

Everyday Heroes:  
Investigating Strengths of Formerly Homeless Families Who Have Found Stability  
Within Their Community  
by

Melanie Piper  
Bachelor of Social Work, University of Victoria, 2003

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Supervisory Committee

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Dr Patricia MacKenzie (School of Social Work)  
Supervisor

Dr. Lyn Davis (Studies in Policy and Practice)  
Member

Dr. Veronica Doyle  
Member

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Supervisor

Dr. Lyn Davis (Studies in Policy and Practice)  
Member

Dr. Veronica Doyle  
Member

### Abstract

While it is generally agreed that family homelessness is rapidly increasing, there is very little research to find out how families have exited homelessness and become stable. There is even less research to investigate the strengths that were employed by family members as they journey toward housing stability. Is it possible that this potentially dis-empowering experience can be enriched by the care and support of fellow community members and helping professionals? More importantly, can family members draw on this experience to recognize their inner strengths and move toward greater happiness and self-sufficiency?

This thesis shows how families who have been displaced from their community due to an experience of homelessness can be better supported to return to a stable life. A narrative lens was used to investigate the findings from semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with three mothers. One of the main criteria was that they found and retained stable housing for at least one year. The families in question currently live in Victoria, B.C. Canada, where this research took place.

Examination of participant's narratives revealed a five-stage process in which inner strengths and outer community supports combined to assist them in moving toward their goals. Participant mothers were able to access new ways to view the situation that did not leave them feeling marginalized. They also built both material and social assets that led to greater happiness and stability. Participants were able to develop resilient behavior by drawing upon past experience for knowledge, insight and inspiration. They overcame inner and outer barriers to these strengths by communicating their needs and reaching out to family, friends or services in a more confident way.

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The *Ready to Rent* program through *Stepping Stones to Housing* is Colleen's latest, and possibly greatest, contribution to the educational needs of families in crisis. Along with her partners, Dr Veronica Doyle and Linda Ross, she has shown tremendous leadership and courage in co-creating a curriculum for Canadian families. Along with program staff, she has demonstrated the value of creating a warm and welcoming educational environment that is inclusive of difference.

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to children and their parents who have survived an experience of being displaced from their community due to homelessness, and went on to flourish, despite unspeakable hardship and adversity. These everyday heroes have much to teach about how to support families to go from surviving to thriving. Their narratives provide insight into how they regained control of their lives and found the strength, courage and resources to pursue their dreams.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### *Introduction*

While it is generally agreed that family homelessness is rapidly increasing, there is very little research to find out how families have exited homelessness and become stable (Goodman, 1991; Toro, 1995; Herth, 1996; Caldwell, Artz & Kasting, 2005; Snyder, 2008). In addition, there is no research to investigate the strengths that were employed by family members as they found stable housing in Victoria, BC. Within this thesis, I determined that an experience of homelessness, and the subsequent return to stability, could be enriched by the care and support of fellow community members. By obtaining rich descriptions of preferred stories from formerly homeless mothers, new interpretations and hidden strengths emerged (Greene, 2002). Ways in which family members were heroic in the face of adversity were mined for key insights that can contribute to efforts to stem the rising tide of family homelessness and instability.

### *Background*

As an outreach worker to homeless families in Victoria, it became clear to me that children and families who were displaced from their community and became homeless experienced extreme stress that negatively impacted their sense of self. This was made worse by social stigma that reinforced a pathologizing view of them as less worthy or capable than stably housed people (Stoltz, personal communication, 2007). This seemed unfair because it appeared clear to me that for families who faced homelessness, instability within their community was triggered by events that were often beyond their control. They simply did not have the capacity or tools to navigate a complex and ill-equipped social system while in such a vulnerable state.

These families faced many of the twists and turns that life presents but had fewer social and material resources to cope with the crisis they faced. They had often outgrown their welcome with friends and relatives or were in hiding from abusive ex-partners. I was regularly humbled by their courage, persistence, sense of hope and determination in the face of challenges that most families may never face. My co-workers and I were often astonished by the tenacity, creativity and persistence of these vulnerable members of society as they endured poverty, trauma and marginalization from society. We noticed how important our encouragement was. This was especially powerful when paired with the support of a social worker who had experience in navigating a potentially hostile social system.

Of equal concern, while many families were displaced from their homes, fragile but vital connections to their communities were lost. Children were forced to move to new schools, sometimes several times within a year. New mothers moved away from caring friends and neighbors who supported them in their new parenting role. Children were raised in hotels for the winter months, only to be displaced as summer rates rendered their housing unaffordable. Many spent their summers living in government campgrounds while parents searched for affordable housing. Frantic parents were forced to hide the number of children they had in case a potential new landlord would not take them. Much-loved pets were given away or taken to animal shelters. All these fragile connections to community to which they felt a valued part, were lost.

Despite all these obstacles, and many more, most of these parents did go on to find stable housing and rebuild their shattered lives in new communities. Within this thesis I determined what their stories and experiences can teach community members



who concern themselves with supporting vulnerable families. A focus on strengths calls for complex descriptions that do not center the person as the problem, but rather frames their knowledge and experience within a broader context. Practitioners of narrative theory avoid making thin conclusions about people's identities; by reframing fixed and unyielding truths, they assist the person to form an alternate story about their situation (Morgan, 2000).

A narrative perspective allows the person seeking assistance to co-construct an alternative story of their experience in a way that does not render them as weak or dysfunctional (White & Epston, 1990). Thin descriptions of homeless family members can draw from a problem saturated and dis-empowering narrative. Framing people in this way obscures broader relations of power and does not reveal ways that the person resisted the injustices they faced. Practitioners of narrative methods are interested in working with people to bring forth and thicken stories that do not support or sustain problems. These new stories assist people to live out self-images that hold new possibilities for the future (Morgan, 2000).

#### *Research statement and purpose*

A review of relevant literature has assisted me to make sense of my experience and has raised further questions for social work practice with families in crisis. I researched in detail stories of mothers who were displaced from their communities in Victoria, B.C. due to homelessness. From this research, I determined how it is possible to emerge from a homeless or unstable state and contribute useful knowledge to the broader community. In particular, I uncovered both inner strengths and community supports that were useful to this enterprise. I hope that this knowledge will inform social work practice

with vulnerable families and the social policies that contribute to greater housing stability.

*Definition and research limitations*

This thesis examines ways in which families can be better supported to rapidly exit a homeless state to find and retain stable housing. I explored the various factors that enabled this process. I researched the experiences of mothers who have been homeless and asked them how they found their way to stability. For the purpose of this study, family homelessness was defined as a ‘family who is staying in temporary housing, such as a hotel or transition house, or staying with family or friends with no legal tenancy agreement for future housing’. This definition is partially based upon on the findings of Caldwell, Artz and Kasting (2006) that family homelessness is often a hidden and therefore under-reported phenomenon. For these reasons it cannot be described in the same way as other homeless groups who may be more visible. Because Victoria, BC, does not currently have a shelter for families, this research will include women who have stayed one or more nights in a transition house for battered women as homeless.

I limited this study to exploring the experiences of mothers who have children under the age of 18 years. Haber and Toro (2004) researched homelessness within various populations and found that the majority of homeless families are mothers with young children under age ten. However, within British Columbia, a family is currently described as “One parent and one child under the age of eighteen” so I will rely on this measure as the standard for this project (Caldwell et al. 2006, p. 9). Finally, mothers must have been able to retain their housing for at least one year in order to be considered

stable. This was a requirement for participation because at least one year of continuous residence in the same home showed a minimum level of stability.

### *Thesis outline*

This thesis is organized into seven chapters. Chapter Two analyzes the current literature concerning homeless families and the strengths-based perspective of narrative theory. This will include a historical and contextual view of family homelessness in Canada generally and Victoria, BC, specifically. Chapter Three outlines the methodology and research methods I employed to conduct this inquiry. Chapter Four summarizes the research process; I discuss the process of analysing the transcripts of interview narratives and describe how meta-themes, themes and sub-themes emerged. In Chapter Five I review the narratives of participants and reveal aspects of their stories that gave meaning to the inquiry and its outcomes. In Chapter Six I engage in a discussion of significant research findings and apply those findings to relevant literature. Chapter Seven summarizes the main findings of this research project as well as discusses its limitations and recommendations for social work practice.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### *Introduction*

In this chapter I review relevant empirical and theoretical literature on a narrative, strengths-based approach to working with formerly homeless mothers who have found stable housing. This includes historical and contextual views of family homelessness in Canada generally, and Victoria, BC, specifically. The Victoria community has risen to this challenge by implementing innovative programs that support families to find and retain stable housing. Following this, I investigate how a strengths-based practice can assist families and those that support them. This will be contrasted with an examination of the effects of a pathologizing discourse and its influence on families in crisis (Stoltz, personal communication, 2007).

Michael White has taken a postmodern perspective to discover how people organize their experiences in order to make meaning of them. He has studied the writings of Michel Foucault who argued that power is constructed by language; it is not “underlying structure or dysfunction”, but the meaning that people attribute to events that assists the influence of ‘problems’ in their lives (White & Epston, 1990, p. 3). This is in contrast to a “flawed-character” view of poverty that locates it as the product of a deviant underclass and individual deficits. Framing families in this manner may center them as personally troubled and does not interrogate the “influence of the problem” in their lives (White et al. 1990, p. 4).

### *Purpose of literature review*

How can families who have been displaced from their community due to homelessness be better supported to regain stability and pursue their dreams? How do

dominant social discourses render vulnerable families as having individual deficits while ignoring the larger social factors that contribute to their situation? This study began to address these questions by appraisal of conceptual frameworks, studies and recent research on the strengths of both homeless and housed families. This was followed by a review of strengths-based, narrative literature. The specific purpose of this was to locate my research within what is known about family's experience of stability and homelessness. Literature was selected that focused on narrative theory, strengths of housed and homeless mothers, and the social context that contributes to perceptions of homeless families.

#### *Literature Review Process*

Internet academic databases such as Academic Search Premiere, Wiley Interscience and EBSCO Host were used in the search. Articles were identified by using keywords such as 'strengths perspective'; 'homelessness', 'stable housing', 'families' and 'resiliency'. To deepen the investigation, I added further key words such as 'social work', 'narrative', and 'adversity'. In order to focus on families in Victoria, BC, I inquired from relevant service providers and researchers about reports that had been written specifically about the situation of homeless and stably housed families in Victoria. These reports described both factors that contribute to family homelessness, and solutions to remedy the situation. In addition, reports on 'Housing First' approaches to supporting people in crisis due to homelessness in Canada were mined for pertinent information. Many of these findings appeared relevant to the housing situation for families in Victoria.

*Narrative view of human nature*

Mary Clark (2002) argues that modernist western culture has evolved to view human nature as essentially self-centred, competitive and aggressive. The modern notion of competition is closely aligned with that of modern capitalism. Beliefs about the competitiveness of human nature overlook and ignore the evolutionary benefits of human cooperation and altruism. Over the course of history people have evolved to selectively see, take in, and interpret what they need to know. As a result, the culture we develop within tells us what to pay attention to, and how to make sense of it. These beliefs and assumptions are deeply hidden within the language and traditions that shape our experience, thus assisting us to create a shared meaning of events (Clark, 2002).

Within modern history, the discourses of psychology and sociology have come to gain particular status as the accepted standard of interpreting human behaviour and interaction. While a useful guide to western psychology at one level, they are very limiting in another. One of the ways that they have not been helpful is to render emotions as a by-product of evolution; left over animal traits that need to be tightly controlled by “stern, paternalistic reason” (Clark, 2002, p. xvi). Throughout this thesis, I have explored how emotions are an essential aspect of uncovering the strengths of people in distress. Ongoing anguish and trauma can cause our highly adaptive brain to send signals telling us to cease reflecting on our actions (Clark, 2002). Evolutionary neural-pathways tell us we must submit to the situation, which may in turn evoke feelings of shame. In this way, uncovering and supporting thick descriptions of family strengths can be a healing journey of recovery for those who have experienced ongoing distress due to the real or potential threat of homelessness (White et al. 1990).

Canadian physician Dr. Gabor Maté describes emotions as having innate survival value. He says that they are an essential component of the limbic system that processes basic emotions such as “love, joy, pleasure, pain, anger and fear”. These emotions modulate two drives that are essential for survival, those of attachment and aversion. Living beings always want to “move toward something positive, inviting and nurturing and repel or withdraw from something threatening, distasteful or toxic’ ... “When well supported and developed, the emotional brain provides a reliable guide to life...It facilitates self-protection and makes love, compassion and healthy social interaction” possible (Maté, 2008, p. 163). This knowledge is echoed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1999) who asserts that all beings wish to find happiness and avoid suffering. He concurs that compassion evolves within a caring and nurturing environment, which in turn contributes to healthy and happy communities.

*A historical and contextual view of family homelessness in Canada*

A review of the Canadian Federal Governments role in managing family homelessness is useful to understand how dominant discourses about housing have been created and sustained. *The Canadian Policy Research Network* asked David Hulchanski to review literature and studies that examine the role of federal government in promoting access to affordable housing in Canada since 1909. According to his research, the federal role in creating affordable housing for Canadians has been sporadic at best. Many efforts by the federal government have been more to forestall criticism on inaction, than to produce acceptable and necessary numbers of affordable housing units. However, during the period of 1963 to 1973 under the *National Housing Act* an effective housing program was created that provided 200,000 units of housing (Hulchanski, 2002).

However, in the mid 1980's, the Mulroney Conservatives made immediate cuts to the program and by 1993, the federal government retreated from housing entirely. Before this time, Canadians were rarely born into homelessness and very few people were unhoused. Today, family homelessness is increasing daily and more Canadian families are excluded from the social benefits that housed families enjoy. While the federal government has acknowledged the lack of affordable housing as major challenge to its economic competitiveness, Canada has the most private sector dominated, market-based housing system of any Western Nation and the smallest social housing sector of any major Western nation (Hulchanski, 2002).

It is difficult to house people with low to moderate incomes when the “market is the main mechanism and allocator of housing” (Hulchanski, 2002, p. 2). The growing gap between the wealthiest and poorest Canadians can be largely attributed to differences in housing affordability for both groups. A rapidly increasing number of parents are excluded from the housing market; the more fortunate ones enter the rental market. Those who cannot afford market rent or are waitlisted for social housing are most at risk of homelessness. It is this group of families who are “exiled from the mainstream patterns of day-to-day life” (Hulchanski, 2002, p. 8).

The situation for low-income families has not been improved by changes to income assistance legislation in British Columbia and the rest of Canada. Shelter rates are scarcely adequate to cover the cost of rent and many desperate families are forced to use money for other essentials, such as food, to ensure that their children stay housed (Rice & Prince, 2000). Clearly homelessness is an extreme form of poverty. Those who are not literally homeless are “one pay check or other misfortune away from losing their



housing” (Haber & Toro, 2004, p. 127). For this reason, the community has come together to find ways to support families who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, find their way back to housing stability (Caldwell, Artz & Kasting, 2005).

#### *‘Housing First’ in Victoria*

A ‘Housing First’ approach to supporting homeless people has demonstrated itself to be successful in providing the necessary housing and supports to ensure successful tenancies (Snyder, 2008). Within this model, people are assisted to find immediate shelter and professional support is offered to enable them to maintain their tenancy. Affordable housing is clearly the most important factor in promoting housing stability (Haber et al. 2004; Hulchanski, 2002) However, the support of family, friends and community members, including professional support services, enables individuals and families to remain housed. These two guiding principles have been at the core of efforts to assist families to become and remain stable in their homes in Victoria, B.C.

#### *Innovative programs that strengthen family stability*

In Victoria B.C., a rich network of services and programs has evolved to assist families who struggle with poverty, homelessness and unstable housing.

*The Burnside- Gorge Homeless Families Outreach Program*, funded by BC Housing, a crown corporation of the provincial government, is a key resource to assist families to find and retain housing. This innovative program was initially developed to support the alarming number of families living in motels along the Gorge Road Strip. These motels serve as unofficial emergency shelters for homeless families in Greater Victoria. The Outreach program sees an average of 35 families a month, and has helped over 1,500

families, including over 3,000 children, since it began its service (Burnside-Gorge Community Association, 2008).

The *Burnside-Gorge Homeless Families Outreach Program* helps families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless to find shelter and/or maintain their housing. Generally, these are single parents with young children. However, program staff also work with two-parent and extended families, and pregnant homeless women. Outreach Workers support families by responding to immediate physical needs such as food, clothing and support to find housing. In addition, workers advocate with resources and services by connecting vulnerable families to community activities, thus reducing both the trauma and stigma of homelessness (Calbick, personal communication, April 12, 2008).

Burnside-Gorge Community Association's website (2008), reports that "the housing crisis in Victoria has lead to a dramatic increase in the number of families needing support and access to affordable housing". Victoria's rental market is among the least affordable in the country. According to the Capital Regional Districts *Housing Affordability Strategy (2007)*, rents are increasing at twice the rate of inflation. Outreach workers have found that families who have limited incomes are severely affected. With few immediate shelter options available to them, families live in motels during the winter season or camp in public campsites during the tourist season.

Burnside-Gorge outreach workers report those homeless children and their families stay with friends or family, live in vehicles, or stay in transition houses for battered women. Frequently, parents report that they have no idea where they will sleep that night. According to statistics from the agency, the most common reason given for

their lack of housing is an inability to find affordable, safe and appropriate places to live within the Victoria region. Fleeing an abusive relationship is cited as another prime cause of family homelessness (Caldwell et al. 2005). In addition, self-reported studies show that up to 50% of street homeless individuals has at least one dependent child that is living with friends or family (Haber et al. 2004).

*Skills to develop resilience and housing stability*

In 2008, following the success of the Homeless Families Outreach Program, a plan was developed to pilot the *Stepping Stones to Housing* project to further assist families at risk of homelessness to gain stability. Housing providers in both the public and private housing markets reported that many families do not have the skills required to maintain a tenancy. While it is costly for housing providers to evict tenants and re-rent a housing resource, many landlords will choose to evict a family that does not abide by the rules of *Residential Tenancy Act (2006)*. This gap in knowledge and skill has led to even greater challenges for parents with an unstable housing history.

*Ready to Rent* is an educational program that assists families to sustain their tenancies and move toward independence and self-sufficiency. *Ready to Rent* supports parents who have had difficulty in finding and maintaining housing to learn the skills of tenancy. Within six training sessions parents learn about the rules and responsibilities required to maintain their tenancy, and resolve barriers to finding and retaining good housing. This training leads to a certificate that proves that the person has been taught necessary skills to be a reliable tenant, thus promoting stability (Sturge, personal communication, April 9, 2009).

The focus of tenancy skill development depends upon learning tenant rights and responsibilities. This may include cleaning and maintaining a home, paying rent in full and on time, and conflict resolution skills. Community partners and staff advocate for more affordable housing in Victoria, while assisting vulnerable families to develop valuable skills to maintain their housing stability. This plan addresses multiple ways to support families in their quest to develop strengths and capacities to live a life of their choosing (Kasting, personal communication, October 9, 2008).

#### *Building strengths and assets*

In August of 2008, *The Victoria Family Self-Sufficiency Program* released the final report of their three-year program (Wolfe, 2008). This asset-building program is an innovative partnership between Burnside-Gorge Community Association, VanCity Savings, The Vancouver Foundation, BC Housing, and The Ministry of Housing and Social Development. *The Family Self-Sufficiency Program* motivates and helps participants to identify their career paths and goals as well as the barriers that could prevent achievement of their goals. In support of increased self-reliance, parents are supported to connect to the existing resources and services that promote employability and financial literacy by building on participant's goals.

Family Advisors assist participating families to develop an action plan to increase economic independence. As of 2008, the 72 participant families in Phase 2 of the program reported increases in savings, reduced debt and an increased ability and to remain stable and pursue their self directed goals. The report shows a dramatic decrease on government social assistance and an overall increase in the numbers of families returning to full or part time work. With the assistance of VanCity and BC Housing, the

72 families collectively saved \$543,120.00 and reduced their collective debt by \$398,940.00. While these numeric factors show the great success of the program, the real benefit was in the overall increase in confidence in their ability to negotiate their families through the tangle of social programs to move toward a goal of their choosing (Wolfe, 2008).

*A narrative perspective on family strengths*

*The Family Self-Sufficiency Program* relies on a solution-focused approach to utilizing the strengths of families emphasizes the abilities and resources that they possess and builds upon what works (White et al. 1990). The meaning that individuals attach to events is especially important and represents an essential way to uncover and resist dominant discourses that keep parents and children locked in fear and shame. These and the other family support programs in Victoria view human nature as cooperative. Their compassionate approach to building assets, strengths and skills reveal ways in which notions of competition can result in a sense of personal failure. This is especially true for those who have been unable to participate fully in a capitalist economy while raising children. The support *Family Self-Sufficiency Program* staff provides enables vulnerable families to regain the skills and resources necessary to promote housing stability.

*The meaning of strengths*

As noted by Mary Clark (2002), the meaning ascribed to events must be uncovered according to the interpretation of the person seeking assistance. Dominant social norms may lead the person to feel worthless, or that they are not a good parent, due to their experience of facing homelessness within their community. In contrast, a strengths perspective may reveal that the person has heroically kept their family intact,

despite incredible obstacles. This view of the parent as courageous in spite of incredible odds may have the effect of leaving the family feeling proud of their accomplishments and heroic in the face of adversity. The housing and asset building programs in Victoria have demonstrated that they promote community inclusion and promote family strengths by starting with parental accounts of the situation.

My own social work practice with families, combined with the findings of these programs, reveals that individuals are often unaware of their own strengths. They possess knowledge and talents that are often important tools for their return to a stable life of their choosing. Inquiring into perceptions of how an experience of adversity has led to the development of strengths and skills is an indispensable aspect of this process (McMillen, 1999). The awareness that they are not alone and others have also walked this path can become an essential part of growth and transformation.

By taking the view that people are the experts on their own situation, they become liberated from dominant discourses and practices that pathologize and render them helpless. It is more useful to examine ways in which they thrived within a chaotic or oppressive environment and reflect upon what they learned on their heroic journey. Shame and isolation are resisted as aspects of the thin description of the dominant cultures view (White et al. 1990).

#### *A humanistic view of human nature*

Humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers believed that a truly helping relationship thrives when a basic sense of trust exists between those seeking assistance, and those who wishing to provide social support. For this trust to be present the helper must be genuine, unconditionally supportive, and empathic.

Rogers believed that individuals would move toward full personhood if appropriate social support were available. He did not believe in punishment and reward styles of assistance, and eschewed the need for professionals to take an expert role in the relationship. This view of human nature is closely aligned with that of narrative views of people and their circumstances. Its basic assumption is that everyone has inherent strengths that can be encouraged and supported by family, friends, peers or community professionals so that everyone can enjoy their full potential (Corey, 2001).

*The effects of a pathologizing discourse on families in crisis*

Dennis Saleebey (1992) argues that for much of its history, social work has constructed its theory and practice around the supposed deficits and pathology of those who come for assistance. These essentially negative constructions describe a fateful future for individuals and families, which is not helpful to them. Those in need of assistance may already view themselves in negative terms and may have been thinly described in this way by others for most of their lives. The words, 'deviant', 'troubled' or 'messed-up' come to mind. A commonly accepted world-view has been constructed that renders them as the centre of the problem. Most alarmingly, many come to believe this pathologizing view to be true; this discourse becomes an internalized and powerful force for self-regulation (Chambon, 1999).

According to White et al. (1990), Foucault concerned himself with how people become involved with their own subjugation by internalizing the discourses of society that promote the need to conform. Self-evaluation and normalizing judgment assist individuals to change their behaviour and expectations of themselves. These internalized standards are promoted by the culture as ideal and normal, but marginalized people do

not set these social standards. For example, the behaviour of parents and children are shaped according to western norms, which are often dictated by standards set by white, middle class, nuclear families (Rice et al. 2000). Western social norms dictate that parents must be able to work and earn enough money to buy or rent accommodation that is of a suitable size.

This discourse of parental responsibility does not take into account social barriers such as ability, poverty and experiences of violence and trauma, or relationship difficulties with their own parents. Ways in which repeated trauma shapes the brain, and thus perceptions of events are not accounted for (Clark, 2002). In my experience, parents blame themselves for their own perceived deficiency and become paralyzed by shame. They become isolated by an experience that they often cannot escape thus becoming “guardians of themselves” (White et al. 1990, p. 24). Alternate explanations, such as the high cost of living and minimal affordable housing combined with lack of affordable day care are obscured when parents internalize the perception of themselves as deficient (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1995).

#### *Studies of social support*

Lisa Goodman (1991) conducted a study in Boston, MA, USA that compared the social support of homeless and housed mothers. One of her key findings was that social isolation is more a *consequence than cause* of family homelessness. This is a key distinction because mental illness and a focus on individual deficits have been attributed to the cause of homelessness. For example, a study of homeless families in Victoria, B.C. reported that mental illness and addiction was a variable that is a partial *cause* of family homelessness (Caldwell et al. 2006).



However, Goodman's research shows that isolation and disconnection from family and community can be part of the tragic *consequence* of poverty and homelessness. For this reason, focusing on the strengths of formerly homeless families may help to uncover richer descriptions of how they found stability. A strengths based narrative does not look for causes within individuals, but allows parents to richly describe their own experiences in ways that may have more complex meanings (White et al. 1990).

Goodman (1991) discovered that both housed and homeless mothers had similarities in the quality and quantity of people in their support networks. While her study showed that it was true that wearing out the members of the network contributed to homelessness, the key difference was expressed as trust in those network members. She describes victims of homelessness as having experienced a profoundly traumatic event that disrupts social relationships, thus contributing to feelings of insecurity and aloneness. She suggests that this may account for the homeless family's perception of trust in others. She concludes her study by noting that homelessness within this group may have more to do with a severe shortage of affordable housing paired with insufficient financial assistance programs, than the individual deficits of family members.

Banyard and Graham-Berman (1995) appear to agree with this conclusion in their discussion of the strengths of homeless mothers. While they concur with Caldwell et al.'s (2006) assertion that homeless mothers are at greater risk of mental health problems and family violence than the average parent, they assert that the experience of homelessness itself may create depressive symptoms and other traumatic reactions. To counter this, they believe that parents who are experiencing homelessness or instability have unique needs for services such as day care, housing, job training, parenting skills training and

transportation. Sadly, they report that such services are generally under funded and welfare services often reinforce the lowly status of homeless women and their children.

### *Conclusions*

It is clear from this review of the literature that developing strengths and assets is an essential component of enhancing housing stability for families who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness. While mainstream social values promote the ideals of home ownership, this reality is challenging to achieve for low-income families. Due to social stigma and internalised feelings of shame, many vulnerable families who experience homelessness fall into self-blame. Rather than view themselves as heroic survivors of a market-based housing system that does not help them meet their basic needs, they are vulnerable to a variety of negative perceptions, both internal and external.

Family violence, addiction, inadequate tenancy skills, mental illness and desperate poverty have led to a downward spiral for many family members who simply cannot cope with such an overwhelming burden. Fortunately, the Victoria community has demonstrated ways to support families to access and retain stable housing while building both material and social assets. This study examined first hand accounts of families in Victoria that have become stably housed and retained their housing for one year. Both internal and external factors that made this stability possible are examined, so that families who are facing housing instability can resist negative self perceptions, and empower themselves to move toward stability.

## Chapter 3: Research Methods

### *Introduction*

This thesis generates a basis to explore the ways in which families who have been displaced from their community, due to an experience of homelessness, can be better supported to return to a stable life. A narrative inquiry was used to examine meanings of self-reported strengths from the perspective of formerly homeless mothers (Cobb, 1994). In particular, their narratives have been investigated for signs of resiliency. According to Greene (2002), families and individuals can create a rich life of their choosing despite experiencing serious negative life events. While exploring stories of courage, we must acknowledge accounts of pain and adversity. However, more significantly, we must carefully unpack the resources and potential that emerge from these narratives in order to assist families who are facing similar crisis to regain stability within their community.

### *Purpose of This Study*

How can families who have been displaced from their community due to homelessness be better supported to regain stability and pursue their dreams? How do dominant social discourses render vulnerable families as having individual deficits while ignoring the larger social factors that contribute to their situation? This research began to address these questions by appraising conceptual frameworks, studies, and recent research on the strengths of both homeless and housed families. This was followed by a review of strengths-based, narrative literature. The specific purpose was to locate my research within what is known about family's experience of stability and homelessness.

This research is guided and framed by a narrative inquiry, which concerns itself with the life experiences of "lived and told stories" (Creswell, 2003, p. 54). While

narrative research can involve itself with descriptions of themes, events or happenings, this research concerns itself with descriptions of family resilience in the face of homelessness. It is anticipated that by obtaining rich descriptions of preferred stories from formerly homeless family members, new interpretations and hidden strengths will emerge (Greene, 2002). Ways in which family members were heroic in the face of adversity were mined for key insights that may help to stem the rising tide of family homelessness and instability.

Borden states that, “the effort to restore a sense of order and meaning assumes the form of a narrative....people revise accounts of life experience in the face of unexpected or adverse events so as maintain a sense of coherence...and to deal with the impact of change and loss”. It is critical that “research efforts address the meaning of events and the impact of experience as appraised by the person” (1992, p. 135). For this reason, a narrative lens has been employed to investigate the findings from semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with three participant mothers, each of whom represent their family.

Narrative perspectives complement other intervention approaches that focus on problem solving such as educational strategies and resource provision (Borden, 1992). Strategies to target family homelessness in Victoria, B.C. such as *The Homeless Families Outreach Program*, *Stepping Stones*, and *The Family Self Sufficiency Program* each rely on problem solving, education and facilitating access to community resources. For the purposes of this inquiry, participants from these social programs were invited to participate in this research, along with a general invitation to the Victoria community.

*Resiliency*

Roberta Greene has examined studies of children who have experienced adversity to discover ways that they have learned from their experience and thrived. These inquiries into resiliency reveal that participants have a “strong capacity to form relationships, solve problems, develop a sense of identity, and to plan and hope” (2002, p.5). Resilient children tend to be sociable, responsible and active within their community. The key to developing a resilient self may lie in the strong attachment bonds between child and caregiver. For this reason, signs of these qualities will be highlighted within narrative interviews, so that their deeper meanings can be explored.

McMillen also reviewed the literature of people who had experienced significantly adverse events. While many respondents perceived themselves to be harmed by the same experiences, 98% of them reported that they “learned something” from the incident. In addition, 79% reported that they were able to “turn some aspect of the experience to their advantage” (1999, p. 457). The most commonly reported change was that research participants sought to actively engage with their environment, and thoughtfully restructure their lives. They were better able to prevent future stressors and find meaning in their adversity.

This important research illustrates ways that learning new skills and enhancing self-awareness by experiencing vulnerability can strengthen families. For this reason, a narrative inquiry has been used to facilitate rich descriptions of the ways in which research participants, with the assistance of people from within their community, were able to find and retain stable housing. Empowerment research methods such as narrative

inquiry contribute to knowledge while supporting participants to have a voice in matters that concern them (Saleeby, 1992).

Clandinin asserts that narrative research consists of obtaining and reflecting upon people's lived experience, which is a "relational endeavor" (2007, p. 537). As a qualitative research method, it involves studying people in their natural setting in order to make sense of phenomena and the meanings participants ascribe to them. The method is "not about prediction and control, but in understanding" (p. 4). Narrative researchers study the impact of particular narratives on experience. In this case, I attended to ways in which participant mothers regained a sense of strength, meaning and resilience following an adverse situation such as becoming homeless (Borden, 1998).

### *Self-Defining Memories*

Studies of self-defining memories show that autobiographical recollections are connected to important ongoing personal goals (Clandinin, 2007). They can be drawn upon to reconstruct meanings of events that highlight strengths and resources. Memories, emotions and images about a remembered event are shaped by the responses of other people in our social environment. This fact highlights the importance of social influences, and illustrates their essential role in the ongoing formation of our internalized life story. This research played an important role in investigating alternate and preferred stories that could potentially paint rich descriptions of participant mother's resiliency in the face of adversity.

However, because the very nature of family homelessness is so shameful for all concerned, these vulnerable children and their parents tend to remain hidden. This research has rendered their plight visible through first hand narratives so that family

homelessness can be addressed. By interviewing families who were homeless, but have found stable housing for at least one year, their knowledge added depth to this inquiry. In this way, first hand knowledge and expertise is gained, while highlighting the strengths and resilience of participants.

*Mindfulness as a tool of reflexive practice*

Social work practice encourages reflexivity as practitioners review their own thoughts, feelings, attitudes and biases as they work with people who enjoy less social privilege (Saleeby, 1992). By learning to quiet the swirl of thoughts and emotions that often accompany a difficult inquiry, mindfulness practice enables me, the researcher, to find the quiet center that is necessary for reflection. From my place of mindfulness and training in body-centered psychotherapy, I have come to learn that it is necessary for both storyteller and listener to observe ways in which the narrative is ‘nourishing’ to both parties. Mindful awareness creates a safe space of containment for in-depth, conversational interviews (Martin, personal communication, 1998).

For example, during the semi-structured interview the researcher pays attention to the narrative by attending to signs of strength and resiliency that invite warmth into the discussion. By cultivating a curious, open, not knowing stance, the participant is encouraged to go further into the narrative, where deeper meanings are held. ‘The story within the story’ can emerge with rich and hidden truths that benefit both researcher and participant. This dialectic is an important part of the healing process and creates an atmosphere of trust that is essential for interviewing (Greene, 2002).

Since a narrative inquiry invites participants into the research, it is essential that the researcher maintain a ‘not knowing’ stance during the conversation. Clandinin (2007)

asserts that the researcher must remain open to generating alternatives while assuming that the participant has strengths and resources. With this method, the researcher must engage in reflexivity and be aware of their values and beliefs in order to avoid the possibility of power struggles between researcher and participant.

#### *Steps in the research process*

This confidential, collaborative inquiry consisted of six steps in which participants could withdraw at any time. Each step involved obtaining feedback about the process and answering questions from participant mothers. No children were interviewed, but information offered by their parents may have been included with the consent of the participant mother. Participants were invited to collaborate with the researcher at each stage of the process in order to validate the inquiry (Patton, 2002). Participants were mothers who have had an experience of homelessness within British Columbia, where a family is currently described for this research as “One parent and at least one child under the age of eighteen” (Caldwell et al. 2006, p. 9).

#### *Homelessness and stability defined*

In order to be considered stably housed, mothers and their children must have obtained and retained their current home for at least one year and consider it their primary residence. Preferably they had a legal tenancy agreement under *The Residential Tenancy Act (2006)* but this was not a requirement for participation in the study. Family homelessness was defined as a “family who is staying in temporary housing, such as a hotel or Transition House, or staying with family or friends with no legal tenancy agreement for future housing” (Caldwell et al. 2006). As Victoria does not currently



have a shelter for families, this research included women who had stayed one or more nights in a transition house for battered women as homeless.

### *Advertising for Participants*

Participant mothers were invited to apply to the narrative inquiry.

Advertisements were available in the offices of *Burnside-Gorge Community Association*, *Blanshard Community Centre*, *Crystal Pool*, *Bridges for Women*, *The Native Friendship Center*, *The Homeless Families Outreach Program*, *Stepping Stones*, and *The Family Self Sufficiency Program* (See Appendix B). Professional support workers from within these programs were advised of the research opportunity and invited to tell potential participants about it. It was anticipated that by distributing information to places frequented by potential participants stating the research topic and goals, that mothers who have experienced homelessness would volunteer to participate.

Applicants were asked to contact me by telephone for detailed information (see Appendix B). Once contacted, I advised them of the purpose of the research. I also discussed the benefits, risks and voluntary nature of participation, as well as their right to withdraw at any time (before, during or after the interview). I also discussed ways that I could ensure their confidentiality and anonymity, and how the data would be used. I requested a variety of times they might be available, as I needed to co-ordinate the availability of other participants. When interested in an individual interview, we set a date and time that was best for them and arranged a venue.

### *Initial meeting*

After participants agreed to take part, an initial meeting took place to review and sign the consent form. Participants were also asked to complete the *Demographic Information Survey* (Appendix C). The purpose of this form was to gather basic demographic information about the family to enrich the data. Demographic information provided a basic background to the research, such as age, number of children, and residency history. This information also gave breadth to the inquiry and illustrated some of the challenges faced by the family. This additional information enabled a more detailed analysis during the research process (Sturge, personal communication, March 3, 2009).

### *Consent and confidentiality*

The consent form for this research included a statement of my research purpose as well as potential risks and benefits, and stressed that participation was completely voluntary. They were reminded that they could discontinue their participation at any time (Appendix E). Before each interview, I engaged in a discussion about consent, ensuring participants' comfort and complete understanding of their role in the research. Applicants were given as much time as is necessary to make a fully informed decision; they were advised of their right to withdraw during the initial recruitment telephone conversation, in writing on the consent form, while discussing the consent form, and after the interview.

Participants were given an honorarium of \$30.00 at the beginning of the initial meeting and were advised of their right to keep this compensation should they choose to withdraw. This amount was not sufficient to be an inducement to participate, but assisted

with childcare, transportation, and unexpected costs. Their right to keep their compensation was noted in the written consent form. Participants were also reminded of the legal obligation of the researcher to report a disclosure of child abuse or neglect, as well as intent to harm themselves or another person.

Participant mothers were asked to use a pseudonym that was noted on the consent form and *Demographic Information Survey* (Appendix C). They are referred to by this pseudonym throughout the manuscript. At all stages of the research (including recruitment, accessing consent, data collection, data analysis, publication) the identity of participants was kept in complete confidence. Each conversation was audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Notes, recorded tapes and transcriptions were contained within a locked box, and erased as soon as they were no longer needed. The consent form (Appendix E) stated that only my thesis supervisor, Dr. Patricia Mackenzie, and I had access to this information. Data from this study was disposed of by erasing electronic data. Transcripts will be shredded two years after the University of Victoria has accepted my thesis.

#### *Semi-structured interview with participant*

The second meeting took place in the participant mother's home, or in a setting that best situated the context for their story. Narratives help people to organize their experience into "meaningful episodes that call upon cultural modes of reasoning and representation" (Fraser, 2004, p. 180). Home interviews enriched the narrative with memories and artifacts that most suitably conveyed the experience of the participant and her family. In the event that a participant did not wish to be interviewed in her home, the researcher arranged and paid for an alternate research venue.

The research guide used to facilitate the recall of relevant narratives can be found in Appendix A. Its focus is upon obtaining accounts of strengths and resiliency taken from memories of past homelessness. Semi-structured interviews helped to keep the spotlight of the narrative on the transition from homelessness to stability. This kind of discussion supports modes that maximize the freedom to co-construct the narrative in a way that best suits the storyteller's cultural perspective. Narratives can reinforce or challenge dominant perspectives as best suited to the participants needs (Fraser, 2004).

#### *Collaborative review of coded transcripts*

Collaboratively reviewing the coded interview transcript is critical to inviting participation and ensuring accuracy. This took place in a third discussion with participant mothers. Kirby and McKenna, (1989) suggest that in order to be valid, the narrator of the story must approve all stages of the inquiry. Participant mothers were asked to confirm that it was an accurate portrayal of their narrative. It was hoped that this provided an opportunity for reflection that enriched the narrative and provide additional time for reflection and discussion between the participant mother and myself. The inquiry was amended as details are added and narratives were deconstructed and constructed according to the preferences of the participants (Riesmann & Quinney, 2005).

#### *Final revisions of narrative inquiry*

Narrative inquiry assists in unpacking the spoken and unspoken, as preferred stories emerged from the research (Fraser, 2004). For this reason, it was crucial that all participants in the inquiry had the opportunity to critique and revise the completed analysis. As a therapeutic enterprise, ensuring accuracy is essential. Participant mothers

were partners in the endeavor, as the inquiry aimed to actively capture heroic events that featured them in a starring, or supportive role.

*'Thank you' letter to participant*

'Thank you' letters can be therapeutic to receive. They convey gratitude for participation, summarize the inquiry, and highlight key aspects of family strengths (White et al. 1990). If it was agreed that a therapeutic letter would be appreciated, I reviewed the final draft of the inquiry and selected highlights of the narrative that were especially inspiring. They focused on language and words that were spoken during the interview, using phrasing and expressions that were helpful to all concerned. Letters that summarize the main points of the discussion assist participant mothers to stay connected to the process of identifying with their preferred story. Letters will be no longer than one page in length, as suggested by Morgan (2000).

In summary, this collaborative inquiry investigated ways that mothers demonstrated resiliency as they moved their families from a period of homeless to finding a stable home life. Narrative inquiry is distinct from other forms of discourse because of its focus on the sequence and consequence of participant stories (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Participatory practice is the hallmark of these relationships. Events are selected, evaluated, connected and organized in a way that is meaningful to the narrator. It is not simply the content, but the way stories are organized according to time and space that is of value. The spoken and unspoken are attended to in a way that honors social work ethics by building relationships and appreciating diversity among participants.

## Chapter 4: The Research Process

*A stumble in life is not a failure. It's only a failure if you choose not to do anything about it. Anybody can stumble, no matter how high they are, or how much money they make, It just takes a split second.  
(Annie).*

### *The Research Process in Practice*

In this chapter, I discuss the process of analyzing the transcripts of interview narratives and describe how meta-themes, themes and sub-themes emerged that lead to the key findings within. An initial analysis of these themes revealed what participant mothers had to teach about the personal strengths necessary to engage with themselves, their families, friends and community. This inquiry revealed the many qualities of resiliency participants drew upon in order to establish stability and develop greater self-sufficiency.

Prior to beginning the study, after receiving approval from the University of Victoria to conduct the research, I spent time cultivating a Beginner's Mind. This kind of awareness is grounded in a sense of openness, and not knowing what the answers might be, or how they might arise. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh says that everybody has a Beginner's Mind, and therefore has the capacity to recognize what is "good, beautiful and true" (2007, p. 61). I knew that it was an honour to be entrusted with the stories of the three participants, and I wanted to remain as open as possible to what they had to teach. Within each stage of the research, I attempted to reside within the openness of Beginner's Mind so that I was able to glean every fragment of knowledge and wisdom from the participants' narratives.

*The recruitment process*

Participant mothers found their way into this study after I had advertised in several recreation and community centers. Each time I left a poster (Appendix B) at a site, I noted the date in my research logbook. I also approached support workers at various community agencies and gave them the poster to review. I took time to explain the research project, and workers agreed to inform potential candidates who may be interested in participation. I did not receive a response for several weeks and kept reminding workers by phone and email of the purpose and value of the study.

During this time, I happened to meet one of the participants whom I knew slightly. I did not know if she had been homeless, but intuitively felt she would have a lot of knowledge to contribute to the research. After due consideration, she agreed to participate after we established the nature and purpose of the research. The other two participant mothers contacted me soon afterwards after being referred from their support workers, people they trusted. Upon reflection I realized that there is a great deal of stigma attached to the term, homeless families. Advertising directly may have had the effect of preventing participation due to perceptions of inadequate parenting, and it seemed important to be recommended by a trusted source.

Throughout the initial meeting with each participant mother, I described the purpose of the study and reviewed the consent form with them. I also asked them to complete the *Demographic Information Survey* (Appendix C) in order to gather some basic information. In addition, each participant mother received a copy of the research guide and was asked to consider the questions before the next meeting. Each mother was also given a \$30.00 honorarium. I was glad to have this initial meeting because the

participant mothers and I had time to meet in person before completing the more intimate, lengthier, semi-structured interview. Participants did not seem overwhelmed by information, and had time to review the questions and make changes if desired.

The second survey used in this research was a semi-structured interview that was designed to give more detailed information about the participant's self reported strengths. This took place at a second meeting and all participants answered the same set of questions, although participants were told that this was a guide. They were not compelled to answer any question they felt uncomfortable with. Participants were reminded about ways their privacy would be protected and that they could speak with confidence. They were also told that they would have additional opportunities to add or change their narratives until they were satisfied that their stories were told with accuracy.

#### *Step One: Coding the themes*

Following each interview, I listened to the audiotapes to review my initial impressions. I noted after completing the interviews that each mother demonstrated a deep love for her children. This bond seemed to enable participants to keep moving forward despite many obstacles. Determination appeared key to providing a safe and happy home and was clearly the basis for all their actions. Communication of their emotional pain and personal struggle to a trusted person also seemed significant. I noted this in my logbook and prepared the transcripts for examination.

#### *Step Two: Developing a theme worksheet*

After checking the transcripts for accuracy, I reviewed each one carefully and decided to break the narratives into chunks, or dib bits, so that the information was more manageable (Creswell, 2003). I used varied and coloured fonts to distinguish the



narratives from each other and printed a copy of each on coloured paper. These dib bits were then cut up and coded so that they could be easily categorized into meta-themes, themes and sub-themes, making notes in my logbook as I went. Finally, they were placed into a worksheet entitled *Coded themes*

Once I was satisfied that the themes were in appropriate groups, I used Microsoft Word to further develop and sort the themes and sub-themes within the worksheet. This enabled me to become more familiar with the narratives, but remain detached from them as they were re-shuffled into more suitable categories. This process took several weeks as members of my supervisory committee encouraged me to look ever more deeply into the stories in order to make meaning of them. I kept refining my ideas as I reviewed the coded narratives and did not stop until I was satisfied that they were in the appropriate groups.

Throughout the process of sorting the dib bits into meta-themes, themes, and sub-themes, I used the worksheet entitled *Themes for Findings* to update new ideas. I put the main point of my research at the top of the page to remind me what I was searching for. The sentence was, “How families make sense of dis-empowering circumstances to overcome challenges, discover new meaning, find greater happiness and develop self-sufficiency”. I was glad that I did this, because as I continually revised the themes, it kept me from losing focus. If the idea or theme that emerged did not appear to fit into this concept it was not included. As I went, I tried to ensure that all three participants were represented in each tentative theme or sub-theme in order to consider it valid.

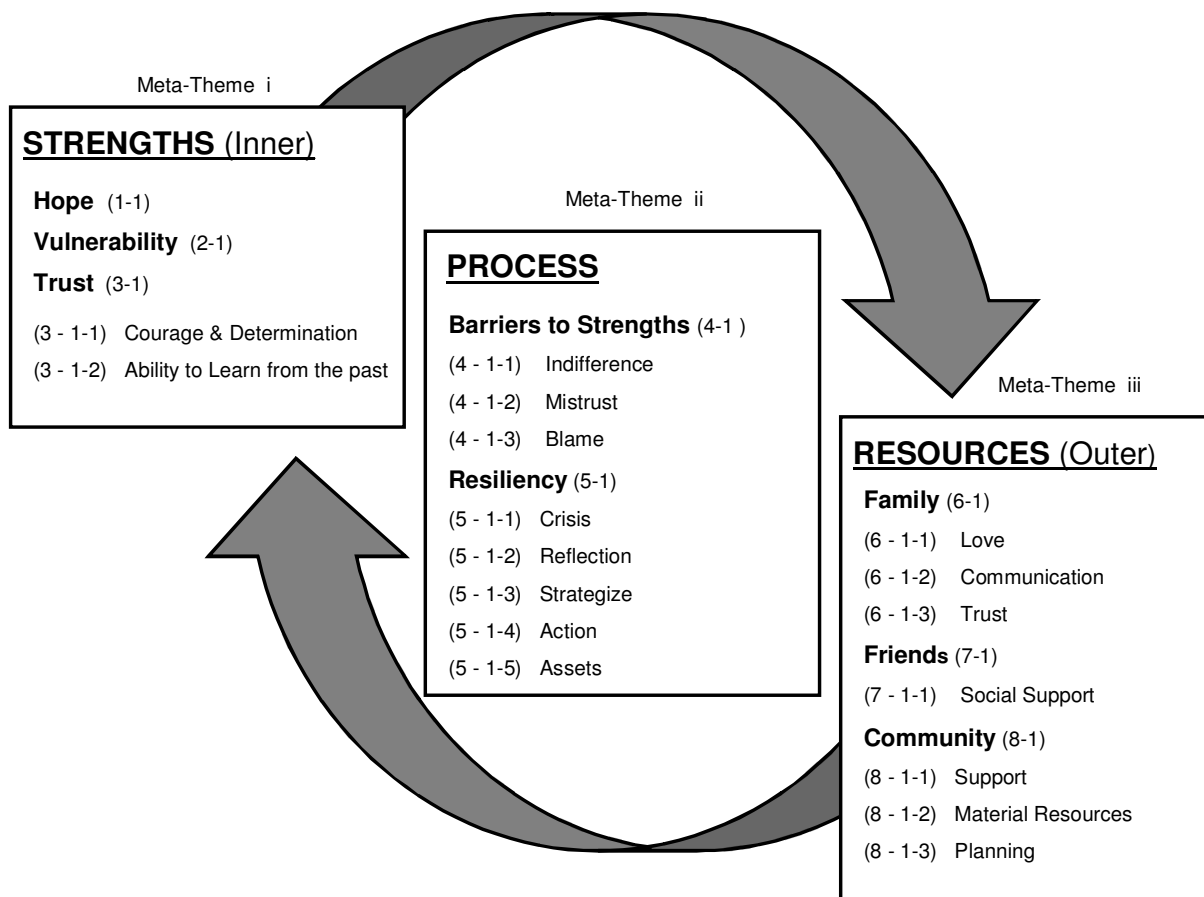
*Step Three: Charting the process*

Over time, three clear meta-themes emerged: strengths, resources, and a process to describe the participant's thoughts and actions as they moved from homelessness to stability. I kept investigating until I was satisfied that the process fit well with the topic sentence under *Themes for Findings*. Participant's words and experiences showed how participants made sense of dis-empowering circumstances to overcome challenges, discover new meaning, find greater happiness and develop self-sufficiency. Meta-themes described the larger, overall stated purpose of the research, while themes described individual aspects of the narratives within the research topic. Sub-themes described more detailed aspects of the larger themes, but did not appear to be a substantial group within themselves.

A model of this process was developed in order to articulate the interconnected nature of the three meta-themes. As I began to develop the model, the connection seemed to be strongest between the strengths and resources. However, over time the process emerged which described the inner development of participant mothers as they moved between stages of inner reflection, and reaching out to others. As they moved through the process, I noticed that each participant developed more trust in herself and others. Inner strengths and resources developed over time as each participant reviewed her situation and made changes to her plan. Inner strengths and outer resources were also drawn upon as she moved toward her goal. These changes appeared to revolve around the central theme of resiliency.

The model is shown below in Figure 1

Figure 1: A process for resiliency; strengths and resources in action



### *Searching for Strengths*

Under the heading of strengths, which I defined as being the inner resources of each mother, I found three themes and two sub-themes. I decided to give each theme a sentence to describe the meanings that emerged as I searched through the dib bits. This was helpful during the sorting process as it kept me alert for consistency among the concepts. If they did not fit the sentence, I considered them for sub-themes or another theme category. Hope, vulnerability and trust emerged consistently throughout the narratives of all participants. This became more obvious as I continued to work with the

transcripts. They seemed to appear with regularity, so I clustered them into themes. These themes and sub-themes emerged under strengths.

*Meta-theme i: Strengths*

*Themes for Strengths*

- 1.1) Hope “A better future is possible”
- 2.1) Vulnerability “I must find a new way”
- 3.1) Trust “I must face my fear and move beyond it”

*Trust sub-themes*

- 3.1.1) Courage & Determination “I can/ I will”
- 3.1.2) Ability to learn from the past “experience makes me stronger”

*Meta-theme ii: Process*

The second meta-theme describes the process that participants moved through as they developed resiliency. At first only the stages of resiliency appeared. Upon closer inspection, participants also described ways that their inner strength and resiliency was blocked in some way. These *barriers to strengths* initially appeared in the strengths category, but later I came to see that they were really part of the larger process of developing resiliency. Without a challenge or crisis, participants remarked that they would not have developed the inner strength to overcome their adversity to the same degree. This inner strength appeared to follow them into their lives as they developed greater confidence in their abilities.

Following the main theme, *lack of social support*, participants clearly described three barriers that I clustered into sub-themes. Each sub-theme was in opposition to the strengths noted in the theme category. For example, they showed an attitude, or lack of

resources could prevent participants from moving toward a stable home and a life of their choosing. Each barrier was given a sentence to summarize its meaning, so that dib bits were placed in the appropriate category. These are shown below for clarity.

#### 4.1) Barriers to strengths: lack of social support

##### *Barriers to strengths: sub-themes*

4.1.1) Indifference “they will just have to wait”

4.1.2) Mistrust “don’t rely on them”

4.1.3) Blame “she brought it on herself”

All participants described the experience of overcoming personal difficulties on their quest to find stable housing and a life of their choosing. This concept seemed central to the idea of resiliency. In finding new ways to come to terms with this difficulty, new strategies and ways of negotiating difficulties emerged. This lead to actions that took participant mother’s into unfamiliar territory as they found ways to develop trust in themselves and others. Although the crisis was unpleasant to cope with, each mother seemed to call upon her love and determination to provide a safe and happy home for her children. The chart clearly shows this process, and the resiliency sub-themes are revealed.

#### 5.1 Resiliency

##### *Resiliency sub-themes*

5.1.1) Crisis: (overwhelm capacity/pushed past limits/ threat to love and trust)

5.1.2) Reflect: (communicate love and concern: Need for new strategy)

5.1.3) Strategize: (communicate and develop new plan)

5.1.4) Action: (respond with new knowledge that conveys love and trust)

5.1.5) Asset building: (convey caring behavior to others: children and parents)

The process of developing resiliency would not be possible without the love and support of community members. Family, friends and service providers were much needed resources for participants. As I sorted through the dib bits to create the worksheet and chart, each resource appeared more significant for some than others. While all participants were fully committed to their own children, they seemed more ambivalent toward their parents.

All participants seemed to find that friends, peers or service providers were more helpful and generally less judgmental toward them than their parents. While all resources provided support in some form, planning and provision of material resources appeared to come from different sources. For example, children alone could not provide income assistance or a new home, but they were central to providing motivation for all participant mothers. Each resource in the community assisted with different needs, which are shown below.

### Meta-theme iii: Resources

#### Theme

#### 6.1) Family (children)

##### Family sub-themes

##### 6.1.1) Love

##### 6.1.2) Communication

##### 6.1.3) Trust

#### *Theme*

#### 7.1) Friends

Friends sub-theme

7.1.1) Social support

*Theme*

8.1) Community (professional and peers)

*Community sub-themes*

8.1.1) Support

8.1.2) Material resources

8.1.3) Planning

When satisfied that the themes were sorted into appropriate categories, I took them to the participant mothers for feedback. This was especially helpful as they were able to add ideas to their narratives that they wanted included in the research. Although no changes to existing categories and themes were necessary, each mother extended her ideas and asked important questions that added to the recommendations for social work practice. As a result, the theme that addressed *barriers to strengths* further enriched my inquiry.

For example, one mother wondered about ways that homeless parents could share their fears with their children in a way that would enhance trust, as they saw their parents carry on in spite of adversity. Another discussed the importance of peer support for vulnerable families. She was concerned that parents most in need of services would avoid them because they were afraid of judgmental attitudes or systems that would further marginalize them.

A different participant mother described the need for safe and appropriate day care while parents were searching for a new home, or support services. All these concerns

raised the need for further inquiry into the data. I continued to make adjustments to my coded transcripts and themes until they were saturated, and the chart was complete.



## Chapter 5: Narratives of Resiliency

Healthy wolves and healthy women share certain psychic characteristics: keen sensing, playful spirit and heightened capacity for devotion. Wolves and women are relational by nature, inquiring, possessed of great endurance and strength. They are deeply intuitive, intensely concerned with their young, their mates and their pack. They are experienced in adapting to constantly changing circumstances; they are fiercely stalwart and very brave (Pinkola-Estes, 1995, p. 2).

### *Introduction*

This narrative inquiry explores the ways in which three mothers who were displaced from their community due to an experience of homelessness were supported to return to a stable life of their choosing. This chapter will reveal aspects of these narratives that address issues of the “personal, practical, and theoretical contexts [that gave] meaning to the inquiry and its outcomes” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 121). Narrative researchers try to understand experience by asking broad questions about how individuals teach and learn. By placing the storied lives of participants within a temporal setting, we can begin to understand how both events and institutions may have framed their lives (Clandinin et al. 2000). These are stories to live by; they assist in the exploration of the phenomena of experience.

### *Context*

To begin these educational accounts, I detail a brief description of each mother’s situation, as revealed by the information given in the *Demographic Information Survey* (Appendix C), interview transcripts, and my perceptions during the research interview. Descriptive data is an important ingredient in creating context, because it creates the foundation upon which interpretation is based (Creswell, 2003). It is necessary for

“making sense of any person, event or thing” and makes it possible to convey the story that lies beyond the research conversation (Clandinin et al. 2000, p. 32).

I was fortunate to be invited to meet participant mothers in their homes, and in some cases, to meet their children. I was struck by the courage and willingness of participants to share their narratives in an uninhibited fashion. As the narratives came into view, the three key concepts of love, communication, and trust kept appearing, and seemed significant within each life story. These three features assisted me to more fully understand the life stories of the research participant's. It seemed that the intimacy created by being invited into the private spaces of participants allowed them to tell their stories with greater comfort and confidence. I was glad that I was able to delve more deeply into their experiences and felt privileged to witness the richness of their daily lives.

### *Participant Profiles*

#### *Annie*

*A stumble in life is not a failure, it's only a failure if you choose not to do anything about it. Anybody can stumble no matter how high they are or how much money they make...it just takes a split second.  
(Annie)*

Annie currently lives with her young daughter in the Vic West Region of Victoria, in an affordable housing development. Prior to this, they were living in Metchosin, B.C., and struggled to find stable housing for five months after losing their home. Fortunately, Annie's daughter was too young to attend school, so finding a location near a suitable and familiar school was not an issue for her. However, her young daughter was in her care during this challenging time and Annie was careful not to convey her anxiety and fear to

her. She found the services of local community centres very helpful while she was searching for a home, and outreach workers were particularly helpful in helping her find affordable housing.

My initial impression of Annie's home was that it was very welcoming and filled with an abundance of age appropriate toys. It was clear that Annie treasured the gift of her young daughter and took the responsibility to care for her very seriously. A young cousin was visiting, and both children played contentedly while Annie and I talked and reviewed the interview materials. When I came back the second time to complete the interview, Annie's young daughter played happily while she shared her story.

On both occasions I was struck by the calm, child oriented nature of their home and Annie's willingness to care for another child, even though she had a busy working life herself. I found myself wishing that all children could enjoy the benefit of such a loving home, which appeared to be enriched by the turmoil and instability that both mother and daughter had overcome to find this peaceful existence.

In order to be able to afford a safe and stable home, Annie located a number of helpful services. She says she was unprepared for the need to go to the social assistance office, but once she got over her fear and personal beliefs about receiving public assistance, she found the service indispensable. She also sought help with housing, childcare, parenting education and most importantly, social support. Although resources to meet their material needs were important, Annie found that she enjoyed the relaxed, non-judgmental and informal atmosphere of neighborhood houses very important to her mental and emotional stability.

Following her experience in obtaining services, Annie and her daughter were offered a home with rent she could afford. She also found work and daycare. This may explain in part why their home had such a warm and loving atmosphere, and why she was able to provide her daughter and young niece with such a child-friendly place to grow within. Annie completed our meeting with sage words of advice for people who find they must obtain financial help from social services. “Patience with their lineups...I’ve gone down there and watched too many people just refuse to wait...it can take up to four hours just to get through to do what you need to do...so it’s very important to plan ahead, bring a book”. This lead me to wonder about the parents who do not, or cannot, wait in the lineup for several hours with their children and I noted this in my research log book for further examination.

*Cheryl*

*I used to think my daughter was my rock, I used to think my daughter saved me, and she didn’t; I saved myself, she was just.... this wonderful, wonderful, person that I get to experience and be with every day of my journey.  
(Cheryl)*

My first meeting with Cheryl took place at her home in the James Bay region of Victoria, where she had been living in subsidized housing for six years. At the time of the interview, Cheryl had decided to move home to be with her family within the Songhees First Nation Reserve. She planned to find permanent housing once she had regained the personal and financial stability that eluded her while living in Victoria. The *Demographic Information Survey* (Appendix C) revealed that she and her daughter moved from their home in the Duncan Region of Vancouver Island to Victoria, in 2003. This was following a period of approximately one, to three months of looking for housing from the local

transition house. Both mother and daughter left a violent relationship and Cheryl's daughter stayed with her grandmother (Cheryl's mom) during this time.

Cheryl says that of all the services she encountered while looking for housing and finding stability, a First Nations service was the most helpful. I was particularly struck by the fact that despite the fact Cheryl's possessions were in boxes all through the apartment, her photograph of her grandmother (detailing her birth and death year) still hung on a prominent wall. I felt from this picture that Cheryl had shared an important relationship with this now deceased lady. I knew I was honoured to have Cheryl participate in the study when she asked me if I was prepared to hear the truth of her experience or did I want her narrative "sugar coated". For her, honest communication was essential at all times; experience had honed her nature into an intense, sometimes fierce, but incredibly loving and wise person, and I felt honoured to hear her speak.

Cheryl's narrative was different from the other two participants in one important way. As her story unfolded, it was clear that her experience as a First Nation's woman had shaped her understanding of life and the meaning it held for her. Like the other mother's in the study, she demonstrated love, communication and trust within the description of her life experience. However, her narrative revealed a life of unwelcome brushes with social systems and institutions from early childhood that forced her to develop a very strong sense of self. Following a litany of sexual abuse from a close family member, Cheryl was taken into foster care. Desire to create a life of her choosing for herself, and her daughter, formed the basis of her determination.

Cheryl seemed very emotional when she talked about her experiences in foster care and I found myself tasting the depths of her despair as she relayed her story. I felt

privileged to hear her when she told me, “When I was a little girl, all I wanted was a family...just a family, not a suitcase, but a family”. She went on to explain that she remained in foster care for several years where she was apart from the love and support of her family.

As a child in care, Cheryl said that members of her foster family, and child welfare system told her many lies that undermined her self worth. However, this resulted in a desire for honest communication and became partnered with the belief that she was an inherently good person. This inner knowing seemed to have evolved as a personal strength that she was able to draw upon later in life. She says: “If I can live through what I lived through as a foster child then you know what? I am so ready to make sure that I provide my daughter with a stable life.”

Cheryl says that her early life experiences, paired with inadequate education and low income, lead to a decision to “sleep for money”. She was adamant that life would be better for her own child. She explains that, “I am a working single mom. My pay-cheques weren’t always feasible for me to even pay my rent. Whether I paid it on time was another question, but at least it got paid”. This led to many personal struggles for Cheryl, but her determination to find a life of her choosing forced her to make many difficult financial decisions. This was evident when she said, “That was a very difficult decision that I had to make ...monthly. And that’s with a job”. This discussion, while honest and open, was difficult to hear. I felt a surge of compassion for all mothers who are forced to remain in abusive or distasteful relationships in order to provide a measure of stability for their children.

As she prepared to make the move from her home in government subsidized housing to shared accommodation with her family, I felt deep concern for her as she struggled to find the happiness that had long evaded her. I was inspired by her courage and deep personal conviction when she said: "I'm scared today, 'cause I'm kind of in that situation where my daughter and I are homeless. But I'm also excited about the fact of my willingness to provide a home of my choosing". Happily, she later obtained social support and suitable family housing within the Songhees Nation Reserve. It appeared her inner strength guided her to safety. Clearly this was a woman of courage. I was deeply humbled by her story of overcoming adversity, and her commitment to honest communication throughout the interview.

*Danielle*

*Everyone says you can't always have what you want, and I say, yes you can, you just have to work for it...and you can.*  
(Danielle)

My initial meeting and interview with Danielle took place at her temporary home, a second stage housing development where she had been living with her two children and new baby for one year. They were preparing to move to subsidized housing in Victoria. Although she was grateful for the opportunity to live in their temporary accommodation, Danielle was looking forward to putting pictures on her walls in her new home.

Danielle moved to her current accommodation from a transition house where she lived for one month while she was pregnant with her youngest son. The *Demographic Information Survey* in Appendix C revealed that her teenaged son stayed with his godparents during this time. She found that the counsellors at the transition house were especially helpful in assisting her to find a home and regain stability for herself and her

children. Once she moved into second stage housing, the staff offered “amazing” support as she developed the skills necessary to search for permanent, affordable housing.

As Danielle was preparing to move into a permanent home, all her possessions were packed into boxes. Like Annie, she had an extra child (now a teen) that felt comfortable calling her place home. She acknowledged that her son’s friend had been part of the family since he was a young child. Her interactions with all the young people in her household were both loving and boisterous, and a sense of warmth and fun pervaded their home. Danielle acknowledged in our second meeting that she had always loved children and it was clear that she was a fierce and devoted mother who took her responsibility seriously. I was struck by her willingness to share her hard-won experiences despite the fact that her life was in a state of disarray that often accompanies families who are preparing to move while the children are on summer vacation!

Danielle described the challenges she overcame while fleeing a violent relationship and her month long stay in a transition house while waiting to find affordable housing. While receiving counselling to cope with her own emotions, she also had to come to terms with the practical details of finding affordable housing within a safe neighbourhood. A new home also needed to be near to daycare so she could return to work. She was able to move to second stage housing from the transition house and was offered subsidized housing after she completed the *Ready to Rent* training. Danielle describes her new home as, “the best place for me luckily, was the place that I got...it was the best place ever...you know it’s just perfect...and that’s been the biggest thing for me”.



Once Danielle and her family were reunited in their new home in second stage housing, she describes her relief at how much help she received from staff in accessing needed resources. When she did not know where to buy groceries they “told me all the places I could go, and you know, they were just so helpful”. Clearly, she was able to develop greater trust in her self, her friends, and service providers as a result of this experience. Danielle spoke about helpful experiences and says, “they’re not judgmental at all” which seemed to be a crucial component of establishing and maintaining trust while in a vulnerable state.

## Chapter 6: Themes of Resiliency

Given our assumptions about human nature as selfish, individualistic, and materially motivated, we do not see these stresses as motivated by social problems, but from the inability of individuals to conform. And so we punish and shame those are not “well adapted”...It will take new ways of organizing society to correct the problem.  
(Clark, 2002, p. 16)

Narrative accounts of self-reported strengths from three formerly homeless mothers were investigated for strengths and signs of resiliency. This chapter analyzes research findings in relation to the literature. Close examination shows how the sense of loss associated with displacement from a familiar home environment is often accompanied by both anxiety and excitement. However, grave stressors may require outside intervention by community members, and service providers, such as social workers. Training in a resiliency model may be helpful to this process because a strengths-based approach is more likely to assist families to reconstruct the crisis positively. Mothers and family members are able to view the situation in a way that does not leave them feeling marginalized (Greene, 2002).

Clandinin et al. (2009) state that it is important to illuminate the experiences of mother's relationships with their children in a way that could not be captured by using any other research method. This narrative shows that a “sense of search...a “re-search” of the phenomena can be more illuminating than attempting to answer specific research questions” (p. 124). After adopting a mindful stance, I looked for “patterns, threads and tensions” in participant mother's stories (p. 132). Plotlines were continually revisited and

negotiated with participant mothers from beginning to end; the themes that emerged attempt to “highlight points of importance” in their narratives (p. 132).

*Meta-themes: strengths, process and resources*

Examination of meta-themes, themes and sub-themes reveals how families make sense of dis-empowering circumstances to overcome challenges, discover new meaning, find greater happiness and increase self-sufficiency. A reciprocal process between strengths and resources developed that resulted in mothers increasing their trust in self and others. The process is ongoing throughout the overwhelming situation, and afterward. In this study, participant mothers were able to develop resilient behaviour by drawing upon past experiences for knowledge, insight or inspiration. They overcame inner and outer barriers to these strengths by communicating their needs and reaching out to family, friends or services in a confident way.

*Hope “A better future is possible”*

Hope is an essential component of inner strength because it assists individuals to endure difficulties and overcome challenges (Greene, 2002). Cheryl drew upon hope when she said, “Life isn’t meant to be perfect and we’re not perfect but we’re real, and what we have is true. And love is real, and as long as you have all those, you’re going to get through anything. Good, bad, ugly, beautiful...that’s it”. Hope has the quality of assisting individuals to overcome fear and move toward a valued resource or life goal. For Danielle, hope evolved into greater self-confidence as she moved toward stability, “I lost that fear to be to go and get what I wanted...without worrying about, you know, what people are going to think about me along the way...I wasn’t going to let someone’s opinion or attitude stand in my way”.

*Vulnerability “I must find a new way”*

Annie spoke about the importance of learning ways to construct a new lifestyle despite being in a vulnerable situation. “It was good for me to bridge that gap and enable me to get some additional schooling and get day care and everything set up for her”. Cheryl took this idea further when she described the spiritual, mental and emotional shifts that enabled change to occur: “when you’re aware that you’re so vulnerable... you’re so open for change”. Pinkola-Estes (1992) speaks of emotional vulnerability and says that the essential self of women is wounded by society’s efforts to domesticate their instinctive nature. It is precisely this inner desire for change, while living in an unpredictable and unfamiliar environment that community members must support. Developing resiliency, while painful at times, can lead to greater opportunities and transformation if appropriate assistance is available.

*Trust “I must face my fear and move beyond it”*

Spirituality and transcendence can be a vital part of the belief systems that family members draw upon to inspire creativity and new possibility. This sense of trust in themselves, and others, leads to transformation, learning, and growth from adversity (Rutter, 1987). Cheryl demonstrates this concept in action when she says, “... and I have been given a second chance, I believe. Not just by these wonderful support people, but by God, and by me. I have given myself permission to say, Hey, I deserve a second chance and here I go, I’m going for it”. If Cheryl had not cultivated such deep inner wisdom from her painful childhood experiences, it is possible she may not have developed such a deep trust in herself and others. She was able to take a previously devastating experience and use this awareness in a creative manner when facing a new challenge.

*Courage and Determination “I can/I will”*

Self-efficacy is the most important personality characteristic associated with resiliency. It involves solid feelings of self worth and a positive perception, paired with confidence in the ability to accomplish life’s tasks (Norman, 2000). All three participant mothers believed that their efforts would be rewarded. Annie explained that, “The only way you’re going to get through something like that is if you have a goal that you need to get to, otherwise you’d just fall apart”. Danielle also showed courage and determination with her philosophy that, “this is just another obstacle on the road to life, and I know that I will get through it, regardless of what I have to do, but I will do it”.

Cheryl had many personal challenges to overcome, but she also drew upon her determination during this time. “Every day was a struggle for me. An emotional frickin’ roller coaster, and there was times I fell, and I had to keep getting up, and there was times I would triumph... and the days I would triumph just made me up want to go and do more, and learn more, and be more. And the days that I fell, I just wanted to run and hide, and drink and do drugs”. Her courage was evident when she reflected back on her situation and said, “the gift isn’t that person, and it’s not the service, it’s yourself. It’s your awareness within yourself, that is going to make you go on”.

*Ability to learn from the past “experience makes me stronger”*

A strong sub-theme among participant mothers was the concept of transcending past troubles and developing personal strength. Danielle explains, “Well, I have had lots of difficulties in the past, and I have overcome them somehow. I think that life was full of difficult experiences to make you stronger, and to show you that you can get past things”. Canadian physician and writer Gabor Maté (2008) states that, “spiritual awakening is no

more and no less than a human being claiming his or her own full humanity” (p. 396). He asserts “our most painful emotions point to our greatest possibilities” (p. 397).

This may explain in part why the participant mothers in this study were able to rise above adversity and find ways to triumphantly reclaim their lives for themselves and their children. Cheryl demonstrated inspiration from past experience when she said, “I had me and my child, and I knew, I knew, the minute I was free, that I had control and all the power to make that happen. But while I was going through it, it was very emotional, and it was very scary”. Transcending past experience an essential component of resiliency and is crucial to transforming frightening and overwhelming experiences into creative and empowering solutions.

*Barriers to strengths: lack of social support*

The *Single Parents’ Housing Study* (Doyle, Burnside and Scott, 1996) explored the characteristics of a health-promoting housing environment. They focused on the social indicators of health and wellness among single parent households. Their study clearly showed that after affordability, maintaining supportive ties, a sense of belonging and influence on their surroundings was key. These factors were crucial indicators of determinants of health that were more important than their connection to the health care system. These findings are consistent with the narratives of the participant mothers in this study as they reached out for social support from community members.

*Indifference “they will just have to wait”*

Lack of adequate material and social support lies at the root of family homelessness and can remain a barrier to regaining stability. Danielle spoke of her struggle to find a safe and affordable home. “We were looking everywhere, I was almost

at my one-month stay at Transition House. And there still was nothing, nothing I could afford”. Facing homelessness was an immense struggle as she attempted to restore harmony in her life following an abusive relationship while being pregnant, and having two other children to care for.

Cheryl did not find that the cost of subsidized housing was adequate to assist her to move forward with her life. At the time of this interview she decided that she would prefer to live closer to her family on the Songhees First Nation Reserve. This is consistent with the determinants of health literature that shows families fare better when connected to their “biological, personal and historical past” (Lindheim & Syme, 1983, p. 353). It is essential that social connection is adequate to assist families in finding and maintaining their housing.

*Mistrust “don’t rely on them”*

Social supports that were inadequate or unreliable were frequently revealed within the participants’ narratives. Danielle spoke about a difficult relationship with a helping professional when she said, “I don’t click with her and I have a hard time opening up to her”. Saleeby (1992) is concerned that service providers do not rely upon a sense of authority that undermines the self-esteem of those seeking assistance. He says that is it crucial to avoid evaluating the efforts of people who are struggling to regain control of their lives. Conversely, Cheryl was concerned with “people just saying what they think you need to hear”. She saw the value in speaking truthfully about potentially harmful situations while remaining non-judgmental and supportive. Well-intentioned but inadequate community support cannot replace the value of championing strengths and providing adequate resources.

*Blame “she brought it on herself”*

Blaming struggling mother's for their plight appeared to be a common experience. Danielle spoke to this when she said, “I don't feel like I can go and talk to them about things and have the support I need. It's more of a “Well, you're here because of this” you know, pointing the finger, which is what I don't need”. Adult family members seemed to be especially prone to blaming behaviour and this left participants feeling vulnerable and alone. Cheryl reveals this sense of isolation, “what they told me was so wrong, and it was so devastating, when I became a young adult, and it actually made me go down all the wrong paths and do all the wrong things”. Clearly, blame leads to confusion and loss of valuable self-esteem that participant mothers needed to draw upon as they moved toward their chosen goals (Norman, 2000).

*Resiliency*

Resilient behaviour was evident throughout this study and was clearly demonstrated by all three participants. The need to enhance and support parents who appear less resilient using a strengths perspective is therefore crucial. Resiliency is not a “fixed attribute” of individuals, but involves interaction between environmental and personal factors (Norman, 2000, p. 3). Cheryl demonstrates this when she says, “They say that when I was being abused, they can take my body, they can manipulate my mind, my thinking, but they can never take my spirit away. So my intuition was very strong. And I think I really use that today”. Despite this inner strength gleaned from intuition and spiritual guidance, she also blossomed with the assistance of community members as she grew into parenthood. This resilient attitude may not have emerged without support from family, friends and service providers.



*The Resiliency Process:*

Examination of participant mothers' narratives revealed a five-stage process in which inner strengths and outer community supports combined to assist them in moving toward their goals. Following a crisis, participants reflected on their dis-empowering circumstances to overcome challenges, discover new possibilities, and develop an action plan. A reciprocal process between strengths and resources emerged that resulted in the growth of greater trust in self and others. The process was ongoing throughout the overwhelming situation, and into the future. Participants were able to develop resilient behavior by drawing upon past experiences for knowledge, insight and inspiration. They overcame barriers to these strengths by communicating their needs and reaching out to others while developing a myriad of assets.

*Step 1. Crisis: (overwhelm capacity/pushed past limits/ threat to love and trust)*

Resilient behavior emerges most clearly during a crisis and may have the effect of enhancing self-esteem if adequate support is available. In these narratives, facing homelessness overwhelmed the mother's coping capacity. It pushed past current limits of safety by threatening the love and trust she had developed with family and community members. Danielle describes the level of crisis she faced prior to finding a new home:

It's been a huge process, it's been emotional, physical just everything. It's just been crazy. I've been under a lot of stress with it, and when I first went to Transition House I was seven months pregnant and had to deal with trying to keep my self healthy, and the baby healthy while I was trying to deal with the emotions that kinda went with it, and try to deal with my kids, and how I would help them cope through it because it was pretty tough on them, having to leave their friends and their neighborhood.

(Danielle)

This narrative shows the fear, anger, dismay and sense of disorganization that can be typical of those who experience a crisis while having children to care for (Greene, 2002).

*Step 2. Reflect:(communicate love and concern: Need for new strategy)*

The crisis of losing a home (often following a period of violence), moving the family to a new neighborhood, and coping with overwhelming fear causes mothers to reflect on their current situation (Artz and Kasting, 2005). All participants in this study described how they communicated love and trust to their children, while finding ways to manage their concerns. They also reached out to community members while communicating their worries in age appropriate ways to their children. For example, Annie's and Danielle's narratives show that they were concerned with maintaining as normal a life as possible for their young daughters. Cheryl used the experience as an opportunity to teach her teenage daughter valuable life skills about safety and seeking a lifestyle of her choosing.

*Step 3. Strategize: (communicate and develop new plan)*

All the mothers in this study spoke with trusted community members, such as friends, peers or support workers to develop a strategy in finding a home. They also reached out to find the resources necessary to create a life of their choosing. Helping professionals played an invaluable role in helping participants locate housing or resources and assisting participants to strategize and find ways to turn strengths into assets (Wolfe, 2008). Annie says she found a nearby neighborhood house especially helpful. She discussed the value of having, "Somebody there to talk to. You'd go there and just relax and learn things". Clearly a supportive, non-judgmental, place to learn and consider new strategies is essential.

*Step 4. Action: (respond with new knowledge that conveys love and trust)*

Artz et al. (2005) found that it is important for both parents and children to have fun, take control of learning, and see the relevance of education for their day-to-day existence if they are to take action. “This approach, together with a continuum of social services, begins to move the family away from perpetuating the cycle of poverty and homelessness toward a more stable, less limited future” (Artz et al. 2005, p. 12). Annie found affordable housing, daycare and a new job. Danielle found an affordable home that was big enough for herself and her three children in a place that was convenient to schools and work. Cheryl was encouraged to return to school where she could find greater satisfaction and income in a career more suited to her skills and aptitudes. All mothers were able to move toward stability and find ways to create a life of their choosing following a crisis involving the loss of a home and familiar community.

*Step 5. Assets: (Convey caring behavior to others: children and parents)*

Homeless or impoverished parents can be supported to develop assets that enable them to move toward stability and a life of their choosing. Inadequate education is a key factor that most greatly limits a family’s capacity to meet current housing and employment challenges. “For parents and children alike, education remains one of the most powerful and effective ways to escape poverty” (Artz et al. 2005, p. 18). Annie reported that she was committed to putting \$20 each month in an education fund for her young daughter and did not miss a single payment. She was able to do this despite experiencing homelessness and lack of stability for an extended period of time. Annie made this sacrifice of limited resources because she believed in a happy future for her self and her daughter.

The process of developing resiliency following a crisis allowed each mother to increase assets that assisted her family and fellow community members. Saving money for future goals is only one way to show caring toward a family member. For example, two of the research participants made room for other children to join their household whenever they needed a safe place. A third participant reached out to other parents in her housing community and encouraged them to pursue their dreams and ambitions. All three were able to draw upon their stability and personal strengths to help others in need.

### *Family*

Human beings make meaning out of experience in order to interpret difficult events that may otherwise be overwhelming. Shared meanings inspire loyalty, and help to coordinate social activity through cultural norms that make sense of the inherent need for both belonging, and individual freedom. “It is the narrative of the meaning system that tells how bonding and autonomy are to be met” (Clark, 2002, p. 237). A common theme among all three participant mothers was that they made meaning from adversity by putting the needs of their children ahead of their own. As Annie says, “ It was a combination of having that experience and having my daughter; of having that responsibly of having somebody who depends on you 110%”.

The desire to create a stable and happy life for their children gave these participant mothers the determination to move past very difficult personal circumstances. “I think the biggest challenge that I had to face and deal with was just, not giving up...just looking at my daughter every day, and she was my biggest, biggest inspiration” (Cheryl). These heroic women all fulfilled the needs of themselves, their family group, and society, by rising above adversity with grace. Danielle demonstrates meaning making

in action when she says, “It’s basically for the kids and for myself...I think that when you have kids you put them before every thing else, and they are your motivation. I’m lucky that I have them. I might have just given up”. By putting their child’s needs ahead of their own, participants created a sense of belonging to a caring family group. Once their children felt safe and supported, they were better able to address their needs for individual freedom and independence.

### *Love*

A sense of belonging to a caring family group is crucial for the development of a child’s self esteem (Clark, 2002). In this study, the most common way that participant mothers demonstrated love for their children was by deeply considering their developmental needs as they moved away from crisis. For example, Danielle was concerned with the impact of moving upon her young daughter. She said, “that’s taking a toll on my daughter, that we are moving again, but I took her with me to the place, and I let her pick her room and that kinda helped her. It’s hard you know, dealing with a 14-year-old and then a younger child, and trying to explain in their way of thinking... but she seems to be doing really good”. Cheryl also felt motivated by seeing the positive impact of loving behavior upon her daughter when she noted that, “I believe that I am a good person and that I have gifts to offer”. Opportunities to give and receive love are essential for healthy bonding between mother and child.

### *Communication*

Communicating needs and reaching out toward social support networks was a key strength of participant mothers (Greene, 2002). Whether it was improved parenting skills, awareness of children’s educational needs, assistance with creating and maintaining

emotional stability, or employment and vocational training, mothers reached out to others for resources and support (Artz et al. 2006). Participant mothers transcended personal barriers as they reached out for services to assist them. Annie found that, “they’re not going to be upset if you ask if there is someone else you can talk with. Just keep going, don’t give up is the biggest thing”. Danielle found that it was most helpful if service providers were approachable. If they were “easy to talk to, ...fun, and were welcoming to my kids” it was especially useful.

### *Trust*

A client-centred, humanistic view of people and their circumstances reveals that trust, or “unconditional positive regard” is the single most important aspect of building relationships. The style of helping is less important than the quality of the relationship between individuals (Corey, 2001, p. 172). In this study, trust appeared to be the most important variable in building and maintaining relationships, whether between mother and child, or mother and community. Annie shows the roots of trust emerging when she describes her commitment to her young daughter: “[She] came into the world with full expectations of being taken care of, so that has to be fulfilled”. In order for any relationship to be considered reliable enough to build upon, trust must be present.

### *Friends*

Friends were an essential source of support for the mothers in this study. It appears that friends often provide the unconditional positive regard that is essential for building inner strength. From this platform of trust, participants were better able to move through the five stages of building resiliency that lead to needed resources. Annie demonstrated this when she said, “Don’t push your friends away...and don’t turn away

any opportunity because you never know where it's going to lead...never say no, and do whatever it takes to get that bit ahead". Annie was able to draw upon trusted relationships by remaining open to creative ideas, and opportunities as they arose.

### *Peer Support*

Supportive relationships were also crucial to Danielle as she moved toward stability. "The one person that was very, very supportive was a good friend of mine, and she was there with me through everything". Her friend told her, "this last year you have been through so much, and I don't think that anybody I know in my life would be able to handle it in the way that you did". This example of admiration and support helped give Danielle the courage and determination she needed to persevere with her struggle to find suitable accommodation, and stability for her family. All participant mothers spoke of the support they received. The most helpful was given without judgment.

### *Community*

While it is essential to overcome personal limitations and difficulties by drawing on the support of friends, it is also important to cultivate the organizational capacity to connect to others (Green, 2002). Regardless of the type of role played by the helper, gestures of support and unconditional positive regard are essential. Danielle speaks about supportive professional relationships when she says, "People don't make you feel like your swallowing your pride, they make you feel welcome, and that you're worth it". Annie found that speaking with peers was especially helpful because they had been in the situation and were subsequently less judgmental. The value of peer support was revealed when she said, "The people you aren't really close to, you can open up better".

### *Professional Support*

The support of professionals was an essential aspect of assisting mothers to find needed resources. Danielle describes her relief when she arrived at the transition house: “Within ten minutes of me being there, I felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders”. She especially appreciated how supportive they were to her children, whose lives had been uprooted so suddenly. She was especially relieved that her son was able to express himself, “and know that he wasn’t going to be judged for how he felt”. This comment reveals how helping professionals were able to draw on the strengths of this family and reconstruct a narrative that evokes feelings of heroism in the face of adversity (Norman, 2000). Family members felt supported, and were able to evaluate their circumstances and develop a new plan that moved them toward stability with greater awareness of their assets.

### *Material resources*

Material support was also important to finding stability following homelessness. Annie was pleased that in her housing development, “they work with you, they’re really good with that...with a single kid they only charge like \$335 a month...as a single parent I can still afford that”. In my conversations with her it was clear that she appreciated the opportunity to live in this family oriented development, especially when the housing society formally invited her to stay on as a permanent tenant: “The first year...they ...decide if they’re going to renew you being here or not. So you’re waiting for that letter to come in saying they’re welcoming you to stay here and they’re renewing your being here”.



### *Planning*

Developing a plan to find housing and stability requires a healthy relationship between the helping professional and those seeking assistance. In this study, participants said that a relaxed, fun, non-judgmental environment was the most effective environment for learning and sharing new skills. It appeared that professionals who assessed the “Whole Person” were most effective in co-constructing a helpful plan. For example, learning about the family’s daily living, educational and vocational aspirations and accomplishments, financial situation, social supports and leisure experiences all contribute to a well-rounded view of the family situation (Saleeby, 1992).

Danielle says that she was able to make a new plan for her finances, which she had been avoiding due to fear that was complicated by an abusive personal relationship. She says, “It wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be. They were just awesome. They were so approachable and easy to talk to”. Developing a good plan requires asking the right questions in a way that fosters trust between the helping professional and the person in need of assistance.

### *Conclusions*

It is clear from these narratives that supportive communities are essential to the development of personal and social networks that foster inclusion and participation. Failure to fully explore the critical social resources of families can lead to further frustration for struggling mothers. They must be able to make meaning of the conditions that affect their lives without external judgment. However, stable, affordable housing is also a crucial aspect of well being for low-income families (Doyle et al. 1996).

Meaningful support from communities, agencies and social housing providers that acknowledge the strengths and assets of vulnerable families is key to this endeavor.

## Chapter 7: Summary of Findings

It is now clear that the essential self of women is wounded by society's efforts to domesticate their instinctive nature. It is precisely this inner desire for change, while in an unpredictable and unfamiliar environment, which members of the community must support (Pinkola-Estes, 1992).

### *Purpose of the study*

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the main findings of this research as well as discuss its limitations and recommendations for social work practice. The original objective of this research was to gain an understanding of how families have exited homelessness and become stable. I attempted to determine whether it is possible that an experience of homelessness and the subsequent return to stability can be enriched by the care and support of fellow community members. I hoped that by obtaining rich descriptions of preferred stories from formerly homeless mothers, that new interpretations and hidden strengths would emerge. Ways in which family members were heroic in the face of adversity were mined for strategies to stem the rising tide of family homelessness and instability.

A narrative inquiry was used to examine meanings of self-reported strengths from the perspective of formerly homeless mothers. It was apparent that the mothers in this study were able learn the skills necessary to access and retain stable housing. They also built both material and social assets that lead to greater happiness and stability. Participants were able to develop resilient behavior by drawing upon past experiences for knowledge, insight or inspiration. They overcame inner and outer barriers to these

strengths by communicating their needs and reaching out to family, friends or services in a more confident way.

### *Key findings*

Friends, family and service providers can assist families to return to stability after an experience of homelessness by communicating their support. Love and communication are easily damaged by mistrust. The key to enhancing resiliency is providing social support and sufficient material resources in a non-judgmental manner. An attitude of unconditional positive regard can assist in the healing of damaged trust in self and others (Corey, 2001). The mother can then draw on inner strengths to communicate needs and reach out to family, friends or services in a more confident way.

### *Barriers to Strengths*

This research revealed that potential resources communicate indifference by being difficult to access. Communicating indifference, insincere messages, or judgment can create mistrust. The mother may feel blamed for a situation that is beyond her control. Experiencing homelessness can take participants into unfamiliar territory until they find new strategies to develop trust in themselves and others. This study showed that although the crisis was unpleasant to cope with, each mother drew upon love and determination to provide a safe and happy home for her children. Community members can assist by creating a welcoming, safe and age appropriate atmosphere for children while the mother is looking for assistance. This kind of support is key to establishing a trusting environment because it communicates open-ness to the whole family's needs.

*The resiliency cycle*

Developing strategies for resilience involved five stages in which participant mothers drew upon both inner strengths and outer resources as they move toward their goal. All participants described the experience of overcoming personal difficulties on their quest to find stable housing and a life of their choosing. This concept seemed central to the idea of resiliency. In finding new ways to come to terms with personal troubles, new strategies and ways to make meaning of difficulties emerged. As participants moved through this process they developed greater trust in them selves and others. Following a crisis, participants reflected on their dis-empowering circumstances to overcome challenges, discover new possibilities, and develop an action plan. This reciprocal process between strengths and resources resulted in the growth of greater trust in self and others.

Participant mothers developed resiliency by drawing upon past successes for knowledge, insight and inspiration. This study showed that self-confidence is the hallmark of resiliency. Participants developed the inner capacity to know what is required and communicate that need. The process was ongoing throughout the overwhelming situation and new knowledge was a taken into future experiences. Inner and outer obstacles were overcome as participants communicated their needs and reached out to others. The gift of this process is that participant mothers developed a myriad of assets that carried them into the future. They clearly benefited from learning new skills and drawing upon opportunities that may not have otherwise been present.

### *Assets*

Assets, whether inner or outer, assist people to achieve their potential and thrive despite adverse experiences. Participant mothers were comfortable to reach out to other children, or parents in need, and assist them in finding ways to get their requirements met. Two of the mothers in this study were able to provide safety and community to other children who were vulnerable. Participant mothers enhanced the resiliency of neighboring children by showing that a caring adult was willing to support them. Participant mothers demonstrated loving behaviors toward themselves, their children, and other community members by being determined to obtain housing and establish a life of their choosing. Affordable, safe and stable housing was central to providing a container for this process.

### *Self-confidence*

A greater sense of confidence was the most important asset that evolved with inner strength. Evidence of self-confidence was shown when participant mothers revealed that if a person, or service could not meet their needs, they moved on, or asked to speak with a different person. All participants were determined to keep searching until they found the resources that were required to obtain housing and a stable life of their choosing. Mothers were confident in their ability to get her own and family needs met, and were inspired by the love they felt toward their children. This study showed that actions that undermine self-confidence work could work against the evolution of asset building behaviors.

The Search Institute (2006) has investigated factors in the development of assets, and rates family support and positive communication as the primary pillar that

contributes to resilient behavior. Following strong family support, adult relationships within a caring neighborhood are crucial to the development of resiliency. The presence of a caring adult other than the parent can lead to resiliency within children. By putting their children first, communicating in age appropriate ways, shielding them from overwhelming adult emotions, and moving relentlessly toward hope, participants assisted children to develop resiliency. This evolved into asset building behavior as participant mothers reached out to support other parents and children within their sphere. In this study, resilient mothers appear to inspire resilient children, both of who contribute to building healthy communities.

#### *Material assets*

While self-confidence and social support are crucial to the development of assets, the accumulation of material wealth is an important aspect of claiming full membership in society. The *Family Self-Sufficiency Program* has demonstrated success in assisting families to build assets, both personal and material. Program manager Colleen Wolfe (personal communication, November 3, 2009) says that when family members do not understand the rules and language of finance they often respond with fear. Judgments about personal character are often perceived through this negative lens. As a result, living with the identity of poverty can greatly undermine the self-esteem of individuals and families. Asset building programs such as the *Family Self Sufficiency Program* have shown that financial literacy and awareness of financial issues can be learned. This new knowledge inspires confidence and awareness of choice. Family members can then make informed decisions about factors that affect their future.

### *Education*

Artz et al. (2006) remind helping professionals that education remains the most powerful and effective way to escape poverty. They stress that learning new life skills must involve the whole family and be provided within a fun and nurturing environment. In this study, all participants benefited from an educational experience at some point in their journey. For example, an older child learned about the impact of violence on his family. His mother learned new ways to manage relationships within her housing complex. Each family member found connection to people, support, and new knowledge through a variety of education opportunities. The crisis of homelessness provided new ways to learn valuable life skills that they may not have otherwise known about.

One mother reported that she was able to move away from unsatisfactory employment toward a meaningful career by overcoming fears about her lack of education. A supportive community professional helped her move toward this valued goal so that she was better able to use her knowledge and skills to assist others in a meaningful way. She will also be able to improve her financial situation as she finds work with better pay. She hopes that an improvement in her financial situation will no longer require that she compromise herself in order to feed and clothe her child.

### *Recommendations for social work practice*

This study shows that mothers who require assistance to regain stability following a time of homelessness can benefit from the support of community members. Although participant mothers and their children experienced extreme emotions and anxiety about their future, resilient parents were better able to overcome crisis and learn new skills and strategies. Social workers and helping professionals can support families who are



struggling to find housing and a life of their choosing by providing support in a non-judgmental manner. It is crucial to remember that unconditional positive regard remains the single most important ingredient in any helping relationship (Corey, 2001). This may help to explain why research participants found that peers who provided a listening ear and had wisdom gleaned from lived experience were especially helpful.

The *Ready to Rent* program teaches important skills and attempts to assist parents to address barriers to accessing housing by developing personal, social and financial assets. This six-session program draws upon the knowledge available within group discussions by highlighting peer driven experiences. Participants learn from each other, as well as community professionals, within a welcoming, child friendly environment (Sturge, personal communication, November 12, 2009). This approach supports the development of skills and building of confidence. Learning within a comfortable social setting allows participants to learn from each other as they share their successes and failures. As Danielle noted, “It’s just uplifting, it takes that scared part of you away that, ”Oh, my credit is going to be horrible”. According to her account, course facilitators assisted participants to make sense of shared meanings and kept the environment safe and comfortable.

#### *Making meaning from adversity*

People can be assisted to make meaning of stress if they are supported to fully comprehend the situation, make meaning from it, and develop the ability to manage its demands (Greene, 2002). Meaning making fosters confidence that will assist the person to transcend other difficulties as they arise. New knowledge and skills can be offered to assist the process and each family member will benefit if they are offered in a friendly

and age appropriate manner. A fresh perspective is essential to developing asset-building behavior and this is best accomplished in a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere.

Recognizing the fear that can be evoked by social institutions such as schools, banks, child welfare and social assistance offices, is essential to the trust-building enterprise.

*Overcoming fear through knowledge*

Participation in asset building programs and accessing financial institutions such as credit unions and banks creates the doorway to an identity as a legitimate member of society. Financial literacy education provides the knowledge and the language for more egalitarian relationships with financial institutions and other social organizations. This is partly because the banks and credit unions represent society's core structural foundations of wealth and commerce (Wolfe, personal communication, November 3, 2009).

VanCity credit union recognized this when assisting in the development of the *Family Self Sufficiency* program. They arranged for specially trained tellers to help families open new bank accounts so that parents were not overwhelmed by the experience. They also developed a matched savings program for youth in which financial skills could be taught, and fear minimized. The result was that young people were better equipped to join the world of commerce with greater confidence and enjoyed the benefit of having money in a savings account for the first time.

A marginal income can create marginalized families. Developing savings is part of the change process from exclusion to inclusion in society for all age groups. Learning the language of commerce and having the support to follow through in building this dialogue with persons within the financial world builds confidence. When parents know that they have the right to ask questions about their financial lives they gain a sense of

them selves as an asset to their family and society. It is essential to have support when addressing fears regarding finances. Building material assets by participating in the world of credit builds both inner and outer strength among families (Wolfe, personal communication, November 3, 2009).

### *Limitations of the study*

The first limitation of this research project is that this study captures the narratives of only three formerly homeless mothers. Information about their children was gathered from second hand information and while useful, cannot be generalized to a wider population. However, a narrative and qualitative methodology appears to be very useful in gathering first hand information from participants. The aim of this was to find out more about the experiences of formerly homeless mothers in a way that left them feeling good about themselves. This method was very beneficial in assisting mothers to view themselves as heroic in the face of adversity. This was in evidence when all three expressed their motivation to develop resiliency and build inner and outer assets. However, this quality may have had the effect of making them more willing to participate in the research, which may mean resilient mothers were more highly represented in the sample.

### *Resilient parents*

All three mothers in the study displayed a high degree of resiliency and were clearly able to find ways to benefit from adversity. This raises the question of mothers who are less resilient and whether they benefit from support in the same way. For example, would mothers struggling with addiction display the same determination and level of commitment to their children as the mothers in this study? How does family

violence affect mothers' ability to draw upon determination and learn from past behavior? Can mothers be better supported to avoid the need to participate in unpleasant and abusive relationships when attempting to provide for their children? While living in a climate of fear, how realistic is it to discuss choices in the same way? Clearly these barriers to supporting resiliency must be addressed before the strengths of mothers in crisis can be fully accessed.

#### *Support for helping professionals*

Assisting families to learn new skills and regain stability in their lives following a crisis, such as homelessness, can be a very rewarding process for the helping professional. However, participants reported that all too often helping professionals were not as effective as they could be for a variety of reasons. The stress associated with helping vulnerable people navigate social systems can take a toll on the health and well being of service providers. It seems apparent that the difficulties faced by those in need of service are very similar to those faced by service providers, such as social workers.

The challenges of parenthood, financial concerns, health problems, family violence and substance misuse are but a few of the personal troubles faced by workers. In this study, parents noted that they were not always able to build rapport with workers, and friends or peers were more able to provide support. All participants reported feeling alienated from certain service providers and they wondered how the situation could be improved. It is possible that that health and social service providers require ongoing support to transcend their personal difficulties so that they can more effectively help others? This is clearly an area for further study and should be addressed locally, due to variation in the quality and quantity of available service and funding opportunities.

*First Nations mothers in Victoria, BC.*

One of the mothers in this study was of First Nations ancestry. Her perspective and experience raised many questions for further research and called into question the adequacy of research findings for Aboriginal mothers. First Nations mothers may have very different perceptions of services and experiences of those services than the general population. This raises the question of how Native and non-Native mothers experience homelessness and the movement toward stability. A similar research design drawn from these populations may produce uniquely different outcomes than the findings of this study.

Further research on resiliency for First Nations mothers may include an inquiry about opportunities and barriers. While Native mothers have a dream for themselves and their families, are there barriers to achieving their goals that non-Native mothers may not perceive or experience? How might this be different for fathers or extended family members? An exploration of barriers might include questions about how the impact of interaction with institutions, such as foster care and the social welfare system. How might this affect their experience of homelessness and the move toward stability and a home of their choosing?

It would also be useful to find out more about the impact of living as a Native person among non-Native people while attempting to raise healthy and well-adjusted children. How is this complicated by struggles with poverty and the effects of sexual, physical and emotional abuse? Who hears this voice and how? What are the specific needs of Native mothers in Victoria who are attempting to find a life of their choosing but do not have the characteristics of resiliency displayed by Cheryl? Are services for Native

families adequate and well funded so that the cycle of poverty and dependence can be broken?

In Victoria, the Songhees Nation has been displaced by non-Native settlement and the band relocated where luxury condominiums and hotels for tourists are now located. For many years until the present, overcrowded trailers housed native Songhees people while their traditional territory was developed. A further study would require an analysis of the effect of the destruction of social networks and the traditional way of life upon mothers and families who find themselves living off reserve lands in Victoria. How do mothers find affordable housing, education and employment while struggling with the effects of cultural genocide, sexual abuse, foster care and other forms of social control? These are important questions if Aboriginal family homelessness is to be addressed.

### *Conclusions*

Narrative accounts of self-reported strengths from three formerly homeless mothers were investigated for strengths and signs of resiliency. The families in this study were able to create a rich life of their choosing despite experiencing serious negative life events. The sense of loss associated with displacement from a familiar home environment is often accompanied by both anxiety and excitement. However, grave stressors may require outside intervention by service providers such as social workers, who are trained in a resiliency model. A strengths-based approach is more effective in supporting families to reconstruct the crisis positively as they develop internal and external assets.

Examination of participant mothers' narratives revealed a five-stage process in which inner strengths and outer community supports combined to assist them in moving toward their goals. Following a crisis, participants reflected on their dis-empowering

circumstances to overcome challenges, discover new possibilities, and develop an action plan. A reciprocal process between strengths and resources emerged that resulted in the growth of greater trust in self and others. The process was ongoing throughout the overwhelming situation, and into the future. They overcame barriers to these strengths by communicating their needs and reaching out to others while developing a myriad of assets.

This study showed that Participant mothers were able to access new ways to view the situation that did not leave them feeling marginalized. These were mined for strategies to stem the rising tide of family homelessness and instability. Mothers were heroic in the face of adversity and were able learn the skills necessary to access and retain stable housing. They also built both material and social assets that lead to greater happiness and stability. Participants were able to develop resilient behavior by drawing upon past experience for knowledge, insight and inspiration. They overcame inner and outer barriers to these strengths by communicating their needs and reaching out to family, friends or services in a more confident way.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A*

#### *Research guide for participant mothers:*

- 1. Now that your experience of homelessness is behind you, what was the biggest challenge you faced as you worked toward finding and keeping stable housing for your family?*
- 2. As your family was moving from homelessness toward stability, did family members have to work to avoid feeling the emotional impact of the situation?*
- 3. Can you tell me more about strategies used by your family members to avoid feeling the emotional impact of the situation?*
- 4. Tell me more about insights you had about yourself or family members as you overcame the situation of finding your family homeless. Were there any surprises?*
- 5. Did you draw upon memories of overcoming other difficulties in your past experience in order to face this challenge?*
- 6. Did you have to overcome any particular obstacles in order to remain housed for at least a year? Can you say more about this?*
- 7. Based on what you know now, what advice would you give a parent or family member who is experiencing a similar situation with his or her housing?*
- 8. If you had a supportive person who was present with you during this time, what would they say about what impressed them the most about the way your family handled the situation?*
- 9. Please tell me about a person or service that was especially helpful while your family was experiencing homelessness and you were moving toward stability.*

*Appendix B*

Come and participate in community-based research

Everyday Heroes: Investigating Strengths of Formerly Homeless Families Who Have Found Stability Within Their Community.

I'd like to hear from you if you are a mother who has moved from being homeless to finding stable housing...

We know that homelessness among families is increasing. We don't know much about is how families move from being homeless to being housed in a stable situation.

If you are a single mother who has custody of your children, who was homeless, and has been housed in a stable situation for at least one year...

...I'd like to know more about what was helpful and what our community should be doing to assist homeless mothers.

How can the Victoria Community assist homeless families by listening to parents who have experienced homelessness themselves?

Please contact me. I'd like to interview you to find out more about your transition from homelessness to housing.

For further information please feel free to contact:

Melanie Piper, R.S.W, Researcher for the project at

250 415 7095

Honorariums will be offered to compensate Research Participants for their time.

*Appendix C: Demographic Information Survey*

Everyday Heroes: Investigating Strengths of Formerly Homeless Families Who Have Found Stability Within Their Community.

1. Which community of Victoria do you live in at the moment?
2. Approximately how long ago was your family homeless?
3. How long did it take for your family to find a home and become stable?
4. Did you manage to stay within the same community within Victoria?
5. Did your children have to move their school?
6. How long have you lived in your present community?
7. How many children live at your current home?
8. Were these children in your custody while you were looking for stable housing?
9. Did these children also have an experience of homelessness?
10. Where did they stay while you were without a home?
11. Was there a professional service within the Victoria Community that helped you find and keep your current home for at least a year?
12. Was there a person within the community that was especially helpful while your family was experiencing homelessness that helped you 'get back on your feet' and become stable?

*Appendix D*

515 Linden Ave,  
Victoria, B.C.,  
V8V 4G6

May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009

Re: Research Project

Dear Community Partner,

I am writing to request the participation and support of your organization in a research project for my Master of Social Work thesis. The title of my research is: *Everyday Heroes: Investigating Strengths of Formerly Homeless Families Who Have Found Stability Within Their Community.*

The focus of this research is to find out how the Victoria Community can more effectively assist homeless families by listening to parents who have become stable following an experience of homelessness. I am interested in finding out what was helpful and what should the community be doing more of.

Three mothers who have experienced homelessness but have been living in stable housing for at least one year will apply to participate. I am hoping that support workers within your organization will be able to assist me in advertising for participants. Flyers will also be freely available at community centers and recreation facilities.

I enclose a poster to give details on applying to participate. Following this, I will be available to come to your organization and explain details to you and your staff. I will have a sample of the research guide for you to view at this time.

Please sign the enclosed Agreement to Participate if you agree to post this flyer and inform your staff of the project. I will contact you to gather the signed document and answer any questions you may have. An approved research proposal is available if you would like to look at a copy.

Melanie Piper, B.S.W., R.S. W  
University of Victoria, School of Social Work



Agreement to participate

I.....agree to post the enclosed flyer which is entitled

Everyday Heroes:

Investigating Strengths of Formerly Homeless Families Who Have Found Stability Within Their Community.

I also agree to inform the relevant staff of this agency/organization of this project and make it known to potential participants.

I understand that this project will require the participation of three formerly homeless mothers who have found stability within their community.

The focus of this research is to find out how the Victoria Community can more effectively assist homeless families by listening to parents who have experienced homelessness themselves.

Melanie Piper is interested in finding out what was helpful, and what the community could be doing more of, in order to assist families who wish to move toward stability and a life of their choosing.

Signed:.....

On behalf of  
(Organization name).....

I have authority to give consent to participation on behalf of this agency.

Date:.....

Researcher signature.....

Melanie Piper, B.S.W, R.S.W.

*Appendix E*

School of Social Work

*University of Victoria*

Participant Consent Form:

You are invited to participate in a study entitled:

*Everyday Heroes: Investigating Strengths of Formerly Homeless Families Who Have Found Stability Within Their Community* which is being conducted by Melanie Piper, BSW, RSW.

Melanie Piper is a graduate student in the department of Human and Social Development at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions by telephoning (250) 415 7095 or sending an email to [mpiper@uvic.ca](mailto:mpiper@uvic.ca).

As a graduate student, I (Melanie Piper) am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Masters Degree in Social Work. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Patricia MacKenzie. You may contact my supervisor at (250) 721-8735.

Purpose and Objectives:

The purpose of this research project is to explore the ways in which families who have had an experience of homelessness can be better supported to return to a stable life. I am interested in interviewing three formerly homeless mothers who have moved from being homeless to finding a stable place to live.

Research of this type is important because:

In Canada, family homelessness is increasing rapidly. However, my experience as an outreach worker has shown that homeless families are mostly hidden and their stories often stay invisible. At this time, there is very little research to find out how families have moved from being homelessness to become settled. There is still a lot to learn about how mothers overcame this problem as they worked to create a better life for themselves, and their children.

This research will uncover ways to address the needs of homeless families based on the expert knowledge of mothers who have been homeless, but have now retained their housing for at least one year.

### Participants Selection:

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a mother who was homeless and have now found a place to settle with your children (and other family members) for at least a year.

If you agree to voluntarily take part in this research, your interview as a participant mother will include:

5 meetings between yourself and the researcher:

1. An initial telephone conversation to give you more information and see if you are interested in participating. This may take up to 30 minutes and will include a discussion about preserving your privacy.
  2. A first meeting with the researcher to complete a short survey and talk in detail about protecting your privacy. This will take about an hour, but one and a half hours will be set aside. This meeting will give you a chance to look closely at the research guide questions and give feedback. This will take about one hour, but two hours will be set aside in case you have questions or concerns.
  3. An interview which will last about one and a half hours, but two hours will be set aside. It is hoped that interviews will take place in your home, or a place you choose so that the researcher can get a sense of your family life. If a home interview is not something you are comfortable with, the researcher will find, and pay for, an alternate place to complete the interview.
- The interviews will be guided by a set of questions. You may choose to answer most of them, but if you decide to spend more time on the ones that help you tell your story, that is great. All participants will have the chance to change or add improvements to the questions if they don't really get to the most important part of your story. You will have the opportunity to view all the questions before signing this consent form.
4. You will have a chance to review the research once it has been made into a first draft of the transcript. You can read it over, or have me read it to you. You will not be identified within the draft. This may take about an hour.
  5. A final revision to the study will ensure that it has accurately captured your story. The final meeting will take about one hour.

#### All participants:

The interview will be recorded on audiotape and then I will make a transcript. I will write my interpretation of your story from this information. No children will be interviewed, but you can talk about your child's experience. All these recordings will be kept locked in a safe in my office. Dr. Patricia MacKenzie will keep copies for two years, as requested by the University of Victoria.

#### Participant mothers:

Once you are satisfied that the research looks right and captured your story properly, you will be asked if you would like to receive a short 'Thank You' letter. This letter will describe ways that we noticed how you and your family handled the situation of going from being homeless to finding a good place to live. I hope this letter will show you how important your story is to other people in the community, as well as your own family.

#### Inconvenience:

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including taking time from your daily life, work or family duties. For this reason, interviews will be held when it is most convenient for you, such as evenings or weekends.

#### Risks to participant mothers:

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research. You may feel sad or angry, or other emotions and memories may be stirred up by this interview. To prevent or to deal with these risks I can help find you the right person to talk to, or I can give you a list of no-cost community resources to help you.

#### Benefits:

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include gathering important information about how families can find and keep a place to live after being homeless. Your story is important because it may help people in your community to be more helpful when families are struggling to find a home and become stable. It will also help you and your family to see ways that you were heroes during a tough time in your lives.

#### Compensation:

As a way to compensate you for any inconvenience related to your involvement, participant mothers will be given thirty dollars. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you may keep the money. You should not take part in the study if money is the main reason you want to participate. The cash is to help with transportation, day care, or other unexpected costs.

#### Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study, your information will be destroyed.

#### On-going Consent:

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will ensure that your information is always kept confidential. You are free to stop the interview at any time with the option of rebooking for another day, or ending your participation entirely.

You should be aware that there is always a legal obligation to report a disclosure of child abuse or neglect. You will be reminded of this obligation before data is collected. I may also be required to report any threats to harm yourself or another person to Emergency Mental Health Services or the police.

#### Anonymity:

Participant mothers will be asked to give a false name and you will be known by that name throughout the study. Nobody will know your true name unless you choose to reveal it.

#### Confidentiality:

At all stages of the research (including recruitment, accessing consent, data collection, data analysis, publication) the identity of all participants will be kept in complete confidence. Notes, recorded tapes and transcriptions will be kept in a locked box at my home and erased as soon as they are no longer needed. Only my thesis supervisor, Patricia MacKenzie and I will have access to this information. Data from this study will be disposed of by erasing electronic data and shredding transcriptions two years after the University of Victoria has accepted my thesis.

#### Dissemination of Results:

Once you have approved the final draft of my study as being accurate, it will be submitted to the University of Victoria department of Graduate Studies where it will be reviewed. I will also be asked to speak about the study before a panel of experts who are invited by my supervisor, Dr. Patricia MacKenzie. If I give further presentations about the research within the community, confidentiality will always be respected.

#### Disposal of Data:

Data from this study will be disposed of by deleting all electronic data from all computer hardware and software, erasing audio recordings, and shredding transcriptions and notes. Data from this study will be stored until two years after the University of Victoria has accepted my thesis.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca)).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

Participant name for the study:

Signature:

Date:

*Appendix F:*

NO COST COMMUNITY RESOURCES TO SUPPORT PARTICIPANT MOTHERS IF REQUIRED.

-NEED CRISIS LINE

THIS 24 HOUR SERVICE WILL PROVIDE SUPPORT TO CALLERS AND REFER TO APPROPRIATE SERVICES AS REQUIRED. THIS INCLUDES EMERGENCY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES.

TELEPHONE 250-386 6323

-LOCAL COMMUNITY CENTRE FAMILY COUNSELLORS.

REFERRAL WILL DEPEND ON LOCATION OF PARTICIPANT MOTHER AND CAN BE ACCESSED VIA THE RESEARCHER, OR IN PERSON.

-CITIZENS COUNSELLING

941 KINGS ROAD, VICTORIA, BC.

TELEPHONE 250-384 9934

-VICTORIA NATIVE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE

231 REGINA AVENUE, VICTORIA, BC.

TELEPHONE 250- 384 3211

-GLBA OF BC

1284 GLADSTONE AVENUE, VICTORIA, BC

TELEPHONE 250-388 6220

-SENIORS SERVICES: SILVER THREADS

1728 DOUGLAS STREET, VICTORIA, BC

TELEPHONE 250-388 4268

-VICTORIA IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE SOCIETY

637 BAY ST, 3rd FLOOR, VICTORIA BC.

TELEPHONE 250-361 9433

Appendix G: Thank you letters to participants.

February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Dear Cheryl,

I am writing to thank you for your invaluable assistance as a research participant in my thesis, which is entitled, *Everyday Heroes: Investigating Strengths of Formerly Homeless Families Who Have Found Stability Within Their Community*.

My hope was that this work would provide insight into how families might be better assisted on their journey to finding stable housing. Your willingness to share your inspiring story has made this important research possible.

From the beginning of our meetings I noticed your relentless desire to communicate honestly. The love you demonstrated for your daughter touched me deeply and I was awed by your courage to pursue a life of your choosing despite incredible obstacles. On several occasions you showed an astonishing determination to succeed despite these challenges. Each time you spoke about how difficult the journey was, it was inspiring to learn how your desire to provide a happy life for your family always came first.

When I look back at your words of wisdom, I am struck by the insight you showed when you said, "I used to think my daughter was my rock, I used to think my daughter saved me, and she didn't, I saved myself, she was just... this wonderful, wonderful, person that I get to experience and be with every day of my journey". I think this philosophy captures the very essence of your spirit and reveals how your inner strength has evolved to guide you throughout your life.

On behalf of myself, families in housing crisis, those who assist them, and The University of Victoria School of Social Work, I would like to thank you for participating in this study.

Please find a copy of my Master of Social Work thesis enclosed. I hope that you will be able to attend the convocation ceremonies in June of 2010 and that it will be a reminder of the invaluable contribution you have made to families in Victoria, BC, and many other communities across the globe.

Sincerely,

Melanie Piper, M.S.W.



February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Dear Annie,

I am writing to thank you for your invaluable assistance as a research participant in my thesis, which is entitled, *Everyday Heroes: Investigating Strengths of Formerly Homeless Families Who Have Found Stability Within Their Community*.

My hope was that this work would provide insight into how families might be better assisted on their journey to finding stable housing. Your willingness to share your inspiring story has made this important research possible.

From the beginning of our meetings I noticed how relaxed and comfortable your home was. The love you demonstrated for your daughter touched me deeply and I was impressed by your insights into community services and how to access them. On several occasions you showed an astonishing determination to succeed despite enormous challenges. Each time you spoke about how difficult the journey was, it was inspiring to learn how your desire to provide a happy life for your daughter always came first.

When I recall our various conversations, I remember very clearly when you said, "A stumble in life is not a failure, it's only a failure if you choose not to do anything about it. Anybody can stumble no matter how high they are or how much money they make... It just takes a split second". For me, this demonstrates the essence of personal strength, and determination to succeed in creating a life of your choosing.

On behalf of myself, families in housing crisis, those who assist them, and The University of Victoria School of Social Work, I would like to thank you for participating in this study.

Please find a copy of my Master of Social Work thesis enclosed. I hope that you will be able to attend the convocation ceremonies in June of 2010 and that it will be a reminder of the invaluable contribution you have made to families in Victoria, BC, and many other communities across the globe.

Sincerely,

Melanie Piper, M.S.W.

February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Dear Danielle,

I am writing to thank you for your invaluable assistance as a research participant in my thesis, which is entitled, *Everyday Heroes: Investigating Strengths of Formerly Homeless Families Who Have Found Stability Within Their Community*.

My hope was that this work would provide insight into how families might be better assisted on their journey to finding stable housing. Your willingness to share your inspiring story has made this important research possible.

From the beginning of our meetings I noticed an atmosphere of fun and relaxation in your home. The love you demonstrated for your three children touched me deeply and I appreciate your willingness to meet with me despite the fact that you were moving to a new home at the time. On several occasions you showed an astonishing determination to succeed despite enormous challenges.

In particular, you were always willing to be honest with yourself and discover a new or better way to find what you needed. Each time you spoke about how difficult the journey was, it was inspiring to learn how your desire to provide a happy life for your family always came first. It is clear that you have a warm and generous nature.

I noticed your resiliency when you said, *“Well, I have had lots of difficulties in the past, and I think back, and basically, I have overcome them somehow. I think that life is full of difficult experiences to make you stronger, and to show you that you can get past things”*. To me, this demonstrates the very essence of personal strength, and I hope it provides a sense of your courage in the face of adversity.

On behalf of myself, families in housing crisis, those who assist them, and The University of Victoria School of Social Work, I would like to thank you for participating in this study.

Please find a copy of my Master of Social Work thesis enclosed. I hope that you will be able to attend the convocation ceremonies in June of 2010 and that it will be a reminder of the invaluable contribution you have made to families in Victoria, BC, and many other communities across the globe.

Sincerely,

Melanie Piper, M.S.W.