



WINTER 2013  
NEWSLETTER

SISTERING

## HARM REDUCTION PROGRAM AT SISTERING

### *Builds Stronger and Healthier Lives*

**THE SUCCESS OF ANY PROGRAM** is often dependent on the leadership and facilitation skills of the program coordinator. And this is more so for programs like harm reduction that require sensitivity, compassion and non-judgment. Since Sistering received funding in 2011, the program has grown from 10 to approximately 70 women who now participate and commit themselves to harm reduction programming.

According to Carol Danis, Harm Reduction Program Coordinator, “Many of the women in our Harm Reduction program have suffered tremendous hardships such as extreme violence, mental health challenges and deep losses. They struggle with substance use issues due to years of trauma, poverty, and marginalized lifestyles. Harm reduction gives them a sense of community and support in their lives they otherwise would not have. At the same time, our programming serves to reduce the spread of HIV and Hepatitis C. The commitment from peers working in the program is inspirational for the community. Harm reduction programs foster empowerment and independence.”

The active involvement of Sistering participants living with substance use is at the heart of Sistering’s Peer Support Harm Reduction program. Sistering peers offer practical and emotional support to other women at risk. Women who are street-involved and many who struggle with substance use and mental health conditions.

Harm reduction recognizes that a percentage of the population will engage in high risk behaviours such as substance use, alcohol consumption and unsafe sex. Harm reduction offers a social justice and public health response to drug use, as



opposed to a criminalizing one. It focuses on reducing the harm associated with high risk behaviours and aims to improve the health and safety of our participants and our community. Harm reduction also provides effective alternatives for working with participants who are street-involved and at risk by focusing on reducing social, economic and health related problems or issues. It is based on the participant’s needs “where they are at”—respecting, honouring and supporting their ability to make decisions.

“Life before Sistering was a dark and lonely place. What I try to do is education while attempting to put smiles on peers’ faces. I do this by doing outreach, kit making, giving and attending workshops and by helping others.” Sistering Participant

Five of Sistering’s participants have become Harm Reduction Peers, and under the guidance of coordinator Carol Danis, have been trained by the City’s

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public health department. The peers have attended workshops, and know how to implement safer drug practices in their outreach. Because the peers are the best source of information (based on their own experiences), they help to determine effective interventions to reduce the harm caused by use. The peer workers educate drug users on how to use drugs more safely and teach safer sex practices to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. The peer workers function as a team to promote health, safety and support. They offer continuous support to fellow peers at Sistering, as well as other partnering agencies such as Queen West Community Centre, All Saints Church, Regent Park Community Health Centre and Parkdale Community Health Centre. As well, Outreach is focused on pockets of marginalized areas in the city, especially where women have little or no access to services. Peers make and distribute safer smoking and injection kits as well as make referrals to other health agencies which provide support to women in need.

KAPOW (Knowledge and Power of Women), a support group for women-identified sex workers in Parkdale, also partners with Sistering's Harm Reduction Peers sharing resources, knowledge and providing peer support.

“While going to other organizations like the Queen West Community Centre, and All Saints Church, I feel like a person with a second chance in life with dignity, self-

respect, self-esteem, safer practices, feeling useful, to make it alright.” Harm Reduction Peer Support Team Member

While Sistering's Peer Harm Reduction Program assists female drug users in staying healthier, it just as importantly helps the peers facilitating the program to feel inspired—their contributions drive their own personal growth and help them to better manage their own lives. Participating in outreach is rewarding. Peers receive recognition from the community, and they are often told by the women they help, that they are happy the peers are there. It is a peer-to-peer relationship that is mutually beneficial and inspiring.

“With this work, I have improved my relationships, I became a better teacher, role model and of course I make money. Although I still use I am still valuable to the community.” Harm Reduction Peer Support Team Member

Sistering's Harm Reduction work has also improved the lives of peers, and challenges them to better themselves and respond better to high risk situations. “Perhaps the most important aspect of this job is seeing how the women learn to love themselves and strive to become all they can be. It is wonderful to be able to see how far they have come, despite all they have been through. The strength and perseverance of these women never fails to amaze me,” says Danis.



*Carol Danis, Harm Reduction Coordinator with peers*

## MESSAGE *from the* EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This has been an exciting year at Sistering! We recently received good news that our application for a capital grant to expand and renovate our kitchen from the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care was approved, and we are hoping that construction will begin in early spring, and that the kitchen will be completed by June 2013.

Over the past year, we have seen an increase in the number of street involved women accessing our Drop-In on Bloor Street and our Outreach program in Parkdale.

In response to this increase we will be working with the Barbra Schlifer clinic to provide a counselling group for women who have experienced trauma. This group will be held at Sistering's Bloor Street Centre, and is specifically for women who do not have access to this kind of service.

We will also be completing our Participant Satisfaction Survey in 2013—a survey comprised of close to 200 participants. Participant feedback will help us evaluate our services, and help us with future program planning and delivery.

Responding to the changing needs of our community of vulnerable women with innovative programming has long been a tradition at Sistering. This year, we have seen some of our newest programs flourish:

- The Peer Pilot Project, funded by the Toronto Central Local Health Integration Network (LHIN), received permanent funding status at the end of last year after two years as a pilot project. This program is a partnership with St. Christopher House and the Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre. It employs individuals with lived experience of mental illness and/or addictions. Peers provide Drop In participants with support and accompany them to necessary appointments.
- The Healing Circle provides women with an opportunity to share and express their feelings and stories within the context of a First Nations healing circle. The group is led by a Native elder and a Sistering staff member. The Circles are open to all Sistering participants and have brought much

peace and guidance on many topics.

- Our social enterprises, Inspirations and Spun Studios provide opportunities for women to supplement their incomes. The women learn art/craft skill development and participate in micro-business training. In January, Inspirations moved to a new studio space at 2480 Dundas Street West.

At Sistering, we engage in advocacy that changes social conditions which endanger women's welfare and put them at risk for increased poverty, homelessness and violence. To that end we have been involved in the following efforts this past year:

- The Fair Fare Coalition advocates for affordable public transit. It focuses on the importance of access to transit for essential appointments, jobs, housing and health care.
- Right to Housing Charter Challenge is a legal challenge to Federal and Provincial governments, highlighting the fact that housing is a right for all under the Charter of Rights and Freedom. The challenge is currently moving through the courts.
- Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women's Memorial acknowledges the ongoing and disproportionate violence against Aboriginal women with a Sisters in Spirit event and the February 14th memorial.
- The Community Start-Up fund was previously provided to persons on social assistance to help with acquiring housing by assisting with the first and last months rent. It was also used for emergency housing situations such as fire or bed bug infestations. This fund has been slated for elimination at the end of 2013. We fear this will have a devastating impact on women who are currently homeless, in substandard housing, or trying to leave violent/abusive situations. We are involved in a number of efforts to try to have this cut reversed. To date we have achieved a small victory as part of the budget has been retained.

As we look forward to 2013, we wish to thank our many funders, donors, and volunteers. Thanks to you all for your continued interest and commitment to Sistering. We truly appreciate your support and generosity.

—Sheryl Lindsay

## EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

### Tina Shapiro, Employment & Income Support Coordinator

**SISTERING WELCOMES TINA SHAPIRO** into the fold as Employment and Income Support Coordinator, working within the On the Path to Employment Program. Prior to joining Sistering in June 2011, Tina had an eclectic, yet illustrious career, spanning over 20 years. Her previous roles have prepared her for her new one, and today, a major portion of her time is dedicated to advocacy work.

In the short time that Tina has been working at Sistering, she has had a positive impact on the lives of the many women we serve. She delivers relevant programs and services with sensitivity, and advocates on their behalf. She recently started a much

needed New Employment Group that meets every Wednesday, at noon, in the Spun Studio, and she runs employment-related workshops based on demand and by request. And in her role as advocate, Tina has been organizing with The Fair Fare Coalition (FFC), a group made up of community members and agency representatives, mobilizing for an economically and physically accessible Toronto Transit Commission.

To schedule an appointment with Tina, to work on employment, education, or income support issues, or on organizing and advocacy, please stop by her office. You can also contact her at 416.926.9762 x245 or at [tshapiro@sistering.org](mailto:tshapiro@sistering.org).

## DRESS FOR SUCCESS

**RECENTLY, BY REQUEST, TINA SHAPIRO**, Sistering's Employment and Income Support Coordinator, facilitated the workshop Dressing for the Workplace.

Participants not only received tips on how to dress appropriately for the workplace, but they also got the opportunity to select two outfits donated by Motion Clothing Women and designer Brenda Beddome.

During the workshop, they explored dressing for various workplaces, and Tina provided practical and useful tips.

According to Tina Shapiro, "Participants were very pleased with their new work outfits. Employment is a social justice issue, as we help each other in accessing and maintaining income security, so important to women's lives."

In January, the Employment Group presented another workshop in the basement. Sistering thanks Motion Clothing, and Brenda Beddome for their generous donation of new outfits.



photo courtesy of Nancy van Keerbergen

# INSPIRATIONS STUDIO

## *one way to rise out of poverty*

**HIGH-QUALITY POTTERY ADORN THE** shelves, waiting to be purchased by those who know how to appreciate beautiful things. Worktables, pottery wheels, kilns—everything a potter needs to create beautiful art. That's what you see when you enter the Inspirations Studio.

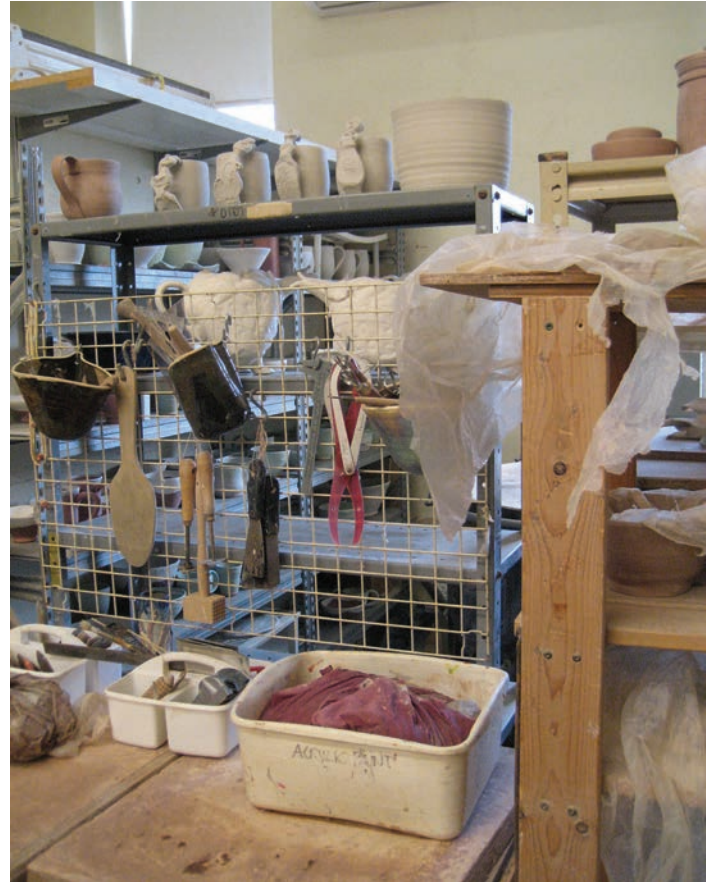
Contrary to popular belief, marginalized individuals and those living in poverty are not looking for a hand-out, instead, they are looking for a hand-up to assist them in improving their lives. Inspirations Studio is a social enterprise program of Sistering that teaches low-income women how to create and sell pottery. Participants enroll in a one-year program, where once a week, for a full day, they attend classes that are geared toward teaching them the ins and outs of pottery making.

Included in the program are classes that teach how to operate a successful business. Many of the women who participate are new to pottery making, and as they gain proficiency, they are integrated into the group. At present, there are over 25 members ranging in age from in their 20s to 70s.

The program is innovative, and recently, United Way volunteers from CIBC Capital Markets employees, were so impressed that they have decided to work with the studio to expand sales into institutional markets, removing a major challenge that they currently face.

Inspirations Studio's primary goal is to help women develop artistic and business skills that will enable them to supplement their personal income. The women produce a range of high quality, handcrafted ceramic products such as bowls, vases and mugs in Inspirations Studio. Theresa Morin, Social Enterprise Coordinator, and Victoria Gudgeon, Studio facilitator, guide participants as they build their creative and entrepreneurial skills.

The studio is structured in such a way that studio time is provided in blocks: those for new participants, and those for the women who have been coming regularly for years—some women have been studio members



for more than 10 years. The women are committed and are serious about their craft, and establishing a micro-business for themselves and consider the studio their place of work.

Last year, Inspirations Studio was informed that it must vacate their studio at 761 Queen Street by March 2013 as the building was sold and urban gentrification continues. We are happy to report that Sistering has found a new space for the studio at 2480 Dundas Street West. This move is timely as the studio has outgrown its current space.

Being involved in the studio helps the women to not only build a business and achieve financial self-sufficiency, it also strengthens their sense of belonging, increased self-esteem and self-worth. To learn more about Sistering's Inspirations Studio, and view the creations of the studio members, visit us at [www.inspirationsstudio.org](http://www.inspirationsstudio.org)

# FUNNY GIRLS AND DYNAMIC DIVAS

## *has staying power*

**LONG-TIME SISTERING SUPPORTERS,** community partners and friends of the organization came out on June 14 to support Sistering's Funny Girls and Dynamic Divas 10th annual benefit—a major accomplishment and milestone.

This year's Funny Girls and Dynamic Divas, sponsored by Motion Clothing Women, took place at the Jane Mallet Theatre. The evening began with a catered reception and silent auction with fantastic prizes, including jewellery, trips, and art and lifestyle packages. All of the prizes were generously donated to raise money for Sistering's programs.

The popular fundraiser generated over \$52,000, all of which will support Sistering's programs that assist women who are homeless, living in poverty and struggling with physical and mental health conditions. What started out as a women's grassroots fundraiser has grown tremendously, and over the years has raised

more than \$200,000 for Sistering. Audiences continue to return year-after-year for some of the best in female entertainment in Canadian comedy and music.

Elvira Kurt, our hilarious emcee, returned to host the evening. Sistering's original Funny Girl Sandra Shamas held the audience captive with her unique sense of humour. Backed by the multi-talented Jane Bunnett and her band, singers Shakura S'Aida, Luanda Jones, Laura Fernandes, Amanda Martinez, and Liberty Silver entertained the audience with their exquisite voices.

This event is made possible with the assistance of our tireless and dedicated volunteers whose participation was integral to the success of the event. We would like to thank our corporate sponsors for their continued support of Funny Girls and Dynamic Divas! We would also like to thank Event Sponsor Motion Clothing Women for their solid commitment to our signature event and the women we serve.

## THANK YOU TO OUR GENEROUS SPONSORS

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# KITCHEN SISTERS DELIVER AGAIN

## *at mildred's temple kitchen*



*Kitchen Sisters host Sonja Smits with guest*

**THE AROMA OF DELICIOUS** pakoras being served with prosecco greeted the guests as they arrived at Kitchen Sisters, Sistering's second Kitchen Renovation fundraising event in Toronto. An assortment of artisan breads from Fred's Breads was beautifully displayed on the communal table, waiting to be tasted. Each course was accompanied by a variety of fine wines—including wines from host, Sonja Smits' Closson Chase Vineyard.

The meal included: salad of baby beets and hazelnuts, served beside a baby cauliflower mousseline with miso toast; shrimp, scallop and lobster in tomato fennel broth with a swirl of saffron cream; beef tenderloin, oven roasted carrots, French beans and onion confit served with horseradish jus; warm plum almond crumble with port reduction and vanilla orange ice cream. A sumptuous feast fit for a queen!

Since moving to our Bloor Street centre six years ago, Sistering has experienced a 40 per cent increase in the number of women seeking food and assistance, making it necessary to expand our kitchen and storage facilities. Our food program is the main connector for women to access the vital services and support they need when they visit our drop-in centre at 962 Bloor Street West. In celebrating International Women's Day, for the second year in a row, Toronto's finest female chefs came together as Kitchens Sisters and prepared a delicious feast with wine pairings to raise money for Sistering's new kitchen.

The generous chef support for Kitchen Sisters included: Donna Dooher, Mildred's Temple Kitchen; Anne Yarymowich, AGO; Christine Bib, Christine Bib Catering; Suzanne Baby, Gallery Grill; Joanne Yolles and Deborah Reid, George

Brown College; and Colen Quinn, Pangaea. Sistering chefs Trisha Beard, Carol Grey and Maureen Watson also participated in this fundraising event for Sistering as they were all paired with a participating chef to prepare the meal. Celebrated Canadian actress Sonja Smits hosted the event at Mildred's Temple Kitchen, and Canadian singer songwriter Shakura S'Aida performed a jazz set for the 100 guests who came out in support of Sistering.

Sistering is thankful to the participating chefs, our host Sonja Smits, Shakura S'Aida and chef coordinator Linsey Thomsen for donating their time and talent for this event in support of Sistering's kitchen renovation. A large outpouring of support for this event also came from Mildred's Temple Kitchen's staff: from the kitchen to the servers, everyone donated their time, and talents to make this event—and it was carried out flawlessly.

The Ministry of Health has approved a capital grant for \$338,900 for us to expand our kitchen and storage facilities, and we are waiting for the dispensation of funds. In addition, we require another \$100,000 for the project, and that's why Kitchen Sisters is so important to us.

Join us once again, on March 8, 2013, International Women's Day, for the third Kitchen Sisters event. Call us now at 416.926.9762 x243 to purchase your tickets!

## PARKDALE DROP-IN

## *Sistering's second home*

“BEEF SHORT RIBS OR chicken,” the server asks as she navigates around crowded tables. There is a lot of laughter, and a sense of camaraderie, as people talk to each other about their lives. This could be an ordinary scene, except it's lunchtime at Sistering's Parkdale Drop-In. Nearly 70 women of various ethno-racial backgrounds have come to eat lunch. The meal is a well-balanced one, and the women are served, which makes them feel special, even if it's for a short time. After the



meal, many of the women schedule an appointment for a haircut, foot reflexology, or any of the other wellness services available.

Sistering operates a second drop-in centre for women seeking assistance at the Masaryk-Cowan Community Centre. Located in a priority neighbourhood, this drop-in centre is commonly referred to as “Outreach” in keeping with Sistering's mandate to provide outreach services to as many vulnerable women as possible in the greater Toronto community.

The majority of participants are older women, many of whom are

immigrants to Canada and are socially isolated. They have come to Canada to be united with their families, however due to culture shock and difficulties assimilating into a new city and culture, these women are often asked to leave their family's home and are left to try and secure housing solely on their old age pensions. This means that the women are spending their full pension cheques on rent with nothing left for groceries and other incidentals. These women receive their daily meals at Sistering where



breakfast and lunch are served daily. Housing support workers visit the Outreach Program once a week, working with clients to secure safe, affordable housing for these elderly, vulnerable women.

Sistering Parkdale's location in the Masaryk-Cowan Community Centre is beneficial for the participants, as they are able to access other community programs and services such as the community centre's fitness classes, arts and crafts and community involvement programs. The centre is also centrally located, and in close proximity to the Parkdale Library,

Parkdale Collegiate is a short walk for women who want to enroll in English as a second language classes, and Parkdale Health Centre is a block away where women can access medical assistance and free dental care.

A variety of recreation activities are provided to participants. Volunteers lead beading, sewing and knitting classes. Wellness services such as massage therapy and reflexology are also available on specific days. Participants enjoy the weekly bingo games



coordinated by staff members, and appreciate group trips to Niagara Falls and Port Dover. The participants at both drop-in locations seek similar supports and services. The Outreach Program is smaller and participants have closer connections with each other as they all reside in the same community. These women come to the drop-in every day to be with their friends regardless of weather conditions, and in spite of their mobility issues. They have built a supportive network, and they know they will be welcomed and taken care of.