



Meet an Advocate: Cecile Guay

CLM: How did you first get involved in anti-poverty work?

Guay: My two daughters took me to a meeting of Branching Out in Dawson Creek. At first, I couldn't understand what they meant by anti-poverty or advocacy, but I found out. That was in 1981 or '82. Branching Out was new at the time. Then, everyone else got married or left town or got a job, so it was up to me to get involved.

I was on assistance for 36 years, much of it on handicapped benefits. I raised four children and adopted a kid with a mental handicap. When I found out about Branching Out, I wished I'd had something like that to help me when my children were growing up. I recently turned 65, so I'm off welfare. I'm a federal bum instead!

My family's involved in anti-poverty work, too. My daughter Gisele has been an FAPG chair and she's very active. She's an advocate in Sechelt. My daughter Renee has been involved in group homes for years.

CLM: Where did you learn your advocacy skills?

Guay: I'd say I learned from the Ministry. They'd say, "It's in the policy manual, it's in the policy manual." I remember the shock I got when I found out that the policy manual wasn't the law — the law was in the act. That was in a workshop that Legal Services

gave, with Ron Rapin and Pat Nelson.

I've also got expertise in disability issues, thanks to the BCCPD (B.C. Coalition of People with Disabilities). I was the regional rep for six years. The funding isn't there any more, but the knowledge is there and the support is still there. I learned more from the BCCPD in one year than in all the years I'd done straight advocacy.

All the dedicated professionals at BCCPD, CLAS, LSS, and PIAC are accessible to those of us who are out of town; they've given us very strong support. I sometimes think we're in a better position in Dawson Creek than we'd be if we were in an urban area.

CLM: How would you describe your approach to advocacy?

Guay: I'm known for being outspoken; I mean exactly what I say. I'm not politically correct. I'm not shy to speak up if I'm unhappy with something. At the local Ministry office in Dawson Creek, they've got a pet name for me: the bulldog. The first time I heard it I thought they were calling me a bitch. What they meant was that I can be really stubborn.

But I'd say abrasive advocacy never works. It hurts the client. You have to treat the opposition the way you expect them to treat your clients. You always have to leave them their face. You can be very firm without being ignorant. There's nothing I dislike more than poor manners.

Two things: Always be honest. Never make a wave unless it's really needed.

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One important thing for new advocates is to make sure they realize they may be new but they have an expertise all their own; we're equals.

CLM: Tell us something about Branching Out's work

Guay: We've got a goldmine up here. We've got four advocates. I advocate to the Ministry and I have this disability expertise. I'm bilingual and that's been handy. Another advocate also does a lot of income assistance, and she worked for ten years in a transition house. Another advocate has expertise in schools, student loans, anything to do with children and schools. Another does CPP, UIC, Workers' Compensation, and tax returns.

Branching Out is a success because the advocacy is always done by peers, as volunteers. That makes a big difference. It's no good having someone say they "understand" when the clothes they've got on their backs cost more than what you've got all year to clothe your children.

At Branching Out, we network for anything north of Prince George — community groups and government services.

CLM: How did you get involved with the FAPG?

Guay: I once told a supervisor there should be somewhere that poor people could band together to get their rights. He said that it was coming. I never dreamed I'd be part of it.

I'd had my first year of advocacy with Branching Out and everyone went to Naramata for the FAPG conference. I was the only one left in town, so I had to get started doing advocacy. That was the beginning.

CLM: You're stepping down from the chair of FAPG after seven years. What has been the greatest challenge?

Guay: The hardest thing for FAPG has been to keep up with our growth. We've gone from 35 groups to 113. That's partly because of Law Foundation funding for groups, and having Gus Long doing workshops around the province. The more groups that get involved, the more work there is to do. I spend at least an hour and a half a day just reading the mail.

CLM: What do you see as FAPG's best achievement over those seven years?

Guay: The FAPG has really strengthened. We're no longer a

divided camp the way we used to be. I think that there is agreement now that the strength of FAPG comes from the groups themselves and the networking, not from the executive.

We've been able to hold regular board meetings, with funding from the Ministry. We've had four this year. That's something we weren't able to do in the past.

I'd say that FAPG is working well. We've got good respect and good credibility, and that's not easily come by in these political days.

CLM: You're now involved with the advisory council.

Guay: I'm co-chair of the Minister's advisory council on income assistance. We've got some good strong people on the advisory council. At least now the advisory council is in the act. Whoever gets into government, there will be an advisory council. It gives us the chance of making even a slight change.

CLM: What are you going to do with your free time?

Guay: Play more cards. My mother is still living, so I'll be spending time with her. And I'm involved in a lot of things locally. I've been going double-time so it will be no problem: I'll be busy.