

The homeless are us

15 Jan 2013
The Gazette PAH

RUNNING WORKSHOPS at La rue des Femmes changed my perspective on people I used to turn away from

Monique Polak



is a Montreal author who teaches at Marianopolis College.

Let me begin with a confession: I used to turn away when I saw people who were homeless.

If I was walking on Ste-Catherine St., I'd pick up my pace. If I was in my car, exiting from the Ville-Marie tunnel, I'd hope for the traffic light to turn green so I wouldn't have to face the panhandler at the corner.

My goal was always to avoid eye contact.

I think that's because when we look people in the eye, we sense a little of what their lives are like. We feel their stories.

My feelings about homelessness changed after photographer Monique Dykstra and I first visited La rue des Femmes, a Montreal centre that provides support and shelter to homeless women.

Before we began the first of a series of writing and photography workshops at La rue des Femmes, case workers suggested we arrive early — to join the women in the lunchroom.

When we arrived, the large, sunny room was bustling. There were women at most of the dozen or so tables, and more women in line at the counter, waiting to be served a hot lunch. On the floor, in a corner of the room, a woman had set up a makeshift bed. So many women come for help to La rue des Femmes that the shelter cannot provide beds for all of them.

We brought our trays over to a table where there were some empty spots. The women who were already there adjusted their chairs to give us



MONIQUE DYKSTRA

Odette, a client of La rue des Femmes, holds her favourite object. She says her sunglasses help her feel safe.

more room. They looked up from their plates — and into our eyes.

Some of our tablemates' faces were lined and weathered from years of living on the streets. Most had knapsacks at their feet. The first woman I spoke with was elderly. She made it clear she had no interest in learning about writing or photography. "Why should I? I worked for many years as a reporter here in Montreal," she said.

One dark-haired woman was dressed in a tailored suit. Because it's customary at La rue des Femmes for staff to join residents in the lunchroom, I asked whether she was the director of La rue des Femmes. That made her laugh. "I live here," she told me. "I'm home-

less." Later, she explained how, in better days, when she worked an office job downtown, she was sometimes reprimanded for dressing too casually. "Now I dress up. I don't want people who see me to know I'm homeless."

Your perspective changes when you learn a person's story.

A woman joined our table. Her large hands and Adam's apple made it clear she was transgender. The other women adjusted their chairs to make room for her, as they had done for us. Soon, the conversation shifted to cooking. Our newest tablemate had worked as a chef. Another woman at our table had studied chemistry. What is the best way to make homemade mayonnaise? Is it

better to use lemon juice instead of vinegar?

The conversation was so lively — the women, it turned out, had strong opinions about mayonnaise — we almost forgot we were at a shelter for homeless women.

We had planned to begin our workshop with what we thought would be a simple task — remembering a peaceful moment from the participants' pasts. I asked the women to take a few deep breaths before they began writing, and I led them through a guided imagery exercise.

One woman wept as she described her memories of living on the land in Quebec's far north.

Another woman was not well enough to come downstairs to at-

tend the workshop. Because she was interested in writing, I went to her little room upstairs, accompanied by a member of La rue des Femmes's staff. There, the woman lay in bed and dictated the story of her life — how her mother, an alcoholic, had been unable to look after her. "Do you want to see my family?" she asked — and then she lowered her bedcovers to show me her collection of stuffed animals.

For our next sessions, inspired in part by those stuffed animals, we asked participants to write and photograph the objects that are most meaningful to them.

One woman wrote about and photographed the sunglasses that help make her feel safe in the world. Another wrote about her mother's gold cross.

In a world where some of us own far too many objects than we will ever need, it is important to be reminded of what we really need: food, shelter and support from those who care for us.

Before our final workshop at La rue des Femmes, we joined the residents for lunch. There were several women there we had not met during our previous visits. I happened to meet the eyes of one of them — they were blue, like mine. Though this woman was years younger than me, I noticed, too, that we had similar faces — eyes set wide apart, determined chins.

This is what I learned at La rue des Femmes: There is no us and them.

Those women at La rue des Femmes? They're us.

Author Monique Polak and photographer Monique Dykstra visited La rue des Femmes as part of Before and After, a Blue Metropolis Literary Foundation project funded by Heritage Canada.