

***Emma's story**

(As retold by Martine Dore)

At the funeral home, her son told me something I will never forget. He said, "I am so glad I am here today. I lost my mother twice: once to her illness, and once to Cancer. Being with her Cornerstone family today, I felt like I got a little piece of her back". My words stuck in my throat; Emma had meant the world to me. She was not just a client; she was also a member of our community.



Photo by Alpay Tonga on Unsplash

When I was working at our Emergency Shelter, I met Emma. At this point, she had been there for years. She was one of the most impactful people early in my career. She was petite, with long hair grey, skin liked dried apple, fragile and thin. When she smiled, she was missing teeth, but her eyes twinkled.

My first time meeting her, I burnt my hand badly while cooking during a shift. She went running off to her room and got a piece of aloe. And she showed me how to care for my hand. She was incredibly kind. I remember that she used to sit and read the newspaper up in the smoking-room. That was in the days that people smoked inside.

I learnt from Emma how to separate the person from the illness. She was a wonderful person who had her life stolen away by mental unwellness and poverty. Emma was a trained vocalist; she had studied with the same teacher as Maureen Forrester. Very intelligent, well-informed. She had been a nurse with a family, but then she got sick. She believed implants were in her teeth, speaking to her. She was so dignified, but sometimes we would be sitting together, and she would stop in distress. She would need us to say to her imagined implants to be quiet. We'd yell into her nose that they needed to leave her alone.

Unfortunately, being medicated made her flat and catatonic. She was in a cycle of hospitalizations as she got older and had her physical health decline, too. There was no safe place for her to stay out in the community. My only goal was to get Emma to move to our only supportive housing location at the time (now we have four!) MacLaren Housing Community.

While I was driving Emma with her things from the shelter, she felt like someone was following her. We had to take a roundabout route, so she felt safe to arrive at her new supportive housing community and her bright bachelor apartment.

I remember one Christmas in particular. Typically, as a rule, we don't talk about our personal lives, as we try and keep the focus on the client and her needs. I had known Emma for many years at this point. So I shared a little about our family traditions that included how in my family we offer a wonderful spread of hors d'oeuvres at Christmas. She said, "I wish I could come home with you", and then she added quickly, "but I know that is not the case!"

The staff and I came up with a plan to offer the same experience to the women in the shelter that year; hors d'oeuvres set out like a buffet. There were cheerful Christmas decorations, Christmas crackers for the women, and place settings and music. She loved it so much. Santa visited, too and gave out candy. She would usually never let me take her picture, but she did this time. I still have it. She is smiling but slightly turned away from the camera. That image stays with me.

After living at MacLaren for a while and doing well, Emma suddenly became very physically sick— she lost weight, and she was in pain. She was diagnosed with Cancer, and it was terminal. As a staff and client community, along with Emma, we decided that she would stay in her Cornerstone home, with her de facto family, and be as comfortable as possible as she journeyed to the end of her life.

When she passed away, I was devastated, but I knew we had upheld her dignity and did right by her. As we were at her service, in the chapel, I remember I was so upset, as we had lost a bright light. After the funeral, I met her lovely son. It was painful for him because he lost his mother to illness and Cancer.

Illness frayed Emma's family bonds; she stayed away. We became her family. We built our Booth St. location because of Emma. We created Booth St. specifically to house twenty senior women, part of our *Aging at Home program*. Traditional hospital settings or long-term care would not work for these elders with complex and chronic health needs. Many have been *street-involved their whole lives*. *Thanks to Emma sharing her experience with us, we created special services to ensure women get the help they need, feel safe, and stay housed so they can have the opportunity to recover and lead a life of dignity at any age.*

One person does make a difference. I'll always remember her, and in that way, she is never really gone.



Martine Dore

*Name changed for privacy.