

Diane Reynolds and Gavin Francis  
Chantel's Place



Chantel's Place, an oasis that provides shelter and specialized care to survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence, came into existence in 1998 through the hard work and determination of two dedicated front-line service providers – Diane Reynolds and Gavin Francis.

Prior to the opening of Chantel's Place, sexual assault victims spent hours sitting in the Emergency Department waiting room, as sexual assault examination kits took a doctor three hours to complete, and urgent medical cases took precedence to collection of forensic evidence. When the victim's medical examination and treatments was finished, a police officer would transport the victim to the police station in the back seat of a cruiser, where they would spend hours in an austere interview room providing a detailed video-taped statement of the sexual assault they had survived. Despite the compassion and care provided by medical staff and police officers, these traumatized victims shared the same waiting rooms, examination rooms, and interview rooms that criminals and perpetrators of these crimes of violence used.

As an ER nurse, Diane Reynolds wanted to offer sexual assault victims a higher standard of care. She began by organizing a Sexual Assault Nursing Team. One of the specially trained nurses on the team would be paged when a sexual assault victim arrived in the Emergency Department, and that nurse would remain with the victim during her/his examination and treatment. In addition to organizing the Sexual Assault Nursing Team, Diane had started to work on a proposal to have a small area in the Emergency Department designated as a "sexual assault examination room". It was during this time period that Diane was invited to speak to the Peel Regional Police Sexual Assault Unit, with the goal that hospital and police staff could work more closely together to assist victims.

Shortly after Diane's presentation, Gavin Francis, a detective (?) assigned to the Sexual Assault Unit, accompanied a victim to the ER, and he and Diane had an opportunity to chat. Gavin had always been concerned about the rights of victims, and the need for special accommodations for sexual assault victims had become especially evident to him during a recent trial, when defence counsel complained about the "dreadful conditions the accused had been subjected to in the police station's interview room" – and it was the same room that had been used for the

victim's interview. Gavin and Diane agreed that there had to be a better way to treat victims, and the discussion led to the idea of a "one stop shop" where victims would receive emergency medical care, have forensic evidence collected, give their statement to police, and be provided with counselling and referrals to community resources.

The first step in implementing their vision of a Sexual Assault Suite was to obtain funding. Gavin initially hoped to obtain government funding, but upon discovering the length of time it took for a grant application to work its way through the approval process, a decision was made to seek funding at the local level. In the fall of 1997, with letters of support from the Chief of Police and the hospital CEO in hand, Diane and Gavin began going out and speaking to local community groups (ie. Rotary, Kinsmen). Invariably at the conclusion of each speaking engagement a member of the audience would approach Diane or Gavin to share their story as a victim of abuse or rape – or to tell them about a family member or friend who had been abused. Donations began to flow in, but more was needed, so Gavin expanded his outreach efforts to the business community. The response was outstanding - Wood Gundy donated \$10,000 for a children's room, custom built furniture was supplied at less-than cost, and a computer manufacturer contributed a top-of-the-line computer.

David Allen, the VP of Public Relations for Trillium Health Centre, threw his support behind Diane's formal proposal for space in the hospital, and shortly thereafter confirmation was received that space had been allocated for a 3-room Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Suite. In the late summer of 1998 Diane and Gavin were asked if they could have the suite built, furnished and ready to open in time for "Domestic Violence Week" – a mere 9 weeks away. The two person team went into high gear – meetings were held with victims to get their input on what should or shouldn't be included in the unit. Construction commenced, furnishings were ordered or built, and nine weeks later the project was complete.

The unit was beautiful – there were comfortable couches, custom built bookcases, a playroom with a crib and toys, a beautiful stained glass window at the end of the corridor, and a row of plaster handprints sent in by celebrities such as Toronto Blue Jay Tony Fernandez, musicians Anne Murray and Jan Arden, and astronaut Robert Thurst. These handprints gave victims validation that even celebrities were willing to speak up against sexual assault and domestic abuse. No detail had been missed – aromatherapy, temperature controls, music - even the magazines were carefully chosen to ensure victims weren't confronted with articles such as "*Top Ten Sex Tips*" or "*How to Please Your Man*". The day prior to the "official" opening a group of victims were invited to tour the unit and they were unanimous in their praise and appreciation to Diane and Gavin for creating this special place for victims who, like them, had survived sexual assault or domestic abuse, and were taking the first step forward in the healing process.

The name "Chantel's Place" was a fitting choice – Chantel was a young woman who had a number of brushes with the law while Gavin was a detective (?) in the Criminal Investigation Bureau. Her life was cut short when her boyfriend beat her to death and left her body hidden under a table and Christmas tree on an apartment balcony. Although Chantel had fallen

through the cracks, this was a way of honouring her memory and ensuring that she would not be forgotten.

Chantel's Place has been in operation since November of 1998; it has provided a safe refuge to countless victims, giving them a private place where they are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. The concept of a separate Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Suite has spread to other communities across the province, and at last count there are 35 hospital-based centres that provide 24/7 emergency care to women, children and men who have been sexually assaulted or who are victims or survivors of domestic violence.

The advice Diane and Gavin have for others who want to make a difference is **be passionate and don't take no for an answer**. If you have a solid idea keep moving ahead and get the community involved – they have a lot of influence.

Gavin Francis and Diane Reynolds truly are “people who have made a difference”. They saw a need, had a vision of how that need could be filled, and through their hard work, determination and passion Chantel's Place came into existence.