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Mary McGuire was studying applied justice at Mount Royal University and needed an agency for practicum experience in 2001.

What she found at Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse was eye-opening. As she trained to respond to women in crisis and sexual violence, McGuire learned abuse victims are all around.

“It impacts so many people, even in your own city and your own circle and you just don’t realize until you start talking to people.”

CCASA is the primary sexual abuse and sexual assault crisis and education service agency in the Calgary area.

During its 18 years of service, CCASA offers crisis intervention and counselling, and programs in sexual abuse education, research and advocacy.

McGuire liked what she saw at the agency — a dedicated group devoted to helping vulnerable people in times of crisis.

Encouraged to keep helping others, McGuire pursued more training beyond her school practicum requirements. She spent five years on the support line for adult survivors of sexual abuse. She worked with police and accompanied people to court.

McGuire continued volunteering on the front lines despite moving on to a busy job as an executive assistant at an environmental consulting firm.

The supportive company not only allowed McGuire the flexibility to book days off to attend court as a support volunteer, but they even donated \$12,000 to the cause.

As McGuire’s career continued gaining momentum, her time volunteering at CCASA never slowed down.

After 12 years as a devoted volunteer, McGuire was approached by director Danielle Aubry who offered her a full time job.

“She said what’s holding you back from working here as a paid employee?”

Now, McGuire is the agency’s community engagement and volunteer program co-ordinator.

“I did some soul searching. It took me about a month to decide if I was going to make that transition.”

Going from a corporate office staffed with 700 people to a non-profit team of about 25 was a profound shift. The other change was walking away from a corporate paycheck and bonuses.

There’s no such thing as a secure financial future working at a non-profit agency.

“That money and the perks that go along with the corporate world — it almost became a no-brainer. It was worth the sacrifice,” said McGuire.

“It wasn’t as tragic as I thought it would be. There was a bit of lifestyle rejigging. You have to rework what is actual priority as far as your finances. You have to follow your heart and figure out what matters more.”

McGuire says she knows she made the right choice.

“Every time I speak about CCASA and what we do for clients and training for volunteers, people really listen. It’s easy to become passionate about it.”

Having her own private counselling service was once a dream, McGuire says. But now that’s she’s part of the fabric of CCASA, McGuire says her eye is on the future. “I see the potential for growth. Maybe I’ll go into fund development with CCASA, which is in its infancy,” she said.

“I feel like I’m going to be with CCASA for the rest of my career. It feels incredibly purposeful.”

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