

## ***'Speak Truthiness to Power'***

***Presentation to Association of Community Legal Clinics of Ontario  
May 7, 2010***

A friend told me I should have a theme for my talk with you today and I thought, well I'm just going to speak the truth and then this word popped into my head: Truthiness.

Truthiness, was of course, popularized by comedian Stephen Colbert. In satire, **truthiness** is a "truth" that a person claims to know intuitively "from the gut" without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts.

Sounds a little bit like the Ontario government's use of the word 'poverty reduction'. Anyone here should know that after the last spring budget there is no government intent to reduce poverty, not when they cancelled the Special Diet Allowance and only gave a 1% increase to people on social assistance.

So many of our struggles are about fighting for what is true and right, whether it is in the courts, in the media or with our neighbours.

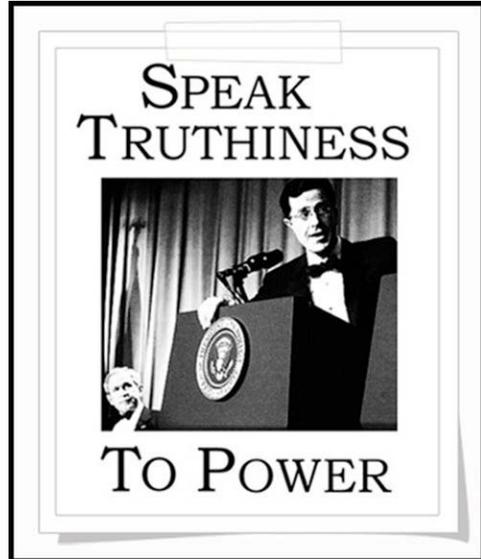
GOOD versus BAD.

This past weekend, all across the City of Toronto, people took part in Jane's walks – community based walking tours inspired by the legendary Jane Jacobs.

The weekend walks reminded me of a walk I took in early December. A reporter who was doing a profile on Sherbourne Street as a microcosm of the city (Rosedale to St. Jamestown to St. Lawrence) wanted to speak to me on the phone. Since most of my career has been based on or nearby Sherbourne – literally, I suggested to her that we walk and talk – on Sherbourne itself.

What I saw and spoke about reflected on the impact of the recession and the last 15 years of provincial politics.

I could have been walking up Parliament Street, or Church, or Jarvis or Yonge Street, or a main street in your community because on every block I could see the tell-tale reminders of how destructive the Conservative Mike Harris years were, but more importantly that this current Liberal government had done little, if any reconstruction or repair.



I saw affordable housing units in disrepair, empty lots that could be housing; churches and community centres that today scramble for donations to meet people's needs, line-ups for food, hospital closures. I could go on and on.

Then there were the faces I saw on the walk. The people – folks that sometimes have to beg the Sherbourne bus driver to let them on for free, or the women with children in tow and pushing strollers (and not the fancy, expensive kind) to get to the No Frills because it's the only place they can afford to shop, or the seniors slowly making their way to medical appointments because there are no services coming to them.

Massive loss of services in the midst of a recession and no provincial aid. This is a hard one to protest against because of the aspect of coercion. How do you fight back against the people that write the cheque for your organization or program?

Even at Street Health, one of the most historically beloved programs for homeless people in Canada we have concerns around accountability to the community and loss of services. This is where I first became a Street Nurse, yet here we have poor people, homeless people protesting outside because of the manner in which this agency is cutting its programs.

The walk inspired me to run in the Toronto Centre by-election this past January. And I had some pretty interesting experiences.

Over the 24 days of my campaign, some challenging experiences!

I had to learn to become a morning person, to be managed with handlers and communications people, be taken shopping for 'the look', i.e. a suit (which I never wore).

I had to be able to talk about HST, green jobs, coal plants, the arts, LGBTTQ issues, education, child care **and housing**.

I had to handle all candidates meetings and you'll find it interesting that one of the hardest questions I had was 'What is your opinion on 'prosecutorial guidelines' for HIV transmission?'

The best thing about the campaign was that I got a crash refresher course on almost every street and doorstep in the riding and it was a wake up call on a number of issues.

I thought I would highlight a few here.

**Hospital and health care.** The GRACE hospital. I received a 7 am call one morning from my campaign manager telling me to look at the front page story on

the STAR. “Toronto Grace on Life Support”. It was about the threatened closure of the GRACE. I was shocked (this riding had already lost two hospitals) but had no idea of the significance at the time. So, this is where being a movie buff is very helpful. I had seen ‘**Dying at Grace**’ by Alan King. I knew from that movie how great ‘The Grace’ was. Things happened fast. Within days I was invited in by the hospital Board for a tour with provincial NDP leader Andrea Horwath and the media. Within days the Ministry of Health met with the Board. There were media scrums and a rally with the workers. Then the day before the election a \$15 million cheque written to the GRACE. It survived!

Ironically a few days later when I was driving by the hospital it was sporting a banner, an advertisement for the TV show ‘Survivor’.

### **Then there was St. Jamestown.**

We held a press conference in St. Jamestown one morning to point to all the high rise buildings surrounding us – close to 9,000 voters that would only have access to three polling stations. In contrast three condominiums on Bay Street with a total of less than 1,000 voters in total each had their own polling station in their building.

Then on Election Day what I saw shocked me and I began to document it with my camera. At one polling station someone had to be carried up the stairs in their wheelchair. I visited fifteen polling stations that day and one-third was inaccessible. I later worked with David Lepofsky of the ACCESSIBILITY FOR ONTARIANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT ALLIANCE to ensure these were presented to the committee reviewing election access in Ontario.

Please go to the AODA website and sign up for their news updates and support their work.

[www.aodaalliance.org](http://www.aodaalliance.org)

There were a number of other very visible (or noticeable by other senses) serious issues that I witnessed.

First of all, the state of the building infrastructure, as you know, especially in the high-rises in our communities is absolutely appalling.

Second and most noticeable is the bedbug issue. I remember the time when I would speak to a provincial group like yours and you would not be able to tell me bedbugs were in your community. How about today? They are everywhere. I saw bedbug bites before we knew what they were and I have watched as they have literally crept and bitten their way across the country. During the election my team and I could smell as soon as we walked in a building if they had sprayed, and then there were the tell tale signs like garlic on the doorsteps and

white powder. People held hostage by the bedbugs and inadequate public health and landlord responses.

Finally, the poor health of so many people living in poverty is today visible like the Depression era images - thin, emaciated, pale, tired faces. People facing so many health challenges, worsened by hunger.

At the same time at our municipal level policies are carried on under the mantra of Housing First. We have the Streets to Homes program and I have already shown you images of how some people in that program are housed. There are targeting policies and new by-laws and street counts that are meaningless and never lead to new funding. Beware of this style of program initiatives in your community that have their roots in American policies.

In closing let me share with you some hope I have regarding OPPORTUNITIES for significant wins.

First, we must not let the LeSage Inquiry into Al Gosling's death be in vain. We must mobilize all across the province on the findings.

Please join us as we use the concept of public inquiry into the issue of hunger, raising the rates and saving the Special Diet. There is huge public sympathy and outrage on this issue.

We must continue to support and monitor MPP Libby Davies' Bill C-304.

In May a Charter Challenge on the right to housing will be filed in the courts. Many, many people from the legal field working on this with great amount of inclusion 'including' the Dream Team members who are here today and Dri from Tent City.

And lastly, consider ordering and using Home Safe Calgary or Home Safe Toronto and use them as an educational and organizing tool on family homelessness, the impact on children, on the issues of hunger, inadequate family shelter, and the right to housing.

[www.skyworksfoundation.org](http://www.skyworksfoundation.org)

Thanks again for inviting me here today!