

## **Section F. 3. Lessons Learned from the Be the Peace Project**

The "Lessons Learned" below are based on our own growth and understanding, as well as from themes derived from "Deep Dialogue Interviews" designed to engage interviewees in deep reflection about the impact of the project on individuals, their personal outlooks, their approach to their work, their organizations and the broader community.

### **A Deeper Understanding of the Issue**

- As we moved through the project, a deepening understanding of the complexity of VAW and of the social and cultural systems that perpetuate it has allowed us to understand that direct experiences of violence are inseparable from the social/cultural and structural violence at its roots. The stories of survivors are the stories of the marginalized and the voiceless, the result of patriarchal systems across the world that institutionalize gender inequity. We understand that colonialism in Canada as a by-product of patriarchy, has resulted in a culture in which persons who are white, male and heterosexual are perceived to be more valuable, allowing all others to become vulnerable to racism, violence, poverty and gender discrimination.
- We are outraged and deeply saddened by the tragedy of missing and murdered aboriginal women, the violence that is perpetrated against members of the African Nova Scotian community, the LGBTQ+ community and those who are disabled. We have come to understand that an effective social change initiative to end VAW mirrors the process by which individual survivors heal from the violence that has been perpetrated against them - recognizing violence for what it is, bringing it out of secrecy and hiding by acknowledging that it exists, building and maintaining supportive networks, nurturing healthy, equitable relationships, gathering the courage to speak truth to those in power, developing plans-of-action, making small changes over a long period of time, understanding triggers and set-backs and that the healing journey will not be short or easy, and finally celebrating growth and progress.

### **Lessons Learned about the Social Change Process**

- **The Power of Community**
  - The success of Be the Peace can be attributed in a number of ways to the engagement of the community at the very beginning of the project. A Public Forum attended by 150 people over two and half days became the "lightning rod" for the work by receiving input about priorities for action from diverse perspectives. From the Forum, a community plan was born which established 12 Working Groups. As the project went on, the Working Groups continued when there was energy and commitment to do so. A second Public Forum was held almost a year later to consult with the community about

progress and to engage new people and new ideas. At this forum, the Working Groups became focussed on fewer priority areas, but on the ones identified by the community as the most urgent and the ones projected to have the widest impact. Those areas remained the priorities until the end of the project – truly grassroots!

- As well, a “Strategic Thinkers” Group was convened on three occasions to lend support to “thinking” about direction. This group was comprised of those leaders in the community who offered to think strategically about the scope and the depth of a large social change initiative. They critiqued, confirmed and supported the direction that the work was taking.
  - Working Groups began to meet after the first Public Forum and continued to determine and implement their own direction and action plans. Each group was open to any person who wished to be involved and was self-determining under the coordination and facilitation of Be the Peace Coordinators.
- **The Nurturing of Relationships - Trust, Credibility, Integrity, Respect and Genuine Curiosity**
    - Feedback received from those involved in the project indicates that Be the Peace did things differently when beginning the long and challenging work of building relationships among a large number of organizations. Hundreds of meetings were held to talk about the issue of violence against women, and to understand each organization’s mandate and to gauge openness to becoming involved. Participants report that they appreciated and trusted the ensuing process because they were able to learn to trust and respect each other and the Coordinators of the project. They were hungry for a way to work together and to support each other, and the project offered them that opportunity. What was especially appreciated was the genuine and authentic curiosity with which the Coordinators learned about the scope of each organization. It was noted that Be the Peace came to the table to ask about possibilities, rather than to blame them for their limitations. The result was more understanding, more engagement at a variety of “interagency” tables and more coordination of the response to VAW in our community. However, we faced tensions and challenges in some of the relationships. For example, we underestimated the barriers that we would face with the men’s community. We were unprepared for the communication barriers and the lack of trust that was apparent as the project unfolded. By the end of the project and with the help of the Project Coordinator of an Engaging Men and Boys initiative in a neighbouring part of the province, we were able to repair and replenish some of those relationships. Others, however, still eluded us at the end of the work.
  - **The Welcoming of All and the Enactment of Equity**
    - Many of those involved with the project over the three years were impressed that everyone was welcome at each table (with the exception of “Gather the Men” and “Gather the Women” which were set up to support a gender-specific need). For all the work, there was an attempt to model equity, such that one survivor of relationship violence mentioned that she thought her voice was as valuable as that of one of the

leaders of the local Health District. There was no attempt to regulate the membership of any of the groups. Those who did not feel that it was a good fit for them chose not to become or remain engaged, while still feeling welcomed. The Coordinators acted as convenors and liaisons among the groups.

- We learned that language cannot only be welcoming, but may also be inadvertently exclusionary. For example, one partner stated that sometimes he had “no clue” about what we were talking about. The lesson learned was about the use of terms regularly used in the women’s community that may not be widely understood in the broader community (e.g. feminist theory) and the necessity of ensuring that everyone has a common understanding of terms.

- **The Engagement of the Engaged**

- One of the challenges of any social change project is maintaining engagement over a number of years, even with those who have a vested interest (either personally or professionally) in the work. Those already working in the field or those directly affected by violence may seem interested and excited at the beginning but slip away as the project moves forward. We learned that maintaining interest and commitment lies in the relationships that are formed among the members of a group, that a responsibility to each other and meaningful, interesting, shared work plans are crucial. As the Working Groups became more focussed on tangible outcomes, some chose not to continue their engagement, while others felt a stronger sense of commitment. The opportunity to check in with each other at the beginning of every meeting, and the willingness to learn from each other were powerful components to ensure engagement. Flexibility with meeting times and locations to accommodate work schedules supported engagement as well.
- As the project progressed, it became very clear that one of the benefits of a broad base of involvement was the ability to make connections for others. The Project Coordinators became knowledgeable about the work that was being done in the county and in the province in ending violence against women and became more and more able to “connect the dots” for others. It also contributed to breaking down historic barriers among organizations that may have contributed to a “silo” effect that left them feeling isolated and ineffective on their own. One partner indicated that her work now is more challenging, but that it is “better work” because of the relationships that she has built with others.

- **The Power of Persistence and The Follow Through with the Follow Up**

- One of the major lessons learned in this project was about persistence – first to request initial involvement and to not easily “take no as an answer”. As the project moved forward, this persistence resulted in more and more people in wider and wider circles of influence becoming involved, or at the very least, becoming aware of the issue and the work. The vision (which some called “fearless”) expanded as each month went by, with an accompanying energy and optimism that change could happen. By the end of the project, there was active involvement from survivors, the women’s community,

- service providers, youth, parents, schools, policing and other members of the Justice Community, clergy, poets, musicians, post-graduate students, private businesses, each of our 5 municipal governments and representatives from provincial government. Numbers from the Project Evaluator indicated that there was involvement, at some level, from 1800 people. The website received almost 8000 visits, and there was regular activity and growth on our Facebook page and Twitter account.
- Many of our partners indicated that they appreciated the ‘gentle poking and prodding’ that it required to maintain their involvement, attendance at meetings and follow through on actions. The strategies of persistence, however, were key. It included coordinating all of the components of the work in a consistent manner – developing “maps” for each working group as well as system mapping, recording notes from each meeting, re-visiting and re-working plans of action, reconvening groups that were in danger of lapsing, setting next meeting dates, and sending meeting reminders. Credibility was built through consistent follow through with the follow up – that we did what we said we would do.

- **Championing the Champions**

- We learned that change cannot happen without the recognition of and the nurturing of “champions” in the community who can move the work forward in a way that might not otherwise be possible. Our champions came in many guises – an extremely influential Chief of Police committed to making change in his organization, a dedicated Manager in our local Department of Community Services wishing to work collaboratively with others to make her service more compassionate, a caring and committed School Principal yearning for involvement with her community, a survivor wishing to speak her truth, and a Coordinator of a project dedicated to engaging men and boys in the work to end violence against women. These individuals came forward as relationships formed and became key players in bringing education and awareness to the community, initiating change in their own organizations and acting as facilitators and “connectors” with a variety of community networks. We felt that it was important to acknowledge their work at every opportunity, to honour their contributions and to learn from their considerable expertise in their own spheres of influence.

- **The Intent and the Impact**

- The impact of a specific course of action may be very different than what was intended. In our work with allies who identify as male, we often referred to the phrase “Consider the impact, not just the intent” – in other words, consider how words and/or actions might impact others negatively and take responsibility for that action, even if the intent was to initiate a positive interaction. The challenge for the project was when we wished to move ahead with an initiative and did not necessarily understand the impact that it would have on key partners.

- **Speaking Truth to Power**

- This project, in its essence, was about speaking truth to power, and then asking for change – in individual lives, in organizations and in the broader community. The challenges and indeed the stress of confronting the systems that oppress and victimize women were overwhelming at times. Survivors spoke clearly and candidly about their experiences with police and others in the Justice system. Students directly addressed teachers in their schools and at School Board level about their struggle with relationships and with not having opportunities to speak meaningfully with caring, supportive adults about issues of importance to them. Women shared their lived experiences with men who had never heard it before and often felt threatened by their honesty. Poets, writers, artists and musicians shared their work publicly, some for the first time. Partnering organizations allowed themselves to come out of their “silos” and share deep fears and hopes with each other, so that trust and connection would be the norm for their work together. The feminist community faced the challenge of welcoming men into the work, understanding that ending violence against women is a men’s issue and that it cannot end without their involvement. Local governments, entirely governed by regulation, took on a social justice initiative outside of their mandate. Human Resource departments spoke to Senior Management and made a case for policies and supportive protocols for survivors of interpersonal violence. We were constantly reminded of the courage that it takes to confront power and were humbled by the many people who took the risk to advocate for others. We know unequivocally that change does not happen without it.

- **Letting Go**

- Almost from the beginning of the project, discussions were held about how the work would continue after funding ended. An initial plan to develop a high-level leadership circle with a mandate to monitor all of the components of the work did not materialize. Instead, this function came to reside organically in the collaborative tables of the major initiatives that evolved from the project - Sexual Assault Services – Lunenburg and Queens, the Community Hub based on the work of Dale McFee in Saskatchewan and modified for local needs to deal with challenging cases within a transdisciplinary process, the Community Dispute Resolution Centre under the guidance of a community-based Advisory Group and under the governance of our local Community Justice Society. The work with Youth and Schools was transferred to the Youth Coordinator at Second Story Women’s Centre and to the Coordinator of the Healthy Relationships for Youth program, as well as to the Coordinator of the Boys program in partnership with HeartWood Centre. Representation on other committees has been assigned to Core Staff at Second Story with, in some cases, a transition period built in.
- The final events of the project included
  - an intergenerational conversation about feminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, designed to inculcate interest in maintaining the discussion – the result was that two young feminists are organizing and hosting another event in the near future

- An event attended by more than 100 people to explore what a restorative justice system would look like for women. Panelists included a Judge in the Mental Health Court, the Director of a Men’s Intervention Program, a world-renowned professor in Restorative Approaches, a representative from the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, a Mik’maq Legal Support Worker, and a Corrections Administrator and the Executive Director of our local Transition House. The event was planned to build support and energy for working towards change within the Justice System.
- A final Be the Peace Public Forum was held to report to the community and to understand the lessons that the community had learned as a result of the project and the directions in which it wishes to proceed. Participants spoke overwhelmingly about the need for change within the Justice System. Second Story Women’s Centre has submitted a proposal with the support of key partners to take on this challenge.

### **In Summary**

The ‘Be the Peace’ project is an example of a grassroots, people’s peace initiative that engaged citizens to coordinate a community response to violence against women by engaging boys and men, girls and women and those who are gender non-conforming. The engagement of youth was pivotal to the project. Collaborating with the school board (at school level as well as at Board level) to provide education on healthy relationships for youth and to engage in critiques of social media that challenge dominant cultural narratives were recognized as essential. It was also recognized that the collaboration among organizations that evolved into a local Hub model is decreasing the isolation of service providers and increasing responsiveness and efficacy. The establishment of a Community Dispute Resolution Centre that incorporates restorative approaches is also an example of responding proactively to disputes. It is anticipated that this centre will teach conflict resolution and non-violent communication skills as they respond to community needs. The engagement of boys and men has been central to this project and counters discourses that portray men as perpetrators of violence and women as victims. From the start of the project, the voices of those who have survived violence have been central as they have defined the work and provided the motivation and inspiration to continue. Improving the range and scope of sexual assault services was also defined as key to this project. Other key aspects of the project included engagement with municipal and provincial government. As a result, the 5 towns and municipalities of Lunenburg County are adopting formal resolutions or policy statements that include their “belief that all women and girls have the right to live in safety and dignity, free from threat, intimidation and violence. Gender based violence in all of its forms diminishes the quality of life for all and is unacceptable to the people of Lunenburg” County.