



Violence-Prone

Part One: How the World’s First Battered Women’s Shelter Started

The idea of a meeting place for women and their children grew out of my disastrous brush with a local group of the newly emergent Women’s Movement in 1971. I was then feeling lonely and isolated, with two small children to care for, and a husband frequently away. When I first began to read the articles that other women were writing, I felt they were writing about me. It was certainly a liberation to find I was not the only woman who could not knit or sew, and that there were other women out there who shared my pathological hatred of housework. I began to look out for our nearest group.

Unfortunately that group, in particular, seemed to be more concerned with world politics than with my day-to-day problems, like how to cope on my own with two children, two dogs and a cat - for the loneliness was sometimes dreadful. Luckily I did meet some women like myself who wanted not only to bring up their children properly at home, but also to use their energies and talents in improving our community life, so that we would no longer feel so cut off and isolated that we lived our lives on Valium. Therefore we left it to the women’s group to decide the solution for world problems, and got on with the more immediate task of finding a place where mothers could

meet each other and bring their children.

So with two of my friends I began to scout round Hounslow for a little house to use as a women’s centre. Eventually Hounslow Council wrote to me about No.2 Belmont Terrace, and I collected the keys. When I first opened the door, I burst into tears - it was derelict. But it was ours! By now our group had grown quite large, and we determinedly got on with the work. Harry Ferrer, our plumber, showed us how to fit pipes and mend washers, and we completely renovated the building until one day it was ready for occupation.

Mothers living locally began to call by on their way to and from school. They would stop in for a chat or to share a problem with us. Gradually we all pooled our knowledge and began to learn the complex Social Security laws. We discovered that many women would come to see us who could not face anything as authoritarian-seeming as a town-hall or a Social Services department. We had created a very happy little community of people from all walks of life, who knew that any time they were lonely or in need of company they just had to go down to No.2 Belmont Terrace, and someone was almost sure to be there to talk to. And even when no one was there, it was still a warm, welcoming place to take your kids. Then home did not seem so much like a prison.

All this changed the day the first battered woman walked through the front door and showed me her bruises. ‘No one will help me,’ she said. Those words took me back to a time in my own childhood when no one would help me - as I begged them to bury my mother because my father refused to. ‘I will help you,’ I promised her, and refuge was born. Within weeks there were at least forty mothers and children packed into four tiny rooms. Fortunately for me, our predicament was high-lighted in a small piece written by a journalist for the Observer. After that a man called by one day and, sitting himself down on a mattress, asked me what I most needed. ‘A new house,’ I told him. ‘Go and find it,’ he said. I did. This man was Neville Vincent, the Managing Director of Bovis Ltd. In November 1974 we acquired a much larger house in Chiswick High Road. However, we were still not out of the woods. Even as we moved in, our numbers were already too great. We were still officially overcrowded. Because at that time there was nowhere else for women to run to, I insisted that no one should ever be turned away. As a result, although we were legally allowed to house only thirty-six residents,

our numbers sometimes went as high as one hundred and fifty mothers and children. My colleague Anne Ashby agreed with me over the ‘open door’ principle, and we enshrined it in our policy that the door would remain open day and night. This, of course, created an unbearable tension between ourselves and our local Borough, who quite rightly were worried by the overcrowding, the ensuing health hazard, and the possibility of fire. On 29 April 1976 the Borough first took me to court for overcrowding.

Just before I was to appear in the Acton Magistrates’ Court, I was invited to tour America with Tina, Nikki, and Annie, who were working with me at the time. I was genuinely startled and moved that anyone should consider that we had anything valuable to offer, so I accepted at once. We flew into New York on 12 March 1976, and visited sixteen other cities to raise funds for new refuges springing up all over the USA. I remember that I was particularly interested in finding if anyone else had come to similar conclusions on why some people actually choose violent relationships - which is the major theme of this book. But in response I mostly met again the hostility of those people who insisted that all women were simply victims of male oppression.

It seems to me that America’s Women’s Movement is much more broadly based than its British counterpart. It was with members of the National Organization of Women that we had the best dialogues - at seminars and meetings where people wanted to share a sense of bewilderment arising from the fact that now there were established refuges, so many women seemed to be merely using them like revolving doors. They would come to the refuges when the level of violence got too much, only to return to their violent men for another few weeks, and then come back to the refuges again for help.

Some of the refuges dealt with this problem by allowing such women three visits only. As they explained to me, this rule meant that the staff could concentrate their efforts on the women who genuinely wanted to get out of violent relationships. But they knew, just as we did, that if you wanted to do effective work in a refuge, the problems attached to women who seemed unable to stay away from violence would have to be fully explored sooner or later.

Our trip ended with a lunch of honour in Washington DC, sponsored by Congresswoman Lindy Boggs and Congressman Newton Steer. As I stood to give my speech in a lovely room surrounded by members of Congress on

Capitol Hill, it was hard not to feel bitter that back home, within a few weeks, I would be facing charges in an English court for carrying out the refuge work I was now describing to a supportive audience.

Thanks to a brilliant manoeuvre on the part of our barrister Stephen Sedly and David Ormondy, a public health adviser, the Acton Magistrates’ Court found me not guilty of overcrowding. The good news was followed immediately by bad news. Hounslow appealed, and got ready to take me to the High Court in the Strand.

During this time, through a series of fortuitous events, we managed to persuade the reluctant civil servants to give us a grant of £2,000 a month. This generosity could have had something to do with the threat of our group arranging a sit-in outside 10 Downing Street. We numbered about one hundred and twenty mothers and children, and we were already well known for our immediate ability to get on the streets with our placards and demand action where necessary. We had received a reassuring letter saying that our application for a grant would be considered. However, we heard nothing for several months, and it was not until October 1974, the day before the publication of my book *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear*, that a cheque arrived by taxi, with a letter from the Department of Health and Social Security.

Meanwhile, during the Conservatives’ period in office, I had been encouraged by Sir Keith Joseph to apply for an Urban Aid Grant of £10,000 a year. The Urban Aid scheme was a very new idea in those days. Hounslow had many other schemes to put forward to the Government, but due to local pressure and the continued support of a local Labour councillor, Jim Duffy, they did put my scheme in. To their surprise and my amusement, it was granted. By this time, help came from another direction. David Astor had resigned from the *Observer* and offered me his services. He brought with him the kindly and powerful figure of Lord Goodman. Now, at least, Anne Ashby and I were no longer on our own.

We had a curious mixture of dedicated staff and volunteers. We scoured London, taking possession of empty houses belonging to other boroughs which refused to take financial responsibility for their own families, who turned up on our doorstep. We took these houses over by night, to create new communities for such additional families. By the time of the court cases, Chiswick Women’s Aid had established twenty-two squats, and had also ac-

quired the Palm Court Hotel (forty-five private suites), three Greater London Council properties, and a large vicarage in Bristol. Even so, at our main refuge we had to erect large garden sheds in the backyard to cope with the overflow of one hundred and fifty mothers and children living in the house.

As the case in the High Court approached, the battle lines were set, but I was no longer powerless, or fighting in a vacuum. We had Lord Gordon on our side, and I felt very much more confident. In the late spring of 1976, Hounslow took me to the High Court, where I was found guilty of the charge of overcrowding. We appealed this decision, and the matter went to the House of Lords in March 1977. There the five Law Lords reluctantly found me guilty, and I returned to Acton Magistrates’ Court for sentencing.

During this time, and responding to so much publicity, other groups had formed to take up the idea of refuge for women and children. Many comprised good, loving people, both men and women, who sincerely wanted to help, but there were also the usual faces seen around all social movements, and I was wary enough to stay clear of their politics. I never saw Women’s Aid as a movement that was hostile to men, but The National Federation, which quickly formed, made it quite clear that men were the enemy. This view totally rejected our own philosophy - which cannot be encapsulated in a political theory, but which recognises that the basis of the problem is a human one: violence occurs in both men and women. That is not a politically fashionable view in certain quarters, and, indeed, for them we were outcasts from the very beginning because we had always employed male workers at our Refuge - and we also ran a special house for the men of the problem families who sought our help.

The civil servants, who hated our open-door policy as much as they hated our evidence of the mistreatment of problem families by the various State-run agencies saw their opportunity to get rid of us. They removed our grant on the grounds that we were not a national organisation, even though we had been officially declared so by the Charity Commissioners and our mothers and children came from all over Britain. They handed the grant to the National Federation instead. At about the same time, Hounslow Council voted to remove our Urban Aid Grant, thus hoping to starve us into submission. Fortunately, they did not know that I had been given a sum of £50,000 by an anonymous well-wisher, which I had tucked away in bonds for just such

an occasion. Those staff that could afford to all gave up their meagre salaries. Most of us were volunteers, so that presented little problem, and we soldiered on.

The final court case was my sentencing at the Acton Magistrates’ Court on 6 October 1977. The following February, in response to a letter from one of our mothers, the Queen intervened and saved the Refuge.* The war was over, and the rest is history. This book is not about the politics of survival for pressure groups, because that is a whole book in itself. This book is about the problem families and my (and later Jeff’s) work with them. *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear* is about how people are violent. *Infernal Child*, my autobiography, is about how a violent childhood affects children. *Proned to Violence* is a book about why people are violent. In these pages we can all recognise parts of ourselves, and hopefully, in gaining understanding, we can learn compassion, and in turn help to persuade our society to refrain from further brutalizing already brutalized people.

*The Court sentencing and the letter from Buckingham Palace (quoted in full) are described in Chapter Five.