**Volunteer Stories**

**Sara Peters** has been volunteering at Sistering for two years, first in the Kitchen and now as a member of the Medical Reception team, joining Sally McLean, Kayla Healy and Nicole Tollenaar. When she moved to Toronto, Sara knew she wanted to volunteer at an agency supporting women, and when she discovered

Sistering, she knew that here is where she

wanted to be. What impresses her: how ferociously the team lives Sistering’s low

barrier philosophy, accepting women as they come, with compassion, wisdom and a genuine desire to help.

As Medical Receptionist, Sara comes face to face with women in pain. During one of her first shifts, a woman needed to see the doctor, she told Sara, because she had been sexually assaulted. Sara had never been so close to so much suffering. But while her job involves triage – participants, doctors and the health care system – she understands that sometimes, her real impact is simply listening – really listening – and making the women who come to her feel truly cared for.

**Souzan Mirza** lives in the neigbourhood and often passed Sistering on her way to school. Interested in learning more about what we do, she joined us for our One Year 24/7 Anniversary Celebration last fall.

In January, Souzan volunteered in the day Beading Program; she used to make jewelry in high school and welcomed the opportunity to reignite her creative spirit. When she learned that we wanted to offer Beading in the Drop In in the evening, she stepped up. Along with Beading volunteers Johana Grande and Shihoko Nakagawa, Souzan meets every other week with between 10 and 20 women, connecting with them as they make beautiful pieces, often as gifts for friends.

The Beading Program brings women together, physically and emotionally, and it’s that sense of community Souzan cherishes. Belonging is the word that comes to mind.

**Crystal** is an active participant with mental health and addiction issues, who has been accessing Employment and Income Support for three years. Initially, she identified facial tattoos as a barrier to traditional employment. She receives on-going employment and supportive counselling, and this year started volunteering in Sistering’s kitchen, washing dishes and prepping food. She is exploring working as a Peer, and has completed the Wellness Recovery and Action Plan (WRAP), to become a Peer Facilitator. Crystal had a housing crisis, and received new housing, thanks to our Community Support Team.

**D.** is 36 years old, the mother of two girls aged 18 and 19. They live with their dad. She Facebooks them. D. left home at 14, bouncing from her 16-year- old boyfriend’s place to a shelter to family and back again. She worked furiously to create a safe home for her young family – her girls were always her priority – but despite her strength and courage the girls’ father eventually gained custody. D. spent a decade using substances. She worked as an exotic dancer. She came into conflict with the law. A chance encounter with a woman who came to Sistering led her to the Drop In.

Fast forward: today D. is a Peer Harm Reduction Worker. She is a vocal advocate for homeless and marginalized women, fighting for their right to be safe and warm and treated with the dignity. Sistering gave D. strength, she says. She learned that she deserved to be treated with respect.

**Raha Javanfar**

Volunteering at Sistering is an experience - eye-opening, upsetting, uplifting and empowering all at the same time. I serve breakfast at Sistering two or three times a month. I arrive around 9am and see women hanging out outside the Drop In door. I wonder where they spent the night. At Sistering? On the street? In a park?

I go inside, and lock my personal belongings in the office before walking through the Drop In, which is now set up for breakfast. I see women waiting for breakfast to start. Some are napping at the tables; others are applying makeup or filling out various forms. Most people are cranky in the morning and these women have endured a night I can’t imagine.I go to the kitchen and set up the breakfast serving area...bowls of cereal, glasses of milk, often boiled eggs or leftovers from dinner the night before, yogurt and bread.

At 9:30, we open the Kitchen serving window and the women line up to get breakfast. I ask them what they'd like. "Cereal? With milk? Egg, bread...?" I'm glad that we're able to offer brown bread to those who prefer it, and nut milk (almond, cashew, etc) to those who are lactose intolerant. Some women are cheerful, others disgruntled. I've started to recognize many of them, and my goal is to learn their names. That's the sad part: realizing how many names there are to learn. I am grateful to Sistering for all that they do for women in this city, and I hope from the bottom of my heart that they'll one day close due to 'lack of business'. Till then, "Cereal? Milk in it?"