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MEGAPHONE

VANCOUVER'S STREET PAPER



SOMEONE WHO GIVES A DAMN

Two filmmakers try to teach others what they learned about homelessness





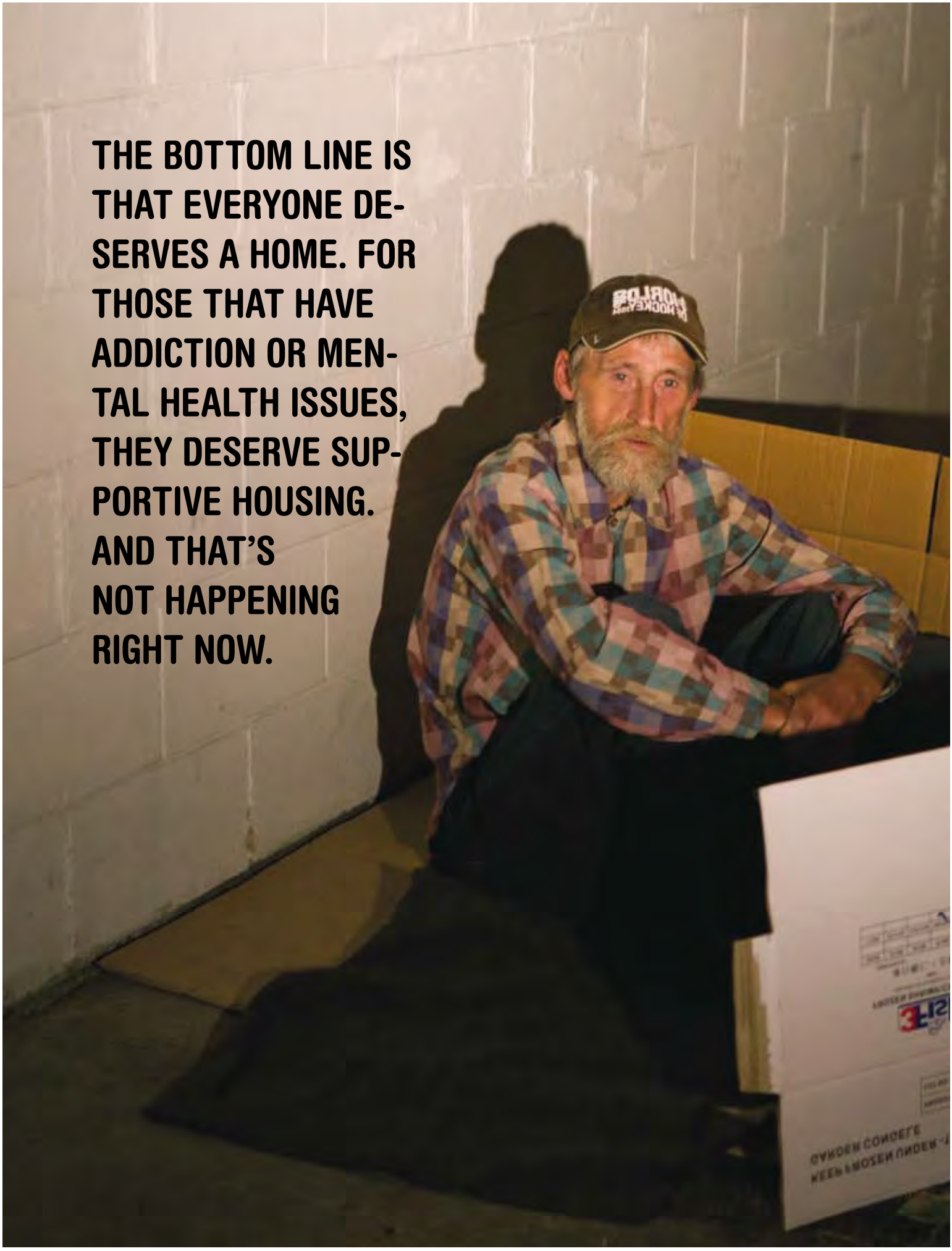
Les Merson and Ken Villeneuve didn't have a lot of experience with homeless people. In fact, the two middle-class, middle-aged men often ignored those they saw sleeping outside. But when Merson saw one of his close friends spiral out of control and end up on the streets, it opened his eyes to a new world.

Frustrated by government inaction and his own ignorance, he enlisted Villeneuve and the two set out to make a film to show people that the road from having a home to living on the street is a lot shorter than most suspect. Along with making the film, Villenueve took photos of the people they interviewed or met along the way, which are featured here in the following pages.

While the two feel that governments need to invest more money and resources into solving the problem, their main message is that the ultimate responsibility lies with you and me. The title of the movie, *Something to Eat, a Place to Sleep & Someone Who Gives a Damn*, encapsulates what they see as a relatively simple solution to a complex problem.

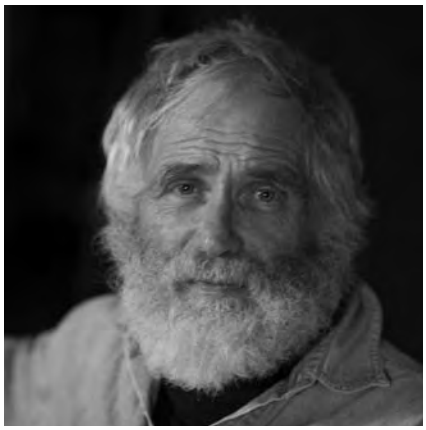
Getting to know the people sleeping in the alleys and listening to their stories would go a long way towards breaking down the barriers that exist between the more and less fortunate and help end this crisis. The more distant and uninvolved we remain, the worse the problem will become.

The following is an edited transcript of an interview that took place at the Potluck Café in the Downtown Eastside.


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Megaphone: The issue of homelessness was new for both of you. What inspired you guys to tackle this subject?

Les Merson: I have a very close friend of mine from work. About four years ago she came to me and said she was addicted to cocaine and that she couldn't live up to the company's expectations. She took some time off to get her life together. In four years she lost everything she had—her friends, her home and her family. She's become a prostitute and is very sick. Here's a young woman who in four years went from earning $120,000 a year to losing everything. That really sensitized me to some of the issues.

Twenty years ago I started writing a series of poems about the Downtown Eastside and I couldn't do it. Three strokes of the brush and I had stereotyped people. I think I've had a history of being judgemental and coming back to the Downtown Eastside was a way for me to try and get to know them as people.

Ken Villeneuve: Les was taking documentary film at Langara and I came on board to help out. It was transformational for me. I used to ignore homeless people and it's changed me.

Megaphone: What were some of the stereotypes you had overturned?

LM: I always felt that people like my friend were anomalies and weren't reflective of the whole. What we learned is that virtually everyone is compelling, interesting and complex—just wonderfully warm and rich human beings.

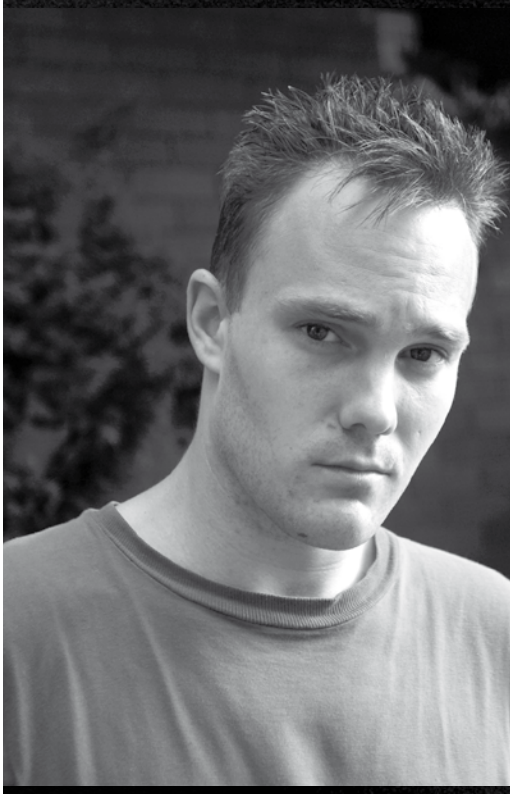
KV: I photograph a lot of actors and the idea is that you try to communicate [through the photo]. And pretty much all the people in the Downtown Eastside I photographed had instant communication of the eyes. Only a few actors I photographed could do that.

LM: There's an honesty in the Downtown Eastside that doesn't exist in a lot of places.

Megaphone: With the number of homeless people in Vancouver increasing every year, what message do you hope people will take home when watching the film?

LM: Quite frankly, it says right in the title of the film *[Something to Eat, a Place to Sleep & Someone Who Gives a Damn]*, which is a report that Dr. Penny Perry did for the City of Vancouver. In terms of the message, we want it to humanize. We wanted to present the homeless in their own voice. And we wanted to invert the way they're traditionally and stereotypically presented. It's very easy to portray someone in a negative light smoking crack. Well, that's only a small part of a drug addict's existence down here.

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NIGEL

When I met Nigel at the PotLuck Café on Hastings, he was in the middle of a conversation with Les Merson about a comment he made in Merson's movie, *Something to Eat, a Place to Sleep and Someone Who Gives a Damn*. Along with talking about his life on the streets, his addiction problems and his battle to get inside, Nigel says in the film that he let a man go down on him to get money for drugs.

The comment sparked concern from a social service worker who suggested Merson edit it out of the film. Nigel, however, refused to have it removed. Even though someone had already attacked him because of what he said in the film, he insists people need to learn about what really happens on the street.

Formerly homeless, addicted to heroin and suffering from Hepatitis C, Nigel is now in housing and is working towards cleaning up, getting a girlfriend and getting his life back on track. After talking with the filmmakers, I sat down with Nigel to hear his story.

FORMERLY HOMELESS, ADDICTED TO HEROIN AND SUFFERING FROM HEPATITIS C, NIGEL IS NOW IN HOUSING AND IS WORKING TOWARDS CLEANING UP, GETTING A GIRLFRIEND AND GETTING HIS LIFE BACK ON TRACK.

Megaphone: How did you end up on the streets?

Nigel: I was 13 when I was kicked out of my house and put into care. Three months after that I was in youth jail for two years. Then I was kicked out of my house again and got my own job. I moved to a new city and asked my grandmother for some money to start selling dope. I told her that was the only way to make money on the streets. She gave me $3,000. Of course, I fucked that up.

Megaphone: You have some really strong stories in the movie. How did you feel about putting that in the film?

Nigel: I got a lot of feeling in there—it's good to get it out. I have to admit that I was a little nervous. I'm comfortable with my sexuality. If someone calls me a gearbox, I'll snap and set the record straight with a bottle over the head. But I don't have a problem with gay people, except the ones that are predators.

Megaphone: What do you hope people learn from your story?

Nigel: I hope that some kid that's good looking like I was when I came here doesn't get wired on heroin and end up in Boystown selling his ass for a year or two and then getting a complex, developing rage and then killing someone, like what happened to my best friend. So instead of a few minutes talk with a counsellor and some honesty, it's cost him two consecutive life sentences.

Megaphone: What about people who don't often go into the neighbourhood?

Nigel: They're addicts too, but they're addicts that are on a different plateau. The majority can be snotty. You come down here you get yourself a good junk habit and grind in day in and day out, then come talk to me. Dope does damage irregardless. I guess that's ignorant for me to say that—I'm not a counsellor, but I've been through it. If I had the answers, I'd be clean.

The bottom line is that everyone deserves a home. For those that have addiction or mental health issues, they deserve supportive housing. And that's not happening right now.

But my challenge to the citizens of Vancouver who say homelessness is the number one issue is, 'What are you doing about ending homelessness?' Because we've all got do to something. The movie talks about what we can do. Get involved. Take someone out for food. Mentor someone.

KV: Dignity and respect. Everyone deserves that.

LM: The movie's not made for those who are already sympathetic to the homeless. It's for those that don't understand it, are ignorant to the conditions and the views and hopefully it will open their eyes and change their views.

Megaphone: Are there plans for more movies about this subject?

LM: I just met someone from Bella Bella. I asked her if she knew Gloria Wilson (the 26-year-old aboriginal woman who was in the film). And she says, 'Of course I know Gloria.' She told me, you need to send the film to Bella Bella and kids need to know that life in the big city isn't as glamorous as it's made out to be and what happens when an aboriginal person comes down to the Downtown Eastside.

My huge concern is that 32 per cent of all homeless are aboriginal. They represent two per cent of the population, but are 32 per cent of homeless. That's unacceptable. The government is doing nothing about this, and that's systemic abuse. I believe every person in Canada should be ashamed of that. I would like to do a movie about what confronts aboriginal people in the Downtown Eastside.

Free copies of Something to Eat, a Place to Sleep & Someone Who Gives a Damn *can be obtained by emailing Les Merson at SeeingEye@Telus.net. Ken Villeneuve's photos are available for $250 each, with all proceeds going to the LifeSkills Centre on East Cordova.*

Text: **Sean Condon**
Photos: **Ken Villeneuve**