INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

• Shaelyn’s story of courage and growth

• An exciting move to a new home

• Equipping foster youth for post-secondary education
More and more, Aunt Leah’s Place is providing parallel care, opportunities that are similar to those provided for children and young adults who live in parented homes. This year has brought with it many new and exciting opportunities for our youth, moms and staff. Many of you have made these accomplishments possible through your generous support.

Two great renovations are taking place as I write. Thanks to matching funds from the federal Homeless Partnering Strategy, we have a new programming space in the building beside the Thresholds House. This will provide on-site workshops, a private consultation room for visiting professionals, a kitchen and an outdoor patio and play area for the young moms.

Thanks to the Central City Foundation and their tenancy improvement funding, we will be moving from our Carnarvon St. Office in New Westminster to 20th street. See page 3 for more information on this location.

Our first Research Project, conducted by the University of Victoria, was completed at the end of March. We will be hosting an event to launch the results in early June.

You’ll read about our new SEFFY Program on page 7. With the support of Telus, Coast Capital Savings, Vancouver Foundation and the City of Vancouver, we will be helping to ensure that foster kids graduate and are able to seek post-secondary education and training.

Recently, we met with the youth from our residential programs and asked them how we could improve life for them. We wanted to know their thoughts on how we could make things better. I’m sure you will be impressed with their insight and awareness and you may even see a need that you would like to respond to yourself!

Some of the requests were:

- Stop using paper plates at our workshops. We want to go green and help the environment.
- We’d like to try for our Driver’s License but have to complete the Young Driver’s Program. We need help to raise $500.00.
- We’d like to have a birthday party twice a year for those who turn 19 and are aging out of government care.
- Can we have a microwave and our own vacuum cleaner in our suite?
- Can we get to know all of the Aunt Leah’s staff, not just our support workers?

While it was a quite a few months ago, we’ve included an update on Christmas 2013 and how significant it was for the youth and moms. Every one of them received a special gift and had an opportunity to celebrate, thanks to our generous donors. Our Christmas Tree Lots were very successful with the introduction of a new site at the North Vancouver Lonsdale location.

This year, with much sadness we saw the passing of our long time Tree Lot Manager, Lionel Friess. I extend my condolences to his family – to Linda, Nick, Lisa and their extended families. Lionel was an amazing friend, supporter, advocate and caregiver. He will be greatly missed.

In closing, I hope this newsletter provides you with information on how your financial gifts have been used and how important your investment is in the lives of B.C. foster children. Thank you so much. May we continue to partner together in this privileged work.

In the spirit of Leah

Gale Stewart.
ANNOUNCING OUR NEW HOME!

After 5 years in our building on Carnarvon Street, we are excited to announce a big move. On June 2, we’ll be moving to a new building - one owned and operated by the Central City Foundation.

This new building is going to be both more affordable and more accessible for our needs. We will have an area specifically devoted to youth programming, a bigger workshop for classes and a bigger kitchen. All of these spaces will be accessible to our youth and young moms, for their use while programs are not in session.

RUN (OR WALK) FOR OUR YOUTH!

Please join us on June 22, 2014, or donate online to sponsor an Aunt Leah’s team member as we take part in the Scotiabank Charity Challenge half-marathon and 5k walk.

This is our first Run/Walk and we are looking forward to seeing you all out there supporting the youth and young moms who are a part of Aunt Leah's Place!

WHY FUNDRAISE FOR AUNT LEAH’S PLACE?

We believe that every young person deserves to feel safe, cared for and have a sense of belonging; we try to fill that gap and to provide the loving support young people in care so desperately need and deserve. We need your help to do so!

WHAT IF YOU CAN’T PARTICIPATE?

You can still help! Sponsor an Aunt Leah’s team member by visiting our website at auntleahs.org. Your support means the difference for our youth – between surviving and thriving.
Shaelyn’s Story

“It’s so hard not being with them during the day,” Shaelyn says of her two sons, “but at the same time, knowing that they are in daycare because I’m going out to work to support my family feels pretty amazing.” Shaelyn’s two sons, Zane and Kayden are two and three years old and require the usual amount of incredible energy and time that toddlers do. “They’re both in their terrible twos, even though Zane’s three!” she says, laughing with the ease of a mom who loves them so unconditionally that you can tell the positives of her two rambunctious boys far outweigh any challenges they bring.

Shaelyn has seen her share of challenges in her 21 years of life. Born and raised in New Westminster and North Delta, she had a fairly typical upbringing until she turned fourteen. That’s when she ran away from her mothers home and ended up living with little supervision at her grandparents. “That’s where my life got chaotic. I started using drugs and school went downhill,” she says. “I was very lost, I guess.”

In the year before her first pregnancy, Shaelyn was hanging out with a dangerous crowd. “My cousins and friends were all into gang related things. I was in a pretty bad spot.” Shaelyn started hanging out with an old family friend during this time. “He had been around since I was five years old, so I’d always known him,” she recounts, “but I never knew certain sides of him.” It was a tough thing to learn when she realized that he was involved in gangs, drugs and fights. “He turned out to be very mentally and emotionally abusive. He got arrested for assault while we were together,” she explains.

In grade twelve at the time, it was a scary reality when Shaelyn realized she was pregnant. “I knew I had to leave him, so the day of commencement I moved in with my sister in Pitt Meadows.”

A few months before Zane was born, Shaelyn found the deep-rooted courage that had followed her through life and started to build her own team of support. “I organized getting myself a counselor, a social worker, a family maintenance worker and a few other supporters,” she explains, showing a resilience and responsibility that you rarely see in someone as young as her. “With the help of my social worker, I called everyone, asked who they knew, who they
could connect me with that could help me. I got on income assistance. I did everything right around the time Zane was born, when I was seventeen. I just wanted to do the right thing for my child.”

For anyone who is raising a child on their own, motherhood can be overwhelming and exhausting. Shaelyn knew that she would need a strong community for herself and little baby Zane. “Two months after Zane was born, I started discussing my options with my social worker,” Shaelyn recalls when she first heard about Aunt Leah’s. “She told me about a place where they take in moms and their babies and help prepare them for their future. She said I could learn to be independent and make a life for myself through Aunt Leah’s.”

A month after first hearing about Aunt Leah’s, Shaelyn was able to move into the group home in Burnaby. She stayed there for six months, while preparing herself to move into fully independent living. While living in the home was hard for her, she recognizes how beneficial it was – in more ways than she expected. “They taught me how to cook and clean and so much more that I would need to know to take care of my baby,” Shaelyn remembers, “but they also encouraged me to explore my roots.”

Prior to coming to Aunt Leah’s Place, Shaelyn had been completely detached from her native roots. The support workers in the group home encouraged her to explore different traditions and research her family history. “It felt amazing to learn about who I am and be part of something. It helped me figure out where I want to be in life. I want to have these opportunities and I want my kids to know about being First Nations,” Shaelyn explains how getting in touch with her First Nations roots changed her whole outlook on life, “I feel more peaceful knowing that I’m part of something. It’s good for the soul.”

While she was in the home, she found herself pregnant once again. “It was tough telling the staff at Aunt Leah’s because they know how tough it is with just one child, let alone two. But they were supportive and it was then that I realized I needed to take as much from my experience there as possible so that I could just burst out of there, fully ready for life.”

Four months after discovering she was pregnant again, Shaelyn did just that. With the help of the Aunt Leah’s workers, she moved into her own apartment and started her life, living as an independent mother of two young boys.

Shaelyn has found a job she loves, working as a real estate assistant. “I’m learning so much and I feel empowered at work.” With this job, she now supports her whole family – both Zane and Kayden and her partner, who has gone back to school. All four of them have been in the same apartment for two years now.

“Had I not moved into Aunt Leah’s, I don’t know what would have happened. I know I wouldn’t be in the position I’m in today,” she says matter-of-factly. “It would have been chaos. I wouldn’t have been able to support my son. Aunt Leah’s took me in at my lowest point. They polished me up, tied the loose ends of my life and helped me become an adult by supporting and encouraging me.”

CELEBRATE MOTHER’S DAY AND HELP YOUNG MOMS, JUST LIKE SHAELYN.

Your support allows us to help young moms build bright futures. By giving a Mother’s Day gift today, you will be giving a fresh start and a new beginning to a young mom and her child. Celebrate Mother’s Day this May 11th with a gift to Aunt Leah’s Place and help young moms, just like Shaelyn, build their futures.

Give online at auntleahs.org
Whether facilitating programs at their inception, organizing the tree lot appreciation dinners or ensuring the independent living suites are ready for foster youth to move in, Bridget has been involved in different aspects of Aunt Leah’s since before it became a society, over twenty-five years ago. “It has become such a major and key part of my life,” says Bridget, her face showing the passion she feels for the work that is done at Aunt Leah’s. “Right from the day Gale suggested we form a society, I knew it would be something that could change peoples lives.”

Bridget and her husband were one of the two couples that originally founded Aunt Leah’s Place with Gale Stewart, the Executive Director and her husband Paul. “We became friends quickly, as we had children the same age and we lived close to each other.” Bridget describes how Aunt Leah’s was formed out of a friendship between the two couples, “Gale always was the one with all the ideas and the rest of us would help her make them happen. It was like this right from the start when she dreamed up the idea of Aunt Leah’s.”

“My husband and I became foster parents, just like Gale and Paul, so the drive for that sort of work ran through all of us.” Bridget ended up helping Gale take care of a young girl that had a baby and the four quickly recognized that young moms needed a place to go in addition to foster kids who were ageing out of care.

While Gale had the original idea and encouraged all four of them to go for it, it has been an incredible group effort. “I was able to dedicate my time to painting and making sure the house was habitable, as I wasn’t working.” Bridget remembers that they worked furiously hard to get the house they purchased on Boundary ready for the young female tenants within a month of purchasing it.

Since the first house was acquired, Bridget has been involved in everything from the cooking program to the theatre program to the suites used for independent living. On top of her multifaceted roles within the society, Bridget has also been responsible for purchasing anything that was needed for Aunt Leah’s.

At 71 years old she has no intention of retiring from Aunt Leah’s but has begun to work on a contract basis – usually about 40 hours per month. “I’ve been happy to cut back on my hours, but I don’t see my role letting up much,” says Bridget, humbly explaining that there will always be a need for someone who is willing to go and get groceries when needed, drop off ski supplies for a youth trip or go shopping for everything from furniture to office supplies to baby clothes. “I’ve always loved being involved and I don’t see myself stopping. My role is one that ebbs and flows, changing to fit what the society needs at that time. I’m happy to be the person who can do the general running around. It suits me and it allows me to stay involved in something that I have cared about deeply for over twenty-five years.”
Supporting Education for Foster Youth (SEFFY)

By the time most youth come to Aunt Leah’s Place, they have lived in 9 different homes. While these transitions are hard enough, they also usually mean transitions from school to school to school: on average, the youth we encounter have been to 6.6 different schools.

This change takes a drastic toll on youth. Shockingly, a higher proportion of foster children in BC become involved with the justice system (35.5%) than graduate from high school (24.5%). This lack of education leads to increased unemployment and more use of income assistance.

That’s why Aunt Leah’s Place started the SEFFY program this spring. SEFFY helps foster youth successfully transition to post-secondary education. “The real added value is that Aunt Leah’s is the primary caregiver of the children in the program,” explains Drew Stewart, Development Officer for the organization. In this way the Aunt Leah’s professional workers and care-providers have a unique ‘parent-like’ insight into the potential difficulties each youth may encounter in their educational career. The relationships that Aunt Leah’s staff have with foster youth create a consistent foundation in a world of residential transiency.

Foster youth can be successful in school, as long as someone believes in them and has expectations for them, which is exactly where our workers come in.

Drew has seen foster youth beat the odds when they have someone to invest in them. “Above all, foster youth need someone to believe in them unconditionally. I’ve been amazed at how a young person will step up to the challenges of education when we start encouraging them, holding them accountable, and simply believing in them,” says Drew.

SEFFY is a sister program of our Link and Support Link programs, both of which are already working hard to bridge the gap in services for foster youth. By creating a new culture of expectations and a sense of permanency, SEFFY will help build a consistent foundation amidst the transiency that so many foster youth feel.

Thank you to the funders of SEFFY:

A new way to get involved in the work at Aunt Leah’s Place. It is a means to help us to plan ahead, respond quickly to urgent needs and bridge the gap of service where the government doesn’t provide.

Help make the most of your gift by becoming a monthly donor and bridging the gap today. Your ongoing support will allow us to help our youth find their way so they don’t end up struggling on the streets.

Monthly giving is effective and easy. You don’t have to think about writing a cheque or mailing in your donation while our programs are more secure with the knowledge that your support is continuous. In addition, your monthly support allows us to cut down on our administrative costs which means more funds are put towards resources for our youth and young moms.

For more information, contact Chloe Dunn at 604-525-1204 ext. 224 or via email at cdunn@auntleahs.org
YOU MADE LAST CHRISTMAS COME TRUE AT AUNT LEAH’S PLACE
It takes a whole community to make Christmas come true for Aunt Leah’s teens and young adults. Without your support—whether your time or your finances—we wouldn’t be able to offer hope and possibility for our youth who are struggling with the barriers of foster care. Thank you for helping us build a bright Christmas for young people who deserve to celebrate hope.

TREE LOT AND TRAINING
From November 29th on, devoted people made a difference by running Tree Lots all over the lower mainland. “Santa Clauses,” hot chocolate, complimentary treats, buzzing shoppers: this is just a glimpse of what each lot felt like. For many, volunteering at an Aunt Leah’s Tree Lot is a rich Christmas tradition. Many volunteer as families to kick-off the holiday season and we are so grateful for every person.

AT OUR 2013 TREE LOT

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GRATITUDE AND GRADUATION
On January 16th, we celebrated our dedicated volunteers by inviting them to a Christmas wrap-up dinner of turkey, stuffing, roasted veggies, and more! At volunteer appreciation dinners, people witness the breadth of the impact they made, and just how many people were helping at all the lots. It also lets people glimpse the reason behind it all—the why behind the what of what we do. And really, the why is all about the who.

We extend the dinner invitation to many of our youth too. We gathered around the youth who had participated in a special Tree Lot Retail Training program and celebrated their success with a graduation ceremony. It’s important for youth facing multiple barriers to know that they’re capable—and that someone’s proud of what they’ve accomplished. “The youth who participated in Tree Lot Retail Training this year were amazing,” says Angelina Oates, who organizes the training at Aunt Leah’s Place. “They loved the idea of helping at the tree lot, and I think it has a lot to do with the atmosphere there. People are happy, in holiday spirits. And it really made the youth feel good about what they were doing.”

Uniting our volunteers and youth in one huge celebration was a way of offering each other a glimpse of the invaluable community that’s required to make Christmas come true. To all our volunteers and supporters, thank you for generously believing in our youth. We couldn’t do it without you!

Give it your way. Donate today.

Online - auntleahs.org  By phone - 604-525-1204 ext 224
By mail - 816 20th Street New Westminster, BC V3M 4W8