

NORTHWEST BRANCH

The Copper Shield

In historic times, high chiefs from the great Houses of the First Nations would hold feasts. The feasts marked special events in the life of the House and were solemnized by giving of gifts. The greatest gift that could be given was the copper shield. Such a gift was a mark of great respect and honour. These shields were so important that each had a name and a story of its own. The story went with the shield.

Gift giving is part of every culture and so are stories. Stories remind us of who we are and who we aspire to be. Social work has many stories.

Social work stories, like the shield stories, are all about power, in our case the power of human beings to care compassionately for one another and the power of people to overcome great obstacles to achieve well-being. As social workers, we advocate for a vision of social justice where everyone is respected and honoured for the special gift that they represent. When we operate out of our principles and best practices, we empower.

So the Northwest Branch of BCASW created a new tradition out of an old one, the giving of shields. There is a lot of symbolism in this. The shields honour the enrichment of the social work profession by social workers. They also signify one of the most basic roles of the profession, to protect.

The tradition we began here in the Northwest is that each year, during Social Work Week, each member of the Branch is able to recognize another practicing social worker for some particularly fine piece of social work. The pin can be awarded for a large piece of work, starting a new service or finishing a good research project. It can also be given for one seemingly small, everyday piece of social work: an effective advocacy, a child made safe, a woman protected, a family strengthened, for any practice done to a high standard in the spirit of our code of ethics.

It is a small pin but it is not easy to give. It requires that we be attentive to each other's work, that we recognize good work and support it.

Every member, as a right of membership, may award one pin a year to a colleague they wish to recognize. There are conditions:

- The award must be given at a meeting of social workers so that there is public recognition.
- The story must be written down so that we have a record and so the tradition can build and deepen each year. (Can you imagine, in the years to come, a book of such stories?) The story is written as part of the presentation certificate and is distributed to those present. Examples are available from the executive.
- The social worker who receives the shield is expected to wear it on public occasions and should be prepared to tell the story, (in a way that respects confidentiality). It is, after all, their story.
- The social worker who notices the shield on another lapel should ask about it and both should be mindful of how many other good stories there are.
- Recipients do not need to be members of BCASW. They do need to have professional social work credentials or the equivalent.
- Members of the Branch board are not eligible for the award while in office or for their work on the board.

Few of us are high chiefs. Most of us are ordinary people. Yet we are part of a very old tradition of human care and compassion, one that takes on new meaning with each generation. Working within that tradition, we enact the very best of the human story.

For further information, please contact your Northwest branch representative.