



# Moving On

A Streettohome Foundation Story Series

# About 'Moving On'

“Moving On” shares the stories of four individuals who have experienced homelessness, or have been at risk for homelessness, and with the support, resources and stability of supportive housing and some wonderful people, found a way to move on with their lives.

Whether they went through addictions treatment (Shelly), found a new purpose and hope for the future (Kris), moved into a great new job (Kathy), or reconciled an abusive past (Gary), they all discovered that with some friendly encouragement they were ready to realize their goals and change their lives.

All four pursued either formal education or on-the-job training, and moved on from shelters or supportive housing to housing in the community.

The transition of individuals from supportive housing — when they choose — to community housing makes available units with much-needed supports for those newly leaving the street and shelters.

**To learn more visit [www.streetohome.org](http://www.streetohome.org)**

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# A Path to Recovery



As an advocate for women who face issues with addictions, Shelly is an inspiration, because she's walked the talk. Five years ago, she kicked her addictions with drugs and alcohol to go back to school and rebuild her life.

Having lived in foster care, to dealing with sexual trauma from a young age and addiction issues as a young adult, then becoming homeless and subsequently living in single room occupancy hotels for many years, she has pushed through many struggles to find her place in the world.

By the age of six, Shelly had been placed in 26 different foster homes. She lived in a home for Aboriginal children with 18 other kids for many years, all of whom had experienced their own share of trauma.

When she 'aged out of foster care' at 19 and had to support herself, she started to fill the void and anguish of the past with drugs and alcohol. Shelly sold sex to make a livelihood for many years. She felt successful for a while, but over the years, she found it harder and harder to keep up the lifestyle.

In 2010, Shelly hit rock bottom – she was only 108 pounds, her body a complete wreck and jaundiced, and she had no teeth. At the time, she didn't have any veins on her body that were soft enough to inject heroin, her preferred drug at the time. As Shelly

puts it, if she couldn't have her drug of choice then she might as well either die or make a change. She chose a change.

Shelly learned about a treatment centre for people with addiction issues while staying at the Rainier Hotel, a low-barrier supportive housing building managed by PHS Community Services Society. After her detox, she went to Onsite, which is located upstairs from Insite (Vancouver's safe injection site.) "They gave me the reason to get up in the morning and provided positive reinforcement. I wasn't ready to be clean at first, but I wasn't willing to be entrenched on the street either. After my first visit, the seed had been planted and so I returned."

During this time, she was introduced to her soul mate, whom she married and has been with for five years. She also slowly returned to running which she loved as a teenager. At first she would go out for five minutes, then 10 minutes, and eventually she made it up to the point where she can now run full marathons. As she put it, "It's the place I meet God. It's my centre and it grounds me."

She now works as a support worker in low barrier supportive housing with a harm reduction focus for women. Shelly is now able to give back to others what she received during her years in supportive housing.

"We do a lot of case planning and meeting women where they are at, but we don't leave them there. The harm reduction model was good for the 1990s and early 2000s, because there was a need to meet people where they were at, but now it's about listening to where people are at and moving them forward so that they can be the experts in their own lives."

Her experience working with vulnerable women started when she was a sponsor during her early years of recovery at Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous. Here she saw the unparalleled value of one woman helping another. It didn't only keep them moving forward, but also kept her moving forward. As she put it, they were saving her life just as much as she was helping them.

Shelly knows she wouldn't be where she is without the champions in her life. She thanks all the incredible service providers that helped her on the path to recovery and living an independent life, including the Lookout Society, Keys Foundation, and South Fraser Community Services Society.

# Through the Kindness of Strangers



When he was 13 years old, Kris went down to the kitchen to find a letter addressed to his father. When he opened to read it, he slowly realized it was in his mother's handwriting. She was leaving Kris's dad and her three children. One week later, his father died in a car crash. Kris was devastated.

These two events would have a lasting impact on Kris.

Only 15 years old, he checked himself into the London Psychiatric Hospital because of depression. After that, he was in and out of prison throughout his adult life. Now, in his 50s, he has faced his demons and he is living in stable housing, working, and has become a local success story for turning his life around.

His epiphany came when he was panhandling in Downtown Vancouver. One day, when someone had been rude to him, a woman came to his defence. After many visits and encouraging comments, she came to be known to Kris as the 'Holt Renfrew Lady', because she worked down the street at the clothing store. With her support, Kris started to gain a little bit of courage and things began to change. As Kris put it, "She sparked something in me that there were choices to be made and that I had to start making the right ones. I couldn't let go of her faith in me."

The Holt Renfrew Lady encouraged Kris to start writing in a journal. Writing helped him unleash his inner conflict and gave him a means to open up about his feelings and thoughts.

He knew that if he wanted to continue to write, he had to move from the shelter he was living in to more stable accommodation. He wanted to move to The Avalon, a supportive housing building, but was hesitant.

“I walked by so many times thinking, ‘they’ll never take me’, until I had this ‘George Costanza’ moment – if everything I believed in before was wrong, I’ve got to do the exact opposite. So I went in and they filled the paper work and I got a room.”

Soon after, he gave up panhandling to work as a Megaphone Magazine vendor on the corner of Dunsmuir and Seymour.

Vendors can purchase the magazine for 75 cents, and charge \$2 to make a profit. This gave Kris the courage to write his first story for Megaphone – and to his surprise it was published!

For six months Kris locked himself up in his room at The Avalon to write. “Everything I was trying to hide from the world I emptied onto paper.” He knew that if he left his room to go out to the street, he might use crack. But here, he could keep his circle small and his distractions to a minimum.

Eventually, Kris would start attending the family nights at The Avalon and push himself to make small talk. After a while he opened up completely. As he puts it, “That’s where I found my voice.”

During Christmas 2013, a man who had walked by Kris almost every single day for two years and never said a word bought several magazines. After about six months, he offered Kris a job at his jewellery shop.

At his job, Kris cleans and makes the alloy to harden gold. He wants to eventually learn all facets of the jewellery making business. He is surprised at how, while it is difficult for him to trust himself, this man has trusted him to work in his shop.

Work has given him a stability he didn’t have before, “I like having somewhere to go every day and being able to plan and budget for the future.” He’s saving up for a trip to go back east to visit a brother and sister he hasn’t seen in more than two decades.

“I’m happier than I’ve been my whole life,” says Kris. “I feel confident and successful. And, you know, if life throws me a curve ball, I’m confident I’m going to make the right choices now.”

# A Full Circle Moment



When Kathy and her young son with disabilities were at risk of homelessness and needed help, she turned to the YWCA's Single Mothers' Support Services and affordable housing program. She eventually returned to school to become a community support worker and now gives back through her work.

It was a long struggle, however. At 21, Kathy left Hungary, which at the time was a communist country with few of the goods and fineries of the West. She and her first husband decided to move to Canada for a better life in 1986.

While she doesn't consider herself the adventurous type, Kathy realizes that she needed to be strong and resilient after she moved, and that these strengths have led her to where she is today.

Even though she had trained and worked as a kindergarten teacher in Hungary, it was difficult to find work in Canada with her foreign credentials. After her marriage fell apart, she met her second partner and settled down with him and had a son. New challenges arose when she realized that her new partner had alcohol issues. When her son was one, she left the relationship and started life as a single mother, remaining hopeful that things would work out.



After her relationship ended, Kathy discovered that her son had autism and Rubinstein-Taybi syndrome (RTS). This meant that he would need a great deal of attention and she couldn't spend any time away from him. Being on social assistance, daycare costs were too high for her and – with her limited education – she didn't have the opportunities to go back to school and retrain.

Kathy had few resources or people she could turn to at the time. In her mid-30s, Kathy found the YWCA's Single Mothers' Support Group that completely changed her life. The group introduced her to women in a similar position.

At the YWCA, Kathy and her son found resources and options including affordable supportive housing, the opportunity for Kathy to go back to school and get the career that she wanted, and a daycare centre for her son so she would always know he was safe while she was away from home. Kathy says, "With the support, it was much, much easier. I can't even imagine what I would have gone through without it." With a special needs son who needed an immense amount of additional care and support, Kathy says it really takes a village to raise a child.

While she lived there, Kathy attended Langara College to complete her Social Services Worker Diploma, so that she could work for the same type of social programs that helped her get on her feet. She started out as a volunteer facilitator at YWCA Single Mothers' Support Group in Vancouver, and then facilitated parenting programs for immigrants. After that, someone approached her about providing pre-employment and life skills training for people who have disabilities, and she was able to say that she had the experience they were looking for because of what she learned while raising her son.

She now works as a Resource Room Coordinator at Work BC in Surrey, where she provides employment counselling and services to people who are looking for work. Interestingly, and probably based on her own experience, the best advice she has for job seekers is to utilize their networks – because employers want to screen you even before they meet with you. Agencies are also working together, creating partnerships, and that's how people get from one point to the next point with more support.

Kathy now lives in independent housing in Port Moody and she couldn't be happier. She now has time to explore her love and interest in the arts and to travel, and feels she has the freedom and energy to do this.

# An Artist's Life



As an artist, Gary was a great candidate for Vancouver Native Housing Society's Skwachàys Artists' Lodge where he spent three years until the spring of 2015. As a resident artist, he worked with the lodge's architect to design one of Vancouver's most beautiful residences.

Gary's life is now peaceful, but it wasn't always the case. Gary's father, a Métis from Buffalo Narrows (a small village six hours north of Saskatoon), was an angry man who drank and was violent to his wife and five children.

In addition, as a young boy, Gary endured years of sexual abuse and trauma that led to feelings of neglect and unworthiness that he masked with alcohol as an adult.

Gary decided to quit drinking at the age of 23, when he had enough. He got his life together and found work becoming the youngest District Foreman, at the time, with the City of Vancouver. He eventually decided to leave his job, and drifted to what his soul craved – creating art.

At 28 years old, Gary took his first cross-country trip and visited Buffalo Narrows where he felt a familiarity and pull to his Aboriginal culture.

His experience of going to familial territory and meeting his relatives helped bring about forgiveness and changed his life. In 1991 he enrolled at the art program at Capilano College.

Blending both First Nations and European cultures became the focus for his work. For his dad, there had been so much shame from being what Gary called a “half breed” – someone who is not accepted in either the First Nations or European community. Instead, Gary decided to embrace his culture and broke out of this heavy, ominous legacy.

Gary’s life took another turn when, in his late 30s, stress and a bad injury led him to using prescription painkillers. His doctor prescribed him Tylenol with codeine. The pain killer led him down a long road of dealing with addictions again, this time to both prescription and non-prescription drugs.

A big day of growth came last March while he was living at Skwachàys, when a friend passed away from drug use, and Gary decided that he didn’t want his own mother to find him like that. When the prescription painkillers weren’t available, he would use heroin and, on that particular day in March, he awoke after passing out from too much heroin. He realized that he could have died. He wanted to change, and he had the support around him to do it.

While at Skwachàys, Gary was involved in creating some of the artwork in the hotel suites and common areas. Gary’s art comes from a process of trust, something that he is realizing works best in his own life as well.

“There’s always this relationship between my making art and asking if I can live my life the way I create my art. If I stay open, the universe has wonderful surprises for me, just like my art has wonderful surprises for me. I don’t know where I am going, but I am going to trust that it will lead me to something good.”

In September, Gary moved into independent housing near Main and Broadway. He loves his new home. He feels completely different there – it’s big and bright, even when it’s overcast – and, best of all, he loves the community which is full of vibrant young faces.

# About Streetohome Foundation

## Together we are making a real difference

Solving homelessness is a community responsibility that takes a community effort. Streetohome Foundation is working to ensure that the most vulnerable in Vancouver have access to safe, decent, affordable, supportive housing. We bring together business, government, service providers and community leaders to build resources and develop sustainable solutions to homelessness. Our long-term work is guided by a 10-Year Plan that will help people break out of the cycle of homelessness, and also prevent people from falling into it.

## Our Goals:

- Provide permanent stable housing with appropriate support services
- Prevent people who are most vulnerable from becoming homeless
- Build broad public support and commitment for permanent solutions to homelessness

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