

HOMELESSNESS: WITH NO DOOR THAT LOCKS

Written By Terry Peters

"There's no place like home. There's no place like home."

For those of us who have secure homes, this famous quote is true. We experience it at the end of a long day, when we return from a long journey, and when we wake from a long and restful sleep. Arriving at home, we can kick off our shoes and change into our comfy clothes. We know where everything is, and where everything goes. Having control over our surroundings, we can choose to be social and invite others over, or choose solitude instead by closing the curtains and locking the door.

For homeless people, who do not have secure homes, no such control exists. There is a denial of one of the most basic benefits of home, one so familiar that it is often overlooked: privacy.

The word *privacy* means many things to different people. Inside our padded nests, we benefit from some of the subtler dimensions of privacy: solitude; refuge; reserve; and intimacy. Having a place of refuge gives us control over what information we choose to reveal, when, and to whom. No one needs to (or deserves to) know about your sex life, what medicines you are taking, your level of personal debt, or how many drinks you had last night. Privacy protects us from being misunderstood, denied well-deserved social advantages, and from being harshly or unfairly judged.



Privacy allows for the gradual, selective, voluntary disclosure of personal information. For homeless people in comparison, privacy does not exist, even in the only place they can call home: a shelter.

In the design of hospitals, mental health facilities, prisons and homeless shelters, access to privacy is seldom part of the plan.

Although shelters are built as a social service, not for punishment, the similarities between shelters and prisons (in the effects they have on residents) are stark and unsettling.

In both cases, residents are in constant social contact, often being monitored by authorities –even while asleep. One's body or belongings can be made open for inspection. Basic bodily functions must be performed with others close-by. Intimacy, instead of being slow, gradual and by choice is immediate, imposed, even relentless. You can never remove those heavy social masks that we all wear. Unavailable are the normal distancing patterns that limit

our contact with people who are loud, rude, disrespectful, or dangerous. In both settings, not only are you more exposed, you are also exposed to more: the activities of others; their bodily sounds and smells; snoring; teeth grinding; groans and nightmares. One depressed, irritable, angry person can change the tone in a room with a single word...but in a shelter, you have no private place to go. Even if everyone is getting along, you are still more exposed to communicable diseases -from the seasonal flu to tuberculosis. Combining all these factors with the consistent overcrowding in Toronto's shelter system creates extremely unstable and volatile living conditions.

These volatile living conditions have been known to erupt into violence. In June 2012, violence erupted at Seaton House, Toronto's largest men's shelter, with one resident striking another in the head with a fire extinguisher – sending him to hospital with serious injuries. Tension in shelters is not uncommon.

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Street Health and many other homelessness advocates continuously say that Toronto's shelter system is under-resourced, over-burdened and unsafe.

Since early 2012, **Street Health** has participated in city consultations for the planning and redevelopment of the Seaton House men's shelter. Located on George Street, in Toronto's downtown east side, this shelter presently houses 534 residents. However, the existing structure, built in 1959, is overcrowded, crumbling, and ill-equipped to meet the needs of its expanding and aging clientele. Of the various redevelopment plans being considered, the city's favoured option includes 96 emergency shelter beds and 162 long-term care beds. If adopted, this plan would mean the loss of 440 shelter spaces, with no existing alternative for the men who currently live there. With demolition planned for early 2014, construction of new buildings not scheduled until 2017, long waiting lists for scarce affordable housing, and an



overwhelmed shelter system – where are vulnerable citizens going to go?

Here at Street Health, in addition to providing nursing care, ID replacement, mental health support, and basic clothing and hygiene supplies, we also devote consistent and concerted advocacy efforts to help improve the living conditions of vulnerable citizens who are too often unheard.

We will continue to listen to clients' concerns, and bring ideas to our

meetings with other agencies and consumer-advisory panels. It is on behalf of clients that we advocate, because as American author and poet *Maya Angelou* once said,

*The ache for home lives in all of us,
the safe place where we can go
as we are
and not be questioned.*

Please visit our blog at <http://blog.streethealth.ca/> to read the full article.



Street Health periodically hosts large meals in the community. We are looking forward to our first community Holiday party on December 5th!

ANNOUNCEMENT!

On Thursday December 5th, Street Health will be hosting a holiday party for the homeless community! Roast turkey and all the trimmings will be served by Jewell Catering.

The event will take place at the All Saints Church, at 315 Dundas St East at noon. We are expecting over 400 people from the community to attend. Thank you so much to our generous sponsor Janssen Inc for making this special day possible!



A Loving Embrace: Lisa Horseback Riding 2012

STREET HEALTH MOURNS A FRIEND AND PEER

Lisa was a longtime member of the harm reduction peer team at Street Health and was well known to many members of our community having been a longtime resident of our downtown neighborhood. Lisa was passionate about women's rights and marched for Reclaim the Streets and Take Back the Night, at which she proudly participated carrying banners.

Lisa was a strong, determined and resilient individual who was featured in two short films about peer programming. In one of the films there is a scene in which she talks about outreach and describes how she just wanted to give them (outreach clients) a big ol' hug and let them know that someone cares whether they live or die. This moment embodies who she was, and in it you feel both her pain and resolve.

Lisa also had a special love for animals – it didn't seem to matter: cat, dog, or horse, she LOVED animals. Lisa would always come on the horseback riding trip every year with the woman's drop-in. She would typically choose the biggest horse and gallop like the wind. She died this year just before our trip, so we brought pictures of her and taped one to the back of the bus drivers' seat so she could hang out with the women on the way. That's when someone noticed a pair of glasses under a seat. We retrieved

them – they didn't belong to anyone and looked just like the glasses Lisa wore. Oddly we weren't terribly surprised by this, we knew she'd be there somehow some way – watching over us and riding like the wind.

Lisa's friends and peers remember her with love:

Lisa will forever be a part of this community, because she will forever have a place in our hearts.

Lisa as a peer outreach worker was able to gain back her self-respect, her pride, her dignity: and proved to herself that she could do whatever she put her mind to.

Being able to share her knowledge of street life and all that goes with it gave Lisa a way to give back to her community in a powerful positive way.

Lisa told us a story about a young girl who has lost her way and ends up on the corner. Lisa tells us how she gave the girl "a big old hug" a hug that made a change, a hug that said I care. That hug came from Lisa's heart – a heart that was full of compassion for her fellow human beings.

Lisa used that heart on all of us – Let's just give everyone a big old hug for Lisa.

A BICYCLE FOR STEVEN

Here at Street Health, several of our housed clients travel from the outskirts of Toronto each day to access our services. Clients who received care while living on the streets or in a shelter downtown often build a bond with their nurse or community mental health worker, and it is vital that this support continues even after a person finds permanent housing. A strong support network is the key to maintaining housing for people who have experienced homelessness. Often a client will have a bicycle that they ride several miles per day in order to access services. Biking can often be therapeutic and provides a sense of freedom for all people, not just those struggling with mental health issues.

Recently, a long time client named Steven had his bike stolen. Steven has traveled each day from east Scarborough to meet with his care givers here at Street Health. In fact, it was rare to see Steven off his bicycle. Steven was devastated and turned to Street Health for help. Our staff were very concerned that Steven would no longer be able to get around, and worried about Steven's well-being.

The very next day, a staff member arrived at work pushing her son's previously used bike to give Steven. He was so thrilled and overwhelmed by this generosity, gushing over what a nice bike it was. Later that day, a second staff member offered to tune up the bike for Steven so that it would run like new. Steven left our office that day with a huge smile on his face.

These small acts of kindness show how the amazing staff at Street Health often go out of their way to help a person in any way possible.

OUR PROGRAMS & SERVICES

Nursing Outreach
Mental Health Support
I.D. Replacement and Storage
Harm Reduction
Advocacy
Research
Education

A GENEROUS BEQUEST

On August 5th the Canadian music scene lost a truly talented person. James Gray, long time keyboardist for the well known band Blue Rodeo, passed away at age 52, leaving behind an impressive musical legacy.

During his life, James was a strong supporter of homelessness issues in Toronto. Upon his passing, James' family chose Street Health to be one of the recipients of in memoriam donations. People wanting to remember James have been making donations over the phone, by mail and on our web site. To date we have raised over \$5000.00.

Thank you so much to the Grey family for this generous gift. We remember James and his amazing contribution to Canadian music.

If you would like to make a donation in memory of James Gray, please visit our web site at: www.streethealth.ca/donate

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HOW YOU CAN HELP

- SEND A DONATION TO STREET HEALTH -

Your donation will help us to expand our programs to better serve our clients.

- ORGANIZE A FUNDRAISER -

Street Health would love to help you plan a fundraising event through your club, church, or office. Please call for more details.

- ADVOCATE FOR THE HOMELESS -

Express your concerns to your municipal, provincial, and federal politicians...
WRITING A LETTER CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

- GIVE STREET HEALTH A VOICE -

Our staff would be happy to speak to your organization, staff, club, or church about our programs and the needs of our clients.

- DONATE SLEEPING BAGS AND WINTER WARMTH ITEMS -

Please give your used sleeping bags, winter coats, warm clothing, new socks, and footwear to Street Health for our Sleeping Bag Distribution and Winter Warmth Project.

HAVE YOU VISITED OUR NEW WEB SITE YET?

Lots of useful information for donors and service providers.

Making a donation online is quick, easy and secure!

Be sure to check out our regular blog posts as well!

www.streethealth.ca



Street Health



@StreetHealthTO

StreetHealth

Together We Can Make It Work

338 Dundas Street East, Toronto ON, M5A 2A1

(416) 921-8668

info@streethealth.ca

www.streethealth.ca

