

Harmony House gets helping hand

By Ruthanne Urquhart
Algonquin Times staff

Three months ago, Deborah MacDonald, a part-time public relations student at Algonquin's Woodroffe campus, planned a benefit, just among friends, to pay off her stack of parking tickets.

"It totally snowballed," she says. "I knew almost from the start, as much as I wanted those tickets paid off, they'd have to wait."

The benefit will be held Feb. 23 at Barrymore's Music Hall, 323 Bank St., but now it's in aid of Harmony House.

The house is a second-stage shelter for women and children, offering a safe home, and counselling and legal advice, for up to a year while restraining orders, separation and custody issues are settled.

Executive Director Leighann Burns-Campagna says the shelter lost all of its provincial government funding Jan. 1, 1997.

The cutbacks of programs and staff have been severe.

"We're in survival mode," she says. "The fact that there are so many members of the community who support us helps us to keep getting up in the morning and doing what we do."

Jim Watson, an Ottawa city councillor, says benefits are the way of the future.

"It's a reality of the times," he says, "that organizations like Harmony House have to look to the public for support where government support was in the past."

MacDonald, 28, says while politicians and the business community know about Harmony House, many people her age don't.

Open your eyes

The benefit may open some Gen-X eyes to the plight of such shelters.

"Most of us aren't married, don't have kids," she says. "These cuts come down

from the province and wind up on the doorsteps of places like Harmony House. It's not right."

MacDonald is a native Ottawan. She studied multimedia and graphics design at Algonquin, film and photography at Vancouver Film School and mass communication at University of Ottawa.

Now she's back at Algonquin, and she's enjoying it, but it's nice to be doing something tangible.

"This benefit is a chance to prove to myself that I'm good at something," she says, "that I can actually pull something like this together."

MacDonald is pulling the community together, and the Gong Show theme is the hook.

Thumbs up

The Gong Show was a popular American comedy/game show in the late 1970s. It featured celebrity judges awarding prizes to, or gonging (thumbs-downing), a wide range of acts.

MacDonald's Gong Show will offer the same format, with local performers and personalities as contestants and judges. She's surprised and overwhelmed by the response.

"Almost everyone likes publicity — we all know that," she says. "But these people don't need our little show for publicity. Harmony House needs them, though, and I guess they all know that."

MC Johnny Vegas (Bingo Jet International), Hinkley Jrs., Rainflower, Hangout, Boy Scouts, Remi Royale et les Tonnes de Fromage and other acts are on board.

They'll all be judged by Brian Gorman (*Ottawa Sun*), Derek Raymaker (*X Press*), Darren Stevens (106.9 The Bear), Tom Green (Tom Green Show) and councillors Jim Watson (Ottawa) and Linda Davis (Regional).

"I'm not exactly a publicity hound," admits Brian Gorman, "but this is worth it. The Gong Show was a guilty pleasure. I



Rob Learn photo

MC VEGAS: Local lounge singer Johnny Vegas will host the benefit for Harmony House at Barrymore's on Feb. 23.

stayed up late and watched it. I loved the two-headed blues singer."

Darren Stevens has been trying to track down Chuck Barris, the original host.

"I haven't found him yet," says Stevens, "but I'll keep trying. Harmony House is a good cause. Every day you grab the paper, and there's more need for it."

All in all, it promises to be successful. Has MacDonald found her niche?

"Yes," she says. "It's what I'm taking at Algonquin — how to organize and promote an event, and how to get people involved. I like doing it, and I'm good at it."

"Besides — I've been so busy I haven't had time to spend money — I may actually get those tickets paid off this century."