

Building Bridges

a project created by, for and with women living with facial and physical differences and/or disabilities

Building Bridges—a partnership project of **AboutFace International**, the only organisation in Canada providing services to persons with facial differences, and the **Body Image Project**, Regional Women's Health Centre, Sunnybrook & Women's—was developed in August 1999. This Project was created with, by, and for women living with facial differences, physical differences, and/or disabilities.

*I have so much to say...
a voice muffled by the fears
of others. I refuse to
stay quiet. I will be heard.*

Our initiative began as the outcome of a series of conversations between **Carla Rice**, Manager of the Body Image Project, and **Lorna Renooy**, staff member at AboutFace. Carla was moved to work with women with disabilities and physical differences as a result of interviews she had been conducting on body image across the life span. Lorna's interest in body image came from her academic, professional, and lived knowledge of the influence of negative social interactions on their bodies and lives. Interested in affirming the capacities of people with body differences to navigate difficult social interactions, **Hilde Zitzelsberger** entered the Project as co-ordinator in 2001.

Over a three-and-a-half year period, the **Building Bridges Project** has run a series of workshops to create opportunities for people with physical differences and/or disabilities to share stories, knowledge, and practical ideas about interpersonal interactions. The women who have joined our workshops include women with diverse facial and other physical differences or disabilities, which may be present at birth (such as a cleft lip and palate), or acquired later in life through injury (such as a burn) or illness (such as facial cancer). Some women may not identify themselves as having a disability. However, there are often many overlaps in issues regarding body- and self-image.

Impetus for **Building Bridges** came from the recognition that there are few spaces for women to explore their subjective and social experiences of living with physical differences and/or disabilities and for group resistance to dominant views of body difference.

The workshops provide a place for participants to discover and expand knowledges and skills they may already possess in handling stressful situations and maintaining a sense of body and self despite others' perceptions.

*I have also learnt the
benefits of having a
cross-disability workshop.
Not only did the participants
become sensitive to issues
of cross-disability,
but they learnt that
their 'community' is greater
than they had previously
thought. I believe that
this awareness will create
a stronger base for change
in society.*

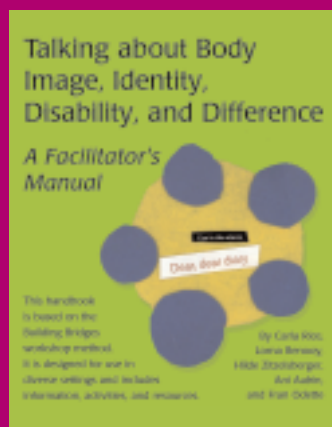
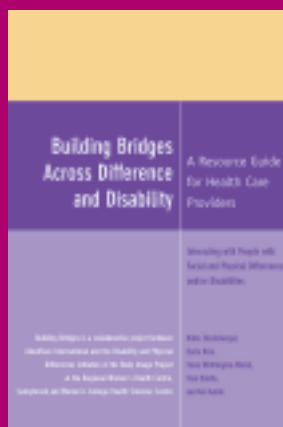
Supported by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the **Building Bridges Project** has produced two resources. Reflecting our experiences with developing and facilitating **Building Bridges** workshops, 'Talking About Body Image, Identity, Disability, and Difference: A Facilitator's Manual' was written to make it possible for others to undertake designing and running similar programs. Guided by interviews with people with disabilities and physical differences, we wrote 'Building Bridges Across Difference and Disability: A Resource Guide For Health Care Providers' to create opportunities for both providers and clients to enhance their sense of comfort and competency in health care encounters.

Over the past year, we have held art making and story telling workshops. The quotes embedded throughout this piece are the voices of women who have participated in these workshops. We are currently exploring other creative workshop modalities, such as drama.

*A wheelchair can be seen
as something positive.
It's a tool that's very liberating.
I always thought of it as
a prison on wheels.
Now I see it as something
that gives freedom.*

Building Bridges creates an opportunity for shifts in meaning of difference and disability to occur. Carla eloquently expresses that "This project does not deny the challenges of others' and our own perceptions of body difference, but it does open up the possibility to imagine. Imagining becomes a resource that allows women to create new images and languages, and make new connections through art, metaphor, and creative expression." ■

If you are interested in finding out more, please call 416-351-3702 or 416-351-3704. To order your own copies of the Resource Guide or Facilitator's Manual, please call AboutFace International at 416-597-2229 or toll-free 1-800-665-3223 or e-mail to info@aboutfaceinternational.org.



The circle can be unbroken by Christene Rowntree

The colours and smaller circles represent the cycles of a woman's life. The yellow circle means there is always something good in your life if you look for it, even though you might be living in the middle of a storm. Sometimes, my life is like living in the eye of the storm. In the morning, some of the people that have to help me with my daily



needs, are like a hurricane. "Good Morning Sunshine!" Their pace is so quick, and sometimes they come in really anxious. So that's what I meant by "Eye in the Storm"; my sense of space is gone. The only time that I feel spiritual or alone is when I'm writing in my journal which explains the "Dear, dear diary" in my piece. I can't escape the same way other people do. Keeping a journal is important for my sanity. I also use my journal as source material for the comedy that I write. ■

Christene Rowntree is a participant in the Building Bridges Project. Thank you for your generous donation of artwork and words.

This article was originally published in Leadership through Partnership: a newsletter compiled by the Centre for Research in Women's Health [CRWH], a partnership between Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Sciences Centre and the University of Toronto. This article may be reproduced for educational purposes in line with fair use. Please send a copy of the reprint or how you are using this information to:

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