which has helped me came through this feeling. Everything that I have received that I do today I got from my Mother, the Earth, to go and sit with her and get to know her, to gain that respect for myself, not to be ashamed of myself, not to feel guilty.

It was her that embraced me and gave me the Teachings. It was also the Grandmothers. I began to see a lot of the things that I do today. It all came from those visions and dreams. Most of my work is involved in the Teachings, the healings of family violence. I had a vision not very long ago, when I was working on myself I also knew that there was something else I had to deal with. I never knew what



it was. It was the abuse I went through when I was in residential school that I had blocked. A lot of the anger that I felt was because I had to face that abuse and I knew there was also a lot of work to be done on myself. It was our Mother, the Earth that helped me, the Creator, our Grandmothers, our Grandfathers.

The time when I began dealing with myself, it was really hard. There was nobody there for me to talk to. Who I went to talk to was my Mother the Earth.

I do awareness Wheel on a native perspective on child sexual abuse. I began to see the healing of our people; I was taken way back in that Wheel. My mother and father are both in the Spirit World, but they are the ones that guide me around that Wheel. They took me far back to when our Teachings were strong and to our people before the white man came to our country. I began to see in that Wheel the way our people were; they were so happy, they were so in harmony. Everyone was family, there was no one excluded from the community. I could see the happiness in the grandmothers and grandfathers, the mothers and fathers, the children, how they were all together.

The grandmothers gave Teachings to the young women and the grandfathers gave Teachings to the young men. I have seen what we have lost. As soon as those Teachings were dropped then the violence began. When I was taken around the Wheel, I began to see women getting beaten up, men and women drunk, I began to see children being sexually abused, I began to see the young people, the suicide.

All the bundles, our Teachings that we had in the beginning were scattered along the trail and we picked up another road which is the white man's road. We picked up their Teachings and left ours behind. That's when family violence began in our communities. All this I was shown in this Wheel and even with my own self, I saw the violence that happened in my own life and how to begin to heal.

When I finished that Wheel, I was given so much. I began to use that Wheel in my workshops. Today I go into communities, I travel all across Canada and also into the United States to do these workshops on the healing of our people.

With the Workshops I go into the Native Teachings, Identity and Spirituality, the Life Cycle, the Wheel to deal with child sexual abuse, the Seven Stages of Life and the Grandmothers' Teachings. The healing sweat lodge was given through a dream, a fast. It was a healing sweat for the sexually abused, and the Cedar Bath.

Those that need healing begin to get in touch with their "inner child," they begin to deal with themselves. It is a long process but it works for us.

I go in communities to give help to the caregivers so that they can help their people. Now there will be Healing Lodges for family violence and also for aboriginal women coming out of prisons. There is a lot of work to be done.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### 4. Directions for Change

Excerpt from NWAC's presentation to the Status of Women Sub-committee to study violence against women

It is an exception rather than the rule to know of an aboriginal woman who has not experienced some form of family violence throughout her life.

Most of the aboriginal victims of family violence are women and children and the offenders are men. The aboriginal victims must deal with the offender or be subject to exile outside the community, from their home, far from close relatives. It is important to realize that the victim and members of the family are victimized again by the system because they must leave their home and community.

Aboriginal women feel that it is the offender that is most in need of help to break the cycle of violence, but is the most ignored. But the women do not want to give up their right to safety. So the logical approach is to intervene and take the offender away from the home.

The nature of current intervention tends to punish or imprison the guilty offender rather than help him heal. Therapy for men is practically non-existent. Currently, we cannot force the offender to go to a program if programs are available. We will need to change the laws and the attitudes.

We need a coordinated approach on crisis intervention, police action, shelters and other forms of protection for the victim.

The preferred approach to dealing with violence is to establish aboriginal lodges in the community for individuals (offenders and victims) and family members to work towards healing, through their renewal of their spiritualism and customs.

### **Healing Lodges**

Excerpt from the Ontario Native Women Healing Lodge proposal

The first priority of the Healing Lodge is to help aboriginal people who have experienced child sexual abuse, and are now coming to terms with it. By using traditional teaching methods we not only want to restore the individual's mental health, but also to restore their dignity and sense of self-worth as aboriginal people. Treatment requires a short term residential component and long term after care treatment.

Advocating the concerns and developing community strategy plans will become a major task for aboriginal women. We realize that our development does not depend on a return to

the past, or an out of hand rejection of non-native technologies. We need a blending of our cultural, economic, social and political aspirations with the appropriate tools of today. We want to take from the past, and blend it with the present, and come out with something that is acceptable to and can be carried out by us.

### **Healing Lodge for federally sentenced women**

The goal to implement concrete changes which create real choices for federally sentenced women is a challenging one. A Healing Lodge will be established in a prairie location. The principles of this Lodge will be: a safe place for aboriginal women prisoners; a caring attitude towards self, family and community; a belief in individualized client-specific planning; an understanding of the transitory aspects of aboriginal life; an appreciation of the healing role of children who are closer to the spirit world; pride in surviving difficult backgrounds and personal experiences.

Programs in the Healing Lodge will be based on a holistic approach to the needs of federally sentenced aboriginal women, including, most importantly, the need to address issues associated with health, with sexual, physical and emotional abuse, with relationships and with substance abuse. An outreach program will facilitate the transition to "walking in the new forest" by providing community-release preparation in the areas of education, vocational training, employment and life skills.

Surviving in the forest is traditional knowledge for aboriginal people. Cities are the "new forest" and the teaching of skills to survive will be an integral part of the Healing Lodge.

### **Conclusion**

We can repeat endlessly the violations and wrongs that aboriginal peoples have been subjected to in the past; this does not change reality but it can bring an understanding of the violence. Each nation has a traditional way of life even

if it seems that all is lost. We may need to ask questions to find the direction. It will be by completing the circle related to the way we think and perceive our life on the Earth that we will practice and put into our lives again, spiritual values found in our traditions and ceremonies.

Our strength is in our visions and dreams, our ability to interpret the songs, dances of the earth, sky, spirit worlds. If we can remember our purpose, we will survive.

## **NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA**

### **BACKGROUND**

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is founded on the collective goal to enhance, promote and foster the social, economic, cultural and political well-being of First Nations and Métis women with First Nations and Canadian societies.

As a non-profit organization incorporated in 1974, the NWAC is an aggregate of Native Women's organizations and as an association is that of a "Grandmother's Lodge." In this "Grandmother's Lodge," we as Aunties, Mothers, Sisters, Brothers, and Relatives collectively recognize, respect, promote, defend and enhance our Native ancestral laws, spiritual beliefs, language and traditions given to us by the Creator.

### **OBJECTIVES**

The principles or objectives of the Native Women's Association of Canada are as follows:

- to be the national voice for Native women;
- to address issues in a manner which reflects the changing needs of Native women in Canada;
- to assist and promote common goals towards self-determination and self-sufficiency for Native peoples in our role as mothers and leaders;
- to promote equal opportunities for Native women in programs and activities;
- to serve as a resource among our constituency and Native communities;
- to cultivate and teach the characteristics that are unique aspects of our cultural and historical traditions;
- to assist Native women's organizations, as well as community initiatives in the development of their local projects;
- to advance issues and concerns of Native women; and to link with other Native organizations with common goals.

### **STRUCTURE**

The NWAC Board of Directors consists of the following:

- One (1) National Speaker
- Four (4) Regional Executive Leaders
- Four (4) Regional Youth Representatives
- Thirteen (13) Regional representatives. Three (3) with the exception of the East which selects four (4)
- A Council of Elders

The NWAC head office is established at the Six Nations of the Grand River in Ohsweken, Ontario. The National office is situated in Ottawa, Ontario.

### **ISSUES**

Current issues that the NWAC is mandated to address are as follows:

- The Indian Act
- The Constitution
- Family Violence
- AIDS
- Justice
- Health related issues
- Child welfare
- Aboriginal Rights

### **For Information, contact:**

The Native Women's Association of Canada  
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K1P 5J6  
Tel: (613) 236-6057  
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## THE CANADIAN COUNCIL ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Founded in 1920, the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) is an independent, national, non-profit organization. Through research, policy analysis, community consultation and information sharing, the CCSD provides a forum for citizen participation in the formulation of progressive social policies.

Since its beginning, the Council has been a positive, non-partisan advocate of social measures such as universal inoculation, pensions, unemployment assistance, workers' compensation, medicare, legal aid, daycare, and social and cooperative housing. The Council played an active role in the development of the Canada Assistance Plan and the Child Tax Credit, and has been a promoter of the Guaranteed Annual Income concept, self-help, voluntarism and community economic development.

The CCSD is not a "think tank." It is the only national social research, advocacy and policy organization with an open public membership. CCSD's analyses, opinions, research and information reflect not only highly professional technical work but also the active analysis and shared experience of its broadly representative membership.

The Council's diverse membership included concerned individuals as well as representatives from business, labour, government, public and private service organizations, voluntary associations and institutions. An annual meeting of the membership reviews the year's program and financial activities. Council activities are directed by a voluntary, 39-member Board of Governors. Board members are formally elected at the annual meeting for terms of one, two and three years.

The CCSD is a major publisher in the field of social development. Publications include books, research reports, policy briefs and occasional papers, as well as several bilingual periodicals: **Perception**, "Canada's social development magazine," **Overview**, reviewing current developments in social policies and programs; **Initiative**, serving the self-help community; and **Vis-à-vis**, exploring family violence issues.

National headquarters of the Canadian Council on Social Development are located at 55 Parkdale Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K1Y 4G1. Tel: (613) 728-1865. Fax: (613) 728-9387. CCSD also has a Quebec office, located at 1074 Berri St., Montreal, H2L 2P1. Tel: (514) 288-1687. Fax: (514) 288-6723.

## The Canadian Council on Social Development Membership Application

### AS A MEMBER OF THE COUNCIL:

- you support work aimed at improving our social and economic environment;
- you participate in a network of people who share your social commitment;
- you are continuously informed of innovative ideas and major developments as they occur.

### YOU ARE ENTITLED TO:

- **Perception**, our bilingual magazine on social development;
- our newsletters:
  - **Overview**, a review of social issues, trends and programs in Canada;
  - **Initiative**, serving the self-help community;
  - **Vis-à-vis**, exploring developments in the field of family violence;
- preferential rates for participation in Council conferences and workshops;
- information on new publications;
- the Council's annual report;
- voting privileges at annual meetings;
- 20% off our regular prices for books and reports.

### MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES

#### Individuals:

- student \$20
- participating \$50
- sustaining \$100

#### Organizations: (Annual Budget)

- less than \$100,000 \$75
- \$100,001 to \$300,000 \$125
- over \$300,000 \$200
- Associate \$500

#### Libraries:

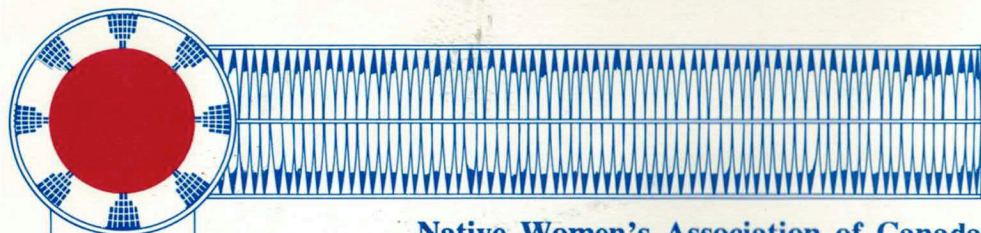
\$50

#### Municipalities:

- per 1,000 population \$2.75  
(minimum fee \$100)

To become a member, send us your name, the name of your organization (if applicable), complete address and membership category, along with your cheque to: **CCSD Membership Services, 55 Parkdale Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario K1Y 4G1. Tel: (613) 728-1865. Fax: (613) 728-9387.**

The CCSD is a non-profit organization registered under the Tax Act relating to charities; tax receipts are issued for all donations and financial contributions.



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