

Presentation to Kingston Mayor's Task Force on Poverty

The Kingston I Knew

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The Kingston I knew

I moved to Kingston in the 1960's with my family from a small town (Cobourg). I entered Grade 10 and was met at Loyalist Collegiate by a guidance counselor who was determined to stream me into what was then considered the second-tier, four year program, despite my clearly stated career plan to go into nursing which would require the five year program with sciences. Despite my mother's protest that a nursing school would not accept me, the counselor would not budge. It was thanks to our next-door neighbours, Loyalist's phys-ed teacher John Ruskay and his wife Eileen, whose outrage motivated my mother to continue to fight for me. I did end up in the 5-year arts and science program and as you now know I did become a nurse! It turns out this was a common way for the high schools to fill up their technical program. Once in high school, the Kingston I came to know had several tiers of students: the 'regulars' in the 5 year program, those deemed to be the lesser in the 4 year program, and the much shorter 2-year occupational program. Imagine, that we called students in that 2-year program the 'ox-squad'. The Kingston I knew then, tended to judge people

based on their class or geographic home. In fact, Kingston was literally divided by class and geography. Real estate agents at the time described Kingston as divided into 4 distinct zones. There was the University, the Army, south of Princess and the North – the infamous ‘north end’. Real estate agents often told newcomers to Kingston not to even look at a house north of Princess, since the schooling was supposedly very poor. I was always reminded of the difference between the north end and the rest of Kingston. But after living here a few years, it became apparent to me that hard-working good people also lived in the City’s north end. More poor people lived there at that time, because housing was less expensive. Today, there are clearly influences that are working to reduce these disparities – the influx of seniors and people from other cultures, the growth of an active and vibrant social justice community, and services and organizations like the Kingston Community Health Centre. In the Kingston I grew up in I could never have imagined there would be weekly vigils to commemorate the impact of poverty on some of its citizens, or delegations of people attending poverty forums at Queen’s Park, or a Street Health program for people homeless or underhoused. When I lived here I didn’t know what supportive housing was and I certainly never imagined that Kingston would need a homeless shelter. I never would have imagined that so many individuals and organizations would have to volunteer and raise funds to support programs like the Kingston Food Bank and the Elizabeth Fry. And who would ever have thought that I would be invited to Kingston by something called the Mayor’s Task Force on Poverty? So to the Mayor, and the task force, thank you for inviting me and thank you for bringing together people who care about the issues of poverty, hunger, homelessness and social isolation! Now back to my nursing..... Since leaving Kingston to become a nurse, I took a path that I never would have imagined. After about 15 years nursing in downtown Toronto – in cardiology, community health and public health - the eruption of, and the expansion of homelessness in downtown Toronto introduced me to a role that became known as ‘Street Nursing’ and the rest is our country’s sad history. Over the course of the next 15 years I was shocked and disturbed, and I remain disturbed by what I

saw. The elderly man in my clinic for whom I could not find a shelter bed. The number of people showing me their tuberculosis medication. The woman discharged from hospital 'to the street'. I began to spend a lot of my time responding to what I saw on the frontlines, and that necessitated forming partnerships and coalitions, calling for inquests, making deputations at City Hall and speaking to the media. Perhaps not the typical work of a nurse. The action I am most proud of is my role in the formation of the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee which declared homelessness a national disaster. This declaration was immediately supported by Toronto City Council, Ottawa-Carleton City Council and 400 other national/provincial/local organizations including the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. The 'Disaster Declaration' called for two things: 1) emergency disaster relief funds to flow from the federal government to municipalities to help them deal with homelessness; 2) the 1% solution – a return to the amount of spending federal and provincial governments used to allocate to affordable housing when we had a national program. 1% of the federal budget = \$2 billion dollars. The nation was galvanized by this process. Media was stirred to respond. For example, the Toronto Star designated for the first time in its history a reporter to cover the homeless issue full-time. Homelessness was featured on their front page for 11 days straight.

The federal government also responded. Prime Minister Chrétien appointed Minister of Labour Claudette Bradshaw as the first ever, perhaps in the history of the world!, a 'Minister Responsible for Homelessness'. Minister Bradshaw toured the country looking at homelessness, and shortly after announced an emergency homelessness relief program known as the Supporting Communities Partnerships Initiatives, aka 'skippy'. This led to hundreds of millions of dollars that would bolster homelessness relief efforts. It just didn't lead to a housing solution. The 'skippy' program was due to sunset this past March, but was saved by quite sophisticated and boisterous lobbying efforts by groups and municipal governments across the country. The program, now renamed 'hippy', the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, although not without its problems, has been one of the only programs that was given a death sentence by this federal

government only to be resuscitated – but just for 2 more years. We also saw the historic federal-provincial signing in Quebec City, of the Affordable Housing Agreement, which although still not a truly national program like Medicare, has meant that some provinces such as Quebec, that were serious about building housing, could create a provincial-federal agreement on the money and start building. Ontario, and that has a direct impact on your Kingston, has done a shameful job making commitments, matching money or creating accessible and manageable mechanisms to flow those monies. It's obvious - The longer homelessness exists the worse it gets. Homelessness leads to the obvious disease outbreaks – diarrhea, colds and flues. We see worsening mental health, including depression. We see the infestations, the most recent being bedbugs. We see the return of the white plague tuberculosis, and the deaths due to tuberculosis. We are now seeing new and emerging threats of viruses such as Norwalk, SARS, and the emerging 'bugs' like MRSA. Then there are the conditions that are less obvious, quiet and gnawing - like malnutrition, hunger, the insult to pride and integrity that occurs when you can't care for your partner while homeless. In my book, Kerre Briggs recounts having to leave his wife Bonnie in a women's shelter for her own health, while he lived in a car and went to work every day at Leon's furniture store. We see the people who, due to poverty, are under constant stress and uncertainty with diminished access to health care and people living with multiple and chronic health conditions such as hepatitis, diabetes, heart disease, asthma and cancer. There is a well documented rising death rate amongst our homeless and poor populations.

'Dying for a Home' Tour As you may know - I have written a book and I'm now touring the book across the country. So as it is fresh in my mind, I thought I would share with you a few stories from the first half of my book tour. First stop Regina: I was speaking at the SOS Medicare Conference where over 600 people from across the country came together to determine how to keep Tommy Douglas's dream alive and how to move to the next natural stage of Medicare. A Toronto newspaper called me in my hotel room to ask me what I thought of a new mobile outreach team that would include a doctor. At the end of our

conversation I said, “well thanks, I’m at the SOS Medicare conference and you’ve just made me realize that we do have a two-tiered health care system here in Canada.” By that, I meant that as long as we have the need for mobile outreach programs, and nurses with knapsacks filled with duct tape, socks, underwear and other health supplies, visiting people in ravines, store doorways, parks and in shelters, we already have a two-tier health care system and we really should be doing something about it. Second stop

Vancouver: Vancouver is undergoing a major transition. The Olympics are coming, there is a massive construction boom, housing and rental costs are exploding, and the early signs of condos in the downtown eastside suggest the gentrification to come. On Hastings Street, and in the nearby agencies, the poverty, and the fatigue, hunger and despair of the poverty is self-evident. Third stop Calgary: I covered a lot of ground in Calgary – literally. I toured the Calgary Drop-In Centre, which provides emergency shelter for over 1100 men and women each night. I was provided with graphic reminders of what the scene looked like when shelter users and staff were sick and quarantined on site during a Norwalk virus several years ago. Calgary too is booming and I mean booming. There is a shortage of workers and a shortage of housing. 100 people move to Calgary for work and settle each day. Tim Horton’s pays its workers over \$15/hour. A 1-bedroom apartment rents for \$1550 to 2500 a month. It takes 2 people earning \$15 an hour to be able to afford a 1 bedroom. Calgary desperately needs 15,000 new affordable units now. An estimated 170 families with children are forced to move nightly from church basement to church basement in the faith based and volunteer driven Inn from the Cold program. It is the only place I know of in Canada where families and children must endure such conditions. Let me describe to you what this means. Every day, in the late afternoon, families enter the reception/greeting area at the Inn from the Cold office. Once registered they wait. They wait to see if there will be space for them in one of the churches that will open its basement for that night. Over 70 churches take part in this expansive program and they have been in existence for many years. Buses then transport the families to the

church site. They are provided with dinner and cots. Bedtime is fairly early because morning comes very early. Waking time is often 5:30 or 6:00. In many cases, one parent goes to work and children of school age are bused to school. The entire process repeats itself the next day and the next and the next. Each night to a new church. Fourth stop Ottawa: I saw a sophisticated network of people and organizations that make up the Alliance to End Homelessness. Some of the most innovative and necessary programs for people who are homeless have been nurtured in this community – a managed alcohol program, a hospice in a shelter, partnerships between the university and community. When their local politicians decided to try to use the recent federal housing monies to bolster the general revenue this group fought back – successfully! Emerging Hotspots If I may, I would like to describe to you six emerging dilemmas or what I call hotspots that I think you should pay attention to, because they are occurring all across this country.

1. Shelters versus Housing. All across the country homelessness is growing, yet all across the country communities are debating whether they should open shelters. Diminished resources from the provincial and federal governments and the pressures of NIMBYism are actually forcing municipalities into debates of shelter versus housing. Many Canadian cities are inviting experts like Philip Mangano, from the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, to advise us on how to create a business plan to end homelessness. His prescription, and it's very questionable as to whether it has worked in the United States, diverts our energies away from advocating for more senior level government responsibility for housing to an almost 'tough love' municipal approach to homelessness – most visible by the targeting of what he calls the chronically homeless. This usually results in programs such as 'Streets into Homes' in Toronto or ideology such as Malcolm Gladwell's 'Million Dollar Murray' story in the New York Times, which results in resources targeting the more obvious 'street homeless', as a target for a business plan that determines who is deserving and not deserving of city funding.

2. Charity instead of publicly funded programs. Canada has witnessed the most unprecedented outpouring of caring by the faith and volunteer sector since I don't know when. Sister Susan who started the Out of the Cold program 20 years ago never imagined that it would grow into a network of 2 dozen faith based programs with thousands of volunteers. John Andras, one of the founders of Toronto's Project Warmth, never realized he would have to be responsible for collecting 30,000 sleeping bags for distribution during a Toronto winter. Dermot Baldwin who has operated the Calgary Drop-In Centre since the 1960s, I'm sure never imagined he would now be forced to shelter 1100 people each and every night.

3. Growing intolerance, discrimination and hate in Canada towards the homeless. I did not expect to see this. I remember vividly the year we saw our first homeless murder in Toronto. It was the first in a succession of murders and it occurred during a period of time when our police chief, our mayor and certain right wing media were really going after squeegee youth and homeless people sleeping outside. I did not expect to see brutal attacks on homeless people in our Canadian cities. I assumed that was an American phenomenon. But it's happened in all of our cities. Paul Crutch, an elderly man sleeping outside in Toronto was beaten while in his sleeping bag in a Toronto park. The trial of the three army reservists charged with his murder is currently underway. It still surprises me to this day that homelessness can be described in mainstream media, given the education of our journalists, as vagrants, bums, drifters, gangrene, hard core, and street person.

4. Not In My Back Yard! – I want to speak separately about NIMBY because although I consider it just another flavour of intolerance, discrimination and hate, we still allow NIMBY type groups and policies to dictate who can receive services, where they can receive services, and even where people are allowed to live or sleep. I can't help but wonder if NIMBY is why your very own Street Health cannot find a temporary home as they are forced to relocate from their location in the next few months.

5. Advocacy – it's become a dirty word. The years of the Ralph Klein government in Alberta and the Mike Harris government in Ontario left a legacy of complacency and defeat in social movements. This has been exacerbated by a number of factors including labour instability, centralization of the media, and a growing need for poor people and social agencies to focus on basic survival. However, let us never forget that it was advocacy, the dramatic voices and the actions of church groups, women's groups, farmers and our World War II vets, that we the people, won everything from Medicare to a national housing program in this country. As I noted earlier, a recent 'protest' ensured that the federal homeless program, due to 'sunset' only 2 months ago would continue for another two years. I encourage you, not to be afraid of petitions, pickets, marches, rallies or demonstrations. There have been moments in time when cities and even mayors join and lead these types of actions. If we can walk and organize for breast cancer or Parkinson's, surely we can do the same for homelessness.

6. Housing money, where is the money? We won the Affordable Housing Agreement in 2001. I was there in Quebec City in a snowstorm, actually demonstrating outside the Chateau Frontenac where the federal/provincial/territorial housing ministers were meeting. I believe our national demonstration, and especially the lead up to it, is in part why that agreement was signed. I also believe that more recently, because we did not make a real fuss, that the Province of Ontario held on to \$392 million in federal housing dollars for over a year. That money, designated for housing, did not require matching dollars from the province, but it just sat there while the province and federal government fought over other fiscal issues. The last time I saw Minister Gerretsen, we were on a panel together at the City Toronto Summit and I remarked on this situation. The money has since been released, but will it be enough? No. Have you, the City of Kingston, received your \$6.5 million allocation yet? The City of Ottawa proposed that they use their money to offset the need for general property tax increases, by using the money as general revenue rather than dedicated to housing. As I mentioned that was fought and

won by local advocates. Make sure you get your money and it is used for housing. When asked what the real solution to this crisis is, I really must say it will involve money. Remember that good work on these issues is already happening in this community by terrific organizations and people. Imagine what you can do together! I wish you all the best in your efforts to diminish poverty and homelessness and in particular to build some social housing in Kingston!

Thank you.

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