

St. Christopher House

Its Role in the Portuguese Women's Community

By Brenda Brandle

One can see a community of women isolated by their own community, cut off from the outside world by a lack of education, confused by a country whose rules and values they do not understand, and pressed to find employment to cover family expenses. Transition into Canadian life is a major problem, and Canada has done little to ease that transition. (The Story of St. Christopher House: 1912-1986)

Immigrant families arrive in Canada with high aspirations for their new life — and often little else — to absorb the inevitable culture shock. These people are isolated by language and cultural differences; their dream of a good life can quickly become a nightmare without the help of a concerned citizenry:

...the essence of St. Christopher House is reflected in the small things that staff and volunteers do from day to day — small things that make a big difference to many people in our community. (St. Christopher House Chronicle, December 1986)

In the spirit of "people sharing life" with people, St. Christopher House has played a productive role in the lives of many immigrant communities since its inception.

The last fifteen years have been significant for the House in its involvement with the Portuguese community. The House aims to help the community as a whole, and in so doing has played a vital part in the lives of many Portuguese women.

St. Christopher House continues to offer services in translation, English as a Second Language (ESL) and Literacy classes; it facilitated the formation of the

Cleaners' Action committee and publishes a newsletter of the same name; actively participates in the Committee for Cleaners' Rights; and provides support groups for victims of domestic violence.

INTERPRETING SERVICE

In 1973 a small group of people who worked as interpreters recognized that the Portuguese community would benefit from a comprehensive self-help program. The Portuguese women were isolated by language and cultural differences and uninformed of their rights and available community resources. The Portuguese West of Bathurst Project (PISEM) was established in 1974 to meet their needs. Community workers and volunteers began a door-knocking campaign: the initial contact was to meet with individual women in their homes, and then in small groups, and much later in larger groups.

These women identified as their issues lack of communication with their children's schools and problems in the work place. PISEM staff organized meetings with teachers at appropriate times for parents who worked in the evening and, as a result, better understanding was promoted between the parents and the teachers.

CLEANERS' ACTION

The women discussed their job-related problems with PISEM staff and from these concerns the Cleaners' Action movement was born in the mid-1970s. *The Cleaners' Action Newsletter* was published and kept the cleaners informed of relevant issues. The newsletter, now in

its eleventh year of publication, is printed in Portuguese and English and is distributed at the work place by the unions and St. Christopher House.

In 1977 many of these women worked as cleaners at Queens Park. The staff cleaners were terminated in favour of hiring an independent contractor. The cleaners — through direct social action, the support of the media, and great determination — were able to extract a fair wage policy from the government. This victory was limited to the Queens Park Cleaners: whenever an employer contracts out the cleaning of their buildings to an independent contractor, the fight must be fought all over again.

COMMITTEE FOR CLEANERS' RIGHTS

Cleaners do not have job or income security, even when they are unionized. Cleaners and cafeteria workers do not qualify for "successor rights" as spelled out in section 63 of the Labour Relations Act. This glaring inequality in the Act prompted a group of concerned people to form the Committee for Cleaners' Rights. The committee is a coalition of labour, community and women's groups who are dedicated to rectifying this inequality and to securing the legal protection required by Ontario's building cleaners. Participants on the Committee include people from St. Christopher House, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), the Portuguese Inter-agency Network (PIN), a number of NDP activists, and unions such as CUPE, FASWOC, CUPW, OPSEU, SEIU, and the Labourers Local 183.

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

English classes have always been a part of the St. Christopher House program to promote community development. The lack of English is a major factor contributing to isolation and alienation: without English and literacy skills immigrant women are forced into low-paying jobs that entail long working hours away from their homes.

St. Christopher House has provided English classes in small informal groups in peoples' homes, in the work place and in classroom settings. In 1955, 125 adults paid the one dollar registration fee for English classes in the Kensington area. Presently there are three programs offered through the House: a literacy program for

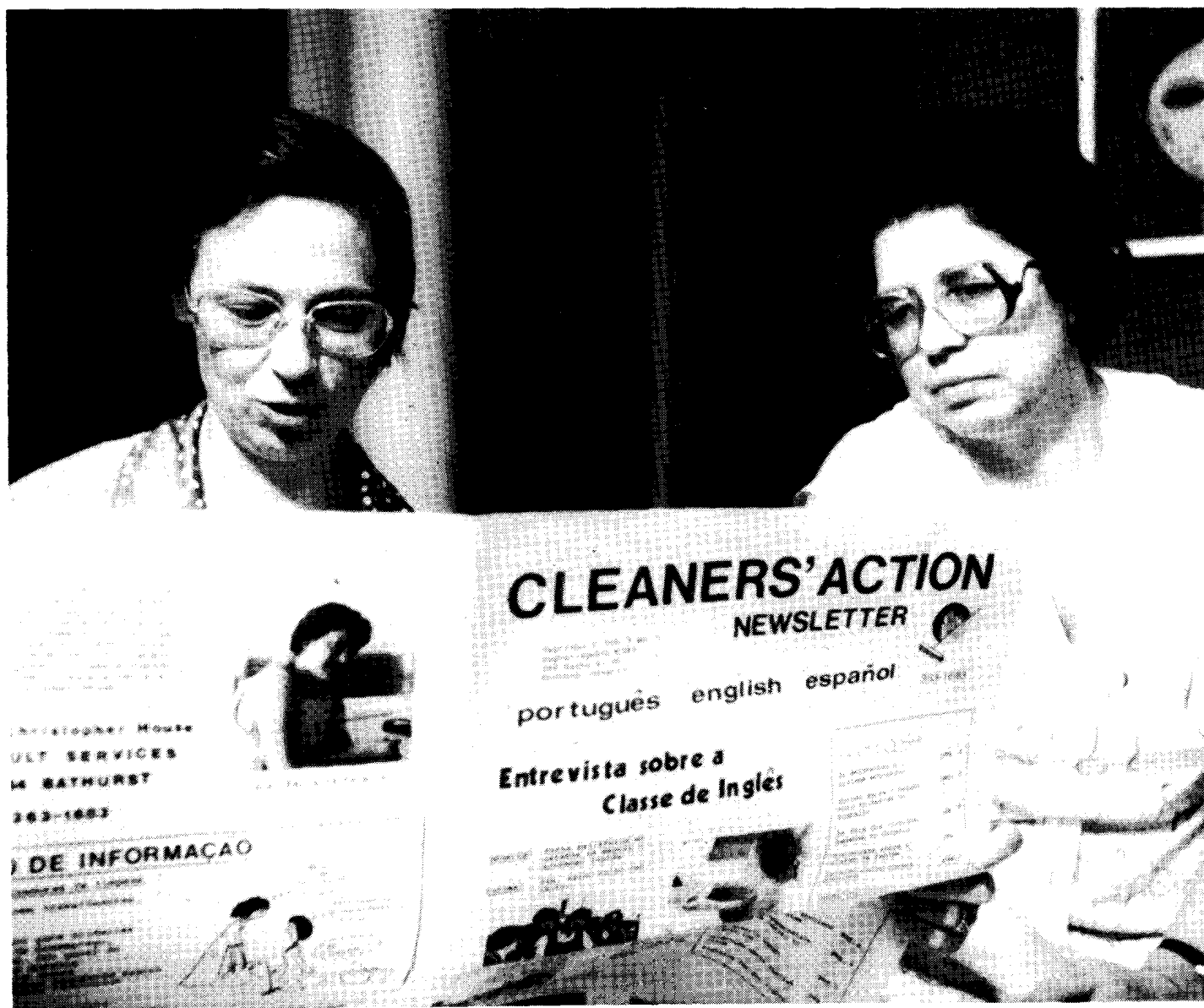
Portuguese speakers; a beginners' program for older adults, and a program run from Sanderson Library for people of all ages and proficiency levels.

The Sanderson Library Program offers child care service to enable women with young children to participate. There are presently twenty people enrolled in this program (fifteen women and five men), ranging in age from sixteen to seventy-two. Some of the older female students are motivated to learn English so that they will be able to speak English with their grandchildren and to communicate with those of their children's spouses who do not speak Portuguese. Younger students are motivated to learn English in order to improve their occupational opportunities. The methodology in these classes is very flexible: a multi-level program is offered, and the time people are able to spend at

their studies varies with each student.

The Older Adult Centre's oldest student is a woman of seventy-six who applies herself to her studies with zeal and enthusiasm. The enrolment in this program is twenty students, fifteen of whom are women. The focus of classroom instruction is Survival English. The students learn important things, such as using the telephone, making appointments and making emergency telephone calls. Some of the students in this program are so keen to learn that they also attend the classes at Sanderson Library.

The Portuguese Literacy class is a small, hard-working group of thirteen people, most of whom are women. Some of these students attend the classes without the knowledge of their husbands. Their ages range from early twenties to seventies; on average, the students are in



Cleaners examine their newsletter

Photo: Courtesy St. Christopher House

their fifties. These people missed out on educational opportunities in their homeland and are now making up for lost time. One can only admire their courage, as they must first acquire literacy skills in their mother tongue in order to then apply them to the difficult task of learning English.

Attendance is not mandatory in these programs and, if people are absent from the class, they are able to resume attendance when their schedules permit. Teaching in these kinds of flexible programs is as demanding as it is exciting: it requires very special and dedicated teachers to respond to the varying needs, levels and schedules of their students.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Programs in the House evolve from the needs expressed by the community. These needs are made apparent through the trust and goodwill engendered in existing programs.

The sensitive issue of domestic violence is just such a program. The Cleaners' Action has not only strengthened women in their goal of improving their working conditions, but has allowed some women to seek assistance for their personal problems. There is presently a very active group of staff workers and volunteers who are helping women and children troubled with violence in the home. Funding shortages have prevented the hiring of a male social worker who could deal directly with the perpetrators of this violence.

Meanwhile, the House does all that it can by providing an evening and a daytime program for women. The focus of these programs is therapeutic: they help the women to deal with the emotional impact of battering and to direct their lives, through education and life skills training, toward renewed self-esteem and financial independence.

There are three children's programs established to assist them through this critical period in their lives: a morning program for pre-schoolers, an afternoon program for school-age children, and an evening program for older children. After a ten-week period the children are integrated into other existing children's programs in the House. The focus of these programs is both therapeutic and preventive. The children have the opportunity to deal with their feelings about the problems in their family and then to go on to normal activities that allow them to experience healthy male role models.



Photo: Courtesy St. Christopher House

In the area of Community Education on Domestic Violence, St. Christopher House sponsors two public forums a year. A panel made up of Catholic Family workers, priests, doctors, lawyers and members of the Domestic Violence Team with the Police Department addresses the problems and answers questions from members of the community. The theme for the March '87 Public Forum "Alcohol and Violence." The forum being organized in conjunction with the Kensington Clinic, a new program run by the Toronto Western Hospital for Portuguese and Spanish-speaking men with alcohol-related problems.

Many immigrant women have used the programs described above to lighten the heavy burdens they carry. Their struggle to adapt to a new life is made a little easier by "sharing life" with each other. It is through becoming a community of women who help one another that they are freed from fear and isolation. St. Christopher House is the instrument that exists in the community for just this purpose — to help people help themselves. Through seventy-five years of active community development, the House has worked to meet the changing needs of all members of the community. It embodies the spirit of the Settlement House philosophy:

The Settlement Houses seek to develop harmonious relationships among different cultural, economic, religious and social groups, and seeks to foster personal growth and self-confidence. They offer an approach to a neighbourhood — helping neighbours find solutions to problems in terms which are meaningful to them. Neighbourhood Houses use both direct services and social action to achieve these goals. (The Story of St.

Christopher House: 1912-1986)

It renews the spirit to know that, in this dark world fraught with political and economic chaos, there is a bright light burning. As individuals we are not able to effect changes on a global scale, but as individuals who live together in communities, we can extend a helping hand to our neighbours. It is in our communities that we can effect changes and make them better places for us all. A caring community, "sharing life," keeps that bright light burning.

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