

# Living – and Dying – on the Street

## *How the social service industry failed Drina Joubert*

A report by Ryan Scott

*Go to any government agency, or for that matter, to most private charities, and you will find yourself enmeshed at once in a bureaucracy so tangled and oppressive, or confronted with so much moral arrogance and contempt, that you will be driven back out onto the streets for relief.*

—Peter Marin, "Helping and Hating the Homeless," *Harper's*, January 1987

Every winter a handful of people die of the cold on Toronto's streets. Last year, one of those people was Drina Joubert. A coroner's inquest was held. Politicians made placating noises. It's embarrassing to have the poor dying in the streets. We do, after all, have a dazzling array of social programs, with community colleges churning out social workers almost as fast as McDonald's does burgers. And surely the poor should be dying out of sight, in the flophouses and boarding homes that have become our new back wards.

Drina Joubert died of exposure in December 1985, in the back of an abandoned pick-up truck behind a downtown rooming house. All the major newspapers carried stories of the former model, complete with before-and-after pictures. Poverty was not cited as a cause of her death. Neither was the failure of the helping professions.

### **Downwardly Mobile**

A portrait of Joubert emerged from the impressions of the 34 witnesses who testified at the inquest. She was born in South Africa in 1944. She had been educated in private schools and spoke four languages. Her photograph had been plastered on South African billboards, and she had

been offered movie roles. In 1970, she emigrated to Canada with her mother. In 1983, her mother developed a brain tumour and Joubert lost her apartment and started living on the street. During the last 18 months of her life, she spent 367 nights in hostels, including 61 in Street Haven, Toronto's first hostel for women.

Peggy Ann Walpole, a founder and the executive director of Street Haven, stressed that what was needed was not more hostels, but better incomes, decent long-term housing and coordinated support services.

Bill Bosworth, a member of The Affordable Housing Not Hostels Coalition, is one of the directors of Homes First, a private non-profit corporation



that operates a 77-unit building for low-income singles. Building more hostels, Bosworth said, is like "pouring money down a sink-hole." He added that "money is being wasted [on certain forms of social support] because permanent housing is not there."

Crown lawyer Mary Hull noted that Joubert was "completely demoralized" by the hostel system, which she suggested should be cleaned up and made more secure. However, much of the testimony focused on the fact that Joubert took refuge in a truck. According to her friend Barbara Shinton, Joubert had wanted privacy and "a place of her own." Shinton added that the lack of a home made control

of Joubert's alcoholism difficult. "She would get better, but the environment didn't change." Another friend, Mary Talasko, said Joubert was finicky about hygiene, and pointed to such common hostel problems as overcrowding, sickness, lack of privacy, theft, assault and intimidation. Joubert had also complained about conditions in boarding houses and the restrictions of group-home living. She had lived in a Houselink community home for only three days before being asked to leave. She was said to be uncooperative and unable to get along with people.

She had been incarcerated at the Queen Street Mental Health Centre on two occasions, after threatening suicide. Vasundhara Srinivason, a psychiatrist at Queen Street, made this succinct comment: "There's nothing odd about [wanting a place of her own] except she couldn't afford it." Pat Capponi of the Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre added that people are "going back [to psychiatric institutions] because of conditions outside."

In 1985, Joubert had to report to a probation officer, Gina Antonacci, for having assaulted a police officer. Antonacci testified that she knew Joubert was living in an abandoned truck and had become increasingly upset about having no place to live. At the time of her death, Joubert's name was on a waiting list for subsidized housing. Antonacci said Joubert "didn't have the strength to fight anymore."

The jury deliberated for nineteen hours before presenting its verdict. The cause of Joubert's death by exposure was determined to be an "acci-

dent caused by alcoholism, mental illness and homelessness."

In its introductory remarks, the jury stated that "Clearly, the bureaucracy designed to help the most disadvantaged among us has become unresponsive to the needs of the people it was created to serve. It is fragmented and inefficient." It was suggested that the women who habitually frequent Toronto's shelters be identified, and each assigned a case-management worker who would find her long-term housing, access social services, provide help with skills development and monitor her finances. A network of drop-in and crisis centres was suggested. Predictably, these much-needed facilities were seen as being administered by mental health professionals.

The most draconian recommendation was originally made by the coroner (formerly a practising psychiatrist), and later echoed by the jury: that "no patient may be discharged from Queen Street Mental Health Centre until an appropriate place is found for the patient to live,"

and further, that psychiatrists should lean toward involuntary aid. But extending the use of mental hospitals as affordable housing for the poor is not an acceptable solution. People whom society has marginalized do not need further damage at the hands of institutional psychiatry.

Regarding hostels, the jury recommended increased training for staff, and extending hostel hours by increasing the daily hostel allowance for single women. It also suggested that "No one who is in residence in one hostel must be required to leave that hostel to move to another hostel." Increased funding was recommended for 416 Dundas East, a drop-in centre formerly frequented by Joubert, so that its hours could be extended. The jury also called for such centres to have support services on call.

Records should be kept of all people seen by the Addiction Research Foundation, the jury continued. But given the current hysteria about drug use, such records could be abused by the state to ferret out undesirables.

It was further recommended that the Premier make one ministry responsible for the development of supportive housing programs. Right now, that responsibility is split between the Ministries of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Health, and Community and Social Services. The aim of this recommendation was to improve hostel efficiency, reduce overcrowding, and alleviate staff shortages. The hostels could be restored to their original function of "shelter during crisis" by the development of long-term housing.

The jury insisted that its recommendations could be paid for out of existing budgets, or through redirecting money by axing inefficient social programs. But who defines "inefficient"? The professionals, or the people using the service?

The coroner's verdict concluded with the presentation of a new and innovative concept. The jury stated that "We are convinced that housing is not even half the solution. We believe that this group of disadvantaged people are probably undereducated and lack basic employer-required skills." It went on to suggest a program that would make subsidized housing available on the condition that the tenant attended school. There would be income support and improved housing for good students. It was suggested that the program would be self-financing in four to five years, due to reduced welfare



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payments and new income tax sources.

Homeless people are seen as an uneducated, unskilled rabble of misfits with bad habits, who should be helped. Joubert herself certainly didn't fit into this stereotype, having been educated in private schools.

Many of us have worse habits than she did, but we have homes, and so are not subject to the same degree of unsolicited help.