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At home with
Deb Cautley



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Do you ever lie in bed after the alarm goes off, and wonder if you're making a difference with your life?

Grant MacEwan College grad Deb Cautley never has that problem.

For the past five years, Cautley has been the executive director of Edmonton's Youth Emergency Shelter Society (YESS). "I get up every morning, and I can't wait to get here. I'm often here at 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning, and I'm often here until 8:00 or 9:00 at night. Part of it's the workload, but you don't work that hard if you don't love what you do."

The Youth Emergency Shelter became a fixture on Whyte Avenue in 1981, when it took over the abandoned fire hall just east of Mill Creek Ravine. Since then, it has provided shelter and programs for homeless, young people between the ages of 15 and 18. In 1992, the society added a second facility—START House—in Edmonton's west end.

The shelters provide a vital alternative to life on the streets. The kids at YESS come from every community in Edmonton. Many have been thrown out of their homes, or have otherwise been abandoned by their parents. Others have simply fled from their families; nearly 70 per cent of YESS clients have been physically, sexually or emotionally abused.

If that makes YESS sound like a depressing place to work, Cautley has news for you. "The kids are so amazing, and so resilient", she says. "They overcome such barriers."

"I can have a bad day, where I just want to throw in the towel, and I go downstairs and see the kids, or I'll go downstairs and talk to one of the front-line workers and say, 'Tell me something good about the kids.' And there's something good every single day."

The path that brought Cautley to YESS was both long and winding. It began at MacEwan's Advertising and Public Relations program, where she graduated in 1980. "That was in the old Safeway building on 118 Avenue, the old Cromdale Campus. I was pretty pregnant when I graduated, with my third child, so it took me a while to get to work."

She spent the next two decades moving among a dizzying array of jobs, from Edmonton's

Phoenix Theatre, to the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary, to marketing director at Eaton Centre. She even tried a stint of self-employment, but found that it wasn't for her. "I'm not an entrepreneur," she laughs. "I like to know what I'm doing every day."

When she was first offered a job at YESS, she didn't exactly jump at the chance. "A friend who was on the board said, 'Come be our funds development manager.' I said no, because I've never raised a cent in my life. So he hired somebody who didn't last very long, and then he came back and asked me again to apply."

This time, in May 1999, she reluctantly said yes. Less than a year later, she suddenly found herself thrust into the role of acting executive director. "That was kind of frightening, for me. I've certainly managed staff, and things like that. But now it's doing budgets, and it's relations with major funders and stakeholders, and things like that. That's where my PR background really, really helped."

A few months later, in November 2000, she officially became executive director. And she hasn't looked back since. "We've had incredible successes since that time," she says. Last year, after extensive research, the society drastically updated its programs and methods. "We've actually thrown out all our programs and restructured. We've done a number of renovations, we've made a lot of progress in staff satisfaction, with motivation, recognition and appreciation. We've come a long, long way."

The new programs place added emphasis on employability, along with basic life skills. Many YESS clients have never learned the day-to-day basics of looking after themselves. "In two of our residential programs, the kids cook their own meals," says Cautley. "They make their own breakfast and lunch, and then one kid will make supper for the group."

"I was leaving last night, and you should have smelt the food! One of the kids made roast beef and mashed potatoes. I went down, and they were all sitting around like a family. Talking about

their day, and picking on each other, just like a bunch of kids in a family would do. I have one staff person who came in on Saturday night (she's crazy like me), and she said it was so cool to go in there. Supper was over, and the kids were doing the dishes. One was on the phone talking to her friend; a couple of them were talking about what they were going to do that night. It was just like your own kids. And that's what they are. They're just everyday, ordinary kids, with some barriers."

Cautley and her staff have made it a priority to build that sense of home into their shelters. "Imagine having your birthday in a shelter, with a bunch of strangers and a bunch of other homeless kids. It's hard. We do the best we can."

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The shelter is associated with a number of MacEwan programs, including Child and Youth Care, and practicum students make up a key portion of the staff structure. In fact, some never leave. "A lot of those practicum students fall in love with what we do," says Cautley. "If we have an opportunity to hire them, we've already got staff that have gone through our training. So it's simple to slip them into a full-time position."

Cautley estimates that about a third of her staff at YESS are fellow MacEwan grads. Like her, they get hooked on the idea of making the world better. "They're so dedicated to those kids. They see so much in them. You come to work every day, and it's like there's sunshine every day."

"Never in a million years did I think I'd be running a charity. And now I can't imagine doing anything else."

For more information on the Youth Emergency Shelter Society, call 468-7070 or visit the website at www.yess.org.