

Night moves

A top salon in a family shelter? Canadian charity Beauty Night makes it happen. TEXT: SUSAN MCCLELLAND PHOTOS: NORBERT MAYER

Children—some as young as three—peer out from the darkened bedrooms on the second floor of the Woodgreen Red Door Family Shelter in Toronto. Behind them are rows of unmade metal bunk beds. Well-used toys and dolls litter the floor. Most of the children are at the shelter with their single mothers, who are escaping abusive relationships or steps away from living on the street, unable to afford Toronto's high rents.

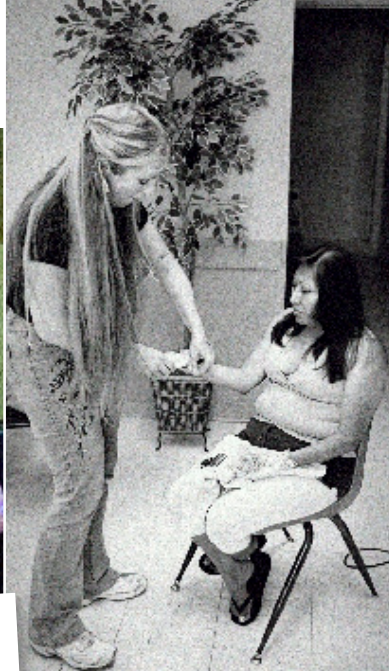
But the children's smiles belie the sombre background. They skip down the hallway to join their mothers, who are giggling and talking as they wait to be let into the shelter's recreation room. Red Door is hosting Beauty Night, an evening in which volunteers do the residents' makeup,

hair and nails, as well as give massages. "I want to be the first to have my makeup done," says a pretty woman who resembles Angelina Jolie, while a five-year-old girl with pigtails and pink shoes exclaims, "I want to look like a princess!"

Within seconds of the door opening, the small rec room is filled with about 20 women—half of them are from the shelter, while the other half are makeup technicians and hairstylists. Several little girls line up to have their nails painted in pastel colours. The other children quickly gobble up a tray of chocolate-dipped fruit. And as M.A.C foundation, Chanel lipstick and Estée Lauder eyeshadow are applied to the women's faces, the music of Anna Bee—one of the shelter's residents—fills the room. "I recorded

this last weekend," explains Bee, a 46-year-old redhead, as she slips onto the sofa at the back of the room.

Bee's song "My Picture" is about being humble, learning to be wise and knowing that no matter what a woman has been through, she can still love and be loved. It's the perfect background music for Beauty Night, which is the name of both the event and the charity that organizes it. "Many of the women who come to our evenings have been exposed to violence," says Beauty Night founder Caroline MacGillivray. "They feel isolated and blame themselves. They have shut down emotionally and feel like they can't relate to other people. Then we put them in this environment, where they feel a great connection with the stylists doing their hair



Clockwise, from top left: Residents of the Woodgreen Red Door Family Shelter in Toronto enjoy an evening of pampering; Yorkville hair stylist Ann Roche, who helped organize the event; the chocolate-dipped fruit, seconds before it was devoured; little princesses get their first manicures.



Musician Anna Bee, before and after the big reveal. Bee was inspired to join in after seeing her friends get stylish new looks; Beauty Night is a family affair, with treatments available for kids as well as their mums.



and makeup. By the end of the evening, it's not just the children who say 'I feel like a princess.'

MacGillivray started Beauty Night in 2000 after volunteering at the WISH Drop-In Centre Society, a Vancouver non-profit agency for sex-trade workers. "A woman came in one afternoon after having had a bad day," she says. "I sat her down, picked up a brush and started smoothing down her hair. Then I did her nails. We talked and bonded." Within a year, MacGillivray was hosting Beauty Nights across Vancouver, with her friends as stylists. Today, many of the volunteers are still her peers, as well as trained hairdressers, aestheticians, makeup artists and massage therapists, and donations come directly from cosmetics and hair-care companies. Beauty Night in Vancouver also gives out clothing at events and operates fitness, nutrition and literacy classes.

In 2002, when MacGillivray was looking to find someone to expand Beauty Night to Toronto, she contacted Ann Roche, a Yorkville hairstylist. Roche had already organized Look At Me Now!, a beauty and wellness pampering day, held at various Toronto hair salons, where women facing poverty, homelessness, abuse and mental health and addiction issues could get their hair cut and styled for free. "I wanted women who felt isolated from society to know that they were welcome in the salons," says Roche. "But, because of family or work commitments, many couldn't make it. Starting Beauty Night allowed me to bring the mainstream to them."

Ellie Munn, a social worker at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto—where Beauty Nights have also been held—says it's not just her clients that benefit from the event; volunteers also gain insight into the women's lives. "One of the biggest barriers that Beauty Night clients face is the stigma of being homeless or having addictions," says Munn. "Here, you have 10



Beauty Night volunteers include trained hairstylists, aestheticians, makeup artists and massage therapists. They use top quality products for the makeovers, all of which are donated by cosmetics and hair-care companies.



volunteers who are face to face with the stigma. The next time they meet a homeless person or prostitute, they will better understand their story. It's a great opportunity for the public to hear these women."

And what is Bee's story? The singer—whose full name is Anna Maria Toda—was once a popular Toronto reggae performer and still wears a big Bob Marley button on her paisley top. She took a hiatus from performing to care for her children as a single mom and is now getting back into music by writing her own songs and recording an album with a friend. She moved into the shelter about a month ago, after her sons' lives were threatened in the subsidized housing project where they lived. (A year ago, her 10-year-old son was set on fire by another youth. Then, a few weeks before she arrived at Red Door, a gang member beat up her 13-year-old son.) Bee has applied for a new subsidized apartment and is now waiting at the shelter until one becomes available. "My boys are safe," she says. "That's all that matters at the moment."

Bee was reluctant to have a makeover at first. "It is for the younger women," she says. But as she watches her friends' transformations, she reluctantly moves from the sofa into a stylist's chair. "The song 'My Picture' was inspired by one of the best photographs ever taken of me," she explains to the makeup artist. "I was in a white dress. Can you make me look like I did in that dress—beautiful like Bob Marley's bride?"

The volunteer laughs. "You already *are* that beautiful," she says to Bee. "You already are!" □

Beauty Night operates in Vancouver and Toronto and has given more than 8,000 makeovers to date. For information on volunteering and donations, visit www.beautynight.org.