from your experience of working with non-profits, how important is it to know that you have reliable and consistent funding and support? What differences can that have on an organization and the people they serve? I thought this is so important! Ultimately I think that consistent and long-term funding leads to consistent and long-term programs. So as an agency you know you can offer a certain set of programs indefinitely, and the community then knows it will always have access to them. Then, from that base of core, stable programming, an agency can start to grow and look at the next set of needs that aren’t being met. Now, my $20 a month doesn’t singlehandedly fix all of those things. But by being part of a healthy monthly donor pool, collectively with my fellow donors, we can! We can make a big difference over time.

What was the appeal for you of becoming a monthly donor?
I’ve worked in non-profits for most of the last 10+ years, and I know how much stability a regular donor pool can bring to an organization. I think there is value in that beyond the dollar amount you are giving. With a monthly donation, it feels more manageable because giving a smaller amount per month can make a big difference over time.

What is next for the clinic?
Collaborating with our community partners, other agencies and community members to get the word out there and continue to increase accessibility for the clinic are the top priorities.

What has the response been to the clinic so far?
The response has been amazing – survivors, nurses and the Sexual Assault Response Team volunteers have all expressed how this space is calm and quiet, and makes them feel comfortable. We have also seen an increase in recent survivors of sexual assault accessing these support services since opening the clinic.

You provided support to recent survivors of sexual assault at the hospital for the last 20 years, what is the biggest difference you have felt since the clinic opened?
There is much more of a relaxed, non-rushed atmosphere at the clinic compared to the hospital emergency room. At the same time, the process for the survivor, regardless of what option they choose, is considerably reduced from what survivors experience in the ER. These changes feel really significant because after experiencing a sexual assault, the process of reaching out for support for the first time and receiving medical treatment can be an overwhelming and exhausting experience, so to offer a calmer and quicker service is a definite improvement.

First of its kind in British Columbia, the Victoria Sexual Assault Clinic shifts key services and supports for recent survivors of sexual assault from the hospital and police stations to one centralized location. The clinic was recently profiled in The Times Colonist. To find out more about the clinic, please check out: http://vsac.ca/clinic/

OVER THIS PAST YEAR PERHAPS YOU HAVE SEEN THE PHRASE “WE BELIEVE SURVIVORS” ON YOUR FACEBOOK WALL, TWITTER FEED OR IN AN ARTICLE YOU READ. “WE BELIEVE SURVIVORS” EMERGED WIDELY ACROSS SOCIAL MEDIA NOT ONLY AS AN IMPORTANT STATEMENT THAT OFFERS SUPPORT AND SOLIDARITY TO SURVIVORS OF SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE, BUT ALSO, AS AN EFFECTIVE MESSAGE TO COUNTER THE VICTIM BLAMING THAT FREQUENTLY APPEARED WHENEVER HIGH-PROFILE CASES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT WERE FEATURED IN THE MEDIA THIS PAST YEAR. AS ONE OF OUR COUNSELLORS TRACEY COULTER REFLECTS, IT’S “SAID THAT WE HAVE TO BE SO EXPLICIT AND THAT IT IS NOT ALREADY A GIVEN”, BUT THIS MESSAGE “IS ABSOLUTELY IMPORTANT": KNOWING YOU ARE BELIEVED IS AN ESSENTIAL PART IN BEGINNING TO HEAL FROM TRAUMA.

For the past 10 years at the Victoria Sexual Assault Centre, Tracey has worked with hundreds of survivors and has seen firsthand why saying “I believe you” to a survivor is important. “Don’t say it implicitly or assume my client knows I believe them, I literally say those words: ‘I believe you and I believe this happened to you because you are telling me that it happened to you,’” says Tracey. She shares that it is quite common that survivors face, making the decision of who to tell a complex process. Tracey explains, “As a counselor, I have lots of conversations with survivors who express they want to start to tell more people in their life but feel scared to. So we break it down: Who feels the safest to tell? What would that be like if you told that person? Who would you never tell? We plan it in a really intentional way.”

As Tracey notes, if a survivor chooses to disclose, who they to disclose to is often the person that feels the safest. So how do we as individuals, as a community begin to create safety for survivors to reach out for support and make decisions on how to heal? We begin by believing. “Safety and support is given in the words ‘I believe you. I’m sorry that happened to you. It’s not your fault. How can I help?’” says Tracey. These may seem like simple statements but ultimately they are catalysts for change in a culture where victim blaming continues to exist. This shift can provide survivors with the validation, safety, trust and choice needed to decide what healing looks like for them.

“Some people go their whole life without telling anyone”, says Tracey, so let’s stand together and say loudly “we believe survivors” until everyone can hear it, feel it and believe it. For more information on what the Victoria Sexual Assault Centre is all about, please visit their website at www.vsac.ca.

I BELIEVE YOU

Over this past year perhaps you have seen the phrase “We Believe Survivors” on your Facebook wall. Twitter feed or in an article you read. “We Believe Survivors” emerged widely across social media not only as an important statement that offers support and solidarity to survivors of sexualized violence, but also, as an effective message to counter the victim blaming that frequently appeared whenever high-profile cases of sexual assault were featured in the media this past year. As one of our counsellors Tracey Coulter reflects, it is “said that we have to be so explicit and that it is not already a given” but this message “is absolutely important”: knowing you are believed is an essential part in beginning to heal from trauma.

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Community and donor support for the new clinic has been incredibly positive and generous: anything you would like to say to those that made the clinic possible? Everyone who has supported the development and continuation of the clinic hold a special place in my heart. I have seen firsthand the huge difference their support has made in the lives of survivors of sexualized violence.

How can someone access the clinic?
First of all, people know that to see if we are there for them and that the clinic is available day and night. The best way to access the clinic is to call VSAC’s crisis and information number at 250-383-3322 to connect with a clinic support worker.

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April 16th, 2016 marked the first ever March to End Sexualized and Gender-Based Violence in Victoria. It was an inspiring day that saw people come together to speak out against sexualized violence. Honorable speakers included Coastal Elder Mae Sam, former Prevention Manager Chow-win-I, Esquimalt-Royal Roads MLA Moira Karagianis and Aching Victoria Mayor Marianne Alto who spoke passionately about the need to create change in order to end sexualized violence. The March was a joint effort among seven front-line anti-violence organizations in Victoria including the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Resource Centre, Peers Victoria, Victoria Native Friendship Centre, Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria, Victoria Women’s Transition House and Victoria Sexual Assault Centre (VSAC).

The 5th Annual Victoria Goddess Run spanned the weekend of June 3rd to 5th and saw thousands of runners and walkers come out to participate. Highlights of the weekend include a 5k, 10k and 15k Walk/Run, to 5th and saw thousands of runners and walkers come out to participate in Victoria including the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Resource Centre. March was a joint effort among seven front-line anti-violence organizations in Victoria including the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Resource Centre.

Why do you think there seems to be this large misunderstanding about what consent is and what it looks like in practice?

In our current dominant culture, we aren’t given many opportunities to learn about consent when we are young and yet there is an unwritten expectation that we will know what it is as an adult.

In theory, I think people agree with the basic principles of consent, but when we put those principles into real life scenarios (through activities we use in workshops) and discuss them with participants, victim blaming comes out, power imbalances are reinforced through assumptions based in sexism, racism, homophobia etc. and people express a discomfort in communicating their sexual wants and boundaries. These beliefs and behaviours are the result of what is often called “the hidden curriculum” – the messages we all are constantly internalizing that we learn from media and watching other people’s behaviour. This hidden curriculum is what creates and perpetuates a culture of sexualized violence.

When you go into schools and work with youth to talk about consent, how do they respond?

Young people experience a lot of situations where they do not always have control of the decisions that are made for or about them. They are seeking opportunities for self-determination, so consent-based education ends up really resonating with them. A lot of the young people that I work with have experienced some form of violence and oppression, so I see a real investment from them in learning about how to change the way things are. The risk that these young people take to affect change in such creative and dynamic ways is deeply inspiring.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE SAYING

Find us on the Web!
www.vsac.ca
www.yesmeamsyes.com

We now have a blog! Keep up-to-date at: www.vsac.ca/blog

@Victoria Sexual Assault Centre @Project Respect - VSAC @ Trans and Gender Variant Inclusion at VSAC @VSACentre @projrespect @inclusiveVSAC

Quotes from youth about the way they are learning after attending a Project Respect workshop:

“I learned to respect other people’s choices.”

“Outside of this workshop, I would have never imagined myself or friends expressing themselves like that. I learned a lot about everyone – they had some great information that I didn’t know. It also made me feel happy because it lets me know that they understand this type of violence and won’t try to hurt me.”

“I learned what consent really is and how it can easily be misread, and if you’re a victim of sexual assault it’s not your fault.”

Prevention is key in ending sexualized violence. As an agency, our primary prevention efforts come through our award-winning prevention initiative Project Respect. Project Respect provides workshops in schools and the community to talk about the root causes of sexualized violence and provide a platform for youth to learn and take action on creating a world free of sexualized violence.

An important aspect of this work is talking to young people about consent: what it is and how you practice it. With a recent study by the Canadian Women’s Foundation revealing that only 33% of Canadians understand what consent is, the need for consent-based education seems more essential than ever. We spoke with Elicia Loiselle, VSAC’s Prevention Manager, to get informed about consent and discuss why it is something we need to talk about.

Why is consent-based education such an important part of sexualized violence prevention?

Ultimately, consent is the bottom line. Practicing consent is foundational for having caring and respectful relationships. Consent goes beyond just sexual situations, it should be how we approach all interactions. At Project Respect, we talk about how practicing consent is not only asking before we do something, but also respecting someone else’s choices. It is especially important to have these conversations with youth because the earlier you learn something the more it integrates with you as you grow up.

How does Project Respect define consent?

When we talk about consent, we define it as a mutual agreement, meaning people verbally, emotionally and physically agree to what will happen. Importantly, consent is continuous: someone can choose to stop at any time, someone can change their mind, and just because someone said yes to one thing doesn’t mean they have consented to anything else. We also emphasize that consent should be enthusiastic and can’t happen if there is coercion (manipulation, threats, or head games).

Importance of Prevention

Our 23rd annual Triathlon of Compassion happened on June 26th! We could not have asked for better weather to welcome the children, youth and adults who signed up to swim, bike and run for VSAC. Whether it was someone’s first triathlon or a returning triathlete, their collective positive energy was infectious making the event such a success. Together, the triathlon fundraisers raised over $24,000 to ensure that survivors of sexualized violence receive much-needed programs and services. Jules Wilson, who completed the triathlon as Team VSAC, as well as raised a significant amount of funds.

Participants in the Kids of Steel distance race came together to support VSAC through these events. Whether it was a child’s first triathlon or a returning triathlete, their collective positive energy was infectious making the event such a success. Together, the triathlon fundraisers raised over $24,000 to ensure that survivors of sexualized violence receive much-needed programs and services. Jules Wilson, top fundraiser at the 2016 Triathlon of compassion, returned this year for his 10th triathlon and once again was the event’s top fundraiser.

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These events, in addition to participating in the Victoria Pride celebrations, were some of the opportunities the Victoria Sexual Assault Centre had to connect with community, create awareness, talk about our services and raise much-needed funds this year so far. Thank you to everyone who came together to support VSAC through these events.

#10. Participants gathered at the start line for the Victoria Goddess Run. #11. Family & Kids Run participants at the Victoria Goddess Run. #12. Nicholas, Catherine & Bobbi from our Victim Service team at the Victoria Pride Festival.