

VICTORIA'S *Wonder*WOMEN

Women In Need offers a hand up toward a better life

Mara Szyz's hands speak as loudly as her words.

Clutching an imaginary can opener in her clenched fist, she speaks about purchasing the item at the Women In Need thrift store and how the utensil marked an important milestone after a separation left her with nothing but the clothes on her back.

"I used to eat food from the cans. ... I had no plates, no can opener, no nothing. I didn't have glasses, so I had to open the sink and drink like this," she says, lapping up water from an imaginary faucet. "I slept on my clothes in my apartment. I had no furniture, no utensils, no bed. For the longest time I was on survival mode."

A year after moving to Canada from Argentina Szyz was lacking English language skills, had no family or friends, and worked four jobs to sustain herself. Then she stumbled upon the Women In Need thrift store on Pandora Street, where she slowly built her life back, purchasing the first items that would eventually fill her home, starting with a simple kitchen utensil.

"I bought my first can opener here," she says with a laugh. "I was able to slowly start making my WIN home, everything that I had came from here."

It is for women like Szyz, Clare Yazganoglu Executive Director of Women In Need, says WIN is so important, and she hopes its days of flying under the radar will soon end, in part because of the need the non-profit co-op fills in the community.

"I love the work that WIN does. I am committed to support women on their journey to self sufficiency from crisis. And it has a huge meaning for me to be with them on that journey," she says. "Working here you see incredible shifts that happen for women as they make new choices and embark on that journey. It is really inspiring."

Women In Need supports more than 1,000 women a year with a variety of programs including education, gift certificates, bursaries and even the necessities for a new life including furniture, beds, kitchen utensils and other household items from the New Start program for women leaving transition homes and start-

ing over.

"We are here to support women who are at that point of wanting to make changes in their lives," Yazganoglu says. "What women in our program have in common is they have come to that point where they are ready to do that and have the courage to embark on that journey."

The co-op does not rely on government funding, but raises money to help women through donations and with its three thrift stores, downtown, on Cook street and in Vic West, all of which sell items that are donated by the community.

"We think about it along the lines of modeling what we want women to do in supporting

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– Clare Yazganoglu



Mara Szyz, left, and Clare Yazganoglu of Women in Need.

people in their own lives," she says of the co-ops model of self sufficiency.

Now with 33 staff, a fleet of more than 50 volunteers – 90 per cent of whom are women – Yazganoglu hopes to continue to build on the \$130,000 of goods it receives annually and the more than \$1.5 million of goods and services that have helped more than 20,000 women over the past 23 years.

To women like Szyz, who is now the retail manager at the WIN store where she bought

her first can opener, it is repayment for what she received from the organization.

"The idea of the circle. To return something that I have been given. I love it. When all that stuff happened, I didn't know when, I didn't know where I was going to end up. I see myself now and I am super proud. ... People think it's just a store and when they realize it's not just a store – it clicks. There are so many people with need."

For more information visit womeninneed.ca.