

Moving Forward celebrates 1st anniversary

By Chris Traber
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Not so long ago, Georgina Lee escaped what she felt was an unsafe marriage. She and her children found shelter in a London, ON co-operative housing facility. In the midst of her own chaos, she witnessed that of others. "I saw people arrive with all their possessions in garbage bags," she said. "I know how hard it is to struggle, to start over and to be without." Ms Lee said she received invaluable social service help and, with the support of a new partner, she survived and thrived. Today, she lives in Woodbridge and works as a shipping supply sales manager. She is also the founder and president of Moving Forward 2015 Foundation, a fledgling non-profit support to York Region survivors of domestic violence. "I did OK," she said. "When the opportunity to give back to the community came, I took it." Led by the fundraising dynamo and assisted by her six volunteer board members, the foundation celebrated its first anniversary earlier this month, raising \$16,000.

The funds will be used to launch the organization's Next Step loan program, an interest-free micro credit initiative, offering up to \$1,000 to help men and women get back on their feet.

The program is not gender specific, she said. "We help survivors and, yes, men are also victims of domestic violence."

In addition to her passion for wanting to help those whose fate she shared, the impetus for the foundation was Yellow Brick House, Ms Lee said.

"I met with them, I saw how great the need was," she said.

After incorporating the foundation, its first order of business was a fundraiser. The \$3,500 collected was used to buy winter clothes women and child at Yellow Brick House. The balance was converted into grocery gift cards for clients. Another fundraiser followed. The donated \$4,000 was parlayed into \$15,000 worth of merchandise thanks to local sponsors, including Sleep Factory, The Brick and Walmart. The goods furnished three homes for women in need.

The loan program was inspired by the December 6 Fund in memory of the 1989 L'École Polytechnique Montreal Massacre when a gunman declared his hatred for feminists and killed 14 women.

The loan program, to be launched in January, will assist men and women impacted by domestic violence who are either living in a shelter, second stage housing or are leaving an abusive home.

The money can be used for expenses, such as rent, furniture, utilities and other costs. The loans are interest free and are expected to be paid back at \$25 a month. Applicants must be referred by a case or social worker, physician or persons working directly with victims.

The criteria and process is simple, Ms Lee said. Applicants must have some form of income, social assistance or otherwise and sign a loan agreement.

"The loans are designed to help people get back on their feet, to walk away from violence" she said. The program will also help free up space in shelters and second stage housing, where wait lists are extensive, she added.

In less than 14 months, Ms Lee and her "small, but mighty" board and supporters have indeed moved forward. Next month the organization moves into new offices on Bayview Avenue, north of Hwy. 7, with donated construction, labour and materials.

2015 is a self imposed deadline, Ms Lee said.

"By the year 2015 we really want to have made a major difference," she explained.

Ms Lee and her group are planning additional events to raise money and awareness to help people safely leave dangerous relationships.

"When moving forward that's the right direction," she said.

To support the foundation or get more information, visit www.movingforward2015.com



Helping hands. Lucy Masi (left) and Georgina Lee are the secretary and president respectively of the Moving Forward Foundation, a non-profit group that provides interest-free micro loans to victims and survivors of domestic abuse so they can improve their lives. The foundation celebrated its first anniversary this month. *Staff Photo/Steve Somerville*