

# Life Stories

## True Champions Found within our City!

I will never forget sitting with Mr. Robillard in front of the larger than life, transparent window panes of the fanciful Star Bucks on White Avenue.

“Did you want to go have a coffee inside, my treat?” I ask him.

“I can’t go in there,” he says, as if it was common sense.

‘Hmmm, okay? Fair enough’, I think to myself.

I proceed to inform him of my intention to get some ‘realistic insight’ for a fictional story on homelessness that I am working on for OUR VOICE.

“But I am not fictional, I’m real, I’m true, true blue,” he replies assertively, waving his clenched right hand, his thumb pointing towards his chest.

I feel a little lost at this point; sometimes a writer will intentionally write a fictional story in an attempt to assert a more powerful perspective towards his target audience.

I have to admit, however, that I think Mr. Robillard is hinting at an even bigger picture. There is a real world picture painted with vibrant colours, and brush strokes of colours so dark that only the most sensitive soul can see them.

Yes, this is real. Actually, this is life, a beautiful masterpiece, so simple and yet so complex, that not even the larger-than-life, glistening windows of the fanciful Star Bucks can compare.

“How do you survive? What do you do when it reaches -30 Celsius? Have you ever slept outside?” I ask empathetically.

Everyone loves a human interest story, especially when it involves the homeless.

Just like alien beings from another planet, we watch the homeless from within the sanctuary of our own homes, if we happen to catch a documentary on television. We find ourselves glued to our television sets by our deeper curiosities. Some of our children even dress up as ‘bums’ and ‘hobos’ on Halloween, as if they were fictional characters in a movie.

Just like alien beings, we also distance ourselves from ‘those street people’, while walking along the sidewalks, rarely interacting with any of ‘them’. Ultimately, we must be somewhat drawn to them, as we do have a tendency to view them as primitive cavemen surviving in our modern day world.

Many of us act with an arrogance that could only be associated with an alien being; we think of and present ourselves as being more advanced and superior. We cannot even imagine ourselves in a similar situation for we are endowed with superior intelligence, sense of ethics, and ‘real’ understanding. We know it all!

I remember my father’s attempts to teach ‘his’ kids to get an education and stay away from drugs. He would drive through the rougher areas of Vancouver and point out the street people. ‘You don’t want to be like them’, was the primary theme. After reflecting on my discussions with Mr. Robillard, however, I am beginning to think that maybe I do want to become like them.

Mr. Robillard opens up to me; he speaks at length about the true kindness and caring of people on the Whyte Avenue strip. On cold winter nights, when he slept in apartment lobby entrances and entrances to banks providing 24-hour ATM accessibility, he would often wake up to find a \$20 bill in his hand or a hot meal awaiting him.

“There are a lot of people with big hearts out there,” he says.

“What about the police?” I ask.

“You treat them with respect and they will treat you with respect,” he says.

I find Mr. Robillard to be very approachable; he maintains himself with a demeanor of humbleness and charisma.

He glances at a cute girl strolling by. “Hi,” he says to the well-dressed blonde. The girl subtly bows her head. “Hello,” she says, displaying a hint of the most amazing smile. This girl is blind to Mr. Robillard’s shabby clothing and un-shaven face; all she sees is another fellow human being.

There are other attractive, well dressed ladies

jail?” I ask.

He tells me about his continuous struggle with alcoholism and that he was recently fined \$900 dollars for public drunkenness. The story blows my mind; this guy is not panhandling by day, to retire to the comforts of some fancy hotel. How in the world do people expect him to pay a fine of \$900 dollars?

The obvious and true answer to the question is: if he cannot pay for the crime, he must do the time. An incident of unpaid public drunkenness nets Mr. Robillard free, overnight lodging in a jail cell.

Mr. Robillard goes on to reveal just how much time he has done for public drunkenness.



Mr. Christopher Robillard sitting in front of Starbucks on Whyte Avenue

who reply to Mr. Robillard’s greeting in a similar tone, while others simply walk by as if he was not even there. The cold shoulder, however, does not seem to phase this man. He is quite comfortable with who he is, unburdened by society’s obsession with improving one’s appearance to perfection.

I find this perspective absolutely unique, especially in a society that places ‘appearance’ as one of the higher priorities.

It is clear to me that Mr. Robillard communicates to ‘our world’ in the most basic human language. As more people walk by, however, it becomes apparent that our advanced, modern world can no longer comprehend this language.

Mr. Robillard goes on to share with me how he spends his days pan-handling for change. He is kind enough to demonstrate by politely asking a man for spare change. All the while he is explaining, “You must always use your manners; say please, excuse me, and thank-you.” As if to belie his words, the prospective donor responds with an “f... you!”

“Thank you (anyway),” says Mr. Robillard.

I am quite impressed with Mr. Robillard’s overall, positive outlook. I need to see more of the picture, however, so I continue with my questions.

“It has to be a hard life. “Have you ever been in

A tear begins to slide down his cheek, followed by another; I feel lost for words at this point.

Is public drunkenness really a crime? Does the act hurt other people, or does it simply break a law not necessarily designed to serve and protect us, rather it helps to maintain the illusion of a society made solely of dignified, ‘normally balanced’ people?

I too am an addict, hooked on a drug as powerful as crack. The only difference is that it is legal; as any smoker will usually argue. Why do I smoke? My life is hard; I get stressed and smoking helps to alleviate that stress.

Like an alcoholic, I will pick up and light a smoke in lieu of my own emotional issues.

I cannot judge this man. Who really and truly can? In all honesty, addiction or not, how many of us escape our harsher realities by turning a blind eye to those areas of our lives that desperately need to be fixed?

Mr. Robillard’s friend, Mr. Leonard Marshall arrives. “Hey Chris,” he says. The two men exchange a short dialogue, and I tell Leonard a little about the article I am writing.

Leonard is not pleased, to say the least. He talks about the multitude of reporters who ask for the life

stories of street people. These writers go on to make a cash killing and do not come back to share the profits with the subjects of their articles.

What Leonard and Mr. Robillard have to say is just as valuable as any scholarly report. Yes, sociologists and other professionals sacrifice their time and money for well-to-do educations. The people who live their lives on the streets however, have real experience behind them, learning in the truest sense of the word.

These men have a primary thesis on homelessness that is not a 40-page report neatly bound in a cover. Their thesis is protected by their own, worn-out clothing. Leonard and Mr. Robillard not only understand, they have actually suffered to understand.

The very souls of these men are shaped into ideologically-bound friendships that function based on basic values that our society so readily forgets: sharing, empathy, humbleness and tolerance for one another’s differences. Having and sticking to these values help the homeless to survive.

What keeps them going? A “desire to live,” responds Mr. Marshall, an answer that is absolutely amazing to me.

Furthermore, these individuals are not cave men retiring to some ‘Gilligan’s Island’ constructed of cardboard boxes. Think about it! How much money would you have to spend to survive a winter-long, outdoor camping trip, at temperatures approaching minus 30 degree Celsius?

Mr. Robillard spends most nights at the apartment of his girlfriend, and Leonard likely has a similar arrangement. Can we ethically use this information as an excuse to ignore their homelessness, however? Do we really want to wait and do nothing until luck runs out for one or both of these men and only Grizzly Adams can save them?

Why don’t they just get a job?

Leonard speaks of his occasional pan-handling days. “The hardest thing to hear is when some one who tells you get a job,” he says. “How the hell can you get a job with no fixed address? Employers are counting on people who are dependable, people they can contact,” he explains.

The reality of it all is that no one makes it on their own through life, all alone; although some people will claim their success in life is due to their strength of character. It is more humanistic and realistic to acknowledge that success usually results from the support of people who lead by example and invest their time to instill such ‘strength of character’. Not everyone is fortunate to have such supports in place throughout their childhood, let alone their entire lives.

Aside from all the un-earned money most of us receive from others, throughout our lives, we must not forget that when we apply for and get jobs, the employer is ‘giving us’ a chance to earn our living.

Leonard and Mr. Robillard are true champions. Despite the hands life has dealt them, these men remain grateful, maintain a great sense of humanity, and they have that ‘desire to live’!

Leonard even quoted Gandhi, revealing his ideology, “Love is the greatest weapon, for love can turn your enemies into your friends.”

I dedicate this article to Christopher Robillard and his good friend, Leonard Marshall.

-Darryl Learie