



Help to get out of hell

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It was late summer, 1989, when Navoya Sarna came to Canada. There is a story, as there always is, in what she left behind. She had been a teacher, and an actor in experimental theatre, and, along with her husband, active in a number of anti-government organizations in the city in which they lived, not far from Krakow.

The couple, then with a young daughter, was happy to leave Poland for a new life, full of hope, optimism, the whole nine yards.

Except that this story does not follow that fairytale narrative. Life in Toronto on social assistance was grinding. Life within the marriage was impossible. There is an undertow when Sarna speaks of this, of the challenges of residing in the shoals of a bad marriage, parenting her daughter born in Poland, and a second daughter born here.

This is what she says: "If we will sit and tell the story of my life in the details, you will see many comparable situations."

This is what an observer sees: we are in Sarna's studio in west end Toronto. She is wearing deep-red Mary Jane flats and a scarf in black and scarlet and an outfit of browns and reds. Her hair is a short pixie cut and tinged with purple. Her eyes are green.

So we sit.

Marriage.

"Marriage," says Sarna, "is the clue in stagnation. In trauma."

We can say it had to end, without rendering the details. That sounds so breezy. Breaking the bonds of emotional dependency. How does one actually do that? Surmounting the belief that one can't survive without the financial support of one's spouse. How does one get past that?

Sarna sought help at St. Joseph's Hospital and not only entered a period of intensive counselling, but found herself connected and — this is essential — encouraged.

As a small girl growing up in Poland, Sarna liked to mix herbs, learning from her grandmother how to make teas and remedies. As an adult, she would create ointments and massage oils. In the wake of her marriage, Sarna turned to this past time. "This is what my soul was craving," she says.

Through St. Joseph's, Sarna connected with the Community MicroSkills Development Centre, a sweeping non-profit facility in Etobicoke. The executive director of MicroSkills is Kay Blair. When Blair stepped into the centre in 1988, it offered a single program and was run by a staff of four. Today, it has a staff of 53, offers more than 40 programs and last year served more than 12,000 clients.

Taking a tour of the facility offers these snapshots: an employment resources centre, banks of computers for IT training, classes in English as a second language, classes in accounting, children being minded in a brightly appointed playroom, a women's technology institute.

Women being tutored in starting their own businesses.

Kay Blair is warm, majestic and powerful. She talks about programs developed to respond to vulnerable individuals. She talks about women who may have experienced violence, who may have fled conflict zones, who are disadvantaged and low-income. "None of it equates to someone being incompetent," she says.

Blair and I are sitting in her office in MicroSkills. She is drawing an invisible circle on her desk top, the circle of experience into which there are different points of entry and different exit points and the trick is identifying the needs of each and every individual.

Blair was 19 when she came to Canada from Jamaica. She was married and had one son. She would later have another. "When my marriage started going crazy, I started looking for services. I didn't find anything that was very helpful."

Blair's background was in accounting and data processing. When you study the MicroSkills offerings, you see right away that technological savvy is a key focus of the operation. An internal feasibility study indicated a tremendous need for a technology institute geared specifically to women, a program that Blair spearheaded.

Nine years ago, MicroSkills launched a program aimed at assisting women in small business startups. "Low-income women don't have established credit," says Blair, and financial institutions rarely provide ready assistance. At MicroSkills, women can secure a small loan, will work through a business plan and a marketing plan and will be partnered with a coach, a relationship that continues beyond the completion of the course. Three hundred women have gone through the course.

Including Navoya Sarna. She remembers her first session, the feeling of vulnerability. She remembers how Kay Blair arrived to address the inaugural class and how surprised she was that it was not a business talk that Blair gave. "She spoke about her life," says Sarna. "I was shocked. She went through hell and I couldn't believe she was sharing that with us."

Kay Blair had escaped her marriage long ago, finding refuge in a shelter, looking around herself to see what pieces could be mended into creating a new future. Navoya Sarna listened to Kay Blair and thought, "If she can make it, I have to make it, too."

From her west end studio, a sweet, small business called Navoya has sprung up. Sarna herself is busily working on packaging and plans for her natural bodycare products. It's an exciting time. On May 18, Sarna is one of four MicroSkills graduates who will receive an entrepreneurship award at the annual MicroSkills gala.

Of course, Kay Blair will be there. And Sarna's daughters, who saw their mother so low.

The story does not end there.

On May 30, Kay Blair herself will be honoured, receiving the community leadership award at this year's YWCA Women of Distinction gala. She will take her mother to the event. Sometimes, she finds herself in discussions with her brother "the capitalist." The brother the capitalist is puzzled by Blair's work. He asks of his sister, "Where is your profit?" She laughs, a great, warm, embracing laugh. "The profit is in the people," she says. You only have to look around to see that this is true.

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