

Domestic violence hits home for Eskimos president

The mission of Catholic Social Services is to care for and bring hope to people in need with humility, compassion and respect, to lift up the most vulnerable among us.



Edmonton Eskimos president Len Rhodes Thandi Konguavi, Grandin Media

So the president and CEO of the Edmonton Eskimos football team would seem to be an unlikely poster boy for CSS. But behind the professional success of Len Rhodes is a harrowing past he shared with CSS staff, donors and supporters at their annual general meeting Sept. 17.

“We all have issues. I grew up in a household where there was domestic violence,” said Rhodes, who was raised in a Catholic family in Montreal with three sisters -- and an abusive father.

“And what went on in there is, I guess, as close to hell as things can be ... too many nights where I’d go to bed, worrying whether my mom was going to be hurt, killed, or what would happen to her at any time. The things that I heard during the night sometimes, no children should be listening to. I felt so helpless as a kid, not speaking out.”

Rhodes said his dad, who abused his mom for many years, eventually stopped drinking and made amends for everything he did ten years before he died in 2001. And Rhodes said he never stopped caring for his father.

“I do love him and I’m convinced he’s in heaven watching down today,” he said.

Rhodes said he kept his family’s history of domestic violence a secret for years, until he was compelled to speak out and share his own experience after a personal encounter with a domestic violence victim during a police ride-along

in 2013.

“While I love Edmonton ... we have a lot of work to do. Once drugs and alcohol come into play, some of the things happening in our own backyard, in our own city, would embarrass the hell out of you.”

Rhodes’ adopted home must continue to help victims of domestic violence and heal with families, he said.



Troy Davies, CEO of Catholic Social Services
Thandi Konguavi, Grandin Media

Catholic Social Services helped more than 200 women and children fleeing abuse in the last year, up from 150 the year before. The agency’s three Edmonton shelters – Valeda House, Katherine Drexel Place and LaSalle – provide women and children with a safe place to live for up to one year.

Of those helped in the last year, 85 per cent of the women transitioned out of shelter into permanent, safe housing, said Troy Davies, the CEO of Catholic Social Services. In the next year, Davies said he hopes every woman and child CSS encounters can find safe housing.

Rhodes’ personal story of domestic violence in his family underscored the importance of knowing not just what CSS does, but why they do it, Davies said. “We work with many of the most vulnerable and voiceless people in our community.”

“But I think the reason CSS has such a powerful and positive impact is because we have a really good sense of our why. Ultimately, we do it because we are rooted in a faith tradition that calls us to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and care for the sick and imprisoned.”

The agency's Children, Family and Community Services served almost 3,700 people this past year, slightly less than the 3,936 in previous fiscal year, and its Community Outreach and Disability Services provided help to more than 1,000 people, up from 946 in the 2016-2017 fiscal year.

Catholic Social Services, which serves central Alberta, is one of the largest social service agencies in Canada. It reported revenue of \$97 million last year, up 3.8 per cent, reflecting an increase in government contracts.

The provincial government increased the contract to provide services to the disabled by 5.7 per cent last year to a total of \$45.2 million. The government of Canada provided \$9.3 million in funding, primarily for immigration and resettlement services.

"Historically we do grow year over year, so we are bigger and offering more services this year than we were able to the previous year," Davies said.

Catholic Social Services' Sign of Hope campaign raised \$3.3 million for programs in the 2017-18 fiscal year. The goal for this year's annual appeal, which kicks off on Sept. 28, is to raise \$2.4 million.

Davies said mental health continues to be a focus for CSS, which provides housing for people with addictions and counselling services through Mercy Counselling.

"There's a cycle. Trauma can lead to mental health issues then mental health issues can often lead to addiction, and then addictions lead to other social problems, so it's an attempt to try to get to the heart of things, to try to break those cycles."