



## Calgary Street Talk

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### “Emma House sheltering homeless pregnant women since 1992”

Living on the streets is tough enough. But being pregnant and living on the streets – it doesn’t get much tougher than that.

And so a group of Christians joined forces 12 years ago to establish what was then a first in Calgary – shelter for homeless pregnant women. Since then, Emma House has been “home” to more than 120 expectant mothers – most of them from the Calgary area, but some from as far away as Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto and even Yellowknife.

“We wanted to offer a constructive alternative to women who thought that living on the streets and/or having an abortion were their only viable options, recalls Jim Amsing, a recently retired Calgary police officer who co-founded the shelter and served as president of the non-profit Emma House Society for its first nine years.

Emma House is relatively small – able to accommodate only three pregnant women at a time. But that smallness, coupled with the fact Emma House operates from a single-family home with live-in house parents, is what gives the place its cozy atmosphere.

“We offer a safe, supportive, loving environment, but one in which – like in any properly functioning household – there are rules and responsibilities for everyone living there,” says Jeff Adams, Emma House’s president for the past three years. “Our house parents play a crucial role in providing the support – and in enforcing the rules.”

The rules include daily chores, curfews and either having a job, going to school or doing volunteer work to provide some consistent structure as the baby’s delivery date nears.

“At first I was angry,” says Shauna Lewis, in describing her arrival at Emma House several years ago. “I’d been on my own for two years. The last thing I wanted was adult supervision. **I was pregnant, and felt abandoned by everyone.**

“It didn’t take me long, however, to warm up to the house parents. They made me feel right at home. And since I felt like I really didn’t have a home, they let me borrow theirs! I felt like I could breathe for the first time in three years. It was so refreshing to have someone who really cared just to listen to me.”

Christina Labbe, a former Emma House houseparent, says many of the women who arrive at Emma House are very angry – at the world around them for the mistreatment they’ve experienced, at the house parents for the authority figures they represent, and at themselves for their own mistakes.

“Sometimes the only way for me as a houseparent to deal with that anger was to wrap my arms around them,” Christina recalls. “At first they’d struggle to get away. But then the anger would turn to tears, and all the emotional walls would start to come down.”

Sheena’s story is similar to that of most Emma House residents. She ran away from a dysfunctional home, met and moved in with a boyfriend, became pregnant, was abandoned by her boyfriend, and desperate for a place to sleep when she learned about Emma House. The home offered Sheena the opportunity to put her life back together and plan for a future for the baby growing inside her.

I felt no pressure to choose adoption or parenting – the decision was mine alone,” Sheena recalls. “And I knew my house parents would support whatever I chose. It was a nice change to have someone get excited about the changes that a pregnancy brings – someone to rub my ever expanding tummy! It made me feel a little less alone.

“Emma House got me information on babies and what to do with the little critters. I was taught how to cook and care for myself. I was given responsibility that I think I secretly craved. I felt so comfortable with the house parents. I think it was the fact that they weren’t the same age of my parents, but close enough to my age that I felt they could relate to a lot of the things I was going through. I was able to open up to both of them, and to never feel like they were better than me.”

“It’s essential that our house parents not act like judge and jury,” says Adams. “Women like Shauna have already been judged far too often. When they come to Emma House they need acceptance and guidance; not judgment.”

Although Emma House’s original mandate was to provide housing for pregnant women only until their babies are born, the home recently began in some special cases to offer post-birth housing for a mother and her newborn if she decides to “parent” or keep her child, rather than placing him/her for adoption.

“Our first priority continues to be housing pregnant women,” Adams says. “However, when space is available and a woman has exhibited maturity, we will provide several weeks or months of additional housing for both the mother and child. This expanded mandate is a direct result of Calgary’s extremely high housing costs that are making it very difficult for these young mothers to find anything affordable.”

Je’Han is one of the first Emma House residents to benefit from its expanded mandate. She remained at the home for a while last summer after her baby was born.

Now employed and living in a townhouse with her boy, Je’Han still remembers what it was like before Emma House: “I was pregnant and living with prostitutes and recovering drug addicts. It was a total relief to go to Emma House. It made me feel totally secure.”

Women interested in living at Emma House should apply through the Calgary Pregnancy Care Centre at 269-3110. The Centre conducts initial

interviews and recommends suitable applicants to Emma House's board, which conducts follow up interviews. It usually takes less than a week from the time a pregnant woman contacts the Pregnancy Care Centre until she moves into Emma House.

Aaryn Manning, a pregnancy Care Centre employee who helps interview and arrange placements at Emma House, says the home provides an essential service: "Because of an affordable housing shortage (in Calgary), we at the Calgary Pregnancy Care Centre are grateful to be able to offer hope to our clients. Knowing that they will not be homeless takes a burden off their shoulders and truly does bring a light to their eyes."

Manning says Emma House is spacious enough to provide residents with "quiet and alone" time as they plan their futures and that of their babies. It's simply not a house or a temporary place to stay. It is a place of growth and nurturing in order to assist the clients in making choices for a successful future.

"Emma House provides the girls with a picture of a different way of living: a loving and healthy family environment where people are treated with respect, kindness and where boundaries are set to assist in growth rather than as a punishment."

Pam and Bryan Smid, Emma House's current house parents, began their live-in roles last summer. The highlight so far for Pam was serving as birthing coach for one of the residents in the delivery room at Foothills Hospital.

"I cannot adequately express in words the feeling I have about seeing a child, a child of God, being born," Pam says. "Let's just say I had a hard time holding back the tears. It was overwhelmingly beautiful. What strength this young woman has to start a new chapter in her life as a single Mom!"

All of Emma House's financial support comes from donations by churches and individuals.

"We face financial and other challenges sometimes," says Adams. "For instance, the van we use to transport the residents to doctor appointments and other things is 11 years old, and we're searching for the cash to replace it. But God always finds a way. When we see what happens to the women and their babies who stay here, how their lives are changed for the better, any challenges that we face in helping them are well worth it."

Sheena, the former resident who chafed under Emma House's rules but eventually came to love the place, gave birth to a healthy baby girl. Since then, she has married and experienced the joy of giving birth to a second child. Her days of being single, pregnant, alone and struggling to find a place to live are behind her – but not forgotten.

"When you are young, single and pregnant, the whole world looks at you differently." Sheena says. "People shake their heads when they walk past you. You feel like the whole world is ashamed of you. Emma House focused on me, not on the mistakes I'd made. I was given a chance – a clean slate."

*(This article was supplied by Emma Maternity House Society. For more information about the Emma Maternity House Society, including becoming a resident or a \$50/years member, email [emma\\_house@yahoo.ca](mailto:emma_house@yahoo.ca) or call the Calgary Pregnancy Care Centre at 269-3110.)*