

Sexual Awareness for Everyone in Revelstoke (SAFER)

It was just over 10 years ago when teens in Revelstoke spoke out. In both a community-wide health assessment (1998) and CBT's Youth Feasibility Study (1999), teens self identified the need for accessible, confidential information about their sexual health. Vivian Mitchell heard what the kids had to say, "Having been a public health nurse, I'd been doing a lot of teaching in the schools. The teens wanted education, they wanted to learn about things, they wanted to be able to take care of themselves." The goal was to establish a health clinic for youth.



Statistics backed up the need – the number adolescent pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections had remained fairly constant for years. In May 2000, public health nurses put together a proposal to the Planned Parenthood Association of BC (now Options for Sexual Health). The application was backed with over 20 letters of support from a variety of community organizations including the city. A powerful letter came from seven teenage women stating, "We would like a clinic to support us and help us make life altering and responsible decisions about sex and pregnancy. We need a place where we are not afraid to express our fears and concerns."

The Planned Parenthood Association approved the proposal and community partners came together to make it happen. Seed money came from the CBT and Planned Parenthood, Family and Youth Resources (FAYR) acted as the host agency, and the health unit provided space. Volunteers were recruited and trained. The clinic opened November 22, 2000 with two nurses, a physician, and 4 or 5 volunteers serving 5 clients. And by 2004 the teen pregnancy rate and incidence of Chlamydia infection in Revelstoke had been cut in half.

This month marks the 10th anniversary of the SAFER clinic in Revelstoke. They've had a few bumps over the years, the most challenging being in 2003 when the public health unit moved up to the hospital. They knew the teens would stop coming. Community Connections stepped up to the plate and to this day offers use of their space at no cost to the clinic. Time and again community partners have provided support, "All we had to do was ask", Vivian emphasizes, "It's been the key to success." Among many others, the CBT, Community Foundation and Hospital Auxiliary have continued to provide support over the years.

But at the heart of the SAFER clinic are the volunteers. Students from RSS have been involved from the beginning and Revelstoke's clinic has been recognized as one of the first clinics in BC to involve youth. Katie Lafreniere is a 16 year-old student at RSS and has volunteered at the clinic for nearly 2 years. Katie meets and greets clients, assists with paperwork and filing, as well as other duties. Katie's involvement started with her friend Megan Phelps, who volunteered during her senior years at RSS before leaving for university. "I have learned a lot, I'm constantly reading, and I'm doing something that means a lot to me. I definitely like this place!" Katie is there nearly every Wednesday night and has become a comfortable, familiar face to the other teens. They know everything is strictly confidential.

While Katie is at the beginning of her working life, Vivian Mitchell is at the other end, having been retired for a number of years. However, her work at the SAFER clinic has always been volunteer and she has been there since the beginning as chair of the board. For Vivian it is a passion. In 2004, Vivian was awarded the Dorothy Shaw Award for inspirational volunteer leadership, and recently, along with Vice-Chair Nelli Richardson, was honored for 10 years of volunteer service by Option for Sexual Health BC.

But during our conversation, Vivian keeps steering the conversation away from herself. She names others – Pat Punt, who recently left Revelstoke, was a secretary of the board for 9 years. Christine Parsons is a new volunteer on both the board and at the clinic and Melanie Jenson is a new enthusiastic volunteer at the clinic. Karen Molder volunteered for over a year before she was hired as clinic coordinator in 2007.

For Nelli Richardson, volunteering for SAFER was a natural extension of working with young people at the (former) career centre and as a school board trustee. Nelli learned that some teens were going out of town for medical care and sexual advice so they didn't have to see their family doctor. Teens needed a place to go closer to home.

Roberta Skalicky has been with the board for 9 years and her skill as treasurer is essential. "I've always done volunteer work and I was working at the health unit at the time, so it was a good fit". Deb Anderson describes herself as a 'career volunteer'. But Vivian emphasizes how important it has been to have a direct link between the SAFER clinic and Community Connections. Deb, who is the executive administrator for Community Connections, has been that vital connection for nearly 5 years. Lorrie Rogers also has a long history with the SAFER clinic, and was a youth worker for FAYR and ran a girls group at the time of its inception.

The thread that binds all these women together is direct experience working with youth and a desire to support sexual health education in Revelstoke. Currently, a driving goal for the board is to once again have a trained Sexual Health Educator in town to support education in both schools and the community.

The SAFER clinic is not just for teens. It is a drop-in clinic (Wednesdays from 7 to 9 pm at Community Connections) that offers sexual health counselling, affordable contraception, and testing. Community outreach and awareness has included a Valentine's Day booth at Out-of-Bounds night club and sexual health promotion at the Glacier Challenge ball tournament.

We're walking out the door when Vivian exclaims how great Revelstoke is, "There are a lot of amazing people in this town that do a lot of amazing work for the community". Well, Vivian and the other SAFER volunteers are definitely in this category! The clinic is always open to new volunteers – both for its Board of Directors as well as the clinic itself. For more information on volunteering at the SAFER clinic, contact Vivian Mitchell at 250-837-4915.