

CAWI Stories: Sharing of Voices and Decisions

Produced in partnership with [the Collaborative Leadership in Practice \(CLiP\) project](#).





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Introduction

At a story-gathering session in November 2017, community partners and staff members of the City for All Women Initiative (CAWI) discussed: “**What is different about partnership** (working with others) **that centers the experiences** (voices) **and decision-making of equity-seeking** (justice/fairness) **groups?**” The story-sharing and paper quilting which followed highlighted important insights about the qualities and actions central to CAWI’s collaborative leadership approach.

These CAWI Stories, and the accompanying resource CAWI Paper Quilt Squares, were produced as tools for learning in partnership with the Collaborative Leadership in Practice (CLiP) project, and are available on the project website. The CLiP project facilitated the sharing across Ontario of experiences and insights related to collaborative and equitable leadership in partnerships. Through the story-gathering and paper quilt activities, the CLiP project was able to listen attentively and document knowledge about this topic directly from the voices of CAWI’s community partners.

These stories speak in rich ways and convey the power of community leadership which prioritizes equity and inclusion. The CLiP project team is very thankful to the eight women who shared their time, their stories, their art and their analysis to co-create this unique tool for learning through stories.

Learn more about the City for All Women Initiative (CAWI) here: www.cawi-ivtf.org

Learn more about the CLiP project here: www.clip-lcp.org

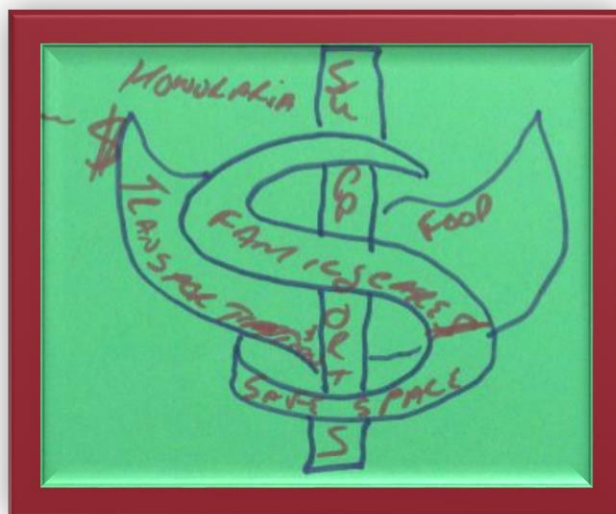
Storyteller: Terri Meehan

Recently one of the staff of the Maytree Foundation contacted my national lived experiences homelessness group. They created a question set and asked for our help. They gave us an honorarium for organizing and putting together focus groups. It had to happen really quickly. Some of us were asked to check the report and answer whether it reflects what is actually going on.

The Maytree Foundation said that they needed lived experiences at all levels of the work they were doing – usually this is unheard of. Normally, it's please put a sticker on our report and we will say 'oh we've got lived experience'. We felt really empowered by their process.

The other part that felt empowering was that I needed to get 15 friends. I was able to say there is an honorarium and food; Your experience is what I need. I got a lot of yeses really quickly.

At every level we were engaged from creating the questions, to creating focus groups, to reading the report. We felt empowered because our opinion and effort was seen as valuable and genuine. The usual thank you feels patronizing. The financial support enabled us to participate and made us feel equal and included.



Storyteller: Andrea Balfour

I went to Jamaica after my grandmother died. Four years later, my father died. Two years after that, my mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer which brought me back to Ottawa with my two children. I connected with Eastern Ottawa Resource Centre and the Centre kept me afloat in different ways.

It was Michelle Lemieux from the Eastern Ottawa Resource Centre who invited me to a Making Votes Count café. That is when I met Linda Kinsella, from CAWI. She taught me about Making Votes Count and I had training. We did a round of Making Votes Count at both provincial and federal levels. I ended up getting really engaged and took the Creating the Change We Want workshop given by Community Development Framework (CDF). Eventually, I did some facilitating as well. I helped get new people excited and involved.

I see the dynamics of how CAWI works and the community development framework: sit down with other residents, bring forward our ideas collaboratively, build teamwork, work alongside each other. It's very important. I would not use the word empowerment, but I felt enriched.

I have always loved political science. I wondered: is the advocacy you hear of with organisations and groups real? At CAWI, I found a position where I can make a difference.

Partnership that centers around voices – it's very important. It helps break different ground. When we meet different people, together we can move a mountain. A key part of our partnership is that we all express ourselves, we are open and we have a common goal.

At CAWI, I feel like I am part of a family: I have no dad, I have no mom. And I can't sit at home - I am no couch potato. Even when my daughter was diagnosed with cancer a year ago, I found a lot of strength by being in the right surroundings, within CAWI.



Storyteller: Linda Kinsella

I don't have much family. Even before my dad died, I had split from my birth family. I was active in many organizations, but I never felt accepted. I have a disability, I am a woman, I am a part of the queer community. I felt this distanced me and prevented me from feeling included. I worked in a political party for 10 years and I didn't know much about the other members (e.g. their kids' names). I was on boards of organizations. Still, I never really knew people.



In 2008, I lost the person who was a second mom to me, Marion Dewar. When the City of Ottawa created a plaza named after Marion, I decided: I have to get back involved in the community in some way. I remembered that Marion had worn CAWI's peach scarf at the City budget meetings, and so I sought out CAWI.

When I first called CAWI, Executive Director Suzanne Doerge and I talked for three hours on the phone. After the conversation, Suzanne knew my skills and acknowledged them right away. She had me doing an action forum on the city budget within two weeks! I think CAWI takes a lot from the leadership and spirit of Suzanne.

The fact that CAWI staff all work from home makes it homier to me (for example, when we first talked, Suzanne's teenage son was walking by and she had to close the door). I have been to CAWI meetings in kitchens and various people's homes. I remember when Tong had her kids at meetings; they were colouring, and that was okay.

I am realizing how acknowledging the full person is vital. One of the problems in our society is it is just skin surface. Whether someone doesn't like chocolate or is a vegetarian – these small pieces count. We are not just a body. Not just a union member. And it's also okay to share that I am separating from my husband.

I get love and acceptance from CAWI and the surroundings where we work together. It's important to share because, again, it's the whole person.

Storyteller: Rabeya

I have been a part of Cornerstone for 16 lovely years. 16 years of hell and greatness. I am an alcoholic. Melanie, who works at Cornerstone Housing for Women, has helped me.

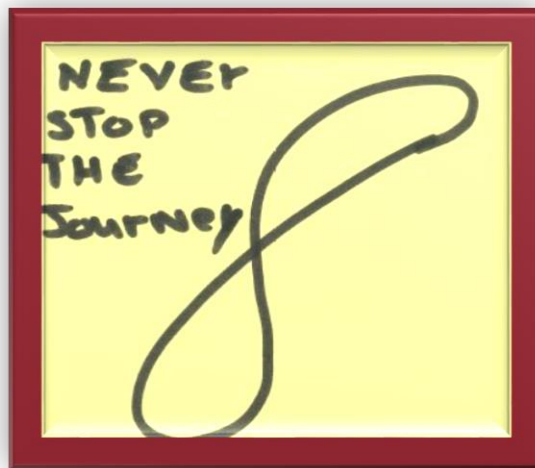
Let me go back to the opposite of all of this. I lived in special housing because of my mental illness and because I couldn't cope. At one point, I was told I had to leave. The way I was told was the opposite of supportive: I was by myself, I had no worker with me, I was in psychosis. I was told I had to be out. So I thought to myself: I am nothing; just a drunk that doesn't belong anywhere.

When I was at the doors of Cornerstone, they opened it just a crack and what they saw was somebody so scared, so frightened. People asked "what would you like to do?" This was different! I was not used to having choice. I was not accustomed to having a voice and being heard.

Within Cornerstone, we all got to know each other. We learned to adapt in a place where there is comfort and it's also your job to make others comfortable. There were bonds we created in this home. Being accepted is such an elementary emotion. It's important from when you are a kid, and this does not change when you are an adult.

At Cornerstone, I learned about myself. I learned what is regular anger, as opposed to flipping your lid. I learned what is patience. I learned that within Cornerstone there was a soft pillow that I could land on if I didn't know what was going on. That pillow is Melanie, who is also a CAWI partner.

Through CAWI, I went to training, and I came and spoke at City Council. We were there together and I was strong. I looked at a politician who was sleeping at his seat, and I spoke louder. It was necessary for me to raise my voice so that all the councillors could hear the importance of giving women a voice.



Storyteller: Suzanne Doerge

CAWI's strength depends on having the opportunity to work with women's organisations, to build political action in partnership. For a period of time there was no funding for women's organizations to engage in political action. (That's about equity too – where are the dollars to support women's organizations?) Many women's organizations faded because of the lack of funding. We look forward to those organizations coming back. Partnership with organizations like Cornerstone, Somerset CHC and the Coalition of Community Health and Resource Centres is how CAWI works.



Rabeya graduated from CAWI's civic participation training 12 years ago. Rabeya connected with us through Cornerstone Housing for Women. When women come into CAWI's training they network with other women who are in different places in their lives. Through these connections, they get politically active. An important part of what makes that work is the trust women have already built with CAWI's local community partners. CAWI works with women who are at the margins and the community partners establish and ensure that emotional support. It's a holistic approach.