



## **I Was Here**

### **Episode 5: Tent City with Cathy Crowe and Beric German**

#### **Please Note:**

These transcripts reflect a taped conversation and as such might not read as grammatically correct in every instance.

#### **Disclaimer**

**Matt:** Hi, this is Matt, the Audio Engineer and Producer for I Was Here. This episode was recorded in two spaces that were less than ideal and the resulting audio is not up to our usual standards. It is still very listenable and we think it's a really important conversation with some great guests. We just wanted to give you a heads up. Enjoy the episode.

#### **Introduction**

**Catherine:** I Was Here was created with generous financial support from the Accessibility Project at the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, Ryerson University. The views and opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the storytellers and are in no way endorsed by, or representative of, the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education.

#### **Cold Open**

**Beric:** And we found her in a truck and I had remembered her because she used to line up for my services and I was unable to get housing for her and many other people. And so I remember actually touching her on the shoulder. She was frozen to death. And at that point we turned around and we began walking down the alley towards the church again and a policeman came to me and he said, you know, there's no need to make a big deal about this. This woman is a heavy drinker and that kind of thing. And I said I don't think so. And I went into the church and I went directly to the telephone and I phoned as many press as I could. And by the next day it was a major story. And then we began to organize around it.

[music]

#### **Interview**

**Catherine:** You are listening to I Was Here a podcast featuring older adults who have interesting stories about, or long histories with, spaces and places in Toronto. I am your host, Catherine Dunphy.

[music]

**Catherine:** On this episode. I'm talking to Cathy Crowe and Beric German. Cathy and Beric have been fighting for Toronto's homeless for 30 years. Longer actually. It was 1985 when Beric, a street and health worker, was summoned to a back alley in Toronto's mean streets near Dundas and Sherbourne and found the body of Drina Zubair. The former South African model had frozen to death sleeping in a truck. Then in 1996 three men froze to death on a cold winter's night and Cathy vowed to expose Canada's dirty little secret. Cathy is a nurse who grew up in the suburb of Coburg. She's the heart and the grit. Beric, a high school dropout from Saskatchewan, is brilliant and savvy. With others, they started the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee to bring social justice and housing to the growing numbers of homeless. For almost a decade they made headlines with their fight culminating in Tent City, an encampment on Toronto's vacant waterfront of outliers and activists. Cathy has been awarded five honorary doctorates, an international humanitarian nursing award, and the Order of Canada. Beric likes the background. What they haven't got yet is the national housing policy they've been demanding for decades. What they haven't done yet is give up.

[music]

**Catherine:** I mean we're talking 30 years but I guess it started at the Four Corners. Do you want to talk about the four corners? It's a very special place in Toronto.

**Cathy C:** Beric, you should go first because you were there first.

**Beric:** All right. Well, there's a history of the what we think of the four corners, that is, Dundas and Sherbourne. And the reason we think of that is because historically it's a territory where many services evolved in Toronto around not just homelessness, but also public housing and services for poor people.

**Beric:** It was the largest serviced area in Canada and I had entered there in 1966 as a young person at 18 and I was homeless. I'd come from Saskatchewan and hitchhiked there. And so that was my first entry. And there's a whole long history of activity in the territory.

**Catherine:** What did you find when you were an 18 year old and you arrived to the four corners in the big city?

**Beric:** Well, the first thing I found was a place to lie down in the park. Then some policemen came and ushered me out and I ended up living in a rooming house. I had with me a few dollars left. I think I maybe had \$10 left, and a rooming house, or what they would have referred to as a flophouse then, cost \$3.00 a night. So that was my first entry.

**Cathy C:** I had worked within walking distance from there but not really known the four corners. But I ended up going to work at Street Health, a little agency that had just gotten funding, and I went there primarily because I was looking for a home for me to nurse in that would be progressive, and wouldn't limit me in my nursing, which I had experienced prior to that. And that's where I guess we formerly met and began working together because Beric was an HIV/AIDS outreach worker.

**Catherine:** And before you met, you had been everything from a cardiac nurse to a nurse practitioner.

**Cathy C:** Yeah, nurse practitioner, public health nurse, community health nurse, clinic nurse.

**Catherine:** But that wasn't fulfilling you.

**Cathy C:** It always did initially and then depending on where I was it was usually physicians or the actual organization managers and board of directors that really restrained me and held me back from working to my full capacity.

**Catherine:** And so you went to work at the church.

**Cathy C:** Mmhmm.

**Catherine:** So tell us about that scene. It was an extraordinarily vibrant and dynamic place.

**Cathy C:** Well, I loved it. It was absolutely great. Every single day, really every single hour, my eyes were open wide. You know there are stories I tell about my naivete. So for example I would see a guy in the clinic that might be wearing a shirt that says Hank but his name was really John and I would say well, what's that all about? And of course he'd gotten his shirt in the clothing donation room, and it was someone else's shirt. There were small things like that were just constantly eye opening. And I remember hearing a lot of maritime accents and not understanding that.

**Catherine:** As to why they were here.

**Cathy C:** As to why they were here, but of course as Beric has said, all roads lead to the big cities in times of recession and poverty across the country. That period of time we were very respected, very welcomed as young nurses. And it was just like a dream really because you got to work fully as a nurse without being held back by other types of workers. And the other thing is we were ordered to do advocacy. So that was like a huge learning curve just constantly. I can remember being in the basement, where our little office was, and trying to memorize my lines for when City TV would arrive and Beric coaching me on how to get the message across properly. And we were always strategizing around what can we do next to move the issue forward and come up with a solution.

**Catherine:** So this is the thing. You guys definitely had jobs that were meaningful to you. Beric, you were an HIV/AIDS outreach worker. Cathy you were a street nurse. I think you coined that phrase yourself. I think you gave it to the world. No?

**Cathy C:** No. It was a homeless guy.

**Catherine:** Did he?

**Cathy C:** He called it to out to a group of us as we were walking back to the office one day. It was meant to be a compliment because people would refer to their best friend as their street brother or an older person that was maybe a mentor or friend as their street father. And so it was a huge compliment. So we kept using the term as a political act.

**Catherine:** Got it. So, speaking of politics, what was happening at this stage? We're sort of being very vague about the time, but what we're talking about, and I read somewhere Beric that you were very clear about this, when our soldiers came back from the war one

of their rights was housing. In fact, they expected so much housing that at some point Toronto actually had a sign out saying don't come here, we have no housing et cetera. This is how the National Housing Plan started, which ended rather abruptly in '93. Then add to that in '96, Ontario, under the Mike Harris government at the time, downloaded the responsibility of housing to the municipalities with no funding mechanism, and cut welfare payments by 21.6%. So this was absolutely a tsunami in terms of what you saw. And it all came down to that street and the epicenter was the corner. And here you were in there with this mess. So what did you do?

**Beric:** Well, yes. And I don't think that we understood any better than people understand today the problems of the loss of a program like the National Housing program. We didn't understand how it began, and thus, we didn't understand what would happen when it was gone.

**Cathy C:** I didn't know it was cut when it was cut and I was there at that corner.

**Beric:** Mmhmm.

**Catherine:** Really?

**Cathy C:** Yeah, I look back and I realize that when the Federal Government cut the program, I didn't know. There were no mass protests around it. I knew when Mike Harris cut it because he also cut 17, 000 units that would have housed about 40,000 people. By then I knew. I guess I'd learned my lesson to watch the news and keep track of things. So it's very important in the times today to watch these developments especially as programs are cut.

**Catherine:** Beric, you had come face on in terms of the risks of what happens with homelessness because you were one of the people who discovered the frozen body of a former South African model named Drina Zubair, who had been living in a truck in behind one of the flophouses in that Dundas/Sherbourne area. Tell us about that. You were there.

**Beric:** Well, yes I was there, but I should explain that we had already recognized that there were deaths, and we have never been able to ascertain how many. So we were organizing at that point on the corners through the Toronto Union of Unemployed Workers. And we put notices on the walls, and particularly the walls of the All Saints Church, saying that if you hear of injury or death, contact us as quickly as you can.

**Catherine:** And is that what happened in the case of Drina Zubair?

**Beric:** Yes, it is. Because I had a job where I would rent out rooming house rooms to people. People would line up for these rooms and so I was becoming very conscious of the problems of homelessness.

I was actually cleaning the church because I was also a cleaner at the church. And so there was a knock on the door of the church in 1985 in the evening. I can't remember the actual date, but it was in the winter. A young boy came to the door and he said, sir we found a woman who has died. And so I left with him and another man and we crossed the street and we went down an alley and we found her in a truck.

And I had remembered her because she used to line up for my services and I was unable to get housing for her and many other people. I remember actually touching her on the

shoulder. She was frozen to death. And at that point we turned around and we began walking down the alley towards the church again. And a policeman came to me and he said, you know there's no need to make a big deal about this. This woman was a heavy drinker. And I said, I don't think so. And I went into the church and I went directly to the telephone. And I phoned as many press as I could. And by the next day it was a major story. And then we began to organize around it.

**Catherine:** So the two of you at this point understood that you were, or did you understand that this was going to be the cause that has basically directed you and dictated who you are and what you've done for the next 30 almost 40 years?

**Cathy C:** I was mostly watching as a supporter at that period of time. I didn't work directly on that. I remember going to that Housing not Hostels march for example, but I know that later on we began to face other atrocious catastrophes like the three freezing deaths.

**Catherine:** This was in the winter of '96.

**Cathy C:** Mmhmm.

**Catherine:** And this is where Cathy you became more prominent because there were three men who had froze to death in a very cold winter within one week, and as you put it, this was the first cluster of deaths. And it led to what was called the Freezing Death Inquiry, correct?

**Cathy C:** That's what we called colloquially. But yeah, it became known as that.

**Catherine:** And this also led you to form the Toronto Coalition Against Homelessness, which was 26 agencies at that point.

**Beric:** That's right. And that was based on the same premise as our work on Drina Zubair.

**Catherine:** And among the many things that happened in that inquiry, other than reminding or telling many people living in warm comfortable homes in Toronto what was happening on the streets, you were telling many people for the first time. This was the first time that they were hearing that people were dying on the streets of Toronto.

**Cathy C:** Yeah. I would say that those deaths shocked the nation let alone Toronto. It was scandalous. People were outraged. And so we used every opportunity we could to tell the circumstances.

**Catherine:** And I understand one of the main things that came from the inquest was a recommendation to establish Cold Weather Alerts. And that's a pretty big deal. It basically says that the government is going to take some responsibility and act when the weather becomes inhumane. And then I think it was a year later, Cathy, that you discovered that Garland Shepherd was found dead in an Adelaide Street parking lot.

**Cathy C:** That's right.

**Catherine:** And this happened when the wind chill factor was minus 30 degrees and there was no cold weather alert. This, plus the ice storm in Quebec, were the two things that led you two, and many others, to form the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee. Yeah?

**Cathy C:** Yeah. A bunch of factors. You know, as street nurses we were seeing the signs of climate change even back then in terms of large populations of people having to try to survive in the winter, but also in these extreme storms, and also in summers. So we started to look at disaster relief literature looking to see how health workers deal with this in another countries. At the same time for me, my naiveté as a nurse, I always believed in the coroner's court process. So just the shock that after a year after the Freezing Deaths Inquests, that it happened again, that the city had not done its due diligence, which was simply to call an alert and open warming centers. They hadn't done it, and we have seen that repeat itself. It makes me mad [laughs].

**Catherine:** So, one February day at the Church of the Holy Trinity, the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee was born. Talk about that day. It was a big deal.

**Cathy C:** So we started in May of that year.

**Catherine:** Oh, OK.

**Cathy C:** Planning and plotting and writing what was called the State of Emergency Declaration.

**Catherine:** Gotcha.

**Cathy C:** And so then it was officially launched October 8, 1998. There were apparently 400 people there in the church breaking fire code rules.

**Catherine:** Some media reports put it at 500. First of all, this was the first time that many homeless people were there because they were excited. And then there were huge numbers of media. Beric, you were the one who got to announce what your platform was, and hand out those buttons. Tell us about that.

**Beric:** Well, I think one of the strategies that we used was to invite people to come and to declare. To have themselves individually declare that homelessness was a national disaster. And there were also agencies and heads of agencies, who were prepared to come forward and declare homelessness to be a national disaster. So each person walked forward and declared on a microphone.

**Catherine:** Was that moving?

**Beric:** Yes, it was because it brought us together, and I think at that point, after doing that, people marched to a committee meeting.

**Cathy C:** At Metro Hall, yeah.

**Beric:** Yes. And I walked into the room and they had already agreed amongst themselves to take this to City Council.

**Cathy C:** We didn't think we were going to be allowed in the building. We thought security would keep us out. But our momentum was so enormous. Not only did they let us in, but they'd already passed a resolution. Then they just very happily accepted our presentation to them of the report. It was astounding. And of course it was front page of The Toronto Star that morning because we had given the exclusive to them.

**Catherine:** Politicians woke up and read it in the newspaper. They knew what was going to happen and they were ahead of you in a way. Now, Toronto declared homelessness a national disaster, as did nine other cities.

**Beric:** Yes, and Toronto did so with a count of 53 City Councillors to one.

**Cathy C:** [laughs]

**Catherine:** Can I ask who?

**Beric:** I think it was Doug Holyday.

**Cathy C:** Yes. Former Etobicoke City Councillor.

**Beric:** You have to remember that what happened when this vote came about was that people filled Metro Hall. People were hanging over the balconies and shouting get on with it. And so when the vote came and it was 53 to one, the one had to be taken out by a security guard.

**All:** [laugh]

**Beric:** No one was going to kill him [laughs].

**Catherine:** So this was the beginning of what you call, actions. This was the beginning of an era of protest and excitement. You did so much. You were on the streets all the time. And every protest always had a breakfast, that was important.

**Cathy C:** Mmhmm. Always had a meal.

**Catherine:** Always had a meal because the people who were homeless were themselves a big part of all of your work. Right?

**Cathy C:** Yeah.

**Catherine:** And so, what you were doing at this point was marching. You made National Housing Day an important day. What was it? November 22?

**Beric:** Well, we created National Housing Day.

**Catherine:** You created it?

**Beric:** When I say we created it, what we did was that we said that November 22 was to be a National Housing Day. What had happened was that we had passed on this to Jack Layton.

**Catherine:** Jack Layton at the time was a City Councillor.

**Beric and Cathy C:** City Councillor, yes.

**Catherine:** Who later went on to become the Federal NDP Leader, but then was very much very active in fighting homelessness. Go on.

**Beric:** Yes. And actually Jack cut his teeth on this issue more so than many other issues that he had been involved in. And he became very well known as an advocate for the homeless.

**Catherine:** You guys were so much into the various programs, specifically the shelters that existed in Toronto, both the men's shelters and the one or two for women. You were always in there checking out the conditions. And when you got inside you talked about what sort of inside they had. At one point you got a secret camera in there to videotape the conditions, and you released it to show the appalling conditions. And then you weren't really welcome in a lot of the city run shelters.

**Cathy C:** That's for sure.

**Beric:** Yes, and we had actually sent in a former head of the United Church.

**Cathy C:** A former moderator, Bruce McCloud. Not technically with a camera, but with his eyes.

**Beric:** And Bruce McCloud went in to stay overnight in Seaton House. He went in with Steve Lane, a well-known homelessness advocate. They stayed the evening and Bruce McCloud greeted the morning with an article on what was going on in Seaton House.

**Catherine:** We need to backtrack a bit. Seaton House was the largest facility for housing single homeless men in Toronto. The people who lived on the streets called it Satan house. They hated it that much. Tell us about what you saw there.

**Cathy C:** Well, it's still the largest men's shelter in Canada. It's not the largest shelter because that would be Calgary Drop-in Centre. So I've been in recently. I was barred from there for a while. Finally got in for a tour recently. So it's a big institution. What's really shocking about seeing it today though is that there have been no upgrades to make it accessible. There are no push buttons for somebody in a wheelchair to come through the door. What we saw back then though, and you would know better than I do Beric, is that there were a lot of bunk beds warehousing many people in a room.

**Beric:** Well, we had done an inquiry into the problems in Seaton House. It's an interesting inquiry because it started because of a complaint by a man who, in his middle age, became a monk. And he began to fast in front of us. And he said he was fasting because of the violence and conditions of Seaton House. Now no one would listen to him. In fact, I had contacted media around him, but they said well, the man is crazy and we can't be following things like that. But we did follow him. We followed his complaints and we set up an inquiry where not only him but others testified about violence that they had witnessed in Seaton House, and the conditions of Seaton House. And that ultimately led to major reforms in Seaton House. There'd always been chats and talk about reforms but suddenly reforms came. And I should point out that both Cathy and I unfortunately didn't know what textbooks to read or how to approach these different questions. We had to learn as we saw them. And we continue to have to do that to an extent. Hopefully, we know a bit more by now.

**Catherine:** Well then you decided one tack was to appeal to the United Nations.

**Cathy C:** Yes. The first time that happened it was a State of Emergency Declaration and all the disaster documents were taken to Geneva by a couple of advocacy groups on our



behalf. Since then quite a number of separate reports were done under the banner of Toronto Disaster Relief Committee. One looking at homeless women in Toronto. One of the most recent ones was when Miloon Kothari, the U.N. rapporteur on adequate housing, came to Canada. We met with him a number of different times to show him the real thing. And in most recent times, I was involved in filming Home Safe Toronto and Home Safe Calgary, films about families to showcase that children's voices were being missed.

**Catherine:** We need to stop for a minute, and do a little bit of a freeze frame about who were the homeless in Toronto. Where were they? Who were they? How many were they? What was it then that you were fighting so hard for?

**Beric:** There was a much smaller population of what we term homeless people because again we didn't understand that homelessness was much larger.

**Catherine:** It didn't include couch surfing.

**Beric:** That's right. I can remember working in the All Saints Church, and the place would be filled with homeless people, but it was one of the few places that had such a large number of people in one setting. And I just want to underline the fact that in that space at that time, in 1984, there was one homeless Black man.

**Cathy C:** Mmmhmm

**Catherine:** Of course.

**Beric:** Only one.

**Catherine:** Only one. It's a miracle.

What I remember, and I need you to validate this, I remember people sleeping on the Rosedale Valley Road up among the trees and underneath the bridges in big populations. I may be wrong about this but what I'm saying is that so many people didn't understand that there was a whole other demographic living outside in Toronto. In various places. You knew them better than I did. And there were so many agencies at the time sprung up who had vans with soup in them and every night would go on various routes to feed these people. To help them. To nurse them. To give them emergency stations. It became almost like little settlements throughout Toronto.

**Cathy C:** So I'd compare that to the cluster of deaths. So there were some things we saw during that period of time. One was more deaths, but also clusters of deaths. And then also outbreaks of disease. That's when we saw tuberculosis for example. There was also the expansion of squats and outdoor sleeping encampments. So you're describing it perfectly. And then of course this overflow from the drop-ins and shelters, and then the squats became something you couldn't ignore because one of them turned into Tent City, which you know at its peak was 150 people.

**Catherine:** So let's talk about Tent City, which, for reasons good and bad, put Toronto on the international map. Media from all over the world came to Tent City. It started in '98. It's now the 20 year anniversary. And I think Toronto Disaster Relief Committee was there almost immediately providing services and support. You want to talk about that? You were there.

**Cathy C:** With OCAP: Ontario Coalition Against Poverty. We got invited in. First of all, we knew a lot of the people as they'd been homeless a long time and we knew them.

**Catherine:** We should say where it is. There was some vacant land owned by Home Depot. They had had plans of building a big box, which had been shut down by Toronto City Council. But there was also, at the same time, Toronto's Olympic bid. And if it had won, their plan was for the athletes' village to be on this land. So a lot of people were looking at this land, which is south of the Lakeshore around Sherburne?

**Cathy C:** Cherry.

**Catherine:** Cherry. And so this was empty and the people who finally acted on it were a group of about five people who decided, we can live here.

**Beric:** Yup.

**Cathy C:** Mmhmm.

**Catherine:** Who were they?

**Cathy C:** Well, Nancy Baker, whose picture is on the cover of my book.

**Catherine:** Cathy wrote a book called Dying for a Home in which the pioneers of Tent City tell their own story.

**Cathy C:** And Marty Lang. And they had been a couple at one point. Dry.

**Catherine:** We'll talk about them because we want to talk about the people.

**Beric:** Well prior to Tent City, there was a test run called the Rooster's Squad.

**Catherine:** The Rooster's Squad was in one of those grain towers which I think has since been demolished.

**Beric:** One of those huge towers is actually still there.

**Cathy C:** There was a Rooster painted on the side. That location was predominantly being used by youth. I would say radicalized youth. They were very strong and strident in their insistence on not wanting to follow shelter rules. They were living in decrepit conditions. The place was PCB contaminated and it was so dangerous to go in. Do you remember Beric?

**Beric:** Yes.

**Cathy C:** Dark.

**Beric:** Yup.

**Cathy C:** Treacherous.

**Beric:** Yup.

**Cathy C:** I remember once going in and discovering a bunch of them in one of the rooms and there was a young woman who had chicken pox. And if I recall she was pregnant as well. So it was just a nightmare scenario. So that predated Tent City. And there was an attempt to get tents down there so that they would have a safer place to be in but that didn't work out so well [laughs].

**Beric:** But you will see the same work carried on in Tent City.

**Cathy C:** Oh yeah.

**Beric:** We managed to get two trailers that were going to be shipped to the third world. They were fixed up by our group of workers. I can't remember who they were but they were very nice folks who did a lot of work on these trailers to make them habitable. And so the people who were in the Rooster's Squad moved from the Rooster's Squad into those trailers. And you'll note later in Tent City that we began to do that.

**Catherine:** So the waterfront was almost a point of destination for many.

**Beric:** The shelters were very full as they are today. Maybe even moreso. And so when shelters get very full people don't use them. And so the waterfront was a place where people were taking respite.

**All:** [laugh]

**Cathy C:** To use the term properly. Unlike the new respite shelters the city is opening.

**Catherine:** So Tent City happened. There were a few people there, and then word got out.

**Beric:** Well yes, but what was actually happening was that we were unable to open the shelters. So as we were failing to open the shelters, a larger number of people began to enter Tent City. So I don't know how many people there were when the order came forward from Home Depot to have people evicted.

**Catherine:** The first one.

**Beric:** And it was at that point that we, the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, went to a press conference and we all said, this is where we stand. You are not to evict these people. There is nowhere to go. The shelters are full. Leave them alone. And then of course we began to strategize around what to do.

**Catherine:** So in Cathy's book, *Dying for a Home*, there is a glorious description of living day-to-day in Tent City by Nancy Baker and Marty Lang, the two pioneers of the thing. And they make it seem so idyllic. They talk about how they had two ducks who would come around and basically honk them awake very early in the morning. And they gave them names, Daisy and Donald. And they talk about the communal fire in the oil drum, and about how they would collect kindling, and how they got water, and how they made coffee and how they would wash their clothes, et cetera. So they said how, when they would go into the city, people would know they were from Tent City because they had that wonderful smell of wood smoke around them. And they talk about this as being true happiness, true community.

**Beric:** I mean we must be careful. You know, we could speak to older people and they'll

tell you what great days it was.

**Cathy C:** [laughs]

**Beric:** When there was no electricity and there were no amenities at all. And I think as compared to the crowded shelters perhaps.

**Catherine:** Yes.

**Catherine:** The point is the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee decided, and you were the ones, to get people porta potties, running water, electricity. You got them two generators, which were running only between 6pm and 9pm many days. You were trying get as many amenities as possible in there to make it work.

**Cathy C:** You forgot the wood stoves.

**Beric:** Yes, the wood stoves.

**Catherine:** The wood stoves?

**Cathy C:** Yes, we purchased a wood stove for every shack that we could put them in and then we brought in the prefab houses.

**Catherine:** Yeah, well I'm going to get to the Durakit. That's a big day in the history of Tent City. So we're talking now 1998 is when it started. But I believe we're in 1999 now when Durakits arrived. And Beric, this is something that I know you had on your mind for many years before it actually happened that winter day. It is a \$2,500 kit of prefab housing that was Canadian made for use in international disasters.

**Beric:** Yeah.

**Catherine:** And you were the one who knew about it and said we could use it here in Toronto.

**Beric:** Well, we were lucky enough to meet quite interesting people who had very little to do with each other prior but they would help us in different ways. One of course was financial. Others were political. And we were basing our movement on breaking the ban. There was actually a ban on these people. They wanted them out. Let's get them out. And we said no, we're not going to stand here and have a protest. We're going to get people together and bring aid to these people. And we called for better housing. We were going to do everything we could to make it comfortable.

**Catherine:** And what you did was Durakit.

**Beric:** We did Durakit. I can't remember who told us about it. I think it was actually David Walsh.

**Cathy C:** Probably.

**Beric:** Yeah.

**Cathy C:** We got it for \$1.00.

**Beric:** Yeah. Got it for \$1.00.

**Cathy C:** The first one that we brought in was a single unit. And then I think the next one was a duplex.

**Beric:** So it was unique because you had to bring these in with trucks. A big house on the back of a big truck.

**Catherine:** You made sure that media was there.

**Beric:** Yes, they were there.

**Catherine:** And it was a very cold day and it was very dramatic because this huge long truck pulls up with this building on it and there was some kind of a crane too.

**Beric and Cathy C:** Yeah.

**Catherine:** And on the building you had a banner.

**Cathy C:** That said, disaster housing.

**Beric:** Yes.

**Catherine:** Yes, the disaster housing banner was on it. The thing was raised way up in the air.

**Beric:** Mmhmm.

**Catherine:** The television cameras thanked you, I'm sure. And then all of a sudden it landed down. And around it was the couple who had been assigned this house.

**Beric:** Yes, that's it. And an interesting point is that when we were in this whole event naturally people knew about it. And on the day it happened, I was walking from my home, which isn't that far from Tent City because I live in the Esplanade area, and I got called from a radio station. And they said, look Home Depot put cement blocks on the road and thus you're not going to be allowed to enter. And so you know, having a little Chutzpah, I said no, get them out of there or we'll move them. We're coming now. And we did.

**Catherine:** You moved them?

**Beric:** Yes, essentially. Jack Layton began to negotiate with Home Depot and then one of our cranes moved forward and lifted the cement pieces out and then the big trucks. And that day I think we had a big turkey dinner.

**Cathy C:** Yup. Turkey dinner.

**Catherine:** OK. So what I'm trying to get at is who the people were who lived there. Cathy, you write beautifully about Brian Boyd and Karen. Brian and Karen were very grateful for that housing. I remember Karen taking such good care of that place when, as a journalist, I would go in, it was immaculate. Better than my home. Definitely a point of pride for her. Brian took his duties as a spokesperson very seriously. He made himself available to

media no matter what or where. I, as media, would go down there and knock on the door and you knew you were waking them up and you knew it had been a rough night. And I watched him will himself together because he was going to stand up and he was going to make sure that the message be brought. That they are fortunate and others aren't. That this housing is needed. And that's what I remember about him as being the first recipient of a Durakit.

**Cathy C:** You know, I mean he was a real leader. There was a core group of them. They just knew how to talk about the right to housing for everybody. And they were fighting for it and getting it, to a certain extent. I mean, it was down on the waterfront and it was an encampment, but it was a fight for all Canadians. And you know they often took part in some of the trips we did when we would go to London or Quebec City for the housing conferences. They took part in press conferences. We held a big press conference at one point on the day of the decision around the Olympics and of course they could talk about that and why spending shouldn't go to sports when we still have this crisis in the city.

**Catherine:** You made sure that they were upfront. That they were speaking about what they were living and what they believed in. That you weren't speaking on behalf of them.

**Beric:** Well, no except that we would have to speak on behalf of some people.

**Catherine:** Of course.

**Beric:** Because we were the receptacle of thousands of people's stories.

**Cathy C:** Yeah. But I think we always talked about making sure their voice was clear.

**Beric:** Oh yeah.

**Cathy C:** So press conferences always included them and they came to City Hall to be a major part of the committee.

**Beric:** Yeah.

**Catherine:** And the thing that I want to say is that when I say that the world was watching when the Durakit arrived, it was because the world was watching. There were crews there from France. There were crews from Germany. I believe there were Americans there. There was all kinds of media watching. Why?

**Beric:** Well, I think we continue to learn that this phenomena is not restricted to Canada. This is a huge worldwide phenomenon that people in Canada and around the world had faced before. Again, I say that we weren't as knowledgeable about these issues prior, but we are now. So in the 1930s there was a crisis like this. There were something like 200 people sleeping in Allan Gardens.

**Cathy C:** Mmhmm.

**Beric:** And they fought and they fought well.

**Catherine:** I understand that was almost a precursor of Occupy Now in some ways.

**Beric:** Well yeah. I mean we're seeing all kinds of reaction to the scenario of people losing

their housing, losing their income, losing their health care because these are all tied together. These are not separate issues. We should begin to understand that the loss of the National Housing Program, which was similar to our national health care program, was devastating to the whole country. And that the loss of such programs or the cutbacks in such programs in Europe have created the same types of problems.

**Catherine:** So back to the day-to-day at Tent City. At one point there was a self-proclaimed mayor.

**Cathy C:** So that was Karl, who probably had the most elaborate house that he shared with a fellow named Tom. He built it himself. He had the German flag flying above it, possibly upside down.

**Beric:** I think the East German flag.

**Cathy C:** [laughs] Oh the East German, OK, thank you. Beric is so good for this detail. And Karl had built his own latrine, which engineering wise, was very complicated because of the water table. And I'm pretty sure he had electricity somehow. So Karl became the self-proclaimed mayor of Tent City and there was a movie made about him. And he also was one of the leaders for sure. And I mean how could it not have happened right? Because of the characters that were there. It was a modern day refugee camp, if you will. Right smack in downtown Toronto. So I really attribute our activism, their activism, but also the international media, to the win that happened at the end.

**Catherine:** So you think that was a very deliberate strategy. Keep the eye of everyone right on this.

**Cathy C:** We did. And it wasn't always easy. I could look out my window and see Tent City, that's how close I lived to Tent City. And one day I looked out my window and Tent City was burning. It was a big burn of rubber tires that were there. And so Beric and I had to go down and be the mom and dad. Because sometimes you don't want media attention on Tent City. I mean, not very often, but occasionally, we had to remind them that the image they have to present is hardworking. You've built showers. You've got a church. You're running the generators. You're planting. The burning of the tires was an anomaly when that happened.

**Beric:** I don't think people understand that putting a group of 150 people together whoever they might have been, and having them live together, is not easy for anybody. It's been an ongoing theme in the cooperative housing movement. There've been all sorts of conflicts. So that would be true too in this little small town which was similar to a pioneer town.

**Catherine:** You used to have weekly meetings at Tent City and there was Kentucky Fried Chicken served in every weekly meeting. What were you doing in those weekly meetings and who came?

**Cathy C:** Not sure it was weekly, was it?

**Beric:** Well, they were fairly regular meetings. There were things that would need discussing such as, should we be bringing in other Durakits? Should we be bringing in toilets? What are the problems of the toilets? Are the toilets kept clean? All kinds of local issues would have to be discussed amongst us just to survive.

**Catherine:** Yes. But you were there talking with people who were representing their neighbors.

**Cathy C:** Yes, and usually around a fire.

**Beric:** Yes.

**Cathy C:** And Danielle Koyama who worked with us very closely at Tent City, she and I would go and pick up the KFC. And she's vegetarian and the smell of her car by the time we arrived with Kentucky Fried Chicken for 50, 60, 70 people, it was yuck. But that was what they wanted, so that's what we've got. I remember there being huge agendas of problems to solve. I had the toilet files so I was in charge of all the toilet issues. And you know we had big union support too so when something came up that we needed help with we could get help from unions to pay for it. And then there also would be time to strategize about next steps. For example, if we were going to Quebec City for a rally and wanted them to know it was really important that they come.

**Catherine:** And it became very important that someone from Tent City be at all the events.

**Cathy C:** Absolutely.

**Catherine:** I mean they were a linchpin to a movement. And you were a movement at this point.

**Cathy C:** Yeah.

**Catherine:** And then 9/11 happened. A big day in the world, but also a big day at Tent City. A lot of people mourned the end of it, but you guys were there. You raced down and by the time you were there hundreds of people had come down. Hundreds of people in Toronto cared enough to come down.

**Cathy C:** I just want to say that, and I'm pretty sure this applies to you too Beric, we were kind of on edge for many weeks. We were anticipating it. So I slept with my cell phone by my bed for example. There were increased signs of police pressure on Tent City. The mayor was driven through once. The police would cruise through and mouth off remarks. We could feel the vibe changing. So then when it happened we were still shocked, but then we also went into rage mode in responding.

**Beric:** And so I had arrived early and I had been given notice that the invaders would come. That they were on their way. But upon arriving, there was nothing there. Nothing. No sound. No people. Nobody was up. And I went down there with Gaetan Haru because I had been given notice at work and I left a meeting at work to go. Daniel Koyama was also there and she had a car. I asked her to drive around outside to see if we could find out which way this invasion was going to come from. And so she went away and she was gone and I started to go around to individuals and wake them up and say, look it looks like we're in trouble now. Get ready. There's going to be an invasion here. And people didn't really believe me. So I walked back towards the gate and suddenly the convoy entered the gates and it was a convoy of security guards and vans and all the rest. So as soon as I saw that I walked in front of the first van and I stopped it. I put my hands on the front of it. And then a policeman took me and grabbed me and escorted me out. And then larger numbers of people started to trickle in. If I recall I think even Bill Blair was there. This was a major event. Everybody had to answer at this point. So when all of the rest of the people



came we began to coalesce together. People began to protest what was happening. And as we were protesting people were being removed.

**Catherine:** And these are people from church groups.

**Beric and Cathy C:** Yeah.

**Catherine:** From unions who have supported you.

**Beric and Cathy C:** Yeah.

**Catherine:** People who have been down to visit.

**Beric and Cathy C:** Yeah.

**Cathy C:** Seniors. People from the St. Lawrence neighborhood. Landlords. Business executives. Directors of organizations. Everybody came out. Yeah.

**Catherine:** Wow.

**Cathy C:** Yeah, it was huge. And as we were protesting we were also being fed information. So for example media would come up to us and say, Mayor Lastman says that there are 200 spaces in the shelter system that people can go to. Of course we knew that wasn't true and so we began countering. It was kind of a continual flow of information and meanwhile people were literally in crisis right in front of us. Crying on the ground. Sitting. Hugging each other. Consoling each other. Crying about their belongings left behind. Losing their home. They were angry.

**Beric:** And at that point there was a press conference set to be held by the Home Depot.

**Cathy C:** And that was going to be in the King Street Hotel right beside the TIFF building where the film festival is now. So we eventually gathered ourselves together and I think we went first to City Council chambers.

**Beric:** And the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty was rather key here because they had always supported us. And so that when this press conference was to happen we all moved on it and it was a big move. The escalators moved towards them and that was the end of the press conference. No press conference. By the end of the day people had come together. We then entered City Council chambers. I can't remember exactly what was happening in City Council chambers at the time.

**Cathy C:** It was a City Council meeting.

**Beric:** I guess it was a City Council meeting. We just shouted, you've evicted the people of Tent City. That's what has to be discussed here. And we broke up their meeting and then they quickly put together a meeting with Shirley Hoy, who was the General Manager of the City at the time.

**Catherine:** The other problem though was that you were fighting on two fronts. Yes, you were definitely saying, this is wrong, you cannot do this. On the other hand, you had 150 people without a place to sleep at night.

**Beric:** Yes. And that was the kind of negotiation that was going on with her administration. We had to get a place for them and thus they had to provide one.

**Cathy C:** I think the anger was so huge that within a very short period of time we convinced them that there was no way that this community was going to be split up and put into one shelter bed here and one shelter bed there. And there were not 200 empty shelter beds. So they had to be together. They had to be protected and stay as a community. And so Woodgreen was opened to operate an emergency shelter. And you know some people that night couldn't sleep inside. They slept out in the park behind Jimmy Simpson Community Center. Yeah.

**Catherine:** There was something big that was accomplished by that day because as a result of what you did, the rent supplement program allowed housing to be founded. And people are still living in that housing.

**Cathy C:** Yeah.

**Beric:** Well, I think the difference in the subsidy program now, I guess it's not so different from some of the subsidy programs today, but at that stage subsidy programs were only in public housing and in co-ops. So the idea that you would have subsidies for private housing and that you could change housing if you needed to, that changed later and would be very problematic. But this was new stuff.

**Catherine:** It was new stuff and it was important because people who had lived in Tent City now had their own place.

**Cathy C:** I mean it took a few days to win that. I remember I was on my way to Halifax after the eviction and I remember coming back and it was negotiated. It was a pot of money apparently that had been kind of sitting there and it was used. But it was a precedent nationally as Beric's saying. We were used to it being in social housing but showing that if you provide it, you can house people quickly, changed things. And of course then attached to that were housing workers, and Beric was very involved for many years with navigating system issues with the city because there were obvious problems.

**Catherine:** On the other hand the work of the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee didn't stop. There were always issues. Cathy, you were fighting in terms of the health issues. So you were still doing many actions were you not at that point?

**Beric:** We continued. We tried to continue.

**Catherine:** Try? You did.

**Cathy C:** [laughs]

**Beric:** We did. We knew the game better than a lot of others and we have tried over the years to pass that on. It wasn't passed as easily to us when we were younger and so we've tried everything we can to pass that on but also to show example.

**Catherine:** Absolutely. Until 2012 when I guess you took a deep breath and decided that the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee could no longer operate. Talk about how and why that ended.

**Cathy C:** Yeah. Beric and I disagree a little bit on this so you'll hear versions. So 2012, but in a way it was really more like 2013 or 2014. So, my memories are that I had wanted to close it. We had talked about it a few times and then we didn't. We realized we didn't have the right to close it. Things were still so bad. Burnout definitely played a factor. Also the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, as a group, was aging and people had life threatening illnesses and some died. There was also a huge challenge for donations because this was following the 2008 recession and both unions seemed to be in trouble. And we had built up a structure where we had essentially three staff. We had an office and rent and everything costs, right? We did things really cheaply, but it cost. So I put it down to a lot of those factors. Beric?

**Beric:** Oh, I think those things are all true. And I think that organizations like the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee do not generally last 14 years. They just don't. You're not going to make an extra buck from doing it. And it's very high stress. We understand well why we're needed. Many of us had learned to become seasoned activists and we didn't do this for our health. We did it to make sure something happened and it generally did happen. But it was also true that we wouldn't have had the same energy and we needed young blood to come and young blood didn't arrive. And again, we've been very fortunate because we have been able to last as seasoned activists both before the TDRC and after. I would say we were sad and yet we also suffered tension. Extreme tension.

**Catherine:** Well this took a personal cost. You've been fighting for decades.

**Cathy C:** Well, yeah. I feel horrible that we shutdown. I really do. But I tend to diminish the point Beric just made about the lack of energy and the aging piece.

**Beric:** Well, she can carry on. She's younger than me.

**Beric and Cathy C:** [laugh]

**Cathy C:** But also the period of time when we shut it down, I was unemployed too. I was essentially the one that shut down the office and put what's described as nine metres of archival material into boxes with my extraordinarily good filing system. I'm the one that deposited all that in the archives. It's all in the City of Toronto Archives. So I'm very proud of that. And I've gone back to visit it. I go back all the time to look at the material because it's so relevant and I'm going to take you soon Beric to see it. So when the Toronto Star recently did their big investigation into homeless death they came to the Archives with me and went through two boxes of material.

**Catherine:** And that's the other thing. There's the personal cost. Both of you took time out. Both of you had to walk away at times because of the stress of this fighting. And something new would turn around and hit you in the forehead or somebody else you knew and loved died.

**Beric:** I became ill. I went to a mental hospital for a month. And others who I know who have been activists have had similar things happen to them. You know, if you go to battle, you might get wounded.

**Cathy C:** And you know what makes me mad about that is that a group like ours had to scrounge for money. And we're in the same position today with some other groups and I think it's just shameful.

**Beric:** Well, we do see these things. We see the people who are going to carry on. And we do work with people who carry on. The issue is we know it now. And it took a long time for us to get to know it. We could easily say now that homelessness will increase exponentially because it hasn't been dealt with. And the dynamics that are at play are pretty horrific. We did not understand that at that time. We understand it better today. And as seniors we will attempt to ensure that some of that knowledge is passed to the new organization and the new groups. The situation is opening up as we speak. And some of the people who are working around homelessness are saying the violence is just opening up in the streets everywhere. Drug use because people are killing pain. And now we've got fentanyl. So we've seen activists working around drug use. And we know them. We've known them over the years and they are the new world order. And they carry on.

**Catherine:** It's not as if you gave up. I want to go back and I just want to, for the record, talk about some of your victories. I think to talk about the Homeless Memorial as a victory might seem callous, but for me it is a victory because it's permanent. It's there. And it's an important document that is out there in the air for the public to see, which was again your initiative. The heartbreaking part of course is that the names continue to be added. What are we up to now?

**Cathy C:** I'd like to do count. I think we are at 1,000. You know, we're easily at 1,000 on the list.

**Catherine:** You were the ones who raised the ruckus about Bed Bugs.

**Cathy C:** Beric even brought them in a little jar to the Board of Health meeting one day.

**Beric:** That's right.

**Cathy C:** I was a Board of Health member. I really enjoyed that day [laughs].

**Beric:** I had a little vial and I eventually passed it on to some people who were working in the CBC. Bed Bugs had been in history with us for a long time, but they'd gone away for a while.

**Catherine:** They weren't supposed to live in Toronto.

**Beric:** Right. But they came back.

**Catherine:** They did. You also fought for the Special Diet Allowance.

**Beric:** For that it's key to give the credit to the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty.

**Cathy C:** Yeah.

**Catherine:** OK, but you did join that one.

**Beric:** Of course.

**Catherine:** There was a time when the police were going around handing out tickets to anybody who was sitting and having a beer in a park or lying down. They were giving them \$130 tickets for loitering. You were protesting that. You found the lawyers for them. You fought against the ban on panhandlers.

**Beric:** Mmhmm.

**Catherine:** So you had a million little fires that you kept putting out and each little fire was contributing to a violation of the dignity of people who were living outside which was part of your motivation. And then of course your final fight up until last year was to get the Moss Park Armouries open as an emergency shelter.

**Beric and Cathy C:** Yeah.

**Beric:** And you might recall that we were the initiators of the Moss Park armories opening house in recent history.

**Cathy C:** In the past yes. And Fort York.

**Catherine:** Yes.

**Cathy C:** We've actually gotten a lot of new shelters open.

**Beric:** Yeah.

**Cathy C:** Princess Margaret Hospital. Doctor's Hospital.

**Catherine:** Absolutely. Yeah. To me the final legacy could be the most recent news which is the City of Toronto announcing their homeless proposal. This winter there will be three new prefab respite centers, each of them costing \$2.5 million. So there will be a roof over another 150 or so people.

**Cathy C:** But it's actually even more remarkable than that because up until last year we would have maybe one 24 hour winter warming center. And then last year they changed the language to call them respite sites. And so they kept them open through the spring and summer too. And now we're going to have 11. Now Beric believed in calling for these dome type structures a long time ago. Toronto Disaster Relief Committee did too. Do you remember?

**Beric:** Yeah.

**Cathy C:** Yeah, of course because that's kind of the disaster relief way. It's the kind of prefab that you can just put up. Although they're not putting two of them up very fast. I got to tour one of them back in May. And they're very impressive. It's better than some of the hellish locations we used last winter. We also got filmed again. We keep using that pattern of film, inquiry, expose.

**Beric:** I mean we should add to that. We entered the shelters with a camera person, who when we saw some of this footage, said, holy shit. Something like that. Maybe worse. And then we got Sarah Polley who had worked with us before.

**Catherine:** The actress and director.

**Beric:** That's right. And so we met with her and we took her into a respite centre. And we just said OK just look around and walk back out and say what you saw and tell your friends.

**Cathy C:** And she wrote an op-ed that ended with the line, Mayor Tory open the damn armouries.

**Beric:** Yeah.

**Cathy C:** [laughs] They opened within days.

**Beric:** That's right. But in reality the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty was bothering the mayor a lot.

**Cathy C:** Yeah.

**Beric:** And the mayor didn't want to be put in the position Lastman had been put in. He did know he'd better respond.

**Catherine:** Well, he did in another way, which I think must be even more satisfying for you. The acknowledgment that a new system of operating had to happen. The acknowledgment that the numbers were wrong. That they weren't reporting any vacancies. That people were outside and not being led in. All of the stuff you have been saying for decades has been acknowledged and money is being spent to fix it.

**Beric:** But I think that's true. Among the saddest part of this story is that the story has not ended.

**Cathy C:** What's sad in my opinion is that they will not be able to close any of those sites. And what does that say about Toronto and Ontario and Canada?

**Beric:** Here's the other story. Long before you hit the streets you may be living in intolerable circumstances and you may be short of food and all of the rest. A recent study said that 250,000 children in Toronto are below the poverty line. The point being is that there are dynamics at play that cannot be dealt with by shelters. We fight for shelters because people face disaster. We know that ultimately a number of other national housing programs have to be implemented. That means that we need housing, public housing, social housing, that is available to us all. This will not be dealt within the private sector. In the condominium sector. And in fact what is happening is that there's a huge growth of poverty and homelessness.

**Catherine:** I was trying to end this on an up swing.

**Beric:** Well there we go. It's a upswing. I'm told there are others behind us. Just over the hill. They're coming. The young people are coming. I can hear them now.

**All:** [laugh]

[music]

## **Closing**

**Catherine:** Special thanks to today's storytellers: Cathy Crowe and Beric German.

Cathy's book is called Dying for a Home: Homeless Activists Speak Out. It was published

by Between the Lines.

[music]

**Catherine:** If you enjoyed this podcast please subscribe and leave us a review on iTunes. We're relying on listeners like you to tell your friends about these stories. You can also listen to and download this podcast, as well as, transcripts from our podcast website: [ryerson.ca/ce/IWASHERE](http://ryerson.ca/ce/IWASHERE). On our website, you'll find a portrait series of each storyteller. These photos were taken by the talented Toronto-based photographer Jessica Blaine Smith.

### **Credits**

**Catherine:** Time for our credits. Today's podcast was made by, Project Supervisor: Darren Cooper. Audio Engineer and Producer: Matt Rideout. Project Coordinator and Producer: Melanie Santarossa. Our theme music was also created by Matt Rideout.

Finally, a very special thank you to Programs for 50+ and Community Engagement at the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, Ryerson University, who supported us in our endeavor to give these storytellers a much needed platform and audience. I'm Catherine Dunphy and on behalf of all the storytellers thanks for listening to I Was Here.

[music]

### **Last Words**

**Catherine:** You make a brilliant team.

**Beric:** There we go.