

***Guest speak at Toronto Salvation Army Staff Appreciation Day
November 15, 2019***

Thank you to Brenda Wooten and Bradley Harris for this invitation today.

I only recently learned that my grandfather played in a Salvation Army band in Stratford, Ontario.

My early work as a street nurse, before the term was coined, was at Regent Park CHC where another nurse and I ran a nursing clinic at the Christian Resource Centre. Shortly after that I moved to Street Health – this is all about 30 years ago. It was a homeless man who called out to us one day ‘ hey street nurse’ and that’s how the term was coined. It was as you can imagine seen as a compliment.

Over the years myself and others have done outreach clinics in shelters and drop-ins and responded to the changing nature of homelessness through various means including:

- forming coalitions such as the Health Card Advocacy group that helped bring to light challenges people had obtaining a health card;
- the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee that declared homelessness to be a national disaster in 1998 – leading to the first ever federal homelessness funding program SCPI then HPI;
- starting the monthly Homeless Memorial in 2000;
- supporting Tent City bringing in infrastructure ranging from woodstoves to generators to work parties to insulate shacks, to bringing in pre-fab houses;
- many inquests into freezing deaths, death by fire, tuberculosis and police shootings;
- growing family homelessness I partnered with Laura Sky to make a series of films on homelessness;
- and sometimes some covert operations such as filming conditions.

I recount most of these in my book. An unusual feature of my book is that each chapter is introduced by a movie that has influenced me. They range from *MASH* to *Dead Man Walking* to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*!!

As a nurse I've always valued Medicare but as well housing. I was working at the corner of Sherbourne and Dundas in 1993 when two federal governments cancelled our national housing program and I didn't even notice. So now I value the fight to get that program back, fully funded, very much.

The title of my book comes from a saying about Tommy Douglas, the founder of Medicare. They said he had a 'suitcase full of dreams', I gather he carried his suitcase as he travelled the province. He valued socialized medicine, but schools, good roads, jobs and housing. In fact he once called for one million homes.

My outreach knapsack was huge and weighed about 30 lbs. So the title is a nod to that plus the first half of the book is about the value of Medicare, fighting apartheid, fighting the return of the death penalty and growing military expenditures.

Then I get to homelessness.

Historical work connection

Some of you who are old enough or have studied homelessness in Toronto or Canada will know that the face of homelessness has changed dramatically and so too has the Salvation Army.

In the late 1980s the Director of Salvation Army Toronto, Major Lawrence Wilson, pointed out that the "*stereotype of the old derelict clutching a bottle no longer applies.*"

Journalists began making efforts to point out that homeless people were more than "winos", relying on jails or shelters in cold weather and that being homeless was not their 'choice'.

They also began to make efforts to show that homelessness included single parents with children, teens fleeing abuse and working people who fell through the cracks.

But the stereotypes persist, don't they?

I was quite frankly surprised to learn that in 2010 the Salvation Army did its own poll to see what Canadians considered to be the cause of homelessness. Unfortunately the old stereotypes carried on, with homelessness blamed on alcohol and drug addiction and mental illness.

Your very own 2011 poll showed that 40% of Canadians believed that homeless people want to be on the street. This despite the fact that one in nine had either experienced homelessness or been on the edge of it.

Over the years

My work has intersected with your work. Often it was at conferences – I think that's where I first met, or at least got to know Bradley better and also John Rook who managed the Calgary Salvation Army shelter. We also ran into each other at city hall meetings, especially in the days of the raucous Homeless Advisory Committee when it was chaired by Jack Layton.

I say raucous because it was anyone's meeting and that was perhaps the success of it. Myself and colleagues very often met just the night before to brainstorm on current emergencies planning to talk Jack into putting them on the agenda the next day. It was a period of real crisis and the meetings were often standing room only, there was sometimes yelling or tears or walkouts. Having said that it was a time when City Hall was more open, more accessible and a huge amount of action happened.

Dion Oxford, Brad and various majors were were often there.

But it was mostly through my patients and people I knew on the street that I knew of your work.

The couple that got married at the Friendship Room, the many whom I write about in my book who were your regulars. I particularly remember the role you played after the murder of Paul Croutch in Moss Park. Dion Oxford of course was instrumental in supporting the grieving community and family. The Lieutenant Governor of Ontario attended that funeral.

Let me read a short excerpt from my book:

Sonya (not her real name, I know was a regular at Florence Booth)

Sonya is an elderly woman who was born in Eastern Europe and then lived in a small town in Ontario before she came to Toronto. Sonya frequents various drop-ins, sometimes the ones with men, sometimes one of the two women-only drop-ins. She immigrated to Canada decades ago, was married, and had children. She is now alone. Her husband was brutal to her. Her kids have no contact with her. She wears layers and layers of clothing, always a kerchief, and uses a bundle buggy to carry her belongings. She's shy, reluctant to sign up in the nursing outreach clinics to see the nurse (me), or ever to ask for anything, but she loves to show me her knitting, sewing, and her prose writing. Over the course of many years, she eventually tells me about her health, sees a doctor I recommend, then a heart specialist... and so on. She even reconnects with a housing worker and finally moves into a place of her own where she is so very lonely that she sometimes goes back to sleeping in the Out of the Cold program.

Sonya has died.

So, in my book ***A Knapsack Full of Dreams*** I write about the huge gap between your reality, my reality and Sonya's reality.

"I'm not really sureif the Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation has learned much about homelessness and affordable housing or what its role in the issue should be. I'm reminded of ... a time when I spoke to CMHC at a meeting in the trendy Distillery District in Toronto. It was a focus group, and I was sandwiched between two developers over a pretty fancy lunch. After our discussion, our CMHC host presented us with a gift bag. Each contained a "Made in

*Canada” birdhouse kit and an enormous hardcover coffee table book titled **Old Toronto Houses**. Well, even birds have homes. So do rich people. Neither gift was exactly helpful to me, or my patients.*

In 2000 I co-wrote a report called ‘Dismantling Toronto’ and we noted the loss of about 400 shelter spaces. We now know this was closely connected to gentrification.

I remember when we lost the Friendship Room drop-in on Victoria Street in 2000 – it provided space for 80 men and women.

Also the reduction from 60-45 beds of the Salvation Army Broadview site.

Also, the loss of 124 beds at Salvation Army Hope Shelter, although I know some of them have been replaced at New Hope.

Over the years I have often included you in my talks:

In 2004 I wrote:

“What would have happened if the first case of SARS had walked into a downtown hospital like St. Michael’s Hospital? What if homeless people were exposed or contracted SARS, what if they slept one night in a Salvation Army shelter, the next day used a soup kitchen, in the afternoon went to a drop-in centre, in the evening had dinner and slept at an Out of the Cold – which the next day is closed necessitating them to go to the next Out of the Cold!”

Of course your staff had already been affected by the tuberculosis outbreak in the early 2000s.

Going back to 1996 – there was what was known as the ‘Freezing Deaths Inquest’ into the deaths of Eugene Upper, Irwin Anderson and Mirsalah Aldin-Kompani.

Every day at the end of that 5-week inquest we produced a newsletter called Inquest Update. I drafted it, sent it to Michael Shapcott for editing and then he faxed it out to about 1000 places including the United Nations. In one addition this was the headline:

Sally Ann captain silenced at homeless inquest - and the story read:

“Meanwhile, another crown witness was silenced by the presiding coroner on Friday at the homeless inquest. Salvation Army Captain Ian McAlister was on the witness stand. Toronto Coalition Against Homelessness lawyer Peter Rosenthal started to ask: "It would seem that Eugene Upper had a difficult life. His father left after he was born. His stepfather was an alcoholic and committed suicide ... ", but the coroner cut him off, saying: "I do not find his life history helpful to the jury." To date, Dr. Naiberg has said that he also doesn't find evidence about affordable housing, supportive housing, welfare and a long list of other items helpful.

In our ***Inquest Update*** we included this as the quote of the day:

"Every night I go there - every night I walk through the halls - every night I ask - it's full. Maybe there were a couple of nights (with empty beds), but only a few." Salvation Army Captain Ian McAlister (asked about empty beds at the men's hostel).

Brad, among others have continued to point out these truths.

In 2017 Jake Aikenhead from Gateway joined a hand-picked group that began to meet with Councillor Josh Matlow, seemingly the only councillor at that time that was ready to hear about the shelter crisis. Over the next two years other councillors stepped in and of course there was the infamous 2018 winter opening of the Armoury that I know you provided food for.

It's been terrific to see that level of truth-telling around the shelter crisis, even better to see the opportunities, few as they are, for you to expand.

With John Rook I visited your new Etobicoke 'castle'. Really an extraordinary building that I know will undergo many changes and renovations in the future.

One story not related to your shelter services but to the Grace Hospital I have to share.

During a period of unemployment I got convinced to run for the NDP provincially.

One morning my campaign manager phoned me around 7 am to say look at the Toronto Star headline. It was about the threatened closing of the Grace Palliative beds. Being a bit slow I said, “what’s that got to do with me?” Well I soon learned. The Grace’s Board of Directors wanting to fight their funding crisis with the then Liberal gov’t actually invited myself, NDP leader Andrea Horwath and TV cameras into the hospital for a tour. I naturally knew of the care provided there thanks to Allan King’s famous movie ‘Dying at the Grace’. Within days a very big cheque was written by the Liberal gov’t and the beds stayed open.

Oh, but I lost the election.

This is the main message I want to leave with you today:

Once you lose something, it’s very hard to get it back – whether that is a shelter that is closed, hospital beds or a national housing program.

You all do really important, really valuable work under increasingly challenging circumstances.

Each chapter in my book ends with an endnote, usually a quote. I’ll read one to you here by American historian Howard Zinn:

“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness...

I think these are values that describe you all very well.

Thank you for having me here today.

Check with delivery