



Lessons from Self-Organising Shelter Communities: 'We were already a community and you put a roof over us'

AUTHORS

AARON MUNRO & VIKKI REYNOLDS WITH RACHEL PLAMONDON

Aaron Munro has worked with people without homes or housing security in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver for almost a decade. He is a trans and queer identified person, first generation Canadian European, and born and raised on unceded Coast Salish Territory. Aaron has a deep interest in social justice issues and is passionate about ending coercion especially in mental health treatment and for those caste in poverty. Aaron can be contacted by email: aaronjmunro@gmail.com

Vikki Reynolds is a community activist whose experience includes supervision and therapy with refugees and survivors of torture, mental health and substance misuse counsellors, activists, anti-violence counsellors, shelter and housing workers, and working alongside transgendered and queer communities. Vikki works towards a decolonising and anti-oppressive stance for the work. Her writing and talks are available for free download at: www.vikkireynolds.ca

Rachel Plamondon is a member of We Wai Kai Nation. She is a recent graduate from the VCC addictions program. Rachel acquired gainful employment with Raincity Housing Society where she started working in the HEAT shelter. She currently enjoys her position as a peer support worker with RainCity's newest housing project in Vancouver. Rachel successfully balances both career and family, as she is also the proud mother of a two-year-old daughter. You can contact her by email: rachelplamondon1980@gmail.com

This paper illustrates the work of a community of shelter folk and shelter workers to create safe-enough and dignified communal living conditions in housing shelters. The aim of this writing is to make clear the intentions and practices of promoting self-organising communities, by embracing a messy and imperfect practice, and working collaboratively with shelter folk to resist professional imperatives to tell people how to live.

Keywords: homelessness, shelter, collaborative practice, anti-oppressive practice, decolonising stance

DEDICATION

A homelessness advocate called us looking for Junior, one of the shelter folk who lived at our Shelter, and later worked as a Peer Worker with us. The advocate had a call from a young couple who were made homeless unexpectedly. They were scared, shocked, and forced to sleep in a park. They said that Junior had met up with them and protected them for two months, supported and mentored them in living rough and staying safe-enough until they got back on their feet. They were now adequately housed in the suburbs with a baby and wanted to find Junior to thank him. Later, in a staff training Vikki facilitated she interviewed Junior about learnings from his life on the street and he said, 'You and I do the same work, you just do it with resources'. We dedicate this writing to Junior, to Chainz, and all the people on whose backs we learn this work.

INTRODUCTION

This writing illustrates the work of a community of shelter folk and shelter workers to create safe-enough and dignified communal living conditions in housing shelters. The aim of this writing is to make clear the intentions and practices of promoting self-organising communities, by embracing a messy and imperfect practice (Reynolds, unpublished paper), and working collaboratively with shelter folk to resist professional imperatives to tell people how to live. We will begin by offering some descriptions of shelters, and particularly the 'HEAT' shelters (Homeless Emergency Action Team) where this work occurred. We will also lay out the context of the homeless city of Vancouver in which we work. We will describe our orientation to staff hiring and training that made it possible to facilitate the community to be self-organising. This required resisting institutionalisation, creating a collective ethic with an anti-oppressive and decolonising stance for our work, and allowing workers to get themselves out of the way. We will outline some practices of enacting respect across chasms of privilege between shelter folk and workers. Our orientation to justice-doing and resisting trying to 'stop oppression with oppression' will be outlined, as well as some understandings of radical harm reduction that informed our work. As an accountability practice and an effort to make space for the voices of shelter folk, Rachel Plamondon will have the final word offering a reflection on this work from her position as a person who has lived in the HEAT shelters, and now works there full-time.

This writing was started the day after the HEAT shelters closed in the first season as an exercise in self-care by an exhausted Aaron who had been so heavily influenced by knowledge and time shared with Vikki. This writing is our attempt to capture some of the beauty of the work and offer strategies and practices that were useful in delivering dignity and promoting autonomous self-organising communities. This writing aims to illustrate our engagement with bringing the ethics of self-organising communities to practice, and is not representative of either the HEAT shelters per se, or RainCity Housing which manages these shelters.

This article should be treated as suspect. It is not neutral and does not purport to offer an accurate accounting of events in the HEAT shelters. Alongside many other housing activists we are not objective or neutral about homelessness, and believe that adequate housing is a right (Tsemberis, 2010). We radically embrace the ethics

of self-organising communities, meaning that shelter folk can be trusted with their own lives and their collective communities. Chainz, an intelligent young man staying at the shelter, eloquently taught us, 'We were already a community, and you put a roof over us'. This teaching has profound implications for inverting the structures of power and accountability in our organising, and how we engage as staff.

Despite being immersed in a society that stigmatises, criminalises and oppresses homeless people, hundreds of shelter folk and shelter team members have participated in co-creating dignified shelter communities of care. It is their work that is being represented here. These ideas were gathered through many sources including stories shared by shelter folks and workers, quotes gathered along the way, focus groups, conferences, public art that was created on-site, and intentional consultations with staff and shelter folk. Contributors' names are used when we could negotiate permission, and pseudonyms when that was more accountable. We acknowledge that academic writing, although well intentioned, works to further make invisible the true authors of the knowledge contained in this writing (Madigan, 1999).

As Junior rightly reminds us by saying that homeless folks and shelter workers 'do the same work', our work is reciprocal, and street culture is collective. Shelter folk have taught us that 'helping work' is not limited to professionals, nor are professionals necessarily the best providers of care (Denborough, 2008; Whyte, 2012). Professionalism allows housed people the out that caring for our neighbour is the paid work of professionals within a capitalist frame, rather than the collective responsibility of all community members.

We are committed to an ethic of belonging (Richardson & Reynolds, 2012) in response to attempts to invisibilise homeless people, which lets housed people exercise the privilege of not knowing or being required to respond to this suffering with collective accountability. The structural inequities that promote homelessness demand complex collective responses. Charity requires housed folks help out poor homeless folks: Justice requires that we all re-structure society so there is no homelessness which will benefit everyone. As trans activist Dean Spade (2011) suggests regarding similar structural challenges facing the trans community, 'these challenges are potential starting points for a trans politics that openly opposes liberal and neoliberal agendas and finds solidarity with other struggles articulated by the forgotten, the inconceivable, the spectacularised and the unimaginable' (p. 33).

A final caution: We do not want to imply that the way these shelters were organised is the 'correct' way to operate a shelter, or a solution to the complex problems of homelessness. It is our hope that by sharing these teachings from self-organising shelter communities more dignity and autonomy will be promoted, and that the work will be picked up in useful ways, transformed and expanded in ways we could not predict, by which we will celebrate and continue to be educated.

SETTING THE CONTEXT: HOMELESS VANCOUVER

Homelessness is most often invisibilised as a structural issue and considered only individually, as if homeless people are personally responsible for the social structures they live in which lack justice and are organised in ways that promote homelessness. We are often asked, 'What happened to these people? Did they make bad choices? Do they use drugs?' These questions construct the complexity of homelessness in an unjust society as a personal responsibility of individual homeless folks. We believe people are responsible for their choices, but only those choices they have the power to make. People are not responsible for the social context which limits choice. Homelessness is a massive structural issue throughout Canada, and specifically in Vancouver: Who is housed or homeless is greatly informed by access to individual power and privilege.

Vancouver is arguably one of the most expensive cities in the western world. For example, a Vancouver family with two children where both parents work minimum-wage jobs, could be homeless. It is important to understand this reality in the context of the unravelling of the social network based on the massive social costs of over 30 years of neo-liberal global and local politics. Canada is the only G8 country that does not have a national housing strategy, as the federal government dismantled Canada's Social Housing Strategy in the early 1990s (Spence Magazine, 2012). The province of British Columbia dramatically reduced its commitments to social housing in 2001. According to the United Nations, Canada has one of the smallest social housing sectors in the developed world (Johal, 2007; Shapcott, 2007) and a United Nations committee described Canada's homelessness situation as a 'national emergency' (United Nations, 2007).

While homelessness is a social problem, and not an individual responsibility of homeless people, thinking that homeless people have no choices is patronising, not helpful, and positions shelter folk as powerless. Oppressed

people have fewer choices and opportunities. As allies, it is our responsibility to work with homeless folks to create more opportunities, and to work towards a more just society (Reynolds, 2010a). We acknowledge that while we are all born of equal worth, we are not born to equal access, privilege and life choices (Spade, 2011). We believe that these are important ethics to discuss with homeless folk. We work to invite homeless folks to take responsibility (Jenkins, 2009) for their real choices, but not for the debilitating oppression, violence, and marginalisation they experience or the social context that promotes the suffering of homelessness (Reynolds, 2011).

SHELTER FOLK

People end up homeless for as many reasons as there are homeless people. We have yet to meet a single person who just made a bad choice, or is solely at fault for their current lack of housing. We have met people whose families have been torn apart by historical (sometimes for generations) and present colonialism and racism; we have known people who were raped as children by the very people who were supposed to be building trust with them, rather than destroying it. In our experience, what gets understood as mental illness can be more influenced by pharmaceutical corporations, capitalism, colonisation, homo/trans/queer phobia, sexism and racism, than by real concern for human suffering. As helping professionals we can participate in the medicalisation of suffering (Strong & Busch, 2013), and defining responses to violence and oppression as pathology (Wade, 1997). It may be more accurate to think about homeless people who struggle against exploitation and domination as being *oppressed* not *depressed* (Reynolds, 2013). We know people who had careers and love to talk about the work they did before brain injuries, resulting in job loss and poverty, changed everything. These conversations and relationships with shelter folk are at the heart of our work, as shelter worker Megan Mullally describes:

Honestly it's these guys that you're looking at right now, that's what brings me back to the work. And that's what makes me want to be there. Recognising how hard they've worked and how hard they've struggled to create this community. I feel humility every day and pride in them. I feel really thankful for them allowing me to be a part of that struggle.

Each year we work alongside a diversity of homeless people in the shelters. One shelter was predominantly occupied by youth. At another shelter we housed a

large group of Francophone people. Yet another shelter housed a large community of Indigenous people, and another a larger community of women. People arrived at the shelters with different life experiences and from diverse locations. All were living with no or very minimal income, and no housing, and this was a point of connection for the community.

We have never met anyone who wants to be homeless. We have met people who are disgusted with how they have been treated by other people and as a result choose to limit engagement with others. We have met people who believe the loss of dignity required to accept some housing is too high a price to pay. We have met people for whom liberty was too valuable to live in housing where they could not control their own lives. In some ways enduring the hardships of homelessness has been their resistance against institutionalisation. We have yet to meet anyone who, after having the opportunity to build trust and was offered housing that was acceptable to them, did not want to come indoors. This sends us a strong message: Respect, dignity, freedom and autonomy are more important than housing. We believe solutions to homelessness must be deeply rooted in these ethics.

LOW BARRIER SHELTERS

The HEAT shelters are located in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, British Columbia, the poorest off reserve part of Canada. The HEAT shelters were designed by an emergency response team the city put together to find a way to get folks out of the cold quickly. The shelters are weather dependent, opening during the worst of the Canadian winter, and closing after spring.

In response to homelessness, the social housing continuum in Vancouver spans a number of options. The HEAT shelters are at the low barrier end of the spectrum. Low-barrier shelters are not supported or transitional housing. While it can be said that everyone is escaping the violence of street homelessness, these shelters are not the same as women's anti-violence shelters. They are simply spaces for people to collectively come inside. Each of the four HEAT shelters were located in buildings designed for purposes other than housing, including an abandoned warehouse, a loft space, and a former grocery store. Although the physical structure of the shelters were barely adequate, they did contain showers, laundry facilities, and a kitchen with a microwave, fridge and a few tables. All the shelters are open spaces, although two of them have a few private rooms. The private rooms are saved for women, trans

people, or other people who feel more vulnerable when asked to sleep close to others.

Low barrier is on the opposite end of the housing continuum from abstinent housing or treatment centres which require that people are totally free from drugs and alcohol and are receiving services to assist these changes. The term 'low barrier' was applied to the HEAT shelters because we had no criteria for acceptance into our services other than need and willingness.

Access to the shelters is not based on appropriate or deserving behaviour but on need. The shelters began welcoming people who were actively using substances after homeless women demanded we do so. Women told us they needed shelter when they were most vulnerable and at risk of violence, times when they were high, experiencing harmful behaviour, and experiencing distressing emotions (Leslie Remund, personal communication). Shelter folks led us to embrace radical practices of harm reduction, which allowed us to engage in more compassionate responses to folks suffering from substance misuse (Sanders, 2007). We are always asking what harms are being reduced, not just individually and personally, but for our community and embedded within larger communities. This helped expand our understandings of harm reduction and structure the shelters as self-organising communities.

Low barrier shelters are important in a continuum of care for homeless folks because some supportive housing have requirements that folks cannot conform to for complex reasons. Many folks fail to maintain more structured housing because of struggles they face related to trusting others, emotional states, and substance use, or because they cannot comply with behavioural requirements. The fluidity of structuring the HEAT shelters as self-organising communities allows for struggling folks to be indoors. If we are not organised in ways that make it possible for folks to come indoors, we believe our shelter is failing, not the shelter folk.

The term 'low barrier' is problematic. It was meant to imply that service providers were willing to not restrict access. In Vancouver, the term has been misconstrued to mean chaos by some neighbours wishing to stop services from operating in their neighbourhoods. Public perception of the term 'low barrier' can lead to thinking, 'it's just a giant party', implying that people with problematic substance misuse, who find themselves living with 39 roommates, sleeping on mats, and sharing one toilet, are having a great deal of fun. Sometimes they are

having fun, and that should be okay as well, but generally speaking these folks are in the midst of hard and chaotic lives within a society that meets them with hostility and punitive measures.

The label 'low barrier' stigmatises shelter folks who live there based on these perceptions and other structures of power, and can make it difficult for them to gain employment or move into more stable housing. Canadian sociologist, Erving Goffman (1963), teaches that stigma requires an attack on the identity of a person to oppress and 'other' them, and in a society and culture that stigmatises homelessness, living in any shelter can work to further oppress people, limiting their life choices. In response, our team viewed the term 'low barrier' as being about accessibility. We now use the term 'accessible shelter' to describe the HEAT shelters, as we are simply trying to make space for people who are not welcome elsewhere.

ACCESSIBLE SHELTERS

An ethic of accessibility requires that we organise in ways that make room for people and welcome them inside, depending on the needs of the community that arrives. At some shelters this has meant noise and drug use are tolerated in order for those community members to be able to stay, and at others it has meant that the community decides to be more quiet and focused. We try to make shelters about the people who access them, and not another place with rigid rules, based on distant policies and management priorities. The following letter written to the shelter team by John, a shelter guest, poignantly describes the ethic of accessibility as the frame for our work:

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is John. I'm a guest here. I want to say a big thanks for this place being available to me. The staff are very caring, polite and understanding. The meals are very good, the bonus is; I can eat whenever I want to do so. I can sleep and stay out late and no-one threatens to kick me out in the rain. I might tell you that I'm dependent on a cane and walker and meds. When I come or go there is always either staff or fellow residents that always offer to help me with the stairs. The staff's ears are always open. So that one can dump the mental load that is hurting. Wow! Nobody wants to know my SIN number or have me sign a pink form. Your staff just wants to do a good thing for people in need.

When I do leave I'll have enough money to rent an apartment. Thanks to you and yours.

In a way, I will feel lonely and not at home not to have this place.

I want to thank everyone for their

Kindness

Generosity

And

Love for their fellow man and women of course.

Keep doing it you're good at it.

I remain honestly

John

(Age 70) ho!

As a team we were touched by this letter and by this gentleman's appreciation. We hold this appreciation alongside experiences of shame and humility that a seventy70-year-old man struggling with disability in a society as rich as Canada is shocked and thankful for the possibility of shelter and the small gestures of care he was offered. That he could eat when he wanted to. That people were listening to him. That he is not being threatened with the punishment of sleeping in a doorway if he stays out too late and misses curfew. We re-visit John's letter to remind ourselves of our commitment to accessibility and of how punishing we can be to the poor.

Early on we began to work with the folks living in the shelter, to make the shelters as accessible as possible. We make it possible for folks to keep their pets, which for some people are their primary relationships of care. We store shopping carts because when folks need to surrender their shopping carts to get shelter they may lose everything they own. Improving accessibility also requires we commit to the constant work to resist replicating racism, sexism, homophobia, or transphobia and classism, as we know that these and other social structures of inequity promote homelessness.

SHELTER WORKERS & COLLECTIVE ETHICS

When choosing shelter workers, less emphasis is made on a candidate's knowledge of addictions theory or mental health diagnosis, and more on an applied awareness of decolonising and anti-oppression practices (Akinyela, 2002; Smith, 2006; Walia, 2012) and understandings of the social stigmas homeless people are subject to. Perhaps the most important quality we look for is an ability to see the dignity in all shelter folk. Shelter workers require relational capacities to create

relationships of dignity and respect across differences of privilege to meet shelter folk where they are at in the world, and assist shelter folks in making any changes they prefer to make to change their relationship to suffering (Reynolds, 2010b). If shelter folk choose to stay with use or misuse of substances, and stay outdoors, we do not pathologise them or think we know better. This requires that shelter workers are able to tolerate trusting people with their own lives, and resist proselytising them. This respect for the dignity of shelter folk is crucial, as we cannot begin to have trust in the concept of self-organising communities if we do not believe that people can be trusted with their own lives and that everyone has something to contribute. Tweak, a shelter guest, articulates the importance of relationships between shelter folk and workers:

The staff are helpful, they let us do our thing and fuck things up ourselves. They put it on us and we had to deal with ourselves. Something stupid would happen. They'd stand up and speak and we'd listen, and made us set it right.

They gave us respect and understanding and we had respect and understanding for ourselves. They befriended us. We kept it clean, did needle sweeps and picked up garbage. We had to deal with it. We also knew they were there to help. When we know we need help they are there and it's on us to get it.

Chris, another shelter guest, speaks to the importance of these relationships and their connection to the usefulness and safety of the shelter:

There are people bickering or arguing. There are so many people with different points of view, you're going to have conflict. The staff has relationships with people to help that. The staff have relationships with people that are more equal, more like friends or family. They are not just asking for what you need, they are also having an open way of talking where more things can be expressed, so with that there is a lot more different expectations that can get heard.

So everybody here, in some way, looks forward. The staff doesn't walk away from problems. The staff do something to help and then it feels like you have a solution for you. There should be fights here every day. I've been here two months and I've never seen a fight even with the arguments that happen.

Workers must be able to embrace a messy process, where we are not organised around extensive rules, but

respond collectively alongside shelter folks to situations and challenges as they emerge. Shelter workers must be able to tolerate not being the experts (White, 2002; Madigan, 2011) which can be problematic for workers whose trainings have oriented them to elevate professional expertise over a person's own wisdom:

'An essential part of the definition of a profession is the possession of a specific knowledge base. Professionals are supposed to be experts. But the power in their expertise can disempower clients and thus subvert the goals of the profession ... thus the professional knowledge claims of social work can become a means of ideological domination' (Sin & Yan, 2003, p. 36).

Job applicants who advocate a 'tough love' approach with shelter folk do not fit with our ethical stance. Shelter folks' lives have been tough enough! If being tough or hard on people was a helpful strategy, folks in shelters would likely be in different positions in society.

We also attempt to resist the temptation to see ourselves as separate from shelter folks, meaning that, while staff have the privilege of being housed, we also struggle. In profound ways we are the people we serve. The hypocrisy of class allows workers who also struggle with substance misuse or what is understood as mental illness, the privilege being housed affords to keep our struggles private, and limit social surveillance. We acknowledge that our class positioning protects us from the consequences of public use and public struggles. On our team life experiences that may include struggles with homelessness and experiences with shelter living, do not disqualify people from the work. In fact, shelter workers who have not had these experiences, struggle with how they will acquire the life skills and knowledge they have not earned from their lived experience.

As part of our ongoing training, the staff team met to co-create our collective ethics (Reynolds, 2009) and commit ourselves to these ethics. Then we struggle to enact these ethics, and to hold all of our work accountable to them. We recursively ask ourselves, are we walking our talk? The practices of how we do shelter work are emergent from these collective ethics (Reynolds, unpublished paper). Holding collective ethics at the centre of our work requires that we allow for and foster self-organising communities. We want to be enacting in the shelters the very changes we are agitating for in our society, as Spade (2011) says, 'Our demands for redistribution, access, and participation must be reflected in our resistance work every day- they can't be something we come back for later' (p. 69).

SELF-ORGANISING COMMUNITIES

Communities are organically self-organising, messy, imperfect and responsive. We have found that the best approach to working in a self-organising shelter environment is to use a facilitative approach. We try to engage shelter folk in the moment, to help them develop their own solutions to issues. Sometimes these decisions are not what team members would choose, but we feel that it is important to continue to encourage self-organisation. Chainz eloquently describes emergent practices that hold the community's right to be self-organising at the centre:

We don't call the staff, 'hey staff', we call them by their names. We steadily grew on each other, spending time together and learning to trust. When things bother us, we can talk, we can work it out. Some other shelters if there is a problem, boom, you're out. The second chances here mean you can learn and improve and it's up to the individual to grow or not grow. People have cycles. When people fail with outside housing they always have a place to go back to and try again. We have our own problems here and our own 'policing' system. If something violent goes down here, we all stand up and say, 'hey, you're going to fuck things up here, go for a walk and come back when you can work it out'. They get a chance to make up with people and repair friendships that could end bad. As far as the partying, other people can go to a bar, but these people can't. So we say keep it low-key don't be an idiot and abuse the privilege of being here. If someone starts using, then let's go for a walk. If someone comes down selling, that brings the heat down here so we tell them to get on.

Felix, a shelter worker, outlines how he has benefited by having the shelters self-organising:

I value working in such a way as a team that balances the larger, collective picture, yet honours each of our individual strengths to do good work engaging with a diverse group of folks. In many ways, it brings out my most extroverted parts. I think also as someone who experiences many intersections of oppressions, there are many opportunities to speak with shelter folks and in solidarity address forms of violence in an impactful way. I come out as a person with richer experiences. This is what drives me to continue to do this work.

Engaging a purposefully messy & imperfect process is informed by queer theory, (Butler, 1990; Jagose, 1996)

anarchist theory and direct action activism, where we aim to respond to all oppression in the moment with justice-doing. As activists, when a shelter person is being harassed by people with power, we do not call for a committee, organise a meeting, and engage in long discussions about what would be an appropriate and perfect action to take. Instead, we respond to the oppression, in the moment, with action. This requires a tolerance for being imperfect. Later we can reflect on our actions, make necessary repairs, and strategise about what might be more appropriate actions for the future (Reynolds, 2010a). This approach requires community-wide relationships of enough-trust and moral courage to take action. This is significantly different from responding to transgressions from a frame of rules. Radical Canadian social worker, Donna Jeffrey (2007), cautions: 'Fear, self-protection, and the need for a shorthand to navigate officialdom and the lives of clients all encourage the use of anti-oppression as a formula for practice' (p. 131). It requires that we take positions, defy neutrality, and have the moral courage to face up to some of the consequences of imperfect actions (Reynolds, 2013, in press). Shelter folks have participated alongside shelter workers in these responses, and these collaborations are part of the magic that has co-constructed these self-organising communities.

The way the individual shelters organised themselves differs from shelter to shelter, and from year to year. In a community meeting in the second year, soon after opening, someone shouted out, 'Hey this is a democracy, we should just vote'. The team questioned back, 'Is it?' The shelter model lends itself to new ways of organising that work for the specific people who access them.

Some communities prefer organised meetings to sort out issues with whoever is living at the shelter at the time; for example, making decisions about when lights will go off, or how much time is fair to take up the bathroom. Shelter workers take notes, steer conversations away from disrespectful arguments, and step in when a decision could affect our ability to operate the shelter or if it could affect safety for people who are either working in or staying at a shelter. If folks do not like the community's decisions, they are invited to attend the next meeting to make their voices heard. We post the community's decisions and try to make the language reflective of the fact that the decision was theirs. For instance, one year the shelter folk wanted only the shelter workers to go into the locked storage area. The sign read, 'At the request of the folk staying here, staff only': At the request of the Francophone population: *A la demande de tout le monde ici. Le personnel seulement est autorise.*

Other shelters were less inclined towards organised meetings and preferred to just work issues out as they occurred. Both approaches are fluid, immediately responsive and were largely successful. As staff, we do not pretend we have no power, and hold this understanding alongside an intention to work with profound collaboration and to be led wherever possible by shelter folk.

Here we will describe some of the fluid and imperfect intentions that shape our work, specifically related to resisting both institutionalism and oppression.

RESISTING INSTITUTIONALISM

Institutionalism is inherently authoritarian. In total institutions (Goffman, 1961), such as prisons and mental wards, every part of a person's life is controlled and dictated within strict parameters, restricting experiences of autonomy and personal responsibility as well as freedom. Judi Chamberlin (1978), was an American activist in the psychiatric survivors movement, who had been involuntarily confined in the 1960s. She wrote poignantly of her humiliating experiences of being institutionalised, and said that after only two weeks of being in an institution she was finally convinced that she was totally incapable of making even simple decisions for herself.

Authoritarianism constructs an 'us and them' mentality, which restricts caring and reciprocal relationships between shelter workers and shelter folk. The informal environment of the self-organising shelters aided in breaking down these rigid structures. Genuine and respectful relationships were possible, allowing us to see that we were often wrong and shelter folk right. As workers, we need to be normal, fallible people so that there is space for shelter folk to be normal, fallible people as well. The non-clinical physical structure of the shelters also aided us in resisting replicating the cold stark realities of institutionalisation. A shelter guest describes how these differences mattered to him:

It's like a squat with food! It's better than any other shelter. The staff and most of the people staying there are good, even with drinkers and tweakers. It's clean. Sure it's a run-down building, but it's kept nice. It's more comfortable. You know people and don't worry as much about fights or theft.

Aaron's following recollection describes the influence of institutionalisation on both shelter folk and shelter staff, and describes his resistance against being positioned as the sole authority in the shelter community:

A shelter supervisor approached me after a difficult conversation with one of the shelter folk. The conversation was about some behaviour (I can't remember what it was) that was disruptive to the team and folks staying at the shelter. The man informed her that if we barred him for a period of time he would stop the offending behaviour. If we did not take action, he would keep doing the behaviour as long as he felt like it. The supervisor questioned if this meant we should have more rules, after all, he was asking for them. We discussed what this member of the shelter folk was asking us to do. What role was he advising we take in the shelter? It seemed to me it wasn't a role that was desirable for us to take. Who invented these roles, and who do they serve? It was an authoritarian role, one that might have been more familiar and possibly comfortable for him, but it also stopped him from having to work out how his actions were negatively impacting his community. We decided just to share our thoughts with him and offer to stand against institutionalism beside him. This offered him an opportunity to take responsibility for his own behaviour, and not be subjected to our judgement and unilateral intervention.

FOSTERING DIGNIFYING RELATIONSHIPS

Resisting institutionalism requires that we avoid a case management approach with shelter folk, and instead create relationships with them. We do this in a number of ways, including being genuinely curious about what changes they might like to make in their lives, and offer information or assistance. We also work to respect shelter folks' self-determination regarding if they want to make any changes at all, as shelter is not dependent on having a plan for change. Shelter folk are not required to commit to timelines or plans. There is no intake process, other than supplying us with a first name, or nickname, and preferred gender pronoun so we know how to address people as they self-identify. The relationships are not built in order to reach any specific objective: Dignified relationships are an end to themselves.

SHELTERS AS CONSTANT CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

The shelters are open 24 hours a day, and once folks get a space they do not have to either go out every day, or line up for their place each night. This allows folks to have their belongings fairly secure while they are out, and not have to carry everything they own with them at all times. Folks can stay in the shelters until we close each spring, or until alternative housing that works for them is found. People accessing services are often expected to find housing quickly or move on, which, in a city that acknowledges inadequate housing, places an insurmountable task on homeless people.

The ability to form a constant connected community allowed for people to move beyond survival and begin creatively claiming communal space. Shelter folk began to bring in and create art and design each shelter in its own unique fashion. One community tagged their few collective agreements on the wall in a beautiful mural. Small living areas were created in one of the larger shelters. We overheard statements such as 'come over to my place'. Some people created mini-homes and shared them with 'roommates'. The consistency of the communities fostered the relationships that enabled the shelters to be self-organising.

ENGENDERING TRUSTWORTHINESS: EXTENDING TRUST

For the first couple of years, many shelter folk thought us naïve. They were visibly shocked that we were not trying to control their actions more than we were. Quite a few of the shelter folk pulled us aside and warned us that we were going to be taken advantage of. We shared our philosophy that we believed that allowing people to make their own decisions is the right thing to do. We acknowledged that the shelter folk were obviously good people who were invested in everyone's safety and the shelter operating well. We believe in an ethic that giving trust a place to grow is our job, being trustworthy and proving we are worthy of trust is what we are required to bring to the community.

Shelter folk have good reasons not to trust. A prudence in relationship to trust can be a sign of intelligence from hard-earned knowledge that trusting is risky. We resist pathologising homeless people for not trusting us. We have an ethical obligation to engender trust, and we strive not to replicate shelter folks' past experiences of being controlled or oppressed. This approach has been instrumental in building significant trust, and sends a message that we do not believe individuals are inherently dangerous because they are living without homes and in poverty.

It is difficult to do ethical relational work with people if they do not trust you, even in small ways. As staff, we have a disproportionate amount of power. For example, if a disagreement takes place, we are the ones that get to call the police, and our interpretation of events is accepted as truth. It is always assumed that we have arrived at our position in society because we have made better choices, and underneath that lies an assumption that it is because

we are better people. Enacting an ethic of dignity requires we extend trust to those we wish to serve.

RESISTING SURVEILLANCE

When folks arrive at the shelter, we purposely did not ask for a lot of information. We had been told that a lot of folk would not access shelters because of the amount of personal information they were required to provide. Our shelters lacked cameras and other surveillance equipment typical in many shelters. Aaron shares this story about the impact of institutionalised surveillance:

A man who lived in a housing project I worked in said he was feeling paranoid, like he was constantly being watched. I looked up at all the cameras in his building and replied, 'Well, you are being watched!' We talked about how services that work with poor people are almost always under surveillance. We both knew that this wasn't something we could change, so we spoke about strategies to mitigate his very real experiences of being watched. It should be noted that some shelter folk do ask for cameras to deter guests from preying on shelter folk. I am not saying that cameras are wrong, just that they do impact on people, and that they haven't been necessary in our open shelter spaces.

We only logged information about folks that was absolutely necessary. One of the advantages about an open space is that everyone sees everything that happens. There is less need for closed-door conversations. We decided to log only those events that other staff needed to know about. We wrote about events in a fashion that if the book went missing it would not matter. One year we experimented with sharing a log with the shelter folks, and it went beautifully. Shelter folks' enthusiasm about sharing their thoughts and ideas about how to improve things reminded us of how important it is to break down the power we hold.

SHARING SPACE

One of the unexpected outcomes of having to share space, and one that broke down a lot of barriers, was how space was shared between the shelter workers and shelter folk. We never have enough bathrooms. Generally, we have two bathrooms that have to be shared between forty shelter folk and two shelter workers. In our self-organising shelters we all shared bathrooms. We also shared meals at dinnertime, and found that some of the best conversations happened while eating and serving together.

DECLINING POWER STRUGGLES

When the shelters first opened, we found that distribution of resources (like milk) was difficult to navigate. Finding new solutions to power struggles with shelter folk over resources was paramount in promoting respectful communities. We know that we do not have enough resources in a shelter to adequately address folks' needs. Nevertheless, it is never worth it to have an argument over a pen or paper towel if it might result in a chaotic situation that puts someone's housing at risk.

One example that illustrates this well is about peanut butter. When the shelters first opened, shelter folk would make sandwiches with two inches of peanut butter on them, or they would help themselves to cups of peanut butter. The workers worried that we would run out of peanut butter, and that everyone was not getting a fair share. Eventually the staff decided to put all the peanut butter and other resources out at once, and left the shelter folk to self-manage the resources, as they belong to the shelter folk, not us.

As the power struggles decreased, shelter folk began to realise that they did not need to fight to get what they needed. Sometimes the shelters run out of resources, but shelter folk know that shelter workers were not rationing resources. It is up to shelter folk to decide what is fair and act accordingly. We are not suggesting that this results in everyone receiving a fair share, but that there is nothing fair about people with lots (shelter workers), teaching people with very little (shelter folk), about fairness.

KEEPING CONNECTION

Sometimes strict codes of behaviour result in shelter folk being banned from social services and community resources when they need help most. Because we believe connection can foster change, we try to resist disconnection as a practice, and we do not 'bar' folks from shelters, which drastically dissolves some potentially intense power struggles. Instead, in rare times we negotiate a break with shelter folk. We collaborate with people to decide how long a break they need in order to stop whatever behaviour is disruptive of the community making the shelter less safe.

HONOURING RESISTANCE

People resist oppression with whatever power they have, and respond to oppression with volitional acts to restore their dignity, and try to move towards liberation and justice (Wade, 1997; Reynolds, 2010a). Our understandings of resistance have informed our discernment of property damage from violence.

When a guy breaks a window in the shelter, we do not ask him to leave. We work with him to increase his power in the shelter so he can resist whatever it is he is resisting, take responsibility for his actions, and make repair with the community, without breaking a window. In the shelter, we try to work with people to identify acts of resistance, and not label it as anti-social behaviour. We need to position ourselves so we celebrate resistance, even if it makes us examine our practice: Especially if it makes us examine our practice.

RESISTING OPPRESSION

The possibility of replicating oppression in our roles as staff is something we continually strategise against, as an important collective ethic of our teams is to not abuse power and replicate shelter folk's oppressive experiences. We make a concerted effort to respond to oppression and problems that occur in the shelter community with immediacy, and to reflect and respond to critiques of our actions with humility, learning and accountability. We have learned that doing the hard work of apologising, being accountable, and making repair when we make mistakes, engenders trust.

All the shelters open with one 'rule': 'No violence in the shelters – Racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia are forms of violence'. After consultation with shelter folk this year, in upcoming years the rule may read:

We are committed to doing our best to address violence – this includes sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and any other language and actions that oppresses a group or individual. We also recognise that we need to commit to constantly working on this ourselves.

Our team made a point of being proactive in identifying and addressing oppression. Our co-worker, Amelia Ridgeway, says, 'It is not enough to call out oppression, we have to do it holding someone's dignity at the fore front' (personal communication). This requires engaging in respectful relationships, not posturing as righteous and correct. Team members view oppressive comments or actions as acts of violence towards the community, and use them as opportunities to engage and empower the community. Our teams use their influence to engage in conversations with everyone who experienced the act, whether they were participants or witnesses. These opportunities for dialogue support a community of care that extends beyond shelter walls and into the larger street community, hopefully engendering more safety for everyone.

As staff, we always have to locate ourselves as people with income and housing, in all of our interactions with shelter folk. One community member remarked, 'They don't try to change us, they let us be who we are'. We believe that when we work across class difference (or any other difference), it is imperative that we do not stigmatise the shelter folk by trying to change them to represent members of our own class. They are worthy of dignity and respect just the way they are.

RESPONDING TO SEXISM

The context of the Downtown Eastside is one of extreme violence against women, within a larger rape culture (Buchwald et al, 2005) and the brutal historic and present horror of murdered and disappeared women (Amnesty International, 2003). Within this context, co-ed shelters present different challenges compared to women-only shelters relative to women's safety. We cannot over-emphasise the responsibility on the agency and community to ensure women sharing space with men are treated with dignity. However, that responsibility and the shared space also present unique opportunities to address sexism and patriarchy. During one focus group, the shelter folk were asked if they felt the co-ed environments worked. The response was overwhelmingly 'yes'. One person smartly called out, 'Life is co-ed'. Women-only shelters need to exist for the women who want them. We acknowledge the hard work and action women in this community have participated in to ensure self-identified women-only spaces, which are crucial.

Most of the women we have encountered who choose to come to co-ed shelters do not want to be separated from their partners, or they may simply not like living in women-only communities. In order to create possible safety for women without housing the shelter system needs a wide range of options. Oppression essentially limits choice, in order to combat oppression we need to trust women to know what they need and support more choice.

The term 'co-ed' is problematic as it perpetrates the false binary of two genders, invisibilising the shelter needs of folks who are trans, gender variant, and gender diverse, that is folks who identify their gender as anything other than man or woman. We use co-ed at the risk of participating in the erasure of trans and gender variant folks (Namaste, 2000) because we have been asked numerous times for information specifically relating to co-ed shelters as they have been controversial.

While issues arise, co-ed shelters provide us with great opportunities to be allies and address patriarchy alongside women living in the shelter. We have an opportunity to support the women as well as an opportunity to address the sexist behaviour. We aim to respond to violence in the moment. We work to set a tone that stops sexist behaviour by addressing everything we witness. We understand that the women we have met have been powerful, and that we should never assume that they need our help. It is important to include them when issues arise, and make sure that they want our help. Not doing so would be patronising and replicate sexism. It is also required that workers do not implicate the woman in any action taken, as doing so might put her safety at risk. Two examples of our responses to patriarchy follow.

One afternoon we signed a new man onto our bed list. A woman shelter guest walked by him and he whistled, gestured rudely and leered, 'Hey sweetheart'. A shelter team member approached the woman and asked if she knew him, and if she wanted any help addressing his behaviour. She said she wasn't overly bothered by it but it would be great if we said something to him. She was not interested in being part of the conversation. We had a lengthy conversation with the new shelter person about the level of harassment and risk of men's violence a lot of the women who stay at the shelters experience on the streets. We pointed out that while they are here, this is their home, and they have a right to be free of that behaviour anywhere, but especially while they are staying at a shelter. We told him he was welcome to stay, but he would need to be a part of maintaining the shelter as a place where women are not harassed.

It is always disheartening to see how surprised men are when this kind of conversation begins. It is evident that they have not often had such conversations before. They have often never been invited to be respectful to women. However, the response is usually positive. This is not to claim that the men start marching in feminist demonstrations the next day, but that they do start thinking about their behaviour.

Aaron shares another example of addressing sexism:

Sexist graffiti written about one of the woman staff appeared on the bathroom wall. We wanted to address this, but we didn't know who wrote the offending words, so it was difficult. We spoke to the staff member involved and asked her if she would like us to address the graffiti. She was upset, and said that she would like us to address it.

We wrote a letter, explaining that we were doing our best to be respectful to everyone, and would appreciate it if this respect were returned, adding that sexism was violence and it was not welcome in the shelter. We then printed many copies and papered the bathroom walls with them.

I expected the letters would be torn down, and even worse negative graffiti would appear as backlash. That didn't happen. I can only hazard a guess that this was because the relationships that were built between shelter folk and shelter team were actually rooted in respect. The next day, many of the letters were still on the wall, and in the ensuing weeks, more graffiti appeared. But this graffiti was different because it was speaking about how it is wrong to speak about women staff disrespectfully. Words about respecting women and how much people appreciated the shelter took the place of the letters. While staff initiated the response, it was the community's response which made it meaningful. It was an amazing experience.

While this approach can have impact, it does not always work. That is why we need men-only shelters and co-ed facilities. Occasionally, we meet men who are not ready or able to be accountable, and we have to refer them to men-only shelters. Many of these men have returned in subsequent years, ready to commit to making some changes. This amplifies our hope. We believe that it is important to allow men back in when they are ready. This is one of the reasons we do our best never to 'bar' people from service, we just give them 'breaks'.

WE CANNOT STOP OPPRESSION WITH OPPRESSION

Aaron shares a story:

During the first year the shelters were in operation, a terrible incident occurred which showed us how much this particular community had to offer. Perhaps due to its proximity to a gay/lesbian neighbourhood in Vancouver, and perhaps due to the large number of staff we had hired who were queer/trans identified, over forty-per-cent of the shelter folk had let us know they identified as queer. We had never seen anything like it. Not only were gay men sleeping beside each other in an open room, but a young trans woman still presenting as a man was wearing women's clothing staff brought in for her. I was intensely proud that these queer staff and shelter folk felt safe enough to be out with us at the shelter. I received a disturbing call from a worker because as they had been closing the shelter that morning, a man had punched another man and called him a 'fag'. I was relieved the shelter was closed for a few hours. This gave me time to recover from my rage. It was one of the first moments I realised that, although I'm a 135lbs trans guy, I had a lot of power in that shelter. I was the guy who

decided who slept on a side walk and who slept in a bed. I needed to use my power in a fashion that would be helpful and build community. The diverse community in that shelter, after all, is one of the things I was proud of. I needed to preserve that, which meant responding in ways that welcomed everyone.

I called the team, and we all met early at the shelter. We settled on a plan and, while the team went outside and let everyone know we would be opening late, I wrote in large letters on the wall: 'No violence, this includes homophobia, sexism, racism and transphobia'.

Next, I went outside, and while the team kept the shelter locked, I let the man in question know exactly how we were feeling. I did this publicly, which I understand might be contrary to a lot of people's beliefs. However, he had done the violence publicly, so the response needed to be public as well, or what message would that send everyone who had witnessed it? I let him know that I was outraged and that his action was not only physical violence, which affected everyone, but he also perpetrated violence against the community, particularly against the queer population. I let him know that the team and I were more afraid in the world because of his actions. I could see he was horrified at this thought. We were all very close with him, and had built a lot of respect. He exclaimed that he would never hurt any of the staff. I reminded him he just had. He asked me to bar him from the shelter for whatever amount of time I decided was fair, and he would abide by it. I was surprised and touched by this, sleeping on the street would be harsh punishment.

I let him know we didn't want him sleeping on a sidewalk, and that he needed to face the community he had harmed and make it better. We then opened the doors and, as folks entered, they read the graffiti I had written on the wall and applauded. The community affirmed that ours would be a community where people could feel safe, regardless of who they were. That applause was more powerful than anything we could have done. It was evidence of us all using the power we had to co-create a community of acceptance and accountability. (As a side note, the man in this story and I still know each other, and after many years have a great deal of affection and respect for each other.)

If we had punished this man by putting him on the street, we would be responding to oppression with oppression. The constant negotiation of power and privilege that takes place in the shelters is not part of the work: It is the work. We are not trying to fix people because they belong to a culture that differs from our own. We are trying to create space for mutual understanding.

When we do this right, we begin to understand each other's actions, and behaviours that were perceived as irrational can be thought of more complexly and make sense. This is true for both the shelter folk and staff.

INTERSECTIONALITY: TAKING OPPRESSION ON ON ALL FRONTS

In taking on oppression and abuses of power we need to take it on on all fronts. The shelters house people from many locations, and there are multiple parts of each person's identity that are subjected to power, what American critical race theorist, Kimberle Crenshaw (1995), calls domains of identity such as ethnicity, 'race', gender, class, age, immigration status, that intersect across lines of power. The convergence of these multiple factors of identity construct our particular intersectionality (Robinson, 2005). Lived experiences of queer theory has taught us that oppression cannot be measured, but that we always need to consider how power is being abused or used accountably in any interaction. Experiences of queer community have taught Aaron this lesson, 'Why are we arguing about who's more oppressed, and why don't we start helping each other in a more accountable way?'

In the earlier example of a man in the shelter saying 'Hey sweetheart', we needed to address sexism, while acknowledging the staff's class privilege. When the woman staff member noticed sexist graffiti on the wall, despite the power class afforded her, we needed to address sexism. The seventy-year-old gentleman who wrote us the letter thanking us for letting him eat when he wants, and come and go as he pleases, was speaking about the stigma against people struggling with disability, agism, classism and the surveillance that comes along with poverty. When the man committed violence and said 'fag', we needed to address violence, homophobia, but simultaneously Aaron needed to address his administrative power over this man's access to shelter.

Next year, when we change the 'No violence in the shelter' signs to end with, 'We also recognise that we need to commit to constantly working on this ourselves', we will be attempting to be accountable for our classism. The first sign we made assumed that, as staff, we would be better at anti-oppression work than shelter folk. That is the great part about a queer spin on being allies, it acknowledges that we do not have it all right yet, but encourages us to engage with oppression imperfectly, and be accountable when we err (Reynolds, 2010a).

TRANSFORMATIONS OF SHELTER WORKERS

It is important to note that this work is exhausting, and many experience it as being so. Constantly negotiating and resisting policy (where it is not effective) is not as easy as responding to issues with set rules and structures. However, many shelter workers have said that the rewards are worth it. Workers have caught us up on the transformations they have experienced in their lives for having participated alongside shelter folks in this work. The kinds of transformations workers speak of are reminiscent of the writings of Brazilian popular education activist Paulo Freire (1970), and El Salvadoran liberatory psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994), and speak to our intention of engaging with justice-doing and not a charity model. Both the helper and helped will be transformed, as Martín-Baró (1994) says, existing in a relationship of solidarity alongside each other, in which they hope to transform not just each other, but the society in which they exist. That is certainly true of our experience as shelter workers in the Downtown Eastside.

One shelter worker wrote this about her transformative experiences working with shelter folks in ways that centre their autonomy and ability to organise their own communities:

If I try to clarify and make sense of why this has been such a moving experience, it is because the people at the shelter are some of the most incredible, dynamic and inspiring people I've ever had the joy of getting to know. I've learnt how crucial it is not only for people to have safe places to go, day or night, but how essential community is . . . for everyone. I'm blown away that forty adults can build a home . . . in one room for four months, and it's pretty unbelievable.

I've seen make-ups, hook-ups, break-ups, fights, apologies, hand-holding and true care exemplified by this community, and through thick and thin people have each other's back and not in some superficial once-in-a-while kinda way, but in a real way. The kind of way that has made me stop, pause and reconsider what it means to care for someone.

Something really incredible happened at the shelter . . . having so many women there, many of whom hadn't been inside for well over five years, make their home for the entirety of four months, was an honour. A woman

told me today that we 'let people be who they are' over the course of the last four months and knowing that people felt like they could really be themselves in a non-judgemental way is something our whole team and the community stood behind.

I'm not saying I wasn't called a whole handful of names throughout the course of my being there, but every time that happened, every time, people apologised. And when I messed up I apologised. And when shit hit the fan, I was blown away by how supported I often would be ... Often if I stood back the community worked it out. And there was a mutual respect that was established ... it actually floored me at times.

This kind of reciprocity I felt was really lacking in my other work. The mutual accountability piece. The fact that we definitely do not have the answers and the more we realise that, the more the walls disintegrate. Being part of a collective team that stood solidly behind anti-oppression practices was, well, to be honest, kind of a dream for me ... and it was actualised at the shelter, and many of us grew from those difficult conversations and breakthroughs.

The transformation of the worker, and the acknowledgment that our lives are also changed, stands in contradiction to ideas of neutrality and professionalism that say we are possibly doing our own personal development work on the backs of shelter folks. We believe these transformations speak to the fact that we are engaging in relational work across huge differences of power and privilege, requiring us to possibly be other than who we have been (White, 1995, 2000 ; Reynolds, 2011).

CLOSING THE SHELTERS

When our funding runs out in spring, closing the shelters each year is incredibly hard on everyone involved, most especially shelter folk as it is unsafe to sleep outside no matter what the weather. Despite these difficulties, we believe the communities that exist in these spaces continue to be strengthened because of our time together. All parties involved learn so much from the intense periods of being so close together, and we are all somewhat better for it. We often hear people referring to the shelters as 'home', and the community as 'family'. This presents an interesting opportunity to dialogue about what constitutes a home. We are careful not to name the shelter community a 'family' or 'home'. We try to avoid replicating complicated power relationships,

such as families, that may have caused folks harm, and also resist creating relationships of inappropriate intimacy. Further, by calling a shelter a 'home', we might infer that the shelter folk do not deserve better housing resources. At the very least, forty people living together in one room for five months, have a thing or two to show housed-folks about creating community and how to get along.

Recently, many have argued that shelters are not part of the solution to ending homelessness. In Vancouver in particular, many believe that money should be spent on housing and not on shelters. The reality we are seeing is that people need a space to go when they mess up, like when they are evicted for various behaviours. They need a safe place to build themselves back up so they can try more established and restrictive housing again. There need not be such a loss of dignity. People do not need to be living on the streets while trying to recover from messing up. Shelters are a necessary part of a network of community responses to homelessness.

IN CONCLUSION

We are not suggesting our under-resourced and not-permanent shelters are a solution to homelessness. We believe that the solutions to homelessness are complex and lie in political will to address systemic issues of power and oppression, and that the responses to homelessness should be shaped by the people who struggle with homelessness. One hope we have for this article is that it will encourage more co-creation alongside shelter folk and workers. It is our hope that by working together to foster and promote self-organising communities, and expanding these practices in new and useful ways, an inversion will happen, where shelter folk teach shelter workers and direct how shelters work. We continue to embrace the messiness that trusting people with their own lives requires, and are open to the possibilities of transformations for ourselves, shelter workers, shelter folk, and the broader society. In a small way, our practice has tried to share with Junior the resources we have for the work.

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This work and writing occurred on Indigenous territories of the Musqueam, Skwxw7mesh-ulh Uxwuhmixw (pronounced Squamish) & Tsleil-Waututh nations which were never surrendered.

REFLECTION BY RACHEL PLAMONDON

I'm Aboriginal. I'm not an activist yet, but it appeals to me for sure. I'm a survivor of the sex trade and a recovered drug addict, I lived 17 years on the DTES. I didn't really access any of the services until the last year. Then I stayed at the HEAT shelters, and then I got housed. That's when I got my shit together. All the trouble I was getting in and all the problems I had was due to lack of housing. All the crime and charges and everything stopped the minute I got housing. And then I got clean. I wonder what would be different if I had got housed ten years before? I lived in a Heat Shelter in 2008. I work in the Heat shelters now, as a support worker. The title seems so institutional to me. Maybe I'm a community organiser?

I was institutionalised for almost fifteen years: In and out, in and out. Obviously when I was first put in jail I would pray to God to get me out, but in the long run it was 'three hots and a cot'. I got used to being told what to do, having a schedule and relying on other people making my decisions for me. When I got to the HEATS, I didn't know it was about accountability for my actions, but I got held accountable quite often. I was the break queen, I had to apologise and make things right. I don't think I'd ever had to do that in my life. Prison doesn't actually require anything of anybody. Making things better that's required in institutions is for all the wrong reasons, like so I don't get beat up. Institutionalism didn't teach me life skills, I had survival skills which I found out you can't use in the real world.

It was weird for me when I first started accessing the Heats, like this can't be for real. There's no rules here, you don't have to be in by a certain time. It seemed too good to be true, so it's pretty cool working there now. I didn't access lots of other shelters because they were ruled based, all about protocol, case planning, I needed to have goals, and be in by a certain time. It was institutional, which is what I expected from every place. I didn't think there'd be a service like the HEATS.

In the first year they kicked everyone out in the morning – we don't do that anymore. Aaron said they had the

hardest time getting me out. I wouldn't get up or leave. I'd pull the blanket over my head and Aaron would have to pull my mat outside. I'd say, 'I'm taking the blankets', and he'd say, 'Okay'. Our morning fights!

One of the things it says in the article I really like is that workers don't tell shelter folk how to live, but that's what I was expecting. The first time I stayed there I snuck in through a back door, being sneaky. I crawled in beside my friend on a mat and pulled the blankets over my head, waiting to get kicked out. It was totally the opposite, more like, 'Are you hungry, do you want some food?' I can't explain how much that meant to me. I'd been convinced that I couldn't maintain any housing. I didn't realise how the HEATS worked until I got my shit together. The second chances and just letting me live. I thought I was super sneaky. I didn't have a reason to trust anyone. Being sneaky was a resistance, as Vikki might say, it was being smart. When everything is institutionalised and based on punishment, I'd be foolish to let go of being sneaky in the face of people who hold a lot of power and are going to withhold my housing. But I started to trust folks at the HEATS.

Instead of institutionalising folks, we are building relationships. That's the whole reason I wanted to get into this field, not to do case work and be behind a desk. I wanted to be in the trenches and to get to know folks and try to relate, that's why I got into doing this.

The workers help, but shelter folk made it possible for the shelters to work without being institutional. In this article it talks about how the community makes the difference. I was in a group there and I felt comfortable, at home – this is huge. This year, I saw community building right away. A girl overdosed and I'd never had that happen to me at work. And I saw it for the first time, it was obviously happening the whole time, that everyone pulled together as a community and put all their differences aside. Calling 911, waiting outside for the ambulance. Giving us workers the space we needed and being genuinely concerned for one another. Instead of tension and people bickering, everyone just stopped and worked together until the ambulance got there. It was the first time I opened my eyes to how much community was there. It was powerful.

One of the folks who has been more of a challenge than most acted out with survival skills, aggression, intimidation, and violence. It's the normality of what he's living in. He's been asked to take several breaks, and with each break he's taken I've seen him come back and have to make things right. Him having that chance to make

things right with whomever he's messed up with is so important. I don't know what it is about him, I just see so much of myself in him. I see so much good in him and I hold him to that. Because of this respect I'm able to bring him back down to where his voice is.

What makes these shelters different is not barring people. There are breaks and accountability rather than rules and bars. Their whole lives they've been pushed through systems, jail, no housing, living in poverty. I don't come to work with expectations, every shift is going to be different. Staff coming in with expectations of folks when they shouldn't put expectations on them, of how they should act can be a downfall. They've had expectations put on them their whole lives that they couldn't live up to.

I didn't know how this is going to work, being staff without lots of rules. But now I understand. Workers build relationships to gain trust to help that sense of community. We treat folks with dignity and don't talk down to them. Everyone builds these relationships, it's such a huge part.

I didn't think about myself as an authority figure until I got called one and I was like, 'please don't call me that, I'm not an authority figure'. And he said, 'you are kind of'. I couldn't believe it, I was really offended. I acknowledge that I do have power, but I'm uneasy with it and I don't use that unless we're in situations where violence is happening or racism, or any of the isms. But I always try to talk and work it out, communicating with folks and let them know what might happen if they don't give us other ways to communicate with them, like call the police.

Not positioning ourselves as authority goes back to building relationships where you can communicate and get that respect, people will listen and you don't need to phone the police. You can have conversations and hopefully bring them to a place of giving you another option when they are going from zero to a hundred. A few of the people have given us different ways to communicate. One guy asked when he gets like that to tell him to come out for a smoke with us. And that's worked so far. Putting it back on him to give us a strategy. It was great to see it actually work. This is what he's asked, not what we've set.

Many shelters' rules are put in place for safety, and I get that, but I think having it the way it is here is working for people. 40 of the 45 people have been there since the very first day and have made things work. Despite all the bickering and differences, they have made it work.

They've made a community out of it. They share three washrooms and one shower; I couldn't imagine doing that again. Zero to no privacy. And making a community out of what they have.

I got emotional reading this article, that I'm part of this for other shelter folks now. I just want to instill a little bit of hope because I know about fifteen folks from my addiction that are living in that shelter, and I'm able to establish rapport with them. There's obviously good days and bad in this job, but bad days, they're just more challenging. I expected nothing less when I started, and I love my job. I just know that this is what I want to do for a long time.

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