

Our history

On August 6, 1977, a small number of volunteers opened Niagara's first safe haven for abused women and children at 9 Salina Street, St. Catharines and began to provide emergency shelter, food and counselling. On the very first day women and children fleeing violence and abuse filled the 8 bed shelter. It soon became apparent the Salina Street facilities were insufficient to meet demand, and so, in 1983, Women's Place built a new shelter in downtown St. Catharines. The three-floor, 24-bed facility operated 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. With more women to help we expanded our range of services.

Eventually during the early years of 2000, our shelter space again was not sufficient for the demand we were experiencing. We needed to expand. Our community and government partners responded strongly to our need. A building committee was created when the former Victoria School on Niagara Street was acquired in 2004. As a result, the plan to convert an old school into a safe haven became the Rebuilding Lives – Restoring Hope Capital Campaign. Renovations began in earnest as the goal was to move into this new facility in the fall of 2007. Through the generous support of our community, the federal and provincial governments, this vision became reality.

A new beginning, began . . . On November 16, 2007, Women's Place St. Catharines and North Niagara celebrated the official grand opening at the new location on Gibson Place. This momentous day was a confirmation of the generosity of our community and government partners. The support from our donors, sponsors and volunteers was extraordinary. Our new name is in honour of the former Executive Director Gillian Dooley, who led our organization from 1980 -2007. Gillian was instrumental in fighting the cycle of violence against women, the effect of her work not only in the community but known nationally. She developed violence prevention programs with the District School Board of Niagara, established a long term counselling agency for abused women called Design for a New Tomorrow, and was a founding member of the December 6 Project, which recognizes the anniversary of the 1989 massacre of 14 women in Montreal. In 2005 partnering with the Niagara Regional Police Services, a Leadership Summit on Family Violence was organized as an ongoing project that continues today "Stop Family Violence, It's Everybody's Business". This project is to educate employers on the costs and effects of family violence on their business and how they can support their employees.

In making the announcement of the name change, Monica Willows, the past president of the board of directors, said "....her commitment and innovation will leave a legacy for hope for people living in fear that will echo for years to come."

Gillian's Place has 18 bedrooms for 34 people; as well we are fully accessible with an elevator to all floors. A number of common rooms were included such as a quiet room, teen room, TV room and we were able to refurbish the original gymnasium. All of this new and improved space allows women more privacy to help in the process of healing. Another needed improvement was the number of counselling rooms – we went from one room to four. Our counsellors are experts in their field providing counseling, understanding and advocacy for abused women to access the community programs and resources they require. We are also pleased to have a larger outdoor playground with equipment and indoor gymnasium for the children who come to Gillian's Place with their Moms. With the help of our

Child and Youth Counsellor these children can begin their healing and just be kids. If you are wondering what the inside of our shelter looks like, please view "Tour our Shelter". Gillian's Place is an accomplishment of collaborative relationships, understanding and meeting the essential support services to empower abused women of Niagara.