

Grassroots: Community Writing 2001: Literacy and the Homeless



LITERACY AND THE HOMELESS

**Thomas Wolfe said figuratively, “You can’t go home again.”
If you literally have no home, you certainly cannot.**

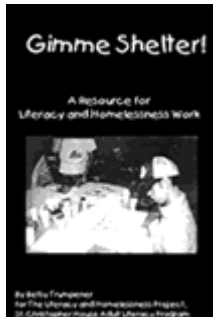
Since the 1960s, the thin line between financial security and insolvency has been crossed by many Canadians who find themselves living precarious lives without permanent shelter. They may be drug addicts, alcoholics, gamblers, or mental patients pushed out of dwindling numbers of institutions; they may be victims of family abuse or family disintegration; or they may be sensitive people who have lost their way in a culture too fast to take notice. Homelessness has become so familiar that many of us no longer notice or we avert our eyes.

Many of the homeless have not had access to school, and lack basic literacy skills; others are accomplished writers who can give voice and shape to the communities that flourish on the street—the nurturing and the predatory. Worldwide today, there are newspapers and poetry anthologies written and sold by the homeless and former homeless to generate income. The writers reveal themselves and question the social conditions that produce their lives. Who writes on the street? What do they write about? Who trains new writers? Who publishes them? Who benefits from their work? Does the writing change their collective reality? Does it change individual lives?

These were some of the questions that we posed at this year’s Grassroots: Community Writing Workshop organized on April 12 by The Centre for Literacy in collaboration with the Blue Metropolis Literary Festival. Writers from communities across Canada also gave a session at Blue Metropolis where they challenged stereotypes and defied the nameless labeling of “the homeless.”

We heard about street people who could not read or write well, but we also heard about talented writers and artists who find themselves on the street at some point in their lives.

Several times during the Community Writing session, someone commented on the John Stackhouses of the media world. No need, they suggested, to send in undercover reporters to reveal the truth about homelessness. There is plenty of talent on the street ready to tell it the way it is. There is no single model of a street paper, however. Despite the principles and goals of the North American Street Newspaper Association (NASNA), there are differences in means of production, in marketing, in distribution. Some papers are not even members of the five-year-old organization.



As for literacy, the connection is not simple. The stresses and immediate needs for food, shelter, and safety put literacy training far down the list of priorities for the homeless. It seems most possible to reach people at the meeting places and drop-in centres where a sense of community has been established. Yet only a few weeks before the Montréal festival when I visited the Meeting Place in Toronto, Pedro Cabeza, one of the coordinators, explained why, despite the computer room, the darkroom, a long history of literacy and homelessness work at the centre, they no longer have a firm connection with local literacy providers. Pedro finds that literacy workers tend to have a limited understanding of homelessness and an exaggerated sense of what form literacy training can do for people on the street. Nevertheless, without naming it, they are doing what some have called “transformative” literacy.

Before I left, Pedro showed me their storage room. In a space no larger than a small bedroom, on wooden shelves neatly stacked from floor to ceiling were rows of plastic bins (of Zeller’s or Canadian variety), each with a name taped on the outside. Each held the entire belongings of a regular at the Meeting Place. It spares the owner the indignity of carrying tattered bags or pushing battered food wagons. Pedro’s photo of the storage room recurs through the next 16 pages.

In these pages, we introduce the participants at the Blue Metropolis Festival and Community Writing Workshop by name, give them faces, and reprint selections from the writings that they read or shared at the Festival. One participant, Michael Paul-Martin, from The Meeting Place, offers his impressions of the day; Michael’s comments are in boxes as “Michael says.”

[LS]

Michael says:

We went in cold. The presenters were introduced to each other at the event “panel” in front of the audience on April 12, so to speak; there was really no prior opportunity for them to get to know one another. The only thing we had were the bios contained in the hand-out telling us briefly about each delegate and the work we each did. In that light the presentations were informative; they provided a clearer idea and understanding about where each person or group was in terms of approach, progress and priorities.

Gimme Shelter

A Resource for Literacy and Homelessness Work by Betsy Trumpener
for The Literacy and Homelessness Project St. Christopher House Adult Literacy Program
Toronto 1997. 114pp.
All excerpts reprinted with permission.

Renaming Literacy

In Canada, adults who admit that they have literacy problems still risk being labelled “slow” or “stupid.” This may be especially true on the street. Staff at many Toronto emergency shelters

rooming houses agreed that even hearing the word “literacy” can turn away potential learners. A worker at Seaton House, Metro Toronto’s largest men’s hostel, explained that “for men who have a long history of institutionalization or incarceration, image is extremely important, and illiteracy is still highly stigmatized.” Research on literacy and homelessness in the United States confirms this, noting that potential learners feared ridicule and embarrassment, and stressed the need for privacy, especially in residential institutions, like hostels. Indeed, many drop-ins and shelters have abandoned the literacy label and renamed learning opportunities as adult education courses, computer classes, writing groups, and learning circles. There are, however, examples of successful groups in drop-ins that bluntly state their literacy orientation.

The realities of life on the street and the challenge of working on a stigmatized issue can encourage us to think about learning and literacy work in new ways. In challenging more traditional ways of teaching literacy, our work can become an “incubator for fresh ideas about literacy education.” One “fresh idea” is to integrate reading and writing into activities, programs and projects that are already established in a drop-in or shelter.

Literacy and Homelessness: What’s the connection?

What does it mean to do literacy work with homeless adults? What does it say about the nature and causes of homelessness? Does our work imply that literacy will empower the people to transcend homelessness? “Two critical assumptions (of this work) were that homeless adults needed such training and that adult educators would know how to provide it...” An American Government report about Adult Education for the Homeless programs was entitled “Learning to Hope.” Are literacy facilitators in drop-ins and shelters expected to be magicians of hope?

Illiteracy and Poverty

There are documented links between poverty and illiteracy, with research indicating both that “circumstances that created people’s poverty were much the same as those preventing them from acquiring an education” and that “enrolling in literacy programs did not mean an end to poverty.” While acknowledging that literacy cannot create jobs, research has shown that “literacy is a cause and consequence of employment success, and can make an individual more employable when there are jobs.”

Homelessness and Poverty

Understanding the primacy of poverty in the lives of the people who are homeless is key to offering literacy opportunities that are relevant. One American study indicated that “when given a chance to describe their own needs, people are more likely to stress first their economic problems” rather than education. A needs assessment of one group of homeless women indicated that finding a home was their first priority, and that gaining literacy skills was not even mentioned.

Our own experience also suggests the inadequacy of an approach that focuses on

education as the single solution to economic problems. Most literacy programs are well aware of their learners' struggles to find and keep housing and jobs. Many learners are hungry when they come to literacy programs, affecting their ability to learn. Still, as literacy programs struggle to survive in an atmosphere of cutbacks, they often have to justify their existence by stressing outcomes and speaking in the language of the marketplace. One of the few analytical Canadian articles about literacy and homelessness notes the irony of the coexistence of literacy for empowerment and literacy for global competitiveness within the same literacy program. The article lauds Frontier College, which works to provide accessible learning opportunities "whenever and wherever people congregate." Yet it points out that Beat the Street, - a pioneering literacy program for marginalized street youth and The Workplace Literacy program, which promotes itself on the grounds of maintaining economic competitiveness, coexist with Frontier College. The article identifies this dichotomy as a "clear pointer to current trends in literacy work in industrialized countries."¹

Some theorists go so far as to argue that "rather than enfranchising people...(literacy) is ulterior and uniquely devoted to Western economic ends...(it) uses literacy and literacy standards to maintain privilege and parcel disadvantage."

Whether we believe these findings or take them with a grain of salt, they do challenge us to consider why and how we want to do literacy work with people who are homeless. What are their needs and desires? How does improving their literacy skills relate to their needs and desires?

Literacy skills in themselves will not necessarily end poverty or ensure that people are housed. Literacy is, however, a tool that people can choose to use for personal and social empowerment.

¹ "From the Campsite to the Street" by Jean-Pierre Velis in Alpha 90. Current Research in Literacy. Jean-Paul Hauteceur, ed. Quebec: Ministère de l'éducation du Québec, and UNESCO Institute for Education, 1990. pp. 15 – 29.



Betsy Trumpener, Prince George, BC, is a journalist and fiction writer who worked for more than a decade in Toronto's adult literacy movement. From 1995 to 1997, Betsy led the Literacy and Homelessness Project at St. Christopher House, where she facilitated a writing group and production of a participatory newsletter with members of a homeless drop-in program. She also did research and training and helped develop a network of Toronto street educators. Betsy is the author of "Gimme Shelter!" The report offered models for creating meaningful learning opportunities in hostels and drop-ins. Her fiction and non-fiction publication credits include The Globe and Mail, Canadian Press, THIS Magazine, NOW Magazine, and the Journal of Addiction and Mental Health. Betsy currently works for CBC Radio in northern BC.

The North American Street Newspaper Association (NASNA)

The North American Street Newspaper Association (NASNA) was formed in 1996 to link street newspapers in North America, to support each other, to improve the quality of the papers and to increase the voice of impoverished and marginalized people for social justice.

NASNA defines a street paper as a publication that informs the public regarding poverty issues and/or creates employment for low-income and homeless people through the sales.

NASNA's Mission is to support a street newspaper movement that creates and upholds journalistic and ethical standards while promoting self-help and empowerment among people living in poverty.

Source: www.speakeasy.org/nasna/

A directory with links to NASNA members can be found at <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/>

The Street Post, Toronto

The Street Post, The Meeting Place Drop-In Center, St. Christopher House, Toronto

The Meeting Place Adult Drop-In program was established by St. Christopher House in 1987 to respond to the growing number of homeless and socially isolated individuals in downtown Toronto. Since then, the Meeting Place has become a landmark centre in Toronto for services for the homeless. *The Street Post* newsletter has been a project of the Meeting Place since 1997. Its purpose is to provide a vehicle of expression for those who would otherwise remain silent.



**Michael
Paul-Martin**

Michael Paul-Martin is a Cree poet originally from James Bay in North Ontario. He speaks Cree; he reads/writes Cree syllabics. His first collection of poetry, *She Said Sometimes I Hear Things*, came out in 1996. For four years, Michael has been one of the writers/editors of *The Street Post* newsletter of Toronto West. He has also worked on scripts for theatre of the oppressed and for a movie. Since February 2000, Michael has been taking leadership training at St. Christopher House; he graduates in June 2001.

She Said Sometimes I Hear Things

by Michael Paul-Martin



Her upbeat walk-in,
seventy years frailty small
without Vancouver vanity,
sat modest at Kettle Drop-in.
Almost cheery to a nobody
listener in particular she told
how the murder of her man months ago
still stabbed her heartless.

She said I don't have my man, only this
bad heart. I did have a way to die once,
but I just had open heart surgery.

Beside her a wall masking
tape held the long wail of Killer Whale
loud on red, its massive green & black
drew back Bald Eagle as an open-beak
fin tail, headed yellow-white.

She said sometimes I hear things.

Flying whale on high absent blue sea,
signed Jimmy Hacket '91, wore piercing
happy harpoon. A most pointed laugh-in
entered downbeat heads-up and came out
below bared teeth, big on face-lift.

She said somebody dies a natural death
is different, but a murder...

She Said Sometimes I Hear Things. (1996). Toronto: 7th Generation Books, p. 11.

Michael says:

I read the title poem from my book, **She Said Sometimes I Hear Things**. It shows, partially, a sample of street life in Vancouver BC, as lived by an elderly



woman. I also presented "Sweet Melt," a kids' poem which won honourable mention at the recent street art awards ceremony in St. Lawrence Market, Toronto. This one shows other possibilities and variations from the typical topics covered in street papers i.e. issue-oriented, controversial and political. I believe that sometimes it's better to express issues, personal or otherwise, through art. Art leads one to safely explore profound ideas and feelings at a subconscious level. It's safe because it generally doesn't arouse feelings like anger and rage, to the point of hurting the artist or his/her audience and readership.

Michael writes social and political commentary focusing on Native realities, systemic oppression, and social hypocrisy; but he also turns an ironic eye on the lives of the homeless themselves.

His recent *Restaurant Reviews of Soup Kitchens* caught mainstream media attention in Toronto; a large daily later sent a food critic "undercover" to write soup kitchen reviews, without acknowledgment to Michael.

The Soup Kitchen Report

...These reviews are fun, and light-hearted in the main. Marginal life is serious enough as The articles are informative and practical. They are also part satire, perhaps to remind us ridiculousness, the absurdity of the new "millennium" times... ..

Our original intention was to review all the poor peoples' eating establishments located in Toronto first, with Yonge Street as the dividing line, then eventually move to Toronto East. this issue... we decided to do Good Shepherd of the east side, knowing that we're not done grazing and scavenging in the wild west just yet.

Excerpt from "The Soup Kitchen Report,"

The Street Post, Spring 2001, 18-19.

by Michael Paul-Martin

St. Felix Centre

(The Order of Felician Sisters)

St. Felix coffee is the best; it has super strength, amazing flavour, and fantastic aroma. It's a godsend when compared to the regular watered down caffeine versions you get at most other places like it. St. Felix coffee reminds one of Moonbeam Café, the independent coffee shop over at Kensington Market.

But today there is no coffee available. It's a rarity; no coffee I mean. Nicole, the good-natured Volunteer Co-ordinator, says to a patron upon the latter's inquiry, "We ran out of (coffee) donations." It's a good thing you can always run as an emergency over to either Evangel Hall or the Meeting Place Drop-in Centre; both have "regular" coffee, and they're only a short walking distance away.



St. Felix is fairly new, a max forty-seater cafeteria place, situated in a basement; but it's not dark and gloomy, there's plenty of light coming from spacious windows along the west wall. Also, various decorative plants sit on the window sills.

It's mainly a homemade soup and sandwich place, a convenience for those who prefer a light meal at that time of day. Both St. Stephen's and Scott Mission serve regular substantive meals at late morning (these places were reviewed last time). Dessert is usually pastry, muffins, or canned mix fruit.

To lend to an atmosphere of ease one can always find Brother John sitting at a table conversing with patrons. These are mainly one on one, and I suppose it's a comfort to those who might need additional privacy for their more personal concerns. There is also from a corner of the "cafeteria" a stereo. Sometimes it plays KISS FM's contemporary soft rock. But most often it sticks to classic music; it soothes stressed nerves, one of the main controlling factors affecting street and marginal life. Finally, Coors, Nicole's canine friend, comes in from time to time and says hi! to everyone. He's sort of like the house dog.

Behind me, towards closing time, a man asks Nicole about where and how to get a few clothing items. It is Friday. She says, "Come back on Monday, we should have some clothes... are you coming on Monday?"



Robert Thomas Payne



Robert Thomas Payne was a sailor in the Canadian Marine for 10 years. Then he was an actor. At one point found himself homeless and in need. He says that what he saw and heard in the drop-ins and soup kitchens of Toronto confirmed his belief that all human beings are subject to same frailties, aspirations and realities, though not the same opportunities. Since 1997, he has been volunteering with Christopher House/The Meeting Place Drop-In as editor

one of the writers of *The Street Post*. He offers words of encouragement to people he's befriended on the street. He thinks a solution to homelessness is opening the lines of communication. He can be found wandering the streets of Toronto, or sitting here and there listening more than talking. "This brings me the gift of many interesting moments. Like this one in Montreal."

Weathering Winter and Such

Editorial Note, *The Street Post*, Winter 2000
by Robert Payne

"Your slightest look easily will unclothe me though I have closed myself as fingers."
e.e. cummings

Winter has come and gone once again. Along with the bitter cold quickening people's steps were times when some paused to consider other people's lives. Especially at celebration of thanksgiving and for the birth of Christianity some paused at dinner to wonder what others were eating...some even wondered about those with no food. In the warmth of some beds some wondered about people they once knew and where they might be. The media, ever in touch with public tastes, were everywhere searching for a story to tell the cozy ones at home.

The "holidays" were also the days of cameras. A person could not attend a drop-in or soup kitchen without having to wade through reporters and more volunteers than usual all smiling and willing to talk. Between the "How are you"s and the "What's it like"s, it became difficult for some to speak to friends in peace. People sitting at the same table who've seen each other for a while don't have to ask each other what it's like. They already know. The people who were asking those questions, act friendly, then leave. Later, they may pause to consider what they've seen, what they've heard, but with so much else in their lives to consider, where would their consideration lead? Meanwhile, after they leave, people still sitting at those tables or gathered where they gather discuss things among themselves. Most people don't like strangers asking them questions. Most people are wary of smiling unfamiliar faces. As for the cameras, I've found that instead of getting turkey, having to duck sucks. If you're a stranger to life on the street should be aware that privacy is at a minimum. You are always surrounded by people. To get even five minutes alone is difficult. There is enough stress for everyone already; no more is needed. No more stupid questions are needed. Real human contact, that is what is needed right now! If you have the space, invite a face!

There is an attitude quite often that a story is a story. "The Problem" is more important than the individual. Yet it should be remembered that these individuals are scrambling for the tools

need to just survive. Those lucky enough to get into the one or two Out of the Cold churches that are open on a given day start their day at 6 a.m. and after a quick bite are tossed onto the streets for the day to go from place to place each of which is open for only a couple of hours. (And between May – Oct, even this is much less of an option.) Sleep-deprivation, killer winter cold, unsmiling faces from the majority of Toronto and the million little degradations meant to inform a person that they are not welcome, coupled with the memories and feelings of loss from all the shit that happened in their past to bring them to this point is part of the daily regimen. Sure, lack of funding is a big issue and is perhaps the crucible upon which your intentions are being tested. When can you say that you've done enough? If people sleep and die on the front steps of missions or behind churches or are being force-fed some fundamentalist views just to get a bite to eat, are Christians being listened to? If for the majority of the year most executive staff members of most places are never around to share a cup of coffee with the people they purport to be speaking for, should they be posing with them?

These are human beings who don't want to be featured on T.V. for being poor. Privacy is important. There are many people out and about who don't want the folks at home to see how they are doing. However, instead of being seen as individuals, they are treated as stories or sound-bytes.

Who are the homeless you ask? The short answer is that the homeless are human beings, often suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, dealing with the law of the jungle inherent in most of the “places of peace and respect and tolerance” because a whole lot of the staff are too busy doing nothing for their 15 dollars plus an hour...while client/volunteers are too busy. Anything that is a barrier to helping people re-gain their self-esteem has no place in the drop-in universe. Every day these people (alias “clients”) are faced with indignities to the spirit, and are aware of the hypocrisy in many of the “helpful” places. These are human beings who don't want to be featured on T.V. for being poor. Privacy is important. There are many people out and about who don't want the folks at home to see how they are doing. However, instead of being seen as individuals, they are treated as stories or sound-bytes.

Of course we must constantly repeat the news that not everyone is doing well, and we need as many volunteers as possible, and to acknowledge the good ones. These are noble quests. ...Remember though, that people on the street have already met a lot of insincere people; therefore it is better to quest with more sincerity. Saying you care is not the same as showing you care. Yes, there are people who have such a commitment to getting to know and help the disadvantaged that they are always getting home way too late and getting up way too early and doing a million things all day every day. They are so few and so necessary and they could really use a helping hand.

My bit is being places, talking to people. Sometimes it's late at night on a rainy street corner, or early in the morning in a park or a drop-in etc, when suddenly a scrap of paper is produced and the person asks if I can do something with it. People want to relate their



stories in their own way, themselves. That's the reason *The Street Post* exists. The person you ignore as you walk down the street could be the person who works hard and you are about to look at. To reach that art that is within everyone isn't always easy. Nor is it easy to build the trust. These things take time. The mainstream media, other people, life, have turned some people almost into mutes. It is becoming known on the streets though that *The Street Post* is here for those voices often ignored. Whenever a new issue of the "zine" comes and I am able to put a copy into the hands of each contributor and see that in their eyes as they realize that others will see their work, it feels good, and that's good enough for me. *The Street Post* is not about any one individual but rather about a whole lot of individuals who are willing to share with each other and others. To continue this journey we must continue to share with each other. Look around you; there are stories everywhere. Believe in yourself, don't let the bastards grind you down! For those of you asking questions: the best way to give the gift of an answer is to bring to the table the gift of time to spend with others. Every day should be one of Thanksgiving. As for me, I heard that for the millennium, I should consider the lilies in the field. I will, but I want to consider them one lily at a time.

Michael says:

Robert Payne read his "*Weathering Winter and Such*" which consists of his thoughts, opinions, and feelings about life on the street, homelessness, dealing with the media, volunteering, and the reason for *The Street Post's* existence, etc. In "*A Session With Zig-Zag*", his interview with a squeegee, we come face to face with what it's like to live out on the street as a young male in Toronto, with his experiences with the cops at the park, and with making a living out of squeegeeing. Perhaps more than any other presentation that day, Robert's two articles enabled us to actually hear street people and the near homeless talking to us.

Street Feat, Halifax

Street Feat is Atlantic Canada's only street newspaper, and covers diverse issues relating to poverty. *Street Feat*, in its fourth year of operation, also calls itself the voice of the poor. It gradually increased its readership to more than 5000 per issue. Apart from annual subscription street vendors sell the papers at various locations in downtown Halifax where there is a high concentration of passers-by. Revenues come from a combination of advertising and subscription sales and street vending as well as from donations.



Mansoor Wani

Mansoor Wani is an MBA in International Business and Information Systems and an independent business consultant. He volunteers his time for office management at *Street Feat* including subscription renewals and communication design. He is also involved with other non-profit organizations in Halifax.

Excerpts from

On a side note.

Perspectives change

by Mansoor Wani

Street Feat, Vol. 4 Issue 2, March-April 2001

Only a few months ago, I would not stop to look at anyone doing anything “funny” on Spring Garden. I was a business student busy completing my masters and even though I cared for people, I did not think much of the people selling anything on Spring Garden. But anyway....

Then things changed after Graduation. For a complexity of reasons that space will not permit me to elaborate on, I was not able to work for some time. So I was homeless and nearly penniless. A not-so-rich family took me in, free stay and free food till things got better. I started working eventually. But that is not what I wanted to talk about...

I started to volunteer with Street Feat last summer, initially for 2 days a week. My goodness, it is a different world out there. I thought I knew how the world works, but that was only a thought. I remember back at school it took us a good six weeks to collect about \$650 for United Way. Many of us would drop a few coins as we passed by the collection can and then proceed downtown to eat a meal for \$20-30, not to mention the money my friends spent to get a bit light as it got dark. But anyway...

I met people, who, despite their shortcomings, were struggling to make a respectable living. And many of them were stuck in a system that almost sucks one in. No money, no phone, no job, no money... and many things in-between. But anyway that is not what I wanted to talk about....

Just across the hall from Street Feat, the Mental Health association has a club. Many of the people working with us are members of that club. And believe it or not, they are human too, and the strange thing is they have emotions. One of the funny things I learnt, there are poor people in this part of the world also.

What are we seeking in life that makes us forget the basic principles of life? Or have the authors of “How to achieve happiness” books become too commercialized? Have you not tried any of their suggestions? Well, if you are sad, go and shop, you might not feel better, but hey, someone made money, so what the heck. But anyway....

I was mentioning women and poverty, how single mothers survive. Yeah...I don't know much about the topic. Read the other articles in this issue, I am sure you will learn something. And... what do you know, maybe in one of the bookstores, in the self-help section, you might find a book on surviving as a single mother. But that is not what I wanted to talk about anyway....

My goodness, I just wanted to say a few words before I actually said the words I meant to say, so here they are.

All in good time

The sad stories will rhyme,
Give it some time
The pain will go, after a while
And if, when you look back, and you smile
It was probably worthwhile.

All in good time, just don't give up hope
You are not burdened,
With more than with what you can cope.

All in good time, just don't say never.
All things go, poverty cannot last forever
But that is not what I wanted to say anyway....
But you get the message.

Michael says: Mansoor Wani's presentation explained the history of Street Feat, how it got started four years ago, what it has done since, and that the "tiger hasn't learned to write yet." We learned from the poem, "My House Calls," not only about the experiences of a marginalized person from the Halifax area, but also how that person saw those experiences as part of her overall artistic vision. Every region in the country has its own flavour, its own style, when it comes to coping with the stressful realities of street life and homelessness.



Erin Wilson

Erin Wilson is a young single parent with a BA in English and Philosophy and a diploma in PR. She has been writing with Street Feat for over two years. She sees herself as "dedicated to social issues of poverty, homelessness and civil rights and has struggled with many of these herself."



How far have we really come?

An excerpt by Erin Wilson

Street Feat, Vol. 3 Issue 1, Feb. 2000

When I found out I was going to have the opportunity to write something with regards to Black History Month I was excited about the chance to address an issue that I believe a lot can be said about. When I sat down to begin, there were so many facts in my head that I became overwhelmed. There is so much to say. I started off with a basic notion that the parallels between racism and poverty are boundless.

From there I determined that the most important place that these parallels manifest themselves is in our school system. I made this determination because systemic racism begins here. I think I got stuck at this point because I became fearful that I was going to say something unpopular that people would not pay attention to. It doesn't bother me that my opinion may be unpopular. On the contrary, I believe that what I have to say, though not original, must be said in such a way that it is clear that it is true. I will feel that I have not done my duty as a writer unless the facts are vivid and undeniable. The thought of somebody bypassing this article with the belief that it doesn't affect them worries me. If anyone disagrees with the truth of these words then they are the ones that most need to hear them. In fact it is the very ignorance that so many of us possess that causes me to write with such trepidation.

This past Saturday night I attended the Juba' Lee celebration at the Metro Center, a musical concert honouring Martin Luther King Day and Black History Month. I had been mulling over this story for days and had to dig in my pocket in the dark for a pen and paper when one of the presenters brought up a point that is central to my argument. He was speaking about Samuel de Champlain and how he was the first explorer to map most of Nova Scotia in 1603. Unknown to many is that Matthew DeCosta, a black man, made this possible by translating the Mic Mac language for Champlain. I will echo his words when I say, bet you didn't read about that in the history books.

.....All people plagued by poverty face a number of social injustices that are tenfold if systemic racism is present. It is too late for those of us that are finished school but it's not too late to strive for a better education for all children. Sure, a lot has been accomplished in battling poverty and racism over the years, but how far have we really come if we can't even keep racism out of the classroom?

Michael says:

In her first year of university sociology class, where the "murder" of Natives were referred to within the general history of Aboriginals, some students said the whites "didn't do it on purpose," a view which Erin says is of the "don't-blame-me complex." Her focus, and indirectly *Street Feat's* focus, is the racist attitudes towards Black people and Aboriginals in and around Halifax. I assume then that both cultural groups have substantial segments of their populations at the poverty or near-poverty levels. I sensed, too, that Erin has done considerable thinking in

her attempt to understand the extent and nature of racial discrimination, and how it has contributed to her approach and commitment as a conscientious worker for Street Feat.

My House Calls: A warrior's work as a nurse

by Dominique Rousseau

Street Feat, Vol. 3 No. 5 June-July 2000

I have no place at my table to invite you in.
A man made disaster - took my home, blew it away, with my kin.
I have no first-aid kit left - I emptied mine, so long ago. I'm all that's left.
I have no place to rock a child, In pain, or was left alone, scared or tired.
I no longer have strong hands to hold a grieving parent's hands,
Nor a war vet hands, who did good deeds,
For all the ones he helped and freed
As the hands he had were blown away.
When he went to a battlefield one day.
I have no nurse's cap, or gown, or cape to wear, on a cold winter day.
As man made disasters blew them away.
I have no cup to fill to, give a sip of water, when you are ill.
I'm too weak today - to do C.P.R. along the way when your heart has stopped,
All I can do for us, is to Stop and Pray each day.
That a man made disaster will not take your life away.
I have no supply of bears to give, to hug and hold,
So you may live.
A man made disaster took them away
- FROM ME EACH DAY
I have no rocking chair with me, to hold upon my broken knee,
To sing a lullabye to you when you feel so sad, and so blue.
A man made disaster took that away too.
I have no lamp, to light when it turns dark - for you or candle to hold, to search for you.
As you lay wounded, sick, alone in the darkness too.
A man made disaster took these from me too.
I have NOT A THING to help your pain
- I AM ILL, ALSO LAME
Or a bed, or home to share
In the rain, or any thing to ease your pain.
A man made disaster took this too.
ALL I AM, I offer you
I have no food, or money left
My pockets EMPTY, just like you.
A MAN MADE DISASTER, TOOK THIS AWAY TOO. From me, as it did to you. ...

I HAVE NO FRESH FLOWERS FOR YOUR HAIR
NOR A GARLAND YOU may wear-
ONCE
-THE FLOWERS that sway, and smell so sweet,
The wild ones that grow beneath my feet-
ARE GONE FOR NOW
THEY ARE NOT MINE to keep.
I must leave them where they grow,
To GIVE their love, to someone else, who passes by AND FEELS LOST-



ALONE

The WILD FLOWERS, WILL take THEM home, SO they need never again need to roam.

AS I STOP BY EMERGENCY ROADS TO SEEK YOU OUT -

ALONG MY WAY-

OF ALL THE HOUSE CALLS I CAN MAKE EACH DAY -

I KNOW THIS FACT -

FOR SURE. NO MAN MADE DISASTER -

WILL EVER STOP LOVE'S CURE,

THE LOVE I HAVE DEEP IN MY HEART.

THAT I TRY AS BEST AS I CAN - TO GIVE YOUR HEART A NEW START.

TO BE THE NURSE, I WAS BEFORE -

WHO MADE A PLEDGE, TO HEAL, AND

GIVE AND BRING A SMILE, AND EASE

SOME PAIN GIVE HOPE TO ALL MAIMED. I FIND THE ONLY CARE FOR ALL MANKIND I KNOW THAT WORKS.

THE LOVE THAT BINDS US ALL -

HUMAN KIND THAT IS THE MIRACLE OF LIFE.

THE HEALER -

ABOVE US ALL SENT BELOW THE CARE OF BROKEN HEARTS, & SOUL OF BROKEN BODIES.

WHEN MAN MADE DISASTERS US BEFALL -

I DO TRY HARD TO TRY EACH DAY -

TO TAKE MY PAIN & YOURS AWAY -

AND TO STOP AND PRAY-

Dominique Rousseau was a street person, originally from Montreal. Everyone in Halifax knew her. She passed away in July 1999 and this article was published on her first anniversary. Her life and death changed many people for the better.

L'Intinéraire, Montréal

Le Groupe Communautaire L'itinéraire is a community group made up of people who have experienced homelessness or substance abuse. They created a street newspaper which is produced and sold on the streets of Montreal by people who have known homelessness. The group has also set up a restaurant and an Internet/Computer Center to help the homeless and unemployed gain the income, skills and confidence they need to reintegrate themselves into society. Income from the restaurant helps fund the paper. The editors train their writers through three stages: writing personal accounts, naming of social and political issues embedded in the personal accounts, and finally critical analysis of these issues as they shape our daily lives. L'itinéraire is considered one of the best street papers in the world.

Songs of the Street

Our Voice Magazine, Edmonton



**Michael
Walters**

Michael Walters describes himself as “a writer who unintentionally gave up writing to facilitate the writing of others.” He is the co-founder of Songs of the Street, a project for street poets. He is also past-editor of *Our Voice Magazine* and the Chairperson of the 48- member North American Street Newspaper Association (NASNA). Michael calls *Our Voice Magazine* “a social justice and social action publication produced and sold in part by the homeless, the formerly homeless, and people living in poverty. *Our Voice* is a form of independent media that puts the voice of the poor first, always.” The magazine has been sold on the streets of Edmonton since April of 1994.

Michael has also been chairperson of Songs of the Street Art Foundation started in 1995. The foundation hosts annual Street Poetry festivals. To date, it has published 4 volumes of street poetry each of which sold 1500 copies. More than 200 street poets have participated in Songs of the Street. Michael describes them as “people who continue to find elegance in their misfortunes and peace in a difficult world.”

BOX 1

The Songs of the Street Arts Foundation, Edmonton

In Edmonton’s inner city, where many of these voiceless people live, there was a need to create room for people to express themselves. Songs of the Street started out as a poetry idea. Something simple that allowed people who lived in poverty to read the words they use to describe their conditions and their understandings... Over the years it has become a community...A community of poets, no longer only from the inner city, but city wide, has formed, and together they find their darkness and together they tear it down. As we look to the future, we look to develop what has become the Songs of the Street Arts Foundation, a project now looking for ways to give people voice beyond the swing of the written word... [W]e opened ... up to submissions of art — paintings, sculptures. We opened up the event to fall harvest and the wonderful community gardens throughout the city.

The Foundation is open to those people interested in a truly artistic and healthy form of community development.

Michael Walters, “Preface.” *Songs of the Street*, Volume IV, 2000.



Michael says:

It is mainly through Michael Walters's presentation (and probably through Betsy Trumpener's and L'itinaire's) that Robert and I realized the difference between The Street Post and the majority of the other street papers, especially in matters of distribution and marketing. The Street Post's priority is still the need to have other volunteers involved in the Meeting Place newsletter, as writers, editors, canvassers, promoters, sketching/drawing artists, photographers, interviewers, researchers, computer graphic artists, and ad procurers by phone and in person. Michael Walters has done a tremendous job in terms of making it possible for street people and the marginalized to be heard through Our Voice Magazine and Songs of the Street.

Michael read poems from several volumes.

Solitaire

by Heather Slade

This lonely game of hearts
and minds

soulless bodies lying one on top of
another
not knowing me
never loving

but you give and I take
and next time
I'll be taken

in a different suit
by a different suitor

black on white
good and evil
or is it just darkening shades of Grey
that I am too blind to see

callous too many one night stands
and this house of cards
never stands
up
to the rigor or my life

My Heart Roars

by Heather Slade

The drums start
slowly at first
then
with the increasing urgency
and strength

the accompanying cry
or song

everyone hears it differently

beats against my heart
and heavens door

eons and echoes of pain
and joy
age
and worship

I hear it all
feel it banging on my chest

rushing through my body
riding crests of heart beats.

or maybe

even yours
we never go to find out
it's only a game
"don't be serious"

No strings
FUN isn't it
I'm sick of solitaire and
lay them quick without a thought

and so the devil
wins this hand

Winning poem in the category "HIV and AIDS".

Closing my eyes

I see ancestors celebrating new life
and others weeping as they bury their
dead.

They are in me, as I was in them
the drums call me beyond the precepts
of time
While some may soar
ethereal in their experiences
my body reacts fully
and corporeally.

I have always been
and will continue
in the heart beat
of the sacred drums.

Reprinted with permission from *Songs of the Street*, edited by Linda Dumont, Edmonton: The Songs of the Street Art Foundation, 2000.

*Heather Slade is a mother of two. A multiple category winner, she is recovering from a long battle with mental illness. Her poetry is a way for her to heal and to communicate with the outside world. She has said that her associations with **Our Voice**, as a writer, and with the **Songs of the Street Art Foundation** have been a life saver in terms of making contact with other people.*

Open City Productions 2002, Montreal

Open City Productions 2002 is a non-profit community arts organization that promotes public awareness of social issues through the arts. Founded in 1991, it continues to create art programs centered on issues surrounding homelessness, youth, racism, violence against women, and marginalization.



Open City Productions 2002 is based in Montreal but has partners across Canada and in South Africa. It has worked with The Centre for Literacy for the past two years at this community writing event at Blue Metropolis.



Ken and colleagues set up empty canvases in the hotel hallway and invited festival attendees to pick up a paint brush and leave their mark. By the end of the day, we had murals of riotous colour, images and streams of words.

The canvases become part of Open City's collection of community art.



**Ken
McLaughlin**

Ken McLaughlin is a photographer/writer currently working as National Projects Coordinator at Open City Productions 2002.

