

STORIES

15 My Journey

Launa Leboe

I am sharing my story about my experiences in order to help to enact changes in policy with the goal of equal and fair treatment while celebrating the diversities we all have a right to enjoy. I see a need for housing to be established to prevent violence and promote acceptance. I suggest separate shelters according to gender in order to reduce conflict, as well as support for those who have other needs. People of all kinds need access for integration into society. Policies need to be established to support what is working, and to fill needs to promote independence. The goal is to end hatred and social separation, help maintain family support without stigma and chastisement, and enable more levels of support with accountable government. By sharing what I have gone through, I hope to be able to prevent additional stress for others dealing with homelessness and poverty.

Today, there are lists of resources for food banks, shelters and caregivers, along with volunteering to help keep us connected and gain valuable skills to avail us to the help we need. There is still a great need for more alternative housing and women's shelters, along with family shelters.

Years ago, I was living in an abusive relationship. 14 stitches later, and after two previous attempts to leave the abusive relationship, I knew it was not going to get better. A man friend lent me his truck to move my things to a new place without her knowing about it, as I was in fear of my safety. I was thinking about returning to work at Seafinn where we had worked together, but I didn't think it was a good idea. The women's shelter I had been to gave me a glimpse of where an alternate home could be.

One day while at a bar, I was injured by a man and required surgery a short time later. This man had evidently beaten several women before he made it to me. The bartender tried to let me know, suggesting I, "...tell my friend" that "she better shut up." At the time, I thought the bartender was overreacting, because my friend obviously knew the woman she was trying to convince to not to get involved with this other guy—my friend knew the woman was going out with another man. I didn't witness her being hit, but when I saw her bleeding with broken glasses and crying, I got mad. I stood up to this six-foot-something guy and took a half-hearted swing at him (not even knowing for sure if it was him who punched her at the time, but found out later it was). My fist grazed the side of his face as he took me out at the knees. I tried to stand, but I couldn't. A cab took me away and about a week later I was rushed into immediate surgery from emergency in Nanaimo. After knee surgery, a muscle graft and being placed on a new experimental machine to keep the knee moving, I recovered. One nurse's bullying in the hospital made me concerned about having no privacy.

While living in Qualicum Beach on my own, I had a job shucking oysters in French Creek (about 8 km away). In the wintertime, I would get a ride with the manager back and forth instead of riding my bike. It was during this time that I found out that they were not paying me fair wages; they were paying everyone else a dollar an hour more than me, and they also had me training others. A female co-worker told me of this slight. Although the wages were low at the next job I was considering (\$5 an hour back then), I let the manager know I needed full-time work to be able to pay my bills. It was the only 24-hour service station open that I knew of, and after four days of steady work, they kept me on full-time. I was alone after a certain point during the night shift, so I was the boss. I had a variety of familiar customers coming in, which made me feel less threatened, although some of the people coming in were impaired or angry. The police would come in on occasion, which I didn't mind at all, because this made me feel safer.

During one shift, a co-worker suggested I lock my till so no one else could get into it. I did this thinking that it was a good idea, seeing as everyone else had their own till. One day a co-worker couldn't get into my till, and he grabbed me really hard on the arms out of frustration. I called my manager and told him that he better get someone else to work for me because I was going to leave. When my replacement came in, I left. My roommate saw the abuser's handprint in the form of dark bruising on my arm, even a week later. As a result of this incident, I quit this job. My female friend and I decided to move to be flag persons, where you control traffic on the road during construction. When we phoned the job for information, we were led to believe that all we needed was a phone, a car and a place to stay there. We ended up flagging for half a day after moving down for this job, but then the boss just didn't need us again. I don't know why we couldn't continue working. This left us without jobs, even though we had already rented a place in Victoria. We did backbreaking work picking daffodils, and had to be on time to get picked up by the crew cab every morning or we wouldn't make it to the farm to work.

After that, we decided to register with the agricultural labour pool to get a job picking mushrooms. We were picking mushrooms at the barn on the manure beds and they didn't pay me for \$20 worth of work, so I decided not to continue until they did. My friend was shorted \$50. Others worked even longer and didn't get their wages, including a woman who worked faithfully expecting that they would pay knowing she had six children. I found out later that the mushroom employer did not even pay the rent to the farm where they had the beds.

So now my roommate and I were going back and forth, from Victoria to Coombs (about 155 km apart), helping her mom and dad work on their hobby farm. We were able to get some fresh farm eggs to sell, and we even kept some to eat. Due to roaches and the hostility of the management at the prior apartment, we were eager to find a new housing arrangement, so when we heard there was work and a chance to come back to the mainland, we did.

After being offered a job at a lumberyard, it turned out that we had to wait outside the lumberyard every morning at 6am in order to be able to work for the day. Since we didn't have a place yet, we used the washroom at a local gas station. We did this until we were able to stay on the floor at my friend's niece's house. Her niece had already recovered from drug use and

had successfully completed a Narcotics Anonymous program, and I felt much safer to be inside her home than continuing sleeping under the Patella Bridge in the car at the time—having the police check up on us and asking us to move the car from place to place.

After about three weeks, we found an affordable one bedroom above a business, near the lumberyard where we worked sorting, grading, painting, stacking, wrapping, and banding lumber five days a week. After my friend's hand injury, I would work five days one week and then six the following week to help support us. I trusted her to manage the money so she wouldn't feel bad about not being able to work outside the house. She did the shopping and I worked outside, and we stuck together. We pooled money to rent a U-Haul to pick-up our belongings, along with a dog, from her parents' farm on Vancouver Island after we had been on steady at the lumberyard.

There was a government-sponsored program at the employment centre that I was accepted into as a Pre-Apprentice Painter. During that training period, we were able to paint the stage for the Show of Hearts, and assist in the renovation, sanding and painting of Canuck Place (a hospice for terminally ill children and their families). I learned house painting, industrial painting and what the pipe colour code represented, while working alongside other trade union journeymen and peers. After completing the training, I worked at a lumberyard, and then decided to go work at BC Ferries. I had my little four-door car with cruise control that my friend helped me save for. This car was very important to me.

My training enabled me to find a higher paying job, like the one at BC Ferries, with more benefits. BC Ferries trained me as a Terminal Attendant, and I began work. The training included Safety Oriented First Aid (S.O.F.A), union agreements, safety, confined spaces, scissor lift, ladder safety, applications of substrates and other valuable colour matching, marbling and painting techniques. This led to them hiring me, thinking I could take a position at Deas Dock as a Painter and Labourer.

During the application process, and after being shortlisted, I was one of the 26 hired of 5,600 applicants. A manager suggested that I go to Deas Dock to be the first female painter! Knowing what another woman had done to 'fit in' as the first female blaster for MacMillan Bloedel, I said I would rather stay at the Terminal. I received training while at BC Ferries as a Terminal Attendant,

Super Host and Equipment Operator. Later, when I was reclassified as a Building Service Worker (BSW), I was taught more.

It came time to move closer to the Tsawwassen Terminal to reduce my travel time to work, so I moved to a new place in Ladner on my own on August 1, 1997. Living in Ladner above a store, I saw people coming into town early in the morning, which made me glad that I was still able to walk and support myself while working. I felt lucky compared to other people's struggles that I saw while participating with Community Crime Watch and the Community Policing Centre. While at one point I did enjoy participating as a voting Legion member—enjoying karaoke, the crib tournaments and the good company—the swearing and aggressive behaviour led me to no longer desire to be a member.

While living in another little place above a store, I was struck by a car and got whiplash. In shock, traumatized by the accident, I went right to the doctor's. The police found the driver who rear-ended me within a week. The doctor said I had whiplash and to keep moving for a few days. I kept moving even after two days because I thought I would be paralyzed or in a wheelchair if I didn't. There was very little damage to my car, but I had quite a bit of physical damage to heal from in my body. I had to sell all my RRSPs in order to pay for my physiotherapy, massage therapy and chiropractic care.

A couple of years later, I was out working with a female co-worker when she ran to catch up with me and smacked me hard on the center of my back. I snarled and told her to never hit me again. It wasn't until after I stopped working at BC Ferries that my chiropractor had told me she could have proven that the woman who hit me on my back flattened my disc. The woman denied this during an internal inquiry by BC Ferries with a shop steward (my union representative) present. The woman said that she lightly placed her hand on my back, which was a lie; the chiropractor said she could prove that the woman's statement was a lie. I didn't provide information from my chiropractor because I learnt about it later. The trial sided with the other woman thinking her testimony was the truth, even though it wasn't. I did not know that I could seek a retrial, but I think I was still in shock. Unreal!

I was quite emotionally hurt by the lying and the lack of justice as the inquiry sided with the abuser. I did not receive any compensation for my

injuries. So I let them know that not only was this workmate not behaving in a professional manner, but another BSW colleague, who had confided to me he was gay, started coming on to me in the BSW van, saying he would have sex with me. He thought he was doing me a great big favour, but I was not impressed with his offer. When BC Ferries chose to do nothing about that incident as well, I was removed. This just added insult to injury.

For over two years, I worked for a lady at a home and business cleaning company. I was still sore when I went to work for her (just a week after being injured at work at BC Ferries), but I did so knowing I had to pay my bills. The cleaning lady trained me, gave me a car to drive and made me the supervisor working the night shift. I carried out all my responsibilities until I began working in production for another company.

When I was working for a food production company, my knee was injured and I applied for Workers' Compensation. Thankfully, I was able to call upon my grandparents—they were like parents to me as they had helped raise me after my mother died in a car accident when I was five and my little brother was two and a half.

Knowing my dilemma, money-wise, and not being able to lift more than one apple and an orange at a time to pick up food for myself due to my injury, they suggested I come back to Vancouver Island. They said they would help find me a place and my uncle could pick me up in his car, as I couldn't afford a moving van. Relieved, I moved into a basement suite that they had found for me, knowing I may only have income assistance. With a separate entrance and the affordable \$500 rent with utilities included, still not knowing if I would be compensated for my accident at work or not, I was looking forward to their help and companionship. Without notice, the landlord tried to raise the rent by \$25 upon my moving in. I said that wasn't the agreement and needless to say, she chose to rent to someone else and I had to move after the six-month lease ended.

For the Payroll Administration Diploma retraining, I was told I might be able to get funded. I had to find the cheapest possible accommodations and research five different colleges in hopes of being approved. My research included finding the best choice based on what I could manage as far as access, education, and the course I would take for retraining.

I had another six months of physiotherapy rehab, and still managed to find my way around on the bus. Wanting to be independent, I faithfully went through the Psychology of Pain and Injury Management, a training course required for WCB at the physiotherapy rehab centre prior to the knee surgery through WCB. After physiotherapy and rehab, my surgeon had me x-rayed, which revealed an unknown existing injury. I was able to have knee surgery a week later due to being on WCB and using the private clinic.

After that, I decided to rehabilitate on my own because I had been through it before. The extension of WCB benefits, through the use of medical E.I. was not approved yet. This left me not knowing if I would have any money at all to live on or pay rent. Nowadays we have more resources available than just the help I had found before at the Salvation Army and Labour Pool shack on Vancouver Island.

I received retraining at college for my Payroll Administration Diploma. I found a job a month prior to completing the diploma, and worked for one tax season. I was in a great deal of pain while working for the tax company due to limping on a sprained ankle (which was a different injury) over a long distance to work at the tax office.

I had twisted my ankle while returning to the tax office after leaving the parking area in behind the tax business. The pain of the injury was much alleviated when my friend gave me a car for Christmas, which I named Bunny at the end of its life. At this job, my bookkeeping experience ended with my boss defiantly stating that I did quite well in most cases but was no longer needed. She tried to deny my right to receive EI, so I wrote them 11 pages of my working conditions along with two additional pages of the contract I had signed, and the expectations of the employer that had not been fulfilled. I won my case against her with Canada Manpower.

Running out of time, with no patience and only three weeks of EI left, I applied for a Front Desk position at an Addictions Recovery Centre. Having to start as an Attendant first, I was more prepared for the non-traditional job for women this time than I was when I was younger and less experienced working for BC Ferries.

At the recovery centre, they said they would receive more money for housing people if I accepted the position, so I readily agreed and wasn't really given

time to read all 51 pages of paperwork that sealed the hiring agreement. I was the first female nighttime attendant in the history of the company (which was quite large) and I was very proud of that accomplishment. After my last year at front desk—which I had to get the union to fight for me to get it—and the six months as an attendant there, the company passed their audit and I left due to dismissal.

I found myself applying for EI, trying to speak for myself but saying nothing at the dismissal. I felt there would be a threat on my life if I did. I later left a statement with the Canada Employment Centre (CEC), but after that the CEC received a call from the company and I was denied my EI benefits. I took whatever God would give me to do and was thankful for it. I continue to be grateful and have faith to keep going.

I remember an older woman saying, “You remind me of Job,” as I waited for the bus to take me to ladies’ Bible study one Saturday, and I remember thinking that I didn’t have the words to say—now I do. I have received more than double for my trouble and have witnessed amazing miracles and the love of families of all kinds.

Now with new friends and family, looking forward to my future, answering the call in my life, I know that all my prayers have not been in vain.

I also believe that separating alcohol and drug recovery centres may be a way to create smaller groups, while still keeping leadership to facilitate and bring in more aspects of protection. I know that others who have seen me around have gained strength, as I have inspired others not to give up, and others have also had words for me in due season.

Somehow I hope all my experience with temp work, drop-in centers, coffee and donut shops, and helping with the first Food Bank in Nanaimo, British Columbia in 1983 is just a beginning. I hope my sharing has somehow enhanced the lives of others as it has mine, and allows others the dignity and respect they deserve. We are all of one earth, and I hope to be part of the solution, with all the willing hands giving a ‘lift up, not a put down.’

Thank you for caring.



Launa Leboe

Born and raised in British Columbia, I was very fortunate to be taken in and cared for by my relatives when I was young.

Living in Kitsilano and on a farm in Langley at three we moved over to Vancouver Island. My mother died at the age of 21 when I was five and I was sent to live with different relatives. It gave me a greater perspective of how different every family dynamic is. Whether it was being the only girl, the oldest at home, the youngest, or somewhere in between, this personal experience has given me an understanding of being placed in different homes, though my placements were with family.

As an adult, ready to be independent and make my own choices at 18, I found no way of knowing who would be a good roommate. After moving seven times when I was 20, I decided to try to make better choices. Working and hanging around with all kinds of people while traveling gave me more of an education on a practical level and with a variety of people, especially with seasonal employment in the 80's.

I am now being appreciated for the contributions I have made and am making, it is truly amazing. My walk with God has been quite a surprise, with revelations amazing me in every aspect of life. Being gifted to heal and be prophetic is truly awesome. Thank you for all your support as I continue with the next leg of my journey, able to make commitments and determined to keep them. Being inspired

by the courage of others to share their experiences so that others may know that they're not alone, or without a voice, and that they are important encourages all of us. I look forward to housing the nations and feeding the hungry as well as attaining the finances to do it. I hope you have a great day and keep the faith.

Yours truly, Launa Leboe.