Sisters of Mercy

Documentary highlights strengths and hardships of aboriginal women





Above: Janet wants to pursue a career as a chef and make sure her kids don't end up in the Downtown Eastside. Bottom Left: Sandra, Sophia and a friend smoke crack in a Downtown Eastside alley during a night of partying.

Six months ago, Sandra spent her nights sleeping on a pew at First United Church and her days doing anything she could to score drugs.

"I was homeless and I had nothing," says the 43-year-old from the Saddle Lake Cree nation. "I was using everyday, 24-hours a day, as long as I could keep going."

It's a far cry from her upbringing. Sandra grew up in an affluent Vancouver neighbourhood and, until five years ago, led a relatively quiet life. She was going to school at the Native Education College, training to become an alcohol and drug counsellor.

"I used to be the person driving down Hastings and feeling sorry for those people," she recalls. "If someone would have asked me five years ago if I'd ever live at [a Single Room Occupancy hotel] I would have shaken my head at the thought."

It was only when Sandra was forced to confront her own demons that her life began to spiral out of control.

"I grew up in Point Grey of all places," she chuckles. "[I was] the only native in a Catholic school. But I had a rough childhood. I was abused. I started drinking at age six."

During her training to become a counsellor, Sandra had to delve into her own troubled past—something that proved too painful to relive.

"I took a two-week leave of absence [from class] when we started getting into my past. I lost it. It was all too much for me. That's when I started drinking more and more and more. That was four years ago."

Sandra spent the following years on and off the streets, until she was approached last spring by Les Merson and Gloria Wilson, co-producers of *Street Sisters*—a documentary that follows nine aboriginal women as they struggle to break away from cycles of poverty, addiction and homelessness.

Wilson, who met Sandra back when she too was homeless and addicted to drugs, asked her to participate in the project.

Fast-forward to the present and Sandra is off the streets and in housing (though she's "not thrilled" with her place). She has reconnected with her son—who she lost 11 years ago to the foster care system—is going back to school, and is on a waiting list for drug and alcohol treatment.

It's the purpose of *Street Sisters*: to meet the women where they are—in the midst of poverty and addiction—and provide them with the tools to accomplish their individual goals, whether it's help finding housing, to reconnect with their kids or to get clean and sober—something all the women have set out to do.

The documentary, which began shooting in April, follows the sisters in their day-to-day activities over a 12-month period—whether they're scoring drugs, visiting their kids, or trying to secure housing, but also as they participate in an aboriginal women's support group.

"This film is about what can happen when a group of women come together in a supportive environment, when resources are put to bare that can assist them and allow these women to make changes in their lives," explains Merson, who is also the film's director. "It's about what can happen."

Merson first met his co-producer Wilson when he interviewed her for his award-winning 2008 documentary about homelessness, *Something to Eat, a Place to Sleep & Someone Who Gives a Damn*.

With the help of Merson and the film's crew, Wilson secured housing and kicked her addictions. Today she's progressing in a methadone maintenance



Sandra is smudged before a group counselling session. Smudging is a traditional ceremony by which herbs are burned and the ash is brushed over the body in order to cleanse the person of negative energy or spirits.

program. Wilson's now able to pay it forward—all nine women featured in *Street Sisters* are friends of hers who face circumstances similar to Wilson's.

As for Merson, the filming experience has given him first-hand witness to the kind of institutional racism aboriginal people face each day.

"I'm a white middle-class male who grew up beside a Musqueam reservation," says Merson. "Aboriginals are our first people and yet they're treated like second-class citizens. So this film hopes to change perceptions, particularly of aboriginal women."

The legacies of colonialism and the residential school system, the foster care system, poverty, childhood violence and sexual abuse, limited education, and drug and alcohol use are just some of the issues the sisters are battling.

The societal obstacles these women are confronted with are staggering. A 2006 report by Statistics Canada found that the average income of an Aboriginal woman is $16,600—that's $7,000 less than the average income of a non-aboriginal woman.

According to the Native Women's Association of Canada, while the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) has an aboriginal population of just two per cent, the proportion of aboriginal people among the homeless population is closer to 30 per cent.

Of the aboriginal homeless population, 35 per cent are women, compared to the non-aboriginal homeless population where women make up only 27 per cent.

Poverty and intergenerational cycles

of violence also mean that aboriginal women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence, with an intimate partner assault rate three times higher than that of non-aboriginal women.

"These women are not garbage," says Wilson. "They are my friends, my family. They deserve dignity, respect and understanding. They have been abandoned and forgotten for too long."

Twice a week the sisters gather for a counselling session facilitated by the renowned author and addictions specialist, Dr. Gabor Maté, residential school survivor and elder of the Huu-ay-aht first nation Marjorie White, and aboriginal counsellor, Sylvia Isaac.

Isaac, who grew up in Fort St. James and is a member of the Nak'azdli first nation, says the path to her career as a counsellor started at the age of five.

"That's when I was first sexually abused and it went on for many years," she explains.

Isaac says she was subjected to repeated sexual abuse, rape, beatings and torture between the ages of five and 11.

Isaac had her first drink at the age of six, was homeless at 11 and addicted to drugs and alcohol by the time she was 12. She spent the following years on the streets of Toronto, in and out of prison and, in 1991, came to Vancouver. Still homeless, Isaac lived in Oppenheimer Park where she continued to numb her pain with drugs and alcohol.

"In 1998, someone told me I could do a lot with my life," says Isaac. "I didn't even know how to read and write but she brought me to the LifeSkills Centre."

Isaac enrolled in Humanities 101, a UBC program that offers non-credit university-level courses for people living in the Downtown Eastside. She finished at the top of her class and went on to train as a wellness counsellor and residential school healing facilitator.

Today, Isaac has been clean and sober for almost 11 years. Though she says she still struggles with memories of her painful childhood, she now feels her life has a purpose.

"I hated childhood and I hated [myself]. I hated that little girl. She didn't have the strength, didn't have the courage," says Isaac. "But now I see that she was strong and she survived to this day.



Sophia, who is four-and-a-half months pregnant and has started on a methadone maintenance program, stands on an East Hastings corner.

"What I went through is what a lot of these girls are going through. I believe I've gone through what I did so I can help these women."

Street Sisters is more than just a chance for the women to change their lives; it's also a chance for them to tell their stories.

For most of the sisters, the documentary is a legacy to leave their children and grandchildren. It's a way to seek understanding and forgiveness from their children—especially those lost to the foster care system.

"When [Merson] told me he found my son, I thought I would fall over," Sandra says. "I was dizzy, shaking.

"It's so scary—you don't know if they're gonna hate you or how they're gonna be, but when you see them it takes such an enormous weight off your shoulders."

For Sandra, the documentary gave her the strength to reconnect with her son.

"The sisters have been so supportive. Before I didn't care if I didn't wake up in the morning; I didn't care about tomorrow, but now I care. And I'm trying to better my life."

Street Sisters is currently in production, however funding trouble could jeopardize that. "Our costs are to the bone and everyone attached to the project is donating their time, including Dr. Maté and all the crew," wrote Merson in an email. "To complete filming we require at least $40,000, plus another $12,000 to provide one-on-one counselling for the women to deal with post-traumatic stress they have suffered, much of it attached to child-hood sexual abuse.

"We have exhausted our resources and need help."

Street Sisters began filming without adequate funding in place when one of the film's original sisters, Charlene Waskahat, died after she fell from the window of a Single Room Occupancy Hotel in early 2009.

Homeless, drug addicted and HIV- and Hepatitis C-positive, Waskahat agreed to take part in *Street Sisters* in the hope that others, particularly aboriginal youth, would have a better life than she did.

"After Charlene died, Gloria didn't want to lose another sister," wrote Merson. "She wanted to start the filming right away with the intent to save lives."

Story by **Amy Juschka**
Photos by **Ken Villeneuve**