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# The End of Poverty: A Survivor's Journal

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This article is the third in a [series](#) on Poverty and Human Rights in Canada.

**SUMMARY:** In this personal narrative, social activist Michael Creek traces the changes in his life from its modest and ordinary beginnings to his long fight with cancer and a subsequent downward spiral that left him homeless and despairing. Creek also describes his recovery from abject poverty through his working for social change in a variety of roles –always speaking about poverty as one who has experienced its demeaning effects.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Dans ce récit personnel, l'activiste social Michael Creek expose les changements survenus dans sa vie, depuis ses débuts modestes et ordinaires jusqu'à son long combat contre le cancer et la déchéance qui s'en est suivi, alors qu'il a connu l'itinérance et le désespoir. Il décrit également comment il est sorti de la pauvreté la plus totale en œuvrant à divers titres en faveur du changement social — son expérience de la pauvreté et de ses effets dégradants lui permet de parler de ce sujet en connaissance de cause.

My name is Michael Creek. I'm the Director of Strategic Initiatives at Working for Change. My work also includes being an anti-poverty advocate. I want to thank The Philanthropist for the opportunity to write this article and special thanks to Elizabeth McIsaac for her encouragement and support.

## My Journey

I grew up in poverty; like many families back in the late 50's and 60's my family struggled. I knew we didn't have money but I never lacked for anything; there was no deprivation, no food banks; there was not the inequality that we see today.

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I had a paper route like many other young people; we had rotary phones and TV antennas; we had fat tire bikes and we had a good life. I started working a regular job in the summer of 1971 as a busboy at the Erie Beach Hotel in Port Dover; as my father had his first heart attack in 1970, all of my siblings took jobs to help the family. I worked at the Erie Beach Hotel for most of my teenage years and my early adult life.

My life took a dramatic turn when I was diagnosed with cancer back in 1994. Up until that point my life was good; I had just started a new job. I had a group of close friends, a nice apartment, a little money in the bank. All of that was going to change over the next year. I was in for the fight of my life. Society was part of that fight; my hospitalization and treatment paid those bills to keep me alive. We live in a country that believes in universal health care. (I would hazard a guess that most Canadians consider our health care to be a right.) I was and remain grateful to those who treated my cancer. It was expensive, almost 100 days in the hospital, but in the end we survived the cancer; but there was going to be a price I was still going to have to pay.

On the afternoon of my discharge, I crawled from the front door of my apartment into my bed, with tears streaming down my face. When I looked around my room seeing pictures and things as simple as my own sheets, the smell of my home was such a change from the smells of a hospital; the sunlight streaming through my window was brighter. I was at home.

It became apparent with my first visit with my oncologist after discharge that my life was saved but so much damage was done that I would not work again. I felt a sense of sadness in hearing this news. Sitting in my wheelchair waiting to return to my home, little did I realize that in a few months I was going to find myself homeless, sleeping in a ravine near the Don River in Toronto, not far from where my great grandparents had a family farm. I tried the shelter system but they scared me to my very core. In the outdoors you could cry or scream, bringing some relief to the inner pain of shame and failure. Those few weeks of living in what I call the valley of the homeless remain permanently etched into my heart; they are not just memories stored in the brain but memories that can cause me such anxiety and pain that they are just one of the traumas that I live with on a daily basis.

A friend ended up allowing me to come and live with him. It was supposed to be for a few months; after years of me camping (couch surfer) with him, he decided to move to another town. I was so afraid of living on my own that I just moved into another friend's apartment; he then moved to another town. I can only guess that I forced them to fulfill their dreams of buying a home and living in a smaller community; at least some good would come from my homelessness but I was running out of friends. The trauma of homelessness was holding me back from getting my own place. After some support I found a basement apartment for a couple of years, then I moved into Regent Park into social housing with Toronto Community Housing.

My health was not getting any better; it was getting worse especially my mental health. I often thought why would society want to spend so much financially to keep me alive and then to condemn me to a life sentence of poverty. I was taking more medication sinking deeper and deeper into the muck of poverty. Hope became a four letter word for me. My life was not worth living; every day was a struggle. My soul was being skinned alive. This was nothing more than torture repeated each day, week, months, years. All around me was despair and others condemned to this torture, to live in a community, bashed, isolated, blamed for being poor. My fight surviving cancer was a breeze compared to the fight to survive poverty.

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In January of 2007, on my bi-weekly appointment with my doctor, I saw a notice on the bulletin board about an opportunity with an organization looking to talk with people living in poverty, homelessness and mental health challenges. I took the notice home with me along with my prescriptions. I wrote a letter to apply to be part of this group; they did not want a resume, they wanted to know about you. I was interviewed and joined Voices from the Street. Little did I know that everything in my life would change again.

### **Voices from the Street and Women Speak Out**

Our members are comprised of marginalized individuals who have had direct experience with homelessness, poverty, and/or mental health issues, abuse and violence, drug and alcohol addictions, newcomers, immigrants and refugees. Voices from the Street puts a human face to poverty, homelessness and many other issues and involves people with direct experience as leaders in a public education process and policy change.

Each spring, twelve to fourteen individuals are chosen to take part in a training program—three days a week over a four-month period. The curriculum includes workshops on developing a personal narrative, public speaking skills, conflict resolution, developing key messages, facilitation skills, and diversity training. Pat Capponi, a well-known author and activist on issues of poverty and mental health, is the lead facilitator. A specialist in diversity training from the community, and John Stapleton, an expert on policy issues, are among the many trainers who work with the participants. In addition to public-speaking skills, graduates of the program have an understanding of policy issues and the need for systemic change.

The Speakers Bureau and Women Speak Out approach has proven to be a unique and necessary tool. It has established a significant platform for those who have experienced homelessness to talk from a personal perspective and to educate a cross-section of the public from college students and medical residents to Rotary Club members. Members of Voices have also taken prominent roles in the 25 in 5 Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Toronto poverty reduction strategy, and have become members on Boards of Directors of social service agencies, created a program on children and poverty for Toronto Schools and participated in policy related discussions on issues ranging from poverty and human rights to women's housing needs. The Speakers Bureau and Women Speak Out create opportunities for members to advocate for societal change, as well as build the necessary bridges with the rest of society so that we may work cooperatively to break down stigma and discrimination.

Voices from the Street was developed through a partnership between the Ontario Council of Alternative Businesses, (OCAB) now called Working for Change, the Gerstein Centre, and the Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre (PARC). In 2005, the City provided seed funding for the first training session. We have since received support from the Atkinson Foundation and the Metcalf Foundation and Status of Women for our on-going work at Women Speak Out.

### **From the Me to the We**

In 2007 my life started to change with the training at Voices from the Street; my soul was being restored, the chains of poverty had been loosened, a sense of hope was rising in my heart. I was telling others about my story, about the systemic issues that far too many people had been written off; that as a society we had created this condition of poverty and homelessness; that it was man made and that we can and must change our hearts and minds.

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In 2008 I was offered full time employment. I became the coordinator of Voices from the Street Speakers Bureau. I also became a leader in the sense that a lived experience was seen as positive in making sure that voices of people were heard to be part of policy change and development. We are the experts; we have chosen the title; we could have chosen to be consultants. What made us different was we wanted to have a conversation about change.

Now we needed find ways to connect the lived experience to policy and break down the barriers. Many people helped to make this happen from people at the City, the Atkinson Foundation, Metcalf Foundation, United Way plus community agencies and individuals fighting for change. I have been so lucky to have been supported by so many individuals who shared their talents with me. My work gave me a wide path to find my way. I joined a group called 25 in 5 that works to reduce poverty. If I was going to successful, I had to grasp the knowledge to understand how policy was made, why so much of our work is tangled in politics. It was now no longer about me but about my friends, my community, our City our Province and our Country. When we as advocates work together we are more powerful.

Some of the greatest challenges have been with how other agencies and organizations treat people who are living in poverty in community and individual consultations. People need to be paid when they share their expertise, when we ask for opinions. How an organization treats people, are they providing opportunity or are they just enhancing their organization or agency? There should be nothing about us without us being approached. It is great to hear those who have power and privilege talk about poverty reduction and we need them, but we need to ensure that voices of those with a lived experience are involved in all aspects.

### **Why a rights-based approach is the logical next step**

We need a 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to ensuring that social and economic and cultural rights are standards that need to be enshrined in how we approach building a better society, about building a better country.

When I was a young man I was involved in the fight for gay rights; it was a real struggle; it was a fight that would determine if my life as a gay man was equal to others. Would I be afforded those same rights as those all around me? I have been attacked verbally and physically because the laws of the land did not protect me. I know what it feels like to not be seen as equal to others. We won that fight and we need to take that approach to social, economic, cultural and political rights to build better communities and a stronger country; that is what a rights approach will bring.

In 2008 or 2009 I went to Ottawa and spoke about poverty and homelessness; I talked about the lack of dignity, that we have been spending decades using band aids to fix these problems. I also spoke about how people's rights were being denied and even more cause for concern was for those whose rights were being denied; and no one was raising this issue. Poor and marginalized, racialized and Indigenous people were kept so busy just trying to survive they could not fight for these rights. Denial of these rights or any rights should be cause for concern for all of society.

This year, I was in with Kenn Hale from ACTO in Geneva, Switzerland, at the United Nations for the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) of Canada. I was there on behalf of the Right to Housing Coalition that was started back in 2009 by the Advocacy Centre

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for Tenants Ontario. Our groups whose members belong to local, provincial and national organizations are made up of community activists, Indigenous groups, lawyers, academics and those with a lived experience of homeless. We challenged in Canadian courts about the right to housing; the Ontario and federal government disagreed. We lost the case without a single piece of evidence ever being heard in a court of law. As a result of this, we took our case to the review of CESCR as Canada signed this International Covenant on economic and social and cultural rights back in January 1976. Of fundamental importance to our work is found in Paragraph 1 of Article 11:

*“The State Parties to the present Covenant recognise the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.”*

We were part of a large Canadian Delegation of NGOs participating in this review. I can share with you that we made a powerful presentation that day; as a person I felt so proud to be with such amazing citizens. I spoke about my experience of homelessness and poverty. I was also concerned about all the areas that our delegation spoke about; it was a hard hitting indictment of my country's inaction to live up to this agreement. Here is part of that speech:

*I think about the men and woman who I see on our streets every day. I think about the men and woman who struggle with poverty, who are steps away from being homeless. I think about the systemic discrimination experienced by those living at the bottom of society. Homeless people often feel disillusioned, often bashed into silence. When you are beaten down by homelessness, you sometime stop struggling and give into the feeling that nothing can change. Rights matter, all people matter, it is time that our country Canada lived up to the right to housing and security of the person. It is time to live up to our international obligations and our Canadian Charter of Rights should reflect these obligations. Will the darkness of homelessness continue or will our new Prime Minister's Sunny Ways reach down to the bottom and recognize that we have rights that are being denied?*

*I hope that this review of my country will state in the strongest terms possible that Canada must do more, that Article 11, the right to adequate housing must be entrenched in our Charter. That Rights Matter! They are more than just words.*

We are at a very important time as our new federal government appears willing to stop putting band aids on poverty and homelessness. There is a growing movement to ensure that all levels of government work hand in hand to make these investments in each other. We often think that these Covenants and international human rights agreements are just a federal responsibility but all three levels of government need to ensure these rights are reflected in strategies and program policy development.

Recently, the government announced that they would begin to develop a housing strategy that would hopefully consider a rights-based approach. This is great news for those of us who believe in this reframing of poverty reduction. This opportunity is not just for poor people but for every Canadian to build a stronger Nation.

I would like to end with a word that has played an important role in my life, that word is courage. Courage has not always been there for me; when I was beaten down by homelessness and poverty, I had lost the courage to lead and to speak out. Courage is what it takes to stand up for

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a rights-based approach, to stand with others and fight for them. As advocates for social justice we need to embrace the idea and principle that rights matter.