Vancouver documentary highlights homeless problem

Downtown Eastside resident contributes own experiences to film

By Jackie Wong

Gloria Wilson has been homeless in the Downtown Eastside for five years, and she says she's had enough. The 26-year-old and her boyfriend are now seeking housing with the help of local filmmaker Les Merson, who featured Wilson in his recent documentary, *Something to Eat, a Place to Sleep & Someone Who Gives a Damn*. The documentary explores the human face of homelessness, and suggests practical ways for individuals to help find solutions.

When *WE* caught up with Wilson and Merson at Oppenheimer Park last week, Wilson had just finished a shift at the nearby LifeSkills Centre, where she volunteers almost every day. The educational drop-in centre offers shower and laundry facilities, a training kitchen to teach people how to cook meals, and addiction-treatment and mental-health services, among other services.

"It gets frustrating at times, because there are people down here [in the Downtown Eastside] that shouldn't be on the streets," says Wilson. "There's a lot of people down here that need more help than others."

When Wilson moved to Vancouver at age 20, from an aboriginal community in Bella Bella, B.C., she had already been on her own for nine years. (Her mother — an alcoholic — was rarely home to care for her.) Wilson landed a waitressing job in Vancouver, but when she refused her manager's sexual advances, she was laid off for two weeks. "I was working every day there to keep a roof over my head, and he [laid me off] and I was on the street," she recalls. She quit in the middle of a shift on her first day back because her manager continued to try to exploit her.



PHOTO: JACKIE WONG

Gloria Wilson, seen here with her boyfriend Sam, has been homeless in the Downtown Eastside for five years. She appears in the locally made documentary, *Something to Eat, a Place to Sleep & Someone Who Gives a Damn*.

"On my 21st birthday, I tried crack for the first time. I knew nothing of the resources down here," Wilson says. "Basically, I did it so I could stay awake, because I had nowhere to live. That's how it started."

Wilson's appearance in *Something to Eat, a Place to Sleep & Someone Who Gives a Damn* was an extension of everyday efforts in her community to raise awareness of the issues that confront people living on the streets. "I do it because I like to try to help," she says.

"I was part of the middle-class society that would drive through the Downtown Eastside and say, 'We should clean this up, we should get rid of the homelessness,' but I just didn't want to do anything," says Merson, who was inspired to make the documentary because of the negative attitudes toward the homeless that he saw developing in his children. "My children were afraid of the homeless," he says. "My father, who I love, thinks what should happen is everybody who lives in the Downtown Eastside who's drug-addicted or homeless should be shipped to an island. A lot of people think that."

Merson's work on *Something to Eat* opened his eyes, and resulted in a change of heart. In addition to helping Wilson and her boyfriend to find housing, he and Wilson are working on a second film about aboriginals and homelessness. Two per cent of Canada's population is aboriginal, of which 32 per cent are homeless. "The hope is that maybe we can stop homelessness before it starts," Merson says of the upcoming film.

As for Mayor Gregor Robertson's pledge to end homelessness by 2015, Merson is optimistic the goal can be reached, but the mayor can't do it alone. "I think Gregor Robertson is a good man... but with the current economy and a tax base that's diminished, he's going to need help," Merson says. "We all have to end homelessness together. This is not something that can be ended by politicians."

Copies of *Something to Eat, a Place to Sleep & Someone Who Gives a Damn* can be obtained by e-mailing Merson at seeingeye@telus.net WE