Former UBC employee's downward spiral spotlighted in new documentary

Film documents plight of homeless, addicted

By Shawn Conner
Staff writer

On a chilly November morning, Anne Campbell sits outside the Kitsilano branch of the public library. Sitting on the stone wall, Campbell draws in her sketchbook a caricature of a man smoking a pipe. Another sketchpad, which sits atop a shopping cart piled high with her things, is filled with elaborate, detailed drawings of plants and trees.

As Les Merson points out, you have nothing else for entertainment but to observe when you live on the street.

Campbell is among the Lower Mainland's thousands of homeless and one of dozens Merson interviewed for his documentary *Something to Eat, A Place to Sleep & Someone Who Gives a Damn*. The 58-year-old Campbell, who once held an office job at UBC, was one of the inspirations behind the film, which began as a student project at Langara.

The film's first source was a friend and co-worker of the Kits-based Merson.

"About four years ago, she made it clear to us that she was addicted to drugs," said the filmmaker. "And I saw in that four years this person descend into serious addiction and homelessness, and just spiralling into the Downtown Eastside. It's been quite shocking frankly. This was a person who worked at a very high level and ended up with nothing."



Anne Campbell worked an office job at UBC before ending up homeless.

photo **Dan Toulgoet**

Merson believed his colleague was an anomaly until he began talking to others, such as Campbell, who had become homeless.

For two years, Campbell was part of the scenery in a nearby park as Merson walked his sons to school. "Every day we'd walk by this woman sitting by herself, with her cart beside her, talking into a tape recorder, possibly with no batteries in it," said Merson. "We never smiled or looked at her or anything. What I found out later is my kids would go to school and conspiratorially talk about this crazy woman in the park."

Interviewing her for his documentary, Merson put a name and story to the face. "She just descended into homelessness," said Merson. "Not through addiction, but maybe through some aspects of mental health. I guess she just found it difficult to cope."

Asked why she was homeless, Campbell said "Miss Judy Graves" is trying to find her a place to live, but the last time the city's housing advocate helped her, Campbell left the provided housing after little more than a year.

The building she was housed in had a flood the first night she moved in, she said, but she stayed. But then the "fire alarm game" began. Someone sets off an alarm that proves to be false, then someone else does the same thing, and soon no one is coming out of their rooms when the alarm goes off. "Then they start a real fire," said Campbell. "So I ran away when they started that game."

Merson hopes *Something to Eat* can change our preconceptions of the homeless, just as the views he and his sons held of homeless people were challenged. "I believe, and maybe this is naïve of me, so much could change [in the DTES] if we just changed the way we looked at it," said Merson. "My God—the whole thing of labelling theory is people live up to the labels and expectations you have of them. If we changed the expectations, if we treated them like human beings, if we actually went down there and got to know them, our attitudes would change, and their attitudes would change."

Merson has shown *Something to Eat* once so far, at SFU Harbour Centre Nov. 3. He said the screening drew 200 people, including teachers, students, and a Vancouver police officer. He also gave out 40 DVD copies to people from various community groups. (Those interested can contact Merson at seeingeye@telus.net.) A panel discussion after the screening included a number of homeless. No civic election candidates from the NPA or Vision Vancouver showed up, as far as he knows.

"Last night the homeless spoke," he said, the morning after the film's debut. "I hope somebody was listening."