



# Monique & Leroy

#Canadianborn #Housed #maintaining #addiction\_recovery #Canada #Edmonton

**“I would say I was destined to go exploring, be a wild child. In my family it’s all lawyers, doctors. I guess it was my time to rebel.”  
- Leroy**

## MEET MONIQUE & LEROY

There are seven women in the little house beside the Mustard Seed. Monique is the youngest one present. She is very slim with dark brown hair in a long braid. She’s wearing slim fit blue jeans and a campy vintage blue tshirt with an American Flag. Her smile is radiant, revealing perfectly straight, white, shiny teeth, which makes her stand out in current company. (Later, I find out these are implants she received after a friend attacked her, smashing the originals into the pavement). She has the nervous energy of a fifteen year old - laughing, standing up as if on a spring, and now gushing a bit about her love. The other women tucking in to the impressive meal they have just made agree that she’s got something good. They talk about

the kinds of intimacy and partners they’d like in their lives right now, and the kind that’s less interesting. The eldest member of the group, in her seventies, contributes: “Even at my age - oh yes! - you can get a booty call, but it’s not the same thing. I’d like to find someone I feel a connection with, someone to do things with!” The others laugh and nod.

Paula, the organizer of the gathering, is a Life Coach, a rare find in inner-city services. She offers a group where someone like Monique can connect with women of different ages and experiences who are just as invested as she is in personal development. After lunch, they’ll have deeper discussion about a set of values the group developed in a previous week, and what it means to build one’s life around these. Paula has a series of game-like tools designed to engage the women in reflexive thinking and conversation.

## VALUES, MOTIVATIONS & ASPIRATIONS

Monique and her boyfriend Leroy have different kinds of goals now than they did last year. Some of it is about leaving off old habits and hangouts, like the Mustard Seed community meals: “you know, we used to go, like daily, like a ritual, like, we always go. But lately we’re trying to get away from the usual...”

Back at their apartment Leroy excitedly announces, “our new goal at the moment that we’re working on is a Lululemon Marathon in August. It’s a fun marathon Lululemon does...”

“In Vancouver!” Monique interjects.

It turns out that running is a latent talent the couple is trying to resurrect.

The couple has other goals. They see their relationship as a thing in progress, something that needs care and attention. They’d like to start a family. After we have breakfast the next day, I drop them off at the hospital where Monique is doing fertility testing to find out if the alcohol she’s been drinking since age 13 has damaged her reproductive system. Monique would also like to do art. She hasn’t made a plan yet but it’s a part of her identity she’d like to explore. Leroy, on the other hand has taken a six month fashion program and is driven to keep developing his skills, which is how he spends a lot of his time. Gaining access to equipment is a challenge.

When I first visit their home, Leroy apologizes that their apartment isn’t tidier. As we enter, he picks up items from the floor, clears off the kitchen table, and chairs. But aside from these odd items, the place feels clean and orderly. It was probably cleaned well for last week’s “home inspection.” Leroy explains that he is in a housing program, Housing First, through Homeward Trust. “I have to answer to whoever they send over. But as you can see, we have nothing to worry about!” He has a very engaging way of talking, putting a strong emphasis on certain syllables. It’s a rhythm all his own. He is tall, casually dressed in jeans, a sky blue Lululemon t-shirt and a black toque. He has a quick smile, and at first glance is indistinguishable from some other, yuppie, 33 year old who’s stayed on the straight and narrow.

In her apartment, Monique begins to display a maturity shaped by 27, mostly difficult, years. She is more relaxed, still energetic, but being at home, without a crowd, she has lost her nervous edge. The home is new to her, and so is the sense of peace. “When things have brought you discomfort, all that anger, shame, and sadness, to have somewhere I can take my shoes off and if my feet stink,

I can take a shower and wash my socks...” that makes a world of difference. That she and Leroy delight in this apartment is clear: they have set it up in an idiosyncratic way, according to their whim. Their bed is a pull out couch in the living room, the perfect place for one of their beloved netflix marathons. The one bedroom is a good size with large closet: the room is empty, but the closet is full and organized. They giddily show off their expanding wardrobes to me, hopping about theatrically, hugging the hanging clothes and mugging for the camera. They are avid thrift store shoppers and love a Lululemon find. Being housed means being able to be stylish. That’s Leroy’s influence.

Maybe Leroy could have bypassed some of the discomfort that makes this apartment such an oasis now, but that’s not the path he took. “I would say I was destined to go exploring, be a wild child. In my family it’s



all lawyers, doctors. So I was well raised with education, books, but then I guess it was my time to rebel. I knew their structure worked, but I wanted to prove that I could do it on my own. And then after a while you just, like, accept that the structure works, and you find ways to...compromise, I guess?” He talks about how, when his brother wanted to come out here, from BC, he “brought him out north and just took him out drinking and made him sleep on a park bench! - and now look at him...One night, and that’s all it took. He determined, ‘I won’t ask for help again, I’ll just figure out how to be successful on my own.’” Tonight that brother is taking Monique and Leroy out for dinner at the Red Robin. Leroy is proud of him. “I mean it’s not the ideal way to help your brother out, but the way we’re raised...we’re stubborn, so we don’t listen if you just say, do this, this, this.”

Monique and Leroy both came to Alberta from their respective home towns in BC, but they were on very different journeys. “...I wanted to meet my mom, that was my dream...stupidest dream,” scoffs Monique. “But,

I came out here and then I moved back home for a year to get everything in order to come back. And then I came [back] out here, and then... homeless!" She laughs the way you do when delivering a disappointing punchline. She was thirteen years old.

Leroy wasn't in search of anything. He just blacked out one night in BC and woke up in Fort Mac, so he rolled with it. He was twenty "and [he] pretty much never turned away because it's so alluring...for the young crowd to come out and have fun...because, if you got to any other province...a kid that age...you're only going to make \$8-10 an hour. I guarantee it!" The place looks after you pretty well in some respects, he points out.

## **BARRIERS & STRESSORS**

It wasn't just the money Leroy became addicted to. "Yeah. I used to be an alcoholic. That's my addiction" he pronounces. Monique audibly clears her throat, prompting Leroy to add "Ha! And I guess women. Alcohol and women."

"I was waiting for that one!" laughs Monique.

"Alcohol and women, and clothes," Leroy continues to amend his statement. There was a time when he never wore the same thing twice. He literally never laundered his clothes.

His life has taken a pretty dramatic change: "Oh yes, very different. I don't think there would have been a day you would have seen me sober," he says of the not-too-distant past. Alcohol helped in Fort MacMurray: "it takes the edge off, allows you to go talk to people. Because normally you're not gonna go up to fully tattooed people and say 'hi.'" Those same big, brawley, tattooed dudes were recommending booze as their preferred way to tackle everyday challenges. "You're two hundred feet up in the air, learning a trade, you look down and you're like, wobbling. And someone hands you a little bit of...here, have a little bit of vodka! This'll help you!" It was just part of the job.

Leroy looks at Monique and tells me that she's never had such problems, "She's wonder woman!" That is, she didn't use alcohol to cope with the work. She had to convince people that she could earn her wage. "I've worked over a decade in construction...Like, I've put in my time. I won't go back if I don't have to." But it saddens her to think back on her younger, lonelier, lost self. "...When I look at these young girls...it hurts me to see these girls-I-don't-even-care-about...hurting! ...because I'm like...when there was that one person to reach out to me when I was in that spot, like, I really...there was nothing for me out here. Like, I was blessed that I was at that age where people were

like" - here she adopts a gruff, throaty voice - "Oh she's a runt, eh. I'll take her into our pack: she'll learn.' Right? That's how I learned..."

## **NETWORKS & SUPPORTS**

Monique was able to get more access to supports after she met Leroy. She didn't know about a lot of what was out there, even after seven years in Edmonton. Leroy considers himself a bit of a master of the services game: "They wanna see you sit in a chair for days. They wanna see that you want it. So I did all that. I said "Fine: I'll be a pest, a burden to you until you help me. If that's the way you want it, I've got nowhere to go. I'll be back, I just gotta go get a six-pack, a mickey. I'll drink it and come back. And sure enough, that's what it takes."

This isn't Leroy's first place. At the first place, Leroy and Monique tried to employ some of that community goodwill and desire to mentor younger kids. They invited some youth associated with one of the inner city youth services into their home. Only, instead of rehabilitating these youngsters, they lost control of their home. Pretty soon they'd gotten on the wrong side of a worker from the youth organization: "They thought we were trying to corrupt kids but we were really trying to help!" They lost that apartment ("had to move out because the kids turned it into a drug house...") but managed to patch things up with the landlord. They've had no such success with the youth service worker, but they'd like to repair that relationship because they still have ambitions to volunteer.

They learned a lot from that episode, and while the housing inspection is a piece of cake, they understand that other aspects of being housed are more challenging. They see it all around them. Leroy is confused about why the "Housing Division" doesn't "wise up...They've gotta open their eyes. People are just constantly failing, turning them [apartments] into drug havens. What are they doing wrong? Why don't they just go to the five percent that does good and ask them 'what are you doing right?'" What are Monique and Leroy doing right? "Well, people gotta want it."

## **ENABLERS**

Leroy would like it if housing programs were "more lenient" on couples housing, for one. Only Leroy is on the lease, and by having Monique move in he was technically breaking the lease. So they have a verbal

agreement with their landlord to pay an extra \$50 a month. Leroy reflects, "If they wanna help people achieve their recovery, or whatever, they do have to understand that it's hard for people to live alone when you're so used to being an alcoholic/addict and all you've known is chaos. They must know you need a companion of some kind. I couldn't live here alone. Are you kidding? I'd probably be back out there boozing... or bringing people here - that'd be bad! She's ma boss." Monique confirms with a nod.

Monique hesitates when I ask how they've made housing and sobriety work. Then she explains, in a quieter voice, "I've let a lot of people go. Like, I still talk to them, say hello. But I won't ever ask them to come over...Cuz I know that they put me in a lot of pitfalls when I was out there - not their fault - it's just how it works." Once they invited over a younger couple who surprised them by having a fight right in front of them, culminating in the wall getting busted up. Monique and Leroy don't fight like that. "We'll give each other room to breathe and come back to it." So now, "we like both of them, we just won't have them both here, together." It's a rule.

Three or four times a week, Monique and Leroy are regulars at a "biblical counselling" session: "where we talk about the bible," says Monique, and "we get counseled for like an hour," adds Leroy. "Yup - it's just with a friend of ours who's also, like, a recovered alcoholic or something." The friend, who they decide to call Eskimo, "just started it on his own." It's not connected to any formal services. There could be 10-15 people at his house, where the gathering is held. "We all met amongst our journeys somehow." What do they get out of it?

"Understand life I guess," offers Leroy.

"You get to hear other people's stories," Monique adds.

"...And it teaches you, I guess what we call it, 'the Edmonton thing', when you know you've sinned and done wrong for five or ten years, you just can't sit down and do nothing and watch the next generation..." Leroy trails off.

"...Make the same mistakes..."

"...When all you have to do is just sit down with them, and let 'em swear at you, or whatever it is - if that's how they talk, let 'em right? Just let 'em voice their opinion. And then someday their going to sit down and let you talk to them," Leroy finishes.

It's not clear who's counselling whom at Eskimo's group. They find it inspiring and helpful to hear about what's going on in other people's lives - the efforts they're making, the struggles they have - and the examples they give are pretty prosaic. Monique finds

it helpful just to hear familiar stories about what stresses people out, in the context of a shared focus on recovery from addiction. The process of sharing these experiences is not just a question of getting things off your chest; Monique explains that you never know what someone will take from what you have to say, and use to their benefit. It's a kind of generosity.

## DAILY ROUTINE

Now that they're in housing, they've got some emerging leisure activities. Like days watching Netflix, and going shopping. Leroy says, "Edmonton has some nice thrift places." He goes on, "I'm her stylist, she's my muse. I'm Calvin Klein, she's my Claudia Schiffer." Monique's interest in clothes is fledgling. She moved in with very few clothes and he had four foot stacks of shirts. She started hanging them all and showed him how to wash them in the tub. He was concerned about ruining things in the machine. Then he started to address her wardrobe: "It was like the second day and I came home with a brand new pair of jeans for her, and she says 'what am I supposed to do with these?'"

Right now it's more like Leroy's a fallen soldier and she's his Florence Nightingale. About six month back Leroy took a pretty considerable beating ("not everybody likes me") and his conditioned worsened after a medical error (staples left in). After that, Monique and Leroy weren't going to the hospital if it wasn't absolutely necessary. "We don't want to go to hospitals if we don't have to. In Edmonton there's a 48 hour wait if you walk in. Do it at home, and if it fails, get an ambulance, and guess what? You're in right away." That led to Monique draining what sounds like an abscess. She did it like a champ and they were both quite proud. They show off the results, which look as though they may leave a scar.

Leroy is on a break from work because he's still healing, but before that, he worked for Boyle Street Community Services moving enterprise. Boyle Street is an organization he trusts and they've provided some significant helpful help. Most recently, Leroy turned to them for advice after the staples were left in at the hospital; now he's pursuing a settlement. But it was also Boyle Street who hired him to run their kitchen two years ago, drawing on latent skills Leroy had from helping out family friends with a restaurant in high school. Monique found work their two, with their cleaning enterprise. Boyle Street provided opportunities before they had turned their life around.



## WELLNESS AND A GOOD LIFE

Life is just starting again, and they are finding pathways into the 'normal' things that late 20-somethings do: work, shop, watch movies, cook for themselves, decorate their apartment. Finding those opportunities has been key. It allows them to walk away from some of the more familiar stuff that makes it hard to move forward. Nonetheless, community is a big motivator for both Monique and Leroy. They want to use their experience to make a difference - to help others who are struggling with the same challenges. That sense of giving back brings purpose to their lives, and may make it easier to cope with the guilt of leaving other friends behind. Aside from biblical counselling from Eskimo, they haven't yet found a successful outlet for this energy and goodwill.

## OPPORTUNITIES

Reciprocity for recovery. Monique and Leroy have heaps of interest in art, design. They no longer qualify as young people for access to services for youth. How might there be the same sort of developmental programs for adults?

Companion housing. Monique and Leroy found a work around so M could live in Leroy's apartment without breaking his lease. For Leroy, not being housed alone is crucial to recovery. How could Housing First respond to needs for companionship?

Peer-led counselling group. Monique and Leroy have heaps of interest in art, design. They no longer Monique and Leroy join a group of people in recovery 3-4 times a week to do "biblical counselling". The group is informal with no link to services or institutions. How could this model spread with from formal supports?





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**“I coulda been someone else, I coulda been the mayor!”**

## MEET AL

“If you guys are looking to score dope you’re being too obvious. I yelled this at them. Yeah I did.” Al is telling me about a time a few years ago when he walked past a group gathered outside the “crack towers” in downtown Edmonton. “They were all just standing there in this group”, so I yelled out “be smart about it, just have one guy buy!”.

“I was walking towards the Hope Mission that night. I was by myself. I thought they were going to beat me up. But, no. Instead, this guy came running up to me and told me they were filming a commercial. I looked carefully at the group and sure – there was a camera, a track on the floor, another camera. Boy had I

misread that situation. The guy asked if I wanted to be in their commercial. I said sure why not. They had an actress there too, a woman dressed up as a prostitute. It was my job to walk past her. So, I did. And you know, when I walked past her I turned around to take a look – I mean what guy doesn’t turn around and take a look at a prostitute? The film guy, well he said I was doing a perfect job. We did about 3 takes and then he gave me \$20”.

“When I got to the Hope Mission I told some people about it. It was only then that I realized – Damn Al you’re so stupid – you never got the name of the video. So now I’m thinking I’m in a condom commercial. No, I’m in an STI commercial. I Still don’t know. It was fun. I would love to do that and get paid for it again. That would be my dream job.”



Al is 53 years old. He's been in Edmonton since he was a baby, since his mom died. This was when he was about two. Social services came to his dad on the reserve and told him that he wouldn't be able to take care of 4 kids. So, they took Al and his brother to Edmonton.

Al was in and out of a couple foster homes. At age 16 he ran away and joined the circus. He travelled with them all over Canada running the dime toss game, managing one of the rides, and helping out with setup and tear down. "It was a good experience for me. I learned to be on my own and that was important. I also learned about people – how they are in different situations, in big crowds, with money etc. I wouldn't trade that for anything."

Not long after Al got back from touring with the circus a photo of him made it to the front page of the Edmonton Star. The photo captured a fresh young Al admiring all the "skirts" – young women- out on the streets during a warm spring day. Al liked the photo but didn't think much about it until not long after. "I walked into the arcade where I liked playing pinball and the owner gave me a piece of paper and said my sister wanted me to call her. My sister? Poof instantly I got a family". His uncle had seen the photo, recognized the family resemblance and tracked Al down. "The reunion was weird. My sister was raised on the reserve by my auntie, while I was raised in care. Our life experience was so different".

Even though Al and I are together for about 5 hours that day, he doesn't mention his sister again. When I press him to talk about family he says: "I don't see them much. No. I don't want to have to explain my life to them. They would be so surprised. They have no idea. With the people I meet here on the streets I don't have to explain anything to them. To all of us here what I do isn't a big deal. I wish my family was more important to me but this is just a fact of where I'm at in my life right now."

## VALUES, MOTIVATIONS & ASPIRATIONS

It was 7:15 in the morning when I first met Al. He was sipping coffee in the corner of a cramped waiting room at the Bissell Centre, a popular inner-city agency, hoping his number would be drawn in the ballot for work that day. The Bissell Centre offers an employment and casual labour service, or temp agency, as it is often referred to. Al has been waiting since about 6:15. The room was pretty full. It was made up mostly of men – a mix of folks new to being on the street as well as old-timers like Al. There was

free coffee and sandwiches and a place to sit indoors. At the front was a desk, and a woman sat there assigning work placements as they came in. The men chatted casually amongst themselves waiting for their number to be drawn.

Al had number 17 and doubted he would get work today. "There's not much work available in the winter time" he said. It's been more than a month since his number was called, nevertheless, Al persists and goes to the centre early each morning. The more we talk the more evident it becomes that Al would see it as a missed opportunity if he didn't at least try each day to secure work.

Al admits that he doesn't really like the kind of work he



gets through this temp agency. Then he corrects himself, "no, it's not really about the work, rather it's about the role". Al explains that he doesn't like being a 'worker'. It's too "vague" and "unfulfilling" he says. "You don't have a title, you're just a generic worker, and since it's just one day of work here, and one day there, it feels like you're on a treadmill going round and round; there's no excitement to the work, no sense of it going anywhere".

And yet everyday Al goes back seeking the opportunity. "Work is what breaks up the cycle"; the unchanging, routine of each and every day. "When you're on the street it's pretty much the same thing week after week, month after month. You go here, you go there, you time it out to be at that place then. This is pretty much the cycle. And at the end, you're just back at the Hope Mission. Don't have anything to shoot for. You Get stuck. I try not to think about it too much."

Al is trained as a builder. For a while he worked as a plasterer, doing stucco and other trade work. He says he always liked the sense of accomplishment at the end of a project. It always felt good. But when he hurt his back a while ago he had to stop. "I couldn't jump into an office job then because I didn't have the right

schooling and so here I am now on AISH (Assured Income for severely handicapped) and this is my life now. "If I don't get work through the temp agency, then I just follow my track, my usual everyday". Al's track consists of drinking coffee at the Bissell centre a bit longer, then going across the road to the Mustard Seed for breakfast, coffee and more socializing with whoever is there.

It seems like when Al hurt his back it was a turning point – not in terms of reduced financial income, although that certainly had an impact – but in terms of losing his sense of purpose and achievement, both very important to Al's wellbeing. "I have no idea what I could do now. I don't know what else I'm good at."

What if agencies could offer Al rotating residencies – temporary internships in a variety of roles/ places so he could decide himself what he would like to pursue.

Al goes bottle picking, "picking" on the weekends – Saturday and Sunday nights and then sleeps whenever he can throughout the day. He usually goes when he's low on cigarettes. On a good night, he can collect 10 bags of bottles. Each bag can be cashed in at the bottle depot for about \$10 / the cost of 1 pack of cigarettes.

For Al, it really doesn't seem to be about money. For him, the value of work is in the sense of purpose and accomplishment he gleans from it. Al takes pride in hard work. This is why he goes "picking" instead of pan handling informal work. "Panhandling is not really work. You just hang out. It's too easy to ask for money the way these young kids are doing it on the south-side. Picking is a real job, it takes a lot of time, motivation and energy."

Other than picking and temp work, Al is at a loss for what else he can do. He identifies himself as an artist and makes some money from time to time making dream catchers which he sells to staff at drop-ins, as well as tourists. One of his intricate dream catchers can sell for between \$70 - \$120. But it's hard to find a space where he can sit uninterrupted and do his craft, so he hasn't done it for a while. Al's dream is to be an entrepreneur. Opportunity space/ What If Al had access to a workroom? What if Al could be introduced to on-line selling sites like ETSY.com where his dream catchers could be commissioned?

Al says he is most happy in the mornings when the day is fresh: "I'm up, I'm alive. It's a new day. There is a chance of getting work. You don't know what's in store for you". He says he finds the end of day much harder "I don't care for the end of day anymore. To me there is dealing with the disappointment of the day, coupled with the temptations for trouble, the stuff to shy away from". How to mobilize this energy each day and not let it dwindle into disappointment each night?; a disappointment in self that is soothed through alcohol and other substances.

## ENABLERS

Al is an accomplished builder, artist, a people person, and a care giver (I observe him giving cigarettes to strangers in sleeping bags on the street, and giving his shopping cart to a woman with "more bags than me"). I ask Al what his current aspirations are. He responds: "to get into the 55+ club". This is housing for folks over 55. Al is 53 years old. "I can't wait to turn 55" he tells me. Not wanting to trouble the Housing workers he's worked with before, Al is biding his time until he this avenue to secure housing opens up for him. Moreover, it's supportive housing, with regulations for guests, which, given Al's track record means its less likely that Al will be evicted. What If folks evicted were segmented by their evictions, and housing workers could offer particular support based on problem area such as hoarding issues? Generously opening up their housing to other people on the streets? If housing support workers had offered Al supportive housing the second time, or strategies to not let buddies stay over, he might have remained in his second home.

Still wanting to know Al's aspirations, I rephrase the question and ask him whether he has any short term goals. "I don't have any, maybe to live a little longer. A lot of us on the streets are drawing a blank. Don't really know what to do in terms of changing our lives". Staying alive, and getting housing are his articulated aspirations and goals when asked directly. But through the time we spent together I learned that Al does still have dreams and wishes for his future.

## NETWORKS & SUPPORTS

When I ask Al how long he's been "sleeping rough" he says: "this time round? about 3 months". In total Al has been street-involved for between 10-15 years. He used to sleep outside, but he says that as he gets older it's much harder to endure the cold winter weather. Plus, he got sick – high blood pressure and heart problems so prefers to stay indoors.

When Al first started feeling unwell he spent some time in the hospital. Health Services brokered him to Homeward Trust who found him accommodation pretty quick. He was housed for a while, but when he started letting his friends in, things with the landlord soured. "I didn't like seeing my buddies sleeping rough so I took them in. But then things went from bad to worse. Dope, drinking, whatever your fix is became the norm. Before long, I no longer had a place."

Al explains that this happened twice. Two times Homeward Trust got him housed, and both times he



got evicted. What if Homeward Trust could broker Al's friends to housing from the comfort of Al's living room?

Al tells me he's tired of sleeping at the Hope Mission each night and lugging his stuff around during the day. But now he's just way too embarrassed to ask the folks at Homeward Trust to help him again. He worked with them for about 6 years and feels like he let them down. Disappointing people he came to know, and not living up to their expectations, weighs heavy on his shoulders. "I kick myself in the ass for the last eviction. And I haven't gone back to Homeward Trust since". Al would rather sleep on a bed-bug infested mat, his head inches from a strangers' feet, than interact with agency staff who and stress about disappointment and closeness.

It's a pattern that seems to repeat itself with Al. Al seems ill-equipped to deal with the emotions that the closeness of relationships may bring. Al says "I've never stuck long enough with a service to finish something. Because when it ends, the ending of something. It's hard. It's hard to open up, to be vulnerable. Services should just let the classes continue, not have an ending".

This is a great tension for Al; he runs away from closeness and the disappointment it brings to him and to others, yet wishes he had more closeness in his life.

"It's going to be an especially hard Christmas for me this year" is one of the first things he tells me when I sit down beside him, moments after we meet. With tears in his eyes he tells me that the mother of his kids had just passed away and that even though they had been a part for a long time he still loved her and had wanted to go to the funeral. His daughter didn't inform him of the time of the funeral, even after he told her he really wanted to go. "I'm pretty shocked about it, about why she didn't find me to tell me? She should have told me".

Al has three kids- age 34, 28 and 30. "They don't come to visit me because of my previous life. Because I was addicted to dope and stuff". They don't want to be around that". So, Al rarely sees them or speaks to them. "I feel like I don't really have a lot to offer my kids".

Instead, Al muses about the construct of the 'family'. "It was naïve of me to think I could get there, have a real family. It was maybe not a goal for me, something I just saw on TV. Maybe it's a goal for others, but not really ever been possible for me." Al is pointing out that, like many Indigenous folks who grew up in care – that he lacks a model of 'family' that he can draw inspiration from when interacting with his own. And so, time passes and his network grows smaller and smaller, dominated mostly by staff at service agencies and by "acquaintances" on the street.

"My everyday is really secluded. I feel so alone. Desolate. Even if I had a relationship it would be hard. I would

always be asking – what do they want from me? What can I give them? And then there's the guilt. It's much easier to have street 'acquaintances' and that's it."

## **BARRIERS & STRESSORS**

It's now 8:30am and we're still sitting at the employment service. It's becoming clear to Al and the folks who remain, that they aren't going to be given work that day. People are starting to leave. Al and I have been chatting for a bit, so I invite him for coffee and to continue the conversation. It doesn't take much convincing, but Al expresses concern about the struggle he faces going places with his two heavy bags. He explains that he usually wheels them around in a shopping cart, a bright orange one is his preference, but he gave the cart to a woman the night before, as she had more stuff than him and was struggling.

Al's bags curtail his movements. Al is not big. Nor does he look particularly strong. My impression of Al, with his soft voice and bright smile is of a sensitive and gentle fella. Al's bags seem real heavy – so I offer to help him carry. They are heavy - full of dirty laundry.

Al explains that while many of the folks who sleep rough choose not to keep possessions because they are cumbersome and get stolen, not even extra clothes ("which are easy to come by in the shelter system"), he can't live this way.

Al is meticulous about his appearance, illustrated by the crisp bright blue collared shirt he is wearing and his shiny long hair. Al explains that over the years he's learned that it's important, when you're on the street, to present yourself as tidy and clean as possible. He explains this is the case especially during winter, where the tidier you look, the more you can blend in if you want to sit for a while at a café, or in a building.

Unfortunately, the bags give away that Al lives on the street. And one moment when I go to the bathroom, a security guard of the mall yells at Al to move along. There is currently no storage facility or locker room where Al can leave his stuff during the day. Having stuff is a barrier to Al leaving the inner city. And it definitely blocks Al from seeking out other opportunities for work, learning, or other activities of interest beyond that which he finds at the Bissell Centre and the Mustard Seed.

Al tells me that one bag is full of clothes for laundering (he has to go to a regular laundromat as the inner city services don't currently offer free laundry), while the other bag contains clean clothes, shampoo, and other personal items. Al explains that the shampoo and conditioner he carries with him are

all “luxury items” which he pays for from the money he earns “picking”.

There aren't too many coffee shops by the Bissell centre so Al suggests we go to the Canada Place, a substantial office complex that can be seen from the distance. Canada Place is home to many Government services and also has a food court on its main floor.

We walk slowly avoiding patches of ice and snow. Like many folks on the street Al is wearing thick boots and a long warm coat. But the bags are cumbersome and Al stops frequently to put them down and take a break. I joke that his bags seem to be full of rocks, and Al insists that there isn't anything in there but clothes. No memorabilia, nothing sentimental, just clothes.

As we talk I believe him - he has a passion for clothes. He has a number of shirts that he says he likes and can't give them up, even after they become holey. Al says it is for this reason that he taught himself to sew. He tells me that he knows several different sewing stitches for patching and repairing clothing. Moreover, the last time he had housing he invested in a sewing machine and was starting to teach himself how to use it through YouTube. Unfortunately, a friend asked to use it one afternoon and when he came home, it was dismantled into many pieces “and that was the end of that”. Touring facilities for at risk youth in Edmonton and in Toronto we've seen workshops with sewing machines and lessons teaching youth to sew on the same machines used in the industry. What if a service like this for adults could help Al both grow his passion and make money, and pass his time with meaning. The lack of services for adults beyond basic needs is a barrier for Al's greater well being.

Al says he doesn't have the confidence to seek out a different life for himself, especially at this point, now that he's 53. Although he does think about a how things could be different sometimes, he says he has low self-esteem, and this is a barrier to him seeking out something different.

Al says he's afraid to get close to people, afraid of disappointing people, afraid of trying out different things. Al tells me that he has had low self-esteem since he was a kid. He says his foster brother used to taunt him telling him that the only reason the family took him in was because the government paid them a monthly stipend to do. “I coulda been someone else” Al tells me, “I coulda been the mayor!” What if Al was exposed to more success stories? Positive stories in a story bank he could access that showed him that change is possible and encouraged him to take a first step? What if Al could spend time with “Al's number 1 fan”, someone who would get to know Al and help him reframe the way he sees himself so that he can try out some of the passions he is good at.

Al says he's pretty much given up on the help that the social services in downtown Edmonton can provide

for him. “It's all quite unhelpful help” he says. He uses services for sleeping, eating and a place to socialize and hang out, but he feels that the available services don't offer much more than that. And when they do try to offer more there are too many barriers for him, “too much paper work to fill out again and again, and too many applications. I just turn away”.

Acknowledging his disappointment in the services around him, I ask Al what he would like social services to deliver more of? “Excitement, newness, unfortunately I don't get much newness or excitement in my life. It's just the same thing day after day”. What if a drop in was like a travel centre? Brokering folks to some of the exciting things around town – art gallery, meet ups, learning events, perhaps trying new things, and meeting new people, would help Al find confidence to make the changes he is contemplating in his life.

## DAILY ROUTINE

Al 's order for breakfast was a coffee, toast and peanut butter, and a bowl of fruit. He eats intermittently, while telling me about his routine.

Wake up 5:30 at the Hope Mission where he sleeps most nights. Go to the Bissel Centre –to get a number making him eligible for the work lottery. It takes a few hours at least until all the work is assigned so he hangs out and drinks coffee and socializes with the same people he sees there most days. If his number is called and he gets work he is given a work package – a packed lunch, gloves, a map etc. and will earn about \$140.00 a day. But, most of the time his number doesn't get called. Since it's warm inside and there's free coffee he stays at the centre a while. But this waiting is pretty boring. “I'm waiting around at least 2-3 hours every day. Waiting and standing in line so often and there is nothing productive to do. Wish I could be making something”.What if the centre gave folks space to work on their side projects there while they wait? So at the end of the morning people like Al who want to work for the meaning and purpose it brings to their lives, feel a bit more accomplished? What if the centre ran an agency wide internal temporary work force– call on your community when you want snow shoveled, or furniture moved, or mail delivered. There is a willing workforce- why contract out?

Whenever he feels its time, Al gathers his bags and walks across the road to the Mustard Seed for breakfast. He says he spends many hours there socializing with folks he knows. If he has a “housekeeping task” to do he usually does it in the afternoon. The tasks usually don't take him far out of the Mustard Seed / Bissel Centre/ Hope Mission / Boyle McCauley Health radius. Last week they involved “travelling around with a friend to check out the cost of reading glasses”.



During the time I'm with Al, the task at hand is finding a replacement shopping cart for his bags. After we finish our coffee at Canada Place I accompany him as he seeks out the shopping cart. We head towards one of the bottle depots where Al says there are always abandoned shopping carts.

As we walk Al gives me a tour – the George Spady where he went in for detox a few years ago, the police headquarters (he used to want to be a cop), the Hope Mission and other services he uses each week. From his tour, I learn that his life is very much limited to a small section of the downtown inner city, and to the services available there. What if there Al and folks like him were given exciting reason to move around the city. What if exchanges were set up with other locations so Al could experience and thus be incentivized to seek out other experiences?

The bottle depot is a busy place. We're there about 10 minutes and at least a dozen people are going in with 5-10 clear garbage bags full of glass bottles and cans coming out with cash. It's \$0.10 for a container 1 litre and under, and \$0.25 for containers over 1 litre. Containers include aluminum cans, glass bottles and also plastic and cardboard juice containers. Inside workers at the depot dump the bags onto a conveyer belt and a machine counts them. We hear a lot from folks in Edmonton about supplementing government checks through "picking". Apparently the Bottle Depot owner will also buy cables and metals and other items people find on the streets.

Al finds a bright orange (Home Depot) shopping cart and loads his bags in. He's much more mobile now. He tells me he's planning on going to the dollar store to buy pieces of red construction paper and turn his cart into santa's sley for the holidays. Al has a playful sense of humor.

Where is he off to next? The Mustard Seed. They offer coffee and food and a place to hang out during the day. The Mustard Seed is a Christian humanitarian

organization running a drop-in centre run in an old church. Staff, wearing mustard coloured shirts, are welcoming and friendly. Inside it has a pub like feel to it, lots of wood paneling and big community tables.

The Mustard Seed seems to be Al's main hang during the day and in the evening. I saw him there 3 evenings in a row. At night when many other services are closed, the Mustard Seed provides dinner (you have to line up 4pm-5pm for dinner at 7pm). They also provide entertainment, including karaoke nights which people seem to really love. Al usually stays until about 8pm or 9pm. It's about that time every night that he heads to the Hope Mission to join the line there in order to get a bed. "Last week I was doing my thing, hanging out at the Mustard Seed, and it got too late for the Hope Mission. I ended up sleeping in the "snake pit" (it's in the basement of the Hope Mission where they put folks when the main area has reached capacity). At 10pm it's touch and go whether the Hope Mission will still have free beds. Being street involved means that your time is very much restricted by service delivery. What if people who return to the same shelter each night can be guaranteed a bed so that if they need to work at night, or want to volunteer, or take a night course etc. they aren't worried about securing a bed for themselves.

Al describes this as his "track" – the track he walks every day. Not much changes, day to day. Al can't remember the last time he left the inner city. He says there must be a good reason for him to leave, "leave to go where?" The inner city is his home and he feels comfortable and safe there.

## WELLNESS AND A GOOD LIFE

Anthropologist Edward Fischer tells us that "well-being is more than just being well; that the good life is not a state to be obtained, but an ongoing aspiration for something better that gives meaning to life's pursuit" (2014: 2). Indeed, in the 5+ hours I spend with Al, he repeatedly comes back to themes reflecting his desire to live a life that he deems more worthwhile, a life of accomplishment, a life where he feels more fulfilled.

However, Al no longer believes that he has power to change his direction. Despite wanting to change, wanting more from his time on earth, Al believes that the opportunity spaces to make these changes aren't there for him. Perhaps, as an Indigenous man, removed from his family and put in care, they never were? So, day after day Al carries his heavy bags around following his "track", waiting to turn 55 so he can access the supportive housing he believes will work best for him.

This is another kind of waiting game. Not just waiting in line for food, or a bed to sleep in. Not waiting for your



number to be drawn for a day of work. This is waiting out life. For Al, passing time until turning 55, seems to be the only aspiration/ purpose/ goal that he feels he can achieve.

Al isn't saving up for anything, not saving up time nor money. The time he has is spent waiting, and his money goes to doing laundry, buying snacks, cigarettes (about a pack a day), and scratch and win cards- "I spend way too much money on that". Al says he's not saving up "I can't see saving up for anything. Whatever it is, it's more for me to carry around". I get the sense that for Al referring both to material objects as well as relationships.

Is this a good life? Al doesn't really think so. He identifies himself as an artist, a builder, a father, a grandfather, a counselor, a friend, a leader. For Al, as a start, a good life, or a better life, would be about adding something new, exciting or different to his daily routine. He feels bored, uninspired, stuck along this one track.



## OPPORTUNITIES

What if agencies could offer Al rotating residencies—temporary internships in a variety of roles/ places so he could decide himself what he would like to pursue.

What if Al had access to a workroom? What if Al could be introduced to on-line selling sites like Etsy.com where his dream catchers could be commissioned?

What if folks evicted were segmented by their evictions, and housing workers could offer particular support based on problem areas (hoarding issues, generously opening inviting other people from the streets to stay etc).

What if Homeward Trust could broker Al's friends to housing from the comfort of Al's living room?

Touring facilities for street involved youth we've seen workshops including sewing workshops where youth are taught to sew on the same machines that are used in the industry. What if a service like this for adults could help Al both grow his passion, make money, and find greater meaning. The lack of services for adults beyond basic needs is a barrier for Al's greater well being.

What if Al was exposed to more success stories? Positive stories in a story bank he could access that showed him that change is possible and encouraged him to take a first step? What if Al could spend time with "Al's number 1 fan", someone who would get to know Al and help him reframe the way he sees himself so that he can try out some of the passions he is good at.

What if a drop in was like a travel centre? Brokering folks to some of the exciting things around town – art gallery,

meet ups, learning events, perhaps trying new things, and meeting new people, would help Al find confidence to make the changes he is contemplating in his life.

What if the centre ran an agency wide internal temporary work force— call on your community when you want snow shoveled, or furniture moved, or mail delivered. There is a willing workforce- why contract out?

What if the centre gave folks space to work on their side projects there while they wait? So at the end of the morning people like Al who want to work for the meaning and purpose it brings to their lives, feels a bit more accomplished?

What if exchanges were set up with other locations so Al could experience and thus be incentivized to seek out other experiences?

What if people who return to the same shelter each night can be guaranteed a bed so that if they need to work at night, or want to volunteer, or take a night course etc. they aren't worried about securing a bed for themselves.



#shelter #Indigenous #Canada #Edmonton

**“I want to get outta here. Everyday counts”**

## MEET BRANDON

“People here say I push myself too hard. Staff here at the agencies, my roommates at the shelter, they’re all telling me to take a break. But I don’t have that kind of time. I need to get outa here fast”. Brandon, age 25, is new to Edmonton, he’s come from a small town in Northern Ontario, and only been in town 2 weeks. He’s trying to find work, any work, so he can get out of the shelter system and start earning money and building up his life.

For Brandon, every day spent “on the streets”, especially if he were to “take a break”, is a waste of his time. He’s strong, fit, young, determined, driven and future oriented. He’s impatient to get his life going and increasingly frustrated by barriers to getting out of the cycle of homelessness.

Talking to Brandon, seeing his enthusiasm and drive, sparks my thinking about the old timers of the Edmonton Streets who I’d been getting to know. How they’d also come to Edmonton in their 20’s with plans for work or school, and how one wrong decision or interaction, or injection of a needle ended up trapping them into the system (for example see Dwayne). As

Brandon tells me himself “I know where those trails lead and I don’t want to go down there”. What if social services segmented folks new to living rough in Edmonton differently from those who have been living rough a long time? For cases like Brandon, a triage system or intake system that offered him support based on where he’s at, brokering him out of the social service system immediately, would reduce the chances of him getting stuck in it. Getting folks like Brandon, desirous of economic self-sufficiency, out of the system would also save the City of Edmonton money each year.

When I meet Brandon for the first time he’s at the Mustard Seed, a Christian humanitarian organization running a drop-in centre in an old church in Edmonton’s inner city. The drop-in has a barn like or pub like feel to it. Brandon is seated at a round table by himself. I have one more pair of thick socks to hand out to someone, but they are pink. “No way, it would break my heart if I wore pink socks” Brandon says rejecting my offer. Brandon speaks in a deep voice – he could be on the radio, and when he talks his face has a real brightness to it.

The Mustard seed is a hub of social activity, in fact it’s known as a place to “socialize”. Thus Brandon is a formidable figure sipping a styrofoam cup full of coffee, alone, at a large circular table in the middle of the room. It’s 10pm and while some folks are making signs of moving on to find a bed for the evening, Brandon says he’s got temporary housing at the Salvation Army and so doesn’t need to leave just yet. “I value that bed more than any other thing in my life right now. Having a bed gives my body the chance to rest which after a busy day walking around is really needed”.

When Brandon first arrived he stayed in a hotel for a couple of days. Then he spent one week at the Herb Jameson. “The Herb Jameson was awful. I used my shoes as a pillow and went to the bathroom so fast so to make sure that no one had time to steal my stuff”. It wasn’t too cold out so he spent some days wandering around, staying up through the night and taking naps in parks during the day. Then he got into the Salvation Army’s short-term residence for men. He’s in their dorms and really doesn’t like it. “It reminds me of jail. There’s no privacy, nothing to do, and no girls”.

Brandon says he prepared well for this move to Edmonton, getting all his ducks in a row. He gathered information from his brother and other people who’d been out here on where to find shelter and food in town, and made sure he had all the right ID cards needed to secure welfare and other social services. This is how he got short term residence so quickly,

and how he’s already enrolled in a course skilling him for the oil rigs, and worked a couple days at a temp agency. All in just 2 weeks of being in Edmonton, and without much help or support or knowing anyone.

Brandon says that he has met one guy who he really liked and who was helpful. Just after he arrived, and was getting his bearings, an older guy on the street called out to him. “This old guy yelled out why are you walking around with a big bag aimlessly? I told him I wasn’t walking around aimlessly, I was exploring. He just laughed at me. But it was good meeting him, we walked around for a while, he gave me a lot of the answers I needed”. What if there were free daily walking tours, run by people who have spent time on the street. The tours could orient people to the area as well as provide accurate information and answer questions. The tour could end someplace where outreach workers could help people with their needs.

Even though Brandon came to town prepared, it didn’t take long before he lost his bag which contained all his intentionally packed possessions – his work boots, a rain suit, cartons of cigarettes, socks, underwear, as well as his birth certificate and SIN card. He’d been wandering around and met some folks who invited him over to a house to party. Brandon said he wasn’t “drinking much, he was just there to gather information”. But before Brandon went into the house he hid his bag in the bushes nearby. In the morning he left early and forgot to get his bag. “I bet it’s still there, I’ve never seen those people again. I still walk around looking, hoping to find the place but I don’t know exactly where it is”. Brandon is now in the process of getting a new birth certificate and SIN card but it takes a long time, about 10-16 weeks he tells me. Brandon tells me he’s currently saving up to restock his gear. He needs runners, new boots, soap, toothpaste, a lock, shower sandals etc. He says he has a written list and when he’s able to he buys 2 or 3 things at a time. Like with many folks on the streets of Edmonton, having the opportunity to keep personal items in lockers and storage facilities would reduce theft and loss of important items that are needed for people’s well being. Moreover, it would reduce the anxiety people carry with them day to day about the theft or loss of their personal items.

We chat for a bit and it looks like the Mustard Seed is closing. Brandon leaves. But his persistence, motivation, foresight and organizational skills, make him quite an unusual member of the sleeping rough population; a “positive deviant”. And so I call the salvation army to leave a message for Brandon to see whether we could meet again the next day.



## VALUES, ASPIRATIONS & MOTIVATIONS

I arrive just after 9am at the Salvation Army men's shelter. Brandon is at the payphone. "Oh it's you who left the message, I wasn't sure". He tells me that he was just thinking about leaving, since he wasn't exactly sure who was coming or when. He usually goes to a temp agency in the morning to see if there is work but is okay spending the morning talking with me and so we walk to Canada Place- a glass and steel office building in downtown Edmonton with a distinctive pink colour. It has a food court. Brandon says he's still full from a big breakfast and so only gets a coffee.



I ask Brandon why he came to Edmonton and he tells me he's here to work; that there was little work available in northern Ontario and so he's come to Edmonton to try his luck. His brother told him about working on the oil rigs in Alberta, a gig that pays well (about \$30/ hour) but is risky - "if there's a gas leak and you don't get away and no one is there to help, you'll be unconscious in seconds and likely die).

For the past week, he's been enrolled in a course –oil rig fixing. He's working on collecting his "tickets" – certificates of qualification needed for the work he's interested in. He's already got first aid, fall protection, bear awareness, fire watch safety etc. but to work

on the oil rigs he also needs skid steer, petroleum safety training, zoom boom, confined space training amongst a few others. He's taking this training through the Bissell Centre. He mentions a few times being pretty frustrated with the pace of the training – that it's just too slow for him and instead of a full week he could have completed it in a day or two.

Brandon is really antsy to get work. "I'm going to have a job next week, that's the hope. If I don't get a job, if I'm just drinking coffee all day, then I might as well have stayed in Ontario. I expect to do better here than what I was doing in Ontario".

Brandon's driving motivation is to have a better life. "I've come here to get away from everything and try something new. This is the farthest from home I've ever been". Brandon tells me that he was moving back and forth a lot in Ontario, staying between grandparents and mother. He would go and disappear for a week, go around, visit, go into the bush and hunt, fish, trap with friends. He told me he was always moving around a lot, even when he was a baby, he was moved from family member to family member, so this was what he was used to, it wasn't new. "Men from northern Ontario like doing their own thing. They don't like depending on someone because when you depend on someone bad things happen, you end up somewhere you don't want to be, lost, or doing something bad. Like yesterday I joined a guy to go to a mission house to get some clothes, but it took so long I ended up missing meals".

Brandon's tells me that his goal is to live a different kind of. "I don't want to be having this kind of life anymore. I have to have a ticket to fall back on. Don't want to keep doing this".

## ENABLERS

His ticket to a different way of life is work, and the possibilities that come with making money. He has plans already for how he will spend his money – both practical and recreational. He will hire a lawyer to help him get a pardon, as his criminal record is a barrier to him finding employment. He plans to buy a car, and eventually drive the car back home to Ontario, probably in 2 -3 years. But then he also wants to save up to travel to Brazil. He wants to experience a different kind of weather, and see the Angel Falls of the Amazon rainforest. He says that once he has a regular income he will upgrade his schooling, eventually he wants to work as a welder. Brandon tells me that he started a welding course before but he ended up on the streets during the first term and so had to drop out. What if there was an accountability coach who would help folks like Brandon with strong well thought out motivations

and aspirations stay on track and not get bogged down by some of the challenges of life. What if there was a platform for someone in the community to sponsor Brandon's education so that Brandon could right away train to be a welder.

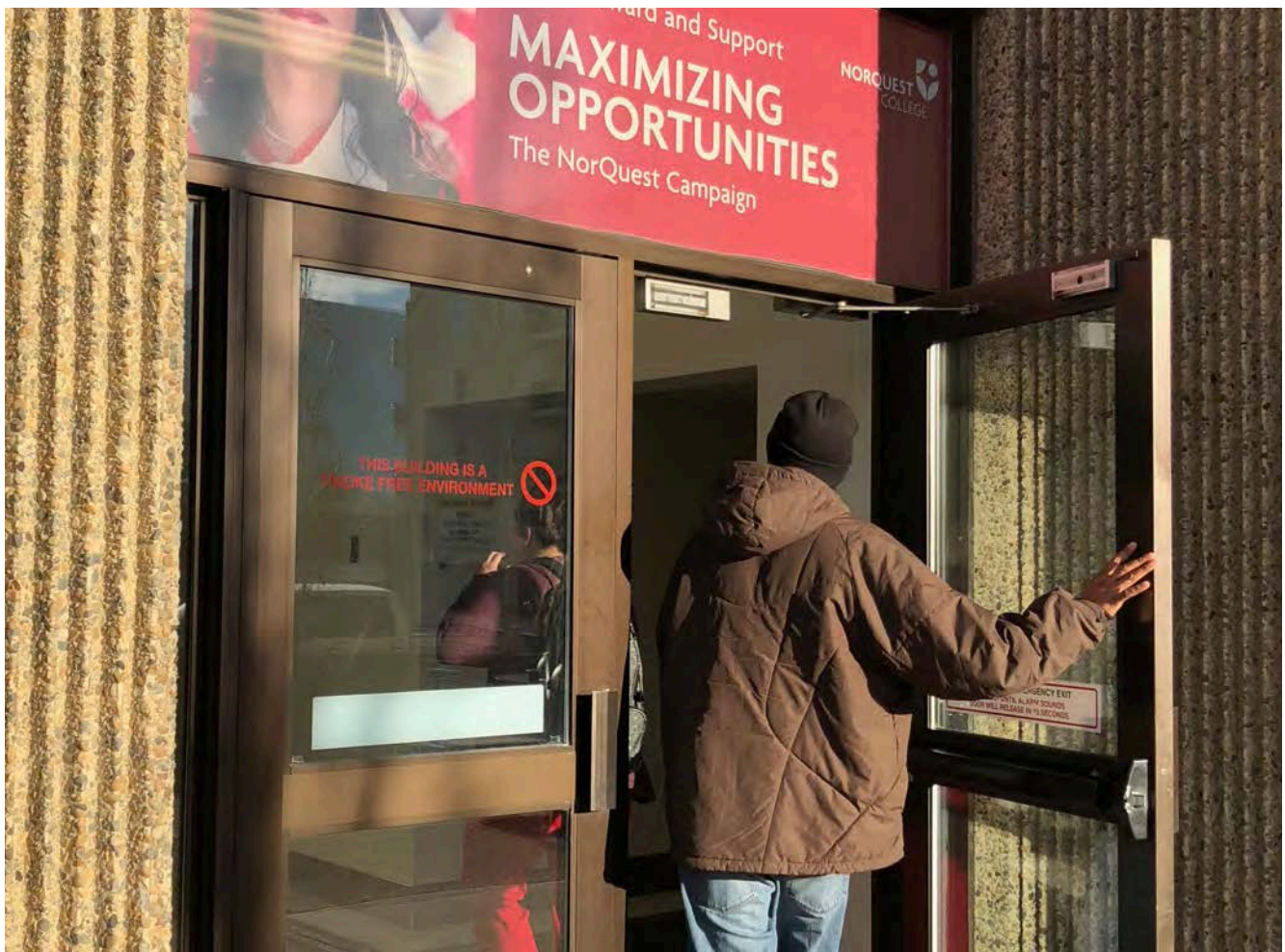
Although he's worried about the risk of working on the oil rig, the good pay will allow him to save up fast. During our walk to the food court we pass an Alberta military recruitment office. Brandon says he'd like to work in the military (again) he used to but was discharged for being too aggressive. But, the main reason he is pursuing another line of work is that his goal is to make more than \$32,000 a year, much more. He tells me that in the military he'd only really make that amount and it's not enough for what he wants to do.

I ask Brandon what makes him different from other people we meet who live on the streets and he says "I don't smoke or do what all these others do. I'm more determined". What if there was a platform through which Brandon could share his drive and motivation to live a different life with other folks who are contemplating change? Could Brandon, who is doing a little better than some other folks, be paired up with folks not doing as well, to help inspire and encourage them to take steps towards change?

## DAILY ROUTINE

It's just after 11am, coffee has been drunk, and we've been sitting down talking for a while, so I ask Brandon what he has planned for the rest of the day. He tells me that he wants to find an institution called NorthQuest College as he's heard they have an employment centre there. "Now is a perfect time to go, I'm on schedule". I see how important time is to Brandon and that he's regimented himself by the hour.

Brandon is an information junkie and a self described "explorer". He's never been in Edmonton before and so spends his days walking around, checking the place out. "People can't keep up with me, I walk fast and I walk far". He outlines for me a perimeter of where he walks to, and it is off my map of the Inner City. He explains that this is how he's gathered most of his information – so now he knows where the thrift stores are, the service agencies, the temp agencies, continuing education departments, the malls, and gyms etc. This knowledge is valuable and seems to make Brandon feel safe – he's able to make informed decisions and be in control of his life.



We leave Canada Place in search of NorthQuest College, “I have a rough idea of where it is” he says as we set out. We walk for about 30 minutes. Brandon tells me that he’s not afraid of walking around. He’s big, been to the military and in good shape. Plus he keeps to his own. If people approach him to cause trouble he tells them not to get in his way. Generally, he feels safe. I notice that Brandon uses keen observation skills to help direct him. “It’s gotta be close, people are wearing colours, they must be students” he says. We find the college. “Not sure if this is the right building. Let’s just start here” Brandon says.

Brandon walks straight in, not hesitating for a moment. Perhaps it is his height (surely he is above 6 feet tall) that has led to his confidence. Brandon scans the foyer, finds the information desk and directly approaches the woman there. “I’m seeking out some information about programs” he says. There is no line up and no one nearby, yet the woman insists that he take a number from the machine before being served. Brandon tries the machine but it asks for a student number, which Brandon does not have. The woman directs Brandon to another building. Brandon is not put off by this and marches on.

The next building over is home to the Alberta Indigenous Construction Career Centre – although Brandon doesn’t say anything to me, it seems like we’ve found the centre he was looking for. He asks the woman behind the desk for information on working the oil rigs and she gives Brandon a cardboard poster that reads “Pipeline Construction Training Program”. Brandon tells her that that’s the one and asks her a few questions about it – how long the course is and what’s involved etc. She doesn’t know very much about it and says she can take his name down and someone else can get back to him. Brandon takes an application anyway to proceed. As we walk towards a table he says to me “I got about as much information out of her as I could. If only they had an info package to answer my questions. Now I have no choice but to wait”.

Brandon fills out one of the application forms –“There’s so much paper work, too much paperwork, I hope pays off” he says. He then prints out his CV which he keeps stored in his email, and hands a complete application to the lady. “Can’t do nothing now but wait until I get a phone call”. The whole process takes about 20 minutes. I’m impressed with how organized Brandon is. The woman tells Brandon that he will have to wait for a call from the course director, which should take a few days maybe a week. I feel pleased for Brandon that he’s one step closer to getting to where he’s going, but frustrated that there are so many gatekeepers slowing him down and hoping that he hasn’t wasted his time. What if there were head hunters for people on the streets? Not just doling out to temporary work, but matching people to jobs or internships in the field they have identified as wanting

to do. These headhunters could help minimize the frustrating gate keepers that too often are barriers to folks on the streets.

Brandon looks at his watch. It’s now 12:30pm. “Too late for lunch, but alright I had a big breakfast”. We start walking. I’m increasingly realizing that social services with their specific times to line up to access meals, or to secure a bed, can be a barrier for people trying to find work, let alone people who are working 9am-5pm. Does the fear of missing a meal prevent some people from leaving the inner-city? From going to appointments or exploring what options are out there as Brandon has done? What if services provided brown bag lunches to folks taking themselves out of the social service sector to explore other options for their lives?

As we leave NorthQuest I ask Brandon to tell me about his regular daily routine- I’m curious about what else he gets up to. He tells me that most mornings he wakes up at 9am. On the days he has a course, he’s in a classroom 9:30am- 3:30pm. After 3:30pm he goes exploring.

Yesterday he didn’t have a course and so went exploring early. He went to the Boyle Street Co-op first thing seeing information about other employment services. “They weren’t really helpful and it was too loud and stressful there”. Brandon said that around 12pm he walked to Alexandria hospital to inquire about Alberta medical coverage. But he’d been given the wrong information, and the hospital was the wrong place to go to ask his questions. He ate soup from a soup van that was stopped near the hospital. At 2pm he walked to the Native Canadian Friendship centre but “there was nothing going on so I just sat around.” He went to see what programs they offered, especially in the evening. “Evenings are the worst, evenings and weekends because there is nothing going on. No courses. Nothing. They should have courses on the weekends as well so you can keep working towards your goal.” Indeed, many folks I’ve spoken to in Edmonton reported feeling anxious about the weekends and how they can’t get stuff done.

What if courses could be self-directed? Then super motivated individuals like Brandon wouldn’t depend on the timing of others and the bureaucracy of organizations?. If the government services that street-involved folks use can’t be opened on weekends, what if drop in centres offered opportunities to ease anxiety and stimulate folks anxious about how they spend their weekend time. What if drop in centres had a travel centre that brokers folks to some of the exciting things around town – art gallery, meet ups, learning events, opportunities to try new things, earn a new skill, meeting new people. What if drop ins ran a U For U (an InWithForward prototype at a drop in centre in Toronto) which curated 1 hour long lectures from philosophers, astronomers, concert violinists etc. to teach people about different topics and stimulate their minds.

Around 5pm most days, Brandon goes to the gym. He



has a subsidized YMCA membership – approximately \$10 a month. Brandon tells me that it's important to him that he stays strong and healthy. "I'm preparing for hard work, for real work. Brandon spends a couple hours working out, always finishing with a soak in the hot tub.

Following the gym Brandon usually goes to the Mustard Seed for dinner and then he stays put. Sometimes he hangs out a bit, sometimes he stays just 15 minutes or so. He says he doesn't really know anyone and is just keeping to himself at the moment. "My motivation is not to go hungry, and not to lose any teeth. I'm in survivor mode. Right now I'm just working to keep myself alive. I'm most worried about that. Nothing else is important". What if there was adult fostering for folks like Brandon who are motivated and trying their best to get off the streets. Could a foster family, providing a safe house, regular meals as well as companionship and emotional support, help folks like Brandon from the stresses of survival mode and the anxiety that comes from struggling through the trenches of life alone?

## NETWORK & SUPPORTS

It's about 1pm when we reach the inner city. "It's different being here, kind of lonely. It's lonely at home too but this is a different lonely. I'm far from what's familiar". Brandon tells me that he's gone to a couple ceremonies to cry about it.

Actually, Brandon had another motivation for coming to Edmonton - to meet his niece and nephew who are both under the age of 10. "The reunion was as sweet as I thought". He's only met them once he says. He really wants to get his stuff together first. "Now I just need to be doing my own thing". When he gets work and a steady income he plans to rent a place near them so that they can be close. Brandon says he could probably crash on their couch for a night or two, but he doesn't want to impose. A program in Melbourne Australia called Kids Under Cover puts up small temporary studio accommodations in the front or back yards of family members homes to give at risk youth independence and their own space, but still keep them close to family and friends. What if services could provide pop up temporary shelter close to family for folks like Brandon who have family members in the city. That way they can continue to be independent but not have to be completely alone. As well they don't feel anxious of being an additional burden on their family.

Brandon really cares about his niece and nephew. When I ask him to select the roles he plays in his life from a list of about 30 different roles he just selects two: survivor and uncle. He doesn't talk about other family members, but brings up his niece and nephew a few times. It's just a month before Christmas and he tells me that he's

saving money to buy them gifts.

Brandon says he doesn't really have too many people he sees or speaks to regularly. Not family, not friends. The most regular people in his life at the moment are the workers at the service agencies – staff at the Salvation Army, the Bissell Centre, the Mustard Seed, the Library. "There are lots of people around me, some I like, some I don't".

Brandon is very much doing this one his own. He doesn't trust the people around him. "Most of the people I've met are thieves or addicts. People will act like your friend but will stab you in the back. So I don't need friends right now. I don't want to be stuck in this position I want to work, I came here to work". Despite all the time Brandon has spent inquiring and collecting information at service agencies, Brandon has not connected with one support staff enough to feel like the support they give is helpful, or the person is warm and friendly enough to return to speak to. And so Brandon is in deep survival mode, completely alone, trying to persevere through this tough moment in time. What if folks new to the Edmonton Streets could receive a catalogue which lists volunteers from the general public who want to offer up their time and energy to become part of folks like Brandon's regular life or 'extended kin'? Volunteers would describe themselves, their background and their interests and folks like Brandon could choose and then interview and pick who they would like to get to know. Added perks would be that they would have an address to use for mail, and someone to call in case of emergencies thereby avoiding trips to hospitals etc.

## BARRIERS & STRESSORS

What stresses Brandon out right now? Wasting time, he says. "I want to get outta here. Everyday counts". Indeed, our time together is peppered with many anecdotes and examples (some of which I observe) of how he feels his time wasted and how infuriating it is for him.

He tells me that at the Salvation Army, where he's staying, has a mandatory narcotics course that everyone has to participate in each week. Brandon says that taking the course doesn't bother him, even though he's never struggled with addictions himself. What bothers him is that they hold the course in the middle of the day. Brandon says they should run the course in the evenings so that he can take other courses and work towards his goals during the day. "Some guys don't do nothing and so it's fine. I don't even want to be here. I just want to work". What if mandatory courses for shelter residents ran these courses during dinner as a dinner and learn, or after dinner with a special desert. This would be an added incentive as well as freeing up working hours for people seeking out other opportunities. What if

mandatory courses were run at two different time slots so that people could choose the time of day or evening that works best for them.

Brandon also tells me that incorrect information has been the most unhelpful help to him since he's been in Edmonton. "The streets are full of wrong information, even staff at service agencies don't always know right. People are quick to guess and tell you wrong directions or incorrect times for things. This just throws me off my course". Brandon hasn't yet gotten a copy of the Street Ways booklet that offers tips and info for surviving the streets of Edmonton that I've seen other people carrying around. He's not the only person I've met who spends a great deal of time piecing together information about where to go and when. What if there was a regularly updated digital information board and map with the most up to date info for newbies, similar to the index and map you see at entrances to shopping malls. If they were large and situated in the entrances of popular services newbies like Brandon could more easily gather needed information. Having access to this amalgamated information board would also go a long way to easing the stress people experience on the streets having to constantly plan out where they are going for meals and when.

Brandon says that he also finds the lack of clarity of the order of steps in making an application for something or in trying to activate a service is frustrating and experienced as a barrier to moving himself forward. He told me that it took him days to register for Alberta works even though he had all the identifications and documentations. "The system is confused. They told me to go register here, then go there, then come back here. Why couldn't there be a step by step plan? Or all in one place?". Brandon is a strong, able-bodied young man. For other folks less able, and less persistent and determined, being sent from office to office, and being confused with how to proceed, would be a barrier to accessing the service they are seeking out.

## WELLNESS AND A GOOD LIFE

Talking about the good life, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes that the good life both "a landscape of discernable ends and of practical paths to the achievement of these ends" (2013: 292). Appadurai suggests that while having the capacity for aspiration is essential, a person's agency and opportunity to realize their aspirations is also integral to a sense of wellbeing. This is certainly the case for Brandon who has the capacity for aspiration, as well as keen ambition, goals, motivation and perseverance. For Brandon, achieving a good life is being brokered by gatekeepers, paperwork, opening hours and bureaucracy. As anthropologist Edward Fischer writes about achieving a state of wellbeing, "the will is important, but there also has to be a way" (2014:6).

Indeed after spending time with Brandon I have a sense that a good life for him would involve a strong sense of independence, agency, opportunity for self-improvement, avoiding negative experiences, and the stability and security that comes with regular income.

However, 3 weeks moving through the social service sector, asking for information and supports, hasn't helped him move closer to his goals, and closer to an improved sense of wellness and well being. Sure, Brandon has a bed and enough food to eat, but this isn't enough for him. He's only been in Edmonton three weeks. What happens if the barriers to his way forward continue? How many days or weeks until Brandon, and other vulnerable newcomers to Edmonton, eager and determined upon their arrival succumb to existing culture of the culture of the street and lose their dream, ambition, and independent ability to move their life forward?

## OPPORTUNITIES

What if social services segmented folks new to living rough in Edmonton differently from those who have been living rough a long time? For cases like Brandon, a triage system or intake system that offered him support based on where he's at, brokering him out of the social service system immediately, would reduce the chances of him getting stuck in it. Getting folks like Brandon, desirous of economic self-sufficiency, out of the system would also save the City of Edmonton money each year.

What if there were free daily walking tours, run by people who have spent time on the street. The tours could orient people to the area as well as provide accurate information and answer questions. The tour could end someplace where outreach workers could help people with their needs.

Like with many folks on the streets of Edmonton, having the opportunity to keep personal items in lockers and storage facilities would reduce theft and loss of important items that are needed for people's well-being. Moreover, it would reduce the anxiety people carry with them day to day about the theft or loss of their personal items.

What if there was an accountability coach who would help folks like Brandon with strong well thought out motivations and aspirations stay on track and not get bogged down by some of the challenges of life. What if there was a platform for someone in the community to sponsor Brandon's education so that Brandon could right away train to be a welder.

What if there were headhunters for people on the streets? Not just doling out to temporary work, but matching people to jobs or internships in the field they have identified as wanting to do. These headhunters could help minimize the frustrating gatekeepers that too often are barriers to folks on the streets.

What if services provided brown bag lunches to folks taking themselves out of the social service sector to explore other options for their lives?

What if courses could be self-directed? Then super motivated individuals like Brandon wouldn't depend on the timing of others and the bureaucracy of organizations? If the government services that street-involved folks use can't be opened on weekends, what if drop in centres offered opportunities to ease anxiety and stimulate folks anxious about how they spend their weekend time. What if drop in centres had a travel centre that brokers folks to some of the exciting things around town – art gallery, meetups, learning events, opportunities to try new things, earn a new skill, meeting

new people. What if drop ins and 'drop out' sessions: pop-up lectures from philosophers, astronomers, concert violinists etc. to teach people about different topics and stimulate their minds.

What if there was adult fostering for folks like Brandon who are motivated and trying their best to get off the streets. Could a foster family, providing a safe house, regular meals as well as companionship and emotional support, help folks like Brandon from the stresses of survival mode and the anxiety that comes from struggling through the trenches of life alone?

A program in Melbourne Australia called Kids Under Cover puts up small temporary studio accommodations in the front or back yards of family members homes to give at risk youth independence and their own space, but still keep them close to family and friends. What if services could provide pop up temporary shelter close to family for folks like Brandon who have family members in the city. That way they can continue to be independent but not have to be completely alone. As well they don't feel anxious of being an additional burden on their family.

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**“I don’t think I’m quite ready to have a home yet. I don’t utilize the services available to me because I’m not ready to respect the rules they have.”**

## MEET JENN

Jenn’s narrative runs against the current: it’s a story of leaving a desolate and unhealthy life in the suburbs and of finding oneself, of discovering one’s purpose and strength, in the marginalized Boyle-McCauley neighbourhood of Inner City Edmonton. There’s been a lot of pain along the way; she hasn’t chosen an easy life, “but it’s a good life.” Now around fifty years old, Jenn’s network is large and she is at the centre of it - a street mum who holds the fragile balance in this community

on the margins. “I’m a mum. [Mums are] people that care about our family unit.” Many depend on her compassion, good counsel, and ability to spread joy. But sometimes, the kind of support that Jenn wants is in short supply. Stubbornly she sleeps in a tent in a parking lot and though she has an appetite for adventure, beauty, and meaning, her appearance and belongings can give her away as homeless, preventing her from accessing places she used to go, like the art gallery.

## VALUES, MOTIVATIONS & ASPIRATIONS

Jenn has a lot of things that matter to her. She defies the common logic that people living rough can only focus on day to day survival. To her, survival and all her higher values are all connected anyway. Still, self-sufficiency tops her list of priorities. She explains, “the [shopping] cart outside the front door means I don’t have to utilize the services needed by others. I don’t have to be a burden. (She is, incidentally, quite nervous about the cart out front, having been asked to move camp earlier that day and having had nowhere to stow it safely.) Feeling self-sufficient is difficult to disentangle from a sense of safety and security - “the two go hand in hand.”

A sense of purpose, she tells me, is good for her health. Connecting with others is what a street mum does. Jenn moves about the community dinner, stopping to check in with people one-on-one. She’s a people person and she likes the fun and adventure others bring to her life. Watching her, it’s clear that Jenn is the caretaker in these interactions. Tonight, Jenn is in a good mood. She is playing with words and hardly sits down for a second before she’s up to chatter with the next person.

“Power,” on the other hand, “is not important. Because, I know I already have personal power, power in me, unbound.” In another life, not so long ago, Jenn had some of the trappings of conventional power. “I wasn’t always homeless. I used to live in a gated community... But I was alone then. This is better, I wouldn’t trade it.” Technically, she wasn’t alone. She was married with a son. But the relationship wasn’t healthy: “I always gave myself over to past partners.”

While the role she plays for her peers contributes to her sense of purpose, it hasn’t been enough. Recently, she gained a new sense of achievement. It was a couple of months ago, when she got a job as an industrial cleaner. “Yes! I have a job!” she exclaimed. “I felt so good [when I was hired]...so accomplished, so good to have that feeling again. I haven’t had that in a long time.” Cleaning things up has always made her feel good. She often leads the end-of-night cleaning of the women’s bathroom at the Mustard Seed. “I still feel accomplished when I organize the people in the neighbourhood to do a clean-up. Everybody helps!” She is referring to the others living rough near her camp, who she calls on to do garbage pick up together.

## NETWORKS & SUPPORTS

When something is wrong, or someone’s behaved

incorrectly, Jenn hears about it. She judiciously doles out a mix of compassion, advice, and resolution, “I will talk to him!” she clucks in response to one distressed young woman. Jenn knows pretty well everyone who walks through the doors of the Mustard Seed everyday. She considers this place like home. She estimates that she talks to about two hundred people each day, but she could narrow this down to a sort of ‘chosen family’ of one hundred and fifty, give or take.

Sometimes, she sees her own family. During the time I spend with her she has a late night visit from her son, now aged twenty, who comes to find her in the wee hours of a Saturday morning, and they hang out. Another evening, an auntie and two cousins surprise her when they arrive from out of town and join her at the community dinner. Sitting down to eat together at the Mustard Seed seems perfectly natural to all. They express love and pleasure at seeing one another. Jenn reflects fondly on her upbringing. “My mum was amazing; she raised nine kids!” Jenn asserts that while they might have been poor, there was always a lot of love in her life. “My parents were seriously good people who nurtured our town and ourselves. I don’t know how they did it.” She attributes her great morals and values to them.

Jenn credits the Mustard Seed with helping her maintain her faith now; “it would be hard without the Mustard Seed.” She also considers the staff at the Bissell Centre to be an important part of her supports. It was through the Bissell Centre that she was able to visit the Muttart Conservatory (a botanical garden with biooms in striking big glass pyramids.) After that, there were only two things left on her bucket list, which seemed a bit ominous to her, so she quickly added a few more (going to the ocean, and skydiving). She purposely picked things she thought might be unattainable because she worries that finishing your bucket list leads to imminent death.

## BARRIERS & STRESSORS

For Jenn, relationships to people come first, even when it tires her out: “I try to maintain the glue that’s keeping people together and repair what’s been done in the past. It’s hard to maintain a personal life.” That includes housing. To succeed in housing, one has to set boundaries - between one’s home and the street, with all the people who spend time there. “I don’t think I’m quite ready to have a home yet. I don’t utilize the services available to me because I’m not ready to respect the rules they have. I can’t turn somebody away that’s in need.”

Nonetheless, Jenn points to family as her top stress.

“My son is almost twenty. I try not to be so involved in his life to allow him to grow up and it’s a stress. I’m just a typical parent that has lost her sense of purpose when the nest is empty!” She laughs, aware of the irony of comparing herself to an empty nester. And now she is a grandma and says she is trying to figure out what that role means. She is proud of the sort of mother she has been. “One year when my son was playing lacrosse I had 32 kids show up at my door with mother’s day presents!”

Being on the street can also trigger other stresses around family: “...It breaks my heart because my sister and family are addicted to that stuff [fentanyl.]” Jenn takes a non-judgemental stance. She identifies as someone who has been a user, an addict, a victim, and a survivor. She kicked a prescription opiate addiction cold turkey and believes others can. “I do some things that aren’t so good for me,” she acknowledges, “but that’s my choice.” When she recently had to administer to someone O’D’ing on fentanyl at a party, she made another choice: “I had to tell the guy that I couldn’t be his friend anymore. I couldn’t go through that again.”

Housing is a stress for Jenn, but not in a way that housing providers address. She prefers to camp, but she’s tired of asking “Where am I going to camp? Am I going to have enough energy to get it done? ...It’s hit and miss: I’ve come back to nothing [at my campsite.]” Constantly being asked to move along is so frustrating. “There should be a place where you’re allowed to be.” It would be less stressful if “I had the right to choose where I live, even camping.”

## ENABLERS

Part of the reason the bathrooms are such a lively place at the Mustard Seed is that places to do one’s make-up and get ready for one’s day and evening are so few and far between. One night Jenn attributes the reason she’s “so out of sorts” to not having had the time or place that day “to put on my war paint!” Grooming is important to Jenn because it’s part of fitting in: “Just because I’m homeless doesn’t mean I have to look like one. Personal care first!” Similarly, Jen longs for storage, so she can put away her things and enjoy the city. She and her friend agree, “the backpack’s the giveaway you’re homeless.” She talks about the night that the Art Gallery opened. “They did a light thing on the sidewalk that made it sparkle and shimmer - I went to see it. We’d been waiting for this so I was there enjoying it and a security guard asked me to leave.” She resisted his assumption that she wasn’t the sort of person who had a right to be there. “I asked about opening hours! I used to do that kind of

stuff [go to art galleries]. I wasn’t always homeless.”

## DAILY ROUTINE

Jenn’s routine is easily disrupted by friends in need, or the imperative to move her camp again. This week she was told she had to get out of the parking lot she’s been in for a while, with others. This began a chain of one-night camping spots, which is a fair bit of work. Jenn keeps waking hours of about 10AM to 3AM, ideally. This week, she had a 3AM visit from her twenty-year old son, and they caught up for a bit. Sometimes, if she doesn’t have the energy to set up, she’ll use the Hope Mission shelter. She doesn’t do this often: her kookum taught her strong survival skills and how to live on the land. As a child, she had her own trapline on her Kookum’s land. So camping out comes naturally to her.

For the last month and a half, she has been doing industrial cleaning shifts whenever they are offered. Yesterday, during the day, she had two shifts, for a total of eight hours. She’s almost always at the Mustard Seed for dinner. This is where she “checks her trapline” - how she refers to touching base with the people she knows, and getting the news. Last night she spent some time on the side of the building, which she describes as “more of a free space” visiting with people. Later in the evening, she watched some TV at a friend’s house. Jenn sometimes references activities that take place at friends’ houses, like cooking bannock during the summer and then taking it out to share on the street. She also noted some of the people who used to be in her life, but aren’t much anymore, are friends who got housed - “but that’s a good thing,” she concludes. This friend loaded her down with lots of stuff, the way she always does, which is a little tricky now Jenn’s camp is on the move. After that, Jenn set up a new camp for the night.

In a typical week, Jenn would spend time ‘picking’ or ‘binning’ and maybe donate the finds she doesn’t need to the Mustard Seed for others’ use. Earlier in the week she had “a rare opportunity” to take some time to herself, and spent hours reading in her tent. It seems that most of Jenn’s ‘spare time’ is directed towards those around her, organizing community clean-ups or festivities, settling disputes, or checking in one-on-one with people. Occasionally she expresses how difficult it can be to get the same level of care in return.

## WELLNESS AND A GOOD LIFE

Jenn stands out among the crowd: she has a strong sense of who she is and her agency in the world. She frames her situation as an active, and



rewarding choice. While she is on very good terms with many service workers, her idea of well being is fundamentally misaligned with the general bent of social services. The system tends to measure success in terms of stability, safety, and risks avoided - being housed, having a family doctor, meeting basic needs. Jenn is attracted by adventure, novelty, relationships, and sense of purpose, values that aren't prioritized in most service offerings. While the premise of Canada's Housing First is to make settling someone in permanent housing the foundational service - the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy - Jenn rejects that premise and is instead reaching for the things at the top of the hierarchy: morality, creativity, problem-solving, etc. At the same time, Jenn is a vital resource for promoting well being within her community and receives little direct support for her role.

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

What if people like Jenn with an unusually strong sense of agency and purpose, and a large network, could be invited to review new developmental services and opportunities and then supported to broker the right people to them. Jen has a great sense for what people need when, and she's trusted.

What if Jenn was provided support in her role as a street mum, much the way that professional therapists have their own therapy sessions? She could

use the forum to learn more about setting boundaries and when to prioritize her own needs.

What if Jenn could play an ambassadorial role with the local business improvement area to coordinate clean-ups, get supplies for safe disposal, and maybe be able to offer her volunteers a warm beverage at a local cafe in return?

What if Jenn had access to bibliotherapy - curated media on a topic of interest, that helped her develop in her role as a street mum? Maybe Jenn could be accessing the latest research on building agency and coping skills in youth with PTSD or about how to support readiness for family reunification.

What if services offered opportunities for adventure, novelty, and meaning as a way to build motivation for the grittier, more tedious process of making life transitions for greater self-sufficiency? What if Jenn could be supported to build a plan that would help get her paragliding over an ocean one day?

What if there were roles or fellowships for street-involved and low income adults to do audience development work with their own communities at places like art galleries, theatres and museums?

What if folks like Jenn who learned traditional skills for living on the land had a forum to share them with others in her community in a retreat-like format, that focused on camping as a skill?





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**“I know I’m no different to any human walking around.  
The least you can do is show respect to your fellow person.”**

## MEET DWAYNE

Dwayne is energized and seemingly always on the move. At home, he dances to trance music he plays through his laptop. Sometimes he puts the speakers out the window so people passing by can dance with him. When he’s out and about he’s got things to cross off his list, and neighbors and friends to visit in order to “pep them up”. He frequents the dollar store to buy items that spice up his day, and the days’ of others. Just this morning he bought 2 plastic hockey sticks and a puck for his neighbor Malcom who’s in a wheelchair. “Believe it or not I got Malcolm playing hockey. I do this because I know that it empowers people. Gives them a boost of confidence. I’m persistent in trying to make people cheer up”. Being a good neighbor is important to Dwayne. “If I don’t say hello to some people, then they can go a whole day without talking to anyone”.

Dwayne keeps himself busy and he likes it that way. Being busy is stimulating, and Dwayne doesn’t want to stagnate.

Dwayne moves fast. But one of the first things you notice, besides his exuberance, is that his balance is a bit off and his speech is sometimes slurred. Without knowing Dwayne, one can easily make the false assumption that he’s intoxicated. “Yeah, a lot of people on the street think I’m just a drunk native, but no, I’m like this because of my ammonia levels”.

A lifetime of drug addiction and living rough has caught up with Dwayne. He’s been diagnosed with HIV, cirrhosis of the liver, and high levels of ammonia which depletes his energy levels, plays tricks on his short-term memory and effects his sense of balance and speech. “No matter what I do now my ammonia levels are against me. I really want to change this issue with my memory but it’s medical. I just need to stop eating red meat.”

Dwayne’s first diagnosis was about 12 years ago. A farmer had donated some big steaks to the place where he was staying. “I grew up on big steaks so I ate and enjoyed it”. A fire alarm sounded in the morning but

Dwayne couldn't get going. "I sat at the side of my bed and stared at my shoes, tears falling down, biting my lips. I didn't know how to put on my shoes. I stared at them. I couldn't put them on. But I knew I was smarter than that. I was confused". The hospital diagnosed Dwayne with "encephalopathy", a decline in brain function; the result of liver damage and increased toxic build up in the bloodstream. "This is something I have to contend with now, I have to take care of my ammonia levels, stop them from getting too high".

Dwayne is originally from a town only 150 km from Edmonton. When he was 4 his mother had a nervous breakdown and he was put into temporary care. 3 days turned into 3 weeks, then 3 months. His mother overdosed and so Dwayne stayed on in foster care. He only has a 10 second memory of his father, when his father would make him sit on his knee. Dwayne didn't like it. He didn't like the smell of alcohol on his dad's breath, nor all the violence around him. When people dismiss Dwayne as "just a drunk native" he feels pain. He tries his best to stay away from this stereotype.

At age 26 Dwayne moved to Edmonton to take a university entrance course. "Oh boy, if I'd stuck to that plan everything woulda worked out". But Dwayne was inexperienced and lacked skills to live alone. He wasn't thinking about consequences or sticking to a plan – "well the money was just sitting in my bank account, so I spent it".

Dwayne is a friendly guy, and when he first arrived he met lots of people on the streets, other young men like him. "We took 3 steps at a time. The world was ours". He spent his money quickly; money that was supposed to last a year. After a few weeks he had just \$25.00 to his name. He followed some guys to the "shooting galleries" – the houses where they give you 10 units of cocaine in a 'rig' (a needle). "I spent my last money on that. I thought, what the heck, this is what I'll do with my last twenty bucks. I main lined it, I'd never injected before. I was so naïve then. I'd smoked a bit but never gotten high. Once, back home a guy handed me two Tylenol 3's and I asked him what they were for because I didn't have a headache. He told me they were to get high. I was 25 years old. I never thought people would take prescription drugs to get stoned. So at the shooting galleries I mainlined it (injected) and I've never been the same since".

## VALUES, MOTIVATIONS & ASPIRATIONS

Dwayne has been on and off the streets for about 25 years. He's lived in a bunch of different places including the infamous "crack towers". "I woulda never rented there had I known the living conditions. It was really bad."

"I was doing crack for a while, but then laid off crack

because the quality went down. But then I got into crystal meth". Dwayne says he weaned himself off opiates about 6 years ago with some help from a detox service. He still smokes weed and takes speed from time to time but he knows that it's up to him now to manage his health. It's his severe medical condition that got him his current housing at a supportive residence mostly for Indigenous individuals and couples. He's been there about 2 months. "It's good, they make sure I take my meds and meals. They have everything there that I need and it's in the perfect location too. Right in the hood".

Dwayne's home is a studio apartment. He keeps his socks in a cupboard in the kitchen, and his pants folded up in a cupboard beside the fridge. He hasn't had this many pairs of pants in a long time. Dwayne has a laptop, speakers, a webcam, a TV, and a stack of DVD's. He loves gadgets and talks about buying a google Pixel phone and a virtual reality headset.

Dwayne says that this is the first "home" he's had in a long time. He points to a distinction between "home" and "place". For Dwayne, home has a sense of security and comfort, while place is just somewhere where you're at. Dwayne is appreciative of the strict rules forbidding overnight guests. He is relieved that he doesn't risk getting evicted because of acquaintances from the street moving in, which, with his big heart, happened a lot. What if outreach housing workers operated from newly housed folks' living rooms? They could help Dwayne's acquaintances find their own housing thus reducing the risk of Dwayne being evicted for too many overnight visitors?

For Dwayne, having a home as a big step: "it's a home, a place to stay, I can make plans now". Dwayne identifies himself as a neighbor, a connector, a role model, a member of his community. "I give as much love and devotion that I can throw their way". He finds it rewarding to interact with people who aren't frequently or regularly engaged.

Dwayne is also a self-described "mad scientist" and thumbs through books and newspapers and pamphlets throughout the day as he finds them. He regularly frequents the library, seeking out knowledge and inspiration. He likes history and science as well as current events and news reports relating to the latest environmental catastrophes.

In his younger years, not long after he got to Edmonton, he spent time babysitting his foster sister's children, his niece and nephew. They were struggling with math homework. Maths is easy for Dwayne and as he tutored them he invented a system - "a number system that makes math easy". This was a very rewarding time for Dwayne as he was using his skills to help others, and felt he had a purpose. What if temp agencies helped to broker skilled folks like Dwayne to community roles? These roles aren't about making money, they are about offering opportunities

for folks like Dwayne to engage in acts that give them a sense of purpose and meaning .

## ENABLERS

Dwayne doesn't have much money at the moment but is expecting a large sum to come through soon, compensation for being removed in the sixties scoop. He has some idea about how he'll spend the money. "I've never travelled East of Saskatchewan or West of BC. I want to hang out on a beach. Feel what it's like to have a beach vacation. Maybe Cuba, or the Mediterranean. Or Dubai, I really want to go to Dubai. Why Dubai? Well it's DUBAI!!!" What if street involved adults were given the opportunity to do exchanges to other locations/ cities? Would the stimulation and novelty, learning and experience, reduce the desire to drink and use drugs?



## WELLNESS AND A GOOD LIFE

Dwayne is also keen on getting himself into better shape. "I want to go on a heavy duty work out plan. Yoga and stuff. Spend time in the hot tub". Dwayne says that his health is his biggest concern at the moment. Sometimes he goes to the Commonwealth Rec. centre, he gets a free pass there through AISH. A staff member from a service agency Dwayne frequents took him once to a yoga class there. He would like to repeat that kind of afternoon.

Dwayne says that now that he's housed, and under medical care, he really hopes to do better. He wants to start setting a proper example for young people, to keep them off the street. He knows that when he was young and new to Edmonton what would have helped him most, what would have helped him stay on track, was not being surrounded by people using drugs. What if people new to the streets were segmented differently? Immediately brokered to people and programs not specifically for the street-involved population. Would an intervention like that have prevented Dwayne from ending up using his last \$20.00 for heroine those many years ago?

## NETWORKS & SUPPORTS

There are a lot of people in Dwayne's everyday life. He's just that sort of guy, very social and always up for a chat. He is especially close to a number of social service support workers and regularly stops by, even if he has no immediate need. He feels its important to thank them for helping him when he was at death's door, and they also they help him stay on track. "They motivate me to keep going in the right direction".

Dwayne's known many of the people who service the inner city for a long time now. Like his primary doctor at the local medical centre, who he sees frequently. "I've known Dr. S for 13 years now. I've known him the longest. He cured me of my Hep C.". For Dwayne this regular contact is vital. He thrives with the continuity and feeling of community and belonging that these long-term relationships engender. He doesn't have that same regular and continued connection with many folks.

It's easy for Dwayne to pop in for a chat, the services he frequents are all right around the corner from where he lives and spends time. He characterizes his hood as "us" and everything else as "them". He doesn't remember when he last left the inner city, there is no need. Moreover, there's no point. His whole life is in downtown Edmonton, and has been for at least a quarter century. What if social services gave Dwayne exciting reasons to leave the inner city and explore other places? For folks like Dwayne who face a poverty of stimulation, bridging him to novel and stimulating experiences would provide richness to his life.

Dwayne also has a couple of siblings who he sees from time to time. He tries to see his older sister every few weeks, but "she is very busy living her own life". His younger sister also lives in town, and he tries to see her every couple of months. But it's hard, she's struggles with schizophrenia and her own drug addictions and "last time I saw her she got violent with me".

He has a couple friends who he likes to see. Folks at the HIV Edmonton support group. "Last week I brought them donuts from the Italian café. They are my really good friends." There's a fellow resident whose company he enjoys. They are from the same tribe and talk often about what to do with the compensation money that's coming to them. And there's a guy from his floor too, but he drinks a lot and this is a trigger. "It surprises me that this guy could drink so much. I can't see him too often, and not when he's drunk". All in all, Dwayne is doing better than at any other time of his Edmonton life. He has quite a large network of both formal and informal supports. What can we learn from Dwayne to help build the network of supports of other street-involved adults?



## BARRIERS & STRESSORS

Dwayne says that it's in his best interest to stay in his studio. "If I go somewhere else, some girl would move in on me and then I'd be in trouble. Ha! Best to stay here".

It quickly becomes apparent that while being housed has certainly improved Dwayne's every day life, having housing is not enough for Dwayne to feel fulfilled. Dwayne, the 'mad scientist', the mathematician, a 'thinker', a 'do-er', is looking for more.

"The programs offered at the residence here, they're okay but they're not rocket science". He says that the interactions with front line staff are pleasant and the place is functional, but they don't stimulate or engage, and so there is not enough intellectual stimulation offered for him. Dwayne can seemingly talk about any topic, he's either read up about it or has a relevant story to tell. Dwayne is thirsty to spend time with more ideas and imagination: "if you're the kind of person to think up an idea, you have the imagination to go with it". While Dwayne knows how to keep himself stimulated and occupied, not everyone does. What if we asked Dwayne and service users more questions about what stimulates them and develop prototypes for learning and engaging? (example University for U - an IWF initiative at a drop in centre in downtown Toronto).

Moreover, a long history of being stereotyped and disrespected as an Indigenous man has made Dwayne acutely aware of the racism, and now that he's a bit older, the ageism, present in too many of his daily interactions. "Why do they talk to me so loudly, like I'm deaf" he said under his breath after a nurse conveyed some information to him. "I would prefer the people working here to be more respectful, to treat me with dignity. I'm older. They don't realize that I've been around the block a lot longer than anyone else and they should give me credit for this." For Dwayne it's a struggle between autonomy and supportive living, between feeling independent and in control of his life and requiring help so that his life stays "on track".

Dwayne tries to not let the racism be a barrier, but how can it not. He experiences it everywhere, at every turn. It's one of his biggest causes of stress, always has been, and it is one of the things that regularly tires him out. "You would cry if you heard my story. How I've been treated. Treated like the anti-Christ by the government, by people. But I'm just like every other man, I'm a person too".

During my six hours with Dwayne I observe what he means. A bank teller, arms crossed, unsmiling, is unfriendly and barely assists Dwayne with what he needs. A woman at the optometrist where Dwayne recently purchased a pair of glasses refuses to replace the cushioning that came off the nose, until he pays a \$3.00 fee. "\$3.00?? but I just bought them last week."

"Do you want me to go ahead or not?", the lady replies gruffly. "Well I guess so" was Dwayne's reply.

"People, most people, well they try to paint a picture of me as a bad guy – oh watch out for that person- they say. But no, I don't want to hurt anyone, quite the opposite. No wonder Dwayne doesn't leave the inner city much, and thus doesn't explore new opportunities or experiences. He doesn't want to feel the pain of being different. And so he stays close to home where he feels safe, where other Indigenous folks hang out.

## DAILY ROUTINE

The bank and optometrist were not the only stops on Dwayne's list of things to do the day I spent with him. When I first walked through the residence door, Dwayne was getting ready for an appointment at the health centre nearby. "My ammonia levels are quite high, so they like to see me every week."

We walk five minutes down the road to the clinic.

It's a few weeks before Christmas. The walls are decorated with gold tinsel, and cut out snowflakes hang from the ceiling. It's quiet, just after 11am. Only four people are seated waiting. Two additional people are hunched over, sleeping on the plastic chairs. Staff answer phones, and nurses walk around. The bathroom door is open, the blue light – a light that prevents you from being able to see your veins and shoot up- emanates out. A cardboard box with a few pairs of socks, "free", is on the table.

Dwayne notifies reception of his arrival. "You're 15 minutes late. I marked down that you're a no-show. I can put you down as a standby?" Dwayne tries to explain, but it doesn't help. Dwayne finds a seat to wait, and picks up a book that's on the table about sea creatures.

More than an hour passes. It's 12:22pm. "I'm missing my lunch" Dwayne tells me.

12:33pm Dwayne approaches the counter. No staff has spoken to Dwayne or given him any update since he arrived. "Appointments are 30 minutes long, we were just 15 min late, this is so frustrating!" Dwayne says. The staff tells Dwayne there's nothing he can do.

The clinic is filling up and most seats are taken. A few more people are asleep on chairs, cuddled up with heavy winter coats. It's hard to tell whether they are here for appointments or to just stay warm and pass time. What if vulnerable populations had more dignified spaces in which to spend time?

"I've got things to do. I've got lots of important things to do", Dwayne says getting impatient. "I've got to pay rent! It's the 4th of the month and I haven't paid rent yet".





12:39pm “I’m pooped! I’m wasting my time”.

12:40pm As an anthropologist I try to be a fly on the wall, observe, ask questions but not intervene. Yet Dwayne was increasingly distraught and depleted. The next time Dwayne approached the counter I went with him and after he was told again that there was nothing they could do, I (regrettably) said “really, how much longer?”.

12:42pm A nurse calls Dwayne in. Dwayne turns to me “if you hadn’t stepped in I’d still be waiting”. But his expression is not relief, it’s pain - that it took someone else to speak on his behalf before he got served.

12:44pm the nurse takes his blood pressure heart rate and weight.

1:00pm Dwayne is ushered into a room to wait for the doctor. I’m asked to step out, for reasons of consent.

1:15pm I’m invited back in. A nurse is bandaging a sore on Dwayne’s leg with care. The doctor gives Dwayne a pep talk reminding him not to use speed, that when he uses speed they can’t tell whether his health is improving or declining. Dwayne and the doctor have some nice banter. The doctor is going on holiday soon and Dwayne tries to guess where.

1:45pm We leave the clinic. “I’m glad I saw him. I’m glad I waited for him”. The stress and impatience Dwayne felt from waiting, from not being served, immediately diminished by the kind attention from the nurse and the humorous conversation with the doctor.

On our way back, we pop into the optometrist to get his glasses fixed. We stop by the Italian bakery to get some lunch. “Oh I ate at the Italian bakery yesterday. They have the best donuts”.

This is a typical day for Dwayne. Items to cross of his list,

but they don’t take him too far out of his comfort zone. But is Dwayne bored? “No not really”. He says. He keeps himself busy with everyday tasks, gadgets and toys he gets from the dollar store. At night he listens to music. Watches nature programs on TV.

2pm We’re back at his residence. Dwayne is exhausted. “I’m gonna go take a nap now. I’m pooped”. Dwayne takes the elevator upstairs to take a nap. Before he goes upstairs he asks one of the staff members to drive him to the bank when he wakes up.

## OPPORTUNITIES

What if outreach housing workers operated from newly housed folks’ living rooms? They could help Dwayne’s acquaintances find their own housing thus reducing the risk of Dwayne being evicted for too many overnight visitors?

What if temp agencies helped to broker skilled folks like Dwayne to community roles? These roles aren’t about making money, they are about offering opportunities for folks like Dwayne to engage in acts that give them a sense of purpose and meaning .

What if street involved adults were given the opportunity to do exchanges to other locations/ cities? Would the stimulation and novelty, learning and experience, reduce the desire to drink and use drugs?

What if people new to the streets were segmented differently? Immediately brokered to people and programs not specifically for the street-involved population. Would an intervention like that have prevented Dwayne from ending up using his last \$20.00 for heroine those many years ago?

What if social services gave Dwayne exciting reasons to leave the inner city and explore other places? For folks like Dwayne who face a poverty of stimulation, bridging him to novel and stimulating experiences would provide richness to his life.

What can we learn from Dwayne to help build the network of supports of other street-involved adults?

What if we asked Dwayne and service users more questions about what stimulates them and develop prototypes for learning and engaging? (example University for U - an IWF initiative at a drop in centre in downtown Toronto).

What if vulnerable populations had more dignified spaces in which to spend time?



**Yvonne**

#Indigenous #temprrary\_housed #Indigenous #Senior #Planning #Canada #Edmonton

**“There are no bad roles.  
When I’m done with one, I just leave it behind.”**

### **MEET YVONNE**

Yvonne was hosting Monday crafts for the first time, at her own request. Normally, a staff member at the Mustard Seed plans and facilitates the weekly craft session and Yvonne comes or doesn't come depending upon the appeal of the project. Yvonne identifies as an artist; she's not just looking to just pass time, with crafts. Today she introduces a whimsical centrepiece that looks like a teacup suspended in the air pouring a waterfall of flowers onto a saucer. She's organized all the supplies and a few finished examples and she confidently leads the assembled group in the activity. She's an exuberant seventy-one year-old with her hair dyed green and shaved on one side, with long bangs, and she wears a long, striped toque of her own creation. In fact she's been making them all day long this week and selling them among her networks, by popular demand. She's curious about me, and soon is eager to show me some of the services on offer that she values most.

Over a bowl of Italian wedding soup, Yvonne calls herself “an invisible homeless.” We meet at a busy cafe in Little Italy because her temporary home - a housesit - is out in Kensington, while the many activities that structure her day are in the rougher neighbourhood of Boyle-McCauley. It's been less than five years since Yvonne was properly housed. She's raised oodles of children including two biological kids, and two grandkids, fought off cancer more than once, and run her own business with her husband. After the death of that husband a few years back, Yvonne finished raising her grandsons and then packed up her life into storage and moved into her van. Since then, she's embraced spontaneity and adventure as well as personal development, while continuing to play a big role as a grandmother. These days, she has a long term house-sit, low income, a gambling habit she's working on, and some dreams she's pretty determined to realize.



## VALUES, MOTIVATIONS & ASPIRATIONS

"I want to live in a tiny house," Yvonne declared very early on. It's a long standing dream. Nothing fancy, in fact she's got her eye on a little shed in the backyard where she's house-sitting. She knows exactly what she'd do to make it home-worthy: she can talk specifics about how she'd do it, what it would cost, and has some ideas about sourcing materials. Her resourcefulness and orientation toward action are on display while she talks about the tiny house. She thinks the project would be fun and living in a tiny house would be neat. That's the kind of attitude she brought to her big move, four years ago, from house to her 2006 Pontiac. She took the passenger seat out and installed a TV in its place. She put a bed in the back. It was hard to get enough power to run the TV properly so she'd park in friends' yards to watch a show. She and her husband had always planned to do it together, before he fell ill. She lived there for a summer, met a guy named Steve who showed her the downtown, and had a ball. Steve didn't have a place either. He worked for a marijuana grow-op and was good company. When winter came, she moved in with her two grown grandsons and contributed financially: "that's why they were glad when I would say 'Can I come and live on your couch?' because then I would help with rent."

Another thing that Yvonne would like to do is foster a child, an Aboriginal child. "Yeah, I wanna talk to the system, because they're looking for Aboriginal homes for Aboriginal kids and I think they do have a hard time... I want one that I can travel with so it has to be some kid about three or four years old." Travel where? "Well to Banff, or to Red Deer or to Vegreville and have pierogies!" She laughs. "Which means I have to get an apartment, right?" As we howl with laughter about the incompatibility of her top two goals she pokes fun at herself, "Can I just have one to travel with? Can I have a travel partner please? I wonder what they'd say to that!?"

When Yvonne was in her twenties, she ran the kind of household where kids just got dropped off, by neighbours or the parents themselves, perhaps before going on a bender: "they were dropped at my house like stray puppies." It was informal: people knew her house was safe and that kids would be taken care of. She helped raise 23 kids that way, including two of her own. "Believe it or not I probably was - and I know I was - feeding of their positive stuff." It wasn't always easy. There was a time when she felt suicidal and she called Children's Aid on herself. "They helped - they really helped." Yvonne is a residential school survivor, and few things are more important to her than making sure kids are listened to and kept safe.

She describes herself as "left behind" by her parents: "there's always one kid left behind" she thinks aloud. Instead, she was raised by grandparents and their love was "palpable." Still, she has a soft spot for children left behind.

## BARRIERS & STRESSORS

"When I was a little girl, I went to the people - to the adults in my life - and I told them what was going on and they told me I couldn't talk about this priest because it was like talking about God." This is what she told the Truth and Reconciliation tribunal, when she got the chance. "I want you guys to know that: I'm not blaming you, and I'm not blaming God - because it wasn't Him. What happened was there were some people in power that should'na been around kids. Just so you know that. Now give me my money!" She laughs. "It wasn't as easy as I'm making it sound. My grandson came with me."

Yvonne has found some ways to cope with the trauma from her childhood, in no small part because she knows what matters to her. But her values have put her in conflict with her children, both of whose own children she has cared for from time to time. "My son is mad at me for calling Children's Aid on him." Her top priority



is to keep her grandchildren safe, even if her kids don't ever understand. "My own life has no drama. I want my grandkids to be safe." Recently she sat down with her daughter to address the bad blood. What causes her stress is when her son tries to penalize her by denying her access to her grandson. Her son is "a drug dealer - just marijuana," but it wasn't so much this fact as the unstable and violent company he was keeping that made her concerned for her grandson. She says, "I'm not a bully." In fact, Yvonne is concerned she might not be a self-advocate because she tends to put other people first. Right now she isn't being allowed to see her grandson and she calls the emotion that it evokes something like grieving. "When I'm depressed, I isolate myself. I have a ten-day limit," she says, with a sense of resolution.

An ongoing stress in Yvonne's life is around her gambling addiction. She's working on it, but she has slips. She hesitates as to whether to count herself as "in recovery" or not, and decides against it. It's not that she plays with huge amounts but that she lives so close to the edge. There's not a lot of playing room.

## NETWORKS & SUPPORTS

Yvonne has a talent for building a network. It's not made of intimate connections - "I don't really get close to people" - but the kind of loose connections that are great for rustling up resources and a shared sense of community. Her closest connection is her 'bestie' who helps her clean this big house she's looking after, and sometimes lends her money when she's spent too much. "She spoils me. Well, and she's lonely." She got this house-sitting gig indirectly, from chatting with a man named Ken, on the bus. Ken was looking to hire people for a big architectural project and she put forth her grandson's name. Ken hired him and bought a house for some of his other workers. After the project was over, he was looking for a caretaker until he sells. Yvonne laughs about his reaction when she moved in (from the van she was living in) with a bunch of furniture: "he says 'You got all this stuff from the garbage and you're going to put it in my house?' I says 'Yes, I am'...he likes me. He thinks I'm a character!"

Every Friday night, Yvonne can be found at Seeds of Recovery, a program run by the Mustard Seed "for people who are addicted to ...anything!" She says it really works; it's about understanding yourself. Yvonne's a magnet for programming that's about self-development. She is a regular at other Mustard Seed programs including therapeutic horseback riding (her grandson comes with her on Tuesdays!) and a group run by a life coach. She also volunteers at Operation Friendship Society for seniors.

In many ways, Yvonne could be anywhere: she stays

in a nice neighbourhood, her grandsons have done post-secondary schooling and are working now, and knows how to talk to anyone. She has a leisure card that allows her to use all kinds of facilities and take part in "so many great things" across the city. Still, she chooses to be part of the community in Boyle McCauley. She takes younger women who are homeless and/or in recovery under her wing and looks out for them. Right now she has three women that she "kinda mentors." She likes to find out what people need and go get it. Or she'll let people know when she'll be at the Mustard Seed with a curling iron and a blow dryer "because I don't like the idea of them going out with their hair wet in this weather!" She has some sourcing tricks. "Elena who runs the PAC [Personal Assistance Centre] store...I'll walk in and she'll say 'Yvonne! What do you need?!' Because she knows I'm always doing this stuff." Yvonne also knows who else can be counted on to distribute good finds and makes sure that underwear, shampoo, and other wanted items get to the right people. Nowadays, Yvonne uses a tricycle with a cargo basket to get around, but when she had a car she would go "picking" (bottle collection). Sometimes she could make \$120 in a day, and found treasures to pass on.

From time to time, she opens up her home to someone who is having a rough time. She has to be careful, because she's been entrusted to look after this house, and she takes that responsibility seriously. "Well I kinda profile them for a while and if they look like they're telling the truth and they're consistent in their stories - and I'm going, okay, I'm gonna trust this one...I'll bring them home for the weekend. Anyone who needs help."

## DAILY ROUTINES

"If I have to wait I'm not standing in line. Being homeless doesn't have to be like that. I'm really lucky I s'pose, but then I've learned." If programs mean wasting time, Yvonne is out. There is too much to do. She'll skip the line for the Mustard Seed's evening meal and come in late for the coffee and snack. She uses her leisure card to access the same resources as the general population, where there's less waiting around. Yvonne likes to be busy. When she's not volunteering or participating in meaningful programming at the Mustard Seed or Operation Friendship, she is probably doing art (she likes to work with birch bark), or crafts (this week is all about sewing hats).

She loves to sing. She hosted Karaoke at two different bars over a nine year period and now she often plays that role at the Mustard Seed's night. "They've gotta have fun, because they're out there on the street!" She goes to "Wings - a sports bar - it has a very good



system. I go all over the place, but Wings is my pit stop - and I'm not a drinker." She works casually, helping out with catering gigs for \$20 an hour, though she'd like to be able to stop taking on these jobs. Instead, she would like to put her energies into starting her pop-up store selling her crafts.

## WELLBEING AND A GOOD LIFE

Yvonne says, "There are no bad roles. When I'm done with one, I just leave it behind." For her, wellbeing is about adventure, novelty, having a role, and being part of something greater than herself. She's pretty good at making herself useful to others and finding opportunities, but benefits from having someone who she can bounce ideas off to help pursue the most meaningful roles. For her, these are mostly informal supports, not service workers. It is clear that personal development is very attractive to Yvonne and sustains her motivation - but most services aren't developmental.

## ENABLERS

For her, this longer term house-sit is the perfect balance between permanence and adventure. Her dream of a tiny house is something she may be able to pull off herself, or with just a bit of help, and anyway, it's not the kind of housing solution that social services are oriented towards helping with. Yvonne's life is about values like learning, reciprocity, community, making, and resourcefulness, but her standard of living stand out among others with similar incomes and childhoods. How can services draw on the experience of someone like Yvonne?

## OPPORTUNITIES

Mentorship for struggling parents. Yvonne's been there. When her children were very young, she felt overwhelmed, depressed, and she worried that her children were not safe with her. So she called child welfare, on herself. "They helped." Her children went a way for a short time and she was offered supports that allowed her to cope and get them back home. She went on to help raise 23 kids: "I was feeding off their positive stuff. They were dropped at my house like stray puppies." Since then she's had to raise her daughters' two children, and call child services on her own son, for which he has not forgiven her. Now she is thinking about fostering, but she could be a great resource for the parents as well as the kids.

Ambassador of a better time. Yvonne knows how to have a good time, and help others have a good time. She did that as a diner proprietor, and as a karaoke host ("They've gotta have fun because they're living out there on the street!") She has an eye for what could be ("If I have to wait, I'm not standing in line. Being homeless doesn't have to be like that!") Yvonne could help bring fun, and art, and purpose to the parts of services that are under-maximized, like the line-up for dinner.

Entrepreneurship Guide. Yvonne has run cottage industry business and small business. Now, she's half way to starting up her pop-up business. Why not take on an apprentice?

Gambler's Insurance. Yvonne's got financial goals. She wants to start a business, build a tiny house. But all that could be jeopardized by one gambling binger. She's aware of her precarity. How could services (maybe Four Directions Bank) support her to create her own insurance? To put away funds that can't easily be accessed or can only be used for a stated purpose?





#gang\_involved #addiction #White #Planning #Living\_rough #Canada #Edmonton

**“It’s me going around in circles helping people out, and when I need help, no one there.”**

## MEET CRAZY

Crazy acts like he’s got nine lives. After his most recent release from prison, less than a week ago, he might be trying to figure out just how many he’s got left. Having taken a significant beating from rival gang members last year, he can’t physically run anymore, which makes him feel vulnerable. He’s sometimes questioning his standard assessment of what might be a good reason to put his life on the line. But when protecting others and contributing to your gang has provided purpose for so long, how do you find new meaning? With no safe place to sleep, chronic pain, and the need to stay vigilant, it’s hard to keep the existential questions top of mind. Not to mention all the forms and administrative barriers between Crazy and the quiet life. You’ve really gotta want it bad.

I met Crazy at the Mustard Seed during one of their community dinners. Crazy sat with some acquaintances, people who “knew me back when both my hands were

in casts.” Over the following days, I spent quite a bit of time with him - in his mall and bus shelter hangouts, back at the Mustard Seed, and shadowing him on visits to several services and driving by potential apartments. Crazy was glad for the company.

## VALUES, MOTIVATIONS & ASPIRATIONS

Respect is important to Crazy. It’s what allows you to connect with someone. Crazy shows respect by returning favours, by “doing what they did for me.” Often, he goes a step further. “My nickname? Used to be Crazy White Boy, but then when I played smash up derby with three undercover cop cars...” Crazy starts into his explanation with bravado - this has been his claim to fame. His carefree expression shifts as he decides, perhaps, what this nickname says about him.

Looking more serious now, he says “I walked into any situation, like, I’ve got a ‘no fear attitude.’ I don’t care what the situation is. If it involves little kids or women, I’m in there. I don’t give a fuck what happens to me. I always make it out alive. My priority is to make sure they’re safe. Ya know?”

Being a protector has a lot of meaning for Crazy. He’d like to play that role, and others, for his young daughter who is currently in foster care, and whom he is not allowed to visit. One day, he’d like to be a mentor to guys like him, a “member of society,” a father, and a provider. He’s been told that due to injuries, he is unable to work. That’s depressing because it really limits how he can imagine his future. He’d like to learn to be a cook. “I like to cook. I was part way through a cooking class in grade 11 when I got arrested the first time. I can’t remember the last time I cooked.”

On the street, Crazy identifies as a good guy: he sees people’s weaknesses being exploited, like innocence or addiction, and he feels compelled to step in. Ultimately though, he sometimes gets exploited for his goodwill. It’s not just bad luck though, in some ways, he seeks it out: “I’m always the underdog... It’s lower pressure.”

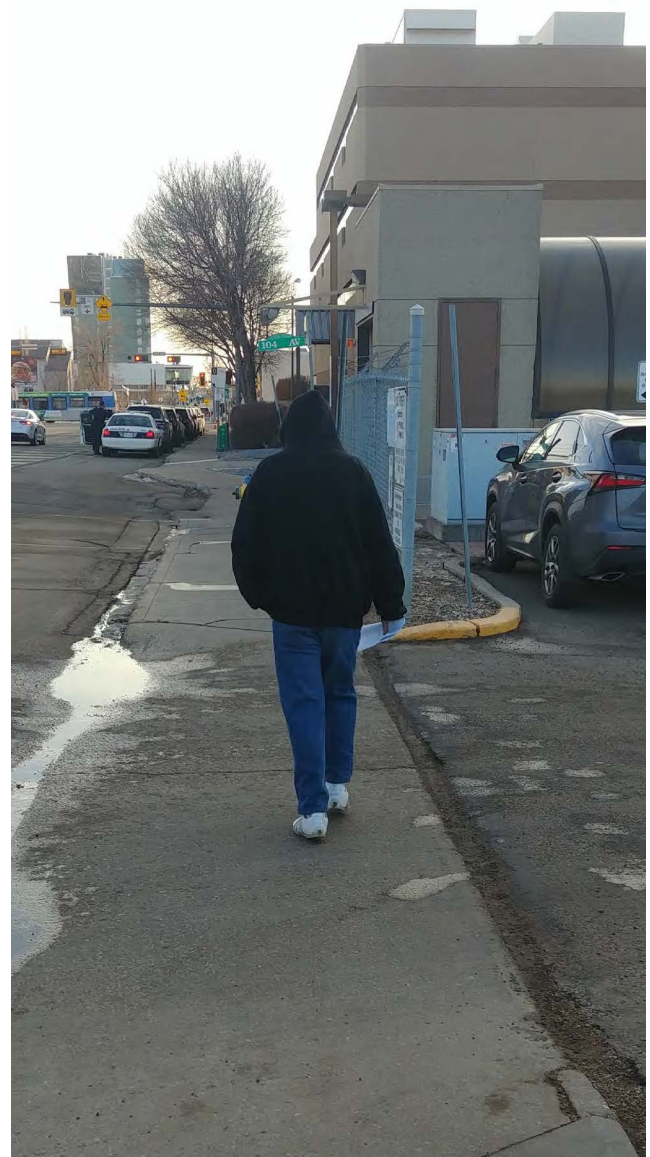
When Crazy talks about his relationships, he generally values them in terms of what he’s able to bring to the table, and sometimes forgets to mention what the other party provides. For example, when he tries to describe what makes his best friend a best friend, he explains “I could show up to his place in a hot truck, filled with gear from a warehouse and he wouldn’t ask a question. Whatever he wanted, I just gave it to him.” Crazy regularly talks about giving away much of the proceeds of his crimes to friends. The other factors that he identifies as important to friendships are history (having met his family, for example, or known him before he first went to jail), and affiliation to his gang. Crazy longs to connect with others but it’s been difficult because he has spent so much time in prison, and because sometimes people he cares about have led him into trouble. Referring to a woman he was spending a lot of time with last year, he says, “I saved her from getting raped, beat-up...but ya know, she played me every time. The only reason I didn’t walk away so quick is because I put my word down.” He believes that she alerted rival gang members to where he was in exchange for drugs. He was beaten within an inch of his life.

## ENABLERS

Crazy admits that despite his focus on helping and protecting others, he’d like a sense of safety and security for himself. This desire is often in competition with his desire to play a protector role on the street, and he’s not totally sure how to feel safe and secure.

“I last felt it before I was fifteen. Maybe one day I can regain it.” At fifteen, Crazy had a traumatic experience in which he was victimized by someone he trusted, and his father refused to believe his story. It did nothing to diminish his loyalty to his father, his sole parent, but the event seems to be concurrent with a turning point in his life. Before the incident, he was a boy who struggled in school due to dyslexia and ADHD but threw himself into sports, playing Bantam football. After, he set himself to becoming “the best B ‘n’ E artist in town,” and made more connections with the guys in his father’s gang. Now, Crazy expresses the ambition to move on: “I’d like to be a retiree from my line of work [crime].”

He’s decided that his main motivation, at present, is to get housing. For him, that’s as simple as “a room where stuff would be safe.” But after rival gang members find him at one of his favourite night spots and rough him up, it becomes clear that he needs a room where he would be safe.





## NETWORKS & SUPPORTS

Crazy doesn't see his dad much. After he was released from prison this week he checked in at a business that is a front for his gang and received a few items of clothing and some messages from his father. He considers it his job to stay hidden. Though he started out at 'the clubhouse' when he got out, he declined an offer to stay there and would prefer to keep his distance more generally. He tried to connect with a good friend so he could stay at his house but concluded that the house was under surveillance. He has a few friends and acquaintances he sees on the streets, or when going to get a meal at the Mustard Seed. He is able to call in some small favours: small amounts of drugs, an item of clothing. He also sees people he thinks might be in greater need and trades a warmer jacket for a lighter one. He says he feels pretty comfortable at the Mustard Seed, which is saying something.

Crazy is re-establishing some formal supports. He collects his mail at the Herb Jamieson where there is a kind nurse who helped him when he was hurt. When he returns to the Bissell Centre he is excited to see a familiar worker as we enter. He greets her like an auntie and updates her on his life as if picking up on a recent, and lengthy conversation. She is warm and expresses interest. Sometimes he heads to the Boyle Coop but is nervous about who he may run across there and says there's "too many drug dealers" outside.

## BARRIERS & STRESSORS

In his first week out of jail Crazy attempts to complete some administrative steps so he can get housing. He starts by getting some good-enough-for-now identification, because jail has released him with none. He then moves onto applying for social assistance and is granted a monthly income of \$334 (which does not include a housing amount because he is not housed.) With it, he receives a form that he is meant to give to the housing worker. The form is incomprehensible to Crazy and appears to mostly be written in code, from one service worker to another. Crazy leaves the inner city to find an income assistance office where he is unlikely to meet rival gang members. While there, he miscalculates his developing rapport with the housing worker, makes a crude pass at her, and is asked to leave by security. He is rather vexed. He tries to laugh it off with a joke, but is troubled. "I don't know how to ask a girl out. What am I supposed to say? Want to go for pizza?" Crazy spent all of his twenties in jail, and half of his thirties. He's missed the opportunities when most other young men began to develop those soft skills.

He has forms to fill out for the housing office and asks me for help. Forms take a lot of patience, with his dyslexia, and he hasn't slept in days. Together we fill them out and head to the housing office where he learns that if he wants a subsidy, there's a months-long wait ahead of him. He is immediately dejected. The worker refers him to the Bissell Centre which she says has a program that could probably house him more quickly. His re-connection with the Bissell Centre will prove invaluable over the next month and half, as his income assistance check fails to show up in the mail, he is accused of lying, banned from the service office after what the manager describes as a "heated" conversation, and is instead given a phone number that no one answers. His worker at the Bissell steps in on Crazy's behalf, competently sorting out the system's error. Crazy feels helpless.

Not surprisingly, Crazy identifies relationships, friends, and housing as his top stressors. On the housing front, Crazy is taking action but without the help of his support worker at the Bissell, he couldn't navigate and advocate for himself in the system. He feels jerked around. When it comes to friends, he's been thinking about making a change, to figure out who to trust and find "someone who's there when you need it." More intimate relationships have Crazy feeling less empowered. He thinks it might be a matter of fate. He'll "try not to get hurt," and accept that "if it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out."

Mostly, Crazy dwells in the present and near future. He began to talk about a desire for housing in the evening, and the next day he began taking steps to get some. He gets some makeshift identification because he was released from jail with none

The plan is still tentative: "people are afraid to change on the street," he explains. "...Too many steps." There are push factors though. Crazy can't return to doing B & Es because he literally can't run away. He's tired of his pattern of investing his energies in people who don't return the favour. There are also pull factors: he'd like to be a father to his daughter in foster care.

## DAILY ROUTINES

When I first meet Crazy, the daytime is about administrative action: figuring out how to get his ID, income assistance, housing, and looking for an apartment. He is also very eager to find out about the status of a Victim Services claim he submitted before going to jail, after he was so severely beaten up. He waits in line for other services like community meals, and the bank. The rest of the time, he wonders mall spaces, mostly downtown. On one of his first days out, he went out to West Edmonton Mall and walked



about. Currently, he describes his days as having no structure, “everyday is different.” That’s a challenge for him because concussions have left him with memory issues. He’d like to have enough structure to his day that he could remember things.

Crazy begins the nights with a routine: a particular, heated bus shelter than he can relax in. “If you close your eyes, they kick you out.” He informs me. And sure enough, when a young man sleeps on the floor we hear a voice of warning over the loudspeaker.

The space is unstaffed, but there are cameras. Crazy won’t go to a shelter because with all the other gang members there, he doesn’t feel safe. He says he feels safe here, and he has his ways of staying awake. (A month later, this bit of routine seems to have gotten him in trouble - “RAs [Red Alerts gang members] found me and beat me up. Three of them.” He looks like the walking wounded with a limp, a tender shoulder, and gingerly holding himself due to broken ribs.) On the average night, after the bus shelter, Crazy goes walk-about.

Sometimes this has taken him to the Emergency Room looking for some Tylenol threes (“I get bad headaches... and my heels give me pain.”) Other times, he meets people and hangs out with them. Nights and weekends are long and feel like interruptions to getting things done that would move Crazy closer to his goal.

## **WELLBEING AND A GOOD LIFE**

For Crazy, well being would mean a break from his past, it would mean gaining the skills to work through trauma, finding some new roles with purpose, and converting what he’s learned from his life experience into something he could be proud of. Currently his day to day has none of this. His support worker at the Bissell Centre cautioned him that going without therapy for too long is a danger, but that it’s important to be housed before he begins because it’s going to be hard work, and he can’t allow himself to be vulnerable while living on the street. He has to stay tough for now.

As a gang member and a convict, obeying rules and working within systems are nothing new to Crazy but this question of what it means to look out for his own well being can look so different across the environments he must negotiate - whether it’s in the gang, in prison, or on the streets. Currently, he alternates between pure survival mode and moving his life forward. Survival is about movement, staying awake, moral flexibility, being seen as strong, even dangerous, medicating pain, being vigilant, and making the most of the contacts you’ve got; whereas, creating the conditions for a new life requires placing his trust in advocates, limiting his dependence on the old network, holding his tongue a lot, and dogged persistence. Crazy is motivated by the hope for a simple room, away from the inner city, and the hope that one day down the road he can know his daughter again. He has no vision of what his life will look like beyond that, or even what it might take to be allowed to play a role in his daughter’s life again. In return for that fuzzy promise, he has to give up all the informal supports he’s known and trust in a system that, to date, won’t pay him his assistance without a fight.

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

Half-way services.

When Crazy left prison, he went straight to sleeping on the streets. He started at square one with ID, medical care, etc. What kind of transitional services could help people like Crazy at this point?

Mentoring.

Crazy didn’t become a criminal by accident. His one parent trained him in it, role modelling that can’t help him with his new goals. How could people like Crazy connect to new role modelling in the inner city?

Vocational try-outs.

With dyslexia and ADD, Crazy struggles to learn through books and computers. He’s been told he can’t work because of his health. What kind of experiences might Crazy connect to for hope and vision for the future?