

The Resource Centre: A Welcoming Place

At the very outset of the governing principles and vision for the Resource Centre it states: “the Resource Centre will be a safe and welcoming place for drug-users.” While this may sound simple or mundane to some, it is actually very powerful and potentially revolutionary. Think of it.

Your childhood is full of anguish; you have been abused and abandoned by those who should have given you care and nurture. Physical and psychological pain has penetrated to the very core of your being. You turn to drugs as a way of coping, of escaping the torment of unbearable suffering. You become addicted, because it offers relief; you know you are harming yourself, but the road out of your inner nightmare is too difficult, beyond your strength. As you become more and more entrenched in the drug scene, you experience further marginalization. Those around you cannot tolerate your presence. You try to hide your addiction, but even that becomes increasingly impossible. You view yourself only through the lenses of society’s rejection and hatred of you. You are kicked out of every apartment or hotel room because you use drugs. Life is permeated by fear: fear of punishment, fear of violence, fear of arrest, fear of death. You end up on the streets, cold, alone, sick, and dying. The only ones who will converse with you are dealers. You configure your Self through the language of others: dirty junkie, criminal, society’s dregs. You slide into guilt and self-loathing. You have no future: it has collapsed into the suffocating immediacy of searching for the next fix. Hope is gone, replaced by deep despair and panic. There is nowhere to go; and the journey out of this place of hopelessness is overwhelmingly impossible. The world around is shouting at you: “you do not deserve to live; you are not welcome here!” So you stop caring, about yourself and about others.

Then you come upon a welcoming place, a place that doesn’t despise or reject you, a place designed and run by people like you, people who have travelled a similar road. Here you can catch your breath – existentially speaking. The acceptance and respect you experience here gives you the psychological space to sit and relax; it is a place of care. It provides initial stability, which amazingly leads to a slowly emerging recovery of self-respect and hope. And with hope comes the possibility of something new.

The Resource Centre is not another social agency. It is something new. In November 1997, in the midst of an epidemic of HIV and Hepatitis C among injection drug users, and an alarming rate of overdose deaths, a small group of drug users gathered together on Saturday afternoons to discuss the circumstances of their lives and how they might work toward improving the conditions in which they lived. The need that was consistently voiced in these meetings was for a place to go and get off the streets, to retreat from the frequent conflict and chaos of the SROs or the sidewalks and alleys. The Vision that emerged was of a place that was welcoming, warm and safe, and that provided the basic amenities of personal care which are so scarce in the DTES (in fact non-existent at night), such as showers, toilets, telephones, laundry facilities. This was the birth of the idea of a Resource Centre. It emerged out of the community of drug users, those who

suffer most from the epidemics of disease and death, and they have been the driving force of this project ever since. It is not the brainchild of some governmental agency, neither Health Canada nor the Vancouver/Richmond Health Board; they are simply partners who have taken up the vision of the users. Indeed, the users are the main players here; they have been and will continue to be the ones who envision, design, govern and operate the Resource Centre. This is what makes it unique, distinct from every other service agency in the DTES; and this is what makes this venture particularly hopeful in terms of its positive impact on the health of the whole community, users and non-users alike.