



TALITHA KOUM SOCIETY

FROM THE HEART

“LOVING OUR CLIENTS BACK TO LIVING”

—VOLUNTEER COUPLE MENTOR T.K. CLIENTS—

Sewing the way forward



MONDAYS WITH THE MCKINNONS: TK clients learn to sew gratitude.

When Talitha Koum volunteers Chris and Val McKinnon sit at the dining room table of their Port Moody condominium, it's more often to share their faith-filled passion, for helping girls in developing areas of the world, than to share a meal.

That's because the table is home to two sewing machines that the couple employ to make reusable sanitary kits for underprivileged girls.

Chris, 72, and Val, 69, volunteer their time with TK and the broader community under the umbrella of the Days for Girls program, an international non-profit that provides reusable menstrual-health kits and education to help eliminate barriers associated with menstruation in many developing countries.

The retired teachers report that the Port Moody chapter they now lead produced 1,300 such kits in 2025 alone—exceeding the 1,000-kits-a-year target they set five years ago. And the total they've produced is now about 10,000 kits.

Both Val and Chris, who have been married for 51 years, smile with obvious satisfaction about that output, and enthusiastically thank not only the volunteers who are part of their chapter, but also a group of women they lead on Monday evenings at Talitha Koum's Starr House.

Their relationship with Talitha Koum began in 2017 when society president Mary O'Neill—Chris's sister—suggested they collaborate with TK's clients not only to teach them new skills but also to show them a way of giving back to society.

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Redemption House 'dream' lives on with new partner

Now in its third year, Talitha Koum's bridging-home program has proven to be all that the society hoped for by giving TK grads an affordable place to live while receiving support in securing permanent housing, work placement, and school enrolment.

“Our dream came true,” Odo Nkum, executive director, says of the bridging home TK has operated in partnership with Redemption Church since 2023.

As the association with Redemption Church concludes, TK is overjoyed to announce that it has entered into a new partnership with the **Bitelli Family Foundation** of Vancouver to ensure that Redemption House will live on!

“It's wonderful news, and will allow us to continue supporting our graduates,” Nkum says. “We are most thankful for the Foundation's commitment to our mission. And, of course, we will be forever grateful for the support we received from Redemption Church.”

The pastor of the church, Daniel Kang, says, “It was an honour to be part of this journey and to provide funds that helped fill a gap between women graduating the program and then being able to live independently.”

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Life lessons stitched with care

... The McKinnons arrive at Starr House with an hour's worth of sewing, ironing, or serging tasks. The evening starts with a prayer written by one of the women and then the instruction and sewing begin amidst a gentle of whirring sewing machines and friendly chatter.

Over time, the sewing circle has become a place not only of peace and purpose, but also of celebration.



For the past several Decembers, Val and Chris have led the women in a Christmas pageant that includes traditional carols and a narrative first written and staged by Chris' broader McKinnon family 40 years ago.

"Every Monday when we come home, we say, 'Wasn't that a great night,'" Chris says. "It's been really special.

"A lot of the women say the work

CHRISTMAS PAGEANT: A 'marriage' of charities.

makes them feel good, gives them a sense of peace."

Val is thankful that she had the opportunity to bring the project to the women. "Marrying the two charities has warmed my heart," Val says.

Their commitment to the project is laced into the fabric of their faith. "Our hope, as Catholics, is that the pillars of our faith are interwoven into our actions," the couple say. "The call to help one another has been our guiding light."

The McKinnons explain they try to honour Jesus's words, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

They are confident that putting those words into action through Days for Girls is having a positive impact. "Whenever women thrive, it has been found that the entire community is raised up," they say.

The McKinnons first learned of Days for Girls 10 years ago when they stumbled upon a group sewing the sanitary kits in the common room of their condominium building. Today, with Chris as the formal head, their chapter includes about two dozen local volunteers, plus a group on Mayne Island, where the McKinnons have a vacation cabin, and the TK women's group.

Val laughs when she describes the scale of their operation: "We pretty well do it every day of the week," she says.

She's not complaining, though. "As a retired teacher, I do like to keep busy," admits Val, who has enjoyed sewing since she was a child. "I wake up every morning, surrounded by piles of fabric, and it does put me in my happy place." Chris, on the other hand, faced a steep learning curve. His passion was sports, and he had never sewn until Val taught him when he was 63. Moreover, even though he grew up alongside four sisters and three brothers, he admits he had complete ignorance of women's menstrual issues.

All that changed after he viewed a Days for Girls' educational video that explained how, in poverty-stricken parts of the world, girls often have to miss a week's worth of schooling every month because of their periods.

"They suffer terrible abuse," Chris says. Their chapter receives strong support from the Catholic Women's League, All Saints, St. Nicholas, St. Anne and Joachim parishes, and the St. Vincent de Paul Society at All Saints. The chapter also received a grant from the R.R. Smith Memorial Fund Foundation last year.

It seems clear that in the quiet hum of their sewing machines, dignity is stitched, community is built, and hope travels farther than either of them ever imagined.

'Work grant' boosts grads

Talitha Koum greatly benefited from receiving \$25,000 through the United Way British Columbia Work Experience Opportunities Grant. This funding enabled TK to create meaningful work-experience opportunities for our graduates who face multiple barriers to employment.

Through this grant, five grads were enrolled in a structured work placement within the organization. Over the course of the 240-hour placement, each participant received a \$3,600 stipend, recognizing their time and commitment while helping reduce financial barriers that often prevent individuals from gaining work experience.

The grads worked closely with TK staff to learn how the social-services field operates, gaining practical exposure to program support, client engagement, and community-based care. A key element was the peer mentorship model, where the grads served as mentors to current clients. Their lived experiences allowed them to provide practical guidance to women currently navigating similar life challenges.

Through their participation, the grads were able to complete the BC Peer Mentorship Program, further strengthening their skills in peer support, leadership, and trauma-informed care.

The outcomes of the initiative have already been significant: Two of the five have been hired by TK! One grad shared that returning to the workforce used to feel impossible, but the gained experience, support, and encouragement helped rebuild her confidence. Today, she feels equipped to pursue a career in social services and is confident that she will excel in the field. Overall, the United Way Work Experience Opportunities Grant has allowed Talitha Koum Society to empower its graduates by transforming lived experience into leadership, mentorship, and employment opportunities, while strengthening the support available to women and families.



City of Coquitlam honours TK president O'Neill



MEMORABLE MOMENT: TK Society president Mary O'Neill at a ceremony honouring her and John Cashore with the Freedom of the City of Coquitlam. Past recipient Sandy Burpee is on her right.

The president of the Talitha Koum Society, Mary O'Neill, received the Freedom of the City in a ceremony at Coquitlam City Hall on March 9.

With Talitha Koum staff, current and former board members, friends, and family witnessing in attendance, O'Neill and John Cashore became only the 13th and 14th persons to receive the city's highest honour.

Mayor Richard Stewart cited O'Neill's contributions to education, student well-being, and community support. Over four decades in School District 43, O'Neill played a pivotal role not only as a teacher and administrator, but also in crisis-response programming, restorative-justice initiatives, and counselling supports for students and families.

Since retiring, O'Neill's multi-faceted leadership of Talitha Koum has enabled the society and its clients to thrive, Mayor Stewart said.

O'Neill responded with a speech in which she said her approach to work and service "has always been quite simple: love and trust God, be kind, and never be indifferent to the needs and pain of others."

HEALING WITH HORSES



EQUINE EQUILIBRIUM: Thanks to a grant from the Women's Interchurch Council of Canada, some of our clients and their children have been benefitting from visits to the Horse Guided Healing Sanctuary in Langley. Equine therapy supports women recovering from addiction by strengthening emotional regulation, rebuilding trust, and restoring a sense of agency. That white horse in most of the photos is named Spirit. Even though he has lost his vision, he has the gift of bringing people into balance. How lovely!

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Grads cite benefits of bridging home

Pastor Kang says the church is "encouraged by the good work of Talitha Koum and the amazing difference it makes in the community ... We are so thankful to have been part of your journey over the last few years."

TK grad Serena, who was among the first group of women to live in Redemption House, says the experience was key to her long-term recovery because "it gave me a safe, protected environment that allowed me the time and space to put my tools into practice while ... becoming a productive member of society."

Serena adds that being able to live with other grads, "working towards like-minded goals and supporting each other through the ups and downs of independent living, was a blessing."

Another grad, Melissa, says that, from her first day at Redemption, she was "met with kindness, patience, and understanding." She says the sense of community within the residence created a safe and welcoming environment where she could begin to rebuild and rediscover herself.

Melissa says that every conversation, every moment of encouragement, and every act of compassion made a lasting impact on her journey. "This experience has given me more than just a place to stay," she says. "It has given me hope, strength, and the tools to move forward with confidence."



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Our Mission and Vision

We are a non-profit charity whose **Mission** is to nurture women with addictions to lead healthy & fulfilling lives. Our **Vision** is to create a healthier world by empowering women to thrive in recovery. The society operates three homes in partnership with **B.C. Housing**, the **City of Coquitlam**, and generous donors.



BONNIE'S BLISS: It was a picture-perfect moment on a late-January Friday afternoon at Starr House as new graduate **Bonnie** embraced Talitha Koum executive director **Odo Nkum**, while society president **Mary O'Neill** (standing) and Starr House coordinator **Terri Carter** (kneeling) recorded the moment at the climax of Bonnie's graduation celebration.



TALKING UP TALITHA KOUM: Staff members **Terri Carter** (centre) and **Kimmie Jensen** shared their knowledge of TK with videographer **Chris Chong**, who is producing a video to be shown at the Tri-Cities Chamber of Commerce's **Business Excellence Awards Gala** on April 25. T.K. is one of three finalists in the **Not-for-Profit of the Year** category!

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