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Writings from the Veith House Women's Education Project '85-'86

The Headway 85-86 Project at Veith House provided an opportunity for women to study subjects they require to obtain their high school equivalency certificate. In English class the teacher had the women write about their own experiences and feelings. The stories and poems produced were powerful and the group decided to put them together into a book. In this excerpt from the introduction to the book, Rachel Carter describes the class of 85-86: "most of the women in this group have come upon hard times. Some were

battered women and I think we have all come to realize that we want more out of life. An education is a good start. We have all become friends. We studied in a friendly atmosphere and have shared a lot of our experiences with each other. I think we were all surprised to find we had similar experiences and all ended up in the same place together." The women involved in this project want to 'break the silence' around battering in the lives of women and children. The following story and poem are reprinted from this book.

Tears,
Crystal prisms,
hot and salty,
sliding effortlessly down my cheeks,
depression, making the sadness I feel
sharper, deeper.
Ache in my heart
and stomach,
all the uncried tears,
aching to get out, screaming at me
from inside.
Loneliness creeping up on me
and winding itself
around me
like a thick wet fog.
Sometimes I wonder
if it's worth it. . .
The price of freedom.

—Cindy Boutilier.

In her own voice: Breaking the silence around battering

By KATHLEEN WALKER

As soon as I opened my eyes, there was a blinding flash of light and my whole head exploded with pain. I knew I was in for another battle with my migraine headache. I reached for my bottle of pills. They wouldn't kill the pain, but if I took enough, I'd be so stoned that I could bear it. Lately I'd been using them to help me get through the days. I needed a lot of help in the last couple of weeks. I had a prescription in my purse that would help me too. It was for tranquilizers that my doctor said would relax me.

The bedroom door opened. "Are you going to get up or are you going to sleep all day?" The voice made my head hurt worse. "I'm getting up," I said "I've got a splitting headache." "Don't you always have an excuse to lay around and do nothing?" He gave me a dirty look and turned away.

This was the way my days went for about two more weeks. By now, I had about three different bottles full of tranquilizers. All I had to do was take one kind for several days, then tell my doctor they were no good, and she would give me a prescription for another kind. I kept myself stoned to avoid my abusive husband. If I wasn't asleep I was so stoned I could tune him out.

But one day, he realized what I was doing. We had a terrible fight and he yelled, "Oh shut up. Go take more pills." That's what I did. I kept taking more and more. Within about two days, I realized I had to get to see my doctor. Something inside of me kept screaming "Get to Dr. Sue."

I barely remember being in her office. I don't remember what I told her. I remember refusing to go home with my husband. I was told later that a councillor from Bryony House spent an hour telling about the place, but I don't remember it at all. She said I kept saying no every time she suggested I go there. Finally she said I'd have a bedroom all to myself. This I remember. I thought "I can shut the door and be left all alone."

The next thing I remember is driving in



a car. I remember sitting at a table. Then I was walking. I thought I was going up steps, but when I raised my foot to put it on the step, it would disappear. My feet would land heavily with each step. This was when they took me to the V.G. Hospital. I was told later.

I was lying on a bed that was hard and very white. A man asked me my name, age and address. I told him and he went away. He came back and asked me for the same information. I told him and he left again.

Soon he was back. This went on and on. Finally after a long, long time, I thought, "This man must be some stupid. Why don't he write it down if he's going to forget that easy?" I told him what he wanted to know again and then I said to him, "I've told you for the last time. Write it down and don't come back again. I'm tired and I'm sick of you bugging me. I'm going to sleep and don't bother me again." The man laughed and said "good". This is what the Dr. wanted, to get a reaction of some kind. I was in a 'robot state'. I would do whatever asked to, the pills were too far absorbed in my body. They couldn't pump my stomach. Because of this 'robot state' I took pills when my husband said to. The Dr. left. Soon the lady came back and said that she was taking me where I could sleep. The next thing I remember is people helping me to get undressed and into bed. This was in the afternoon.

**"Oh shut up.
Go take more pills."**

The next thing I remember is sitting at a table. I didn't know where I was. A sparkling clean kitchen, 2 fridges, a great big table and two girls sitting across from me eating a pizza. I asked them where I was. They looked at each other and one left. The other girl said to wait just a minute and someone would explain anything I wanted to know. I asked her what time it was. She said midnight. I had slept from the afternoon before — about 36 hours.

A girl came in and said she was a counsellor and that I was at Bryony House for battered women. She made us coffee and

spent the next 3 hours filling me in.

A couple of days later, a welfare woman came to see me. The first thing she said to me was that I had better not dare to try to get my kids. I asked why not. She said I was an unfit mother and that she would testify in court to this fact. Now this was the first time I had ever seen this woman. She said my husband was such a fine man, and she couldn't understand how I could do this to him. Then she said that I had to go back home because welfare was not going to pay for me to stay there. I started to tell her how my "fine man" had beaten me, and made my life such a hell that I used the pills to escape. She told me she wasn't interested in my stories and that I'd better get back home. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I started to grab her. I guess I could have killed her but for the counsellor that grabbed me. She told the welfare worker, Anna Kane, to get out. Then she explained that she did this to all the women there, because it was cheaper to force the women to go home than pay for their stay there.

I ended up going home because my husband said he was going to take off to Ontario with the kids. I knew that welfare lady would have helped him, so against the advice of Bryony House staff, I went back home in 1979 and for four more years I went through hell. I went back in 1983 to Bryony, and worked out an agreement with my husband, after 3 months. But he started mentally abusing me after about 6 months. I put up with it for about 2 years. I finally left, with the help of a fine social worker, Heather Hillier. I had an apartment with my girlfriend and her husband for 6 months and then rented myself a small room. I am taking upgrading to get my grade 12. I am also taking assertiveness training. I've met a fine man who has helped me to put my life together, in order of my priorities. He has taught me to be independent and most importantly to like myself. He says "Kathy has to do for Kathy." I'm very happy with the way my life is going, so the first chance I have, I'm going to help someone else the way people have helped me.