Prepared by Jody Paterson on behalf of Peers Victoria for an anthology of sex work activism in Canada (published in 2019)

The 20-year history of Peers Victoria mirrors much of Canada's own shifting and conflicted thinking around sex work over that same period. With each new wave of thinking, law-making and community initiative around the sex industry, Peers has seen its funding wax and wane accordingly, through years when it was every funder's darling to years when it could barely keep the doors open.

But while the grassroots non-profit in Victoria, B.C. has been buffeted repeatedly by the ebb and flow of public and political support for sex workers – and has faced near-closure more than once during the worst of it – Peers Victoria survives. More importantly, the original vision of a peer-based organization run by and for sex workers has survived, helping Peers stay the course not only through all the ups and downs in funding, but also through a momentous 2013 decision to end years of deliberate neutrality and come out in support of decriminalization of sex work.

"We are dedicated to continuing our work to create a safe, respectful and healthy environment for those with a history of sex trade work," declared Peers in that original vision statement. "We strive to meet the needs of our members and continue to provide services that remain flexible and relevant to the changing needs of our community. We will continue to be a voice to speak out publicly against the abuse and stigmatization of prostitutes and continue to add our voice to creating more sensitive public policies and programs."[1]

The organization no longer uses the word "prostitute," but everything else about Peers' long-ago vision for itself still holds true today. Programs, projects, staff, board members, executive directors and funding have come and gone many times since Peers was launched in 1995, but it has never swayed from its commitment to be an organization run by and for people who are currently or were formerly in the sex industry, and a strong voice for a population of Canadian workers who continue to be silenced, talked over, dismissed and shut out of policy decisions, public conversations and law-making that directly affects them.

Back when Peers was coming to life in 1995 under the guidance of two former sex workers and a Victoria community activist known for being able to get things done, the concept of sex work as work was still a radical idea for the majority of Canadians. The idea of all sex workers as suffering victims being manipulated by predatory third parties was firmly entrenched in the public's mind. There was an appetite for projects that helped sexually exploited youth, and Peers' co-sponsorship of an international summit in Victoria in 1998 was a catalyst for bringing the fledgling group to the attention of the community, provincial and federal politicians, and potential funders.

Peers was initially envisaged by its founders as a 12-step-style program for local sex workers wanting a safe, non-stigmatized place where they could support each other in getting out of the

[1] "Impossible, Eh? The Story of Peers," 2001, page 13

industry. While Peers has gone on to play an integral role in Greater Victoria's spectrum of harm-reduction services, nobody was envisaging a community service agency in the early days. Nor was anyone talking about activism initially.

"I think we were grassroots, trying to deal with a lot of troubled young women when we all had our own issues," recalls Kelly Heggart, part of the group of experiential women who helped lead Peers in the early years. "I think there was little time for activism in the community, we were dealing on the front lines and we'd long stopped caring about what the community thought of sex work. You either supported us or you didn't. But as former sex workers, we were used to it. We were too busy trying to help a demographic that had never received any support or guidance in the same community that shunned us and them."

On the issue of decriminalization, Peers Victoria stayed purposely and proudly neutral for most of its history. Taking a neutral position was seen by the organization as a pragmatic decision that not only avoided having to seek agreement among sex workers and supporters with differing and passionate views on the issue, but also kept Peers from running into trouble with funders who might be reluctant (or even outright opposed) to funding an organization actively involved in sex work law reform.

That changed at one fateful board meeting a few weeks before the Supreme Court of Canada handed down its landmark December 2013 Bedford decision that threw out the country's main laws against sex work as unconstitutional. The Peers board had already been through some difficult conversations several years earlier about taking a position, but by 2013 the board was aligned around supporting decriminalization and the time seemed right, recalls Peers executive director Rachel Phillips.

"We had worked so hard not to take a position," recalls Susan Strega, an academic and former sex worker whose history on the Peers board goes back to 2000. But the subject came up around 2009 when two former Peers staffers started investigating the possibility of opening a co-op brothel in 2009 and Peers found itself inadvertently drawn into the public conversation around sex-work laws. A board member from that period urged Peers to take a stand against decriminalization or risk alienating funders.

"Having it put to us like that – that we would have to oppose decriminalization or people wouldn't donate to us, that we couldn't support a co-op brothel project being talked about at that time or we'd lose funding – well, that changed things," says Susan. Pushed between further criminalization or legalization, which we knew wouldn't be good for sex workers, we came out in support of decriminalization."

The report documenting Peers' first six years was fittingly titled, *"Impossible, Eh?"* Peers was one of the first sex-worker-led organizations in Canada when it was founded in 1995, and few who were connected to it then could have imagined a long life for a group whose very existence

challenged popular assumption that all sex workers were helpless victims too broken to solve their own problems.

That Peers survives is proof that it's definitely not impossible to be a sex-worker-led organization. In fact, services and support provided by people "who have been there" is now a popular strategy in the health and social services sectors. Nor is it impossible to maintain financial support even after taking a controversial and potentially divisive stand in favour of decriminalization. But that's not to suggest that any of it has ever been easy.

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While Peers wasn't conceived for the purpose of activism, just wanting to create a grassroots organization led by and for people with sex work backgrounds was an activist concept in itself in 1995.

"I saw Peers as the most perfect model for social learning. The people who are living it are learning from it," recalls Barbara Smith, a co-founder of Peers and one of the many people whose own life journeys intertwined with Peers in various ways over the years. (Barbara went on to do stints as Peers executive director, program facilitator, and researcher on a number of studies and initiatives).

The original group of five founders, encouraged and supported by community activist and organizer Jannit Rabinovitch, named the organization the Prostitutes Empowerment Education and Recovery Society – PEERS for short. But as PEERS started to provide more services for people who use substances and adopted harm-reduction practices, it was decided that having "Recovery" in the name didn't fit an organization that wanted to be open to people regardless of whether they felt the need to recover from anything. And so the R in PEERS became "Resources." By 2009, the organization felt increasingly uncomfortable at having "Prostitute" in its name, and so got rid of the acronym entirely and became Peers Victoria.

"I definitely didn't know enough about organizations to start one," remembers Barbara of the early days. "But I was in sex work and ready to get out, and I wanted to get into social work. I needed 60 hours of community volunteering to get into the program. Somebody gave me Jannit Rabinovitch's name, and we went for coffee. She was the one who knew how to get money."

The money didn't take long to start coming. It was a time when years of reports about missing women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside were finally getting more public attention in B.C., and the federal government in particular was eager to fund projects aimed at helping sex workers "exit" from the industry. Concerns about underage teens in the sex industry - sexually exploited youth – were also capturing media headlines, and funders were eager to support Peers to run programs aimed at helping youth with histories of sexual exploitation learn life skills focused on preparing them for work in the formal economy.

As Peers took root, people from the industry sought more from the organization, particularly outdoor workers coping with many different kinds of challenges in their life. They brought their own experiences of sex work into the organization and onto the board of directors, and Peers was soon launched on a course of ever-changing programs, projects and funders that continues to this

day. The underlying vision of Peers as an organization run for and by sex workers remained a constant, however.

In 1998, Peers co-sponsored an international summit in Victoria for sexually exploited youth from throughout the Americas, *Out From the Shadows.* That summit increased Peers' public profile significantly due to media interest in the week-long event. By 2001, Peers had multiple programs, 16 staff, late-night outreach on the outdoor strolls, and an annual budget approaching $1 million.

The bubble burst in 2003, when more conservative governments provincially and federally cut core funding for Peers and ended Status of Women grants. Peers had just bought and moved into a new building, and struggled to cover operating costs under a difficult performance-based contract funded by the province.

But by 2004, the organization had bounced back. It was now providing seven-nights-a-week outreach on Victoria's outdoor strolls and four hours of daily programming five days a week at its drop-in centre. There was funding for project-based staff travel and focus groups that helped forge and deepen connections with other sex-worker-led organizations like Vancouver's PACE Society and Stepping Stone in Halifax N.S., and Peers staff began to connect with sex workers in other provinces who wanted to start their own versions of Peers.

The diverse programs and projects at Peers over the years have included late-night outreach and needle exchange on Victoria's outdoor strolls (that service has been consistent through most of Peers' history); daytime drop-in; lunch and art programs; money for new clothes, housewares, and employment-related training; housing supports; scholarships; in-house medical clinics; in-house psychiatric appointments; sex-worker-developed and led wellness programming; trauma counselling; Peers-run housing; substance dependence recovery work; spiritual support; and small-business training, just to name a few.

From the start, funders saw potential in Peers as an employment service that could help sex workers ready themselves to move into other kinds of work. Although their vision for how that would happen rarely reflected the complexities in the lives of those who most needed the training programs, Peers successfully ran employment programs funded by federal and provincial governments for more than 15 years, giving them up in 2013 only after program restrictions and billing models became onerous to the point that they were affecting the way staff interacted with program participants.

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Researchers have long taken an interest in Peers not only for the work it does, but as a resource for connecting with people in the sex industry. Twenty years ago, researchers still had a lot to learn about the people who worked in the sex industry, and some of Peers' founders recall people being negatively impacted by participating in research projects that triggered memories of dark periods in their lives. But these days, "many academic sex workers have had a fairly big part in the sex work movement, and these are people that are really fusing lived experience and academic ways of knowing," says Rachel Phillips, a researcher herself who first connected with Peers in 1998 while conducting interviews there.

Peers also initiated its own research projects – not so much because the organization felt a drive to do research, but because potential funders wanted further verification that there really were sex workers in Victoria who would benefit from the services they were asked to fund. Little research of any kind was done on sex work in Canada until the 1970s,[2] and for many years after that research continued to be something that was more often done *to* sex workers rather than done with them. Now, academics with sex work histories guiding research projects into the sex industry is the norm, another quiet act of activism that has opened the doors to much richer and myth-busting knowledge about all aspects of the industry.[3]

> It was never really the intention of the women who started PEERS to engage in research. As far as they were concerned, they knew far more than they wanted to about the sex trade and about the needs of ex-sex trade workers. However, one of the first responses to the idea that sex trade workers needed specialized services was, "Show me the evidence." Many policy makers and government funders had to be convinced that there was something unique about the experience of being in the sex trade and they wanted more than personal anecdotal information.
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> - *Excerpted from "Impossible, Eh? The Story of Peers," 2001*

From the outset, Peers chose to forge broad community alliances. The organization was to be led by and for sex workers, but policy allowed for up to 50 per cent of the Peers board and a minority of staff positions to be people without sex work backgrounds. Today, three-quarters of Peers' current staff identify as current or former sex workers or sexually exploited youth, and the requirement that at least half of board directors have sex-work experience remains in place.

The whole concept of "experiential" and "non-experiential" has changed significantly since those years, notes Rachel: "The idea of experiential and non-experiential people as comprising two groups has broken down a bit to make room for a more complicated view of sex work identities." But in the early years, Peers participants took pains to word organizational policy so that everyone was clear on its commitment to sex worker leadership.

> One of the things about PEERS that makes it such a useful and unique agency is that it acts as a bridge between mainstream populations and sex workers. In order to create this bridge, two things must be present: a group of peers that can relate to and support each other and mainstream community members. One of the important functions of community supporters is bringing in other people and developing relationships with the sex workers. At PEERS the women felt that it was important, however, that mainstream people were not in positions of power over sex workers. For them, the relationship must be as egalitarian as possible.
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> - *Excerpted from "Impossible, Eh?" 2001*

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[2] http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/csj-sjc/jsp-sjp/rr02_9/p1.

[3] http://www.understandingsexwork.com/

Executive directors over the years have brought work skills from perspectives both inside and outside the industry. Peers remains passionate about supporting and promoting sex work leadership throughout the organization, says Rachel. But at times the commitment to employ people with sex work backgrounds has prompted hiring decisions that put people into work they didn't yet have the skills for, a human resources challenge.

"The belief that sex workers are the ones to be hired and provide the services and supports for other sex workers is extremely valuable and the way it should be," says Karen Dennis, a former Peers employee and long-time supporter. "In the beginning, the outreach workers definitely had a wealth of knowledge and passion. However, it was raw, and having come right from the working arenas, many of the first faces of Peers didn't have the skills, tact and ability to read the audience. Many times in my experience I saw good people with their important message get lost in their personal triggers, anger and experiences when trying to convey the important messages to community groups."

Relationships with the Victoria Police Department had their ups and downs, especially in the early years.

"Members of the Victoria Police Department believed … that by supporting people wherever they were at, Peers was enabling dangerous and unhealthy behaviour to continue," noted Jannit Rabinovitch and Megan Lewis, authors of "Impossible, Eh?", the 2001 history of Peers' first six years. "Many professionals, especially those working within the criminal justice system, see the issues as a little more black and white: Either people quit the trade and move on, or they are part of an underworld that deserves no support and that is linked directly to criminal activity and the 'bad guys.'"

Those attitudes were already changing by the time the report was published, and have changed further as relationships and communication between Peers and the Victoria Police Department improved. Peers and the police have since worked together on projects like improving bad-date reporting and liaising with indoor workers. When the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act became law in July 2014 and buyers of sex were newly criminalized, Victoria Police made it clear that there were no plans to step up enforcement.

In recent years, members of Victoria Police have met with sex workers to hear their concerns about how the law impacts their lives and their ability to come forward with crimes committed against them. Peers continues to facilitate meetings between police, Peers staff and program participants at least three times a year, says Rachel. "The business of improving relationships between people in the sex industry and police is not something that happens easily, but rather is a very gradual process that takes committed champions on both sides."

Former board member Susan Strega believes Peers' solid connections in to the wider health and social services community as well as connections to politicians and academics have benefited everyone by facilitating working relationships and mutually beneficial education opportunities.

"We've built relationships – with police, with bylaw officers, with our MLAs. One year, the mayor led our Red Umbrella march," says Susan. "People all across the political spectrum have stood with Peers. We've also benefited from the charismatic leadership of people from the

community who are well-known and well-connected – people who already have a lot of respect in the community and bring that to the organization."

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A key aspect of Peers activism has been its public presence in the community. From the earliest days, Peers participants have presented publicly on sex work, told their stories, and talked about Peers programs and the needs of the people coming through the organization's doors. Audiences for these presentations have run the gamut from high-school classes to service club members, university women's clubs, city councils, provincial governments, federal governments, task forces, round tables and more. Representatives of Peers have sat on numerous community boards over the years, and participated in a large number of research projects.

Annual fundraisers have also put the organization and the people that it represents into the public view, whether via the highly successful Hot Pink burlesque show benefiting Peers every year or a run of several years in the mid-2000s of Victoria Idol, a singing contest for amateur singers of all ages that was organized and run by Peers and provided a unique vehicle for bringing the issues of Peers and sex workers to an entirely new audience. Peers organizes a Red Umbrella march every Dec. 17. Public events such as these have not only provided opportunities to speak to new audiences about the existence of sex work and the importance of sex workers' rights, but also bring media coverage, giving Peers and the people and issues it represents a more prominent place in the Greater Victoria community.

Since making the decision in 2013 to support decriminalization, Peers has become more politically active as well. Peers presented its submission in person to the federal Justice Committee Hearing in July 2014, voicing deep concern over the impact that Canada's new laws would have on sex workers now that their customers had been criminalized and their right to work together in groups to increase safety had been declared illegal. The organization sent the submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee as well later that year.

In September 2014, Peers organized and hosted a talk-show-style panel in Victoria in support of decriminalizing sex work as the best mechanism for ensuring sex workers' human rights, increasing work safety, and reducing the stigma that affects every aspect of a sex worker's life. More than 130 people attended to take in the views, voices and research of the eight-person expert panel, which included sex workers, researchers, a law professor, a police officer, and a Member of Parliament.

Meeting community demand for people with sex work experience to "tell their stories" to different audiences was seen by Peers initially as an excellent way to educate and inform people from a sex workers' perspective, and the speaking circuit quickly became a popular fundraising tool as well. However, such a tool must be used with care by an organization, note a number of people interviewed for this article. Speaking out about a personal background in sex work can be an empowering act, but it also leaves people vulnerable to being stereotyped, judged and stigmatized now that others in the community know their history. Speaking out about experiences in sex work can be a powerful tool for connecting with an audience that simply has no idea, but it can also be deeply traumatizing for those whose stories end up taking them back to painful past experiences of stigma and discrimination.

"The requests for presentations outnumbered the hours of availability," recalls Karen Dennis of the early years, when she was doing public education workshops on behalf of Peers. "When I took a speaker with me, it was someone who had done a significant amount of healing and self-work. Speakers were also provided pre- and post-support. But I still run into people who tell me how powerful and illuminating these presentations were."

Lauren Casey, a former Peers executive director, facilitator and consultant, went public as a former sex worker when she joined Peers in 2003 as executive director, and now sees that decision as a major turning point in her own life.

"When I started with Peers, I was brand-new in coming out. That's where it started," recalls Lauren. "At first it was scary, but then it was quite empowering, and gave me the chance to use it as a vehicle to talk about the issues that I had, and to realize how all of it – the stigma, the layers of society's moral views, the shaming – had impacted me."

Lauren and Barbara Smith went on to develop the program "Sex Workers Addressing Treatment" (SWAT), an innovative curriculum developed by and for people from the sex industry that Lauren has since introduced to Los Angeles women's prisons, Ethiopia, and other Canadian organizations providing services to sex workers.

"We'd run a pilot, then fine tune it based on what people told us, then run it again," recalls Lauren. "It became a strengths-based empowerment model for looking at your time in sex work, as opposed to 'what happened to me when I was five.' Sex workers brought experiences that came from the work, not from the research."

Peers maintains an updated web site and circulates newsletters at least three times a year, and has had an active presence on Facebook and Twitter for a number of years. In 2016, Peers launched its #sexworkstories feature, asking past and present sex workers to write their own stories for featuring on the Peers web site and social media platforms. Peers also participated in the 2016 Canadian Alliance For Sex Work Law Reform initiative that resulted in a nine-part series on the Ricochet Media site focusing on the lives of Canadian sex workers.

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Establishing and maintaining funding and stability for a non-profit led by people in and from the sex industry is never going to be a smooth undertaking as long as sex work remains deeply stigmatized and misunderstood; funding remains piecemeal and uncertain; and non-profits struggle to cover even basic administration costs, let alone provide the necessary levels of staff development, training and support that might ease people's transition into mainstream work culture and address the fatigue and turnover that is a constant concern for Peers. Taking a stance in favour of decriminalization has added to those challenges, but at the same time has connected Peers much more strongly to national and international movements of sex workers and allies fighting for the human rights of a profoundly stigmatized population of workers.

Upholding your vision is a challenge for any organization, but is particularly difficult for groups representing a stigmatized population whose industry is the subject of heated political debate. Projects for any non-profit tends to be shaped more by funders' requirements than clients' needs – a "square-hole, round-peg" problem that has added to organizational challenges for Peers over the years and at times threatened to undermine its vision due to funding requirements. In

recent years Peers found it increasingly difficult to uphold its vision and maintain neutrality on the subject of decriminalization in the face of stepped-up efforts by the former Harper government toward further criminalization. (On the upside, that turn of events led to rapid growth in the counter movement led by sex worker organizations and allies in Canada, which Peers is proud to be part of.)

Peers' commitment to four core values - the experiential voice, non-judgmental and client-centred services, harm reduction, and social justice – helped the organization keep its focus on activism and advocacy even during the years before it took a stand on decriminalization. Taking a position in 2013 aligned Peers much more tightly with activism going on around the world on behalf of people in the sex industry, but has also ended opportunities from foundations and other funders whose own beliefs around the sex industry run counter to the Peers position. As well, choosing sides brings the possibility of being excluded from government funding in times when the ruling political party takes the opposite view.

"We definitely make compromises for funding," says Rachel Phillips. "Right now it's not about our position on decriminalization, but about having to squeeze our work into boxes that we don't easily fit in."

People with backgrounds in sex work remain deeply divided themselves over how sex work should be legislated, notes Susan Strega. Comparable rights fights such as the one for LGBTQ rights have also struggled to adequately represent the individual experiences of everyone who fits under a very big umbrella, she says, but the diversity of experiences in sex work is even more complex on issues such as gender, race, working conditions, and life experiences.

"Sex work is really stratified," she says. "It needs a complex analysis, because a lot of people at the street level really aren't there by genuine choice. So yes, let's push 100 per cent for decriminalization, but there ***are*** people who are being exploited. There ***are*** a lot of race, class and gender issues going on. Indigenous people have a whole other take on this issue, and 40 per cent of the people who come to Peers identify as indigenous. If you look at the historic relationship between indigenous women and non-indigenous men, from that perspective it's an unbroken story of sexual exploitation. Somehow you have to get that nuance in there as well or you're going down the racism road."

That the majority of sex workers continue to be women also means the issue comes up against all the gendered thinking, inequalities and biases that beset women regardless of what line of work they're in, adds Susan: "Look at the ongoing disparity in earnings, sexual assault rates, harassment. Yes, there has been progress on many fronts, but I often wonder these days if feminism even happened. Most sex work is still done by women for men, and so little has changed for women."

The deep stigma around sex work continues to impede progress on sex workers' rights, says Rachel, a researcher whose own work established that stigma against sex work is so strong that even an organization that supports sex workers can suffer "courtesy stigma" significant enough to affect staff health. Speaking about higher income sex workers trying to locate housing in a tight rental markets such as Victoria, Rachel notes that, "you can have all the money in the world, but stigma still creates powerful barriers to something as simple as a rental application."

What does activism around stigma look like?

"People have to just keep coming out and talking about sex work, but it's really hard," she says. "And yes, patriarchy and class hierarchy have played a role in the problem of destigmatizing sex work, but a lot of opposition to decriminalization is from women. One of the things that I think is still going on is the view of sex work as a threat to monogamy. 'What does it mean to marriage if women will have sex for money?' That's a really old hetero-normative construct that is challenged by sex work."

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Peers will continue to work with allies across the country in the fight for decriminalization. The organization isn't funded for its advocacy work, but board members, staff and participants routinely volunteer their time to work on national efforts to change Canada's laws.

Back home in Greater Victoria, Peers carries on as a grassroots service agency and community hub led for and by people from the sex industry. The organization lives each fiscal year worrying about the next, but staff are skilled in proposal-writing and Peers is currently able to provides late-night outreach, health and housing supports, small business training, drop-in services and social activities to more than 300 current and former sex workers a year.

"When we got to a point in 2013 where it looked like Peers might have to close due to lack of funding, so many people came to us and said how important Peers had been to them in their lives," says executive director Rachel Phillips. "Peers matters to people. That's what keeps me going."

End