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NEWS THAT HITS HOME

■ **Tomorrow's Swim of Hope looks to raise \$100,000 for child abuse survivors**

# Swimmer is a beacon of hope for abused kids

By **TAMARA SHEPHARD**  
*Guardian Staff*

When Anita Morrow begins her Swim of Hope tomorrow, she'll be a beacon for thousands of child abuse survivors, helping guide them to the healing shores of recovery.

The Oakville athlete aims to raise \$100,000 in her weekend Lake Ontario crossing for The Gatehouse, an Etobicoke-based advocacy and support centre for child abuse survivors.

All Swim of Hope donations will help fund the development of a network of additional Gatehouse sites, the first of which is planned to open in Scarborough.

"I'm coming now from a place of peace and forgiveness," said Morrow, 40, reflecting on her recent, arduous two-year road to recovery from the scars of psychological and physical abuse she suffered during her childhood and youth in Romania.

"I thought, 'how many more people out there were abused as a child or in their adolescence and it still impacts on their lives, in depression and all sorts of destructive behaviours.'"

The swim begins Saturday at 6 p.m. when Morrow enters the water at Nelles Beach Park in Grimsby and ends Sunday around 2 p.m. when she comes ashore at Coronation Park in her hometown of Oakville.

Morrow is still looking for corporate and individual donors. (Visit [www.swimofhope.ca](http://www.swimofhope.ca) or call 1-877-959-9909 or donate at any Royal Bank branch, transit No. 6302, account No. 103-9130).

A reflective walk along the lake on a March day in 2004 with her husband, Scott, and their dog, Matisse, inspired Morrow's Swim of Hope. She swam competitively during her youth in Romania, a respite from the abuse.

"I'd experienced recovery and was feeling alive for the first time in my life," she recalls. "I thought, 'what's next? What am I supposed to do with my life?' Until I figure that out, why don't I swim across the lake?"

A friend connected the IT specialist with The Gatehouse in Etobicoke. The Swim of Hope was born.

Since The Gatehouse opened in 1988 it has served 4,500 people, including children, youth and adults, accompanying family members, as well as police investigators and social workers.

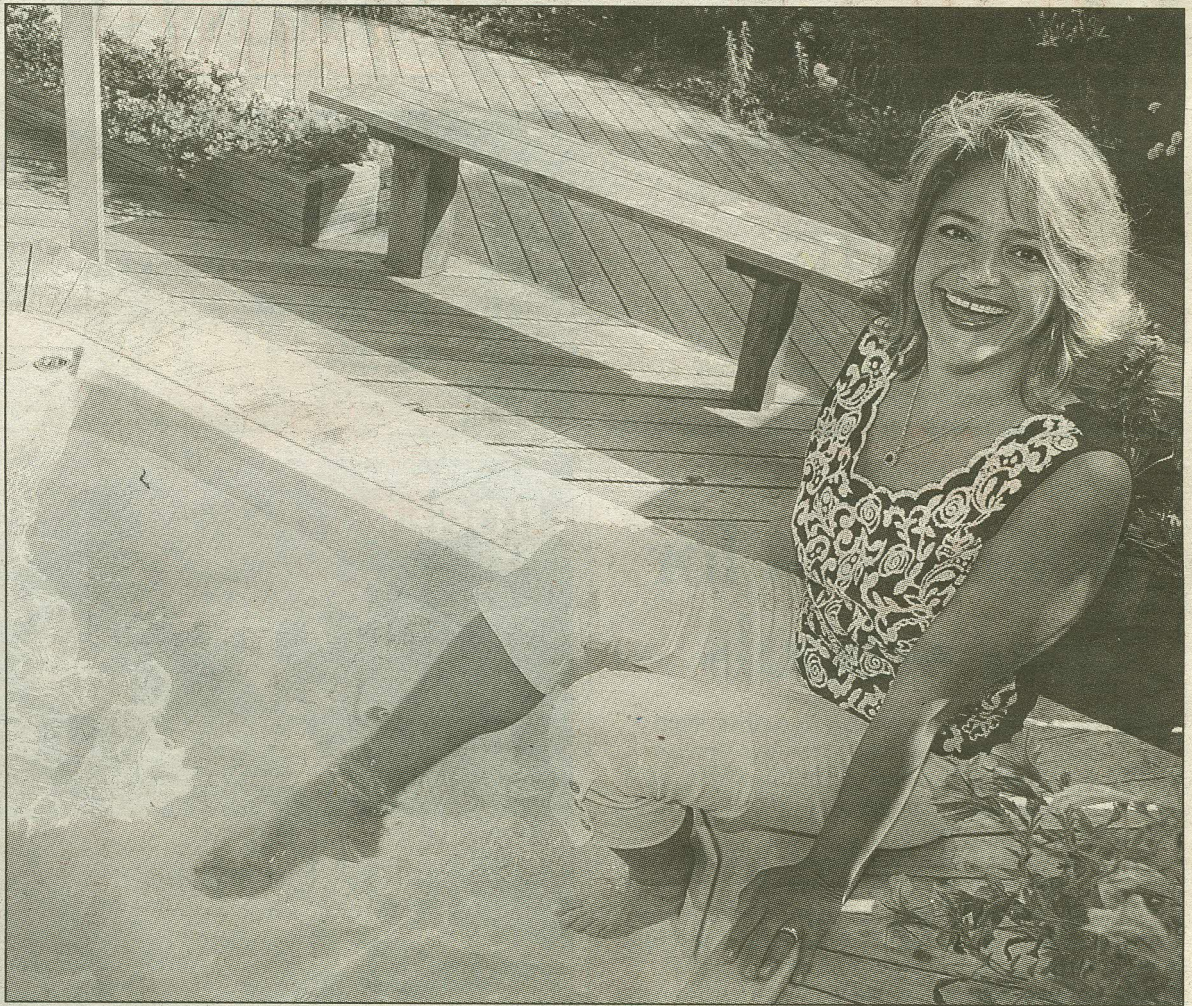
The agency offers crisis support through short-term counselling, referrals to appropriate community services, innovative programs and ongoing support through

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Guardian photo/GRAHAM PAINE

Tomorrow, Anita Morrow will attempt to cross Lake Ontario to raise funds for The Gatehouse, a local charity that helps victims of child abuse.

# Victim of child abuse wants to help others tell their story



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the process of healing and recovery.

Resiliency – as Morrow has shown – is critical to move through healing from abuse and move on to a life of health and happiness, Janet Handy, executive director of The Gatehouse said.

“Part of what The Gatehouse tries to do with adult survivors is encourage them to draw upon their resiliency, to make it through the experience and to move on in their life despite the experience,” she said. “Part of resiliency is healing in a proactive way.

“It’s important for people to know that out of the (recovery) experience – which isn’t an easy journey – they can come through the other side to live healthy, productive lives.”

Statistics indicate one in four adults suffered some form of abuse as a child.

Breaking the silence heals and, as Morrow’s swim demonstrates, allows survivors the opportunity to share how they’ve achieved resiliency, Handy said.

Resiliency, borne in crisis, forced Morrow to confront her past and her pain.

Two years ago, haunted by her past abuse, she desperately sought escape.

She’d experienced cycles of depression for years, but always salvaged them by setting and achieving goals, such as earning a Master’s degree. Goals, once achieved, she would belittle.

Eventually, achieving goals no longer numbed her pain. Morrow’s psychological and emotional pain became physical: she experienced chest pains and a “void” in the pit of her stomach.

Again, she sought escape.

She secured a job contract in Europe, and planned to leave behind her husband, family and friends for a new life.

Instead, she stayed – to fight.

“I just wanted to run away from the pain,” she recalls. “I was crying a lot, wishing someone could reach into my heart and tear away that pain. Then I remembered reading that ‘courage is not the absence of fear, but acting in spite of fear.’ I knew I’d never get rid of that pain if I never confronted my past. So I decided to stay, and reach out for help.”

She tried everything: Individual therapy, group therapy, reading everything about abuse and recovery she could find.

Nothing seemed to work. The pain lingered, and grew. She calls that period in her life, “the dark night of my soul.”

“It was hard to challenge my belief system, to let in new ideas” she recalls.

“As a survivor, you experience constant guilt, believing whatever you’ve achieved in life you don’t deserve. I had to learn how to let it (the pain) go, to learn how to forgive and to learn that I am worthy of love.”

Recovery came after Morrow heard and identified with other survivors’ stories.

“It helped me heal. I accepted that the abuse wasn’t my fault. I thought, ‘I’ve got to tell my story, help people tell their stories, reach out.’”

And so she does, at speaking engagements and this weekend, through her Swim of Hope.

Letting go of the pain and learning to forgive was the biggest hurdle in her recovery, Morrow

said.

“As long as we hold on to the resentment, we are giving the person who hurt us power over us. It’s in the past; you can’t change it. Then, I realized, it’s your responsibility to shape your future. It’s your responsibility to work on your own happiness. You’re in charge. You’re in control. It was like a lightbulb went on. I can let go of my resentment and take responsibility for my own happiness.”

Well along her road to recovery, Morrow returned to the water that had comforted her as a child and began training for her Swim of Hope.

Training involves jumping in the lake every morning at 5:30 for a two- or three-kilometre swim. Swim master Bryan Findlay assisted her with a scientific diet to maximize her energy.

She will swim the entire 33 kilometres from Grimsby to Oakville using the breaststroke.

At her side will be a crew of 20, including a sailboat with a GPS, a pair of Zodiacs and a powerboat. The water is a warm 21C versus a “breathtakingly freezing” 11C a week ago.

Just as miracles happened during her recovery – “the right person, hearing the right story when I wanted to quit” – Morrow believes forces destined a successful swim this weekend.

Morrow spent two years “swimming across my own lake” in recovery.

She said she hopes her Swim of Hope helps other survivors swim theirs.

“If out of the swim, only one person reaches and out and changes their life and finds happiness again, it’s worth it.”