

Aging Out

After Charlene Hodgson saw the reality of life for a boy without family, she found a way to help

BY JESSICA NATALE WOOLLARD

IT WAS ON A TUESDAY IN OCTOBER 2004 that a young man living in a group home in northern B.C. would turn 19. All his life, he had bounced around foster homes until settling here about two years previously. And it *was* home, or would be, until his upcoming birthday.

Then, like thousands of kids in care in British Columbia, he would be cut off from government-funded housing and other supports like food and health care.

Charlene Hodgson, a new teacher at the young man's school, learned about his terrible predicament two weeks before the fated birthday. She and her colleagues helped him find a part-time job and a new home, which they stocked with donated supplies – a bed, pots and pans, dishes, a vacuum.

“Once you turn 19, you're out. And it doesn't matter whether it's May or June or December or January,” Hodgson says. “It was the first time I'd really experienced this. And it wasn't an isolated incident. It haunted all of us.”

After 35 years of teaching, Hodgson retired in Kelowna. In the spring of 2016 she joined the local chapter of the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW), a national organization that promotes human rights, public education, and social justice. Around that time, the BC Council of the CFUW (CFUW-BC) adopted a policy that urges the provincial government to provide financial support to all young people who have aged out of foster care, not just those who meet certain stringent criteria, until they turn 25.

One of the first initiatives the CFUW-BC embarked on under its new policy was a Study Circle project, a pilot that brought together members in four cities with local organizations, community members, and youth who have aged out of care, to have conversations about the barriers they face. These include high rates of homelessness, disability, mental health issues, substance use, isolation and poverty.

The aim was to discuss which supports were already in place and which weren't, and to identify community-specific action items that could improve the outcomes of this vulnerable population. The Study Circle project was funded by a \$35,000 grant from Vancouver Foundation.

The four pilot communities – Kelowna, Vancouver, North Vancouver and Victoria – held six study circle



sessions over two months in the fall of 2016. Then, they merged for a provincial action forum held in Vancouver.

Audrey Hobbs Johnson of the North Vancouver CFUW was the project coordinator of the Study Circle project. She says the circles were an excellent starting point because they engaged the youth and adults in a reciprocal conversation. Now, CFUW-BC is using the information gathered to devise a five-year plan. “We're looking at what we can put in place that will really support youth aging out of foster care, that will prevent the mental health issues, drug-related issues and homelessness,” she says. “We know we aren't going to solve this today, but tomorrow we might.”

Hodgson agrees; hope is on the horizon. The Kelowna Study Circle has continued to meet since the provincial action forum. Their first goal was to host a political forum to inform electoral candidates and the general public about key issues facing youth aging out of care. The forum was a success, attended by the majority of candidates. Says Hodgson: “We have an obligation to make sure that all people, no matter who they are, have the support systems that the rest of us enjoy.” ∞

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