

Cathy Crowe Newsletter #45 - May 2008

The Death of Paul Croutch – another casualty of Canada’s military misadventures

He was described as a 59 year old homeless man who met his brutal death while sleeping on a bench in Moss Park on a rainy August night in downtown Toronto.

In the strict and formal atmosphere of the courtroom, where three army reservists were recently tried for his murder, there was little to remind us of who Paul Croutch was, let alone why a 59 year old man in poor health was sleeping on a park bench on a rainy summer night.



Like most homeless men and women I have met over the years Croutch had a whole array of experiences, both good and bad, that had shaped him – not unlike you or I. Paul Croutch was a husband, he was a father and he was a friend to many. A recent front page picture on the Toronto Star shows a 1978 family photo of a cherub faced young dad holding his maybe one year old daughter Shannon on his lap. The accompanying article by Peter Small was refreshingly detailed, respectful and personal, including revelations of Croutch’s unhappy childhood that had included violence and foster care.

For those of us who didn’t know Paul Croutch, we have gleaned that he was intelligent, well-read, generous and passionate about community affairs. He was multi-skilled, having worked as a travelling salesman for a Ford dealership, a union rep at McDonnell Douglas Aircraft, an advertising manager for the *Peace River Block News*, a financial controller of a farm implements firm, and a writer and publisher of *The Mirror*, a Dawson Creek weekly – the latter, a fact certainly not lost on the media.

He had an immediate impact on people who met him. “He had bright blue eyes” remarked street outreach worker Wendy Babcock who was clearly distraught after his death. At his funeral, held at the Salvation Army Gateway shelter, James Bartleman, Ontario Lieutenant-Governor remembered Paul as having an “innate sense of dignity” and said that “He was the innocent among the guilty, the lamb among the wolves of our city.”

The violence is in the words

At the time of his death Paul Croutch was homeless. Consider the violent words still used by media and others to describe someone like Mr. Croutch: **vagrant, bum, drifter, transient, chronic, itinerant, feral, drunkard, wino, crazy, crackhead, street person, hardcore, bag lady.**

These words are an important reminder of the 'back story' – the atmosphere, the culture and attitude towards people who are homeless.

To the Toronto Star's credit, Kathy English the Star's Public Editor recently wrote a powerful editorial on the language used to describe homeless people. She noted:

“‘Bag lady’ is, to me, an inhumane, sexist label that provides facile images, but doesn't begin to capture the complexity of this anonymous woman, nor the many who share her plight. I fear it allows us to dismiss her in much the same way many avert their eyes as they walk by the people living on our streets.”

<http://www.thestar.com/comment/columnists/article/413728>

The violence is in the decisions that create the conditions

At the time of Paul Croutch's death, our city was in the throes of more than political indifference or apathy towards homeless people. Social and public planning forces had begun a purposeful, targeted and multi-layered public and political attack on the population most in need of support and services, caring and protection.

Instead of expanding outreach programs, they turned off the funding taps for the life-saving food and sleeping bag outreach programs saying they 'enabled' homeless people.

Instead of funding and opening more emergency shelter beds, they introduced cuts to shelter beds that would eventually reach a total loss of 300 beds. In addition they de-funded and de-prioritized day shelters and food programs that served thousands and thousands of people.

Instead of creating less institutional shelter options that would be more inviting to people with special needs they chose to ignore the possibilities.

In actuality, policy makers chose a neo-conservative approach to the social welfare disaster of homelessness, all the while dismissing the research, dismissing the growing numbers of homeless people, and especially dismissing homeless people themselves and the advocates that were fighting for life-saving

services. The attack extended to include the introduction of punitive laws, selective enforcement of existing laws and formal processes including street counts and evictions of homeless people who dared to create a living space to survive outside. Bus shelters and park benches were made inhospitable with bars on the benches to prevent resting or sleeping. Public safety, quality of life and disdain for 'bandaid solutions' such as food and shelter became the mantra at City Hall to rationalize these actions.

The present ideological incarnation of the attack on homeless people is the 'Streets to Homes' project which is exercised at the expense of the existing shelter system.

The **2007 Street Health Report** notes that social policy decisions are responsible for worsening health status and growing homelessness.

Their findings, just two years after Mr. Crutch was murdered on a park bench, are sobering:

- 35% of homeless people they interviewed had been assaulted or beaten in the past year
- 39% were unable to get a shelter bed
- 74% had at least one serious physical health condition (such as heart disease or arthritis)
- 56% had experienced serious depression in the past year
- 23 % had seriously considered suicide in the past year and 10% had tried to commit suicide in the past year

www.streethealth.ca

The pattern of violence in Mr. Crutch's death is not just about who perpetrated the violence, it is also about the conditions that have allowed this violence to happen.

The violence is in the hate

The incendiary and discriminatory comments by some politicians towards homeless people has been further fuelled and given credence by some media outlets who engage in nasty political commentary. That culture has played a significant role in the growing climate of hate towards homeless people.

In the last few years there has been a startling rise in reported hate crimes towards homeless people across the country. During the course of the Paul Crutch murder trial at least one homeless man was severely beaten and another homeless man beaten to death while sleeping in a park adjacent to a shelter in Calgary.

Dion Oxford from the Salvation Army Gateway told me that Paul always thought the government was going to kill him. He noted wryly "It turns out maybe he was right."

Three army reservists Corporal Jeffrey Hall, Private Brian Deganis and Corporal Mountaz Ibrahim from the Canadian Forces' Queen's Own Rifles, based at the Moss Park Armoury in Toronto, were charged with second degree murder, which was then elevated to first degree murder but dropped back to second degree. The three were also charged with assault on Valerie Valen, a woman who attempted to intervene in their attack on Mr. Croutch.

Mid-trial, the reservists changed their pleas from not guilty to the second-degree murder charge and submitted an agreed statement of facts. Hall and Deganis pleaded guilty to manslaughter and Ibrahim to being an accessory after the fact. All three pleaded guilty to the assault on Ms. Valen.

The violence is in the killing

Crown attorney Hank Goody solemnly and quietly read the list of Mr. Croutch's injuries noted in the post-mortem examination: extensive bruises to the chest, 6 broken ribs on his left (five were broken in more than one place), 2 additional posterior ribs broken, a ruptured spleen, extensive haemorrhaging of tissues of the scalp and brain, a brain stem injury, severe blunt injury wounds to the head and facial area and upper torso, right eye bruised black, lacerations to the cheeks and in the mouth. He reported there were no defensive injuries, suggesting Mr. Croutch did not fight back.

Judge Eugene Ewaschuk cited the savagery of the beating and the hatred of homeless persons as primary factors in his sentencing. "The sheer violence inflicted on the helpless, homeless Paul Croutch constitutes aggravated manslaughter."

Describing the actions as the "despicable and horrible killing of Mr. Croutch" the judge noted that the savagery of the beating put to shame the violence of "soccer hooligans." "They savagely and mercilessly used him (Mr. Croutch) as a combination punching bag and soccer ball." "Croutch had no chance of survival. The accused literally stomped Mr. Croutch to death." The judge described the murder as perhaps the worst he had presided over in his 40 plus year career.

The hatred in the violence

In 2005 front line activists from the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee knew enough about the circumstances in the murder that we appealed to Ontario Attorney General Michael Bryant and the Crown Attorney prosecuting the crimes and we asked them to charge the reservists with a hate crime.

According to the Province of Ontario's Crown Policy Manual on Hate Crime and Discrimination (March 21, 2005):

"Hate crimes are offences that involve the intentional selection of a victim based on the offender's prejudice toward a 'group' characteristic of the victim such as [but not exclusive to] race, ethnic background, religion, gender, physical or mental disability or sexual orientation."

Our request was not granted.

There is no question however that the graphic evidence presented by Canadian Forces Major St. Denis who witnessed various altercations between the reservists and the first-hand account of witness Valerie Valin herself a victim of the attack, convinced the judge. The judge stated he was "satisfied Hall and Deganis knew they were beating a homeless person."

In his sentencing statement he noted that he heard evidence that homeless people were not liked by the military personnel using the Moss Park Armoury. He believed that one of the accused had "wanted to harm a worthless homeless bum in a bus shelter" and they had made derogatory remarks about the "worthless homeless persons who frequented Moss Park." Judge Ewaschuk noted that the reservists spewed "hateful and venomous invectives" to poor people who frequent Moss Park. With respect to their attack on Ms. Valen: "They mocked her, toyed with her, kicked her legs out from under her. The effect was to totally humiliate Ms. Valen," "They had an elitist attitude and regarded (Valen and Croutch) as human garbage."

Judge Ewaschuk acknowledged that the degree of intoxication of reservists Hall and Deganis had been a principal issue in the trial and that they were in an "advanced state of intoxication". Both men admitted to being alcoholics, stated their actions were out of character, and at least one lawyer suggested that moral culpability is less due to the state of intoxication and should be a factor in sentencing.

In the media scrum following the sentencing, Beric German of the TDRC noted "Alcohol, while it can lead to a lack of inhibition did not and cannot lead to the development of hate towards homeless people. That toxic brew of hate was non-alcoholic and its source often comes from people of authority."

Violence affects three more lives

Just prior to sentencing, two of the young men quietly removed their ties and placed them on the back of their bench, presumably for their fathers to take home, as they would be handcuffed and taken directly into custody. The reservists shook hands, hugged each other then stood to face their sentence.

Corporal Jeffrey Hall and Private Brian Deganis, both age 24, received a 10 year prison sentence for manslaughter in the August 31, 2005 slaying of Paul Crouch and an additional one year for the attack on Valerie Valen. They were also sentenced to a lifetime ban on the possession of a firearm.

Corporal Mountaz Ibrahim, age 25, received 9 months as an accessory after the fact in the slaying and an additional 3 months for the assault on Ms. Valen. He also received a ten year prohibition on possession of a firearm.

With time served taken into account (two for one), Deganis will serve 5 years and six months, Hall 10 years and eight months, and Ibrahim 10 months.

During the trial Beric German reminded me that there were four lives lost – Mr. Crouch and the three reservists. “We don’t call for retribution. Our response to this is we have to move towards the future. Long penitentiary stays may result in the opposite of what they are intended to do.”

Violence – from Moss Park to Afghanistan

Mr. Crouch died homeless in a park adjacent to the Moss Park Armoury. He was murdered by the very same people entrusted to protect the public.

Two of the reservists had signed up to go to Afghanistan.

How could three young men, all with an unblemished record, all from seemingly loving and supportive families, who claimed no animosity or hate towards homeless people, two of whom expressed shock and remorse at their own actions and broke down in tears on the stand - do what they did?

One of the defence lawyers suggested that the reservists were simply conditioned or trained to respond to a threat to themselves or fellow soldiers. He called it a “preconditioned response”. The reservists’ training at the Armoury would lead to bonding and a highly developed loyalty to their fellow soldiers. This, he suggested, went into play during the violent attack that night. Another defence lawyer suggested reservists are trained as a team, to think like a unit.

The judge didn’t buy it, noting that "The savagery displayed by the accused has disgraced and dishonoured the Canadian Armed Forces."

But it’s not the first time that seemingly good young men (mostly) do evil things while in the military. Who can forget the Canadian Airborne regiment’s time in Somalia? During a ‘peacekeeping’ mission their aggression, racism, and violence included torture and murders of Somalis, including the shocking torture death of 16 year old Shidane Arone that was caught on film.

Dave Grossman, an author and expert on killing, writes how soldiers need to be specifically trained to kill. “The training methods the military uses are brutalization, classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and role modeling.”

So, right in the heart of downtown Toronto, and close to the bench Paul Crouch slept on, the Moss Park Armoury provides the space for the kind of training that would ready our reservists and cadets, to go to war in Afghanistan.

Author Linda McQuaig has raised “the disturbing possibility that these young reservists considered the Rambo-like posture of Canada’s top general, Rick Hillier, licence to behave aggressively.”

Rick Hillier, the retired Chief of Defence is no stranger to what I call violent language. Referring to the ‘enemy’ in Afghanistan he called them “detestable murderers and scumbags” and according to one national news report he received high public approval ratings for the statement.

“We’re not the public service of Canada, we’re not just another department. We are the Canadian Forces, and our job is to be able to kill people.”
Rick Hillier

Major Michael Sartori has been analyzing military police records for years and he has uncovered an alarming increase in suicide among members of the Canadian military. The numbers suggest that the intensification of Canada’s war efforts in Afghanistan is taking a toll on our soldiers. The suicide rate among both regular and reserve members of the Canadian Forces doubled in the past year, rising to 36, the highest in more than a decade. Dr. Greg Passey, a former military psychiatrist says he believes the spike is related to what he calls the “increased tempo” of the Afghanistan mission.

Economic violence

In April author Linda McQuaig and I spoke in Kingston, Ontario on the topic of ***The War in Afghanistan. Who Profits? Who Pays?***

http://tdrc.net/uploads/file/no_lovely_wars.pdf

This year, in a recession, the federal government will allocate \$18.2 billion towards the military and spend \$100 million per month in Afghanistan. The last federal budget, which was silent on housing, means that we will continue to spend only \$2 billion on housing (primarily older existing housing agreements).

Perhaps if our government’s priorities were different, Paul Crouch wouldn’t have been on that bench and the murder of a homeless man in Calgary would not have happened.

The effects of prioritizing the military over housing and creating an acceptable hate against those who are homeless has created murder. Now we must pick up the pieces, educate, and fight on for housing not war, to ensure that our finances and our energies are put towards peaceful and meaningful purposes.

We should insist that training for killing no longer take place in downtown Toronto. We should demand the Department of National Defence turn the Moss Park Armoury over to the City of Toronto for social housing. ***Maybe one of the buildings could be called the Paul Crouch Seniors Co-op?***

If you have not yet signed the Housing Not War declaration I invite you to.

www.housingnotwar.ca

Cathy

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