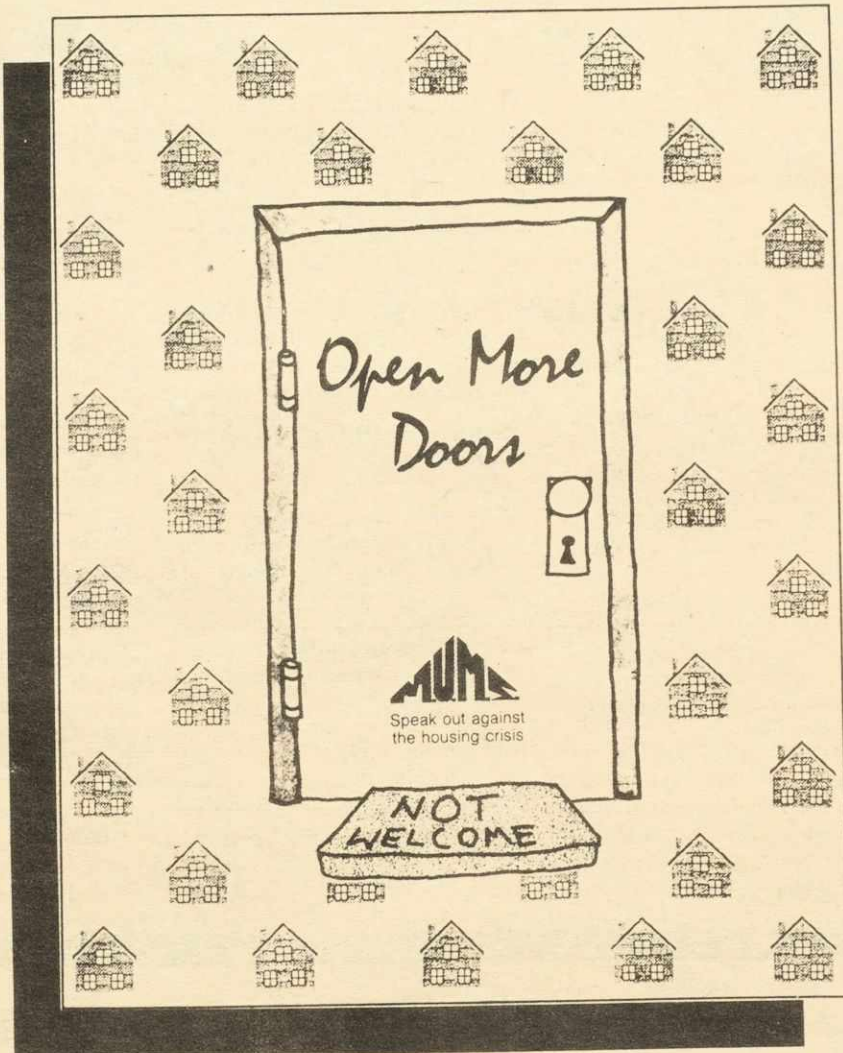


INTERNATIONAL

Women's Day Supplement



MUMS

Mothers United for Metro Shelter

A review of Open More Doors, a booklet published by the 1986 International Women's Week Shelter Committee in Halifax. Copies are available at the Red Herring Co-operative Bookstore (corner of Blowers and Argyle).

Dear Mom

I just finished reading a book on the housing crisis here in Halifax and I want to share it with you. When I read these women's descriptions of their homes I thought of ours. I remembered those funny and exasperating nights that it rained and we had to run to the kitchen and find pots and pans to put under the holes in the roof. What an event! And what a funny sound the rain drops made on those pots. Plink, plunk, plink, all night long. I used to grin in my bed. Then we got that lovely

red tin roof and the days of stepping in pots and pans on the way to the bathroom were over. True bliss.

I also remember fighting not to get up in the morning for school; trying to stay in bed for the longest possible time because the floors were so damn cold and there was no hot water.

But the stories these women tell, Mom, are scary, not humorous, like yours and mine. These women are the MUMS, Mothers United for Metro Shelter, and their struggles for adequate housing are horrible, and sad. The MUMS started their crusade over

two years ago, trying to get the government to provide decent and affordable homes for themselves and their children. Most of these women are abused by their husbands or as single parents, to boot.

No matter how many times we had to step around Dad's efforts at remodelling our house, it was always a home: a roof, a fire and a family. These women don't have that, and I feel for them.

The MUMS have put faces to statistics that show that 85 per cent of all single-parent families are headed by women, and that 47 per cent of these families live in poverty. Many of the MUMS live on welfare, and one woman says it got to the point where she had to keep \$20 to herself, a month, or she would have gone crazy. That's \$20. The same woman, Edna, lived in a place on Göttingen, not far from my home now, that was infested with cockroaches.

"I couldn't put water in the bathtub because a nest of cockroaches plugged up the drain," she says. Edna could smell the cockroaches all through her house, but she didn't have anywhere else to live.

Some of the stories are humorous, and they remind me of when I lived with you. Do you remember seeing the mouse in the oven? And how about the time when we were watching television and that little imp ran out from behind the piano and across the hardwood living room floor?

Well Mom, these women can top those stories. One woman, Elizabeth, watched five mice jump through one of her kid's trucks at one o'clock in the morning. Elizabeth and her friend, Jennie, caught 23 mice in one hour in their kitchen. But they couldn't go to their landlord, because they knew he would throw them out on the street for complaining. So they kept quiet, all the time trying to find another place to live.

And in Halifax, that isn't easy. These women face discrimination from landlords because they live on welfare and because they have children. Many of the new housing projects in Halifax are designed for the rich: everywhere you look condominiums are for sale, but there are no places available in public housing.

So the women continue to live in places that other people try to ignore. Jennie and Elizabeth's house was infested with earwigs, long, black bugs with feelers and a hard shell. They tried to go after the bugs one day, with Sobey's bags tied over their arms and legs.

They put garbage bags over their heads and they each had a spray bottle of Raid. They called themselves the bug squad. But an earwig got into Jennie's son's ear. She rushed him to the hospital and refused to go back to the house before it was fumigated. I don't blame her. So she had to stay in Collins House, a temporary shelter for women, for a few days. Jennie tried to get the provincial department of social services to pay for her stay at Collins House, but the welfare people insisted she should have returned to her home after the fumigators had left, even though the fumigators themselves told her not to go back for four days. She appealed the social services decision and the appeal board told her, basically, that that type of earwig just didn't fly into people's ears anyway.

But Jennie says she can still hear her son screaming when the doctor took the thing out of his ear, and she still has the damn bug in a bottle at home. So who are we supposed to believe?

These stories, Mom, unfortunately, are not the worst the new book has to offer. More frightening and disturbing are the experiences these women share about the abuse they faced from husbands, fathers, grandfathers and landlords. They are beaten, raped, molested and kicked out onto the streets. They are left caring for children with no money and no job. They are scorned by society and they are called worthless and parasitic. But I don't believe any of the names other people use to describe these women: after reading their book, I know they are strong, intelligent, beautiful women who are just trying to get what they deserve, adequate homes for themselves and their children, who they love dearly.

When I read about these women, and later met them, I wanted to invite them to your home. That big white house on the farm in New Brunswick. If only it was bigger and if only it would solve the problem. But these women have a right to live where they want, and our government should provide public housing for them. It is not too much to ask.

Thanks, Mom, for our home. Thanks for the drips and the drafts and the cold water and the messy bedroom. I hope the children from the MUMS book will soon be able to thank their mothers.

Take care. I love you. Give my best to Jim and Dad.

Love, Lois