

Gatehouse's executive director departs after successful tenure

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Lisa Marucci began working behind the purple door three years ago. Soon she hopes to inspire the construction of a network of purple doors across Canada.

This September, the executive director of The Gatehouse leaves the advocacy centre for child, youth and adult survivors of child abuse and their families she helped launch three years ago. She plans to expand her private social work practice to include psychotherapy work with children.

"It's a good time to leave," Marucci reflected. "The Gatehouse has excellent staff, a good base of volunteers, well-run programs, stable funding, a lot of respect in the community. It's a good time to bring on someone to take The Gatehouse to the next step in its evolution."

That next step involves the promotion of the south Etobicoke-based advocacy centre as a model for a national network of advocacy centres for child, youth and adult survivors of sexual, emotional and physical child abuse.

Later this year, Marucci, Gatehouse board chair Laurel Broten and others will strike a national expansion committee to expand The Gatehouse model throughout Toronto and across Canada.

"I'd like to see 'purple doors' across Canada," Marucci said, explaining the purple ribbon is the emblem of the annual Children's

Unique centre uses compassion to help abuse victims become survivors

Aid Societies' campaign designed to raise awareness of the need to prevent child abuse and neglect. "Where anyone could walk through a purple door knowing it to be a safe place where they could talk about child abuse. Where kids could feel safe making a disclosure (of abuse).

"We began the programs at The Gatehouse not knowing if we'd have a budget next month," she said, adding funding is now stable. "I'm willing to be surprised (by success) again."

The Gatehouse offers children, youth, their families and adult survivors of abuse crisis support through short-term counselling, referrals to appropriate community services, innovative programs and ongoing support through the process of healing and recovery.

Broten suggested mobilizing host communities and getting a

buy-in from stakeholders including clients, police, child welfare workers and Crown attorneys remains key to the success of the advocacy centre model.

"It's exciting to have communities coming to us to ask us how we did it," said Broten, a litigation lawyer who volunteered on cases of child sexual abuse as an undergrad. "The Gatehouse has gotten recognition as a 'best practice site' from the Office for the Victims of Crime. We're being viewed as a national voice for child abuse issues. Recently, we were interviewed for an article in Maclean's magazine."

Last year, The Ministry of the Attorney General's Office for the Victims of Crime designated The Gatehouse a "best practice site" in Ontario in a report, 'A Voice for Victims', recommending appropriate government ministries examine the centre as a model to be replicated and funded across the country.

Three years ago, area residents and business owners completely renovated the Victorian house now known as The Gatehouse, left empty and in a state of disrepair for 30 years. Community mobilization is key to The Gatehouse's success, Marucci said.

"The Gatehouse is a house in the community people loved," she recalled. "We never heard, 'NIM-BY' (Not In My Back Yard)... The house itself is a metaphor for an abuse survivor - dilapidated and abused. People felt compassion for the house. They take care of the house."

Developing a network of national advocacy centres will require a concerted education campaign to destigmatize the issue of abuse, the executive director suggested.

"People continue to believe child abuse happens to people over there," Marucci argued. "But it does happen to you and to me. Statistics says one-quarter of children are abused. You can't look at child abuse as something that happens outside yourself."

Gatehouse services and programs - an interview room where police and child welfare workers obtain disclosures from children alleging abuse; a support program for adult male survivors of sexual abuse; an expressive arts group for teenage girls to assist in the development of self-esteem, and a peer support program matching child abuse survivors and trained volunteers - bridge the gaps in existing social services, Broten said.

The interview room remains the cornerstone of The Gatehouse. Child welfare workers assist police officers in obtaining videotaped disclosures from children alleging abuse using hidden cameras and microphones in a home-like setting filled with stuffed animals.

"When a child walks into The Gatehouse, you can see them breathe a sigh of relief," Toronto



Lisa Marucci, executive director of The Gatehouse, is leaving to expand her private practice as a social worker. Marucci helped launch The Gatehouse three years ago.

Guardian Photo/DENNIS HANAGAN

Police Const. Theresa Monaghan attested.

"They're much more relaxed (than if they'd gone to a police station). You get a better disclosure (of abuse) from them. And ultimately, a better rate of conviction (against alleged offenders)."

State-of-the-art, picture-in-a-picture video technology allows a close-up shot of the child, while also recording all occupants present in the room, preventing allegations a child has been coached in his or her disclosure.

Currently, Toronto Police conduct an average 10 interviews per week at The Gatehouse with children alleging abuse, Marucci reported.

Statistics staggering

Last year, Toronto police investigated 4,000 child abuse incidents, Monaghan noted.

The officer said she'd like to see another Gatehouse open in Scarborough.

"We only have one Gatehouse," she said. "We need five. Our goal is to open one in each of the former cities comprising the amalgamated city of Toronto."

The pressing need for a support group for adult male survivors of childhood sexual abuse became apparent following the suicide of the Martin Kruze, Monaghan said.

The Toronto man's complaint prompted the investigation of former Maple Leaf Gardens equipment manager Gordon Stuckless, who was sentenced to temporary chemical castration, two years in prison and three years' probation

in 1997 after he admitted sexually assaulting 24 boys from 1969 to 1988.

Since 1999, the Maple Leafs Hockey Club and Toronto Child Abuse Centre have hosted Martin's Hope, an annual forum to educate teachers and children about child abuse.

"I started receiving calls from 52 Division officers saying, 'We have 200 victims here,'" Monaghan recalled of the Stuckless case. "Where can I send these men (for support)? There are no resources for male survivors of sexual abuse. The Gatehouse decided it definitely needed to develop a male survivor piece."

An expressive arts therapy group launched for young women in February of last year also continues to grow in popularity, Marucci said.

Two 'Loud and Proud' groups, one for girls aged 12 to 15, a second for girls 15 to 18, encourages girls to learn healthy boundaries and assertiveness skills while developing their self-esteem.

The Gatehouse also offers peer support, matching child abuse survivors with a trained volunteer to help reduce the isolation and stigmatism felt by those in need of support.

400 clients served

More than 400 clients have accessed Gatehouse services in the past three years.

"There's a true connection at The Gatehouse," she said.

"When people walk into The Gatehouse, they meet a person, not a professional. They often say,

"Thank you. I never thought anyone would care about what I had to say.' We tell them, 'This whole house has been made for you to be heard. This issue is so important, we have 400 volunteers on our database to keep this place alive so you can tell your story.'"

Supporters of abuse survivors, such as partners, parents and friends are also Gatehouse clients, Marucci stressed.

The time has come for awareness and prevention of child abuse to take its place among other high-profile issues such as AIDS and breast cancer, the social worker suggested.

Statistics suggest one in four Canadian children experience abuse.

"We have a 'Run for the Cure' and a run for AIDS. Why couldn't we have a run to stop child abuse?" Marucci said.

"With the recent police seat-belt campaign, now everyone's buckling up. Why can't we launch a huge campaign to make child abuse a national issue?"

This August, Marucci and Monaghan will speak to The Gatehouse's model of community mobilization at a National Organization for Victims conference in Edmonton.

"I think there should be a Gatehouse on every corner in Canada," Marucci said.

"I do believe, despite the stigma still attached to child abuse, people want to do the right thing. The rates of child abuse are staggering. Ultimately, I believe the protection of children is important to people."