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## Opening Pandora's box

Reporter follows outreach team to explore the reality of Pandora's 900 block  
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On a rainy September morning, Tyler cradles his four-month-old kitten, Striker, on the 900 block of Pandora Avenue.

(Oliver Loatin / Victoria News)

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# Opening Pandora's box: a day in the epicentre of Victoria's homelessness crisis

*Reporter follows outreach team to explore the reality of Pandora's 900 block*

By Olivier Laurin / Victoria News

Read story online at: <https://www.vicnews.com/news/opening-pandoras-box-a-day-in-the-epi-centre-of-victorias-homelessness-crisis-7602226>

*On Sept. 23, Black Press Media spent a day with the outreach team of Our Place Society, a charity serving Greater Victoria's unhoused population. This article delves into the daily reality of two front-line workers on Pandora Avenue's 900 block – the epicentre of the city's homelessness crisis.*

Madeline Tessmer tucked a pack of cigarettes into her jacket and grabbed three steaming cups of overly sweet coffee. While heading out of Our Place's community centre, she was joined by her colleague, Cameron Harper, who held the door open as they stepped onto the 900 block of Pandora Avenue shortly after 8 a.m.

As the two outreach workers were on their way to deliver the much-awaited beverages and cigarettes, they explained that every morning followed a similar routine.

1-coffee8:28 a.m. - Our Place Society outreach workers Madeline Tessmer and Cameron Harper (left) offer Tyler a cup of coffee on the morning of Sept. 23, as he cradles his four-month-old cat, Striker. (Olivier Laurin / Victoria News)

Their shift begins at 7 a.m., cleaning the community centre as it transitions from an overnight shelter into a lounging area. After storing the mats and setting up the chairs, they prepare a copious amount of coffee. Half an hour later, when the centre opens its doors, Harper and Tessmer head out to the streets.

While handing out their first cups of coffee, the two front-line workers used this opportunity to connect with unhoused folks. Tessmer noted their daily schedule is loosely shaped by the community's needs, ranging from arranging a doctor's appointment to giving someone a ride to meet their probation officer.

Despite the early morning rain, morale remained high, noted Harper. However, the street community has recently experienced increasing stress levels due to a growing number of encampment cleanups conducted by city bylaws and police officers.

"We're just trying to stay on top of the updates and let as many people know as we can so [sweeps are] less of a surprise," he said. "We want people to be prepared and give them time to pack up their belongings, keep their things safe, and be out of the way."

Acting as mediators between local authorities and the street community, Harper and Tessmer recognized the benefits of these cleanups for removing biohazardous waste and hoarded goods. However, witnessing the impacts of these near-daily encampment sweeps on their clients has taken a toll on both of them.

"We've been working on the block for almost a year now and we have bonded... with a lot of these folks so it can

definitely eat out our heart a bit to see people get their stuff taken away,” she said.

Moments after returning to the block with a final round of coffee, Tessmer handed a cup to Jennifer, who had been living on the streets with her husband, Keith, for the past year.

As she described her daily challenges, a man walked by and gave her a blanket. After a brief exchange of thanks, she noted how small acts of kindness can brighten her day.

“At nighttime people come and drop off food all the time,” said Jennifer. “At Christmas time it was just a bonanza. I got called over by somebody driving by and they had a tray of desserts that was left over from their Christmas party.”

Shortly after 10 a.m., shouts break out near the community centre’s main gate. “Narcan,” several voices called, as a small group huddled around a young woman lying on her back. Within seconds, Tessmer rushed to the scene, followed by Our Place’s paramedic, Jonathan.

“People were just afraid that she had overdosed because she fell back and hit her head really hard,” she said afterwards. “Everybody was on top of it. I’ve never heard people yell out that fast.”

As Harper joined Tessmer, he explained that the usual overdose protocol followed by outreach workers is straightforward.

“We’ll give the first shot of Narcan as we’re still waiting for other services to arrive,” he said. “Paramedics are usually one of the first people we call over since they are more equipped to deal with this.”

Harper explained that the rule of thumb is to have three people tending to an overdose: one person should administer naloxone, an opioid antagonist also known as Narcan; another should manage the individual’s airway; and the third should contact emergency services.

“If there’s three people there, we won’t go because we don’t need to create a bigger crowd,” he added. Standing nearby, Jonathan explained that the team at Our Place responds to roughly 700 overdoses a year, averaging about two per day.

“Sometimes, you will go a couple of weeks without one and then you’re doing like six in just a few days,” said the paramedic.

According to the BC Coroners Service, 172 people died from overdoses in Greater Victoria in 2023. As of October, the death toll stands at 101.

Contrary to popular belief, the trope of homeless people being the sole consumers of drugs is a faulty generalization, according to Tessmer. Most of those struggling with a substance addiction are using behind closed doors, away from the public’s gaze, while remaining active members of society.

“I see multiple people that are housed come down in their work outfits just to purchase some [drugs] and then leave,” she said. “It’s interesting because you never assume somebody that’s not homeless is using.”

As they headed back inside the community centre, the two outreach workers set aside half an hour before lunch to plan their afternoon. Away from the street’s hustle, they settled into a quieter spot to share their stories. Cameron Harper, 28, a musician who plays the drums, said he started working at Our Place over two years ago after changing his career path from years spent in kitchens working as a cook.

“I wanted to change gears and do community-orientated work... hoping to make a positive change downtown,” he said. “I’ve always told myself that I never want to be the kind of person who ignores or gives up on people who live in the same city as me.”

Madeline Tessmer, 26, who struggled with her own mental health and addiction in the past, wanted to lend a hand to those in need.

“I’ve experienced my own stigma and I wanted to [help] people out here,” she said. “I wanted to treat these people like they’re not what half the world thinks they are.”

“If I didn’t have the support that I had, I would probably have been here myself.”

After lunch, Tessmer and Harper returned to Pandora to meet Tyler, who needed a ride to the bylaw office to recover belongings impounded during a sweep. His four-month-old kitten, Striker, lay curled up in his tent.

“It makes a huge difference to come back to your spot and just have this warm bundle of fur that unconditionally loves you,” he said. “When she wakes up, she’s just in go mode, zooming around, trying to catch stuff and sniffing everything. She’s so curious, looking around at this crazy world we live in.”

When a friend offered him the kitten last summer, he initially refused, believing it would be unfair to the animal to raise it on the street. Yet, after getting a larger tent, where he could provide better care, he changed his mind.

As Tyler changed clothes and headed to the van for the trip to the bylaw office, Harper got a call about a bad overdose nearby. By the time he arrived, paramedics from SOLID Outreach and Our Place were already on site, tending to a young woman lying on the ground.

Seeing that the situation was under control, Harper headed back to the vehicle and drove off with Tyler and Tessmer on board. As they passed the scene, Tyler seemed rattled by the event.

He said he knew the young woman, noting that she wasn’t a fentanyl user. The overdose, he suspected, might have been accidental, possibly from using someone else’s paraphernalia or drugs laced with opioids. Tessmer added that this case appeared to be particularly severe.

“It’s not good because usually after one or two doses of Narcan they wake up pretty quickly,” she said. “I think the hard part was seeing the chest compressions. Usually, paramedics always do artificial manual breathing.” Painting a grim picture, Tyler explained that overdoses are often a way for people to escape the harsh reality of life on the street without fully considering the consequences of their actions.

“A lot of these people are taking that hit thinking that they want it to be their last one,” he said. “They wake up mad because you rob them of the opportunity to escape this life they live in. It’s sad to think of it like that but that is the reality.”

Tyler said much of the difficulty faced by homeless folks stems from police and bylaw enforcement, making it hard to live on the streets for people who see their few belongings confiscated.

“It’s really demotivating to change anything in a positive manner when they come and take the rest of what you have away and then you have to start from scratch again.

“How many times can one start over from zero, in a place like Pandora, and still get back up and attack the world?”

Following a short ride, Tyler got out of the car, accompanied by Tessmer, while Harper held back in the van. On the way to the bylaw office, Tyler claimed to have been targeted by police a month earlier and stripped of most of his possessions.

During a short and tense, yet polite exchange, the bylaw officer explained that the raid was conducted for safety issues, noting that the unhoused man had a replica firearm, knives, and hatchets in his possession while illegally camping on Pandora. In turn, Tyler acknowledged owning these items that he claimed were used as tools and for self-defence.

Ultimately, Tyler returned to the van empty-handed after the bylaw officer stated they had returned everything possible.

“People get a few of their items back, but they are usually not happy with the amount,” said Tessmer, standing aside during the interaction. “It’s up to the bylaw (officer) to decide what is lawful to return or store.” Black Press Media has reported on this issue multiple times, highlighting it as a reality experienced by many in the street community.

On his way back to the vehicle, Tyler appeared upset.

“I don’t understand how they expect me to just get a job or a house if I don’t have any clothes to wear to a housing interview or to go meet with a boss.”

Tyler explained that the bylaw officer, citing new city regulations, told him to camp overnight in one of three designated parks. However, he noted that these locations were kilometres away from the services he needs daily, paradoxically putting him at greater risk.

“Do they expect me to make [three]-kilometre treks and back for every meal and be able to make it off Pandora... without any of my bare essentials? They’re putting me in a spot that’s very tough to ever get out of, essentially trapping me on the streets.

“I’m doing the best I can to get out of here and they’re doing their best to keep me here.”

Back at the community centre just before 3 p.m., Harper and Tessmer parted ways with Tyler.

As the two front-line workers headed to the staff room to conclude their shift, Jonathan sat in his office, decompressing after tending to the overdose earlier.

“When we first arrived, she was going into respiratory arrest,” he said. “I started airway management and... we started oxygenating her. She had a bit of a pulse, but then the pulse quickly stopped.”

The paramedic noted that they were able to detect a heartbeat when the woman, who had received four doses of naloxone, was loaded onto a stretcher as the ambulance arrived.

While being somewhat of a hopeful sign, he mentioned that the worst-case scenario cannot be ruled out.

“It always depends on how long her brain went without oxygen and how long her heart wasn’t pumping,” he said. “Generally, with a pulse back they can be kept alive with machines in the hospital, but eventually, they will call them [legally] dead and then take them off life support.”

Jonathan explained experiences like these are mentally and physically draining.

“There’s a lot of adrenaline that comes up in scenes like that carry you through it but then, there’s a big crash afterwards.”

As all the day staff left the facility shortly after 3 p.m., giving way to evening workers, Loup Bayle sat outside the main gate.

During a much-travelled childhood where he lived in France, Canada, and Colombia, he discovered a lifelong passion for music in Tunisia when he received a darbuka, a Middle Eastern percussion instrument, at the age of four.

While he initially played the drums and piano, the saxophone became his instrument of choice as he pursued a classical education in jazz at the College Aretha Franklin in the quiet town of Marciac, in southern France. For him, music represents a means to connect with others.

“Music...can be enjoyed by all,” said Bayle. “It’s easy to share with other cultures who do not speak the same language or have the same referents. You just feel it.”

With the sun slowly setting, the musician carefully opened his saxophone case. While proudly assembling his golden Taiwan-made instrument, he described the rich sound it produced as the best he’d ever heard.

As he moistened his lips and took a deep breath, Bayle closed his eyes. When he began to play the first notes of a soulful improvisation, the melody resonated throughout the 900 block of Pandora Street, drawing the attention of fellow unhoused folks. In that fleeting moment, a burden seemed to have lifted from their shoulders as Bayle radiated peace.

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A week after Black Press Media went out on the 900 block of Pandora, Jonathan, Our Place’s paramedic, shared that the woman who had suffered a severe overdose had come out of her coma and walked out of the hospital on Oct. 8.

“I had a chance to speak with her,” he said. “It just put me in a really great mood and I’m on Cloud 9 to find out that she was out and about after an event like a cardiac arrest.”

In his eight years of working on the streets of Victoria, the paramedic noted that this was the first time he had witnessed a patient leave the hospital alive given the severity of the incident.

“She’s my first patient that has come back from CPR,” he said. “Having someone come back like this is such a nice thing to see.”