

A TRIBUTE TO PEGGY BIRNBERG

by Phillip Dufresne

I moved into Houselink in April 1992, about a year after Peggy Birnberg became the Executive Director (ED). During her tenure as ED, I worked with Peggy on the Board for about 12 years, including 4 years as President. I have seen a lot of change in both myself and Houselink over the years. Most of that change was positive and a major reason for that was due to Peggy's outstanding leadership qualities. Peggy was wise, kind, understanding and fair-minded. She was well respected by the staff, the members the Board and by her peers in the mental health sector.

My first year in Houselink, David Dufoe drove Peggy, one of the Board members and me to the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association (ONPHA) Conference in Windsor. I never said a word the whole trip. Peggy always mentioned that to other people whenever she would talk about me. I enjoyed the conference and eventually ran for the Houselink Board and became President. I also got involved in other Houselink activities such as the Social Recreation Committee, the Member Advisory Forum, Social Issues and the Men's Group. Later, I joined the Dream Team. Peggy was always supportive and always encouraged me to do more.

I never fit in that well at work or at school and never had many friends. I always felt like an outcast. At Houselink, I began to realize that I enjoyed doing volunteer work and for the first time in my life, I began to develop confidence in myself. Peggy had a lot to do with this.

When I first joined Houselink, the only opportunities for members to contribute to the organization were the Board and Social Rec. Over the years, Peggy's wise leadership gave the members many other opportunities to contribute such as the employment program, the food program, Social Issues, the Member Advisory Forum, Families Moving Forward, the Bursary Fund, the Rainy Day Fund, the Men's Group, the Women's Group, the Computer Club, etc.

Houselink also added many new buildings, membership increased to about 500, staff doubled in size to about 70 full-time equivalents and the budget increased accordingly. Recovery was also incorporated into all of our work.

When I was President of the Board from 1999-2003, Peggy and I attended a community meeting when Houselink was in the process of developing the Broadview building. We talked to the neighbours about the plans that Houselink had for developing the building. The neighbours said that they didn't want any crazy people living in their neighbourhood and they compared the people who would be living there to murderers, rapists, child molesters, drug addicts, prostitutes and even terrorists.

After that meeting, Peggy decided that Houselink didn't have to take that kind of abuse anymore. It was outright discrimination. So, she started up a group called HomeComing Community Choice Coalition. HomeComing believes that all human beings have a right to live in the community of their choice. People on social assistance and people with mental health and physical disabilities are also protected by the Ontario Human Rights Code concerning the right to housing.

I am a stronger, better and a more understanding person today because of Peggy and I will miss her a lot.