

A business that grows on you

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Lora Warkentin is in her 15th year at Cornerstone Manor, Buffalo's homeless shelter for women and children. Known as "Dr. Lora" to staff and residents, Warkentin supervises a state-of-the-art facility that is filled to capacity. Almost nothing surprises this nurse-scholar who has dedicated her life to helping others.

PT: What is the key to your job?
LW: Compassion, and the ability to communicate that in different venues, because the women I deal with come to us in crisis. To be able to switch from being happy over someone who has gotten her life together to walking down the corridor and seeing someone in crisis, you have to shift gears constantly.

PT: How do you stay detached?
LW: I've been a nurse for many years. One of the things I learned after I came to Cornerstone is that their problems are not mine, and if I made their problems mine, I could not function. So I don't remain detached but I keep it in perspective.

PT: What about you as a person makes this work?

LW: I was a homeless child, a refugee child. I was born in Crimea, so post-World War II for eight years my family was homeless. I don't remember my story, but I've chronicled my mom's story. I needed to understand my roots, where I came from. I needed to deal with this pent-up anger that was inside, not understanding what happened to us. I was a baby and I don't ever remember having a home. I do remember standing in food lines and going to sleep hungry.

PT: And then your family made it to Canada?

LW: We arrived in Canada when I was 9 years old. Until then I did not go to school. My parents used to



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tell us that we were now in the land of opportunity. So I went to school and got my degrees but I was never content, never happy because I didn't know who I was.

PT: Who are you now?

LW: I'm a mover and a shaker, a creative thinker. I'm a people person who is willing to take risks. On the outside, I look pretty composed. On the inside I often have butterflies. As much as I have confidence, I also have fear. I don't want to fail. In fact, the motto for my life is a Bible verse and it says: "Fear not."

PT: For a city its size, does Buffalo have a lot of homeless women?

LW: Yes, when I first came here, we had a 35-bed facility. We enlarged

that - by moving rooms around - to 60 beds, and we were turning people away. We were turning from 100 to 150 people away a month. Then we built this building with 122 beds, and guess what? We're turning people away. Around the country, homelessness for women and children is increasing.

PT: What do you find difficult about your job?

LW: The political piece, the fundraising. I'm not responsible - but I feel responsible - to fund this place. So I do a lot of public speaking.

PT: Do you keep in touch with former residents?

LW: Many of them keep in touch with us. They will call. They say they want to hear my voice. For them to

be willing to reach out and ask for help takes courage. I'm a pretty independent person and in 2001, when I was diagnosed with cancer and ended up with surgery and chemo, I needed help. That was one of my biggest struggles.

PT: What do you do for fun?

LW: I have a very strong social network. I go home to my family in Ontario at least once a week. I'm one of eight. I'm not married so I'm the aunt who spoils everybody. I love to entertain. I love to cook, bake and decorate. It's fun to go home to the garden. I enjoy doing construction. I re-modeled my own home.

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