

Elder financial abuse victims become agents of change

Some adult children have sense of entitlement

By Fiona Hughes, Vancouver Courier March 29, 2011

Last Wednesday at Heritage Hall, the future felt brighter. Nothing Earth-shattering happened and I had no epiphanies. But a feeling of optimism was palpable when women well into their senior years shared stories of family members taking advantage of them and how they decided no longer to accept being treated like a doormat—or worse.

Hearing from individuals you don't expect to see speaking out about injustices is always uplifting, whether it's women, men or children. In this case, it was mostly women of various cultural backgrounds, who discussed, acted out scenarios and performed a puppet show to illustrate examples of elder financial abuse within their communities.

The dialogue on the touchy topic sprang out of the 2007 initiative called Finding Home, a neighbourhood-level approach to building inclusive communities. Since then, neighbourhood associations, seniors groups and community organizers have held gatherings to discover what "home" means and to foster a sense of belonging in the wider community. As one senior noted, "Finding a sense of home makes me feel alive. When I feel alive, I can give more to my community."

Finding Home founder Jessie Sutherland noticed from "the get go" issues of financial abuse emerging from seniors groups. With federal funding, Sutherland, who has a background in dispute resolution and fostering reconciliation, started dialogues on elder financial abuse in 2010. Fourteen were held and Sutherland has been nothing short of impressed. As one senior opened up, others began to feel their confidence building knowing they weren't alone. "What has been surprising and inspiring is the level of resistance at the beginning of the project that none of these issues existed at all," Sutherland said. "Some in the community said, 'We don't need this because elder abuse doesn't happen. It's not a Punjabi issue, it's not an Afghan issue. We're completely fine.' To go from strongly resistant to becoming public speakers about the issues and being very excited to the growth and personal change that has happened has been very insightful."

At Heritage Hall, a Sikh couple acted out a scenario of wanting to buy airline tickets for a visit to India only to discover an empty bank account. They had opened a joint account with a grandson. He was meant to use the money to pay for their medication but instead cleaned them out. "This is financial abuse," explained an interpreter. "Older people rely on their children and grandchildren."

I spoke to one woman, who did not want to be identified, whose story goes back decades to when she first arrived in Canada as a single mother, unable to speak English, let alone read. She soon married but her husband, since deceased, took control of her life, taking her paycheque and not giving her access to a bank account. One of her daughters convinced her to open a joint account that covered mortgage payments. Unfortunately, the daughter takes what isn't hers, leaving the mother on the hook for overdue payments. Now 71, the mother feels broken, sad and worried about her future. She says she's not alone in her community.

An increasing number of women—within their own communities and cross-culturally—are speaking up and advising fellow seniors to make a will, refuse to co-sign a loan, keep their names on property titles, keep things confidential, and not to spoil sons and grandsons.

An Afghan woman told the story of an elderly couple whose adult children convinced them to sell their house so they could get the money. The elderly couple were reduced from being revered advisers to beggars.

Sutherland rightly points out that a sense of entitlement among adult children isn't unique to any single ethnic community. Among European Canadians, Sutherland heard stories about adult children taking a parent grocery shopping and adding their own groceries to the bill. Or children in their 40s and 50s moving back home and not helping with household chores or expenses and instead expecting their aging parents to provide everything.

What left me with a sense of hope was the women's desire to be agents of change that was anchored on the positive—teach respect by showing respect, raise conscientious children, remain open to new ideas, be brave, be humorous and value yourself and your strengths.

For more information, go to findinghome.ca.

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Last week's column incorrectly stated a UBC scientist studying "pathogen production." The area of study is "pathogen reduction."

fhughes@vancourier.com

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