

# Greater Toronto

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## Hope found in escaping poverty trap

It was being destitute, not having depression or cancer, that almost broke activist's spirit

**LURIE MONSEBRAATEN**  
SOCIAL JUSTICE REPORTER

For years, "hope" was just a four-letter word to anti-poverty activist Mike Creek.

After working his way up in the hotel industry from dishwasher to head office manager, Creek lost it all in 1993 when he was diagnosed with cancer. He was just 37.

As he would later tell a packed Queen's Park forum, it wasn't the cancer or the depression that broke his spirit. It was the poverty.

With no workplace disability benefits, he clung to Employment Insurance while enduring nine months of chemotherapy, two surgeries,



Anti-poverty activist Mike Creek

Eventually he ended up in a subsidized apartment in a gloomy Regent Park highrise where a man was slain the weekend he moved in.

He was frightened, depressed and alone. "I was very sick. Basically, I

Park's first condominium complex at One Cole St., near the corner of Dundas and Parliament Sts.

He may be a medical miracle — Creek's non-Hodgkin's lymphoma is in remission — but he believes his

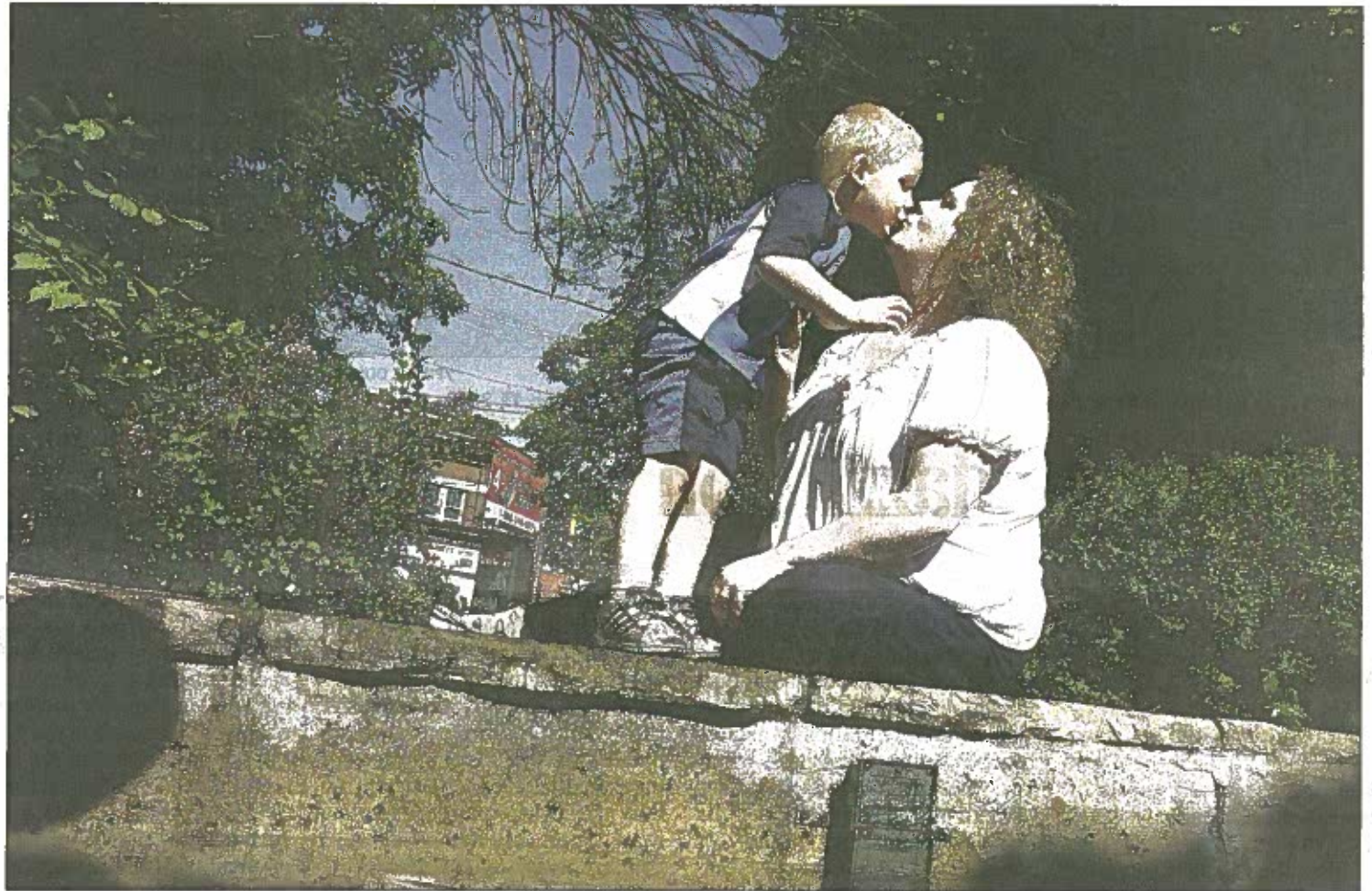
from poverty when given the opportunity."

"If I can do it, others can too," says Creek, 53, as he looks west at the city skyline from his spacious terrace, which is next door to Council-

want to leave the community," he says. "I think it's important to stay, to show others it's possible."

During 12 years on welfare and Ontario's Disability Support Plan, Creek lived on about \$666 a month.

## THERESA SCHRADER BEAT HARD LIFE ON THE STREET FOR SON MARKUS, GT4



STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

# Ex-addict puts poverty behind her

'That was the day I decided to take back my life'

**LURIE MONSEBRAATEN**  
SOCIAL JUSTICE REPORTER

Theresa Schrader was a terrible loser.

But it wasn't losing her home, her family or her dignity to a life of addiction and the streets that tore her apart.

It was losing two babies to children's aid that she couldn't bear.

So four years ago, when she discovered she was pregnant for a third time, Schrader decided to become a winner.

"That was the day I decided to take back my life," says the former addict, who spent a decade living on Toronto streets.

Today, Schrader, 34, is the proud mother of an inquisitive and energetic 3-year-old boy. She has just aced her first year of social work at George Brown College. And she has landed her first "real" summer job, which she created herself and pays a handsome \$2,600 a month.

If all goes well — and she is deter-

The Yonge St. Mission offered Schrader safe, subsidized housing and a child-care centre next door gave her son quality early learning experiences while she worked to

put her life back together.

But Voices from the Street and its coordinator Mike Creek — a cancer patient who lived in poverty himself for more than a decade — was her inspiration.

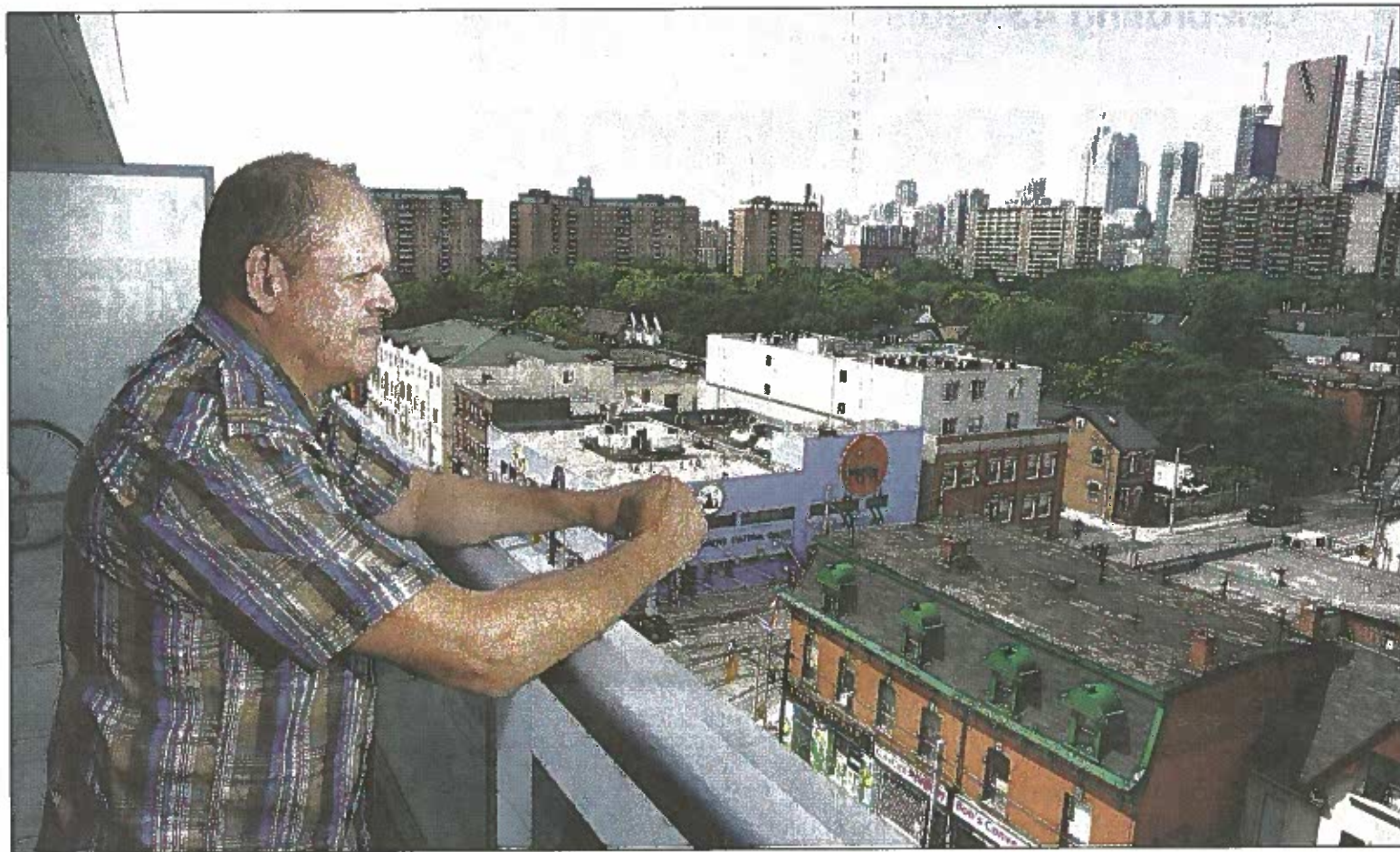
"That was the program that

helped me believe in myself," she says. "He helped me believe that I could go back to school and become something better."

Now Schrader is taking the Voices model and spreading the hope to others in her Street Academy. The

12-week, \$25,000 program she designed and directs is funded by Ve'ahavta and will include a variety of guest speakers, including *Hockey Night in Canada's* Ron MacLean.

"My welfare days are over," she says triumphantly.



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

Mike Creek recently took ownership of his own condo in Regent Park, far from the cancer diagnosis 17 years earlier that pushed him into poverty.

## His activism inspired by hardships

ESCAPE from GT1

In early 2007, Creek saw a poster in his doctor's office inviting people with a history of homelessness to participate in a new advocacy program. The 12-week program, Voices from the Street, provided a TTC pass, meals and a weekly honorarium of \$60.

Creek signed up and soon learned he was not alone. He met others who had been set on the pathway to poverty by mental illness, addiction and domestic assault. And he began to understand how government programs for the poor become a trap.

When the program coordinator's position became available in early 2008, Creek applied. He got the job and soon was earning \$40,000 plus benefits.

That fall, the shy, quiet-spoken cancer survivor told his story to a Queen's Park forum of more than 500 social activists — including Children's Minister Deb Matthews, who was leading the province's anti-poverty efforts.

As a leader in the 25-in-5 Network for Poverty Reduction, Creek helped to push Ontario into adopting a goal of reducing child poverty in the province by 5 per cent within five years.

When the first Regent Park condos went on the market in February 2009, Creek was the fourth in line. He saved \$1,000 a month for almost a year for the \$11,000 down payment on his \$200,000 600-square-foot unit.

"When I first moved in, I cried for a week," he confesses, still barely able to believe how far he has come. "It was very emotional for me. It still is."

The move has also improved his health. He has shed almost 60 pounds since he began regular workouts in the condo's exercise room. His skin wounds are healing and he has been able to go

medication-free for the first time in more than a decade.

He credits good health to his better living conditions and sense of financial and personal security.

His personal journey has reinforced his passion to push for change.

"I never dreamed of home ownership, let alone a job and place in society," he says. "I have been so fortunate to have been given choices again. It is those choices and opportunities that I want for all citizens."

"Hope is not just a four-letter word," he says. "It is a dream that can come true."

That was the program that helped me believe in myself

Theresa Schrader, about Voices from the Street program

mined to ensure it does — Schrader hopes to turn her job running a summer school for the homeless into a career.

She got lots of help along the way.

Her first big break was winning a creative writing contest run by Ve'ahavta, a Jewish charity that helps the vulnerable in Toronto, Canada and abroad.

The contest, which encourages the homeless to write about their experiences, connected Schrader to a network of services and mentors, such as charity founder Avrum Rosensweig, who helped her launch the Ve'ahavta Street Academy. It has 11 students this summer, she says.

Nazareth House, a shelter for pregnant, street-involved women, offered sanctuary, and "an army" of street nurses worked to ensure Schrader had a healthy pregnancy and birth.