

# VANCOUVER'S MUNROE

Jan Lancaster and Ajax Quinby

*Monroe house est une maison de transition de Vancouver. Cet article, écrit par les deux administratrices de cette maison, montre le besoin pour les femmes battues d'un soutien à long terme. L'objectif est de donner aux femmes le temps "de faire des plans et de commencer à prendre des mesures pour trouver une alternative à leur situation de femmes battues." Créée par le YWCA en 1979 et subventionnée par le ministère des Ressources humaines, cette grande maison contient six appartements d'une chambre. Depuis sa création, elle a accueilli 67 femmes et 114 enfants. Les personnes qui y travaillent aident les femmes à devenir aussi indépendantes que possible.*

Anyone who works in a transition house knows that the minimal time allowed is often not long enough to give many women the support and the protection needed for them to be independent. There are an overwhelming number of people, events, and attitudes, as well as economic realities, that force women and children back into destructive relationships. For example, legal proceedings often do not start until months after the woman has left a transition house. It may take many months to overcome physical injuries; furthermore, the effects of emotional injuries need the support of feminist

workers — otherwise the anti-woman attitudes of many institutions will reopen those wounds.

The need for second-stage housing was recognized early in the history of Vancouver Transition House. It was often discussed at staff meetings as a resident whom the staff knew had an overwhelming number of practical problems yet to overcome prepared to leave.

One of the recommendations from the Conference on Family Violence held in Vancouver in March, 1977, was that a second-stage house for battered women be provided in the community. It seemed "natural" for the YWCA to be involved. By November, 1978, a funding proposal was complete. The plan was to start an interim housing facility which would give women time to "make a plan and begin to take the action needed to reach an alternative to being battered." After the Ministry of Human Resources and the YWCA contracted to start such a facility, in September, 1979, Munroe House became a reality.

Munroe House, located in a quiet, mixed, residential area of Vancouver, is a large old house containing six self-contained one-bedroom apartments and a staff office. Each suite is furnished with the essentials: hide-a-bed, chairs, tables, lamps, beds, fridge, and stove. There are also basic kitchen utensils and linens for the beds. Residents share a small playroom

with some play equipment for the children, a laundry room, and a TV room.

The staff consists of two comanagers and one on-call person who covers in vacation and sickness time. When Munroe House started it had a social worker manager-director and a part-time office staff person, but when the first director resigned it was decided to share the management equally between two comanagers. The staff works thirty-two hours a week at the house; three days of 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and one day of 1 p.m. to 9 p.m. As well, each comanager is on call, carrying a pager twenty-four hours a day every alternate week.

Residents are referred to the house on the basis of several criteria. Only battered women with children are accepted; no differential is made between physical and psychological battering; she cannot be potentially abusive to herself or to her children; and she must not be at that time chemically or alcoholically dependent. Women and their children can stay for approximately six months. Since the house opened in September, 1979, we have accommodated 67 women and 114 children. Although the average length of stay has been seven months, it has varied from two days to one year. Three families have returned to Munroe House for a second stay. Two of those families went out the second

# HOUSE<sup>A</sup> SECOND-STAGE TRANSITION HOUSE

time around to live alone; one woman chose to return to her husband.

There have been eight native Indian women, nineteen women from various ethnic backgrounds (including Italian, Greek, Portuguese, and East Indian), and forty women whose first language was English. Excluding the returning residents, thirty-nine women (64 per cent) left to live alone, fifteen (24 per cent) returned to their husbands, five (.8 per cent) disappeared from the house leaving no directions as to their whereabouts, and 2 women (.3 per cent) went to live with their parents again. If Vancouver Transition House does not have a suitable referral when a vacancy occurs, then the other six transition houses in the Lower Mainland are approached.

An advisory board consisting of the Director of Support Services from the YWCA, a YWCA board member, the comanager, the supervisor and the social worker from the local office of the Ministry of Human Resources, and the supervisor and a staff person from Vancouver Transition House meets every three months. A Ministry of Human Resources grant is administered by the YWCA Finance Department, which also deals with payment of salaries and invoices for Munroe House.

We at Munroe House want to provide women with a safe, supportive environment where they

can grow to be as self-reliant as possible. We help women to learn the skills and identify the resources needed to be self-sufficient. For instance, we discuss beforehand with a client what is likely to happen at an appointment with a lawyer so that she is able to identify what is important to discuss. We may accompany her and subsequently discuss what happened. With many women who have language and cultural differences, we go to every appointment in order to co-ordinate information regarding legal proceedings, child custody and visits, immigration, and medical matters.

When a recent resident seemed upset after her visit to a therapist, we found that the therapist asked her, "Why did you give your husband the power to hit you?" In blatant ignorance and insensitivity to the situation of a battered woman, the therapist, who had assumed the role of the psychologically abusive husband, continued the battering! In another instance, a woman who left her husband to save the life of her unborn child was told by a court counsellor that she would have to get used to the husband's having visits with the baby. Visits with violent and abusive fathers are forced upon children, and the destructive results of those visits are left for the mother to solve. These are practical problems that are a result of a sexist society.

Although we do not "preach" feminism, feminist explanations of events and attitudes are important. How otherwise can a situation like the following make sense? The woman whom the court charges with "contempt" when her children refuse to visit their abusive father is considered a bad mother! A father whom the court has never charged for failing to pay court-ordered maintenance is not a bad father! Understanding that society treats *all* women as second-class persons helps relieve the personal loss of self-esteem which the judicial system creates.

Much of our time is spent talking about lives, plans, and ambitions to real women with real-life, practical problems that are a result of sexism.

Houses that give battered women and their children the freedom to choose their future — as well as any woman can in a society that believes in profiting by, and relieving its frustration upon, women — are needed everywhere in Canada.

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*Jan Lancaster, comanager of Monroe House, worked at Le centre de refuge de Montréal and is involved with the Vancouver Incest and Sexual Abuse Centre.*

*Ajax Quinby, mother of four and comanager of Monroe House, is a founding member of Battered Women's Support Services in Vancouver.*