

A NEW LIFE

Running away to join the world

Hutterite woman leaves the colony's 'small box' behind

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Even as a little girl, Sandra Waldner knew she wouldn't spend her life in the Hutterite colony.

She saw her future reflected in the shiny pages of the Sears catalogue, before her mother threw the wicked thing out.

At 17 years of age, she climbed into an outcast's car and became an outcast herself. On a perfect June evening she rode out of the colony bound for Winnipeg and a life outside "the small box," as she calls her former life. She couldn't speak English and couldn't count money. But she was free, and life was big.

Today, Waldner is a poised woman of 33. This winter she will finish her Grade 12. After that, who knows? The business world beckons, she says.

The student at Edmonton's NorQuest College is still touched by her upbringing—she reddens at the idea of being photographed, which was considered a sin in her childhood—but

"In the colony, I had no power. Now I want to become something, to show women that you can do it."

Sandra Waldner

is not a victim of it.

"In the last three years, I've finally become the person I want to be," she says. "In the colony, I had no power. Now I want to become something, to show women that you can do it."

It was a gorgeous warm night in June 1986 when she left the colony, just before dark. She had arranged a secret meeting with a young woman who had fled the Hutterite life earlier. Signals got crossed, though, and the getaway car drove right into the colony.

"You can't just leave. You have to run away," she says. "They will try to pull you back. To talk you out of it."

So Sandra jumped in the car. But because she had visualized the moment so many times in her mind, she was calm.

"It wasn't tough at all," she says. "It was freedom. From when I was a little girl—for as long as I can remember—I wanted to leave that place."

Hutterites follow early Christ-

ian teachings and believe rigorously in communal living and pacifism. Persecution against such beliefs drove them from eastern Europe into the United States, then into Canada in 1918.

Colonies dot the Prairie provinces and their fundamentalist beliefs and old-world dress continue to set Hutterites apart. While they have faced some harassment in Canada, they have also earned a reputation for being good and helpful neighbours.

Hutterites accept new technologies onto their communal farms, but the fundamentalist social structure remains largely unchanged. Women on the colony carry out an established subordinate role to men.

Waldner smiles at the memory of being a little girl and coming across the Sears catalogue and its pictures of women in business attire.

It was a revelation.

Sandra liked the people of her community. She just couldn't reconcile the kindness with the inequity.

She didn't like having to ask the colony boss for permission to make an appointment to have her eyes checked.

She didn't like the way women were treated as second-class citizens. She didn't like the spanking she got at age 14 from the teacher.

Her crime? Cutting her hair.

She also didn't like the quality of the education. She wanted to learn English, but almost all the studies were in German. So much emphasis was placed on Hutterite history, she says.

"My English used to be very poor," she says. "Now, I don't even think in German. It's totally gone from my mind. I like that."

The morning after her escape, still dressed in colony garb, she found a job in the classified ads for a live-in nanny to a Mennonite family. The woman of the house was kind and helped Sandra acclimatize.

Still, for at least six months, she wore only long, loose-fitting



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Sandra Waldner fled a Hutterite colony at age 17 and now is a NorQuest College student, finishing Grade 12.

Woman who left restrictive colony sees new opportunities

skirts. In the Hutterite colony, pants had been prohibited.

"I was shy and embarrassed," she says of her first time in pants.

Then she tried a bathing suit. "It felt like everyone was looking at me."

For the first three years, she had no contact with her family. She would call. They would hang up. But the hospitalization of one brother allowed some contact, and some softening of the hard line against her.

"I like my family, they are good people. They are all good people," she says of the Hutterites. "It's just that it's not for me."

Eventually, she moved to Edmonton with a boyfriend and began a career working in fast food.

At first, she was too shy to face the public and wanted to work only in back.

But her confidence grew and she was hired away by another chain. For a long time, she worked two jobs, from morning to late night.

Then fate changed her life.

She was struck by a car in 1994 and suffered a minor brain injury. A cascade of circumstances—inspirational books, psychological therapy, the kindness of strangers—led her to a provincial career development centre. She was encouraged to go back to school.

At NorQuest College her educational level was assessed.

For whatever reason—her Hutterite schooling, the intervening years, the car accident—Waldner was given standing at a Grade 4.5 level.

She says the people at NorQuest didn't give up on her. But she re-



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NorQuest College student, Waldner, 33, who fled the Hutterite colony she was raised on at 17 for a life in the big world. She is now upgrading to Grade 12 with plans to further her education.

members one of her first courses, where everyone was asked to write one paragraph about themselves.

"I didn't know what a paragraph was," she says. "The shame hit me."

She credits NorQuest tutoring services, as well as its life-skills courses, for rounding her out as a student and a person.

She's been named a student ambassador for NorQuest College, as well as sitting on the student advisory committee.

David Beharry, spokesman for NorQuest College, says Waldner, in some ways, typifies the kind of students at the institution.

But she was recently named a student of the month at the college because she stands out, said

Beharry.

"Her work ethic is just incredible, her marks are fantastic and teachers comment on how she lights up a classroom and inspires the other students," he said.

Waldner remains bitter about the lack of education she received as a Hutterite child.

Is her story typical?

Sam Hofer, a Saskatchewan author who left the Hutterite lifestyle as a young man, said some colonies in Western Canada now keep their children in school until they complete Grade 12.

A few children, he says, will even go on to get education degrees at university and return as colony teachers.

But that is not the case at all

colonies.

Howard Rasmusson, principal of Two Hills High School, has two colony schools under his jurisdiction, at nearby Plain Lake and Hairy Hill.

At both of those colonies, the students leave school as soon as they turn 15, he said, even though the strict legal requirement for dropping out is age 16. Some Hutterite children attain Grade 10, but not many, he said.

For Waldner, the scribbled-up pages of an old diary are a reminder of how far she's come.

"I used to see the world as this little box. Now, with school, there's opportunity. The world is so big. It's huge."

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