

Good intentions, unlikely alliances can brighten up the dark times

People & Places

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As months go, December is always the darkest; darker still when viewed through blackened eyes and sunglasses.

As Canada's oldest shelter for abused women and their children, Toronto's Interval House has seen 32 Decembers, 10,000 women and more dark days than its workers can count since it opened in an old house in 1973.

Still, there aren't many corners that the light doesn't reach inside the large, newly renovated building where the shelter will relocate next month, thanks to large windows, enlightened thinking and unlikely alliances.

Over the past three years, Interval House — a women's collective with no executive director — tapped in to what is arguably the biggest bastion of traditional male power in the country — Bay Street — to help fund its \$5-million move.

In the process, the agency has managed to challenge stereotypes, and raise a few eyebrows, on both sides of the bargain.

"We can't solve this problem on our own," said Lesley Ackrill, an Interval House administrator who led the funding drive with long-time colleague Nadine Chan. "We need to build a partnership, with men and women."

As shelter employees for nearly 20 years, both women are fully aware of the consequences of male violence toward women, and how shelters, in turn, are seen as havens for hard attitudes and strident feminist politics.

That image doesn't suit Ms. Ackrill and Ms. Chan, who approach their work with an irrepressible good humour, and feel the problem of domestic violence is better viewed from atop bridges than behind fences.

"I mean, there are good men out there," Ms. Chan said yesterday, amid the smell of fresh paint in one of the expanded shelter's family suites.

Ms. Ackrill and Ms. Chan, both married and in their late 40s, have met more than a few good men since the shelter's board charged them with the task, three years ago, of raising enough cash to expand to 30 beds from 22.

Early on, they began to receive donations, made in lieu of flowers, from friends and relatives of a Toronto woman who died.

It turned out that the woman was the 90-something mother of Michael Young, global head of real estate for CIBC World Markets, and his brother, Toronto playwright David Young. The brothers directed donations to Interval House because their mother "would really love this little street-front charity," Ms. Ackrill said.

At the time, the two women were still casting about for a high-profile volunteer to put a public face on their campaign, in order to ensure all \$5-million was raised. So they approached Michael Young and said, "Why don't you do it?"

"He thought, 'I'm a guy,'" implying he was a less-than-ideal



DEBORAH BAC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Lesley Ackrill and Nadine Chan, long-time colleagues at Interval House in Toronto, raised \$5-million for a new building to help abused women.

choice, Ms. Ackrill said.

Mr. Young, who splits his time between Toronto and Dallas, suggested several well-placed Toronto women with fundraising experience, but all had other commitments. So Ms. Ackrill and Ms. Chan put the question to him again, and he accepted.

In the corridors of the money towers, Mr. Young soon found himself on the receiving end of questions about his work for a women's shelter, and had to explain that "this is not about women only, this is about families," Ms.

Chan said.

Soon enough, his fellow suits were reaching for their cheque-books.

"We had 100 meetings, one-on-one, with men and women, executives and owners, huge barons," Ms. Ackrill said, smiling widely. "They came [to the shelter] and sat on our baby chairs in our basement office."

The prospective donors parked their Mercedes and Ferraris out front and toured the old house, listening to the women's stories. Ms. Ackrill and Ms. Chan, in turn,

were invited downtown to give presentations.

"Before that, Nadine and I had not stepped foot at Bay and Adelaide," Ms. Ackrill said. "Now we know every boardroom."

Yesterday, as they sat on a brand-new shelter bed and laughed at the image of those opposite worlds colliding, the women pointed out that the shelter has always been fiscally conservative, and has never strayed into the red — a strong selling point when pitching to corporate types.

More significantly, they were

able to convey the message that domestic violence is a clear and obvious community problem, not just some prickly gender issue to be avoided.

How did they do it? The shelter workers and the suits took a step outside the assigned stereotypes, and toward each other.

"We're functioning in different worlds; we don't have access to theirs and they don't have access to ours," Ms. Ackrill said. "So, we try to build a bridge."

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