

“THE BUILDING THAT FOUGHT BACK”



PHOTO CREDIT: DOUGAL BICHAN.

LAST YEAR I facilitated a community Circle at a supportive housing project for formerly homeless people. The housing project is in Regent Park, a Toronto neighbourhood still notorious for poverty and street drugs. The Circle began as an effort to deal with noise and garbage in the building: It quickly morphed into a campaign to rid the building of drug trafficking. We held monthly Circle meetings with tenants and staff over the course of nine months. When I facilitated the last meeting, all but the major drug dealer had left the building. I wrote a piece about it for the *Globe & Mail*, called “The Building that Fought Back.”

Recently, I learned from the Director of the housing project, who I will call Ruth, that they had succeeded in evicting the major drug dealer as well. I asked her what had happened to bring about this wonderful result.

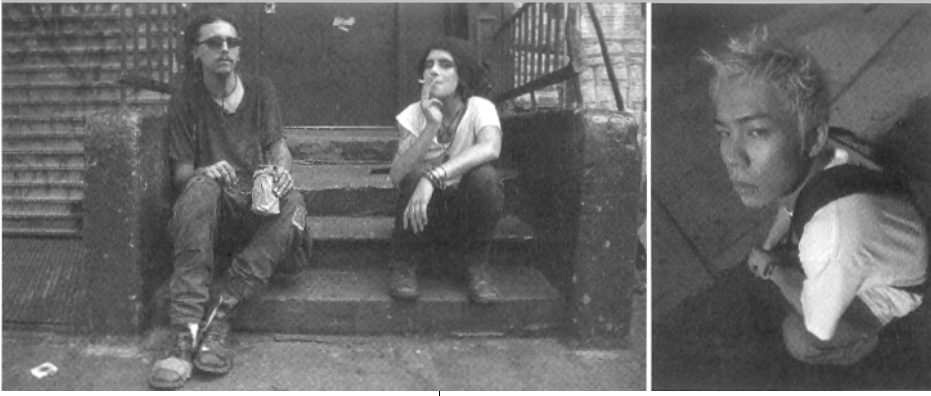
She said, “Every tenant has been on the street; they identify with street culture. Street culture has a

kind of covenant that says, ‘you don’t give up your own’. “Tenants don’t want to ‘rat out’ other tenants. Not to mention the fear of ‘pay-back’ if they rat out on somebody.”

So, what changed? I asked. Ruth’s eyes lit up. She spoke with conviction. “The tenants found their voice in the Circle. By being given a voice, by having others bear witness to their

fears and hopes, they were validated and strengthened. The Circle created a new ethos, it established a counter-point to the fear and isolation of the street. Somehow, the coming together of staff and tenants on a level playing field, and the collective listening, turned this building into a place, and turned this place into a community.”

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How so? “The turning point was when the tenants decided to hold the vigil. That was their idea, they worked it out, they made it happen. For the first time, they got recognition and resources. For the first time, they took ownership of this building and had the experience of making a difference. That is very empowering.”

When I asked why this made a difference at the Housing Tribunal, Ruth didn’t hesitate. Her understanding of this change was crystal clear.

“Because it gave them a sense of entitlement: They decided that this is their place and they deserve to live in peace. They believe they have a right to feel safe. That gave tenants the courage to file and sign complaints, and to testify at the Housing Tribunal. It gave them a sense of belonging to something other than themselves.”

So all is well? The building is free of drugs?

“Well no, but it’s very different now. We have three users and one small dealer living here, but they are all keeping the drugs out of the building. They don’t deal in the building and they don’t bring users in at night. The building has a new norm, and they are respecting that norm.

In fact, one of the users – remember the man who came to the Circle and apologized for how he behaves badly when he’s

using? That tenant is going to counseling for the first time. The Circle planted in him a sense that he is part of this community. And that gives him reason to fight his addiction.”

Has anything else changed? I asked.

“We know the signs of drugs, and take action sooner. We have more tenants on the tenant selection committee, and staff knows that they have a kind of radar that we don’t have. We realized that, as a family building, we couldn’t take people straight from the street. We changed our mandate to say that people who live here need to be able to be a good neighbour and they need to be able to use the supportive services.”

The Director then asked how I was doing. I paused for a moment. Again I realized that being in the Circle, as a facilitator and participant, had changed me too. I told her this story.

“There’s a homeless kid in my neighborhood.” I told her. “I’ve seen him for more than a year. He looks 17 going on 35, and he has a dog. Last week, I saw him without his German shepherd so I asked, ‘Where’s your dog?’ It was the first time I had spoken to him.

“She got stolen.’ he replied. “We were asleep and when I woke up, she was gone.”

“Oh, that’s tough, I’m really sorry.” I replied. He kicked aimlessly at the ground. “Yeah, well... I really miss her.”

“I bet you do. What’s your name?”

“Kevin” he replied.

“I gave him some change and was about to walk on when he asked, “Do you have a dog?” That stopped me in my tracks. This kid was asking about me, about my life. “We used to have a dog. We got her from the Humane Society when she was a puppy.” I told him.

“What kind of dog?” he asked.

“She was a funny kind of dog. She loved to go for walks, so I would take her to the corner store. When I tied her up and went into the store, she would cry and bark and just freak out.”

“How come?” asked Kevin.

“When we adopted her, the Humane Society told us that they had found her abandoned in the subway. So, I understood that being separated made her anxious, but in fifteen years that dog never got over her fear.”

Kevin kicked at the frozen ground again, and another first -- for the first time, he looked me in the eye -- and said, “I know how she feels.”

I looked him back in the eye. I said, “Yeah, I bet you do.”

Now it was Ruth looking me right in the eye. “So, what changed for you?”

“Before I did the work in Regent Park, I had never spoken to a homeless person, I was afraid of them. In the Circle, I got to know a bunch of homeless people, and I saw the value and the wonderful wisdom of those people. So now, it’s like, Kevin is my neighbor - he’s part of my community.”

Ruth gave me a knowing look. “That’s what keeps us going, isn’t it? Community.”

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