

## Thesis shows hidden side of Revelstoke

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When Melissa Jameson started in her position as housing outreach worker with Community Connections, she found herself in a battle trying to explain her work to people.

“I work directly with the homeless. I know they exist. I was up against this brick wall that I constantly had to educate people that there are homeless – you just can’t see them,” she said. “There was this big gap in communication happening between service providers and, a lot of times, the city,” she said.

This frustration led her to want to look into how the issue of rural homelessness is communicated. She enrolled at Royal Roads University to undertake a Masters in Intercultural and International Communication and began work on her thesis, which she will be presenting as part of “INVISIBLE: Narratives on Homelessness in Revelstoke” at Castle Joe Books for the rest of the month starting Apr. 15.

“I’m exploring what it’s like to be homeless in Revelstoke, in a rural community, but I’m also exploring why rural homelessness is communicated in a different context,” she said.

Jameson’s work as housing outreach worker helped helped spark her interest in the subject.

“I started noticing that dialogue surrounding homelessness was impacting how homelessness in rural communities was viewed, especially Revelstoke,” she said. “There tends to be a misconception that homelessness is absolute or what you find in Vancouver.”

As housing outreach worker, she's helped out both the homeless and those at risk of being homeless.

She estimates the number of homeless in Revelstoke at anywhere from 70 to 80 people, all with varying circumstances.

"Some people might have spent three months camped out under the Big Eddy Bridge while others might have spent two or three nights here and there camped out," she said.

One of the first things Jameson had to do was decided on a definition of homelessness. She chose to use a broad view.

"It ranges from people who don't have a roof over their head and are sleeping outdoors to people that may have accommodation but it lacks safety or basic amenities," she said.

To research her thesis, Jameson interviewed five homeless people in Revelstoke as well as the attitudes of eight other "housed" people towards homelessness.

Jameson said her position as housing outreach worker helped her speak to the homeless people for her research. The five that took part were very open about their experience, she said, adding that they didn't all refer to themselves as homeless.

"They don't come out and say 'I'm homeless' or 'I have been homeless,'" she said.

Jameson said it was easier getting the homeless people to participate.

"The homeless interviews were easier in that I had a relationship established with the people I did approach," she said, adding that she used pseudonyms instead of their real names in order to preserve anonymity.

Three of the homeless featured in the thesis were given disposable cameras to carry around with them to document their lives.

"It's a participatory action research method. It gives participants the power to have some control over the research aspect," Jameson said. "It has been used looking at issues of homelessness before."

Nine photos from each will be on display as part of the exhibit at Castle Joe's.

"I felt it was a good way to allow them to photograph some aspects of their lives without me being there," she said.

"Initially I planned on going with them but then I thought they would change things and not go to some places."

The results are illuminating.

“The intent of the exhibits is to show the photos and let people in Revelstoke know about places that are occupied by the homeless,” she said.

“I’ve seen everything from the river bank to storage lockers that people were living in.”

The eight “housed” people range city officials to business owners to social workers. Their attitudes towards homeless varied equally, with some accepting the broad view used by Jameson while others only considered the homeless to be those that sleep outside.

INVISIBLE: Narratives on Homelessness in Revelstoke opens at Castle Joe Books on Thursday, Apr. 15 from 7 to 10 p.m. The exhibition will feature 27 photos taken by homeless people during Jameson’s research.

Several copies of the draft of Jameson’s thesis will be available to read in the form of a pamphlet. Final copies will be available for purchase to cover the cost of printing.

**The following are excerpts from a draft of the thesis:**

When questioned on whether she thought someone staying at a friend or family members because they had no home her response was: “I know there’s a lot of people, but they’re not homeless, they have a place to stay [...] I think probably you could say homeless for the night, and they’re really freaked out I’m sure ...”

This participant also provided the least in-depth narrative regarding interaction with homeless persons. While she did acknowledge one woman in the community as being homeless, she was quick to point out “but don’t talk to her.”

Despite a limited experience with individual homeless, this participant did feel a need for acceptance within the community: “if you want to take those people away, wherever you take them it’s going to cost you money, so accept it for what it is, accept those people for their differences, that’s all..”

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What is interesting about “Alex’s” story is, like many others I have come across, he has experienced homelessness in a larger city. When asked about a comparison between being homeless in a larger centre and a rural one he revealed that in a rural centre “there’s not as many places to go like drop-ins or hostels or anything like that.”

During our discourse, Alex also spoke very highly of the transient homeless he had come across during the three months he spent camped out over the bridge during the summer months of 2009 (“they were kind of in the same boat I was, so they were pretty friendly.”)

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Perhaps the most telling of “Alex’s” experience as a homeless individual in Revelstoke is in the following statement: “I know of a couple other individuals in town here who are homeless. I’ve heard them say ‘it’s my personal choice,’ but I don’t want to be homeless here.”