

## **Michelle's Jacket**

**October 12, 2008**

Good morning. It is good to be here with you today. I recently marked the one year anniversary of one of the most important, and magical days of my life; the anniversary of my ordination to the Unitarian ministry, by this congregation. I am glad to be here, learning and growing with you good people. I am a community minister, and although I have been through the same training and process of ordination as any other Unitarian minister in Canada I have chosen to serve in the community as opposed to a parish location.

I work at a small non-profit agency called Inner City Women's Initiative Society that has been serving HIV+ women and women at risk in the Downtown Eastside for 15 years. Our specific programme is called DAMS (Drug, Alcohol, Meeting and Support) and we are often just known as the DAMS ladies. I am an Outreach worker, which means I do a little bit of everything, from serving meals, to coordinating volunteers, to visiting patients on the HIV+ ward at St. Paul's hospital.

Here is a picture of what my typical Wednesday can look like, just to give you an idea of the work I do. I start my day at 3:00PM when I arrive at the LifeSkills Centre. LifeSkills is a drop-in centre just behind the Patricia Hotel on Hastings Street. First, I like to prep outreach supplies in the office. Then I might go to the LifeSkills kitchen to make sandwiches for handing out later, which means I open an endless number of little cans of tuna by hand until we have a mountain of fish sitting in a bowl. As I open these cans I often wonder just how many fish bodies are going into the bowl... And then its time to mix in the mayonnaise. I realize that tuna is meat, and meat is valuable protein, but being a vegetarian, sinking my gloved hands into the gooey fishy bowl is not my favourite part of the job. And yet to be honest, I've grown to like that cold and slimy feeling...

At 5:00, I open the front doors of the centre and start welcoming the ladies in for dinner. We serve dinner from 5-6:30 and we get anywhere from 18 to 118 women. Our numbers are hard to predict, but they grow steadily higher as the financial desparation mounts leading up to welfare Wednesday. After dinner I serve many of the women at a reception counter in the centre and hand out harm reduction supplies. A few women stick around, asking for supplies. These women are lonely, or angry or bored or cold, or stoned. In all mental states they come to DAMS to be served. However it is they arrive there is usually a desparate urgency to their request for clean needles, or bandaids or mouth pieces.

Supply distribution lasts half an hour. At 7, two other women join me, one is a peer volunteer from the community, and one is a nurse volunteering with us. We load up a van with those yummy tuna sandwiches (lovingly-made by these vegetarian hands), and pastries, drinks, and more harm

reduction supplies, and then we head out onto the streets. For the next 3.5 hours we drive the streets in the neighbourhood looking for the working girls. We offer them food, harm reduction supplies, bad date sheets, referrals to services, a ride to the hospital or clinic, or sometimes just an ear to listen.

That's what one day looks like, and every day at DAMS is different. I have worked there for 9 months now, and have gotten to know many of our women quite well. Their faces and stories are familiar to me. Some of the people I work with are confused, hard and angry and this can make assisting them challenging... and yet just as many have warmed my heart.

Let me tell you a story that is an amalgam of experiences I've had with these women. For the sake of confidentiality, I have woven several women's stories together, and at the same time I want to share with you some of what inspires me about this work.

Michelle comes every week to visit and say hello. She has time now that she is clean. She tells me it is good to occupy her time. So every week she comes to the LifeSkills Centre for my group. Michelle slowly hobbles up to me. She tells me that she never knew she was so sick until she stopped using. Michelle has learned that many addicts who detox get seriously ill when the drugs leave their system. And now that she is clean, she is in so much pain.

Michelle has a beautiful smile with small, white teeth. Her long, shiny black hair, shot through with an occasional grey strand, hangs down just past her shoulders. She has a friendly round face, and soft brown eyes. Her whole face lights up as she tells me about the jacket, baby blue leather, with fringe, that she is saving up to buy at a shop in Gastown. It costs \$500, but she is delighted to be saving her money towards buying it. She has been clean 7 weeks. She is not in a treatment program, but everyday she goes to NA meetings in the neighbourhood.

I don't know how she does it, but I do know that every week I look forward to seeing her healthy smile, her bright eyes.

Michelle talks to me for a while then she hobbles along with her cane and huge smile for those she meets. She tells her recovery story to everyone. I notice that even the people twitching, and tweeking in the rain are affected by the hope she spreads.

These women are beautiful and precious. It is a privilege to work with them, to get to know them. I hear and witness incredible stories of very basic survival that inspire. It may seem odd that women living desparate lives, women dying on the streets give me hope, but they do. My wish today is that Michelle's story, which is more than just the story of one woman, has given you a sense of hope too.

On Wednesday, October 15th we, the Unitarian Church of Vancouver, and DAMS are having a joint dinner. I offer my thanks to Steven Epperson, whose idea this dinner was. Many of you here have volunteered to come down and make a hearty, homemade meal and serve these women. This is the first time I have brought my work as an outreach worker into the life of this congregation. And your response, interest and willingness to get involved in the lives of these women has been overwhelming. Thank you. Thank you so much.

I hope for those of you that come down on Wednesday to help with the dinner, that you do even more than serve our women. It is my hope that you might get to know them even a little. Listen to their stories, ask questions, let them get to know you over dinner. Sit down with our women, break bread together. Let's all eat at the same table.

However you choose to celebrate it this year, I wish you all a Happy Thanksgiving. Blessed be.