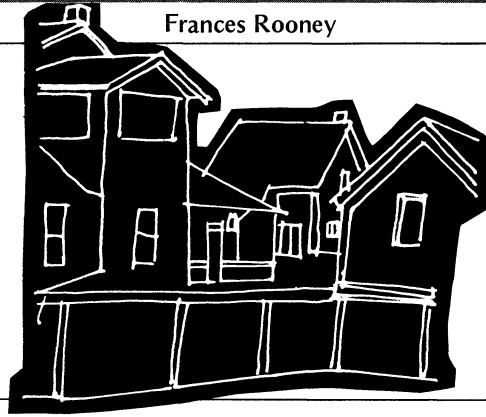


# Vancouver Transition House

Frances Rooney



La Maison de transition de Vancouver a réussi à surmonter de nombreux obstacles et à offrir dans le quartier est de la ville un cadre à la fois matériel et affectif aux femmes avec des enfants qui traversent une période de crise.

In 1971 the Women in Transition Society applied for a LIP grant with which to open a house for women and children in crisis. The application was refused. Eighteen gruelling months later, armed with a one-year contract from the provincial government, a rent-free house from the Children's Aid Society, seven full-time and four part-time workers, and a deceptively simple working philosophy, Vancouver Transition House was ready to receive residents.

The House itself is a two-storey building on one of Vancouver's main east-end streets. It can accommodate up to twenty people at a time. Each family may stay for as long as a month.

The purpose, the basic working principle, of Transition House is to provide physical and emotional support to women with children who are in crisis/transition states. During their stay, women receive assistance in making whatever changes they decide are necessary to alleviate the pressures that sent them to TH in the first place and to provide a base for a more satisfactory lifestyle. The work is divided up in three ways. Residents and staff provide child care. Staff maintains food and supplies and plans menus, while residents share cooking and chores. Staff act as a liaison between the women and the community agencies and are advocates in difficult legal situations.

Because the emotional climate is so important, it is carefully structured and tended. Staff members are chosen for their ability to empathize and be supportive in very stressful situations and to relate to residents as one person to another, *not* as a social service worker to a client. This sense of equality,

and the collective manner in which TH is run, help a resident get a sense of participation in and control over her own life.

At TH it is important that everybody talks and everybody gets heard. A new woman who doesn't yet feel free to talk with other residents can tell her story to no fewer than five staff members in any twenty-four period. And most do. For many of the residents, this is a unique experience. Often they find it hard to believe that there is no hidden requirement, no price to pay later, that they are being heard because that is what they need. For some of the very young mothers, this is their first chance to pay attention to their own needs as women, in fact it is their first chance to discover what those needs are. The principle of total, patient, and unquestioning support produces a structure in which people can grow, change, and finally experience their own power. It is this principle that makes Vancouver Transition House (and the Transition House movement) genuinely revolutionary.

As the provincial government's interest in social services dwindles, so do funds. Worse, the government is building a neatly structured, painfully hierarchical social-service network. Part of this process has been to sever TH's affiliation with SORWUC which is the Service, Office, and Retail Workers Union of Canada, which grew from the Vancouver Working Women's Association and whose membership consists largely of women in traditional women's — i.e., nonunionized — trades.

The SORWUC contracts provided satisfactory salaries for the workers at TH, protected the interests of part-time workers, and assured continued recognition of TH's unique character and needs. If all goes according to plan, by the time this article is in print the collective structure of the house will be gone. Further changes are planned. Clearly, the future does not look encouraging. But who knows? Six years and a thousand residents ago, it looked as if there would never be a Vancouver Transition House.

