

## Three Days, Two Perspectives, One Community

*His...*

*Avrum Rosensweig is the Founding Director of Ve'ahavta: The Canadian Jewish Relief and Humanitarian Organization, and a freelance writer. He enjoys combining his outreach work with his writing to establish awareness on the importance of volunteerism and encourage social dialogue locally and internationally.*

On August 26th, I headed onto the streets of Toronto to live with the homeless. It was a cool morning. The heat would soon rise.

Several months ago, *Ve'ahavta: The Canadian Jewish Humanitarian & Relief Committee*, the organization of which I am president, decided we would try to better understand the individuals we work with on the street - those people we call homeless. We wanted to get to know them as individuals, not merely as 'homeless' persons. We subsequently set about organizing a program we affectionately call: 'Three Days on the Street'.

Since 1998, Ve'ahavta staff and volunteers have traveled the streets of Toronto in our Mobile Jewish Response to the Homeless vans, giving out food and drink, clothing, books, and other items of benefit to the homeless. We also sponsor a Creative Writing Contest for the Homeless with world-class judges such as Michael Ondaatje. Our work with this community, one of the most vulnerable in our city, has been challenging but rewarding. It was now time to reach further and deeper.

Together, with three of my colleagues, Alvaro Castellanos, his brother Boris, and Jacqueline Stein, we began a trek into a far away world right here in Toronto, participating in a plethora of activities including volunteer work at the Good Shepherd Drop-In and the Friendship Centre, a hosted BBQ at Evangel Hall, and a Drum and Honesty Circle at Trinity Bellwoods Park.

From the onset it was clear, however, that our team was in no way homeless. This became evident on our first night out when I fell ill. The team voted I go home to regain my strength. I did and returned the next day. The homeless do not have this option. We were not homeless, but rather visitors on the streets of Toronto, home to thousands of men, women, and teens without walls.

Our goal on the street was to engage people of all backgrounds living on or near the street – our fellow citizens – in conversation to learn what pushed them out the mainstream door and away from a "traditional" lifestyle. We wanted to know what was so tough about their lives and share our findings with others so as to enhance our city's compassion.

On 'Day One', I sat on the pavement in front of the Good Shepherd and initiated a conversation with Art, a man of about 55 who has been on the streets and/or in jail for most of his life. When we first starting schmoozing, he figured I was an undercover cop but was soon advised otherwise by Theresa Schrader, our street advisor.

Theresa is a former prostitute and crack addict who spent eight years living on the street. Her life reads like a horror story filled with abuse, rape, and torment. But Theresa is also a 'poster girl' for change.

This incredible woman chose to come back inside and today studies social work, is a mother to a beautiful little boy, and mentors others on how to positively change their lives. One day, as we walked, I confided in Theresa that I felt so vulnerable, having never been in a fight, wearing my kipa (Jewish skullcap), and that I was not sure I could defend myself in the face of conflict.

Confidentially, she replied: 'Don't worry, I got your back'.

Art told me his earliest memory was witnessing his three-year-old sister being crushed to death by a truck. He was her babysitter. The next several years were a blur; that is, until his father left home when he was nine. I asked him if he was happy. "No" he said. I asked him if he had ever been happy. "No", he repeated.

Later, Dave, a burly fellow on a bike and a friend of Theresa's, stopped by to chat. Dave told me that he was given up by his father at the age of ten. His mother didn't want him either. "I'm not loveable, and I don't know why," Dave said.

I pitched him my finest 'Oprah' line. "Dave, just sitting here, I feel your warmth. I'm going to bet you are very loveable." But you know how that works? It doesn't. Because when you're dad, the person you love more than anyone, your hero, leaves you alone in a courtroom of strangers and walks away - how could you *possibly feel* loveable?

This happens everyday in our courts. Dave is just one of many Canadians whose lonely childhoods have left them severely troubled in their adulthoods.

We wrapped up 'Three Days on the Street' at the Minsk Synagogue in Kensington Market with a beautiful Sabbath dinner for the homeless and the congregants. It was there that I began to exhale and digest the words and actions of our fellow citizens - the homeless. It was here and over the next few days I began to recognize the tragedy of the street, but also the tremendous hope it emanates.

I recalled the four Native Canadians who pulled off their clothes in a drunken stooper, as we said the Jewish mourner's prayer in front of the homeless memorial at Trinity Square. I then pondered the life of a woman of East Indian decent who was raped by her father over and over when she was a child. (She is schizophrenic and told me the voices in her head are her friends and that she misses them when she takes her medication). I was saddened for them, and for us.

Then I remembered the rest of their stories. I recalled that the East Indian woman told me her father had recently returned home from visiting his spiritual leader in India. He walked through the front door of their house, saw his daughter, and immediately fell at her feet, kissed them and begged for forgiveness. I thought about Theresa and considered the courage she mustered up to come back from a life of terror and anguish. I

remembered that Dave was going for a dog-grooming job that day, and I visualized Art's face as he told me about the many homeless people he has helped and his dream to become a lawyer.

'Three Days on the Street' introduced the Ve'ahavta team to a world that is tragic. It painted a dark and dismal picture of the lives of many Torontonians, Ontarians, and Canadians whose existence can be as dismal as those living in refugee camps. Abuse is abuse and cigarette marks on the skin burn as painfully here as they do in a Godforsaken African village.

And 'Three Days on the Street' showed us what the true meaning of hope is and our ability to change in spite of the difficulties we face in our lives. It was on the street, more so than inside, where I engaged with women and men who were so badly damaged, but who have nonetheless made the conscious decision to live life to its utmost. While walking our downtown streets, I realized that many of those we see panhandling or sleeping by the side of the road wake up every morning with very real dreams.

One day, our team will head out there again. We will listen to more stories from bearded men and pierced women; cry some more with them, celebrate their dreams, and hope that, one day, they might just reach them.

### *Hers...*

*Jacqueline Stein is a Canadian writer, journalist, and women's rights activist. She has been pursuing her interests in cross-cultural communications and local and international development, and has traveled extensively, living in diverse regions of the world and partaking in many cultural exchanges.*

For the first instance in my adult life, I have lost track of time. There is no alarm alerting me to wake up, no watch reminding me that it is my lunch hour, and no clock signaling to me that it is the end of the workday and therefore time to go home.

My regimented schedule has become, in many ways, my religion: bringing purpose and meaning to my life and giving me reason to get up in the morning and get on with my day.

When I left it behind – my alarm, my watch, my schedule...my “religion” – to come face-to-face with another way of living, I had not anticipated what I would learn about humanity, about our relationships, with ourselves and with others, when I stopped looking at the clock.

Still, as we are a culture dependent on the security of numbers and time constraints, I will put it into context: three days, 72 hours, 4,320 minutes. *This* is the time I spent living on the street. *This* is the insight I gained.

For those whom we refer to as Toronto's homeless, the regiment of a schedule is next to non-existent. Though many shelters and drop-in centres offer meals and sleeping curfews

at specific times, I abruptly learn that when you live on the streets for an extended period, a schedule is akin to a prison sentence.

To elaborate, many of those I encountered during my stay on the streets were rebelling against this sentence (*not the passing teenage rebellion that our society has become accustomed to hearing and reading about*) while also encountering a new set of demons: a 40-year-old mother of three who had been raped at seven years old, comforted by her own substance abusing mother who assured her of the “normalcy” of sexual violence; a 29-year-old former *University of Toronto* student in and out of psychiatric wards, tormented by the heckling voices in his head; and an 18-year-old street youth forced into a clothing dryer as a child and neglected by her caretakers. The mother fled from the confines of a violent home only to pursue dysfunctional and abusive adult relationships, the student’s schizophrenia resulted in severe anxiety and paranoia, preventing him from staying in one place for too long, and the street youth abandoned the dryer and a tumultuous life of forced commands for the harsh realities of loneliness and self-sabotage.

These are a select few of the thousands of Torontonians living on or near the streets. Their rebellion stems from a place of such destruction, self-loathing, hatred, and hurt, that any one of us would give our last dollar not to experience the kind of suffering that these individuals have been subjected to throughout their lives.

For them, a schedule is not *just* a schedule. It is a painful reminder of a life fraught with orders and abuse – when a little girl is no longer a little girl but an object of sexual desire, and when the burning heat of a clothes dryer replaces the warm retreat of a bed. A schedule is, in the most basic sense, society’s way of keeping its civilians in check and ensuring that we do as we are supposed to *when* we are supposed to. A schedule for those living on the streets, many of whom are survivors of abuse, abandonment, and exploitation, signifies that there is still an authority barking orders. It is a fear-inducing concept that often becomes too much to bear.

Yet, this fear has become two-fold. Though we all call Toronto “home”, we are living in two increasingly divergent communities or, as I have come to realize, a culture of the “*haves*” and a sub-culture of the “*have-nots*”. A culture of those who *have* has taken reign. This is a culture of decision makers, of money and, as a result, of influence. In direct opposition to this exists a sub-culture of those who *have not*, for all intents and purposes, homeless persons. No home. No money. And thus, no influence or power to affect the direction of the community in which they have a share in.

All of this equates to a level of fear and contempt that inevitably takes a serious toll on the health and prosperity of a community. Those who *have* are afraid of what might be taken from them – money and other material resources – or how the system may be abused – health care and social assistance programs, for example – by those who *have not*. Those who *have not* live in unrest in the shadow of a socio-economic system created and perpetuated by those who *have*.

It is a tireless cycle that has led us all to exhaustion, whether we sleep in the plushness of a king-sized bed with 400-thread count linen or on a sidewalk grate. Money, luxuries,

and, evidently, a safe and secure upbringing aside, there is not much to separate the *haves* from the *have-nots*. We are all navigating our place and purpose within our community; we are all trying to survive against the personal and professional obstacles and challenges we face, and we are all on a lifelong pursuit of happiness, though our definition of this term varies widely.

If we were to see a resemblance in the fundamentals of our existence, we would also open our eyes to the reality that our similarities far outweigh our differences. This truth extends to the fact that the security blankets protecting some us from the elements today could be pulled away, leaving us cold and defenseless tomorrow.

If, hypothetically, I were to lose my job, to be diagnosed with a mental illness, or to get involved in an abusive relationship, there are no guarantees that I would not find myself in dire circumstances, forced to decide between affordable housing and food on my plate.

A university-educated 20-something, there is little to separate me from the schizophrenic former *UofT* student, save for a mental illness. Much like the mother of three and the street youth, I too had caregivers who raised me from childhood into adulthood. It was not *my* decision to be brought up in a home where love, compassion, and humane disciplinary action prevailed. So too, it was not at the discretion of these women to grow up in homes where rape and neglect were the rules and not the exceptions.

Somehow, somewhere, we, as a community, have lost much more than the roofs over our heads. We have lost our sense of humanity, of what it means to embrace and support one another irrespective of the material goods that we possess. We have forgotten what it means to love, but we have most certainly come to learn, understand, and perpetrate the meaning of hate.

Just as we have been conditioned to hate that which is unknown to us, we can, in the same breath, be unconditioned. This is the true beauty and complexity of humanity. We *can* learn to love and understand one another better. It seems simple because it *is* simple.

I challenge you. Take a breath. Now hold it. Think about why you looked right through someone panhandling for change. *Stop*. Think about why you thought it was acceptable to reach into someone's back pocket and steal his or her wallet. *Stop*. Think about why you assume that someone wearing unlaundered clothing does not hold a university degree or that someone in a suit and tie places no concern on your welfare. *Stop*. Let us think, collectively, about how we can work together to heal the ills that plague us all, the *haves* and the *have-nots* of our community, so that we can share better and love better. Now breathe.