STORIES

6 My Life Story, My Youth

Rose Henry

My name is Rose Henry. I was born June 15th, 1958, in Bremerton, Washington, in The United States. I come from Sliammon Nation (mother's side). My birth parents are the late Florence and Moses Dominic, who were survivors of the residential school system. I remember hearing stories of when my 15-year-old mother and 19-year-old father had to pick strawberries as their only source of employment to survive. Life was so hard for them back in those days, forcing them to move a lot, and they eventually moved to my mother's home community of Sliammon, north of the Powell River in British Columbia, Canada.

These horrible experiences were overshadowed by the trauma of seeing their first-born apprehended by the Canadian state authorities in 1966. I was placed in government care in a residential health facility called Sunny Hill Children's Hospital. I was two years old and would remain there for the next six years, classified as a ward of the state and misdiagnosed by medical authorities as 'mentally retarded.' Finally, at eight years of age, I was placed into foster care. Fortunately for me, my foster parents

understood that I had a very strong need to be with my biological parents. My foster mom used to say to me, "You would get literally sick." They were risk takers who had to break all the rules to bring me to my mother. My foster parents would always make sure, for the whole ten years I stayed with them, that I had some interaction with my birth parents. They would tell my mother and father where I was and what I was doing, at all times. When I look back now, I realize that all four of them were my pillars of life; they taught me good values and provided me with a great moral compass that I still abide by today.

My foster parents had taken a hands-on approach to raising me, completely overlooking the 'mentally retarded' label that was bestowed upon me by the state. They debunked this misdiagnosis by instilling in me the idea that anything was possible. Moreover, their unconditional love provided me with structure and consistency, which taught me the value of trust and commitment. I know I was quite lucky, as most children who go through the foster care system aren't as fortunate as I was. I am grateful for their guidance and affection.

Regardless of all my parents' efforts, I still ended up homeless as a consequence of the Sixties Scoop. Going through the Scoop left me wondering which world or culture I belonged in: white Canadian or First Nations community. I was torn between the two. It has had a very damaging effect on me; society told me you're brown on the outside and white in the middle (as I was brought up in a white home). I was confused and lost, and it was this path that ultimately led me to my life on the streets. My confusion about my identity was not all bad though. It was dualistic like me; it was both a hindrance and strength, and has remained so throughout my journey. In fact, there have been times in my life that I have used it as a guide to negotiate between two worlds and two very different cultures. But overall, I have to admit that it was very damaging in my youth.

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Heading out on My Own and Becoming Homeless

At age 19, when the foster funding ended, I struck out on my own and travelled to Calgary, Alberta where my foster brother and his best friend were. Unbeknownst to me, this would be the place where I would first experience homelessness. It didn't take long. Soon after I moved to Calgary and landed my first real job, my brother and his friend decided to move. Their decision to leave left me alone and very vulnerable for the first time in my life. I was in a strange new city and I was utterly isolated. I felt abandoned, and despair began to set in. As a result of my hopelessness, my choices in life began to suffer, and I descended into the dark downward spiral of street life. Being homeless for the first time, I really felt like I had no other options but to drink and party to escape the hard reality of being all alone in a big city full of racist rednecks.

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It was not long before I fell prey to the first man who promised me the world of unconditional love. In my misery, I was so susceptible to his false yet well-practiced words. He told me what I wanted to hear. I believed that he could change my life and make it better, and that he was looking out for me. Nothing could have been further from the truth. As the money was running out and the bills were piling up, I took to the streets to find another job. As I walked the streets with resume in hand, I learned more about the racism and ignorance of society, until one day, one of my street friends introduced me to the world of prostitution. That turned out to be a world of perverted johns, brutal rape, excessive alcohol, regular beatings and total emotional neglect.

As terrible as those things were, I am sure that my darkest moment on the streets of Calgary had to be when I was left for dead in a dumpster. The temperature was -36C, and I was somewhere in the middle of an industrial park at 3:30 in the morning. Traumatized, cold and disoriented, I managed to climb out and stumble several blocks to a fire station. I ended up in the Calgary Foothills Hospital, badly battered and unable to lift my arm. This was the arm that my assailant had used to grab me and tie me up. Despite the pain, I gave my victim report to the police who showed their ignorance, and along with the other professionals showed their lack of good judgment

and racist attitude. I suffered for several months and was not able to move my arm and shoulder. My family doctor eventually sent me to a specialist who informed me that I had MS (multiple sclerosis) and that there was nothing he could do for a junkie like me. I told him that I was not a junkie and that the pain was real. He refused to help me. I could barely tolerate the pain in my arm and shoulder. The arm had become so severely infected that I almost lost it altogether.

Life was just so unbearable for me at that time. I felt like I wanted to give up. It is always darkest before the dawn, however, and it was at this moment that I had been unknowingly blessed in my trials. I had to see past my present circumstances. I was pregnant, and this gave me some well-needed hope. It was a hope that I had not known in so long; it made me see past my present circumstances, and it allowed me to dream of the future again. I knew if I didn't get clean and off the streets, I could never have my baby or keep it. I also realized that if I didn't get to keep my baby, I would be just repeating history—a history that I did not want to repeat. I couldn't let that happen. This was a life-defining moment for me. My baby gave me the strength to change. No longer was I going to be a prostitute or a wife to an alcoholic. My decision to clean up forced me to grow up mentally, emotionally and spiritually. My child gave me a good a reason to live, and once I understood that I had to live for this child, I had all the reason I needed to pull myself off the streets.

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30 years ago, my child was born healthy, normal and very active! He was a very active baby and remained that way throughout his infancy. This child's rambunctiousness had other great effects on me. I truly believe that chasing after my baby helped my arm and my spirit. Now as I look at my arm, I look at the scars and I see my past. I see those hard years on the streets of Calgary, and I remember it was only after my pregnancy that my arm began to heal and I got stronger.

Moreover, I believe that my boy healed my heart, because when I close my eyes and look deep within myself, I feel the scars of my turbulent past. In doing this, I am also reminded that it was only after my pregnancy that my broken heart mended, and it was becoming a parent that gave me the strength to pull myself away from a life that was spiralling out of control.

I truly love my child for this, and I am thankful for this miracle that came to illuminate my world.

I was 25 years old when I decided to leave the streets. In my perfect altruism, I soon realized that if I was really going to make a difference for my new family, I would have to get a decent job and an education. It took me five tries before I got my grade 12, and in doing so, I changed our lives.

I'm 54 years old now and getting my education has helped me greatly over the years. The literacy it has provided has allowed me to write for two blogs: www.rosehenry.blogspot.com and www.homelessnation.org. Both give me a great creative outlet to voice my opinions and stay involved with the homeless community where I feel I am needed.

I am also a great appreciator of art media and freedom of expression. It is through this personal refinement that I have become involved in video production. I am also politically active in many human rights causes. My passion for those causes is only matched by my devotion to homelessness issues. I have a dream of eventually running for a seat on the Victoria City Council and becoming Victoria's first First Nations council member and advocate for some of society's most marginalized community members. My energy and compassion might seem supernatural, but I attribute it to my faith in a higher power, which comes directly from my family and friends. Also, my desire to contribute to my community comes from an old saying that my parents told me when I was young: "Community is only what I make of it." I believe that if I don't speak up now, then no one is going to hear what my needs are and no one is going to speak for me. This belief compels me to think local, because I believe true change is grassroots, and if change happens, I want to be a part of it with my neighbours and friends. Only then will I be able to give hope to the next generation of community leaders. I must be the change, homeless or not.

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My Observations of Life on the Streets

Being homeless or living close to poverty has always been hard and costly for me. I have seen first-hand the ugly division of trace, age, ability and the cruelty of others all over Turtle Island. *Injustice* instead of justice—that's what I found.

When you live on the city streets, however, they are ugly, dirty places. Most of the business people and passers-by ignore you. They seem dead, like zombies. Their eyes are devoid of life. As they pass me, their lives seem pointless. As I stand there trying to etch out a meagre income, I can only pray that they have to open their eyes. I guess that if I didn't have human needs, I too might be walking in their shoes, so I should not cast my stone too far. I have always been a hard worker, and will do any hard labour just to survive. But just surviving is hard. Remaining positive is hard. Farm work is tough and backbreaking because you are usually down on your hands and knees crawling through a farmer's field—similar to being homeless because when you are on the streets you carry all your possessions on your back, or push them in a cart through the city streets. Right now my hands, feet, and back ache every night. I have no choice but to go through the pain. No choice!

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Living in a car can be just as demanding on your body as it is on your wallet. Constantly having to move your car is hard on the engine and gas. In most cities, you have to move every two hours and there is no overnight sleeping on the side streets; if you do you'll get a ticket. This is where you learn to become a master magician because every night you make your car disappear for fear of a ticket. Another problem with sleeping in a car is the physical pain you have to endure, which stems from not being able to stretch properly. The pain that homelessness brings upon your body is, however, not only physical; the wounds it creates on your spirit and soul are far more painful. I have found that helping those around me is an effective way to soothe and remedy the misery and discomfort of not having a place to call home.

My Current Situation and Outlook

Being homeless at 50 has its own unique challenges. If you mix a working couple not on income assistance with being Indigenous, it is not always a positive stage to be in. My last bout with homelessness gave me a deeper and somewhat wiser understanding of the realm to which I was being subjected. I received three different official notices that my family and I were being evicted from our home—a home that we had worked so hard to build into a community house, and that did more than just pay the rent to some mysterious landlord. We were a newly-formed family of people who cared about one another, and still do care about the well being of our community. For us, our community extends beyond our walls and out the front door. We were, and still are, some of the most marginalized community members who have faced all sorts of obstacles brought on by society. Some of these obstacles were based on poverty, race, age discrimination, education, gender identity (services available to other homeless people are virtually nonexistent for transgendered homeless people) and health (serious health issues and poverty often do not mix—for example, medication storage for HIV, AIDS, Hepatitis C, Type 2 diabetes, etc.). For many of us, these issues are hard to deal with on a daily basis, so when we all started to move to one community, we learned that these obstacles were our common ground, and that we all had a strong desire to make changes. We decided that we were up to the challenge of learning to work together, and we started living together as one street family. Soon, we started hosting and organizing community meetings in our home forums that were designed to educate people about social issues that affected us all. We never really charged anyone for attending our public workshops because it was never about money—it was, and still is, about educating people about what it is like to be judged for being who we are.

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My latest forced-move affected more than just dollars and cents. The cost was my spiritual well being. I asked myself: "Where do I belong in today's society, where do I belong?" And then there was the financial burden of first month's rent, damage deposit, transportation and utility hook-up (too scary

to even write or think about), which equalled $1,245.

I was $20 short for my first month of rent and had to pay an additional $30. If I couldn't come up with the $20, how could I be expected to pay the $30 for extra paper, which the landlord said was the cost of processing? $30 is equivalent to selling 50 newspapers. On a good day, I can sell about one paper every 15 minutes, which is equivalent to $8 an hour. On a bad day, I will make zero after trying to sell for about two hours. My partner signs over 100% of his pay cheque every month to pay for rent, medical bills and some food. For us, living in poverty is costly on our health, both mental and physical. The amount of time we spend trying to survive is incredibly exhausting, and getting off the streets is even more taxing. It takes a lot of effort and co-operative teamwork to find a home. It does not matter if you're related or not related; once you're homeless, you're all in it together, and together you have to help each other to get off the streets. There simply is no other way out of absolute homelessness. The cost of living in the city comes with a heavy price when one is born into poverty. It gets even heavier when one ends up homeless. I believe being homeless is the ultimate class equalizer—no matter the difference, as we all end up using the same services: soup kitchens, food banks and emergency shelters.

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Homelessness As I Define It

Perhaps it is time for me to define what homelessness is. Its definition is different for each individual. If you asked anyone I've experienced absolute homelessness with, their answer would be an equivocal: "Our home is everywhere!" Two friends of mine derive their answer from having spent 40 years on the streets. My definition as a person at risk of becoming unhoused, however, is far different. I say you are homeless if you don't have a place of your own. Living on a friend's couch or in your family's potato cellar, I believe both still count as homeless. Living in a car is still homeless as well. I haven't been homeless all my life. Some would say I am not homeless now, because somehow I managed to find a place that doesn't ask me for a credit card (as most apartments do) and not a lot of

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character references. Having to present a credit card so that I can have access to a human right—a home—is ludicrous. And this is Canada! Now we have all heard the saying that people are the same everywhere you go. That homeless people are all the same: lazy, uneducated criminals who are drug addicted with no desire to work, and would rather collect a government cheque. I beg to differ, because I have lived the experience of being homeless twice in my life. The first time when I was in my twenties as a single, free-spirited youth who had just been set free from my life in foster care. The second time was in my fifties with a partner who had lived a similar life to mine. People across this nation are as diverse as the weather, and some of those funny stereotypes we hear have rings of truth about them. Of course all people are not the same. But who said people *have* to be the same? Life is different. That is the beauty of it. We are all different, but we get by, helping each other out. Because we are considered unwanted or disposable, vagrant people are rarely missed anyway. Sometimes it is easy for us to move around unnoticed. There are lots of places a person could disappear right in front of society's eyes. No one notices.

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I am Tle'min from Sliammon Nation. I was taken from my family and community in 1966. I spent the better half of the first eight years of my life in a children's hospital before I was placed in the foster care system just before my eighth birthday. The reasons I went there instead of residential school like my parents went to was because I was labeled mentally retarded; therefore I was un-adoptable and unteachable. It was through my foster parents' unconditional love that I became the person who survived the foster care system; life on the streets; became a reasonable, good parent; and traveled the United Nations world conference in Durban South Africa, where I attended the world conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Zionism. I have developed the skills to speak to thousands people on multiple issues ending in 'ism' and 'ide'. As a mature adult I returned back to school twice to get my grade 12 equivalence around 2007 where I have store to challenge my writing block in the same style I challenge public speaking; head-on. Since I started this part of my journey with getting my certificate, I have traveled to Scotland, England, the United States, and shared a small portion of my journey. Today I still struggle to write, but with less fear and more desires to overcome my fear of being mislabeled as mentally retarded. So, overcoming all the judgments I received as a child has been a struggle, but it's one that I can overcome with a lot of help from my family and my community.

Photo credit: Joshua James Dominic (Rose's son)