

A-WAY EXPRESSIONS

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE CUSTOMERS, MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF A-WAY EXPRESS

Spring 2010

Peggy Birnberg on Board

By Maureen O'Donnell

Peggy Birnberg puts a voice to compassion and makes sure it is heard. With the tenacity of a good New Yorker, she made her way from Brooklyn to Toronto in 1976 and is now about to retire from her ensuing career. For almost twenty years she has been at the helm of Houselink as Executive Director. Peggy has saved a space in her upcoming retired life to continue sitting on our Board of Directors at A-Way Express. This is an immeasurable honour for us.

At the age of 20, as a new teacher working on the lower-east side of Manhattan, Peggy would “obey all the big rules” and then do what she felt was needed to get through to the students behind closed doors. That would include feeding them, supplying educational materials (from her own pocket) and discarding the curriculum, to reach children who were unable to focus on books. They would respond to “doing, seeing and talking”, so that was how she taught. There were parents who faced their own challenges of drug recovery and poverty, but she loved the children and encouraged the parents to recognize their worth as good parents. This work gave her a great deal of satisfaction and stands out as a real success in her career. And it paved the road no doubt for her work here in Canada, as an advocate who fought hard on the ground and in the boardrooms to supply opportunities for mothers and children to develop self-esteem, to develop skills, and to have affordable housing which is a fundamental right, in her view, and a social determinant of health.

Life in Brooklyn taught her about the leverage a good education can afford and she was primed to work in the Jane-Finch community. She knew about poverty, she knew about community and she knew about the need to chart a course by listening to the voice of the community. Coming from a system that was carved in stone and having the soul of an activist for change, she was not afraid to be disliked, and found that the first 10 years in Toronto were difficult times for her. It must have been lonely for someone who speaks her mind plainly in a culture that can be slow to take risk. She reflects that she sees this coming around in Toronto, but as a person who gets things done, it must have been frustrating to witness the Canadian need to be “appropriate”. It's an attitude that stands in the way of progress, and Peggy is nothing, if not progressive.



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The first five years at Houselink required a radical turnaround from having a fearful, angry staff that had been mismanaged, to being at a place where people have a say in their direction and growth. It was a long haul, but another favourite among her successes. A large number of people remain on staff since that time, which is very unusual. In fact, it is something that Houselink has in common with A-Way: a buy-in to the mission and values of the organization. Today, Houselink owns and operates 22 buildings across Toronto, recently acquiring 125 non-owned units. Peggy is very clear that these units are home to the people who live there.... not just housing.

‘Recovery’ to Peggy is defined by the person experiencing the mental health challenge. By her definition, each recovery will look differently, but from the inside it means there is hope to flourish in new ways and to no longer be defined by the illness. She believes that anyone can recover. This does not mean they are cured, but able to live fully in life, according to personal choices. For each it is a unique journey.

Peggy’s retirement plan is to have absolutely nothing driving her except her own ideas. After a full life of working mostly as sole supporter, it’s time to do what is fun; that includes being with family, watching any kind of film, going to art exhibits, going to Cape Cod in the summer and attending to her huge stack of books. We bow to your wishes Peggy and look forward to your continued contributions on the Board at A-Way. Congratulations on a beautiful career.

* **Houselink** is a non-profit, charitable agency based in Toronto that provides supportive housing to people living with mental illness.

Myrna

By Rosemarie Gelineau

Myrna was born in Saskatchewan and moved to Toronto in 1995. In 1997, she was attending the Psychiatric Survivor Pride Day celebrations (now referred to as "Mad Pride"), where A-Way had an info-booth. Unfortunately, at the time they were not taking applications. A couple of years later she attended the Mayworks Festival and was inspired by a screening of the National Film Board's video - "Working Like Crazy" that happened to feature A-Way courier, Susan Ashby (amongst other survivors). Realizing that she too, could work at A-Way, she contacted the office again and was hired as a courier in January 2000. Within six months, she was offered a job in the Accounts Receivable department handling collections. Since then, she has worked in Marketing and is also currently teaching computer literacy skills to A-Way employees. Her collections job entails keeping track of overdue accounts, contacting those customers and following up. She really enjoys the camaraderie of the Accounting team, including her "great supervisor", our accountant, George Karrantjas. While in the Marketing Department, Myrna had a hand in configuring some of the software we use, which she really enjoyed. Her computer skills class has become quite popular here at A-Way and she is really proud to be making that contribution. In her spare time Myrna enjoys boxing, soccer, community theatre, running, creative writing and photography. She lists Ruth Ruth Stackhouse and her boxing coach at Newsgirl's Boxing Club, Savoy, as two of her role models.

The following questions were asked just for fun:

What was the worst job you've held?

Working in a Market Research call centre on the evening shift; I lasted one day!!

What are three of your attributes that you are the most proud of?

I'm an independent learner- I'm able to teach myself almost anything; my ability to analyze and solve problems and my persistence.

What are some traits you'd like to work on?

Learning to let go; not stressing too easily over small things and cultivating more self-confidence.

Are there any skills/hobbies you'd like to learn?

I would like to study anthropology and develop my creative writing skills further.

What is your favourite:

Junk food? Chocolate

T.V. guilty pleasure? Two and a Half Men

Genre of music? Hymns

Place to shop? Zellers

Place to relax? Riverdale Park ... **and lastly, what is your "life motto" in a sentence?** Follow your dreams !!!!

Wendy

By Rosemarie Gelineau

Wendy, a native Torontonian, heard about A-Way through a mental health agency about five years ago and she was then hired as a part-time courier. Previously, she had held jobs as diverse as: nanny, shoe repair person, factory worker, housekeeper and a gas fitter/inspector, to name a few. Although she has gone on to do other tasks at A-Way as well, she continues as a courier; a position she enjoys for the flexible hours, the interaction with the customers and minimal stress levels. Although there are some personal challenges to the job, such as navigating stairs, complicated buildings and hidden mailrooms, her experience has been overwhelmingly positive.

Concessions made to accommodate employees' changing circumstances mean a lot to Wendy, along with open communication, tolerance, empathy and compassion. She feels it is important for couriers to be honest about their limitations with their managers, dispatch and themselves. She was also surprised about the ability to "learn as you go" at A-Way, including opportunities to be on the Board, even for the inexperienced.

I learned some little-known facts about Wendy through a series of unorthodox questions:

What were you like as a child?

I was a tomboy; I loved to play "Starsky and Hutch" and "Emergency", hung out on the Bluffs and was the head of my "nerdy boys gang"!!! (Laughs)

What are some misconceptions about you?

That I'm aggressive; I like to think I'm assertive!
Also, that I'm always outspoken.

What is something you feel you "need" to do in this lifetime?

Get more education, find a direction; see tangible goals reached within a timeframe. Get more organized and learn to say "NO!" sometimes.

If you could have three wishes, what would they be?

Have enough money to create a co-op farm where the homeless and disadvantaged could work, live and relax.
Market and create my: S.H.I.T (Self-Help Intervention Toolkit) a hands-on resource to help survivors cope, be pro-active and access links to other care.
Win just enough money to take a month-long vacation to Greece, with those close to me.

What are some of your unusual interests/hobbies?

Bingo with seniors in my building, church bazaars, community dinners and fundraisers...and the casino!

What is your favourite:

Colour? Aquamarine (green for energy, blue for serenity)

Meal? Steak and seafood.

Performer? ABBA

Movie/Play? Phantom of the Opera

Town/City? I would like to see Paris.

What are the three things you value most?

Family, autonomy and a personal belief system.

Notable and Quotable

Mental illness is an equal-opportunity illness. Every one of us is impacted by mental illness. **One in five adults** is dealing with this illness and many are not seeking help because the stigma prevents that.

~ Margaret Larson

A-Way Getaways

By Vern Nicholson

I love travelling. When I've had the means, far-flung destinations have beckoned and from Santo Domingo to St. John's to San Francisco, I have unfailingly answered the call. How though, does one satisfy that wanderlust during lean times? Well, a little digging can unearth a slew of overlooked gems, all closer to home than you think. The cheapest option, of course, is that slim plastic wedge in your wallet—the Metropass. Sure, you've used it to frequent such exotic locales as Alterna Savings, Metro Hall, and Nellie's, but it's also your ticket to fun, frolic and recreation. Consider these day trips within the city, all of which can be had for the princely sum of \$0.00 if you pack a lunch:

- Humber Bay Park – 501 Queen or 66D Prince Edward from Old Mill Station
- Col. Samuel Smith Park – 44 Kipling South from Kipling Station
- The Distillery District – 72A Pape from Pape or Union Station
- The Beach(es) – 501 Queen or 92 Woodbine South from Woodbine Station
- Taylor Creek Park – 23 Dawes from Main Street Station
- Scarborough Bluffs – 12 Kingston Rd from Victoria Park Station
- Guild Inn – 116 Morningside from Kennedy Station
- Rouge Park – 86A Scarborough from Kennedy Station

Should you wish to splurge, give GO Transit a try. GO trains and buses serve the GTA from Waterloo to Peterborough, Barrie to Niagara Falls. Here are a few sample destinations, along with return fares from Union GO Station:

- Port Credit \$10.10
- Oakville \$13.00
- Stouffville \$15.10
- Georgetown \$17.00
- Caledon \$18.40
- Port Perry \$18.60
- Hamilton \$19.00
- Guelph \$23.40
- Beaverton \$25.80
- Kitchener \$29.20
- Niagara Falls \$32.30
- Peterborough \$33.00

If you plan carefully using GO's schedule finder (www.gotransit.com), all can be done as day trips. I once took a GO bus to Jackson's Point on Lake Simcoe, walked a few kilometres east, and enjoyed a lovely day swimming at Sibbald Point Provincial Park (\$21.90 return, if you're wondering—and no fee to enter the park on foot).

Surprisingly, the best travel deal around is that which takes you the farthest. I give you Exhibit A: www.megabus.com. If you book far enough in advance and the gods are with you, you can travel to Buffalo, Kingston or Montreal for as little as \$2 return. Yes, you read that right. I've already done Kingston and Montreal and eagerly await my jaunt to Buffalo this August.

So who says you can't afford a vacation? With a dollop of ingenuity and very little cash, an A-Way Getaway is yours for the taking. Happy trails, A-Way friends!

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