



Safety Circles: A Collaborative Safety Planning Process for Women in Crisis

Safety Circles: A made-in-PEI response to fear and isolation

by Catherine Smith* and Kirstin Lund

In January of 2006, Jarrod Carmichael*, serving federal time for a vicious 3-hour long physical and sexual attack on a woman who had ended a dating relationship with him, was released to a halfway house in Ontario. Five minutes later, he walked out the door and headed home. A Canada-wide warrant was issued and his picture released to the media. He was on the run for 14 days before he called police to turn himself in. He spent those 14 days less than a block away from the woman who had been living in fear for herself and for her children since she was advised of his escape.

Catherine Smith* knew where Jarrod was hiding; she felt it in her bones. “When he went on the run, I knew that he would head to his mother’s house down the street from me. I phoned 2 or 3 police officers and told them where he would be but no-one went to the door. I felt like a sitting duck, like I was stuck out there on a limb on my own. I felt that no-one was listening to my concerns,” she recalls.

When Jarrod was returned to custody, Catherine continued to be fearful, anticipating his full release in 4 months. “I was scared because I knew that he could kill me. That night when he had his hand on my throat, I remember thinking, ‘I can’t believe I’m going to die like this’,” she says, “Because no-one would listen to me when he was on the run, I didn’t feel I would be protected when he got out for good.”

Although Catherine was receiving some support, she didn’t want a lot of people knowing about the situation. “I was embarrassed that I had let him into my life and that after all this time, he was still cause for concern,” she confides.

Feeling isolated and unsafe and facing Jarrod’s imminent release, however, Catherine determined that she needed to reach out to more people. The response she received was from Kirstin Lund, a trained mediator and facilitator with a background in restorative justice. Unable to easily find a process for women with Catherine’s need, Kirstin worked with Catherine and family violence outreach worker Gloria Dennis to create a comprehensive process that would bring supporters around Catherine’s family to plan for their safety.

“Over an 8 month period, we regularly brought together service providers, such as police and Victim Services, and personal supporters, such as Catherine’s employer and her children’s school counselors, to develop and monitor a safety plan,” says Lund, who acted as process facilitator. “Although some had been already working with Catherine, they weren’t working together and they all had different pieces of the puzzle. Bringing those pieces together and adding the police, who were keen to participate, resulted in a far more comprehensive safety plan than would have otherwise been created.”

While the safety circle process does not involve an encounter between a victim and offender, Lund identifies it as restorative. "There was harm done when Catherine didn't feel supported or protected by her community. She felt isolated and alone. Catherine's coming together with members of the community repaired some of that harm. She was able to re-integrate into the community," reflects Lund. "While the process doesn't ask the perpetrator of the initial harm to take responsibility; the harm does continue through isolation of the victim and the process asks service providers and the community to share responsibility for safety and inclusion."

Catherine recalls, "When the circle started, I was embarrassed and thought, 'Here I am dragging all these people in here and the focus is on me' but then I felt a shift, people were very compassionate and concerned and I didn't feel as isolated anymore. I didn't have to live in secrecy or embarrassment about it. After the circle ended, I felt relieved that we did everything that we could to ensure our safety. I feel safer and my stress level has been reduced tremendously."

As a result of the circle, Catherine developed a sense of community that many victims of woman abuse lack. In addition to having a comprehensive safety plan with built-in accountability for follow-through, she has developed a relationship of greater trust with the police and feels more comfortable calling with concerns.

As the center of the circle, Catherine was involved in every step of the process, including its development, which has empowered her to help other women. One year later, with funding from Status of Women Canada, Catherine and Kirstin are beginning the work of more formally developing the safety circle process, with hopes that it will be useful to other women in crisis.

* names have been changed.

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