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ULSTER QUAKER SERVICE COMMITTEE

An exploration of the impact of QUAKER COTTAGE

For over 25 years, Quaker Cottage, a cross community family support centre, has provided broad and diverse support services to families in North and West Belfast who have been referred by social and health care professionals. Every year, up to 30 families take part in a one-year intensive support program.

The impact Quaker Cottage has on these families is often evidenced by changes within individuals that lead to external changes in relationships and attitudes. Respect and acceptance are two dominant words that both staff and women that have attended use to describe the work of Quaker Cottage.

As a part of my MA dissertation for the University of Bradford Peace Studies Department, I researched the impact of Quaker Cottage on the families they work with, and therefore the communities of North and West Belfast. During the summer of 2006, I interviewed 13 women who had previously attended Quaker Cottage (they had left anywhere from five to one years previously), 3 social or health

professionals who refer families to Quaker Cottage, as well as to distribute a questionnaire completed by a further 6 referrers. This report is a brief overview of the findings.

The feedback from the women and referrers was overwhelmingly positive; a sign that although the project is small, it is making a significant impact on the lives of those it touches.



In the words of the women participants.....

"It changed me because I learnt self respect. I learned to respect me no matter what anybody else me no in the world thought of me. And I learnt to respect my kids for who they were, and that I wasn't the bad mummy that I thought I was."

"They didn't sit you down and try to tackle every problem at once, it was sort of like tackling wee

small things that mattered. It wasn't these big problems, it was the wee small things that helped you."

"Like that was really stupid that for 25 years I wouldn't talk to another person because of their religion. And now I am doing it."

"They showed me love big time, and I didn't know what it was."

"It was just like a

family, like a family that you never ever had."

"It took awhile to start sharing your problems. There was a lot of shame in your body, a lot of things you never talk about. Because it was very homely, and people started to say wee things, you could start talking, and you knew it was confidential, and you knew people weren't going to laugh at you."

What the women say.....

Each family attends Quaker Cottage for one year, yet the question remains of how does this year impact the lives of the families involved after their time at Quaker Cottage is finished? It is difficult to 'sum



up' the experiences of the women and how it influenced their lives. There were major themes that reappeared in every interview. These were themes of trust, acceptance, respect, support, and love. As evidenced in the interviews, women described how as they experienced respect at Quaker Cottage, their own self-respect grew and they gained healthy coping skills, which in turn impacted their lives as well as the lives of their families and communities.

Women spoke of multiple ways their lives were impacted. These included (but not limited to): gaining confidence, increased ability to cope with children,

wanted to 'give back' to others, no longer accepting violence, seeing 'new' ways to cope, greater understanding and acceptance of 'the other'. The majority of the changes that women

spoke of were about personal internal changes that were reflected in statements such as, "*Quakers learn you to be yourself, not to try and be somebody you are not... You know I have to be happy myself before, for example, I can make my kids happy.*" Personal transformations or experiences of 'being yourself' are ones that have lasting impact on lives in immeasurable ways, as understandings of self worth and individual potential illuminate new possibilities.

The way Quaker Cottage works focuses on respect and acceptance, by meeting families where they are without judgment and seeking to meet the needs

(material, emotional, or psychological) of the families involved. This way of working builds a relationship that is different than a traditional therapist or social worker role. This was evidenced by the way the women interviewed referred to the Quaker Cottage staff as 'friends'.

Quaker Cottage is based in the 'real world' where problems arise and challenges for the women will continue to happen, the difference is how does one respond to those challenges. One woman described her perspective, "*You have falls, but you pick yourself up. Before you would have made a mountain out of a mole hill, you found yourself, you would have cracked up at the slightest wee thing, I would have lost my temper, it was stupid things, but now, it is like, so it happened, what do you do, you move on and take the next hurdle. So everything is... well it isn't great, but it is better.*" The internal changes impact the external way of responding, something that lasts much longer than one year at Quaker Cottage.

What the referrers say.....

When asked how to improve the program, one social worker replied, "*do not try to fix something that isn't broken.*" On the questionnaire of 6 referrers, when asked to rank from 1-10 (10 as the highest) the services provided by Quaker Cottage, the results were: 10--(3), 9--(2), 8--(1).

A few quotes reflect much of the feedback:

"Quakers don't pretend they have the answers or give out medicine, they listen and give hope, and this is most important."

"I would have known a lot of mums that have experienced a

"Quakers don't pretend they have the answers or give out medicine, they listen and give hope, and this is most important."

major benefit by increasing their self esteem and confidence so that they can deal better with problems."

"Maybe because they get to Quakers it doesn't reach the point where they are on the child protection register."

Cross Community

All groups at Quaker Cottage are cross community with each group comprised of 45% of women from the Protestant/Unionist community and 45% of women from the Catholic/Nationalist community.



12 of 13 women interviewed had not been involved in any cross community activities as an adult before attending Quaker Cottage. All of the women stated that the cross community aspect of Quaker Cottage was ‘never a big issue’ and that they were able to discuss or laugh about issues together that usually would cause fights.

“There were people up there who had real strong beliefs about politics and all but it could come up but without any raised voices, they probably wouldn’t be able to do that in their own area, where it might have ended up in an argument or ended up in cuffs.”

All the women stated that they had developed close friendships from the ‘other side’ Many described how they had been afraid at first of visiting their friends in the ‘other’ area, but how many did despite fears. One woman, who has a daughter who attended Holy Cross Primary School in 2001, described how she would now walk freely

into Glenbryn area to visit a friend from Quaker Cottage.

One Protestant woman spoke of the understanding she felt from the Catholic women at Quaker Cottage when her child was beaten by

the police. She then took her understanding to challenge views in her own community.

“Last year we (her Protestant neighbourhood) went through a bad time with the police. The police had beat my wee boy, 16 year old, and I went up and they (Catholic women at Quaker Cottage) said, ‘we went through it so many years, we know what you are going through, like.’ When years ago we heard that the police beat Catholics we never believed it...I said to them, my mummies age group, ‘it is true what the Catholics said.’”

This ability to see the ‘other’ as similar to one’s self and to empathize with another’s pain, no matter the side they are on is crucial for breaking

down barriers. At Quaker Cottage,

women from different sides of the conflict are engaging with

one another, firstly as human beings with needs and then building friendships across the divide.

At Quaker Cottage the women are all working on their own lives and are able to share and learn from one another in regard to raising children, coping with past/present traumas, and living ‘everyday’ life. This makes no difference if one is Protestant or Catholic, but sets those identities aside to engage with identities of mother, partner, or child, that are more present in daily life.

The focus on meeting the basic needs of belonging and self-esteem set aside identities that may otherwise be divisive.

“...probably the ones that I was the closest to were from the other side. None of that mattered when you were up at Quakers. Like none of us were anything when we were up there.”

Women are coming together to support one another in their own personal transformations that will impact their families and potentially their communities. This becomes the foundation of the Quaker Cottage experience, and therefore when this base is in place, addressing larger political and societal issues becomes possible in ways it may not have been previously.



Impact on children.....

Quaker Cottage works directly with children and the children's work is important and based on the same ethos as the work with the women. This report focuses on the children via a perspective of the mother, but the direct contact the staff has on the children is also valuable to explore.

A staff member described her understanding of the children's work, as trust and acceptance. *"The children have learned to trust, and that is what is different. (A child) knows that he can go off on one, but still be accepted. And that is very difficult... children that have been abused in any way, it is very difficult for them to trust an adult."*

What the children gain from coming to Quaker Cottage is not limited to their direct involvement, but also their mother's involvement. The self-respect she may gain deeply impacts the life of the child. In the interviews, all women were asked the question, *"did your time at Quaker Cottage effect your parenting?"* The most common answer given was expressed as the feeling that they were able to 'understand' their children better and see more clearly how their actions, as a parent, impact their children. One woman described her insight. *"I was only being selfish, God help me, he needs me, the child needs me, and all they want is to be loved."*

When adults have experienced a traumatic event(s), their ability to fulfil their care-taking role of their children may be compromised. Adults who have been severely traumatized can be so shocked they are unable to recognize the needs of their own children. One example is when responsibility is forced on a child to 'parent' younger siblings and potentially the parent. One woman described how with her 7 year old daughter she had *"sort of made her into a mummy."*

One mother described how her relationship with her children changed. *"I find we are closer. We can talk more, especially my oldest wee girl. I used to be really hard on her. I tortured her. She never got doing things, she never got a break, but now me and her is great, we talk about everything, we go to the zoo and all, and the park. We do everything more. She gets out more, instead of me making her stay in the house and help me."*

Childhood experiences inevitably impact on adulthood behaviours; therefore, supporting healthy families could be seen as one building block towards increasing healthy societies. A child who is able to experience a level of security and love will be much more likely to be an adult who is able to use healthy coping strategies when difficulties present themselves as well as to develop their full capacity as members of society.

Conclusion

One mother described Quaker Cottage as *"magic, magic how the year started and how it ended."*

Magic is not a word we use often in evaluations of projects, yet the feedback and strong sentiments the women spoke of Quaker Cottage conveyed a special place that does not lend itself easily to statistics. The women spoke of a place where they felt loved, accepted, and respected. A project that can do that has a power to impact far beyond the women they come in

contact with. The conclusion is in the words of one of the women, and the summary of her experience.

"They will support you in every way possible. They give you your self-confidence back, they give you love, they make you feel warm. They help you find yourself again. When you feel lost, it is awful hard to find the right path to find friends again. And they are friends, they are friends

you will never lose, that you never want to lose."

