

# My Space

Stories from Inside the Downtown Eastside  
Vancouver, Canada, 2009

Photographs by Rita Leistner  
Interviews by Julia Wilson and Rita Leistner  
In cooperation with the VANDU Oral History Project

It's nice having my own little space that I can go to to be by myself and shut the world out.

Gary

I wanted to tell you that I'm going to rehab. [Being a part of this project] has given me the courage to believe I deserve to get clean.

Lucie





**I would have never believed as a lone junkie** that VANDU [The Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users] would become an organization that has come together and accomplished important things. But when we came together, to see this transformation, to see people saying “I am somebody, I am important, I am not a piece of shit that should be locked up, that everybody hates - I’m worthless,” which is the message that’s constantly pounded in, but to see people come alive and realize that maybe we can actually change something and be of help here; that was beautiful to see, just to see the enthusiastic expressions in the faces, and people worked seventy hours a week for \$40 dollars or something like that, because they were so tired by what we were doing. It was a really emotional and powerful feeling; it was a powerful time. We can finally change something.

One vital thing I think that VANDU has done, is that at first there were agencies that really didn’t like VANDU, that they thought that the drug addicts down here were the problem and that’s changed. That change has been because of the dedication of the members of VANDU. That is a major accomplishment. Now that this community is really under siege with gentrification I wonder how much the members now realize that VANDU has been a powerful force in keeping this a community. Every meeting, every event that they go to, these things have broadened what VANDU is and also it reinforces that this is really a community. When I first got here, like I said, I didn’t know what a family was, what a community was, what really being alive was. I kept hearing this is a community so I started researching, community, what is community, and I saw that this area has characteristics of community which is traditional and rare really. It’s a community of primarily low-income people, many of whom are very ill and yet the spirituality is powerful here. The creativity is so strong I couldn’t imagine how many documentaries, plays, books, and music have been made by people here and how many people are drawn because of that spirituality and that kind of inspiration. If you’re here honestly, well you are very welcome.

I have good feelings about where I am now that I never had in my life or ever imagined or dreamed and it has to do with being in a community and doing what I can with other people who are similar to me in many ways and who have come through the traumas. And being involved in resistance together, there is a togetherness in saving this community and I think it will only become stronger.

**Bud Osborn**  
Founder, Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU)







**There were two different after-hours restaurants on Davie Street.** One was for high end and one was for low end. I was high end when I got here. But I owed money and I knew that there was a way to make money; I knew there was prostitution, I knew about prostitutes. The drag-queens that I was hanging out with... you couldn't just go out on the street, you'd get eaten up. It just didn't work out that way. I was too good for that, I was a complete snob back then. But when I owe money and had to make money fast I figured out that I could just go work the street.

Eventually I got pushed into the Downtown Eastside. There is nowhere that you could really get a no go in the Downtown Eastside. That's how a lot of these girls end up down here. They started off in these glamorous areas escorting and they end up homeless in the Downtown Eastside. A lot of people don't know that these people used to be beautiful vibrant healthy people and then just a lot of bad things happened and you get a chain effect.

**Anonymous**



Lord, show us  
the heart of our God  
and the love of our  
Father who is  
with us and  
for us, who is  
with us and  
for us, who is  
with us and  
for us.

By Christmas  
to you  
the Jesus is  
born!







Love hurts  
Love scars  
Love wounds  
and harms

THE SINGERS BACKING  
ONE VOICED LYRICS  
CASSIETY PLAYER / RECORDER





## *Pigeon Park, Vancouver*

**This is where my dad taught me** how to poke a hole in the bottom of a Lysol can to let all the air out and pour it into a gallon jug and add the rest with water and we would just pass that around to about five or six of us and drank that jug 'till it was gone.

**Abuse of all kinds was just of a normal thing.** As far as I can remember, whether it was physical, mental, or sexual abuse. And so when you're living in that type of environment growing up, it was just normal. Even though deep inside of me I knew that it was wrong, and I was crying, and I was very hurt, it became such a part of my life that I just – uh, I guess you would say as I got older I adopted that into my being, to start acting out whether it was physical, mental, sexual onto others - whether it was woman in high-school or social, I remember having girlfriends left right and centre in high-school – and there were so many drunken parties in foster homes in which the inappropriate sexual activities would happen on and on. Mostly on weekends because most people would be working throughout the week.

It wasn't until I got to Vancouver myself, which was when I graduated in '79, but I started --- I met my dad for the first time when I was 19. My mother had died when I was 6 years old and I never got to meet her.

**The elders said to me:** “You have to learn to humble yourself Alwin. Humble yourself and start listening to learn, and learn to listen.” And when I started actually doing that, then and only then I was able to start learning how to start the growth of that wounded inner child from within who was desperately crying out for help.

**And it will take me the rest of my life** to do the healing of all the damage that has been done to me.

**Alwin**

**Ending up in Federal prison** was how I got to Downtown Eastside. When I first arrived in the Downtown Eastside I was still involved with drugs but realized after being in the big house there were not many more options, so I knew I could continue using drugs till I died, or do something about it. I saw a counselor for a year and went to rehab program at MRTC [Morrissey Rehabilitation & Treatment Counselling in Nova Scotia] . Feb 18, 2009 is my four year anniversary of being clean. By the time I finally got clean I had been involved in substance abuse for forty years. I started sniffing gas before I went to school. I still see a counsellor today. Through counselling I realized all the developmental things in my life that were dysfunctional, like relationships and job knowledge.

I have been in the Downtown Eastside for five years and I feel I am part of the community but I'm just not using drugs. I have a great rapport with so many people.

I have a bond with people, I have been there and they trust me. You have to think outside of the box to help some people to go to meetings and apply for benefits. You have to take the people by the hand and help them get their stuff together. The dope-sick people need a lot of help. Its part of the bonding process with the people.

Everyone does their own thing and that's ok. I just want to help people that are down-and-out. I blew my life and survived being drug free - I'm a good and bad example. The odds were stacked against me but I did it and am living proof it can be done. The odds are slim but it can be done.

**Paul**





**When I first arrived here** practically 30 years ago I was basically using marijuana and alcohol. I used to go to the bar six or seven times a week.

Now I go ten times a year. [Drinking's] great cause I can spend a ten dollar bill and I get a buzz. But I heard about the \$28 dollar payments for doing volunteering shifts at VANDU, so I went – filled out the application and lied and said 'yes I consume drugs.' And boom I was in. And the \$28 dollars I get goes towards marijuana and alcohol for a period of time. And then a female acquaintance introduced me to the pleasure of crack and what a downwards spiral that was.

**It's definitely affected my life** just from the money that gets spent on it. Rough guess: ten to fifteen thousand a year - which for a lot of people

in the thralls of drugs use is a lot, but it's also not that much because there are many people out there who - through whatever means manage to acquire funds

- easily spend 100 dollars a day. And 100 dollars a day is 35 thousand a year. And like 15 thousand, that high end for me, that would be the max. That's almost 50 dollars a day. If you're not a criminal, you gotta really scramble.

**Social interaction:** My family's never seen me high. I refuse to be around them if I'm high. That's the part of life that – as far as I'm concerned – they don't need to see. Although, I'm sure many people who've gone to recovery say that's one of the first steps, that you gotta get in touch with all these people.

**If I'm ever going to stop using crack,** number one I realize I'm going have to totally disengage myself from everybody down here. Pretty much 98% of people down here use drugs. I figure I have to definitely get out of the area. Plus the olympics are coming. I want – I'm trying to create a volunteer position for myself for the Olympics.

**Rick C.**







**That's Britney - she's 10 years old here**, or no, there, she be would 12 years old. And this is my nephew and his family. This is my niece.

They're all up in Fort St John. It got really hard. I was able to visit my son up until he was two and a half. Week after week, just see them for a couple of hours. Just rips your heart out.

**I consider these people around here more like my family** more than my own family. Because I was raised here, I lived with these people, like some of these people that moved here lived here for 15 years. Some of them are still here. I know so many people. It's my little home.

**I was actually brought down here by a social worker from 100 Mile House (South Cariboo, B.C.)**. I was placed into Vancouver juvenile psyche facilities for 16 weeks and ended being kicked out in three because I ran of out foster home 'cause they couldn't control me. I was around, in and out. I was on the run. I just jacked every house I was in. They needed a psychiatric assessment – 'cause I threatened to kill my family. I burnt their house down. From the time I was 12 to 19, I was a ward of court. When I turned 19, they said there's the welfare. I said alright see you later. You can move out of the house, you can live anywhere. You're on your own. See you later. Find your own place with a bed. And that was the end of that. They dropped me like a hot potato. And soon as you come to age – that's it. And uh – I don't know. Now I have to watch my kids go thru it.

**Rick A.**

















**Seven years ago my daughters found out** about my choice, what I was doing - spending all my money on crack. My kids asked my to go to detox which I did. While I was in there my girls up and left with my grandkids. When I got out of detox and went home all I had there was my cats and [my girls] were nowhere to be found. Social services had me sign them away. They were in and out of foster homes after that and even when I was trying to find them they didn't want anything to do with me because of what I was doing.

I had a house up on 29th and Rupert , I lived in that house for 9 years with my kids. I thought for sure my kids would be there until they were all 19 but they weren't, they were just young teenagers when they left. Back then, seven years ago, not only did I have that house, I had a car, I paid my bills, I looked after my kids, and I had a job. I was working in a cannery in North Van and I was making really good money, I was supporting the family on my own.

Now I don't have a job, I'm on welfare, I'm living in a shitty hotel. I work around drug addicts, I work at the safe injection site, I have been there for over four years as a peer support worker. Some clients that come in, they get upset and they tend to cry in front of me, especially the ladies. The stories I hear there are similar to what I went through. You know, being alone.

After I got out of detox I was in my house for one month and I got kicked out and I just had a house full of everything you could think of in there. I ended up leaving it all and I was in the homeless shelters for about three months and that's how I got here. I was going from line-up to line-up. I didn't like being in the shelters. I 'm used to coming and going as I want. Curfews were at 11:00 [at night]. The doors lock at 11:00. And sleeping on the floor with just a sheet on top of you, waking up at six in the morning "here's your coffee and doughnut" and get out. There was only space for ten women at the UGM [Union Gospel Mission], there were like sixty men on the other side, but there were only ten spots for women. It was the most depressing time of my life, being homeless. I had nobody. I was all by myself. I had friends down here but they were doing the same thing I was. The only time someone would come visit me was when I was smoking crack in my room.

Having that experience back then helped me with what I'm doing now. I was at the Front Door on Main Street. I was in that group for about three years down here. There was a bunch of young kids that came down from up north, we toured them down skid row told them about drug dealers and drug users. They saw that people inject in the alley, smoke rock in the alley. Hopefully we made a difference with these kids 'cause they were like twelve and up. We shared a lot of stories with the kids - "don't grow up to be like this." I lost a couple of friends that I used to do drugs with, they're all gone now. They're overdosing or dying of AIDS or HIV.

I would like to get out of this area but all my work is down here. I volunteer and run groups. I work. All of that's down here. All of the friends that I've made down here. A lot of people I'm friends with I could go up and share anything. My healing circles I do. I never went to residential school but I was abused by two of my half brothers. I started drinking at twelve years old, not down here but in Port Alberni. Twelve years old standing in front of the beer parlour and asking them to get me a case of beer and they did it. That was my way of forgetting everything I went through as a young girl. I hid that for years and years because of my half brothers. I had nobody to talk to. I shared a lot of things in that group that I wouldn't have told my own family. We just let go of things that we keep in and open up and you're not ashamed of crying front of people you don't know. Being able to talk openly and have people just sit there and listen.

I experimented with pot when I was a young kid too, that's all I did before I got down here. I'd watch everybody else do drugs and then I got curious and I got carried away and then I ended up losing everything.

Think really hard before you do that drug you know cause in the end it's not worth it. I still cry today about what I lost: My girls, my grandkids - not being able to see them.

## Fern





Deb's  
Alex





**As a result of being part of the Ministry** until I was an adult, I was moved around the province from foster home to foster home; I was taken

from my family at age 6. I did eventually get back to my family but my mother had past on after I got out of the ministry. I was a troubled child being in there.

I got into the drug scene when I got to the DTES. I stayed for 3 years and did pot, or cocaine, or heroin. Doing all those drugs I ended up mixing them and ended up flat-lining and coming to, and thinking “wow what a rush,” not realizing that I was by myself at that point. After doing those drugs a number of times I realized that I had overdosed and flat-lined. I’ve seen some stuff that I cannot describe. I was not here in the body, but spiritually I crossed over and came back. Realizing I had overdosed and I had flat-lined, after experiencing that side, I knew I wasn’t ready, the creator wasn’t ready to take me.

I stay in the DTES because I am learning and knowing that I’m actually helping people escape their addiction. They can control the product rather than the product controlling them. They can be a functioning user. People need to know that you do have the power to say no; you are not hopelessly addicted.

We are a city that actually has a soul and a spirit and we do care for other DTES residence. There may be the odd individual that when they consume their drug of choice their personality changes so they may be happy go luck and when they consume their drug they may change. Not everyone is like that down here. We do watch out for each other. We do care. I do not want to move from down here. We are magnetized to each other; we draw each other to each other, we have been there done that. We’ve finally got a spot here in the city where we actually feel like we belong.

**Clyde**





FRANKIE

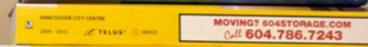
310

CONTAMINATION

NOTICE OF PESTICIDE USE  
Customer: [illegible]  
Address: [illegible]  
City: [illegible]  
State: [illegible]  
Zip: [illegible]  
Phone: [illegible]  
Pesticide Use: [illegible]  
Treatment Area: [illegible]  
Pesticide: [illegible]  
Application Date: [illegible]  
Application Time: [illegible]  
Application Method: [illegible]  
Application Rate: [illegible]  
Application Frequency: [illegible]  
Application Duration: [illegible]  
Application Location: [illegible]  
Application Notes: [illegible]  
DO NOT ENTER THE TREATED AREA BEFORE [illegible]

CLARK REEFER LINES

14



**Alcohol. No... I don't use drugs...** No... no... I don't like pot... I hate smoking pot. You know I don't like pot. Yeah, I'm an alcoholic. I drink a lot.

**I got ulcers.** I got small little holes in my gut. Well, I barf all the time. I see the doc, well I gotta go one of these days. I don't care about dying you know.

That's the way life goes. You live and then you die.

**Hector**



THINGS to BUY !!

~~Phone minutes~~ \*urgent 50.00

- X marg.
- Peanut butter
- Honey / Strawberry Jam

**I went through it for a while with no money.** I thought I'd just suffer, but over time I couldn't take it anymore I wanted to get out. So I started picking bottles for my time and it took me a few months but I started making enough money where I could go get a half gram or a twenty everyday after going out and picking bottles. So I do that and I just started living the part like fuckin' not showering, not shaving, just covered in fucking pop, juice, just anything.

My boss would come back from Europe and I would go back to work in construction and everything was good for six or eight months with lots of money and partying all the time. This cycle went on for four years.

I did my whole apprenticeship smoking dope all day at work. My routine at work was, if I didn't have a place to stay I would sleep at the house, like security, to watch all the tools we had there. So the routine was, he'd buy me breakfast, show up at the site wake me up, feed me, I'd work for maybe an hour, an hour and a half until the drug phones turned on. After about two years I started going and asking him for money. He would give it to me because I worked better when I was high. I was fast and made him lots of money. I made about \$200 a day. I would get high all day and all night. I am realizing now that doing so much dope while he was here because I had so much money was probably why I would fall so hard when he was gone to Europe for the winter.

## Chris

**You just kind of go where you know**, where you feel most comfortable. Everything I do is around here. I have VANDU, I have the Health Contact Center, I've got the Consumers Board, Emerging Voices at WISH, I've got Ladies' Night at the Downtown Eastside Clinic. So I do a lot of work in the neighbourhood. I just kind of stumbled upon the work, and then boom I'm just into all these things.

My job keeps me in the Downtown Eastside. I know everybody and I've lived down here, it's just a force of habit now. People want me to work for them down here so I do. It's a good feeling! You know, there are thousands of bars in this city, and I only go to one of them, and it's down here.

It's pretty cool down here you know. You can't know anything, you have to learn it on your own, you really do. Vancouver's a pretty city, it's very beautiful. There are only a couple of snakes around but you always be careful and watch your back.

## Juanita



**A lot of us kids were sometimes left alone for days and days** until the drinking stopped. So there was a lot of hunger in that time. Most of us young kids couldn't wait until somebody died, 'cause back home an eating place would be set up for five days [when someone died]. And most of us ate and ate and ate – and we always wondered who would die next just so we could eat again. I used to remember eating with my cousins – most of them died. Most of my original friends died too.

I understand that you gotta be careful with what you hate, because chances are you are that too.

**In a lot of ways, the Downtown Eastside resembles the place where I grew up.** All the stuff that happens around me has a lot to do with how I grew up too: The violence, the drinking, the drug use, people getting raped. Somehow I needed to move away from that too. But working at Sweet Grass [Native support centre] is opening up a door. And that's the thing when you work at healing people: Really there's nothing you can do until they ask for help – and then you can help a person heal.

Derek



**It's just hard I feel like I have so many gifts and talents.** And I feel like I just kind of threw them down the drain. I have little glimpses of them. It's awesome cause I know the potential I do have... did have – cause I know it's there.

**Yeah, I would go for rehab, but** you have to want it. But maybe I don't really want rehab. Even though it would be the best thing for me. I still got my skills and I still got my talents – I still got my big bright ideas. Like I said I get glimpses of them so I know its gonna be there but for how long? For every talent it doesn't just go away – just cause you fuck it up right? I just gotta get my motivation back and my patience.

**Rose**











On June 19th, 2009, this work opened at the **W2 Flack Block Gallery** in Vancouver. Many of the people interviewed and in the photographs came to the opening.

**Julia and I invited them** to come back the next day to talk about the **My Space** project. Their comments now hang in the gallery too.

## Credits

Artistic Director, W2: Irwin Oostinde

Interviews: Julia Wilson and Rita Leistner

Photography: Rita Leistner

Exhibition Installation Crew: Steven Tong and Tim Bonham

Graphic Design for gallery text panels: Gavin Shaefer

Video footage and editing: Andrew Lavigne

Book design, layout, edit: Rita Leistner

PacBlue Printing in Vancouver sponsored the printing. Thanks Greg Downes at PacBlue.



**My Space**  
**Rita Lensen**  
**June 17-July 26**  
Curated by Julia Wilson  
VANDU Oral History Project









**Some People don't like having their picture taken** - they think it's taking their spirit or something. But people down here kind of enjoy it - so that people from the outside can find out how they're living. It's a lot better than what you see on T.V. This shows people how they are, in their rooms and stuff, their homes.

**Marvin**

**At first I thought, oh, just another photographer...** I'm surprised at the quality of the photographs and the subject matter. They show the positive sides of people's lives. It really impressed me. I like seeing my own picture, but I also like seeing how other people down here live, and you show a great deal of that. Seeing everyone else down here. I enjoy seeing how my friends are living down here. We've been friends [Marvin and I] for five years, and we've never seen each other's rooms. **It turned out a lot better than I thought it would.**

**Gary**

# Acknowledgements

**I never know what I will photograph until I get there.** The only thing I knew when I came to the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver (DTES) was that I had no interest in making more pictures of what I'd already seen photographed many times. I spent three weeks talking to DTES residents before I took a photograph. I resolved early-on not to take any street photography, and not to photograph anyone using drugs. Based on conversations I had, my focus became people in their own spaces. I am indebted to those DTES residents who allowed me into their private spaces. These photographs belong first and foremost to you. May you find what you are looking for and the love and shelter you deserve.

I believe there is no greater reward for an artist than to see their work put to good use. I am honoured to be a part of "My Space," an installation beautifully put together by the talented Julia Wilson of SFU, along with the tireless, long standing DTES arts community activist Irwin Oostinde and his colleagues at W2 - Steven Tong, Tim Bonham, and Andrew Lavigne. I never would have met Julia if not for the quick thinking of my new friend, Paul Campbell. Paul, I could not have made this work without you. Your resourcefulness, insight, and help have been invaluable. Thanks as always to my family and to my cousin Lianne Scott for finding us. Thanks to Steve Simon who in the frenzy of producing my last book was egregiously forgotten. Steve, your friendship, generous spirit and commitment to photography are dear to me. Thanks to Christopher Morris and his beautiful blonds for anchoring me in Van; thank-you Brian Green and Mark James for digs and bikes; Kendall Messick, Katja Heinemann, Henry Knight, Guntar Kravis, Dale McMurchy and Rob Palmer you are my lifelines. Artist and poet Cecily Nicholson and Carol Martin at The Downtown Eastside Women's Centre, the amazing Rita Blind at Sweetgrass, and Susie Gray have offered friendship and advice to a newcomer. Thanks to Femke Van Delft. Femke, you and your gang rock. Special thanks to Marie Clements, Rosemary Georgeson, and Brenda Leadlay at Presentation House Theatre: You encouraged me to come to the DTES as part of The Edward Curtis Project, even when I resisted. Thanks to Daniel MacIvor for taking the second step with me, among other things. And to my friends at The Dugout and the 515. And to Kate Anthony, Pam Walker, and many others. Thanks.

**Rita Leistner, Vancouver, June 19th, 2009**

**As a Graduate student at Simon Fraser University,** I knew I wanted to use my research as an opportunity to work with residents in the Downtown Eastside to produce something meaningful to the community. I connected with The Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) almost two years ago as they presented their vision of compiling and archiving the life-stories of some of their 2000 members.

The Downtown Eastside oral history project was recognized by the VANDU membership over three years ago as a necessary undertaking to crystallize some of the rich stories of the DTES community, which would otherwise die with their owners or never make it into the history books. This project is an opportunity for DTES community members themselves to engage “outsiders”, who often view the population as disposable criminals, to recognize that in fact, this community abounds with interesting people of value.

We hope to provide a greater understanding of some of the unique political, cultural, and economic perspectives of people living in the DTES. This will provide a more comprehensive picture of the DTES as a real community of individuals confronted with real issues.

This project was brought to life by photojournalist Rita Leistner. Your vision is inimitable. Thank you to Irwin Oostindie and the team at W2 for your hard work and expertise. Thank you to VANDU and the collaborators in this project who have shared their stories. To my family, thank you for your unwavering love and support. Robb Johannes, thank you for grounding me in this project. Jenny Safronic and Marlen Reyes your work has been an incredible support.

**Julia Wilson, Vancouver, June 19th, 2009**

## Rita Leistner - biography

In 2003, unable to get a military embed, Rita walked to Iraq with Kurdish smugglers. Rita has an MA in comparative literature from the University of Toronto, and worked in the film industry as a lighting specialist before moving to Cambodia in 1997 to work as an independent photojournalist. Rita works in the tradition of “Concerned Photography” which she studied at the International Centre for Photography in New York. Challenging the barriers between genres, Rita’s work merges artistic and documentary practice with an ethnographic approach to subject matter: Working from the inside out, allowing the subjects to define themselves in the framework of photographic story-telling. Rita is a dynamic public speaker and social activist who lectures widely and often publishes her writing alongside her award-winning photographs. Rita’s photographs have been exhibited around the world and published in books and magazines such as *Battlespace: Unrealities of War*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Vanity Fair Italy*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Walrus*, *Maclean’s*, *Ideas*, *Alphabet City*, *Colors* and *Mother Jones*. She is co-author of *Unembedded: Four Independent Photojournalists on the War in Iraq*. Her documentary project on First Nations (Native Indian) communities in North America - a collaboration with renowned Métis playwright Marie Clements and commissioned by Presentation House in Vancouver - was selected for the Cultural Olympiad at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games. Rita Leistner is based in Toronto, and is represented by Redux Pictures in New York.

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