**In Memoriam Carmela Sebastiana Hutchison 1961-2019**

Carmela Hutchison was a leading feminist disability activist in Canada, perhaps best known for her role as the President of the DisAbled Women’s Network (DAWN) Canada, but also well recognized for her work as a mental health advocate.

Carmela graduated from the Mount Royal College Diploma Nursing Program in 1983 as a registered nurse and specialized in mental health. Her professional career encompassed long-term, acute, adolescent and community mental health and psychiatric clinical settings. She nursed in both Nova Scotia and Alberta. In 1990, Carmela sustained injuries in a rollover car accident. As a result, she was diagnosed with Multiple Personality (now called Dissociative Identity Disorder or DID), Depression, and Post-Concussion Syndrome.

She served as DAWN Canada’s Interim President in 2006, was elected in 2007, and held the position until she retired in January 2019. Under her leadership, DAWN Canada was able to significantly improve its governance and stability.

Beyond governance, Carmela led DAWN Canada’s board with a strong vision for the organization while maintaining a deep commitment to women with disabilities and Deaf women. She led initiatives for policy change and advocacy on some of the most critical issues for women with disabilities, including violence prevention, housing, employment, and Medical Assistance in Dying.

Carmela developed and presented parliamentary briefs, contributed to bodies of research and developed ground-breaking tools in the area of inclusive practice. One example is [the Diversity Through Inclusive Practice Toolkit](https://dawncanada.net/media/uploads/page_data/page-304/inclusive-practices-toolkit-1.0-accessible-digital.pdf) which Carmela developed while volunteering for DAWN Canada on a Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) in partnership with the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women ([CRIAW](https://www.criaw-icref.ca/en/)).

Carmela’s contributions to people with disabilities extended well beyond DAWN Canada. Her volunteerism spanned more than two decades and included a broad range of complex and compelling issues. She made further contributions through knowledge transfer and service in the areas of peer support and mental health, poverty, addictions, disaster planning and tourism.

Carmela served Canadians with disabilities, not only in her role as DAWN Canada’s president, but also as the president of the [Alberta Network for Mental Health](http://www.anmhf.ca/), and as an executive member of the [Council of Canadians with Disabilities](http://www.ccdonline.ca/en/) from 2005 to 2018. She was one of BC Mental Health Case Sub-committee's member and a member of the Ending of Life Ethics Committee as well.

Carmela has received the 2007 Council of Canadians with Disabilities Award Contribution to the Disability Rights Movement in Canada and the 2003 Nadine-Sterling Award for Self-Disclosure and Commitment to Consumer Based Initiatives.

Carmela’s work in mental health was perhaps the most measureable. She contributed many hours daily to the wellness and support of people who live with mental health and physical disabilities through connecting people to resources, helping them navigate the system, teaching self-care and self-confidence and through individual and systemic advocacy.

Carmela’s contribution to educating professionals and policy makers about how their interventions and actions affect those with a lived experience of mental health and/or disability issues, as well as gender issues was widely known. Her gentle, articulate openness had dispelled many of the myths about people with disabilities. Carmela’s ability to bridge peer and professional relationships led to a much deeper respect for the ‘consumer’ within the mental health sector.

She and her husband Bob had ‘extended’ their home and their family to include friends from the consumer movement – folks whose own families rejected them, abandoned them or harmed them. Carmela and her family were featured in a documentary called “Not a One Way Street” a film about people with disabilities as family members and caregivers of other people.

Carmela Hutchison’s mantra for dealing with challenging situations was: Fair, firm and friendly. These words represent the sage advice she gave to many as well as the words she lived by.

She said …” It comes down to being able to solve problems, being willing to help and willing to show a quality called “positive leadership” which basically means approaching situations with enthusiasm and excellence. Oh! And our best service is provided when we care for ourselves.”