

CORTES ISLAND WOMEN'S CENTRE – IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW (CONDENSED Q&A)

SECTION 1: ORIGINS AND WHAT THE CENTRE OFFERS

DE: I guess the first thing we should talk about, for people who don't know any of this, is just the fact that there's a women's center on Cortes. So you might wanna start with, um, what is the women's center? How is it funded? How is it organized? What hours is it open? What services do you provide?

TANYA: So we opened in 2019 as a resource center for women. We created a 24-hour accessible space for members where we have computers, a little kitchenette, food offerings, tea and coffee, all those basic things – a cozy, warm space that can be used really in whatever way members wanna use it. Over the years we've had people do art classes out of here. We host counselling. Our outreach worker and safe home coordinator comes over on the last Monday of the month and does in-house women's empowerment workshops and circles.

When we opened in 2019, we opened under the umbrella of the Campbell River North Island Transition Society. They really supported us in being able to exist – they became the place where donations could be accepted. They didn't financially support us, but they've been a big help. They are the nearest crisis center that supports women on Cortes, so we became a nice intermediary between them and our community.

SECTION 2: THE SAFE HOME PROGRAM – CONFIDENTIALITY AND ACCESS

DE: I just think we might wanna emphasise for people who really aren't familiar with this territory that "safe home coordinator" is not like your FireSmart assistant who helps you to make your home safer.

TANYA: Right. It's someone who can provide a safe home for a woman to go to if she's in danger. And we're always in more need of those on Cortes. The idea is it's a fully confidential service – it's not done through us, it's done through the Safe Home service of North Island. If someone calls up the crisis line or gets in touch with Haley, she can hook them up with whoever might be hosting at that time. It's generally for a weekend or a few days as an immediate safe home for women and children, and potentially their pets if

possible. It gives an immediate place for someone to go while they figure out their next steps.

The confidentiality is a really big part of it. Like, if I have a safe home and you have a safe home, you and I shouldn't know that we both have safe homes. We could always use more support with that, especially in summertime – that's when we tend to lose safe homes because people sometimes offer things that end up becoming vacation rentals.

DE: How does a woman get in touch with that service if she believes that she needs it?

TANYA: There's a 24-hour crisis line done through the Campbell River and North Island Transition Society. The number is **250-286-3666**, and there's also an 800 number: **1-800-667-2188**. If you were interested in becoming a safe home host, you could call the crisis line and let them know, and they'd connect you with Haley. If you have questions for Haley, we also have an email for her. She comes out once a month and offers free counselling to women who are in abusive relationships or recovering from them – that's offered every two weeks, often over the phone or Zoom.

DE: How much usage do those services actually get on Cortes in any given year?

TANYA: You know, they don't report to me when they're used, so I don't have –

DE: Because of the confidentiality.

TANYA: Yeah. I haven't collected data on that. We certainly can sit with women and be like, "Here's the number," or call on their behalf. We're not a crisis center, but we can help link women in crisis to resources that they need, and the space is accessible to members 24 hours, so it becomes a safe space. We're not set up for crisis, at least at this point – it's more of a place where you can get away, get some time to think, or make calls that you need to make.

DE: And where you have internet access.

TANYA: We have internet access. We have a phone line here, a landline, which is actually a big deal because if women are trying to make a safety plan or reach for help, phones are too accessible to partners – using your

own phone isn't usually the safest. So with a landline here, we also have an answering service. It's not confidential, but messages certainly can be left for women here.

DE: In some high-control abusive relationships, the dominant partner tries to prevent their partner from communicating – doesn't let them have a phone or a computer. So it's really important that you can offer those.

TANYA: And again, that being accessible 24 hours becomes a benefit too, because calls or email can be done during times when you wouldn't be missed.

SECTION 3: NON-VIOLENT INTERVENTION BY MEN – THE "CALL-OUT" CULTURE

DE: Some years ago, when you were just starting up, there was a young fellow organizing a network of men willing to go and intervene nonviolently in dangerous situations – because we can call the cops, but it's gonna take them hours. Is any of that still functioning?

TANYA: The person who's coordinating that effort is still doing that work on a volunteer basis. He's still an outreach and a support for our community, and sometimes that isn't even through us – he's become well-known enough that women in particular have known they could reach out to him for support.

DE: And he still has a team of his own that he can call on, or is he kind of operating alone now?

TANYA: I feel like we probably shouldn't delve too much into that right now 'cause I'm not totally sure. I know he's still doing his own thing, but I don't know that there's a team structure. There was some other stuff that bridged that for a bit, so I can't go into great depths right now about the crisis response team.

DE: But if someone needed that, how would they get in touch?

TANYA: If they don't know him personally, they could get in touch with me – or with the Women's Centre – and then I can connect them.

DE: So if they were like, "My partner is doing these bullying behaviours,

and it's getting consistent, and I'm worried about it – is there anyone who will come and talk to him?"

TANYA: Jim has been really proactive about that in the past – just trying to have a decent conversation and express as a peer what's tolerated and what's not tolerated in a healthy relationship. The big impression is the non-violent part – it's about calling people out on their behaviour. We can help get women out of where they are – get some vehicles, have somebody willing to go into the home to grab stuff or to be there as a presence.

DE: I remember when he talked about his work, he said the important thing was to sit down with the guy who has anger management issues, who's stepping over the line into abusive behaviour, and just engage him, just talk to him, just let him talk. Meanwhile, you can get the woman to a safer place. He's feeling like he's being heard, and he's sometimes more able to listen to a guy telling him that his behaviour needs to change – or at least to distract him for a while.

TANYA: We've seen a lot more – not necessarily on Cortes, but in general – of a social trend or movement, for men to call each other out. It really shouldn't be on the shoulders of women to call men out on their sexism and oppression. That's one of the most powerful things men could do to help women. There are a lot of great men out there who don't perpetuate that abuse or micro aggression, that oppression, but still don't feel strong enough in their masculinity to call it out – they'll snicker or roll their eyes or look the other way, but they're not like, "Dude, that's not cool — what are you getting out of saying that?"

SECTION 4: THE DYNAMICS OF CONTROL AND THE PHYSICAL WEIGHT OF TRAUMA

DE: A safe quiet place to think and recover after experiencing violence is so essential. I mean, in the aftermath of trauma, your executive function is toast. Often, you can't plan or think straight.

TANYA: Toast. Thinking strategically, organising your thoughts, prioritising, dealing with any kind of complexity becomes very, very difficult. And that's why things like safe homes are so important – it takes days if not weeks for your nervous system to get anywhere near regulation.

DE: And sometimes very anxiety-inducing specific threats are made: "If you

leave me, I will do this." How can any woman tell if it's rhetoric or if it's serious?

TANYA: Especially if there's been years of emotional manipulation. And we often forget that for over 90% – if it's not over 95% – of women who are killed or hurt severely by partners, it's after they've left. So often a woman will feel safer, even though it's awful, staying within the relationship. And often there's children involved.

DE: Do you feel like there are advantages or disadvantages to being in such a small community? Like, are women more reluctant to take steps because they think, "Oh God, now everybody will know"? Or is that actually good because word gets around and we figure out whether guys are okay or not? Maybe it's 50/50?

TANYA: Yeah. For us as a centre and a resource, in a way it's great because we can be like, yeah, we know who a lot of the key players are in abusive relationships. After being here as long as I have – 20 years this year – we know there are some players where if a woman walks through this door, we know the pattern, we've gone through the series of women – multiple, serial partners for these same abusers. Sadly those abusive men tend to stay; we tend to lose the women. Typical behaviour in abusive men is that they find women who don't live here and bring them here – it all seems like magic at first, beautiful community, and then winter hits or the honeymoon's over.

But there's also so little resources here. In Campbell River, you can start going to a different grocery store, you've got other places to go. Here, such a small community, women face their abusers on a daily basis – so often they tend to isolate themselves, have anxiety about just going to get milk because they might see this person. One of our big things was just how many women don't feel safe to hitchhike or go to the store because they might see predatory men, who have already scared or hurt them or their friends. And it's challenging because you also see abusive men in community being all chipper – "Oh, hey, how you doing, buddy?" – holding the door open, looking like a shining star the second they see an audience. But how they behave in private is another matter.

DE: Yes. I mean you look at how well a lot of abusers are actually able to regulate their behaviour, like they will behave perfectly fine in public, in social situations, even at work. You can tell that they know that the bullying and abusing behaviour is wrong, that they're not proud of it. And that when

they say “oh I just lost control, I couldn’t help it,” you have to notice that they have no problem maintaining control when they’re in public and other people are watching.... But back to the smallness of the community — it also makes some classic tactics harder. I remember back in the '70s and '80s, women would gather — some women from the local support group — and go to a guy's workplace along with a woman that he had bullied or abused — not menacing, no threats, but just saying, "You hit this woman, and we all know." I think it's much harder to do that in a tiny community because... well, they know where you live.

TANYA: Yes, women do not feel safe enough to pull those kind of things off here, and that's why it would be nice if the *men* could call each other out a little more — in a very casual and unthreatening way. Because they can have a confrontation with another guy, and still feel safe going to sleep at night, not worrying that by calling someone out publicly, that person may somehow sabotage them or make their lives uncomfortable, come after them.

DE: Yes generally men don’t have to be careful where they park their car because your ex might just come and slash your tyres. I mean sometimes there must be a woman that vindictive — but when it comes to stalking and terrorising, seems like it’s mostly the other way around. Men don't usually have to fear that — even if they have a fight with another guy, generally there isn't that persecution or stalking afterwards.

TANYA: I think that's the truth. Even if that type of thing happens, like hazing or intimidation — most men don't respond with the same level of physical fear or intimidation that a woman would. We teach girls from the ages of six, seven, eight years old that how they're dressed could cause them to get physically or sexually harmed. That the world is a dangerous place if you’re female. That male violence, including sexual assault, is something to be aware of all the time.

DE: “Don't talk to strange men,” we tell them. And men — bad men, that is — reinforce that with sexual bullying, with rape jokes or rape threats towards girls and women. And unfortunately it’s not just strange men. It is more likely to be men you know.

TANYA: We're taught to be scared of men for some pretty justifiable reasons. And so when men do intimidating things — even micro-intimidations — they land harder. Especially for women who have survived assault or abuse, which is more women than most people realise. A woman

can be thinking about plans with her friend, but her back is in knots, her shoulders are up to her ears, and she's had a headache for three days after some guy sexually harassed her, or threw gendered insults at her, or her male partner threatened her. The way we carry trauma and fear in our body – even if we can rationalise them in our mind – is really complex. The body remembers.

SECTION 5: FROM COLLECTIVE TO NONPROFIT – THE BUREAUCRATIC SHIFT

DE: Let's clarify – you used to be sort of an outpost of North Island Transition, but now the Women's Centre is a BC nonprofit society in its own right?

TANYA: Yes, we are. We have a board of a minimum of three members, and we have to register with BC Societies every year. It's a learning curve – all the paperwork, taxes, everything. We're not charitable yet – you need good standing with Revenue Canada, and we haven't been around long enough – but we do have an account with the Cortes Community Foundation. They can receive donations where somebody would like a tax receipt.

Being our own society opens up the grant world to us – we can apply for grants we couldn't before, because you can only do one application per society. Some grants require charitable status, but we can access those through the Cortes Community Foundation. That's been a ginormous help.

DE: So the cost of that is the extra paperwork, but it's once a year basically. And you have to have a minimum of three people willing to be your board.

TANYA: That's right. We're gonna have our first AGM in September. We have our three board members right now, and a couple of them wouldn't mind stepping down – they're founding members and very supportive, but we'd love fresh faces. In our bylaws, you have to be a member for a couple of months before you can vote or be on the board. Ally members don't have voting rights – that's reserved for “access members”.

SECTION 6: MEMBERSHIP, FUNDING, AND THE AGM

DE: So you have two tiers of membership?

TANYA: Yes. Ally memberships are basically supporters, can be any gender – \$25 for a year, they get updates and newsletters, and any events we put on they can get by donation. Access members are women and women-identified folks who live on Cortes at least part-time – membership is by donation, and it gives them the code to access the centre, access to workshops by donation, and voting rights.

DE: And you're looking for new board members at the AGM?

TANYA: Yes. If we have people interested, sure. We'll take what we can get. Board meetings would likely be seasonal – I wouldn't see us meeting more than that – I guess a new Board might show up and be like, "Let's do this every 30 days, this will be great." But so far we've tried to be low maintenance.

SECTION 7: THE HOUSING CRISIS AS A SAFETY ISSUE

TANYA: One thing landowners on Cortes – especially those who are very rarely here – could do to address domestic violence on the island is *open up rentals*, open up the Airbnbs. One of the biggest things that puts women and children at risk and in harm's way on this island, is the lack of housing. There are amazing things happening with the Housing Society, but hands down, that is one of the biggest factors that puts women and children in unsafe scenarios – no option to just move, to get away.

DE: So they end up having to stay in an unsafe situation because otherwise — it's being homeless.

TANYA: Also women can't always just leave the island after a divorce or separation, if they have children, because men have access rights – even if a woman moves to Quadra it can be legally argued that this doesn't give men proper access to their kids. So you can literally stop a woman from being able to leave Cortes Island, if she has children and she's in an abusive situation.

DE: So the fact that there's such a feeble rental market effectively traps her there.

TANYA: Yes. And how easy is it to couch-surf with kids? How healthy is that? This is an under-discussed aspect of our dysfunctional housing situation – one of the outcomes of having 30% of our housing stock

dedicated to people who are only here for two weeks or a month, is that it traps women in these situations. That is a human and moral cost of the kind of housing economy we have.

SECTION 8: FUTURE PLANS – MEN'S LUNCHEONS, RECONCILIATION, AND MENTAL WELLNESS

DE: What do you see as the main challenges for the next year? Obviously the finances, but...

TANYA: I'm actually really *excited* about this coming year. I'm passionate about us getting more of a team – another paid position maybe – having more regular offerings that are reliable. I'd love to see a volunteer team too – somebody willing to do Friday markets during fundraising seasons, or do open hours at the centre.

One initiative — I can't promise anything because it's just in the planning stage, so I'm a little reluctant to say too much, but it's pretty exciting — we're working on a men's wellness luncheon series, hopefully once a month throughout the winter. It would be pretty casual — just lunch for a couple of hours. We already have commitments from key players: Tamara from the ambulance team for community outreach, so you could get your blood pressure checked. Sean Lymworth has a wealth of information about body dynamics — stretches, ways to help body pains and relieve tension. Steve, our mental health nurse at the clinic, will participate in at least some of them. Bruce Taylor has offered a guest talk. Gary Cork, who has run men's circles for over 40 years in the Comox Valley, he's interested. Some good food would be an excuse for men in the community to come together.

DE: To make it easier to connect with help or support? Because some guys have been taught since they were kids that asking for help is a symptom of failure, like they're supposed to stand completely alone and never need anything from anyone.

TANYA: Hey, it's hard for everybody, not just old-school men — asking for help is just hard, period. But if they've seen a helpful guy's face and had a chat and felt like, "I wouldn't mind having another conversation with that guy," I think it gets easier. We've seen the power of women getting together with intention — so this is a way to offer something to men that will hopefully make them feel good, a little more *connected*. More supported.

Men who are happy and healthy make for a safer community.

DE: Yes, it seems like an excellent way to offer resources – you can always just be there for the lunch, be there for the pizza, and it just so happens that someone can take your blood pressure right there. That's easier than making a formal appointment at the clinic — something some men are really phobic about!

TANYA: That's the thought. And maybe there'll be pamphlets about different health resources — physical and mental health. The dark months are hard for everybody on the island – we all could use a little more connectivity and community.

SECTION 9: RECONCILIATION EFFORTS

TANYA: The two major priorities we've put forward since becoming a nonprofit are creating a mental-emotional wellness team agenda, and reconciliation. That's where volunteers of any gender could participate. We've done little things like gatherings and walks, but they've been under-attended. This last January we did a reading challenge – read a book by an Indigenous author – and we intend to do that every winter now. We'll do it pre-Christmas also next year – encourage people to support an Indigenous author and buy a book, then have a coming-together in early spring to celebrate those authors and share what we learned.

I feel that Cortes as a community could do more on reconciliation – the school is devoted to it, but it could be something we do on a more regular basis, and the settler community should be putting it together, not putting the onus on the Indigenous communities.

SECTION 10: FINAL RECAP – HOW TO HELP

DE: If people are inspired and want to support the Women's Centre, what are different ways they can be supportive?

TANYA: If you're interested in providing any kind of workshop, circle, art space, book club, knitting – especially as we come into fall and winter – that would be great. If you're interested in hosting time in the space, that's huge. We do have a Patreon account for one-time or monthly payments. If you're interested in a tax receipt, donations can go through the Cortes Community

Foundation. E-transfers can be sent to corteswomenscentre@gmail.com.

Or just get a membership. Come check out our AGM in mid-September. Ally members (\$25) support us; access members (by donation) get door codes and voting rights. To vote, you need to be a member at least a couple of months in advance, but you can buy a membership at the AGM if you just show up out of curiosity.

If you want to help with the Safe Home program, get in touch with me and I'll connect you with Haley – there's an interview process and some training.

DE: Just for people who are under-informed – do you have a rough estimate of the number of women struggling with domestic violence that you assist in a given year? Some people think this doesn't happen on Cortes because it's such a nice community.

TANYA: I would say, on average, we have about 12 to 15 crisis scenarios we help support a year – and that isn't necessarily just domestic violence. Since COVID, it's been almost 50/50 for domestic abuse vs women struggling with mental health issues.

DE: So that would still leave six or so domestic violence incidents that got to a crisis level in a given year – which is more than a lot of people would think.

TANYA: Well, yeah. And on that note, if landowners are hearing this – open up those rentals, open up the Airbnbs. I'm going to say it again, lack of housing is hands down one of the biggest factors that puts women and children at risk. Providing more rental housing is one of the most powerful things an ally could do for women on the island.