INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

• Chelsea’s story of hope and independence

• One couple whose life will leave a legacy

• How Retail Training equips youth for success
Our government has the responsibility and the challenge of caring for Canada’s most vulnerable children. We know what parenthood requires: one or two dedicated and loving individuals who will sacrifice whatever it takes to put their child’s needs ahead of their own. The relationship is intimate, it’s personal, and it’s long term. For all of these characteristics and more, institutions are simply incapable of being good parents.

With your help, Aunt Leah’s picks up where these systems let go. And whenever we do, we find ourselves face-to-face with teenagers whose precious lives are full of potential, full of worth. The problem is that maybe, until now, no one’s ever told them that they are these things.

We have failed today’s foster youth, and the proof is all around us. You’ve heard the statistic before: 65% of folks living without shelter come from foster care. At some point during their leap to independence, these 65% didn’t feel supported, lacked resources, were taken advantage of, and ultimately, were left to deal with it themselves. The legacy of a failing system is walking the streets of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. That’s where we come in. Aunt Leah’s fills the spaces, supports the cracks where young lives fall because of a lack of support and compassion.

At Aunt Leah’s, we’re here to tell kids that they matter, that they have value and worth, and that their future can be bright. We celebrate the whole person, providing youth with practical lessons that we know they’re capable of applying. Our Link Program and Essential Skills training program are designed to meet our youth’s holistic needs. They are designed to teach these teenagers that they are capable of empowering themselves—but to remind them that we’re here to support them every step of the way.

As we look back on our past 25 years, we feel grateful. We feel grateful for your support, your dedication, and your commitment to building a brighter future for foster kids. This year we will celebrate our 25th anniversary. This is an incredible milestone that wouldn’t be possible without you, our wider community. I want to thank all of you for changing the face of youth homelessness. But our work isn’t quite finished.

Government cuts are continuing. With a decrease in funding for kids in care as they age out of the system, this is an opportunity to ensure that your donation makes every difference for youth on the cusp of independence. Many of these kids have no one to turn to as they face the pressures of adulthood. Many of them might feel unprepared, even terrified. At Aunt Leah’s, we are the hope and the practical support for these foster children. We equip them with the skills and confidence required for a life of independence, a life off the street, a life that is full.

As you read Chelsea’s story, I hope you’ll realize the impact you’ve had on so many young moms in our community. With mother’s day just around the corner, I hope you’ll join me in celebrating how far Chelsea—and many young, dedicated mothers like her—have come. Thank you for making a difference that changes lives, reminds teens of their inherent worth, and helps them reach their potential.

In the Spirit of Leah,

Gale Stewart
From our Calendar to Yours
Upcoming Events

Aunt Leah’s has given new life to a building.
We invite you to attend the Grand Opening:

**AUNT LEAH’S ETC.**
**EDUCATION, TRAINING, & COMMUNITY**
**SATURDAY, APRIL 6TH, 11AM - 2PM**

Formerly known as the warehouse, this building is the furnace that fuels our Retail Training program. Our Retail team collects, sorts, and merchandises clothing and furniture in the back so that we can sell donations at both Aunt Leah’s Etc. and Urban Thrift! All proceeds from our thrift stores benefit Aunt Leah’s youth.

Leading up to this event, we’re casting our net wide and calling for all of your gently used clothing, household items, books, DVDs, furniture, and more. We have an especially high need for high-end items that we can sell at our Mount Pleasant thrift store.

**DONATION DROP-OFF LOCATIONS**

Urban Thrift - 177 East Broadway 604.709.3254
Please note: Clothing only at this location
Tuesday - Saturday from 11 - 6
Aunt Leah’s Etc. - 816 20th Street, New Westminster 778.888.2645
Thursday - Friday from 4 - 8
Saturday from 10 - 5

**IVERY’S STORY**
**His Future is bright**

Ivery just returned from a busy weekend on the Aunt Leah’s ski trip. February is winding down and he’s gearing up for a busy month. “I’ve always known I wanted to be a business person,” he says. “I’ve always conducted my life that way.” But now, Ivery gets to put that philosophy into practice. Ivery first got involved at Aunt Leah’s when he was 15. “My social worker told me about them,” he says. For Ivery, Aunt Leah’s was always a place that helped him reach his goals and work towards independent living. “They helped me live on my own,” he says plainly.

As an adult, Ivery is still an active member of Aunt Leah’s community—and he’s even started to give back in very helpful, practical ways. Ivery recently started a business called ICreate that provides clients with web, design, and other helpful tools. He recently completed a website for Aunt Leah’s very own thrift store!

When asked what advice he’d give to young people today, Ivery says, “I’d tell them not to take anything for granted.”

To check out Ivery’s work, visit auntleahsthrift.org
“Mom, look! It’s my hat! And my purse!” Emily exclaims, beaming and raising her pastel toys like a triumphant day of show-and-tell. “Easter is coming and then, then I can put all the treats in here!” she explains with confidence. Emily recently turned three years old, but Chelsea says that their past few years together have flown by. “She’s really grown up this past year,” says Chelsea. “It’s crazy. I can actually have a conversation with her now.”

Chelsea didn’t know she was pregnant with Emily until three months in. “I was scared,” she admits. “I didn’t tell anyone.” She had just turned fifteen. “I started looking into independent living to see how much it would cost me. I was trying to build a case to show why I should be able to live independently and raise this kid.” When she finally did tell her social worker that she was pregnant, a weight was lifted from Chelsea’s determined, but exhausted, shoulders. “She told me about Aunt Leah’s. She told me they had a home for me,” Chelsea explains. When Chelsea was around 7 months pregnant, she moved into Aunt Leah’s House for young moms. “When I heard about Aunt Leah’s, it took so much stress off my pregnancy,” she says. “I don’t think I would have Emily today without them. I don’t think I would have been able to keep her.”

Chelsea explains the stress she experienced while struggling to come up with ways to raise her daughter. It’s the kind of stress that no mother, let alone a fifteen-year old girl as dynamic as Chelsea, should ever have to experience. “Having that weight lifted really helped me focus on my pregnancy and come to terms with it,” she says. That’s when Chelsea started telling even more people in her life about the life she was carrying. “Before Aunt Leah’s, I didn’t know what would happen,” she reflects.
Before Emily, Chelsea was roller-coastering her way through life much like any other teenager—but with a few more barriers thrown her way. Five years ago, Chelsea was living with her dad, unsure of her mother’s whereabouts. But after reconnecting with her mom in 2007, Chelsea went to visit her in Toronto. “While I was in Ontario, my brother passed away,” she says. “So I had to come home.” Returning to her dad’s wasn’t easy. “I was home for barely any time at all before I got kicked out,” she remembers. Chelsea explains her summer of homelessness with unusual but resilient logic: “It was summertime. It was nice out. I just slept outside,” she says, matter-of-fact. “I’d been in and out of foster care before,” she says. “But it wasn’t until then, when I was 14, that I was officially signed over.” Shortly after, Chelsea was placed in her first group home.

The summer before Chelsea got pregnant, she was partying pretty heavily. “I would go AWOL from the group home for weeks at a time,” she recalls. “I was doing drugs when I met Emily’s dad. Partying lots.” However, one scary night taught her a lesson that completely changed her—and Emily’s—path. “I cleaned up two months before I got pregnant because I almost overdosed,” she explains. “It was really scary, and a total wake up call for me to clean up. So I did. I’m so happy that happened and that Emily is okay, because I wouldn’t have known to stop doing drugs otherwise.”

For anyone, let alone a young single parent like Chelsea, carrying and raising a child is full of unknowns. For Chelsea, one of the scarier parts of the entire experience was the birth itself. Being the youngest child in her family, Chelsea had never seen any of her brothers or sisters being born. “That’s when I was really happy that I was at Aunt Leah’s, because I had no idea what I was doing,” she recalls. After Emily’s birth, Aunt Leah’s House staff continued to work and support Chelsea for Emily’s first year. Chelsea recalls aspects of their support: breakfast in bed the morning after Emily was born; lessons in bathing a naked, cold baby; a book of homemade baby food recipes that one of the staff made for her. While living at Aunt Leah’s, Chelsea went to school while Emily went to daycare. They came home to cook dinner sometimes, and attended Aunt Leah’s Independent Life Skills training every Wednesday. “A big thing for me was being supported as a young person,” she explains.

Today, Chelsea lives in her own apartment. “I’m so happy that Aunt Leah’s isn’t just something that happens when you’re living in their house,” she says. “I’ve been out of the house for 2 years now and I still have a relationship with them.” Chelsea and Emily attend Aunt Leah’s Young Mom’s Fresh Food Program on a regular basis, a program whose budgeting lessons inspired Chelsea’s newest hobby: couponing. “Emily has even made best friends with another girl who comes and who was born in the same week as her,” she says.

May is going to be a big month for this little family: Chelsea turns 19, reaches the age of independence, and graduates high school. To top it off, Chelsea’s mom is coming to visit right after both these events. Though nervous to age out of government care, Chelsea feels as prepared as she can be. She has a stockpile of coupons at home, plans to move to a place with cheaper rent, and a resilient, hard-working spirit. “I’m in the process of applying for assistance,” she explains. “But I’m not sure that that’s what I want yet.”

Today, three-year old Emily runs around the room with matchless energy; she blows bright, soapy bubbles, spills sudsy water on her socks, climbs onto her mom’s lap to recover. “Why don’t you blow the bubbles while I hold the container?” Chelsea suggests, motherly as ever. “But my socks are wet,” wails Emily. “Good thing I packed extra,” Chelsea says, reaching into her daughter’s backpack for a warm, dry pair. Rooting through Emily’s bag, Chelsea continues. “Everything that has happened to me has everything to do with who I am today,” she explains. And who she will be tomorrow. In five years time, Chelsea hopes to be finishing up school and figuring out a career. “I think I want to be an advocate for children in care,” she says. “But I’m just going to have to take it as it comes: graduating, ageing out, everything. I don’t know. I think we’ll be okay.”
Angelina always knew she wanted to work with people, but it wasn’t until she started working with teenagers that she realized how well-suited she was for her current role at Aunt Leah’s Place. “People just don’t give teenagers a chance,” she says. “I find that that’s a huge problem facing our youth today. Sometimes they don’t even get that initial opportunity to prove themselves.”

That’s why Aunt Leah’s Retail Training program exists: to equip the youth in Aunt Leah’s care with the opportunity to excel. After completing this unique 12-week course, graduates walk away with a certificate, a reference from whoever trained them, and experience in both sales and merchandising—but they also walk away with confidence. “For many of our youth, that confidence is huge,” Angelina explains.

Though there’s a weekly structure, each training lesson is adapted to the unique needs of the individual participant. “We always let the youth know that we’re going to work with them,” she says. To make sure every participant gets the attention they deserve, Angelina tries to work with everyone on a one-on-one basis so she can gear the training to their strengths and weaknesses. “I think that’s one of our programs strengths,” she explains. “We encourage the youth’s gifts and try to improve their weaknesses.”

In many ways, the process of applying for Aunt Leah’s Retail Training mimics the process of applying for a job: participants must fill out an application, they must go through an interview where they articulate their motivation and goals for applying, and they must agree to show up for every shift. “We ask them questions like Why do you want to be in this program? and What do you hope to gain from it?” Angelina says. “It’s like the beginning steps of a real job interview, but with far less stress.” Once enrolled, Retail Training students work in Aunt Leah’s ETC. (Education, Training, and Community) warehouse and storefront, where they learn customer relations, sorting, merchandising, and sales skills.

“We’re equipping people to enter the work force by preparing them with skills and qualifications to list on their resume,” Angelina says. Once they’ve completed the program, graduates can even choose to participate in Retail Training a second time by mentoring first-timers and taking more responsibility at Urban Thrift.

One of the highlights Retail Training is the graduation ceremony that happens at the end of each session. “Many of our youth have never been to a real celebration of their accomplishments,” says Angelina. In order to make sure their achievements are celebrated well, each graduate is called up on stage and given a rose and a certificate, in front of an audience of their families, social workers, and friends. “These are youth that, you know, can be pretty tough sometimes,” she says. “But they can get so excited when we call them up on stage to celebrate their success. It’s pretty neat to see.”
Anne, Jim, and Aunt Leah’s Place:
A partnership that will last a lifetime

Whether serving on the board, volunteering at Tree Lot events, or donating their finances, Jim and Anne have been part of Aunt Leah’s wider community for over twenty years now. “Aunt Leah’s treats the young people in their care with respect. With dignity,” says Jim, articulating how pleased he is with the way Aunt Leah’s lives out its core values. “One thing I learned when we first became grandparents was that there’s a difference between loving and respecting children,” Anne explains, going on the praise the way in which Aunt Leah’s let’s young people develop their voice. “Aunt Leah’s does just that—they let these youth have choices and opinions.”

Jim and Anne have lived a rich life: they’ve raised two beautiful generations, worked in social work and Anglican ministry, and lived a life of justice and integrity. Despite a life of relative privilege, giving just seems second nature to them. Not only do they donate to Aunt Leah’s on a monthly basis, but they’ve also committed to donating part of their estate—a gift that will leave a lasting impact. “There’s so much need in the world, everywhere,” says Anne. “It just means a lot to be able to support people and a program that seems to be having such a positive effect on others’ lives.”

No one would deny that supporting organizations like Aunt Leah’s is a positive, life-giving practice. Many people are aware that it’s healthy to give back to organizations that positively impact our communities. However, many of us lack an awareness of commitment, of roots. Jim and Anne have roots in Aunt Leah’s because they’ve chosen to put their roots there. They’ve given their time, talents, and treasures to Aunt Leah’s work for two whole decades now. They’ve had an impact on many young mothers, teenagers, and young adults’ lives. But like any relationship, in turn, the community at Aunt Leah’s has had an impact on Jim and Anne. “Over the years, meeting the people, staff, and some of the young people at events—well it’s just confirmed everything,” Anne reflects. “We’ve had the chance to see the children of some of the girls come into this world as babies and grow older. We’ve been able to glimpse a bit of the young people acting as parents and really just see the difference the program has made for them.”

Jim and Anne are living proof that it takes a whole community to make a difference. But there’s more to it than that. Jim and Anne are a gracious reminder that partnering with organizations like Aunt Leah’s is something that we get to do. “I feel content knowing that we will be able to continue supporting the work that we believe in,” says Anne, humbly discussing the benefits of Planned Giving. Jim continues, unpacking why they’ve supported this organization so consistently over the years—and will continue to for many more. “We’ve always had a deep sense that we should help those in need,” he says. “There might be other places but for whatever reason, we chose Aunt Leah’s. And it fits.”

If you too would like to rest assured knowing that you’re leaving a legacy that will last a lifetime, consider donating part of your estate to Aunt Leah’s Place. If you are interested in or curious about Aunt Leah’s Planned Giving program, we’d love to speak with you. Please contact Gale at 604-525-1204.
A Year at Aunt Leah’s Place:

Linking Youth with Success

For 25 years, Aunt Leah’s has been working hard to support youth in foster care as they reach the age of independence. In order to do this, we walk alongside our youth as they become adults. Our staff meet these young adults where they’re at and provide them with whatever practical skills, resources, and counsel they need. We do this by celebrating their achievements and working on areas of desired, or needed growth and support. We also do this by connecting youth who have aged out of care with our Link program.

“The Link” provides youth who have aged out of foster care, as well as any past participants of Aunt Leah’s Programs, with a caring support worker who can help them look for employment and find educational opportunities. We also teach practical skills such as budgeting and meal planning, and assist with finding safe and affordable housing. At Aunt Leah’s, we build a healthy, familial community of support and belonging so that all foster youth and those transitioning into adulthood feel capable, equipped, and empowered to work towards a life of independence, a life of hope.

We hope the following statistics will help to paint a picture of the work you make possible every day. In 2012, we provided:

- **12 Beds** for Pregnant & Parenting Moms of all stages in life
- **16 Support Link Homes** in Greater Vancouver
- **701 Visits** between a Link participant and a Support Worker
- **40+ Former** foster youth with hope and support each month

**Did you know** that **88.13% of all Link participants** went on to find safe, independent housing in 2012? Thank you providing these young adults with foundation, support, and a place to call home.