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# Providing a Safe Haven

Local Bees' Nest house offers a valuable step in the recovery process...

By Ian Lidster • October, 2010



“I make the Bees’ Nest kind of a metaphor for recovery,” says Lise Carignan, who with partner Rod Braun, aims to help their residents get back on their feet. “Change is never easy.”

Photo by Boomer Jerritt

In truth, it wasn’t exactly a toss-up between providing safe and healthy haven for a little foster-child, and doing what she ultimately did, but it was close.

Rather than fostering a helpless and possibly ‘wounded’ child, Lise Carignan took on a small group of metaphorically wounded adult men and gave them that haven. A haven that has, in its two-and-a-half years of existence, become a kind of metaphor for ‘safe’ recovery for a number of men. Welcome to the Bees’ Nest.

What Carignan—who is frank and honest about the fact she is a recovering alcohol abuser with a number of years of good sobriety—realized as a virtual inspiration one day during a time of quiet meditation was that if people were given the opportunity to occupy a safe, sane and sober dwelling during that perilous period of early recovery, then they might stand a much better chance of returning to the realm of productive and sane citizenry.

What she appreciated was that people coming out of a recovery facility often have no safe place to go. While the clients may have had 28-days (or more) of structured security while they travel through their first stage of recovery, there is a huge paucity of safe and inexpensive housing for these people as they move into their second stage of recovery. The lack of affordable housing in the Comox Valley (and other communities) is a grievous social ill and is yet to be solved.

Carignan, however, had a house that she was either going to move into (possibly with that foster child), or that she might rent out, or that she could use to fill that safe housing gap in her own community. Fortunately for many, she chose the latter and she, her residents and the community gained as a result of that decision.

“I offered up a prayer in which I actually asked what I should do with the house,” she says. “The foster child idea that I seriously considered was something that would enable me to help teen girls, and to maybe act as a mentor for the girls. When I think of my own teen years and how difficult they were, I know my life might have turned out differently if I’d had a strong female mentor.”

But, the idea of being a single foster parent, she came to realize, was too daunting a prospect for somebody who was working full time at a stressful job. So, from that she moved on to the idea of helping people through second stage recovery.

“I was growing in experience in my own recovery,” she says, “and I felt a sense of obligation to the community. This was especially true after the homelessness study was published and I realized how dire the problem actually was. So, here I was, sitting on a house and trying to figure out what to do with it. The answer became an obvious one.”

Carignan also candidly admits that in choosing the road that she did, it hasn’t been an ‘easy’ bit of traveling.

“But, I make the Bees’ Nest kind of a metaphor for recovery,” she says. “Change is never easy, and if they think they can come out of CVRC (Comox Valley Recovery Centre), say, and then will move into a nice and simple life, they would be wrong.”

Carignan says her goal with the Bees’ Nest is to aid the residents in getting steady on their feet.

“Stage one recovery, in a facility, is baby steps,” she says. “This isn’t to demean it, because those baby steps are vital to the process, it’s just to suggest that a person at that stage has just begun, and if he doesn’t want to do the hard stuff—and there is a lot of hard stuff—then he is going to fail. It takes guts and perseverance. But, if the person is physically in a safe place, it can make a world of difference.”

Carignan is candid about the fact she entered the Bees’ Nest venture quite oblivious to the trials and tribulations that were going to manifest. And manifest they did, with a vengeance, it seemed at the time. The first big test stemmed from something as prosaic as lousy weather and a bad drainage system in the less-than-new Courtenay house that had only recently become the Bees’ Nest.

So, the drains backed up and it was a hideous mess that ruined the flooring in the ground floor area where the residential rooms were located. She was heartsick at the mess and wondered if she’d made a grievous mistake with the venture. She was in debt and knew she had taken on an onerous, possibly even impossible, task. And those were just the physical realities of the venture and had nothing to do with the residents per se.

Just who are these ‘strangers’ she was letting take up residence on her personal property? They are males aged 19 or older who have either successfully completed chemical dependency treatment within the previous 30 days, or who have 60-plus successive days clean and sober. They must have a recovery plan in place and they must be doing all that is needed to maintain their newfound sobriety, such as attending 12-Step meetings and are totally abstinent from any and all drugs and alcohol. About this last point Carignan is adamant and unwavering.

“It’s one strike and you’re out,” she says. “You use, you lose.”

It has to be that way, she says, both for their stage two recovery, and also because any hint of use is distressing to other residents. Furthermore the residents, if they are not advancing their education, must be actively seeking employment. Added to which they must be able to participate in house activities and are responsible for their part of the rent each month.

Carignan says she thought long and hard about many aspects of bringing the Bees’ Nest into being. While she had the house, there was still to be huge costs involved with needed renovations to render it a suitable dwelling for multiple tenants. She wanted grace and comfort within, and nothing resembling depressing squalor, because too many prospective residents came from such less-than-adequate accommodations.

And then there is the unanticipated, such as the flooding and the expenses that dumped in her lap. Finally she was (at that point) going it alone and that led her to feeling a keen sense of isolation at different times. Those were the times when she wanted to just pack it in, but her resolve, her faith and her own recovery kept that from happening and she soldiered on despite adversity.

“When I started the Bees’ Nest it was similar to my experience in recovery in that I initially wanted to be invisible,” she says. “I shortly learned that would be impossible. In setting up I realized I now had a certain obligation to the community, but at the same time I couldn’t ‘not’ make mistakes. They would happen and I would have to deal with them. At least I was willing to learn.”

Carignan readily admits that it hasn’t always gone smoothly, but she suffered no delusions that it would. She knows what the recovery process, with all its pitfalls, is like.

“You bring in some people and within a couple of weeks you wish you hadn’t,” she says. “These are the ones for whom when it gets hard—and it will get hard, that’s a guarantee, especially at the beginning—they go back out. It’s frustrating and sometimes

I feel like a parent who has, she thinks, created a perfect environment, so why would anybody want to reject that? But, that's the way it works and I know that."

And it is a pleasing environment with five comfortable and clean rooms, a good kitchen, a nice living-room lounge and meeting area replete with big screen TV, stereo and virtually anything most people would want.

To Carignan's delight her rather solitary and frustrating quest to make this thing work to the advantage of everybody, changed much for the better. A man with whom she'd long been acquainted came into her life, not only as a partner in operating the Bees' Nest, but also as a life partner. She couldn't be happier about that, at many levels.

"I couldn't be happier at the role Rod (Braun) has played in this for the last year," she says. "Now that there is a couple running the house it gives it more credibility. Now, every Sunday evening we all, Rod and I and the residents as well, meet for Sunday dinner and to discuss what is going on in the house. We talk things out and it has made a huge difference to the operation."

While Carignan has huge praises for Braun, she also has no small praise for her facility being in the same community as CVRC, the residential 28-day facility on Menzies Avenue in Courtenay that has long been a feature of the Comox Valley and is deserving of accolades in its own right.

With Carignan's strict criteria for admittance to the Bees' Nest, Comox Valley Recovery Centre's clients are made-to-order and she says the facility has cooperated with her wants and needs in a mutually beneficial way. "I'd be dead without them," Carignan says of CVRC. "They feel fully confident in sending people my way because they know that I follow the fundamental CVRC rule of one strike and you're out. That's the way it is there, and that's the way it is with the Bees' Nest. I must adhere to that, both because I believe it's realistic, but also because it is essential for CVRC to trust me."

In respect to a program that some might see as too rigid, Carignan defends the stringent standards of the Bees' Nest. "It's not as much about control as it is about the comfort and safety of the other residents," she says. "If somebody is using and lying about it, it upsets the tone of the place and the other residents are often stricter than I am about this. And why not? This is their home for however long they want to make it their home. A breakdown in morale impacts everybody and then the place starts to lose credibility."

Why Bees' Nest? In one respect that is due to a personal bit of philosophy Carignan has adhered to for a number of years, and she figured that the metaphor worked at a few levels, so she went with it.

"The bee has long been my symbol," she says. "It's based on the idea that I went for a long time being a human 'do-ing' rather than a human 'be-ing'. So the bee represented a transformation within me. At the same time, with the Bees' Nest I am definitely not the Queen Bee, nor are the residents my drones."

How long can residents stay at the facility? Carignan says that when she established the Bees' Nest she set a cap of a year, working from the assumption that by the time a year was completed in complete sobriety and with a good recovery program, clients should be in a position to move on and let somebody new utilize the space.

Today the duration of residency depends on the circumstances. She still holds to a year if the client has secured a job.

"If you're working, then it's time to move on," she says. "However, if you are upgrading your education in order to improve your employment opportunities, then you can stay longer than a year. I have one resident who has been there for two years. He's actually a huge asset. He's at NIC and he also has such good recovery that he can act as a mentor for new residents."

She reiterates the fact that strict adherence to the zero tolerance of the house is the one thing that can keep the whole thing going.

"For the residents there must always be that element of trust," she says. "It also means that former belief systems must be set aside as residents enter that new world of sobriety. In the 'using' world you would never rat somebody out. In the recovery world you must, or all will fall. It's as simple as that."

Carignan says she hates expelling a resident, but she is realistic about it. While she feels for their pain, she also is piqued by the fact that she loses the money they would have been paying to stay. After all, it is a business.

"I lose money a lot," she says. "They relapse and I don't get their rent. But, if they straighten out and get sober again they can return after 60 days. So they always retain the option of coming back."

As far as money is concerned, the Bees' Nest has been a huge investment on her part and she can only express delight in how generous the Comox Valley community has been in helping her keep the place going. The testimonial list she would like to create would be huge, she says. But, as it stands she is overwhelmed by how the community has banded together to play a part in helping to solve two serious problems—addiction and the lack of safe housing—in the Comox Valley.

In that, she cites the case of one group of businessmen who made an anonymous donation of \$1,000 for the facility.

Over the two-and-a-half years of the Bees Nest help of many kinds has also been received from (in no particular order): Pilon Tool Rental, Home Depot, ReStore, the Salvation Army, Torry & Sons, AHERO, Wachiay Friendship Centre, Alano Club,

Shamrock Veterinary Clinic, Comox Valley Recovery Centre, Bob (The Builder) Dehaas, Mike Claire, Tracy Forbes, Corix Water Products, Lee Gingrich and SD 71 students, Second Chance Recovery Centre, Ronni Lister (Remax), Grasshopper Graphics, Andrew Sheret Ltd., Bartle & Gibson Co., Complete Auto Care, Highland Precast, residents of the Bees' Nest, the Comox Valley Homelessness Commission, Rod Braun, Ian Lidster, Gary and Stan Pawlak, and numerous volunteers and anonymous donors. "The Bees' Nest wouldn't have continued to exist without the help of all those mentioned," Carignan says.

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