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A NEW IDENTITY IN MUSIC

THE STORIES OF **PEOPLE HELPING PEOPLE**
AT ABBOTSFORD COMMUNITY SERVICES

Abbotsford
**Community
services**
People Helping People

ABBOTSFORD COMMUNITY SERVICES

STORIES MAGAZINE

OUR MISSION

Abbotsford Community Services fosters community well-being and social justice through positive action and leadership.

OUR VISION

Justice, opportunities and equitable access for all.

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Abbotsford
**Community
services**
People Helping People



FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT

We Are Making a Difference. Greetings to all! I am taking this opportunity on behalf of the ACS Board of Directors to give you an update on some of the exciting ways our organization continues to make a difference for those in need in our community.

In a recent survey, an Abbotsford community leader said, “Abbotsford is a vibrant city in part because of the leadership shown by Abbotsford Community Services.” This is high praise, indeed, and it serves as a reminder of the role ACS plays in community development.

Our well-established programs such as the **Food Bank**, the **Abbotsford Mission Recycling Depot**, **AbbotsfordWORKS** Employment Centre, as well as events such as the **Cultural Diversity Awards** have provided needed services, employment opportunities, and celebrations for a diverse community.

This past year we proudly welcomed new programs including the **Opioid Agonist Treatment Centre (OAT)** and **Foundry**. **OAT** is a partnership with Fraser Health that addresses the growing opioid crisis with evidence-based treatment, counselling and referrals.

Foundry provides comprehensive health and social services for youth in one central location with 16 partners including Fraser Health, Ministry of Children and Family Development, Impact, Abbotsford School District, Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, and Division of Family Practice.

As board president, I am continuously reminded of the good that ACS does. I get great news from the **Family Centre** on the impact of programming for families. I see the difference ACS makes for babies, teen moms and dads at **New Beginnings**. I hear of great things happening in our low-barrier housing initiative, **Hearthstone**.

There is so much to celebrate but I am also reminded regularly of the emerging or unmet needs within our community. Though we make a difference for many, there are many more that need our help. Our board will revise our Strategic Plan this year and continue our mission of ‘fostering community well-being and social justice through positive action and leadership.’

Abbotsford is a caring and generous community. Throughout the year community and business members have donated their time, money and services to help those less fortunate. I thank everyone on behalf of the board of directors for their contributions and humbly request your continued support into the future. Together we will work to realize the vision of ACS: ‘Justice, opportunities and equitable access for all.’



STEVE CARLTON

BOARD PRESIDENT

ABBOTSFORD COMMUNITY SERVICES



LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Abbotsford Community Services is all about people helping people. Through the continued impacts of more than 90 programs, 450+ staff, 1,000+ volunteers, and dozens of community partners, we foster well-being and social justice for families and individuals in our communities.

For many people, accessing ACS supports means opening a door to a wide network of services with a significant impact in their lives. For some, it is the door to settlement in Canada, for others it is the door to employment. For still more people, ACS is the door to counselling and support services, to a place to call home, to food, to legal advocacy, to language learning, and to better health.

Here are some of the ways we made a difference this year:

74 rental supplements were provided by the **Homelessness Prevention Program** to people in identified at-risk groups for homelessness such as women experiencing violence and youth transitioning out of foster care. Rental supplements get and/or keep individuals in their own permanent living accommodations.

80% of clients surveyed said they felt healthier due to receiving **Meals on Wheels** on a regular and consistent schedule. More than 10,000 meals were delivered to individuals who are homebound, critically ill, low-income, and/or with impaired memory function.

100% of **EPIC** program clients, who have diverse abilities, had some sort of employment and income in the last quarter of 2017-2018. Among these, 48% are leaving the program with successful, permanent employment.

75% improvement in family functioning and parenting for parents participating in the **Family Connections** Program. Family Connections also provides therapy to increase functioning for parents experiencing chronic difficulties due to the impact of multi-generational or trauma-based issues.

100% of clients said counselling from the **Abbotsford Addictions Centre** made a positive change in their lives. This year the program provided 1405 sessions of individual counselling and 336 group counselling sessions for individuals with substance use issues and those affected by someone else's use.

Thank you for your part in working toward our vision for this community: a vision of justice, opportunities, and equitable access for all.



ROD SANTIAGO
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
ABBOTSFORD COMMUNITY SERVICES



CHUCK'S STORY

A CHANCE TO START AGAIN

Before Chuck came to Hearthstone Place, he was living under a bridge in Abbotsford. Once an award-winning mechanic, he wanted to “get back to reality” but felt stuck. He didn’t like the attitude on the streets and while he got along with local aid workers and police officers, he was the victim of repeated thefts. Once, he was even beaten up and tasered while sleeping by people pretending to be the police.

When he came in off the streets into supportive housing, Chuck describes himself as “pretty wild.” The conditions at Hearthstone required an adjustment, but staff made him feel comfortable and safe. Finally, he was in a place where he could start to improve his situation.

A PLACE TO START FROM

Chuck’s appreciation for the opportunity he has at Hearthstone is obvious. He has a roof over his head again and takes pride in his suite. It’s compact but homey and every inch is immaculate. He also has new glasses and copies of his identification and other essential paperwork that were stolen when he was on the street. These are some of the first steps down the path towards his ultimate desires, to get his own home and a new job. Now that Chuck feels safe, he’s able to start pursuing those goals.

“As much as we help him, Chuck helps us, too,” reports Megan Capp, Manager of Hearthstone Place. She’s quick to share that Chuck helps keeps the area around the building tidy, looks after other residents when they’re sick and volunteers for jobs like staining the wood on their new benches. After his interview, he was heading to the Food Bank to assist a friend.

MAKING GOOD NEIGHBOURS

Other Hearthstone residents are also integral in having a positive effect on the area. They’re proactive about collecting garbage dropped in the neighbourhood, and have recently decided to participate in the “Adopt a Block” program.

Despite some strong opposition to Hearthstone’s creation, there have been no formal complaints since opening a year ago and criminal activity has not increased. Residents are committed to being good neighbours, taking ownership of their surroundings and working together to resolve the issues that can occur when people live in close proximity to one another.

“THESE ARE SOME OF THE FIRST STEPS DOWN THE PATH TOWARDS HIS ULTIMATE DESIRES, TO GET HIS OWN HOME AND A NEW JOB.”

STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Everyone who lives at Hearthstone has the opportunity to work with professionals to address their individual and often complex needs which may include: mental health, substance use, essential life skills and employability. Residents define a set of goals within a two-year plan and are committed to working towards these goals. Some ultimately seek to secure jobs and move into market housing.

In some circumstances, particularly for those with higher support needs, this isn't feasible. In these situations getting off the streets and living at Hearthstone supports them towards a better quality of life, a positive role in the community and, in many cases, a reduced number of calls to emergency services.

Megan reports that for some residents, "baby steps" are often the most significant. While people like Chuck are eager to get started on self-improvement, it takes longer for others. It's not for lack of desire; many people on the street don't feel deserving of a home at Hearthstone or even a daily shower. Others have grown up in environments where they weren't taught life skills or hygiene fundamentals. Hearthstone's "housing first" approach gives them a base from which to start developing these skills before exploring larger goals. Clients are met wherever they're at in life.

A PLACE OF POSITIVITY AND LOVE

For the residents and staff of Hearthstone, each day presents new challenges. While their work isn't easy, Megan and her team work to stay at the forefront of best and emerging practices around homelessness and related issues. They put love and positivity at the heart of everything they do, centering their work on what's best for each client instead of a "one size fits all" approach.

There's been considerable support from the wider community as well, including a local church which donated a beautiful Christmas tree and a woman who raised funds independently to buy each resident a Christmas gift.

Considering the concerns about Hearthstone's creation, Megan says it was time to try something new and impact those in need. Now over one year after opening, Hearthstone is a concrete example of love and positivity towards marginalized people in Abbotsford. Its success is evident in residents like Chuck, who, with the right support, is safely in a place where he can start again.



HEARTHSTONE PLACE

IS A LOW-BARRIER HOUSING INITIATIVE IN ABBOTSFORD

supporting men and women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Unlike emergency shelters, it provides a stable home and focuses on addressing personal barriers with a goal of reintegration into market housing. Hearthstone is a partnership of the City of Abbotsford, Province of BC and Abbotsford Community Services and has been in operation since March 1, 2017.



HEVIN'S STORY

A TALE OF PERSEVERANCE

**Hevin and some of her family members*

In less than two years, Hevin has made great strides. From a young refugee starting school in a new country and a new language to a dedicated student receiving a major Award of Excellence at her Abbotsford secondary school, she's risen above the challenges life has handed her.

Hevin is the latest recipient of the Tanya Colthorpe Memorial Award, which is presented to local students who have overcome significant adversity and shown strength, perseverance and a positive attitude.

Hevin's story of perseverance began in Syria back in 2012. At just 12 years old, government tanks rolled into her city and the troops ordered everyone to leave immediately. Hevin personally witnessed them firing indiscriminately as she fled with her family. With only the belongings they could carry, they escaped to their farm in another city.

They were safe for only six months before the violence followed. They then fled to a one-room house in a small Kurdish village where the family of eight stayed with relatives. Four months later, when ISIS took over their town, they decided to escape to Turkey.

Hevin still recalls how helpless they felt. "The government and ISIS both say ... 'we are fighting for you'...but we, we are just dying."

They lived in Turkey for two years before the opportunity to move to Canada arose. At first, Hevin's father refused, worried that it was a scam. He had heard of other refugees who had been ripped off or even killed by people taking advantage of their precarious situation.

After being reassured, they decided to accept the opportunity and travel to Canada, a place they knew virtually nothing about. Although it meant leaving a more familiar country and their extended families, they wanted greater security and opportunity for the future. Hevin's youngest brother also required specialized medical care that was not available to them in Turkey.

When the family of government-sponsored refugees arrived at Vancouver International Airport in 2016, they were greeted by settlement workers from Abbotsford Community Services (ACS). For the first few months, the eight of them lived in a hotel room; they were crowded and in unfamiliar territory, but safe.



**Hevin's little brother*

The settlement workers helped them find affordable local housing and get established, filling out paperwork, showing them around Abbotsford and connecting them with English language classes and other resources.

At first, Hevin missed her friends and family. She found it difficult not to dwell on everything that had happened back home in Syria. Having arrived in winter, she also found the snow and cold challenging to get used to, despite assurances that it would soon melt and reveal Canada's beauty.

Gradually she settled into her new life and shares that, "with so many people loving us, everyone supporting us without racism, it made my thinking change."

After spending six months learning English through a school program, Hevin officially began grade 11 in 2017. Every day after school, the ACS Moving Ahead Program (MAP) picked Hevin and her siblings up so they could attend the homework club, play sports, make crafts and go on field trips. Through MAP, Syrian students like Hevin have the chance to connect with others who share their experiences and meet other young newcomers from around the world.

“ I JUST WANT TO
THANK CANADA A LOT
FOR THE CHANCE TO
COME HERE.”

For Hevin, a highlight of the year was being one of four girls in her school chosen to attend Michelle Obama's speaking engagement at the Board of Trade in Vancouver. She returned home inspired by how Obama came from humble beginnings but was able to succeed because of her dedication to education. The speech inspired Hevin to fill a journal with notes, including the quote, "you can do anything you want to do." It's a message she has taken to heart.

Due to the turmoil of life in Syria and Turkey, Hevin hadn't been to school in almost four years. She felt stuck and unable to plan ahead. Now that she has returned to school and been reminded what she's capable of, she plans to become a pharmacist. Despite considerable challenges, she has completed Grade 11 and is on track to graduate in 2019.



**Award winning student Hevin*

Hevin's school recognized her efforts with that Award of Excellence back in June. Discovering she'd been recognized was a considerable honour and surprise to Hevin, who "never thought the school would give an award to someone like me." Her teachers describe her as a hard worker, focused, kind, genuine and open to new ideas.

During the summer before Grade 12, Hevin found a full-time job on a farm, fulfilling orders for large grocery stores. She works long hours but is happy to be earning money. She is saving up for university but like many teenage girls sets a little aside for small luxuries like make-up. When she heads back to school in September, she plans to find a retail job that will better suit her schedule.

While she doesn't like to dwell on the past, Hevin does "want to share it with people. We want all to know what we lived, but we are still strong."

When asked if there is anything else she wants to share, she says, "I just want to thank Canada a lot for the chance to come here. Before we were dead, now we're alive again." She feels appreciated, valued and empowered to follow her dreams.



DANIEL'S STORY

BREAKING THE CYCLE

Abused, addicted, abandoned. Daniel's young life has been full of challenges, though you wouldn't know it immediately by looking at his cheerful smile.

As a child, he experienced physical abuse at the hands of his father. When he began to fear for his life, he persuaded a school guidance counsellor to place him in a foster home. While in care he fought, got high and sold drugs and guns. In hindsight, he now realizes he was "mirroring the abuse I experienced at home." He bounced around in 17 different foster and group homes before leaving to live with a drug-dealing "friend" who eventually stabbed him when he contemplated leaving the criminal lifestyle.

It took an overdose at Mill Lake before life began to change for the better. Concerned he was going to die, family from across Canada gathered to see him. As he recovered, his father took him to Alberta to help him get clean, but due to their volatile relationship that didn't last long. Still just in his teens, Daniel worked in a bar and as a gravedigger in their rural hamlet until the cousins he was staying with decided to move to B.C.

FROM OVERDOSE TO DAD

Back in Abbotsford, Daniel was still in the early stages of recovery. A young woman he had a relationship with told him he was the father of her baby, and he says he always knew he'd straighten his life out once he had a child. Despite eventually learning the baby wasn't his, he managed to stay clean. He got a job, moved in with friends, began a new relationship and soon found out he was actually going to be a dad.

With the birth of his daughter fast approaching and the

knowledge that social services would be involved from the start, Daniel started doing everything he could to become her primary caregiver. He connected with Abbotsford Community Services and took advantage of multiple opportunities to improve his ability to parent.

From attending the Abby Dads program twice a week to the Parent Project, Triple P Parenting and Nobody's Perfect classes, if there was a course or service he could access, Daniel was there. He also took anger management, food skills classes and saw a drug counsellor.

Daniel's infant daughter stayed with him for some time, but personal challenges brought her temporarily back into foster care. What some people may have seen as a setback, the ever-resilient Daniel took as just another opportunity for self-improvement. He immediately began attending more parenting programs, started seeing an attachment specialist and continued working on completing secondary school.

“IF THERE WAS A SERVICE OR COURSE HE COULD ACCESS, DANIEL WAS THERE.”

DANIEL'S NEW BEGINNING

Daniel graduated from secondary school in 2018 through the New Beginnings Young Parent program. He's been accepted into the welding program at UFV and is close to having his daughter living with him full-time. His approach to life and ability to connect with other young dads even led to him become a school speaker warning about the realities of teen pregnancy and parenting through the Community Education about Adolescent Sexuality (CEAS) program.

As the first male in his family to graduate, Daniel is focused. He wants to improve the quality of life for himself and his daughter, ensuring they both have brighter futures. While he readily admits he wasn't a nice person in the past, today he's proud of who he is and the work he's done. "I moved from intimidation to communication," he says.

Daniel wants to be an example to other young dads and dads-to-be, especially those who are struggling as he has. He acknowledges that dealing with life's challenges is difficult, but wants to focus on what's next.

Daniel encourages other fathers to start by trying drop-in programs like Abby Dads' Dad Chat. While everyone is allowed to complain about tough situations, participants are then encouraged to figure out what they can personally do to improve the situation. The dads ask hard questions, talk through their troubles and identify how to move forward in life.

When you learn you're going to be a young father, "it's not over!" insists Daniel. "The first step (towards happiness and positive parenting) is getting the help you need." "You're not alone," he insists. "Come to Dad Chat."



**Daniel's graduation photo*

“ I’VE MOVED FROM INTIMIDATION TO COMMUNICATION.”



**Abby Dads program supervisor Reg Unrau and Daniel*



CLAUDIA'S STORY

FROM A MEXICAN CIRCUS TO LIVING IN CANADA

Claudia's life has been full of challenges. At age 12 she was kicked out of her home in Mexico and lived on the streets for over a year before finding a welcoming family in a traveling circus. At the circus, Claudia did everything from selling popcorn and cleaning trailers to making costumes and juggling rings.

During her time traveling with the circus she had her first son before eventually meeting a Canadian man who would become her husband.

LEAVING THE CIRCUS

Though the pull to stay with her circus family and return to Mexico was strong, Claudia wanted a better life for her young son. She knew that in Canada he would have more access to healthcare, education and opportunities for the future.

In 2005, after settling into her new life in Canada, Claudia had her second baby. She was doing seasonal work in plant nurseries and dreaming of starting her own cleaning business, but unfortunately she was about to hit a few bumps in the road.

Claudia and her husband separated, but for the boys' sake continued living together as a family in the same home. When her ex-husband decided to sell the home where they were raising their family in, Claudia and the boys were suddenly left with nowhere to go.

ON HER OWN AGAIN

As a single mother of two, Claudia barely scraped by on a combination of seasonal work, Employment Insurance and income assistance. Despite the busyness of raising her two sons, working, learning English and losing her marriage, she still managed to become a Canadian citizen and put what she could on the table each night for her family. However, it was never quite enough and times were getting tougher.

In early 2015, Claudia's friend convinced her to go to the Abbotsford Community Services Food Bank and seek help. She felt shy at first and it took time for her to work up the courage to go, but when she did, her life began to change.

"They were so nice and welcoming," Claudia said. The Food Bank staff helped ensure that she and her sons had enough nutritious food to eat, and during better economic times, she in turn helped Mexican migrants who worked locally but didn't always have enough for themselves.

“IT'S GREAT TO COME HERE IF YOU NEED HELP... COME HERE WITH DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE.”

COME WITH A DREAM

Through the support of the Food Bank, Claudia also started to gain self-confidence. “I realized I could do better.”

Nick Johnson, the Food Bank supervisor, has been especially helpful. He has assisted her with completing paperwork for things like the BC Housing subsidy and researching scholarships and bursaries that would cover skills training.

“I didn’t do much school,” explains Claudia, noting the young age at which she left home and joined the circus in Mexico. But today, with the help of the Food Bank she’s completed certifications for Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHIMIS) and industrial janitorial training. Her hard work helped her gain a full time job in a large nursery, where she earns more than minimum wage. She is still thinking of starting her own cleaning business, and has been able to start helping others.

An accomplished singer, Claudia often performs with bands at fundraisers. Recently she helped raise money for the victims of earthquakes in Mexico and Guatemala. She has also volunteered at Menno Home here in Abbotsford.

“People are embarrassed to come to the Food Bank, but it’s great to come here if you need help. Don’t be embarrassed,” she emphasizes, “but come here with dreams for the future. Don’t get stuck.”

“I knew my potential. God knew I could do better,” Claudia says. And with a combination of self-motivation and help when she needed it, she has hope for an even brighter future.



**Claudia’s circus days*

“THEY WERE SO NICE AND WELCOMING.”



** Claudia at the Food Bank*



New Beginnings Graduates



Foundry Grand Opening



Community Builders' Awards



Recycling Mind Grind



Settlement Workers



India2Canada Team

A YEAR AT

ABBOTSFORD COMMUNITY SERVICES

Crossing Guard Program

Abby Dads



Multicultural Picnic



Team Depot Volunteers



Stop Exploiting Youth Rally



LINC Staff



Golf Tournament



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We Are Abbotsford



Seniors' Christmas Luncheon



Foundry Grand Opening



EPIC's Car Wash



Staff Recognition (5 years)



Multicultural Picnic



Golf Tournament



Angel Tree at Prospera



Fraser Valley Career Conference



Inclusive Employer Awards



OAT Clinic



JCI graduation



Family Centre



Toys for Tots



Garden Project



Best for Babies



Cultural Diversity Awards



Staff Recognition (10 Years)



ELL graduation



Abby Dads



International Women's Day



NICHOLAS' STORY

SAYING YES TO A GREAT OPPORTUNITY

Twelve-year-old Nicholas was bright – and bored. Despite his abilities, the nature of an average school day at Abbotsford Middle School just wasn't working for him. His Vice Principal, Ian Levings, saw Nicholas' potential and connected him with the Youth Education Support (YES) program at Abbotsford Community Services (ACS) in 2011.

The YES program, a part of the Youth Resource Centre (YRC), is designed for youth who have social or academic challenges in the standard school setting and lack positive support at home. Students get matched with youth workers who are trained to offer the support and guidance that will help them achieve their goals and have a more positive school experience.

Nicholas spent most of his program time with Carmen Machado, a youth and family worker at the YRC. At the beginning, he would refuse to come out of his house or talk, but gradually Carmen's continued presence convinced him to open up. Throughout middle and high school, they'd meet weekly at school to do things like chat and play cards, including games that Nicholas invented.

As their relationship grew, Nicholas found he had someone to rely on, who understood him and wanted him to succeed. Together, they identified his three goals:

NICHOLAS' GOALS

- **Phat Stacks:** Getting a job was hugely important to Nicholas in order to “make phat stacks.” He soon made that a reality with a job at a gas station and then in the construction industry. Although he's no longer at either job, his former employer still boasts about his performance and reliability to this day.

- **Getting Buff:**

Nicholas was the type of kid who managed to talk the school into letting him postpone attending gym class until right before he graduated. However, the desire to work on his health was there. With Carmen's encouragement, Nicholas found a workout buddy and went to the gym every single day for a year, enforcing “getting buff” as a regular part of his life.

- **Sick Ride:** Nicholas was also eager to get his own car and have freedom and independence while going to school, work or out with friends. Because he achieved his goal of getting a job, soon he was also able to buy his first vehicle.

“IT MAY NOT SEEM LIKE MUCH BUT THAT EXTRA PUSH HELPS A LOT.”

Nicholas worked diligently to achieve his goals with Carmen's support. His grades and attendance at school improved and his efforts were rewarded with fun YES program group activities like cooking classes, jamming sessions and trips to the waterslides and PNE – chances he likely wouldn't have had otherwise.

The social aspects of the program also proved hugely beneficial for Nicholas. Though he'd struggled to make friends in the classroom, he was better able to relate to others at the YRC. He still stays in touch with many of these friends today and he was able to improve his relationships with his older siblings.

Nineteen-year-old Nicholas is now achieving his professional goals towards a fulfilling and rewarding career. He graduated from secondary school in 2016 and recently completed a diploma in graphic and digital design from the University of the Fraser Valley. Nicholas is the first YES program youth to graduate from post-secondary school.

Carmen's delight in Nicholas' success is clear. Despite lacking familial and financial support, he took advantage of the opportunity the YES program offered him, finding personal success and developing character and skills that will serve him well as an adult.

Nicholas has a word of advice for youth who have the opportunity to take part: just do it! "It may not seem like much but that extra push helps a lot."

While he had been connected to other youth programs in our community, the thing that made the difference for him was how the YES program tailored the support to his needs.

Nicholas is emphatic that without the support of Carmen and the YES program, he wouldn't have become more confident socially or felt able to step out of his comfort zone and try new things. The boost to his self-esteem was huge, and today he has a positive attitude and looks forward to what the future holds.



**Nicholas and youth worker Carmen Machado*



NYACHOL'S STORY

FROM CHILD IN CARE TO YOUTH WORKER

Nyachol Solomon knows all too well some of the challenges facing the youth she now works with at Abbotsford Community Services (ACS). From her experiences as an immigrant with learning challenges, to being a child in care and battling substance use, she's lived through it all.

Now a Peer Support Worker, Nyachol relies on her background to connect with youth and help them access the resources they need to meet them where they are.

When Nyachol was 8 years old, she moved to Abbotsford from war-torn Sudan with her dad and siblings. While grateful for a fresh start in Canada, she battled loneliness, learning disabilities and the challenges of learning English before dropping out of school in grade nine.

Her dad traveled a lot and eventually Nyachol was surrendered into care at age 16. When he returned to Sudan, she found herself alone in Abbotsford, feeling like nobody cared. Nyachol struggled with substance use and thought everyone was out to get her. The next few years held numerous foster homes and multiple different youth workers before she eventually connected with one who felt like a friend.

One day Nyachol woke up and thought, "I'm ready; I need to be something."

She turned to The Warm Zone, an emergency drop-in centre for women, for help with the support of her youth worker. Her partner, who had previously battled with substance use, also encouraged her as she entered treatment and began to identify what kind of life she wanted. She decided "that it wasn't going to be my life anymore." No longer would she let her past determine her future.

After completing treatment for substance use, Nyachol was ready to pursue the goals she had identified with her youth worker from ACS. She started attending the Bakerview Centre for Learning and working on her high school diploma.

When she became pregnant with her first child, she switched to New Beginnings, a program operated by ACS in partnership with Abbotsford School District, so she could balance her goal of graduating from secondary school with her responsibilities as a young mom.

She also accessed another ACS program, Best for Babies, which offered crucial support for a healthy pregnancy. Through Best for Babies, Nyachol was able to access educational resources for new parents, receive prenatal vitamins and food vouchers, participate in maternity and baby clothes exchanges and gain referrals for other community resources.

“WHATEVER YOUR PAST HAS BEEN, YOU HAVE A SPOTLESS FUTURE.”

- MELANIE GUSTAFSON

“WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN WILL KEEP YOU GOING.”

After graduating high school, Nyachol's experiences as a youth in care led her to pursue a career helping other young people. Back when she was a teen, she wasn't aware of all the resources available to her. Now she's determined to make sure that others don't miss out on opportunities as she "walks with youth" who are experiencing challenges.

Nyachol first began working with the Housing, Employment and Community Connections program at ACS. She helped raise awareness of where youth at risk could turn to if they needed help finding jobs or housing, and promoted AbbotsfordWORKS workshops which teach skills like resume writing.

“I ALWAYS THOUGHT ONE DAY I'D WORK AT ACS.”

Now 26 years old, Nyachol is a busy mother of two. She has progressed from accessing the multiple programs which gave her much-needed support to working for Foundry, an integrated health and social services centre for youth. ACS is the lead agency of Foundry Abbotsford along with 15 other services.

At Foundry, her role includes encouraging young people to access the many programs the community offers, whether they need help with substance abuse issues, housing, life skills or employability. She also co-facilitates the popular Life Chats for youth and young adults currently or formerly in care, and the Youth and Family Inclusions group.

Nyachol is preparing to attend the University of the Fraser Valley to further her education. She encourages the youth she supports to never give up. She believes that if youth are given more opportunities they'll be better able to stay off the street and less likely to engage in risky behaviours. As she reflects on her journey, she smiles as she says "I feel like my life is complete."



**Nyachol and her daughter*



**Foundry staff Leah Froese, Jenni Johnson,
Nyachol Solomon and Simone Maassen*



LESLIE'S STORY: ADJUSTING TO A NEW REALITY

Until 2014, Leslie was a busy fisherman and painter in the northern BC community of Prince Rupert. He was often found on one of his boats, until an accident changed his life. Suddenly, his profession and even his home were no longer accessible to him, and his small community didn't have the extensive resources he needed.

Learning that the Lower Mainland had more opportunities and resources for disabled people, Leslie relocated to Abbotsford. He connected with Community Living BC, the organization for adults with developmental disabilities, and was referred to the Employing People in Community (EPIC) program at Abbotsford Community Services (ACS).

Going from such physically active jobs, Leslie had a hard time envisioning what kind of job he could get now that he was using a wheelchair and had challenges with verbal communication after his accident.

The team at EPIC were able to support Leslie as he sought new employment and adjusted to his new reality. They assisted with skills training and job opportunities such as wood fabrication, grounds keeping and data entry. EPIC program specialist, Matts Batryn, credits Leslie as being vital to the account setup process for ACS' Community Living Programs, where he did the data entry for 400+ accounts. He also participates in the EPIC fundraiser car wash every summer and for the last three years has worked at the ACS Food Bank, assisting with mail-out campaigns.

“ IN THE BLINK
OF AN EYE, EVERYTHING
WAS DIFFERENT.”

Like many Lower Mainland residents, one aspect of life that Leslie has found challenging is securing affordable and accessible housing. That situation has improved in the last six months, thankfully, since he got a new job at a grocery store. There, Leslie is the lot maintenance worker in charge of collecting garbage and keeping the parking area tidy. Finally finding consistent employment has helped him move into a great home-share.

As Leslie's ability to communicate verbally changed after his accident, the supportive team at EPIC were there to advocate on his behalf. They helped him reach out to prospective employers and assisted through the interview process, ensuring his capability, employability and excellent attention to detail were recognized.

For his part, Leslie says his accident "opened up his eyes more" regarding how people with diverse abilities are perceived in the community. He's grateful for his new community and the friendship he's found through EPIC, a program that truly understands all people are capable of finding meaningful work and playing vital roles in society.

“ HIS ACCIDENT
OPENED UP HIS EYES
MORE REGARDING HOW
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ABILITIES ARE PERCEIVED
IN THE COMMUNITY.”



**Leslie on the job in Aldergrove*

FEATURED VOLUNTEERS



SANDY

Sandy felt called to volunteer, and a church contact put him in touch with ACS' **Medical Transportation** program. To date, he's driven over 100 people to hundreds of appointments throughout the Lower Mainland. "I've made genuine friendships for life through this program," he says.



JOSHLYN

An outstanding volunteer in our **AbbotsfordWORKS** employment office, Joshlyn always has a smile for the clients who come to the resource room. She's especially recognized for her positive attitude and ability to take initiative with projects.



DAWN

Dawn's commitment to the **Community Connections** program is unflinching. Over the last eight years, she's become the "Canadian mum" to her match, Jolin, an immigrant to Canada. Dawn loves to volunteer because it makes her feel useful and valued. She brings incredible energy and enthusiasm to every ACS event she attends.



PATRICIA

Patricia volunteers as a teaching assistant in the **Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)** program. She feels it's important to help people develop the skills that will enable them to integrate easily into life in Abbotsford and carve out great futures for themselves.



DON

A surgeon and GP for 40 years, Don was used to keeping busy. When he retired, he got in touch with ACS and began volunteering as a tutor with the **Access2English** program. Don typically works one-on-one with professionals looking to polish their English for the workplace. “Don’t be scared,” he encourages. It’s clear he finds connecting with English language learners interesting and fun.



SHARON

Sharon, a retired RN, was keen to keep doing something that helped people in the community. These days, she volunteers as a tutor in the **Access2English** program. The students she works with keep her enthusiastic and excited. “When it comes down to it,” Sharon says, “everyone just wants to communicate.”



SIEGLINDE

With a passion for the community and eagerness to share her skills with others, Sieglinde possess a true desire to help people succeed. She’s an exceptional asset to the **Employment Mentors** program, sharing tips on resume development, self-awareness and accessing professional resources for newcomers to Canada



LINDA & DARLENE

Linda and Darlene are regular volunteers for **Meals on Wheels**, delivering food to local people throughout the week. They bring smiles to each of their clients, such as Lorna.



BERNICE

Bernice is one of the many amazing volunteers that make the ACS **Food Bank** tick. Her story is one that inspires and motivates us forward. “Many years ago I had to use the food bank, and I now found the opportunity to give back. It’s a great group of people to work with and you get a good feeling helping others.”



ABBOTSFORDWORKS

THREE EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS STORIES

JOHN'S STORY

HEAVY EQUIPMENT OPERATOR

John* was nine-years-old when he first used hard drugs and started his decades-long struggle with addiction. 'Shooting up' was a way to deal with his horrific childhood, which included sexual abuse by his father. He ran away at age 11 and after trying to shoot his father at age 13, he cut off contact.

He first began "pulling wrenches" as a teenager and eventually became a mechanic. He married young and life was good for a bit, although he still struggled with addiction.

At 25, John suffered a brain aneurysm and in his words, "became crazy." He didn't care about anything or anyone and didn't think that anyone cared about him. When he inherited \$750,000, he invested the majority into cocaine and became a high-level drug dealer. The law caught up with him eventually and he spent seven years in jail for drug and weapons charges.

When he was released, he admits that he didn't want sobriety enough to stick to it and he went in and out of treatment. Finally, after overdosing three times in one night, he realized he had to make a change if he wanted to survive. With the support of his current wife, John entered an addictions treatment facility. Now in his early 50's, he's realized he is done with that lifestyle of "drugs, guns and women."

In addition to addictions counselling and trauma therapy, the treatment facility offered an employment readiness program in

collaboration with AbbotsfordWORKS. The clients work on their goals, make vision boards and take part in personalized workshops like Aboriginal Teaching.

John was ready for a career change and as automotive technology had advanced, the industry was no longer familiar to him. Based on a friend's recommendation and a transferable skills workshop, he decided to become a heavy equipment operator. John's caseworker then identified several avenues of financial support for the Heavy Equipment Operator course, including the Métis Nation British Columbia and Employment Insurance.

His mechanical background is helpful as he is learning how to operate machinery like excavators. Although considered a tough course, he was able to get 90% on his first exam. He enjoys being outside and being able to see what he is accomplishing. He is gaining certifications and learning patience as he follows the motto of "go low and slow."

To maintain his sobriety, John attends AA meetings every couple of days, has a sponsor and avoids unhealthy environments. Once he finishes his training, he is determined to find a job that will support him and his wife and allow him to start saving for retirement.

At his treatment program's graduation, his friends, family and the staff overwhelmed him with positive support and kind words. John finally feels like there are people who care for him and he's on the path to sustainable employment.

**Real name withheld*



** Amandeep and her daughter*



** Elizabeth and her daughter at graduation*

AMANDEEP'S STORY

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR

Before immigrating to Canada in 2012, Amandeep had worked as an elementary school teacher in India. Despite having a master's degree in English, she found it difficult to find a suitable job here since her teaching credentials were not transferrable. She ended up working long, seasonal hours in a greenhouse and in retail, becoming depressed and thinking, "why did I come here, to work this kind of job?"

Since Amandeep's husband was unwilling to help her upgrade her education and she had a young daughter to care for, she couldn't see a way out of her situation until an ACS settlement worker told her about AbbotsfordWORKS.

After assessing Amandeep's strengths and interests, her employment counsellor recommended she become an Early Childhood Educator (ECE) as it would pair her love of children with her teaching experience.

Amandeep received assistance with her tuition, book costs, daycare fees and transportation. Within a year of contacting AbbotsfordWORKS, she graduated with an Honors ECE Certificate from a private college. Her husband is now "so proud" of her accomplishment and realized he made a mistake by not supporting her initially. She even had a job lined up with a local preschool before she graduated, and is now working there full-time. Amandeep says, "I can't even explain how happy I am. My insides are happy."

ELIZABETH'S STORY

HEALTH CARE AID

Elizabeth was always on the "lucky end" of lay-offs until that luck ran out in 2017. While she enjoyed her work at production companies the industry wasn't always stable and didn't provide additional training or opportunities for advancement.

As a single mother in her 40's, she didn't know how it would be possible to "pay my bills and support my child" if she went back to school. She also had the responsibility of caring for ailing father until his death in 2010. Through that difficult time, she discovered how much she enjoyed helping people and thought about becoming a health care aide, but without the financial resources to go to school she stayed in the production industry.

After being laid off, she decided to see if AbbotsfordWORKS could help her with a loan for school. She was pleasantly surprised to find that she qualified for financial assistance with tuition, supplies, transportation and even living support. She appreciated how her case manager "held her hand" as they filled out the applications, researched the labour market and conducted informational interviews with other health care aides.

Feeling confident in her decision, she started college in October 2017. By the time she graduated in June 2018, she had secured a job at the assisted living facility where she did her preceptorship. She finds her new career really rewarding and "loves helping the residents and being able to put smiles on their faces."



HARLEY'S STORY

SEEKING A NEW IDENTITY IN MUSIC

Harley loves performing hip-hop on stage. But there is one song that he can't bring himself to perform in public. While he can sometimes write and record a song in less than half an hour, this particular song took months to write and record. Once recorded, he waited a few more months to upload it to YouTube and never promoted it.

The song, "My Story" details his troubled past. In the beginning he raps,

"lost my dad, a part of that was mom was going broken and in and out treatment made Harley mad."

With those four verses, Harley manages to sum up his early teenage years. His father, with whom he had been close with, committed suicide when Harley was only 11. The family instantly struggled financially. His mom, who hadn't worked previously, now had to find a way to provide for her three children. Between losing her husband and now being the sole provider, she found it very challenging.

"The struggles were difficult for me. Very soon after my husband died, I developed anorexia. The anorexia, three years ago, led me to a drug addiction for two years. My son didn't have much of a chance."

By the age of 14, Harley's anger had resulted in assault and theft charges, dropping out of middle school, and taking hard drugs. He ran with a rough crowd who convinced him to sell drugs for local gangs. In 2012, during a deal gone wrong he was stabbed in the wrist.

"I was someone who didn't care about the rules," reflects Harley, "I just thought it was normal."

While completing 125 hours of court-ordered community service in 2013 he became connected with a youth worker from Abbotsford Community Services. He was one of the first youth referred to the In It Together (IIT) program which helps youth avoid gangs and helps them leave when they're ready. IIT provides individual support, educational resources, counselling and parenting classes.

It took a while but after his youth worker, Josh Bailey, kept showing up consistently and whenever needed, Harley began to trust him. "It feels like family here, which was very new."

“ IT FEELS LIKE FAMILY HERE.”

It helped that Bailey was also First Nations and someone he could identify with. They bonded over fast-food meals and Bailey taught him the traditional sport of lacrosse.

Harley began to realize there was another path his life could take if he could control his emotions and hold himself accountable for his actions.

A line in "My Story" references his mom, "now I can see she has a weakness." He came to understand that while he couldn't change his family or background, he could understand their

struggles. His mom eventually connected with the ACS Addictions Centre who helped her get into a treatment facility. She has now been clean for one year and is grateful to the program for stepping in while the family struggled. As she puts it, “they gave him dreams when he had no reason to dream.”

Through all the tough times, Harley had one bright spot in his life, a talent for song-writing. He had been writing lyrics for two years but never had the opportunity to record anything. When his youth worker learned about his talent, he connected him with a music counsellor. “We got really close,” Harley says about Rob Taylor. After Taylor taught Harley how to record and mix music, he began spending almost every day working with IIT’s recording equipment.

He was eventually able to pass on his knowledge to other youth in the program. If he noticed someone having a bad day, he would encourage them to come hang out in the recording area and let out their frustrations.

Not only did music help keep him away from the gang life; it helped Harley begin to see himself as a musician rather than a criminal.

Harley gives “200%” credit to the program for helping him turn his life around. “If I wasn’t in the program, I would have ended up doing something really wrong. I would have probably been dead or in jail. This program totally changed me and made me actually find control of my happiness.”

“I can definitely say that if this program has helped me as much as it has, it can definitely help any other youth.”

When asked if he had any advice for other youth in similar situations, he cautioned, “There is so much more to, actually, this life than doing that kind of stuff. I found a passion and I’ve gone pretty far with my passion already.”

In the summer of 2018, 19-year-old Harley toured with a group of other artists and performed in 18 shows in 30 days. “Like, it’s going crazy right now,” he says with a smile.

After releasing his first album in August, his dream is to hit the road again as soon as possible.

“My Story” ends with the verses,

**“it’s crazy how my life turned to this page
after childhood was f***** up
but that’s just one chapter
what happens in the end
is what I realize matters.”**



**Recording music at IIT*

“ I CAN DEFINITELY SAY THAT IF THIS PROGRAM HAS HELPED ME AS MUCH AS IT HAS, IT CAN DEFINITELY HELP ANY OTHER YOUTH.”



**Harley with IIT Coordinator
Alison Guttrath*



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