

Our Voices

WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE

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Years of Legacy at the WRC

By Haley Anderson



On the fourth floor of the MacEwan Student Centre sits the Women's Resource Centre (WRC) — a modern space with a lot of history.

Oct. 18, 2016 marked the 10-year anniversary of the WRC in its current form, but a women's centre has existed at the university in various forms since the 1970s. The demand was high on campus but each space closed due to reliance on volunteer efforts, space constraints or a lack of funding.

In 2002, a grassroots effort beginning in Dr. Fiona Nelson's Women's Studies Praxis course,

generated the momentum for what would become a three-year pursuit of a more equitable campus. With the support of women faculty and staff, notably Dr. Nelson, Catherine Fisher and Dr. Claudia Emes, the Women's Resource Centre campaign began.

"We faced four years of very hard work, meeting with many people, both supporters and opponents," said Nelson.

"Despite some opposition, however, we had wide support from students, faculty, staff and administration."

When Sheila O'Brien was appointed as Special Advisor to the President on

Student Life in 2005, she was asked to evaluate the student experience at the University of Calgary. It became clear early on that students, staff and faculty all desired to have a women's centre on campus. O'Brien joined efforts with Dr. Nelson and they set out to find funding for the project.

The turning point came when, after much reflection, O'Brien and her late husband Kevin Peterson generously donated her year's salary to bring the centre to life.

The group held campus-wide consultations to find out how people wanted to use the space, and what services and programs they wanted to see offered by the centre. This information was used to work with two Environmental Design graduate students to custom-design the original space as part of O'Brien's work with the Take Your Place 40th Anniversary Project.

"We were reaching out to philanthropists in the community to fund these spaces around campus — but my late husband and I thought, for us, it was really important we fund the Women's Centre," she added.

"We built the Women's Centre in a way that no one had done it before —

we had women develop the concept, design the space and then build it.”

When the Women’s Resource Centre opened its doors, it was established as a place of kindness and community, but above all else, a space where women could come together as their authentic selves and talk about the unique experiences of women.

“In that moment my heart was so full of pride, joy and hope that we had actually pulled it off. That all of us had come together to create something for future leaders that also reflected our values as feminists, and could grow as a women’s community at the University,” said O’Brien.

The WRC has since relocated from its original space and O’Brien noted that although the beautiful space the group originally designed no longer exists – she is ecstatic that the positive intent behind the space remained.

“Ten years later, it’s everything I could have hoped for and more. The fact that the programming has sustained, evolved and grown really is a wonderful thing,” she added.

“It was the best investment Kevin and I ever could have made.”

Nanako Furuyama, coordinator of the WRC, added the centre has maintained its vision for a more equitable campus through three pillars of work: wellness, leadership and diversity.

“In ten years, the WRC has become a destination for all individuals interested in promoting equality and building community,” said Furuyama.

“Students, volunteers, staff, faculty and members of the community who fought for a safer space for women on campus are who we have to thank for what it has become today.”

Furuyama believes the Centre’s greatest accomplishment has been

growing the volunteer base to more than five hundred peer helpers over the years who have contributed to the WRC in diverse ways ranging from raising awareness about mental health, sexual assault and gender based violence, to supporting peers one-on-one to help them through challenging times.

Samantha Withnell, a peer helper with the WRC since 2011, added the WRC’s accomplishments over the course of her five years of involvement have been significant.

“It was already clear when I started that we were outgrowing our (old) space,” she said.

“We were almost always overcapacity for our events.”

“The WRC is now visible and vital to campus life,” she continued. “We managed to do that in only ten years, so I think I speak for everyone when I say we are excited for what’s ahead.”

2017 WRC Award Recipients

Distinguished Alumna

Charlene Butler



Upon completing her MBA at the University of Alberta ('09), Charlene founded Butler Business Solutions (BBS), a consulting company focused on assisting primarily non-profit organizations. She derives great satisfaction from working with organizations on tough issues such as domestic violence, poverty, mental

health and addiction and from assisting immigrant, refugee, indigenous, and other vulnerable populations. Many of the projects she consults on directly impact women and their families. Prior to founding BBS Charlene worked for over 22 years in the petroleum, insurance and risk management sectors. In addition to her MBA Charlene holds her Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Science (Actuarial Science), both from the University of Calgary, and a Chemical Technology diploma from SAIT.

Charlene credits her parents and daughters for being the true inspiration behind all she has accomplished. She was raised to be an independent woman who never stops learning and never gives up when the going is tough. In 1993 with two daughters under age 6, Charlene left an abusive marriage and returned to University full time. When her mother passed away suddenly she became guardian of both her father with Alzheimer’s and her grandmother.

Despite these additional pressures Charlene graduated with her BComm and BSc completing the two degrees within 3.5 years and receiving Honours in both. She is very proud of the example she set for her daughters and other young women.

Charlene is a committed community volunteer. She is Vice Chair of the Mental Health Foundation, Vice Chair of the Alberta Automobile Insurance Rate Board, a Senator and Alumni Council Executive member for the University of Alberta and a member of the City of Edmonton’s Council Initiative on Public Engagement. In addition she is an active member of the Rotary Club of Edmonton Glenora, a Rotary Club focused on assisting women and children in Canada and across the world and a mentor to international and female MBA students.

Distinguished Graduate Student

Eliana El Khoury



Eliana is a passionate teacher, researcher, and scholar. She was born in Lebanon where she completed a B.Sc in

Information Technology from the Holy Spirit University in 2010 and a Masters of Education from Lebanese University in 2013. In September of 2013, she moved to Canada to pursue her PhD in Learning Sciences at the University of Calgary. She has since embarked on multiple projects related to supporting both international professors and international students. Eliana worked closely with campus partners, such as the ombudsperson, and the Student Success Centre, to bring valuable resources to the campus community.

Eliana has had her own share of obstacles to overcome. It is her determination, tenacity and her level of commitment that has brought her so far and she looks forward to the opportunity that lay ahead of her.

Through her work at the University of Calgary – and internationally – Eliana is a role model for the women around her. Eliana is currently developing online learning opportunities for Syrian refugee women who are not able to go to classes for various reasons. In Lebanon, she co-founded a non-governmental organization which strives to provide educational opportunities for girls and women so they can access to post-secondary education and the job market. Her work in Canada echoes this as she continues to use her multilingual abilities to volunteer with newcomers and help them settle into the Canadian society. As a Residence Life Coordinator in Residence and Peer Mentor for graduate students – Eliana exemplifies natural leadership and guidance.

Distinguished Undergraduate Student

Chrystal Campbell



Chrystal Campbell started her academic career in her late 20's, first in Business Administration, before transitioning into the Social Work field. Chrystal is now in her final year of the Bachelor of Social Work program at the University of Calgary. As a proud First Nations woman, she is dedicated to finding creative ways to apply her academic and life experience in her community.

For the past five years, Chrystal has managed to successfully meet her educational goals while working full-time as a Social Development/Income Support Worker in her community of Duncan's First Nation.

Chrystal has overcome barriers such as personal loss and intergenerational trauma; which have given her experience and the foresight to better understand and be compassionate to the needs of others. Since returning to her community 20 years ago, Chrystal has continuously been invested in and dedicated to community development projects. Chrystal is passionate about education and believes not only in the conventional academic aspects of education - but also honors the traditional, cultural and holistic teachings that guide her in her practice. Chrystal has been instrumental in implementing initiatives that encourage healing and growth, as well as promote healthy relationships and community wellness.

In her role as an Income Support Worker in her home community, she has shaped the program to bring in

additional supports and resources to combat issues such as violence against women and families, and addressing lateral violence within the community. Chrystal is passionate about the passing down of cultural teachings, and strives to keep these teachings alive in the community by working with groups of women and youth to practice these important traditions, such as beading and regalia-making for the pow-wow. Chrystal believes that these values not only empower women and youth but create a strong foundation for one's self-identity and belief in one's self.