

Harm reduction a natural progression for passionate RN

MARILOU GAGNON'S PRIMARY FOCUS IS ON HEALTH CARE THAT ADDRESSES STIGMA, DISCRIMINATION, SOCIAL JUSTICE.

RN MARILOU GAGNON KNOWS WHAT it's like to save a life. As co-organizer for an Ottawa supervised injection pop-up site in a downtown park, she walks around with her naloxone kit, ready to help anyone at risk of an overdose. Even though she's exhausted from the challenges of the site, she sees the impact the team is having. "I feel proud of the work we've done," she says.

For this 36-year-old nurse, the controversy around harm reduction, and the care she provides, may be intense these days, but the only thing she's concerned about is the patient.

Since entering the nursing program at Quebec's John Abbott College in 1999, Gagnon says she has not looked back. Two weeks into that program, she was placed in a local hospital to learn the basics of nursing. "I liked the fact that we were introduced very early on to patients, families and units," says Gagnon, who completed her diploma in 2002.

The day after finishing her classes, she began working in the emergency and trauma departments at Montreal General Hospital. She got a real taste of nursing as she was pushed to make quick decisions, and provide care in complex situations.

"It was a very stimulating environment," says Gagnon, who, while working, also finished her nursing degree at the University of Montreal (UdeM). For her clinical rotation in her final year, Gagnon had a

placement at the HIV clinic at Montreal Chest Institute.

"That was the moment everything came together for me," she says about falling in love with the field of HIV care, from the clinical to the social and political aspects, including stigma and discrimination.

Three things you didn't know about Marilou Gagnon:

1. She is a big fan of the Beatles.
2. She loves to dance and has taken classes all her life.
3. She has 27 tattoos.

At the clinic, she treated patients with HIV and did everything from education to testing. She developed close relationships with her clients, which reminded her of the relationship she had with her godfather, who passed away from AIDS in the early 90s. "We just loved him and accepted him," shares Gagnon, who, unlike others at the time, did not avoid touching HIV-positive patients for fear of catching the illness.

After completing her degree in 2005, Gagnon was hired as an RN at the HIV clinic. As she saw more and more patients with body shape changes caused by the treatment they were receiving (known as

lipodystrophy), she started to feel helpless and didn't know how to best care for them.

"They were very impacted... emotionally, psychologically and socially," she says. The experience pushed her to switch from doing her master's degree in nursing at UdeM to a



PhD at the University of Ottawa on lipodystrophy.

Gagnon also began volunteering for the Canadian Association of Nurses in HIV/AIDS Care (CANAC), where she became an expert advisor in 2013 and honed her advocacy skills to raise awareness for issues related to HIV/AIDS.

She completed her PhD in 2010 and became an assistant professor at the University of Ottawa that same year. She was promoted to associate professor in 2013. Until 2016, she worked as an expert advisor for CANAC and developed position statements, and even spoke in front of the senate about *Bill C-2, Respect for*

Communities Act. Gagnon saw the position as an opportunity to learn more about inspiring change for vulnerable/stigmatized populations.

Her advocacy work with CANAC exposed her to the world of harm reduction and supervised injection services (SIS). Seeing the increasing need for SIS, Gagnon took it upon herself to speak out. "If it's not for people pushing, nothing will happen," she says, adding that's what drove her to start the Coalition of Nurses for Supervised Injection Services in 2015.

Fast forward two years to the opening of the pop-up injection site in Ottawa, where she plays a direct role in helping to prevent overdoses and save lives. "We saw 1,524 people at our site in 43 days," Gagnon says of the opioid crisis that led to an average of four overdoses in emergency departments in Ottawa per day this summer.

Now, with the pop-up site running, Gagnon sees a clear path ahead. The coalition she started is now the Harm Reduction Nurses Association. And, as its first president, Gagnon says she will continue to mobilize support for harm reduction initiatives.

"Nurses have a huge role to play," she says, especially when it comes to making change happen. **RN**

VICTORIA ALARCON IS EDITORIAL ASSISTANT FOR RNAO.