



Survivor draws on personal experience to help others

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by YUKIE KURAHASHI

Shes worked the ugliest job at the pulp mill. She was the second-everfemale ice-maker in BC. Shes survived abuse, learned her rights, and won a case on appeal for a 25-year-old sexual assault.

Andrea Hill Housekeeper Victoria Women's Transition Society

She can fix your plumbing. Or your lights. Or help you with your computer. She can even interpret using sign language if youre deaf or hard of hearing.

And on top of all that ... she can dance.

Andrea Hill has compelling reasons for having chosen to work at Victoria Transition House. "I have dealt with abusive relationships in my own past, and felt called to work in this field," she said. "I am interested in supporting and encouraging womens personal growth and development. I am the housekeeper at my workplace, and while this is not the most glamorous job on the site, I feel that I am able to contribute to the terrific environment we provide."

She says she now wishes she had gone to a transition house for help when she needed it. "I probably would have gotten out [of the relationship] sooner and made some wiser choices, had I had the kind of guidance they offer. Our house is very progressive, inclusive, and cooperative," she said. "Its really a great place to work."

Even on her days off, Hill continues to contribute to her community. In addition to volunteering with both the Island Deaf and Hard of Hearing Centre and the Bridges for Women Project, she is involved with various other womens and social justice organizations.

Hill decided to take up sign language as a result of her experiences at the Gay Games in Amsterdam two summers ago. Hill laughs as she describes how she found herself in the ballroom dance competition, in the "Beginners Combi" division.

"I had been in a beginners ballroom dance class. One woman... who was in a wheelchair ... approached me and asked if I would consider partnering her at the Gay Games," she said.

"We had seven months of practice together. We couldnt find any information for what was called the "Combi class; its one standing, one in a wheelchair. So we just took basic ballroom and Latin dance steps and adapted

them to work with a wheelchair. We had several obstacles to overcome, including the fact that we didn't know how to ballroom and Latin dance! We had financial difficulties; we couldn't get government sponsorship, so we held a fundraiser benefit."

The dancers worked hard to get to Amsterdam, but once there, they faced further challenges. "My partner, who is deaf, had been assured that there would be sign language interpreters for her, and that everything would be wheelchair accessible. When we got to the school we were staying in, the showers weren't accessible! We were pleased that the dance hall had accessible showers, or it would have been a really long week."

Then they had trouble arranging for sign language interpreters. "We had many, many problems. She could lip-read me okay, because we had been working together for so long. But many times, we had people's attitudes to deal with," she said.

"We were signed up for a really wonderful workshop put on by two professional dancers, and when I asked where the interpreter was, we were told my partner doesn't need to hear anything, she can just watch. And that's the main reason that I'm a sign language student now."

Despite the obstacles, Hill and her partner brought home two bronze medals. Hill is modest about their winnings. "It wasn't a very large competition," she said. "And the 'Combi' class is very new."

Andrea Hill credits the Bridges for Women Society with helping supplement her skills in building maintenance and management with computer training.

"It's an employment training program for women with a history of abuse," she said. "I really wanted computer training and couldn't afford it, but I was eligible as a survivor of abuse. The self-confidence level was incredible after I'd been there."

"They also teach people about their learning styles. I seem to have a different way of learning than a lot of people, so it was really helpful for me because I discovered what works for me. If I'm having trouble, it gives me an option of trying to re-work how I'm learning."

Hill loves to learn. "I believe that Bridges gave me the ability to dream again," she said.

Her current dream is to gain further her skills in interpretation. "Eventually I'd like to become a musical interpreter, but that's such a long-range goal."

"Musical interpretation is interpreting songs so people get the true meaning of it. It would allow me to incorporate body movement ... so it's sort of a combination of singing and dancing and working with your body."

"That's my dream at the moment."

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