

Ambulance workers reach out to Whalley's homeless neighbours

by Ellen Baragon

Susan accepts a brown lunch bag and can of pop offered by two paramedics, thanks them politely, then tucks herself back into a sleeping bag lying on the ground under a building overhang in the heart of Whalley in central Surrey.

This is home for Susan—at least this week.

The 32-year-old woman, originally from Alberta, says she has lived on the street for about 13 years since her husband died, her income went down, and she lost custody of her child. She says that she fights with drug addiction and has bounced around Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. But she's been straight for four months and would like to stay that way.

Despite her obvious poor circumstances, Susan is an attractive, polite, well-spoken and sober young woman, so it is somewhat shocking to hear her say she never anticipates having a home ever again.

"Sure, it would be nice, but..." she trails off as though the prospect is so far out of reach it's not worth talking about.

Meeting people at night, on the street, and having these kind of personal conversations is something most of us are unaccustomed to. But for paramedics Tim James and Mark Lau, this is a regular routine. Partners who work for the B.C. Ambulance Service based at Surrey Memorial Hospital (SMH), the pair's goodwill sends them out at night to hand out bag lunches to the homeless in Whalley a couple of times a month. James prepares the lunches at home, and they borrow the ambulance for an hour to make their run.

Lau teases that he got dragged into lunch bag duty against his will. "This is all Tim's fault," he says smiling.

Everyone talks about homelessness, and sense it's getting worse, but the statistics are not always clear. To get an up to date estimate of homeless numbers and their demographic profiles, the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, on which Fraser Health serves, contracted the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC) to conduct the 2008 Homeless Count in early March this year. The last count in 2005 revealed the homeless had increased by an astronomical 235% over the previous three years, from 330 people to 1105.

This year 400 specially trained volunteers were recruited to spread themselves across Metro Vancouver in order to gather information about the people living homeless, and their number. The intent is

to use the information to plan services, direct policy and fund programs to help people with no place to live.

James, who also is a keen supporter of the Backpack Project which SANE nurse Lynn Gifford got started, shines with an energy and enthusiasm for the homeless community that is rarely seen in the average person.

As a tag-along rider for this evening's lunch bag drop, James greets and introduces me as though we joining a group of friends at a dinner party. He enjoys what he does, and he gets

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a nice response from people. Even those who are shy and private make a special point to mutter, "Thanks man." A brunette who calls herself Connie reaches out to shake our hands before accepting her lunch bag. Her fingers are very cold and James he tells her he is very sorry he doesn't have any gloves to hand out this night.

The people that James and Lau encounter are mostly friendly, polite, and thankful. The one truism about homeless citizens that tends to get lost in the public debate is that the homeless are people—people who happen to be without a home. It may be true that many living in this area have, or have had, a problem with addiction, and it may or may not be true their life decisions have contributed to where they have arrived, here on the streets of Whalley. Some have been struck down in other ways, illness, injury, loss of income. But people like James question whether illness, injury or addiction deserves the punishment of homelessness and social stigma.

"There are people out there who really speak to you from their heart," says James, who says he has met people who were at the top of their careers before taking a tumble down. In his view, they all have a story worth telling.

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As James chats with the small group that has gathered around the ambulance, Don, about 50 years old, approaches. He is fairly well dressed, and carries a bag over his shoulder.

Likable and articulate, Don explains that he's lived on the street for about 12 years since he lost a house he owned in New Westminster. He says his luck went bad after a severe neck injury caused him to lose a highly paid job, and he was forced to live on a disability pension. Don also admits to having had a past with drugs, but doesn't indulge in that much anymore. He says securing a place to live is complicated because you need to show you are reputable and able to pay the rent each month. The cost of renting has escalated, he says, and so has the violence on the street.

"It's getting crazy," says Don. "There are so many knives and guns now. It's more and more violent all the time. He has not been seriously attacked, but he's aware of the dangers due to the prevalence of crime.

"This is where you have to have that keen sense of knowing who to avoid."

"Yeah, I've got to get away from this place," he says, but not altogether convinced. "It will happen, it will happen." James believes that the role of a paramedic allows he and his partner to gain trust with people living on the street.

"I want to use my ambulance uniform," he explains, "because then people recognize me as someone who will help. "

James does not judge the people he helps, and says it's not his mission to change them. Rather, he'd like to see the world change.

"My wish would be that we had no homelessness," James says. "My goal is not to change someone, but to help them as they are today, even if it's something as simple as a lunch. We'll do it."