

## United Way: Dixon Hall opens the door to woman “knocked off my feet”

Dixon Hall offers a wide variety of support to the homeless, disabled, youth, immigrants and seniors.

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LESLIE FERENC / TORONTO STAR

Gerri Law, left, is a client and volunteer at Dixon Hall. She is among the agency's success stories, says David Reycraft, director of housing and homelessness services.

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**By:** Leslie Ferenc Staff Reporter, Published on Mon Dec 10 2012

Life in Renfrew was a dream realized for Gerri Law, a single mother of three who was happily working as a baker and taking care of her children.

The family may never have left the small eastern Ontario town had Law's mother not become ill. They returned to Toronto to be close to her. It meant Law had to start over again.

She settled for an office job to pay the bills. When her kids grew up and went out on their own, Law moved to Brampton where she'd been offered a good job in a bakery. Within six weeks, she fell victim to the economic downturn and was laid off. With no prospects and bills piling up, her confidence began to erode. She lost it all when her mother died.

“Everything was going perfectly and then bing, bang, boom,” the 49-year-old woman said of the chain of events that changed her life.

“I got knocked off my feet. This is how I ended up homeless two years ago.”

Law was grateful her sister took her in, but by then despair had cast her into darkness. “I couldn't see the tunnel, there was no light,” she said, adding if not for Dixon Hall, a United Way Toronto agency, there's no telling where she would be.

“I had reached bottom,” said Law.

Services at Dixon Hall's Heyward House, an emergency shelter, and a hand up from staff gave her the

hope for a better future. So did the birth of her granddaughter which made her stronger and more determined to succeed.

These days, Law is bursting with energy and enthusiasm, ready to face any challenges that come her way.

Staff helped her find more permanent shared accommodations and steered her to a program at the Toronto District School Board where she trained in basic food handling. Law put her skills to work volunteering in the Dixon Hall breakfast program where she learned the operation inside out.

The program gives volunteers like Law a chance to rebuild self-esteem, said Dinath De La Barrera, social assistance liaison and housing worker with the agency's housing and homelessness services.

"Volunteers work on many skills such as leadership and conflict resolution, and improve their language," she said. "It also helps people feel good about themselves again."

As a multi-service agency, Dixon Hall works with the homeless, disabled, youth, immigrants and seniors, offering a wide variety of support, said David Reycraft, director of housing and homelessness services.

"United Way plays a critical role," said Reycraft. "We couldn't open our doors without support from United Way."

After Law completed a placement at a seniors' residence, Dixon Hall staff suggested she enroll in a program at George Brown College taught by Toronto executive chef Chris Klugman.

When she "graduated," Law was one of five students selected by the chef to work at his new eatery, Paintbox Bistro. It's a social purpose enterprise, that's a revenue-generating business employing local Regent Park residents and those like Law who are getting back on their feet.

The experience has solidified her future. She loves the hospitality side of the business. And when Law is working as the dining room host, it's service with a big smile.

"Where would I be if not for Dixon Hall? That's a scary thought," Law admitted. "I'd be afraid I'd be in a shelter giving up hope . . . It's terrifying to think where I'd be without these services."

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