

LIFESTYLE

In it to WIN it

Local non-profit Women in Need is helping women in Victoria in a variety of areas

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"There is a change coming in the lives of girls and women. But it is up to us to make it come."

-Alice Munro

Need an inexpensive but brand-new Crooks and Castles jacket? A cityscape patterned vintage tie? Maybe a toaster? If you're a low budget, consumerism-conscious, environmentally-friendly fashionista (or any of the above), who a) is passionate about non-profit organizations and social change, and/or b) wishes there was a way to purchase nice things without contributing to mass global waste and feeding the jaws of greedy corporations, then let me introduce you to Women in Need.

The Women in Need Community Cooperative (WIN) is a non-profit organization that provides support for women in Victoria who are in the process of leaving abusive relationships and starting fresh.

This could mean support with finances, housing, legal costs, childcare, counseling, and referrals to other resources. WIN also offers education and employment opportunities.

Here's how it works: people like you and me donate clothing, furniture, cookware, books, toys, art, or basically any household item in good condition. WIN sorts it at the donation centre and issues it to one of their four resale locations in Victoria. Then, you and I meander in to buy a jacket or tie or toaster, and the money we pay goes directly towards sustaining the organization and funding their five main programs.

These programs are designed to meet women at whatever stage they're at:

The Gift Certificate program supports over 400 women per year by providing them with prepaid certificates to use in the resale stores to buy essential items for their children and families.

The Self Sufficiency Program is a bursary that supplies applicants with funding to pursue further education or training, giving them the opportunity for a sustainable career.

The Transformations Program is an intensive educational period for participants to learn communication skills and reassess and grow their relationship and behavioral patterns and skills.

The Crisis and Referral program puts participants in touch with a number of resources that best suit their needs.

Finally, the New Start Program supplies participants with the basic essentials to set up a new home for themselves and their children. This is one of the most unique programs offered by WIN. Much of the organization's donated furniture doesn't make it to resale but is used instead to furnish apartments for women who are moving out of a transition house as they begin to reintegrate into an abuse-free life.

I met with Mabel Marin, WIN's Marketing and Communications Coordinator, to talk about the organization and their New Start Program specifically.

We spent a few moments marveling at the diverse range of unique needs that WIN fills in the community and admiring each other's cute blouses — both purchased from the largest WIN

resale location on Pandora Avenue — but when we started talking details, the conversation took a serious turn.

"If they are leaving a transition house and need to start all over again, they've usually left everything behind," Marin says about the program's participants. "In most cases, these women don't have anything."

Much of what they don't have, the New Start Program can provide. Furniture, pots, pans, utensils, beds, linens, loveseats, side tables, lamps

careful in colour-matching everything and making sure that everything is beautiful and in great condition, that the families that are getting it are going to be happy," she said. "This sense of ownership and feeling that they belong to a community again is important."

On top of ongoing communication with transition houses, management of the stores, and facilitation of the four other programs, WIN aims to complete two New Start projects per week: a rattling statistic.

Marin noted, however, that although WIN "[supports] the journey of this many women leaving abusive relationships ... this is only a small proportion of the number of women still living in abusive relationships in Victoria."

WIN's compassion and change-making attitude has earned the organization recognition in more areas than human relations. In 2012, the Capital Regional District awarded them an EcoStar award for their environmental responsibility initiatives, due to their success in reducing the organization's annual waste by 49 per cent and carbon footprint by 51 per cent.

Environmental sustainability is one of WIN's core values, as is economic sustainability in the form of self-sufficiency.

98 per cent of WIN's financing is generated through sales in their stores. Approximately two per cent comes from monetary donations from the public and sometimes other businesses, but it is in no way funded

by the government. WIN believes their mission to empower women to be self-sufficient must begin with a self-sufficient organization.

WIN has the income to sustain the employment of around 50 staff members, but relies heavily on volunteers (50 to 70 per month) to fill necessary spaces.

"Volunteers help us to do a lot," said Marin. "From helping on the sales floor to assisting in the warehouse, tagging products, organizing."

WIN couldn't operate without them.

"For every person, there is a volunteer opportunity." Marin continued. "If the person is shy and wants to help behind the scenes, there is an opportunity. If the person wants to work with the public, there is an opportunity for that as well."

In lieu of a final pitch or sell, Marin had only gratitude:

"We thank the community a lot because without the donations of course none of this would be possible. We wouldn't be able to provide five programs to women in need if the community didn't donate. So thank you to the community for donating and supporting us and for all the shoppers who shop at WIN to support the cause with us and for empowering women with us."

For more information about the organization and how to get involved, visit <http://www.womeninneed.ca/>

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— everything. Over the past twenty-five years, WIN has provided over 1 500 women with the items they need to start fresh in a new home.

Marin emphasized the great care that goes into selecting furnishings that will create a home that the participants can be proud of.

"[The employee] tries to be very

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